The Powers That Be: How Collective Identity Performance Sustains Online Fan Communities

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A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for award of degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law.

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January 2010
Abstract

Postmodern narratives concerning the internet and modernity focus on the premise of a self fragmented and unmoored from the relationships and processes that work to stabilise it and produce a cohesive social identity. Online spaces are posited as a place where amorphous and fickle persona are created on a whim, where people use the anonymity and freedom from the conditions of their material existence to play with identity and become new people. However, those narratives prove to be over-exaggerated and unrelated to the experiences of the majority of internet users. Furthermore, contrary to postmodern assertions, data indicates people actively seek out opportunities that offer the presentation of a cohesive self, allowing them to build up communities of like minded individuals through mutually defined norms and values, a trend which media fans have shown a strong orientation towards and embraced enthusiastically. However, such commitment to a community has interrelated effects on the self.

This thesis therefore examines the role of performance in an online fan culture to prove how individual and group identity is continually shaped, negotiated and interpreted through collective performance, with users creating their own symbolically mediated, hierarchically organised culture in the process. Using a symbolic interactionist framework to underpin Goffman’s (1959) theory of performance, this thesis will prove that Goffman can be profitably connected with interactions outside of a co-present setting. His dramaturgical metaphor argues we perform contextually every day in our co-present encounters; by extending and updating it in an online context, it makes redundant the online/offline distinction users complain promotes the conception of their experiences as inauthentic, trivial and pathetic. Furthermore, it demonstrates instead how the majority of users need to feel they present a cohesive self across contexts, proving how integrated their online identity performance and sense of self are.
Acknowledgements

As an ethnographer, I feel compelled to form a narrative; therefore, I would first and foremost like to thank my family, whose financial and practical support have made this a realistic, if challenging journey. To Mum, who did the bulk of childcare, and to Dad, who helped fund this, offering his own unique style of motivational speech at times of uncertainty. Without you both, this would have been an untenable project.

From an academic perspective, this narrative is reversed. I would like to offer my sincere thanks to Dr. Lee Marshall, whose focus and dedication to fan studies provided my thesis with the direction it very much needed, and Professor Tom Osborne, who has witnessed my development from a mature student to a student of maturity over the past fifteen years. My deepest thanks to both of you. I would also like to give thanks to Professor Gregor McLennan for passing the torch on to Dr. Marshall, and to pay tribute to Irving Velody, whose infectious and avant-garde dissemination of postmodernism started me on this internet journey in 1997.

Finally, I would like to thank my “three husbands,” who between them have managed the children, my absent-mindedness and complete obsession with grace, humour and compassion. Mike’s sacrifice of his own fannish obsession is duly noted, to be paid back with a solo two week cycling trip to the Pyrenees. Luke’s ability to drop everything at a moments notice and offer practical support never ceases to amaze me, and particularly I would like to thank Luke for his help in finishing the thesis in the final days. Finally I would like to thank Scott, who has always kept his ‘beady eyes’ on the look out for data, and helped proof read every step of the way. You all deserve a huge thank you for making this a reality.

For Dominic and Arabella
Authors’ Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

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Introduction

Overview of the research

This thesis looks at the role of identity and community in online bulletin boards, examines how fans of a media product perform their individual and group identity in those settings, and how those performances work to situate, develop and renegotiate the self as a symbolic and mediated work in progress, online and offline. In the process, it engages in the production of a multi-dimensional understanding that explains how performances and the mediation of experience converge to construct and sustain identity and community, illustrates how these users move gracefully between their experiences in online and offline environments, regarding them as different in context rather than substance or spirit, and examines how experiences of online community shape the individual’s fandom and allow them to reflexively evolve a sense of self.

Information technology’s pervasive reach and influence over human experience regarding information flow, cultural innovation and communications exchange (Castells, 1996: 5) fundamentally alters our understanding, knowledge and sense of contemporary society. Further dissolving the boundaries of phenomena identified as central to modern experience by theorists such as Giddens, who argues that the mediation of experience, its disembedding characteristics and the globalisation of social activity which interlaces ‘social events and social relations “at distance” with local contextualities’ are specific to high modernity (Giddens, 1990: 21), or Bauman, whose ‘fluid world of globalization, deregulation and individualization’ equals a liquid, rather than solid modernity (Bauman, 2002: 19), the internet is ‘directly implicated in at least four major transformations of our epoch’ (Baym and Markham, 2008: x). In the areas of media convergence, mediated identities, the redefinition of social boundaries,
and the transcendence of geographical boundaries, the internet has had wide
ranging effect on the individual’s day to day existence and their interactions
with others. Taking these transformations as central to user’s experiences of life
online offers the researcher fruitful new ground to explore, and new questions
to be asked of contemporary experience. However, problematic for such
research is the accelerating pace of technological innovation and how it
converges and compresses cultural contexts until they become entangled and
interdependent, making it difficult for researchers to tease out the strands of
each context, sometimes even to define which context they should be
categorised in.

This is addressed by paying careful attention to the approach, inquiry and
context of interactions between the research and researcher. In their 2008
exposition concerning internet research, Baym and Markham assert ‘quality in
research design relies on a good fit among question, phenomenon and
method’ (2008: x). This research has at its core the objective of fitting together
those concerns by asking fans the question of how they go about the formation,
maintenance and continual renegotiation of an individual and communal
identity in relation to a media object, exploring the phenomena of being online
through the experiences of users, through the application of a ‘bricolage’ of
ethnographic methods used in an internet context (Denzin, 2004: 2). This is
framed in part by modernity’s transformations as noted by Giddens (1991),
Castells (1996), Bauman (2000), but also by Gergen (1991), and Thompson (1995)
who have examined how the technological change of modern society has
impacted upon our experience of life, and how our identity is mediated and
constructed through the omnipresence of technological factors, leading to the
self as ‘saturated’, or ‘a symbolic project.’ As Slevin (2000: 175) writes, the
internet allows us to negotiate experience in new ways, by ‘making information
and other symbolic content available to others and actively acquiring mediated
content and re-embedding it as part of the context of the self.’
I argue this online interchange of symbolic resources between the self and imagined or specific others provides a natural fit for the use of symbolic interaction. Symbolic interaction’s theories, such as those of Cooley, where in the process of the looking glass self ‘one’s self…[appears] in a particular mind and the kind of self feeling one has is determined by the attitude toward this attributed to that other mind’ by the self (1902: 183), or Mead, for whom the self ‘arises in the process of social experience and activity (1934: 135), and Blumer, who posits the self as ‘arising in the process of interaction between people’ (Blumer, 1969: 4) are used to underpin the assumption that the self is socially constructed through interactions with others.

However, Slevin (2000: 175) asserts that negotiated experience must always be ‘understood within the socially structured contexts it is generated in’ and that is why this thesis has as its foundation the legacy of Erving Goffman’s dramaturgy and impression management. Goffman employs Mead’s concept of the self as built through taking the attitude of the other in face-to-face interactions, co-present with the other. In his study *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) he examines the specifics of contextually situated performances and the strategies utilised by the self to maintain an identity in relationship to a specific audience. Goffman’s theory focuses on the minutiae of everyday life, the day-to-day, mundane aspects of face-to-face conversation. Whilst it would appear that this is incongruent with internet communications as unmediated contexts are the only place where the full co-presence of others is realised, citing the telephone as an example Giddens argues ‘mediated contacts that permit some of the intimacies of co-presence’ are realised in electronic communications (Giddens, 1984: 68). I propose Goffman’s analysis of performance is relevant to the internet context, as although the internet does not provide a fully physical site allowing the strategies of impression management to be fulfilled in a true Goffmanian sense, as a result of the appropriation and naturalisation of opportunities by users across contexts and platforms specific
to mediated communication, users do not distinguish between online and offline contexts in the terms of their identity performance to any significant degree. This, therefore, fulfills the requirements for an application of Goffman’s research methods.

With the complexities of media convergence, it is difficult to precisely define what kind of communication we are engaging in, or what type of experience we are experiencing. Innovation is accelerating to the point where different media satisfy many functions. Telephone calls over the internet, video chat on telephones, e-mails and surfing on televisions, and videos on demand available on a number of platforms illustrate how media and contexts can no longer be neatly bracketed off into separate compartments. For example, is a video chat a face-to-face conversation, a computer-mediated-conversation, or both? Face-to-face components of conversation are there, such as facial expression, gesture, subtle glances and visual contact, but is a physical co-presence needed to define it as face-to-face, or does it no longer matter to those communicating? The question is, what effect does this saturation of communication have on our sense of self? As Baym and Markham (2008: x) opine, ‘[m]edia are integral to the full range of human social practices…appropriated for the everyday conduct of social, occupational, and civic life’, and it is within this context that my research questions about internet use and its ubiquity in the daily practices of the research subjects are examined.

For fans, technological innovation has also had an impact. What would formerly have been an eagerly anticipated television event now appears on an assortment of media, outside of the traditional context for audiences of media products, and out of sequence with production and distribution timelines as the chosen fan artefacts cross over temporal and spatial boundaries. How does this change the nature of their fandom? In addition, fans now have instant access to any number of other people interested in the same product or genre. How does being online alter their fan identity? Does it impact on their offline identity?
Does it intensify their feelings of belonging to a community? Questions about fan identity in relation to media convergence are therefore addressed by this thesis.

Focussing on an online fan culture provides a naturally bounded, self-identified research site, representative of community in the context of internet communications; its members are drawn together by topic, rather than locale, or as boyd articulates, cultures that are ‘socially proximate, not geographically defined’ (2008: 28). The specific focus group, fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the related media products from Joss Whedon, have a strong online presence across many fandom sites, assisted in the first instance by the official sites constructed to tie together commercial interests of a company, in this case Warner Brothers (Gatson and Zweerink, 2000: 112) and their audience, but continued and developed in ways determined by the fans themselves through their own appropriation of internet technology, becoming both producers and consumers of their own fan products.

**Why are the group worth studying?**

The construction, maintenance and continual renegotiation of identity are central to our experience and our interactions with others. In the course of activity, identity is actioned to others, to instruct their understanding of who we are, what we stand for and where we belong, framed in terms of our accomplishments, motivations and desires, in order for them to position us as like them, to give us validation or foster a sense of belonging. Reisman (2008: 106) states ‘[w]e are forever composing impressions of ourselves, projecting a definition of who we are, and making claims about ourselves and the world that we test out and negotiate with others.’ Fans accomplish this through the
production, consumption and discussion of fan artefacts; as fans are heavy, product specific consumers, their collective interpretations of the product nurture the formation of a fan identity and community, dependent on the fan product.

Fandom is therefore a way of mediating one’s identity. At a time which, as Giddens maintains, ‘the reflexivity of modernity extends into the core of the self’ (1991: 32), having a device which assists to coordinate the self, shape one’s experiences and guide activities whilst providing a purpose for activity separate to those imposed by work or family commitments is a useful tool. It is an individual, leisure driven activity, which makes possible an opportunity to commune with others, or to sink into solitary self-enjoyment. Thompson argues that:

[t]o be a fan, is to organise one’s daily life in such a way that following a certain activity... or cultivating a relation to particular media products or genres, becomes a central preoccupation of the self and serves to govern one’s activity and interaction with others... [it is] one way of reflexively organizing the self and its day to day conduct (1995: 222).

Online this takes on new dimensions. The various media used by individuals to access their fan product and distribute the result of their engagement with it to audiences in multiple places demonstrates the extent to which the boundaries between mediated identities and media convergence are collapsing.

If identity and self-narratives are constructed through language (Gergen, 1991: 161), and people ‘produce, stage and cobble together their biographies’ (Beck, 1994: 13) the coalescence of a text based bulletin board where the primary unifying factor is a specific media product’s fandom, its fan related chat, user graphics, avatars, signatures, fan produced banners, personal biographies, the .html links to homepages, blogs and external sites (Facebook, YouTube, Live
Journal and MySpace etc.) in sum, the *fan performances* that take place in that forum illustrate how mediated identities are built, layer by layer, into a personality recognisable to the community, in the context of the internet.

In online fandom, the ‘testing’ and ‘negotiation’ Reismann (2008: 106) discusses are played out symbolically before an audience; language, avatars and fan-coded messages illustrate that a fan is worthy of inclusion in the community. The degree of influence of media convergence, mediated identities, social boundary redefinitions and geographical transcendence in an internet era can be assessed by investigating individual and group identity performance through the lens of fandom, focusing on how narratives of identity are composed and received in context. Layering is important, as fans do not limit construction of their identity based solely upon their fandom. The ratio of and differences between ‘fan’ to ‘non-fan’ or ‘off-topic’ (OT) related performance in fan research sites remain under-examined and invites deeper research; ‘fannish’ discourse can occur in ‘off-topic’ threads, whilst some members rarely discuss the fan product itself, choosing instead to use the communal aspects of their shared fandom to presuppose a safe environment in which to discuss the more mundane aspects of their lives, framed through the fan artefact.

‘The contemporary self,’ state Baym and Markham, ‘must now be seen as constructed with and in response to multiple media’ (2008: x, original emphasis). Of course, Goffman (1959 and 1963), Mead (1934), and Cooley (1902 and 1909) amongst others argue this has always been the case, but modern experience’s transformative aspects make examining the construction of identity online problematic for researchers; the redefinitions of social boundaries and the transcendence of geographical boundaries are brought into sharp relief on the internet. In studies of internet communications, it is often proposed a ‘disinhibiting effect’ is present online (Suler, 2004), bringing concerns to the fore over the nature of public and private, challenging the ethics of replicating data whilst protecting the anonymity of the research subject who feels safe in the
environment, and may disclose information they may or should not normally disclose.

This research has witnessed members generally sharing personal experiences more quickly and in more depth than they would in co-present situations, with those considered ‘strangers’ in an offline context; I would thus argue researchers must be diligent towards this factor. Although not a homogenous culture, there is a great degree of overlap between fans as they share similarities in experience, conditions of existence, philosophical judgments, and tastes, all of which encourage feelings of trust, safety and security; a sense of being part of an imagined community of like others. This has been my experience of online fan forums – although on the surface the geographical distribution of participants would lead one to believe there is great disparity, their personal circumstances often unify members, for example, through their roles as mothers, students or husbands, or through their ethnicity, religion or sexuality. As a result of their assorted perspectives participants share a great deal of their thoughts, putting forward other points of view and personal information to their fellow members, so caution and discretion must be used in replicating the data, but the researcher’s own position and relationship with members needs to be reflexively acknowledged, as this frank, open dialogue fosters close relationships with participants. This openness in offering information and its effects cannot be underestimated. However, this trend can also transfer to the sharing of thoughts and experiences about life online more readily to the researcher, particularly the insider participant observer, which can yield better quality, thicker, richer data (Geertz, 1973).

The challenge brought about by global communications’ effect on geographically bounded fields of enquiry influences how research is conducted as the questions the researcher asks need to be applicable across different locations and cultures. For some time the local environment’s grip on our subjectivity has been weakening, replaced by greater influence from the media
Thompson expressed over a decade ago that ‘self-formation is increasingly nourished by mediated symbolic materials, greatly expanding the range of options available to individuals and loosening – without destroying – the connection between self formation and shared locale’ (1995: 207). In the twenty-first century this connection becomes more tenuous; as Gergen argues, communication technologies:

function to undermine the sense of a bounded self… foster communication links outside of one’s immediate social surrounds … enable one to participate in alterior systems of belief and value, in dialogues with novel and creative outcomes, and in projects that generate new interdependencies (2003)

Experience and identity are mediated in an internet context, as users source, create and perform their identity globally. ‘[S]hared or traditionally conceptually geographic and temporal space is less forceful than ever in bounding our identities, relationships, collaborators, information sources, entertainment or financial dealings’ (Baym and Markham, 2008: xi). The problems of redefined social and geographical boundaries complicate ethical and methodological considerations researchers have to make when writing data gleaned from online environments, particularly when the objects of study have local, if ephemeral, boundaries, but globally distributed participants and media products.

Although this is a study of macro-level issues of community and identity it is concerned with how those issues transform when combined with the phenomenon of the internet. Focusing on a specific internet group, bounded by a common interest or, borrowing from Gatson and Zwerink the micro-level of internet communications, (2004: 180) the results of this research offer provisional answers and ‘transferable’ generalisations (Gobo, 2004) about the processes underpinning identity and community in other internet contexts,
particularly in those where there is "fittingness"… a degree of congruence’ between the contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 124), such as other fandoms.

The research group of Buffy the Vampire Slayer fans was decided upon through a combination of convenience, practicality and existence of camaraderie as a fellow fan and member of various Buffy fan sites. Although already involved in the study of identity and community in the context of the internet at undergraduate and postgraduate level, the first bulletin boards I engaged in were Buffy fan sites, and therefore I have an emotional connection to the kind of interaction that occurs there, to the fandom, and to other fans, all of which position the research and support a sense of belonging with the members, integral to a community feel; online fandom fundamentally altered my perception regarding what people present of themselves and how their identity is performed online, removing from my analysis the idea of a postmodern fragmentation of the self, heavy identity play and purposeful deception as described in early CMC research, having been primarily undertaken in Multi-User Dungeon, Multi-User Shared Hallucination and Multi-User Object Oriented environments. Examples of research in these multi-player real-time virtual worlds that are inhabited for the purposes of social interaction and role play games are provided by Turkle (1995), Donath (1998), Dibble (1993), Reid (1991) and Stone (1991), and epitomise this trend.

Studies of fan artefacts, fandom, and of fans by fans, such as Jenkins (1992), Hills (2002), Marshall (2007), Baym (2000), Brooker (2002), and Cavicchi (1998) amongst others suggests I am not alone in my use of insider status to guide my research sites; whether approaching research generally, for example at the more abstract level of a music or cult media fan, or precisely, as a fellow fan of a specific product, fans understand fans, their level of focus, loyalty, consumption practices, their desire to amass knowledge on their subject, and their passion.
Why Ethnography?

This research has used a broadly ethnographic approach to explore the research questions and collect data, taking its lead from exemplary cultural studies research in the fields of audience studies such as Ang (1985), Morley (1996) and online groups such as Baym (2000), Kendall (2002), Hine (2000), Markham (1998). To clarify, the typically established meaning of ethnography is defined as a set of methods that ‘involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 1). Applying this methodology in cultural analyses allows for participation in ‘an ongoing, open-ended, politically oriented debate, aimed at evaluating and producing critique on our contemporary cultural condition’, one which focuses on ‘ topicality, critical sensibility and sensitivity for the concrete’ (Ang, 1990: 240).

Since the late 1980s, audience studies has employed ethnographic research ‘to understand television viewing and other media consumption practices as they are embedded in the context of everyday life’ (Morley, 1996: 322), steering away from the previous ‘effects’ and ‘uses and gratifications’ paradigms which previously dominated the field, and ‘the increasingly sterile reiterations of classical critical theory’ offered by those models (Ang, 1990: 241). Particularly, the area of reception studies, that is, the enterprise of understanding the meanings to audiences and the cultural consequences of their interpretations of texts, ‘could very well be called the ethnography of media audiences’ (Ang, 1990: 243). In fact, ethnographic methodology has become the lauded strategy for audience research (Staiger, 2005: 14), and a ‘recognised tradition of enquiry’ in the field (Press and Livingstone, 2006: 176).
Challenges are posed to ethnography by the online environment, for example, matters of public versus private, published versus unpublished, anonymous versus identified are complicated by the internet (Bruckman, 2004: 101-103); issues of representation and remaining sensitive to the context of communications whilst accepting that internet communications ‘privilege and highlight certain features of interaction while diminishing or obscuring others’ (Markham, 2004: 141); how to approach a ‘site’, delineate the boundaries of the field and adapt partial ethnographies to suit the environment (Hine, 2000: 154). As a fan and an internet culture member, I am in a position like Hine, who argues ‘[t]he ethnographer’s engagement with the medium is a valuable source of insight. Virtual ethnography can usefully draw on ethnographer as informant and embrace the reflexive dimension’ (2000: 65).

Online ethnography also offers a benefit as a result of a more passive stance taken by the researcher. In offline contexts, the researcher is more in control of who is included in the research, and the physically bounded research site chosen. In online research, the researcher ‘selects an appropriate venue in which to invite participants to come to her…shifting power from the researcher to the researched’ (Johns, Hall and Crowell, 2004: 120-121).

Online ethnographic research takes as its starting point an analysis of the internet as a culture, and the specific online environments encountered as symbolically structured, employing the methodology to ‘create, negotiate, and make sense of’ users’ experiences online (Markham, 1998: 9). In text based ‘chat’ or bulletin board environments, ethnography becomes arguably the most well rounded way of obtaining data, as the degrees of participant observation can be varied according to the subject of study, from lurker to active member, whilst still being part of the group. For Gatson and Zweerink (2004), their immersion in the field site of The Bronze Posting Board Community allowed for an in-depth examination of an online environment; they argue ‘The Bronze existed as a community that, while pushing the physical definitions of such, also typified
community in that it existed at the nexus of legal, political, cultural, spatial and intimate and affective ties and boundaries’ (2004: 180). It is for this reason that Kendall (2002), Hine (2000), Baym (2000), Markham (1998), and Danet (2001) chose ethnography as their methodological stance.

The areas of audience studies and internet research may both use ethnographic methodology, but it is not without criticism. The main criticism stems from a ‘crisis of representation’ and the nature of the construction of ethnographic texts (Marcus and Fischer, 1986: Clifford and Marcus, 1986). ‘The aim [of thick description ethnography] is to draw large conclusions from small but very densely textured facts; to support broad assertions about the role of culture in the construction of collective life by engaging them exactly with complex specifics’ (Geertz, 1973: 28) but it is this which invokes the critique, as for these assertions to carry authority to their audience, the author must abide by academic conventions for writing, write from a position of alterity, and inevitably hold an unequal distribution of power in the ultimate representation of the subject (Hakken, 1999: 47: Moores, 1993: 63). The consequences of such critiques have been not to abandon the ethnographic method in its entirety, but instead to turn to ‘more personalised and intimate ethnographic strategies’ (Murphy, 1999: 205). These ‘autoethnographic’ forms, explicitly ascribe the researcher’s position in the methodology, their situatedness is recognised, explained, and used to draw parallels with their participants. Walkerdine (1986) in her essay Video Replay shows how through reflexively exploring one’s own subjective position, a better understanding of the research participant’s overlapping and contradictory subjectivities can be extrapolated. Ang (1985), Baym (2000), Hills (2002), Tulloch and Jenkins (1995) have approached their research from the position of a fan, thus allying themselves with the research subjects, and bringing the dimension of insider status to the fore. Murphy asserts that although this goes some way in leveling the playing field between the researcher and the researched it is not without problems; as is
the case with traditional ethnographies, the end product still depends upon ‘a
great deal of selection, editing, and ultimately, a presentation that relies heavily
on interpretation’ (1999: 216). Instead, he calls for researchers to “get dirty” and,
specifically of interest for this research, suggests one way of doing this ‘is
through the elaboration of audience ethnographies that collapse the strength of
reception theory… with the “deep play” of material and/or performative
aspects of media consumption’ (1999: 216).

**Autobiographical considerations**

Jones (2005) calls for an ‘interpretive turn’ in internet studies, arguing there is a
pressing need for us to be aware of how we come by our knowledge. He suggests:

> if an interpretive turn consists at least in part of self-reflection, of
knowing how we know others, then we must as part of the
development of our research and scholarship unpack the
complicities and complications of our own positions as internet

In line with this, by providing the ‘autobiographical element’ as Hine would
put it (2008: 16) it is possible to unpack my own situated positions. My interest
in communications technology is motivated by employment in the
telecommunications industry and the quick business and personal adoption of
new technologies that go hand in hand with the environment. Communicating
by phone, e-mail, or message system has been the usual course of events in my
private and public dealings for many years, and accordingly, my experiences
have ‘inevitably shaped the places that I went to and my interpretations of
them’ (Hine, 2008: 16).
My overlapping insider positions impact upon my chosen field of study. I am an insider of the net fan culture this research has been conducted in, of the larger net culture, and of media fan cultures, specifically the sci-fi/horror genre, which predates my involvement with communications technologies. The shared interest in these cultural products by overlapping groups is noted by authors like MacDonald (1998), Hills (2002), and also Bailey (2005: 170), who posited that by January 1999, ‘media fan groups and discourse about television programs were firmly established elements within the World Wide Web.’ He goes on to argue that there is a ‘high degree of overlap’ between the target audience, in his case, the animation *Futurama*, and those statistically more likely to have ‘a particularly high level of internet access and usage’ with the greatest audience figures residing in the 15-30 age group, students, and the technologically minded (2005: 171). This is compounded by the overlaps in the science fiction and fantasy genre and internet use generally.

Goth, alternative, rock and club subcultures predate my other situated positions. These have no doubt guided my interpretations, either through the subject of my fandom and the way it has manifested in online environments, or through my natural identification with what I experience online as form of subculture, or an imagined, symbolically constructed community in its own right. What must also be recognised is that as an insider of academia, my personal experiences at the research site are subject to its influence, the ramification of which is an inability to experience environments in their purest form, without the drive to analyse or explain sociologically.

**Insider Knowledge**

Cultural studies expansion has provided researchers the opportunity to undertake research in specific cultural sites they have a vested interest in, for
example, Bailey, (2005), Hodkinson, (2002), Marshall, (2005). In particular, the appropriation of a subcultural model in explaining group dynamics, the critiques levied against the CCCSs ‘resistance’ framework and the subsequent ethnographic turn has attracted researchers towards groups they have an affiliation with, to provide new understandings from an insider’s perspective of how people construct their identities in a series of fluid and dynamic practices, and the relationship subcultures have with those processes (Muggleton: 2000). Internet researchers are no exception to this trend, which is not without problems. At first glance it would appear the processes that possibly remain hidden to outsiders are both perceptible to and experienced by insiders as a result of their dual status, so it should follow belonging to a group gives the researcher an advantage over externally situated researchers. This assumption is more complex and ambiguous than it first appears.

Internet researchers of sites in which they have a vested interest are in a particularly difficult situation. They have the responsibility of presenting their native community in what would be deemed a fair and balanced analysis, whilst it remains necessary to provide rigorous research and a thorough analysis of the culture. In balancing their dual identities, the researcher faces reprisal and ostracisation from their academic and subcultural affiliations for their research practices, in addition to losing academic favour by over-romanticising and losing objectivity. Attempting to balance the dual facets of their own identity, the researcher feels the pull from their community members as strongly as the push from their academic peers, thus creating a force of continual checks and balances in an effort to maintain objectivity.

There are also potentially fewer obstacles to gaining access and selecting interview participants, although being an insider can alter one’s ability to enter different levels of admission. For example, as a member and researcher at Buffy-boards, I was not in the position of detached observer. Whilst aware of backstage ‘team’ spaces, such as moderator forums or private ‘houses,’
unfettered access could not be given because of my participation in the general communications on the board and the existing bonds built with research participants.

A greater understanding of the subtleties of interaction between group members as well as those between researcher and research subject exists primarily as a result of being an insider to a group that demonstrates added favour to fellow colleagues. The advantages of a history of interchange prior to research or the commencing of additional research creates a sense of belonging, appreciation and camaraderie within the subject group, feelings intensified by possessing a shared fan object. Thus, the rapport that forms between research and researched through common interaction allows for the acquisition of more substantial data.

As Hine says of her analysis of the discipline of systematics online ‘I wanted to be sure both that my analysis of the data was not wildly out of kilter with the way participants viewed it and also that my use of the data did not offend sensibilities’ (2008: 14); insider researchers must walk this tightrope of double accountability with care. Having been a doctoral student and researcher during a time of change in the discipline gave Hine insights into what kinds of questions to ask of her participants, an advantage she chose to develop. It is this kind of advantage I have sought to make use of in this research, and my emotional links and personal engagement with the group have assisted in my understanding of the participants; being an insider has meant rather than merely reading subjects, I understand the environment and through my conversations with fellow members, how experiences within it can affect individuals. However, this connection also impacts upon the direction and boundaries of my research, as my subjective experience as member/researcher ultimately positions the questions I ask and my interpretation of the data I obtain.
This research is very much grounded in experience as a user, and as such directly answers a critique often levied against the CCCSs examinations of subcultural groups, for example by Bennett (1999) and Blackman (2005), where the use of a Marxist framework combined with the ‘conspicuous absence’ of primary fieldwork and ethnographic data led participants to be read, not understood (Muggleton, 2005: 205).

However, while being an insider researcher creates many opportunities, it has attached challenges and problems that need to be addressed as a result of the researcher’s familiarity with the research subjects and territory of the research site. Consequently, the same emotional links and experience that proved advantageous in building rapport within their group can become a hindrance when the researcher navigates between participants’ subjective experiences and their own views as participant and researcher. This is the disadvantage to being an insider, as without careful attention and self-awareness, fieldwork can be tainted as a result of prior interchanges and interactions. The backdrop of preceding rapport, trust and informational exchanges can create a difference of interpretation of data between that of an inside or outside researcher. As an example, the history between group members can, if not monitored, colour an inside researcher’s perception of an individual participant in relation to, and as a result of their first-hand group experiences. The inside researcher does not study the history of the group as the outsider does; they instead become a part of the living history of the group, potentially resulting in an unfair assessment of group dynamics and identity performances.

With regards to data analysis, the researcher may find the results offered up in questionnaires and interviews contradict their personal experience of events to an extent that they feel unable to trust the interview data, leaning instead towards their own subjective position. Therefore, the emphasis remains on the researcher to continually question the possible implications of their results and analyses, to always be mindful for potential bias. In addition to the potential of
data skewing, the inside researcher must, even if they are of a different nature, acknowledge and compensate for preconceptions, interpretations and assumed values as much as that of an outside researcher. Strictly maintaining a difference between the dual personalities of researcher and board participant enabled me to view research data from one perspective and typical board life from the perspective of my own fandom. This became a necessity when answers to research questions seemed to contradict what I witnessed as board participant. Rather than skewing, or altering the data received I learned to separate my own fandom activity from that of my academic, research activity. Internet research, qualitative research and ethnographic methods all have inherent problems that must be acknowledged in order for their influence to be assessed and reflected upon in this research. These will be discussed in greater depth in the methods chapter.

Key issues with Internet Research

Privilege

Our individual use of technology cannot help but invisibly frame the questions we ask and the research we conduct. Markham argues that just as ethnocentrism, patriarchy and colonialism have been challenged for their situated bias, we should also reflect on how our own use of what we are studying situates us, and contains us ‘within some powerful and, more importantly, invisible structures for sense making’ (2008: 133). With this in mind, it is important to frame this work in the same way, and clarify that this research is about high technology users, by a high technology user. Therefore,
claims made about the nature of social interactions and identity performance online are viewed through an insider’s lens as a fan and as a high technology user, with the two frames coupling in membership of an internet community. However, that is not to say that the subjects’ experiences are any less important an area of study, as although the research group represents a portion of internet use, the ‘transferability’ (Gobo, 2008), of their general experiences across the many different forums and social groupings online means that it is illustrative of the experiences of a number of heavy internet users, even if it is not broadly representative of all internet use.

The internet, though now all pervading in many cultures and societies, is not universal, and therefore research examining internet communications and interactions between users must address that there are systems of privilege and a dependence on a specific cultural context entrenched in their use. The influence of concrete conditions on theoretical and personal parameters is elucidated by Markham’s experience of working as an academic in the U.S. Virgin Islands. She articulates a how such a ‘mundane thing as electricity’ made her realise that:

[m]y everyday behaviours were developed in a cultural context of ready access to basic goods and services, my modes of communication were overly dependent on electronic technologies, and my working theories about new technologies for communication were embedded in invisible infrastructures of privilege. (2008: 132)

Cultural contexts such as geographical location played a part in my research site, biasing my consideration of conducting face-to-face interviews. Britain’s relative proximity between cities allows a reasonable degree of interaction with those we are separated from with limited effort, whilst in locations like the Unites States, where many members of the board reside, the result of widely spread cities means those with whom individuals have intimate associations
meet infrequently at best, thus individuals are less likely to consider the possibility of meeting more casual acquaintances.

Privilege and access to resources is pertinent, but researchers must also not automatically assume that individuals and groups with access to the technology will use it in the same ways. Borrowing from Pinch and Bijker (1987, cited in Hine, 2000: 3-34), Hine asserts technologies have ‘interpretative flexibility,’ as ‘different social groups might view them quite differently’ and their ‘consumption involves processes of negotiation and interpretation’ (2000: 33-34). Hine also argues that the internet can be seen both as ‘a place... where culture is both formed and reformed’, and ‘a product of culture... produced by people with contextually situated goals and priorities’ (9). boyd (2008) concurs with this dual view of the internet ‘naturally’, having grown up with technology. This is the case for many of my own research participants, as their consumption interprets technology’s use as commonplace and essential to their everyday routines. In earlier research Markham (1998) argued the internet was viewed by research subjects on a continuum, from a tool, to a place, to a way of being, dependent on how connected and invested in internet communications the individual was, but the exponential increase in internet use in much of the developed world and the naturalisation and domestication of it (Silverstone et al, 1992) particularly with a new generation of users, results in the emphasis for many being towards the ‘way of being’ end of the continuum. Daily practices are so infused with cycling through different windows, flicking from personal use to work use, from information to communication, it can be argued for specific sets of users it is now just a way of life.

The internet’s permeation of our everyday life has theoretical implications; as a result of it now being naturalised and mundane to specific groups of users, the rules and conventions governing interactions in those settings become invisible. No longer spectacular or special, the internet is now a succession of settings within which we appropriate different identity performances based upon the
reception and reflection back to us of an imagined audience, whether they are colleagues, friends, family, or a combination of the above. The blending together of previously compartmentalised sites for interaction is challenging to the individual and researcher, as it undermines the security offered by boundaries of audience segregation and self-disclosure.

Issues concerning the practices and methods used in studying users’ applications of the internet need to be addressed, even if it is accepted that the internet is culturally specific and it is conservatively proposed those who see it as a way of life are intensive users. It is still a novel and capricious terrain, and although there are general guidelines proffered by research within the field such as Hine (2000), Baym (2002), Jones (1999), Mann and Stewart (2000), Fielding et al (2008), Ess and AoIR (2002), and numerous general examples of good qualitative research, such as Denzin and Lincoln (2005), Seale (2004a), in the context of the internet it is difficult to remain completely up to date with each small, site-specific functionality that offers different data or alters interactions, or even the practical considerations of users logging on and off frequently, only being active in a specific place for a short period of time, which gives small windows of opportunity for research (Sveningsson Elm, 2008: 72). It is, as Baym and Markham say, ‘a markedly undisciplined field for inquiry,’ but that also advantageous, as ‘it offers much potential to creative research endeavours’ (2008: xiv).

boyd (2008) emphasises how technology shapes the practice of research online, and gives four areas that need to be considered by researchers; persistence, searchability, replicability and invisible audiences. What is written endures online for many years, even if the original page has been deleted or the website closed; as web search engines conduct searches for text it has lasting implications for quoting, regardless of whether pseudonyms are used.
Confidentiality and anonymity are crucial to all research, but in the internet context, it brings new challenges to the researcher. Although user names are created, many users develop a persona and a reputation over a length of time, using the name on a number of sites, a name which may include part of their own offline name (Markham, 2004: 103) Whilst names can be changed, McKee and Porter (2009: 43) discuss the ramifications for a member’s privacy when a researcher uses direct quotes from public message forums without seeking permission from the individuals concerned. Search engines are able to give direct URLs to the posts, and therefore the online identity of those quoted can be obtained. It can also be difficult to be sure of the author’s ownership of what they write, as they can easily replicate their words from another site. Finally, as boyd suggests, nobody can be sure of who is reading what online; nonetheless users often write openly online, and feel comfortable in their online environments to the extent they forget the data contained in their message is available to everyone, even researchers. This has implications for researchers; thus contextual sensitivity must remain forefront when analysing and reproducing the data encountered.

The public/private dichotomy

On the internet new strategies are required to conceptualise the nature of public and private domains, particularly in order to reassess the individual’s subjective understanding of privacy. Sveningsson Elm suggests in online environments we should think of public and private as part of a continuum, rather than discrete areas (2008: 75). She posits four possible positions to assess the cultural context of privacy in the individual environments studied by internet researchers; a public environment, open to all, not requiring registration, for example, public chat, web pages; a semi-public environment, available in principle to most people after registering as a member, usually required by
communities and social networking sites; a *semi-private environment*, only available to some people, requiring membership and registration, or belonging to specific institutions or groups, such as intranet sites; a *private environment*, unavailable or even unseen by the public, invitation only, such as creator owned photo sites or members only chat rooms. Categorising environments is a complicated issue; as internet sites are ‘multi-faceted’ with ‘different modes and arenas aimed at interaction coexist[ing] at the same site’ (2008: 76) as there are often different positions on the continuum within public or semi-public sites, as well as between different sites. Furthermore, Sveningsson Elm accurately adds that although a site ‘admittedly *is* public, it doesn’t *feel* public to its users’ (77), firmly designating responsibility to remain contextually sensitive with the researcher, who should be the ‘custodian of the data’ (Enyon et al, 2008: 24).

Using my own research sites as examples, privacy varies between public to private, obfuscating issues surrounding informed consent; therefore careful attention must be paid to the sources yielding data. Although in principle the sites range from public to semi-public, their privacy crosses the whole range of Sveningsson-Elm’s continuum. At Buffy-boards the episode synopsis and bulletin board parts of the site are towards the public end of the continuum; specific discussion groups are a little less public. ‘Houses’ have limited and ‘locked’ membership, thus content can only be viewed by other members of the house. These areas are therefore situated between semi-public and semi-private. User pages, virtual messages, profiles and guest books are more private, but only because of their context, as although accessible to members they are embedded deep within the site. Moderator-only forums are private, by invitation only, and accessible by only a handful of high status members. Private messages are not only private, but in the case of e-mails sent to offsite addresses, external too. This has affected the range of data that can be observed, the effects of which will be discussed later in more depth.
Privacy

The researcher is responsible for attempting to ascertain the privacy expectations of those they research. Stern (2008) suggests the easiest way to do this is simply to ask, if only to get the general feel for participant’s expectations, or to find similar communities if it is not feasible to ask directly. After conversations with the youth authors Stern was researching, she adopted this working principle: if the conversation was hidden from those who knew them in their offline everyday existence, it was private, irrespective of how many global participants were privy to it (2008: 96). In sites like my own, where one would presume ‘fan discourse’ is the priority, much of the interesting data and community atmosphere is generated from the off-topic (OT) conversations, where feelings, opinions and personal experiences are reflected upon and shared. The researcher has to ask questions of themselves concerning participants’ knowledge of and comfort with knowing their communications are being analysed, but this must be balanced by the consequences of participants becoming guarded to such an extent it is detrimental to their expression, group interaction, and to the data (Stern, 2008: 97).

I have maintained an honest approach about my dual status as fan and researcher on my principle research boards, and remained direct and frank with those members who I have received questionnaire responses from and interviewed. With regard to researcher’s responsibilities for the distribution of contextually sensitive data, I have used my own judgement as to where data falls on the public/private continuum. As a general rule of thumb, I also ask myself if I would be comfortable with the evidence I present if I were the participant, although I acknowledge my own position is subjective and situated; for example, due to my age, personal circumstances and my role as a researcher I am more reserved than others and remain careful of maintaining privacy online though audience segregation and the careful management of performance to protect reputation and status. However, I contrast this with my
long-standing participation in various boards, and I believe this has allowed a practical assessment of users’ privacy expectations in the environments I have studied. Therefore my insider status allows me to use considered judgment of what is appropriate for the context and the users.

As Ess points out, ‘it is part of the function of judgment to determine just what general rules indeed apply to a particular context’ (2002: 4) and I believe I have employed a great deal of consideration to the privacy issues of participants, and have been clear about how the information will be used. However it has not always been possible to obtain informed consent for some public/semi-public data, as participants often leave forums before data collection is complete. Having an online identity of any sort puts individuals in a problematic situation; though they are able to control what elements of their identity they present, choosing to perform and emphasise some aspects over others, they are unable to control others interpretations of the ‘data persona’, the sum of the incongruent postings, profiles, avatars and comments made across different contexts that exists as a result of those performances (Buchanan, 2008: 89). This may result in a very different picture from their subjective perception of online image, as often identity performances online are context specific. A distorted image can appear when data is ‘harvested …out of context’ without informed consent (Buchanan, 2008: 89). This is taxing for research, as through their absence or anonymity, the participants have inadvertently surrendered to the researcher the IRB Guidebook’s (n.d.) tenet of privacy in research, which is their ‘control over the extent, timing and circumstances of sharing oneself (physically, behaviourally or intellectually) with others.’ It is up to the researcher to be reflexively aware of the ramifications of their research for the participants, and use their skill and training to do the best for their research subjects given the complexities of the environment.
Qualitative Research Issues

With regard to the internet, Ess suggests we now turn to our own discipline specific practices in the first instance when undertaking research online, suggesting there is now a general consensus amongst researchers that online ethics and methods may challenge those in offline environments, but should still be derived from them (2002: 1, also Enyon et al, 2008: 26). However, the field of qualitative research itself is not without problems. It too has invisible processes which drive and frame research practices, prioritise some sets of data over other sets, guiding us to explore one avenue and not another, ask some questions and not others. ‘Our methodological instincts are to clean up complexity and tell straight-forward linear stories, and thus we tend to exclude descriptions that are faithful to experiences of mess, ambivalence, elusiveness and multiplicity’ argues Hine (2008: 5), borrowing from Law (2004). It is exactly these imperceptible selective data practices that produce research and our portrayals of our specific research sites; this research has also been subject to the same desire to create a clean narrative, untainted by confusion, conflict and duplicity. Though the researcher’s position has an effect on data analysis, an insiders need to reflect what it feels like as a member, how they experience shifts in reality, can redress the researcher’s impulse to represent a cohesive experience, as will be discussed in the final chapter.

Framing and Boundaries

Law (2004) insists the researcher’s agency should be allowed to be the constructor of reality; rather than using method as a technique that justifies what data is valid, the researcher’s knowledge of the context should be trusted to bind the field and frame the study. It is this knowledge that guides the study from one set of framing and boundaries unto the next, while allowing
experience to influence research shape, design and results, rather than entering sites with predetermined ideas on what is expected to be encountered. The nature of networked communications is that one point of entry can lead to an infinite number of connections, and consequently a study can be bound in seemingly countless ways, with no two studies representing the communications in the same fashion. With the sheer volume of data that can be acquired as a result, researchers have to be reflexive about recognising the matters that are side issues, and those that remain key to the questions asked, without closing down opportunities for new ways of looking at the data. They therefore may need to bind a study in interrelated ways in order to make sense of, correlate, and unify the varied data, as the research needs to be guided in part by what is experienced, rather than through preconceived notions of what to find (Hine, 2008: 4). Kendall (2008: 22) suggests there are other considerations that must be made when examining boundaries and influences on research shape, design and results. As well as spatial boundaries, the where, who and what we research, there are also temporal boundaries reflecting the time constraints we have with our sites or our projects, and relational boundaries, between the researcher and those researched, and the researcher and their audience. Researchers are also impacted by spheres of influence, either analytical; the methods and theoretical decisions made in research; ethical considerations and the drive to protect participants; or personal, their own history, skills, participation or biography. She clearly explains how all of these factors ‘blur and overlap’ and remain influential over each of the others through use of a translucent faceted gem metaphor. ‘One can turn the gem so as to focus on a single facet, but through that facet also see the other facets’ (Kendall, 2008: 22).
Interviews

Issues of ‘resistance’ to questions, a fear of being impolite or speaking inappropriately, of the unequal distribution of power between the interview subject and researcher, of an inability to articulate the answers to questions, or to want to answer ‘correctly’ rather than subjectively and so on, are some of the challenges faced while undertaking research interviews.

When faced with these challenges, the onus falls upon the researcher to pose questions that match the atmosphere and tone of venue in which the studies take place. This bears weight on the type of interview styles as well as the means by which the researcher implements the interview; non-directive, open-ended questions, whether to be forthright about the intentions of research and bias the results, whether to interview via e-mail, through the forum itself or in direct conversation. These are thorny decisions to make, as they will ultimately all produce work that differs in breadth or depth, quality or accuracy. Taking from Jones’ assertion that our participants ‘are persons, who construct the meaning and significance of their realities [through] a complex personal framework of beliefs and values, which they have developed over their lives to categorise, characterise, explain and predict in their worlds’ (2004: 257, original emphasis), I have strived to have deep, continued dialogue with my participants, using their responses to guide, advance, and develop my research, within the boundaries of my own limitations and research interest. Using Oakley’s maxim ‘no intimacy without reciprocity’ (2004: 264) as my guide, I have used insider status to elicit the best quality data from my participants, using methods that emphasise the similarities between myself and the other members, sharing experiences and ‘fan talk’, and remaining open and honest about my interest in the research questions and the group members experiences from the outset. This however is not without critique, as non-hierarchical methods also put the participant in a more vulnerable position because of the highly personal data they illicit; subjects are exposed to ‘far greater danger and
exploitation’ with this approach, argues Stacey (1988: 24) with ‘the greater the intimacy – the greater the apparent mutuality of the researcher/researched relationship – the greater the danger’ (ibid).

The Thesis

This research proves that identities in fan communities are enduring and carefully constructed, yet flexible enough to yield to the idiosyncrasies of various means of communication, varied settings, and to audiences with different levels of familiarity to the actor. In the same manner in which attire or facial expression act as a means to entice or dissuade further exchanges, through the use of carefully formed, renegotiated and performed identity, the same feat is achieved digitally, further erasing the line between offline and online performances of the self for the performer.
Chapter One:

Methods

What, where, how and who?

During the course of this investigation I have had two main sites of research guiding my fieldwork; these sites have then steered the research to other fan related computer-mediated communication sites, external sites, and physical spaces where community members interacted. The places and spaces for my fieldwork overlap chronologically and physically (or virtually), as although internet sites can be temporary, community members are often in contact external to the internet site, and their networks of social contact have an almost rhizomic quality, reproducing quickly and diversely. Therefore, members of one site can overlap into other sites, and ‘meets’ can occur under the banner of a site that has been closed for years. In total, I have been a participating member in three boards, and a lurker in two more.

A British based, fan organised Buffy fan bulletin board called BuffyUK was the first site encountered as a researcher and a ‘newbie’ to bulletin boards and asynchronous computer-mediated communication. I participated from March 2000, prior to my research on fan communities, until its closure in July 2001. I attended ‘The Stakehouse Party’ (a BuffyUK fan meeting) early in 2001, and observed members who had previously only spoken virtually engage in their first face-to-face contact. Some members had met previously at monthly ‘Nosferatu’ nights run by external organisers Sector 14 Events at Pages bar in Westminster, London; I attended one of these events. Ex-BuffyUK staff administrators organised an Alton Towers meet and a ‘Tea in the Park’ meet in Windsor in 2001 after the BuffyUK board closed, both of which I attended.
Upon closure of the BuffyUK boards, many members migrated to another board, Tangent21 (T21) set up and run by ex-BuffyUK board administrators and high status BuffyUK members offered involvement at an administrative level. T21 is a cult media fan site, and therefore not specific to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* fandom, although they are discussed and represented by the fans’ debates. I have remained a lurking member there since its inception, having only contributed a few posts. A lag occurred between the closure of BuffyUK and the start of T21; in the interim many members who were left without their fellow fans and their internet community migrated to other boards.

Members who were primarily interested in Buffy fandom rather than the online community aspects of the forum, who wanted to focus on other products from the franchise, the creator Joss Whedon, or other projects involving Buffy cast, crew and writers, sought out other fan environments specific to Buffy. Familiarity with the ex-BuffyUK members who became members at T21 and the social aspects of an online community were possibly not enough to compensate for ‘sharing’ the setting with fans of all cult media and the limits this imposed on discussing their fandom. Some members chose CityOfAngels (CoA), an *Angel* (*BtVS* sister show) bulletin board, or the forums at BuffyGuide, a long-standing and well respected fan run Buffy resource webpage. Others joined the new BronzeBeta boards, run by members of the first official Buffy fan site, The Bronze, whilst some managed to secure a membership at Whedonesque, a popular site where Joss Whedon occasionally posts; thus membership runs are limited to specific times of the year to contain numbers. Other members joined sites owned by ordinary ex-BuffyUK members. One such board was Slayer-boards; I joined this site, eventually becoming a moderator responsible for monitoring the content of eight forums.

This changed my perception of fan community performance, providing information about the reinforcement of community norms and the construction
of the community’s social reality unseen by the larger audience, for example, messages admonishing content, or threads being deleted before being read by the general audience. In addition to the responsibilities of patrolling the forums, the administration team communicated in moderator only forums and attended monthly meetings ‘virtually’ in the moderator’s chat room. Current threads, communications by individual members, rules, and board etiquette were discussed here, along with dialogue concerning how the boards would be funded, as registering domain names and occupying server space on host equipment requires capital. As fan run sites rely on the contributions of their members to fund them, or sponsored links such as Amazon, the amount of effort fans expend setting up, maintaining and improving fan sites for other fans is considerable, both financially and socially.

Previously being an administrator has provided depth to the research, as it offers a view of the invisible communications working to uphold the community’s norms, and gives the researcher a sense of the commitment and dedication to the community from those who help maintain it. An administrator role also changes engagement with the community as a member ‘frontstage,’ as there is greater awareness of how much performance is observed and discussed ‘backstage.’

Some skilled and savvy performers are aware of the types of conversations moderators have about members through their duties on other boards. For example, Schillaci’s involvement in a quickly extinguished (and later, deleted) flame, and the moderators’ continuous editing of his posts inspired him to post the following:

I can see it now:

Moderator Forum

Public Enemy number 1 – How do we deal with Schillaci!??
"We could hire an assassin?"

"nah, I heard he eats assassins for breakfast"

"What's his weakness?"

"I gots it! We'll assign a moderator each month to edit his posts, making up any little discrepancy, until eventually he'll get so annoyed at us fur bein' idjits, he'll stop coming here!!"

"genius, lets do it!"

Although the ‘added value’ of my admin duties can only be a direct comment on the workings of Slayer-boards and the specific duration of my involvement as a staff member, it has provided another layer of insider status. Many participants were motivated to take part in the research because they were long standing, committed members of Buffy-boards. A few of these subsequently became moderators; a rapport was already in place prior to their position of authority, allowing me to understand their situation, frame questions accordingly and be accepted as ‘one of us’ by the team, even if offstage and off the record. It remains that many members are blithely unaware of the amount of coordination and monitoring that occurs on their behalf in the spaces they like to call home, and the ongoing commitment to maintaining sites made by staff and owners.

This commitment often outstrips fans’ capacity to continue provision of the site, and sites close unexpectedly. Following the sudden closure of Slayer-boards members migrated to other Buffy boards, one of which, Buffy-boards.com, I have remained a member of since May 2003. Their administration and members are spread globally. Here I have undertaken most of the qualitative and quantitative analysis with members, but have posted less frequently than on BuffyUK or Slayer-Boards. However, the format of these boards has greater functionality for performance and non-post related communications, whilst
since the demise of the shows BtVS and Angel, there is less of the heightened fan activity that used to be observed when new episodes were aired. Although fan critiques are ongoing as new fans add their opinions to the analytical canon, the ‘spatio-temporal rhythm’ of the series as an entirely new television experience has been lost (Hills, 2002: 176). As Hills comments about X-Files fandom at alt.tv.X-Files, the fans’ textual analyses ‘unfold[s] with as much scheduled regularity and predictability as point of origin/attachment... In thrall to the scheduling [it is] built up out of topical and timely posts which march onwards to the rhythms of The X-Files as an established media commodity’ (2002: 176). With no new episodic offerings, fans have filled the void with fan written ‘Virtual Season Eight,’ Role Play Games (RPG’s), analysis of BtVS books and Tales of the Slayer graphic novels for example, but it does not offer to the researcher the volume of fan specific data, or bring about the building of intensity surrounding new episodes previously witnessed on other sites. However, this has given the opportunity to look much more at the ‘Off Topic’ (OT) conversations, and how fans project their individual and community identity through their choice of names, avatars, signatures or language in non- BtVS specific threads.

I have also been a non-contributing ‘lurker’ at two boards; in addition to non-participating membership at T21, I also lurked at the previously mentioned BuffyGuide.com forums, a board with a much different tone in terms of the setting and tone, and the discourse occurring there. BuffyGuide.com is arguably the premier resource for Buffy fans, and has been for many years. It provides for fans episode guides, screenshots, quotes and the minutiae of content required by fans for their ‘curatorial consumption’ (Tankel and Murphy, 1998) of their fan artefact, as well as resources for webmasters who want to start their own Buffy-fan pages, such as recommended servers, software, advice on how to juggle bandwidth limitations with fees and so on. As such, it has an unofficial
fan-sanctioned high status. Jamie-Marie, the current site owner, took over the site in 1998, and has maintained the site continuously on her own since 2001.

I have attended two fan conventions, the Buffy/Angel Eclipse Fancon in 2002, and Hallowhedon in October 2009, where I met cast members, attended talks, lectures and screenings of the shows, and met international fans, some of which were members across three or more of the boards I had participated in. I have also made a vacation to the United States ‘dual purpose’ by meeting informally with a handful of members of Buffy-boards.com.

**Quantitative and Qualitative methods**

The research has been undertaken by a variety of methods from a broadly ethnographic perspective, and so emphasises qualitative over quantitative data. Primarily the research has been undertaken online, rather than in the participant’s physical presence, although there have been a number of face-to-face interviews. There have been two sets of questions sent out to members of Buffy-Boards, initiated from posting a thread soliciting participants; 30 initial questionnaires were sent out, with a high return rate of 27. 15 of these participants have also completed a series of longer open-ended questions based on e-mail or private message interviews, gradually developing into an electronic conversation. Data presented in this thesis has been gathered from interviews, unless stated otherwise.

There have been several participants in ‘virtual’ interviews, which have taken place over MSN, AIM or iChat instant messaging systems, with each subsequent interview building upon the relationship from the previous conversation to extract rich data. A further 10 members, some of whom were initial participants, some moderators and some new members were also used for a second set of data concerning the decline of community spirit and hostility.
that occurred between 2008 and 2009; clusters of questions were sent out soliciting personal experience, thoughts and feelings about the atmosphere, and the responses used to guide more probing questions and pull together the pertinent themes as felt by the members. Most significantly, there has been the continual analysis of the textual and visual communications that combine in various ways to exhibit how individual, fan and community identities are presented online, through nuance and personality as expressed in posts, themes in visual representation, such as avatars and signatures, or other textual data such as biographies and in some cases, external sites linked from their member profile pages. This cannot be underestimated, as Williams and Robson argue, “from “smiley” faces… to conventions of describing physical actions in parenthesis… to more sophisticated avatars, the inclusion of physical elements in online encounters has increased as technology has advanced’ (2004: 33). Data presented in this thesis therefore includes the use of emoticons to emphasise how these are used in performance, whilst the text is represented as written by the participants, to include board specific styles of speech and spelling mistakes.

The rise in mediated identities, media convergence and the development of more elegant forms of replicating the subtleties of co-present communications online plays a large part in why users feel their offline identities are very much situated in their online identities, and visa versa, becoming a composite of mixed media and physically co-present performances. The symbolic resources and opportunity to perform identity offered by Buffy-boards means the researcher has to remain flexible about what strategies to use to collect data, what justifies as data, and which elements should be excluded or included in order of relevance. Denzin (2004) argues that online researchers are ‘theoretically sophisticated’, able to weave together methods, visual and textual data, settings and varied communications:
As methodological bricoleur, the online researcher becomes adept at performing a wide range of tasks, from online interviewing, to conducting virtual focus groups, to lurking, to doing discourse analysis of conversational threads … and understands that online research is an interactive process shaped by personal history, biography, gender, social class, race and ethnicity, and of the people in the setting (2004: 3).

Seeing the researcher as a quilt maker allows an understanding of how ethnographic research in online cultures permits different observations and accounts of the same site of research to be made by separate researchers; according to the raw material used in terms of data, the researcher’s skills and techniques in the construction of their research, their engagement with the participants and the background to their inquiry leads to a different end product. As Hammersley asserts, ‘[t]here are multiple, non-contradictory, true descriptions of any phenomenon... depend[ing] not just on decisions about what we believe to be true, but also on judgments about relevance’ (1992: 28)

Relevance judgments are part of the way ethnographies vary between researchers, but online, the problem of ethnography being both partial and multiple occurs. When conducting online research, the researcher can analyse part, but invariably not whole communications between members; analysis is mainly limited to the public performance. The researcher is able to analyse communications that are both public and internal, but when it comes to communications outside of the scope of their research lens they are at the mercy of their research subjects. People build strong relationships, have inner circles of friends and form cliques on message boards, despite this being frowned upon in some forums; some relationships predate board membership as members encourage friends to join, inevitably resulting in some communications remaining invisible to the researcher. The number of people involved in direct communications outside of the researcher’s range can vary depending on the
circumstance, as usage patterns differ from board to board, member to member, and from one member to different members within their inner circle, making it difficult to quantify the amount of invisible communications.

Communications can be a combination of public, semi-public or private, and external or internal and this impacts on its accessibility. Responses to a thread are public-internal communications, as all members can read them. However, there can be a public-external and private-external element to those communications too dependent on the relationship between the participants. This can be quite explicitly referenced, or not obvious to anyone other than those involved, through use of ‘secret signals’ (Goffman, 1959: 175). For example, a heavy bulletin boards user, known as ‘Spike/Buffy69’ on Buffy-boards, may know that ‘Lil’Red Witch’ on Buffy-Boards, ‘GwenRaiden’ on City of Angel, and ‘Sawyer’s Gal’ on Lost-forums are the same person and these members may play around intertextually with those public-external identities within the internal research site, referencing threads on other boards or cross-posting from one forum to another. This can be played out quite obviously with links to other boards and direct references, but it can also be observed as a very private joke and almost too subtle to pick up on, even for an insider-researcher.

Instead of one to one, the communication may be between a handful of people, played out in a semi-private environment, for example when the researcher is not present in Internet Relay Chat (IRC) conversations, which lie secluded within the boards. Only those people present during the chat and those able to access the chat logs are privy to the communication in theory but even within this, there is the facility to send a private message directly to another participant without the other chat participants knowing, limiting the audience; content from live chat can be copied and pasted to MSN or e-mail, and the data transferred to absent others. When the flirtations and flamings that sometimes occur in these environments spill out onto the boards, it can be hard for the researcher to analyse why posts between two members are becoming
increasingly bawdy or vitriolic, without knowing the conditions that precipitate them. What goes on in IRC influences its participants’ performances to all members of the board’s community; the IRC’s specific manner of communication, the self referential posts that continue IRC performance across the site and the close relationships built there affect the social reality of the community, which will be covered in the final chapter in greater detail. Finally, private messages and e-mails between members are not available for all to see, and as such are not a part of the community as a whole, although they play a part in forming bonds between members.

**Internet Specific Functionalities**

New functions are regularly added to the boards to increase the communications between members, to increase a sense of community and to attract new and retain old members by making the site more interesting in comparison with other fan sites. Private messaging, chat boxes, Internet Relay chat (IRC) visitor messages (VM) function and so on alter the communications within the space and the performance of identity, changing the norms and conventions within each setting by modifying audience numbers and levels of intimacy. For example, VMs allow users to send messages to one another on their profile page. Within this function, other members can read the ‘ping-pong’ semi-public internal communication between individual users in a linear format, although they may not be involved in the conversation itself. The members to whom the VMs belong can see who is looking at their conversation, so this is not as voyeuristic as it would appear, and members can choose to delete the VMs as they are received. It is another way in which members build up a broader performance of their online self within the board, functioning with the pictures and links to external pages on their profile, providing them with a personal ‘shout box’ where other members leave short public messages. Within
posts, members are also encouraged to give reputation points known as ‘karma’ for funny, clever, helpful, friendly, or acerbic remarks on threads, leaving comments under each individual’s posts, boosting the reputation points of the user. These functions combine, allowing the member to perform group, individual and fan identity simultaneously.

**Internet Specific Problems**

In online communities members take comfort from their friendships and seek out people who have a similar outlook to their selves. As a member, I have an attachment to my current board, and those I have been a member of in the past as a result of the content and the relationships built, the people encountered, the debates engaged in. When the first site closed unexpectedly (BuffyUK), there was a palpable sense of loss from its members, expressed in chat rooms, personal communications and on Yahoo forums set up to help steer members towards the sites where the community were migrating. All pages connected to the site were lost, and therefore, all the contact data to other members, the history of communications with other members in private messages and in saved threads were unavailable. Part of the glue that binds community is the ability to read all the conversations in the forums and join in long after the initial posts have taken place. When this is expunged, the community is left feeling disjointed and without a history. Communications on active sites can be read after the threads have closed, providing a permanent record of communications; due to the hypertext nature of web communications, a pattern of threads started by specific users, their posts and who they favour in their cliques can be tracked accordingly. When BuffyUK closed and the data disappeared, the virtual village and evidence of its inhabitants were expunged. It took time for those people to find new homes, split into different factions. However, the Buffy-boards site has remained stable since 2003, and as many of
the members were also members of BuffyUK, a map of their fandom affiliations can be traced.

As a result of this event, I reinforced my data collection methods, by simultaneously keeping hard copies of interviews, threads, member pages and profiles, and resorted to old fashioned pen and paper to keep track of external details such as e-mail, MSN and AIM nicknames, and where applicable, telephone numbers. I also regularly archived the site via SiteSucker, and maintained a line of contact with the staff through external communications.

The Research – Benefits and Limitations

In this research, the gem metaphor described earlier by Kendall is again useful; it describes the delimitations imposed by each boundary and influence, but it also describes how the central concepts of community, identity, fandom and the internet modify, connect and influence each other. My central thrust is this; if we conceive of the individual as the gem and of each separate theme as the facets, each should be looked at in relation to the others, not as discrete, abstract objects of individual study. Looking at the subject through the facet of fandom, identity, community and the internet can be seen, and we can understand that just as the individual cannot take them separately, there is also a relationship with the other themes for the purposes of research. Equally, looking though the facet of identity, the influence of fandom, fan communities and the internet as combined together can be explored, because for the individual, these categories are not separate, they represent the different sides of their lived experience.
Strengths

Whilst a large degree of the specific data concerning participants feelings, thoughts and attachments to the community and their fandom were solicited through interviews, e-mails, questionnaires and instant messaging, the internet strongly supports the researchers ability to collect naturally occurring data and combine it to make a data set that balances the unseen structures of power concerning researcher and subject, compensating for the possibility of participants skewing their answers to better suit an academic audience. I will now give examples of how research questions can be addressed through the use of naturally occurring textual data, combining ‘fan talk’ and events related to offline life with members internet identities. This data shows, albeit in the specific circumstance of the bulletin boards, how media convergence and mediated identities are a trend that warrants investigation.

Returning to mediated identity’s central relevance to the experience of online communities, on bulletin boards, time and care are taken to produce an online identity before most individuals begin writing in threads or ‘posting’. This presentation of a ‘personal front’ in Goffman’s terms (1959) will be covered in a later chapter in greater detail. This brief explanation is simply to show how identities are constructed online at Buffy-boards; an online identity is made up of a user name and an avatar, generally related to Buffy fandom or other genre related products, a ‘one line’ title quote appearing underneath it, a banner, comprised of GIFs and/or TIFFs, and a signature, a quote from a favourite episode or character, occasionally related to other fandom’s, usually Buffy related, sometimes related to specific ‘house’ groups. Users can also personalise their profile pages within the board to some extent. The members are known not by their real names (unless they choose to do so) but by their user names, and are spoken of as if they were people known in co-present situations. The production of their online identity and the thought that goes into it is a source of some amusement and pride for the members, as illustrated below:
You spend FOREVER choosing the perfect av for the "rate that avatar" thread

When you spend more consideration on your avatar on the Boards than your daily outfit.

When you spend an hour thinking of a good user title quote when you have something else that needs to be done.

Most of your days off are spent painstakingly matching your avatar to your signature.

This shows how the presentation of their online self is an important matter to members, and how as much effort is put into promoting the right kinds of image or attitudes to present to the community as in co-present social interaction.

The imagining of the performer by the audience through their user names, avatars, signatures and user title, rather than attempting to imagine them in what would be considered ‘real terms’ by non digital-natives, i.e. as a face-to-face individual, is standard in an internet context.

you see people as their avatars

You have abbreviations for some of the members. (VG, BEG, N4H)

Sometimes when you're talking to your friends at work/school you say "yeah, keanoite/TabulaRasa/wiccianslayer etc told me that!!"

That is not to say gender is invisible and irrelevant in the audiences’ imagined reconstruction of fellow participants, as the following thread shows.

You get freaked out when girls use male avatars and when guys use female avatars
Media convergence and the ways in which users normal activities simultaneously appropriate technologies across a variety of fandoms, CMCs and technological platforms can also be explored through this naturally occurring data. In what follows, users are employing a variety of media to access their internet site, which is related to fandom of a media product, whilst engaging in other activities.

You go on the Internet on your mobile/cellphone just to check BB.

You've posted from your ipod..

Your talking to a Friend on Yahoo instant messengar and then you put the window down to look ata thread and get so engrossed in the thread you forget all about the friend and leave her/him hanging for a few minutes.

When you've contemplated reading or posting to BB from your iPhone at Uni, when you're in a dull class/lecture. (Next step ... ACTUALLY post from iPhone ... :D)

When you skipped class, to mooch on the library computers just so you can get on BB! (And they said drugs were bad for us? BB is like THE most addictive thing)

This data also serves to illustrate how the fans are performing their commitment to the community, in effect, their fandom of the fan site, through actively positioning themselves as prioritising it over their other co-present participations.

Finally, the relevance of the internet changing temporal, social and geographical boundaries can be assessed. In these examples, users are describing how their ‘addiction’ to the boards and the feeling of community is changing their perception of time and distance.

You travel to another country to meet your friends from the boards.
You are up to insane o’clock in the morning online

You literally cry when you’re reading old threads from 2 years ago.

You plan a trip around the world just to meet people you’ve never seen before and probably don’t know their REAL first names... and are confused when your RL friends look at you funny... and make you complete your Will :)

When you start to measure the amount of sleep you got the previous night not in hours, but in the number of new posts there are when you wake up.

These examples of interactions are merely for illustrative purposes, but represent the types of naturally occurring information available to the researcher, often written as part of larger examinations and performance relating to the users’ own fandom and internet culture. Importantly, this information is not forced or contrived, and unlike the case of questions that solicit data concerning the key themes of the era, misunderstanding is limited, however context increases in its relevance. By positioning the researcher as audience, the community’s authority replaces the elevated position of the researcher in research relationships, allowing the researcher to gather naturally occurring data; what is said is no longer skewed by leading questions or the perception of the imagined right response by the participant, but is tied to the desire to provide the correct impression to the community. In this regard, the data can be said to be a more honest representation of the environment as experienced naturally than in other contexts, illustrating how the fundamental form of constructing the self through communication with the generalised other is the performance of identity to the group.

Internet fandom provides an attractive arena for an ethnographic inquiry into identity performance and how it sustains community, as the medium of the internet and practices of fandom are both predisposed to a high volume of good quality textual data, produced in this case by overlapping cultures who position
texts highly; the identity performances of an online textual community, and the critical practices and performances of fan ‘capital’ (Fiske, 1992) fans engage in during their discourse.

Fan activity, social activity and identity performance can be traced hypertextually on internet forums, by cycling through coexisting threads, user pages, off-site links, searching posts by user, by subject, and rank. This assists in shaping the research site. It allows for a permanent record of fan activity, and as such, is less skewed by the subjective experiences of fans during flaming or uncomfortable situations, such as described by Becker’s and Geer’s ‘distorting lens’ (2004). They posit different perceptions of events are offered by interviewees depending on their position in the hierarchy of the object of study. In particular, ‘changes in the social environment and in the self inevitably produce transformations of perspective, and it is characteristic of such transformations that the person finds it difficult or impossible to remember his former actions, outlook, or feelings’ (2004: 249). Through participant observation and the enduring availability of the data available on the internet, it is possible to compensate for any distortions.

The same permanence also offers the kind of data Plummer (1983) would term biographical, albeit in this form a virtual or electronic biography, available through the various links Buchanan (2008) put forward as contentious in relation to privacy, as mentioned earlier. Often, the stories told are spontaneous, topical, and naturalistic, occurring during the normal course of fan and community debate on a wide range of issues. Taken together, they allow for a composite, if abstract, picture of the subject to be built, which can guide further research questions and examinations, necessary in order to ‘understand the different layers of context in which individual lives are embedded’ (Brannan and Nilsen, 2005: 8). Furthermore, the internet’s ability to date-stamp particular thoughts and feelings is important, as the permanence of the text remains long after the participant has changed their perception; as Becker and Geer point out,
in instances concerning identity and the self, opinions often transmute over time. As such, it offers a snapshot of the experiences, interpersonal debates and the development of relationships in communities, and allows the researcher an edge in identifying gaps and discerning meaning (Orgad, 2008) through the things people ‘inevitably forget, select, exaggerate, become confused, and sometimes lie’ about at interview level (47).

**Weaknesses**

In line with Sveningsson Elm’s development of public, semi public, semi private and private (2008), I have also used a similar method to categorise the types of communications members can be engaged in across internet platforms. This is of relevance because it is impossible to gauge how much communication is missed, which in turn affects the boundary and limitations of the results. I will describe each one in turn and give examples. *Public internal* – Buffy-boards threads, reputation points, available to all board members and *public external* – other bulletin boards, other websites, other fandoms, different identities used in external spaces. *Private internal* – private messages, only available to user and *private external* – e-mail, facebook messages, face to face contact, telephone calls, SMS, MSN and AIM instant chat where an offline identity is required to contact the member, inaccessible to other board members unless privy to the specific detail. *Semi-public internal* – live chat, visitor messages, where the degree of availability is dependent on who is in chat, who is looking at the user pages, not archived or *semi-public external*, external live chat, facebook ‘wall’, myspace, all inaccessible to other board members unless privy to the specific detail. These variations mean the inevitability of a partial ethnography.

The extent of the influence of external communications is difficult to ascertain and will be explained in more detail later, but there is substantial evidence that
members contact each other outside of the forums, either people they know in real life, members they have met, or ones they maintain external communications with but have not met face-to-face. Moreover, they use these external communications channels to discuss the boards, other members and the community in general, away from the jurisdiction of the community or administrators. Here are some comments that specifically allude to external communications and the transfer of individual board identity into external contexts, or promotion of the boards as a community across other forums.

you find yourself spending time on *clears throat* ahem Myspace doing something related to BB "wink"

When you've managed to procrastinate with friends IRL about getting MSN for years, and now REALLY want to download it so you can chat even more with your BB buddies. :P

When you stay up ALL NIGHT (with a partner in crime...."NUDGE") giving other members a make over and you're having SO much fun you can't wait for them to see it!

Members also use external communication to export their fandom out, to perform their Buffy-boards identity in other spaces. No longer keeping their fandom closeted, they actively promote their community and identity within it to media where other or offline social networks can see it.

You are a member of BB, BB on myspace, BB on facebook...

You make your MSN screenname directly relate to BB, even though no one on your MSN knows of your Buffy love or BB.

you quote the BB, complete with reference or link, on other forums you visit (which are not as good) just to try and encourage others to come here.

Your url for your myspace account is your BB name.
Your sign on names for things is your BB name (and you signed up for those looooong after starting the BB)

You used to stalk people on Facebook, but now when you have nothing better to do you lurk around here finding something to talk about.

As such, wherever possible I have tried to follow the individual’s fandom into non-board contexts, including a Buffy-Boards members group on Facebook. I have taken their fandom on the various Buffy boards as the middle layer, and attempted to trace activity as they export their fandom out into other boards and other fandoms at the same time as my focus board, or, in the case of the closed boards, into other Buffy fan boards, and as they import their fandom in and internalise it through their online identity on the boards, in blogs, MySpace, Facebook and LiveJournal.

**Authenticity**

Although some offline data has been compiled, it could be argued there is a limit to its validity in terms of the authenticity of research subjects, its ability to embed the online culture in the context of offline environments, and the motivations of the users. Offline data can help to contextualise the research, but it can also complicate it with details that although relevant to the researcher, are not relevant to the community, and accordingly, this information can detract from the type of contextually relevant data required to assess the research questions. To illustrate, I will use the example of ‘authentic’ identity, in contrast with online identity. The potential for deception exists in both contexts; even if a researcher meets face-to-face with a respondent, they have no sure way of knowing the information presented is any more ‘truthful’ than it would be in an online context. What Hine argues is that the real question should be ‘how, where and when identities and realities are made available on the
Furthermore, although the internet offers the potential for identity play and experimentation with different personalities, unless the offline/online distinction is strictly maintained and the specific environment is centred upon play, such as Multi-user Dungeons and other similar environments, the majority of online users’ experiences suggest a great deal of consistency in their identity performances, and communications outside of the forum. Research conducted outside of role play communities suggests the differences between on and offline identities are limited, as ‘many people aim for an integrated and holistic self-presentation,’ with their online identity portraying an extension of the ‘real’ individual (Wallace, 1999: 33) in another social environment. The members of Buffy-boards may have played with their identity in the form of carefully constructed ‘fan’ identities, but they are stable in their performances within the context of the community, supporting the findings of earlier studies (Baym, 2000: Kendall, 1999: Markham, 1998). Authenticity should instead be understood as something that is situationally negotiated and sustained (Hine: 2000). What strikes at the heart of this issue, namely the perception of online identities as not being ‘real’ or at least, not being ‘real enough,’ is a seeming inability to accept that the presentation of self offline is as contrived as it is online; this is exacerbated by the discomfort felt by non-digital natives when all visual clues are absent and all that remains are symbolical and textual communications. For people who have encompassed the spirit of computer-mediated communications, this acceptance seems a matter of course. By combining online and offline data, researchers also run the risk of suggesting to the participants that the online data is less important than the offline data, which would thwart the objectives of research. (Orgad, 2008: 39).

To compensate for what will perhaps be viewed as limitations to authenticity in this research, online and offline data have been compiled, so each set of data can mutually contextualise the other. However, for many research participants, online and offline identities and the daily experiences in both are not mutually
exclusive. A selection of posts here allude to how the conversations experienced online are taken across context into offline lives, and how the relationships they build online are as meaningful as their offline counterparts. Often, members see no distinction in their identity or the level of friendship and intimacy they have between the contexts of online and offline.

You think about something someone said hours later and laugh about it when your out with friends.

You count certain members as close, personal friends.

You write your BB buddies birthdays on every calendar!

You drive around running errands wishing you could call members on the phone because you feel like you’re missing out on conversations.

Your husband comes home and instead of asking what happened in your life he asks if there are any interesting discussions on the BB to debate about.

When someone disagrees with you, you automatically find yourself saying 'People on the BB would agree!' and when they look at you like you're crazy, you walk away, laughing.

It must also be noted even the concept of offline and online is not value free, and carries with it baggage which ‘shape social practices and discursive statements through specific ideological positions and power dynamics’ (Gajjala, 2008: 64). Calling instead for methodologies that are situated, immersive and critical, Gajjala argues that as our subjects are ‘produced’ through typing, the online self is ultimately never able to have completely unmediated access to the self as there is a gap, a lag between the act of ‘doing’ and thinking. However, that is not to say that our identities are any more real in one environment than in another, merely that we exist ‘simultaneously online and offline, here and there’ (2008: 64).
Why Primarily Online?

Context and content

As Geertz says in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), anthropologists ‘don’t study villages (tribes, towns, neighbourhoods…) they study *in* villages’ (22). Although not an anthropological study of a culture as favoured by Geertz, my own sociological focus has been an online culture, because the users’ experiences of their internet communications, their identity and community performances, their reality *online*, is what I wish to understand. To develop this argument, I borrow from Lincoln and Guba (1985) who suggest ‘that inquiry must be carried out in a “natural setting” because phenomena of study, whatever they may be – physical, biological, social, psychological – *take their meaning as much from their contexts as they do from themselves* (1973: 189, original emphasis). They argue the constructed nature of reality dictates our research should be context- and time- dependent, and, paraphrasing Heron (1981), they propose we should use ‘experiential knowledge’ gained through ‘sustained acquaintance’ with our subject in the production of our conclusions.

Conducting offline interviews early on in my research influenced my understanding of the identity as portrayed online, and as such, I decided that biographical data would be used to contextualise research participants in relation to external factors concerning power and privilege that could affect their access to the online medium, whether gender, age, educational background or employment. For working through the issues raised, seven face-to-face interviews were conducted with an opportunistic sample of respondents selected through proximity, availability and their interest in meeting. More than this would skew my interpretation of what occurred online, which was the phenomena I wished to examine. This is primarily why the majority of the
research has been conducted online, but there are other reasons, which I will come to shortly.

What must be addressed is under what circumstances it should be necessary to conduct both online and offline data, and what assumptions are implicit in preserving the hierarchical position of offline data – ‘real fieldwork’ in an anthropological sense – if the focus of the research is online interaction. Orgad (2008: 36) suggests our tendency to dichotomise online and offline is centred on a presumption of the internet as merely the latest communications media of many situated in an offline environment, leading us to examine it in the same way televisions and telephones have been in the past. However, unlike other communications media, the internet’s ability for many-to-many communications allows for a culture to originate, a culture that should be investigated within its own context, using offline data if the research questions call for it. To illustrate this using an offline example, if the study was centred on a close-knit Hebridean community and how their individual and collective identities interplayed, it is unlikely probing questions would be asked about issues that did not pertain to their experiences as islander, other than for the purpose of contextualising the subject’s position. Although the Hebrideans’ environments to perform in are limited compared to the availability for people online (unless they too use online forums), the principle remains that we should accept the culture at face value, on its own terms. In this research, I therefore follow Geertz’s lead, who states his position was ‘to try to keep the analysis of symbolic forms as closely tied as I could to concrete social events and occasions’ (Geertz, 1973: 30) and thus conducted my research mainly online, as the only data that authentically speaks for that specific culture is the online data, the sum of the community and individual fan performances in e-mails, posts, chat and messages.

This trend is not without precedent in studies of textual communities. Eichhorn’s ethnography of ‘zine culture suggests we should interpret Clifford’s
(1997) notion of ‘variously rooted fieldwork’ as multi-sited and accessed through modes that do not require physical dislocation. She ‘insist[s] that understanding people’s lives, particularly in the technologically driven Western world, may sometimes require ethnographers to do what the people they seek to study do, even if it necessitates staying at home’ (2001: 566)

Through the narrative of semiotically constructed identities, the negotiation of textual communities and the performance of fandom on the internet, participants’ experiences of online life becomes an almost intangible collection of influences and positions, bringing about culturally specific ways of behaving. Geertz summarises that:

[t]he whole point of a semiotic approach to culture is... to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them (Geertz, 1973: 24, author emphasis)

Many internet users’ ‘conceptual worlds’ pays no attention to the online/offline dichotomy, as daily practices are infused by the pervasiveness of communications technologies, making it difficult for the researcher or researched to pinpoint what is offline or online. Suggesting that there are other distinctions that could be more constructive in our appraisal of internet communications, Bakardjieva proposes the categories of ‘user-centred versus medium-centred approaches... naturally occurring data versus researcher-elicited data, participant versus nonparticipant, interview data versus computer-captured and compiled data’ (2008: 58). Drawing specific attention to e-mail, she contends it belongs to neither camp fully and straddles the divide; e-mail, and other associated forms of computer-mediated communications are ‘rowdy hybrids’ that need to be assessed in the same spectrum as offline methods, rather than seen as distinct, offer ‘complementary records of events unfolding in the same social world’ (2008: 60).
Hine’s experience in various internet research projects have allowed her to suggest that we are looking more for texture than clear patterns in ethnographies undertaken in online environments, with definitions guided by the participants’ use (2008). To some extent, my research has followed her experiences, where the concentration has been ‘working across the immediately apparent boundaries, exploring connections, making tentative forays that have then turned into defensible decisions, and retrofitting research questions to emergent field sites (2008: 6). In order to see how fandom and technology are integrated into everyday life, and how identity and community are constructed from those raw materials, it has been necessary to take the group’s lead, as the social processes of the technology and the local dynamics in their appropriation determine their use. My own use of the internet as both ‘tool’ and ‘place,’ to use Markham (1998) has facilitated the dialogue between the participants and myself; this is transparent, but it has also guided my framework and questions. Above all, I wanted to examine if what was occurring in bulletin boards was culturally significant and specific to the internet; by limiting the offline data to the minimum required for a sample allowed me to become immersed and innovative in deciphering the meanings users construct online.

**Practical issues**

There is another sphere of influence hinted at, though not explicitly examined, by Kendall (2008); practical issues pertaining to time, administrative issues, finances and so on. Although not the principle reason, these issues have had some significance in my decision to conduct my research primarily online, and so they must be addressed.

By choosing to research a textual community bound by an interest in a media object rather than a physical setting, there is no real ‘space’ to interview participants in other than in the context of their own ‘natural’ setting, which as I
have posited, is a methodologically sound approach for the research questions. Related to this is the global participation in the ‘local’ research site, which makes face-to-face access with participants difficult, time consuming and costly. For example, the webmistresses of two of the boards I have conducted analysis in are based in the United States, the webmaster of my first site was in Europe, and members of the primary research site are spread globally. In fact, based on the biographical information provided in user profiles and conversations or ‘threads’ concerning location, rarely have I found other members in the same region of the country or surrounding counties as myself. When attempts have been made to arrange local meets, there has been the logistical difficulty of organising a number of people from different backgrounds, with their various attendant work, educational and family commitments, to agree to a date, place or time. For some participants, there is a reluctance to meet their online group in an offline environment; perhaps because of an awareness of safety issues involved with meeting people offline, but also perhaps for fear of the online ‘spark’ they have with other members failing to transfer to offline environments, making subsequent online communications awkward and thus changing their experience of enjoyment online. My data suggests some members like to ‘ring-fence’ their online and offline communications and relationships, whilst others see no distinction between the two, which may also explain why arranging to meet other members, as a focus group, or individually for face-to-face interviews, proved a challenge.

Research Ethics

A challenge is posed to standard ethics in internet research, but the issues of confidentiality, informed consent, identification of the researcher and their research questions, the ability for participants to withdraw and the potential for
private information to be reproduced in the public arena remain problems the researcher has to negotiate in the course of their research.

The continuum of public/private was addressed earlier, but at this point it is worth reiterating how the internet complicates matters over data classification in a public forum. For example, Pacagnella argues ‘[c]onversation on publicly accessible IRC channels or messages posted on newsgroups are not equivalent to private letters (while private, one-to-one e-mail messages of course are); they are instead public acts deliberately intended for public consumption’ (1997). Researchers should therefore proceed with caution, but no more than would be necessary in offline contexts. I have adhered to this principle throughout the research, remaining sensitive to the context and content of the data. Data available in the public space without logging in has been used without seeking the permission of the author, whilst in the houses, which have a smaller audience to the performances, or in VMs, the content has been the driving issue behind the data. If the data reveals no more private or personal information than content the member has posted in the public space, it has been used without seeking the permission of the author. Permission has been sought to use the content in the case of private communications, e-mails, electronic chats, PMs and so on, and data from the questionnaires.

As the final chapter illustrates, the content of the information in certain sensitive circumstances will guide a double distancing of anonymity of the subject, in order to protect participant’s identities from fellow community members, or staff, past and present. Although not the intended audience, allowing members to read how their own research participation has been used in the thesis may result in them obtaining access to data that would harm other participants, through loss of standing in the community, or the loss of friendships. Thus, as the final chapter details a breaching of community norms that brought about great hostility, in some quotes a composite identity is used to
obscure the identity of participants whose user names could be deduced by a process of elimination, with the rest comprising anonymous interview data.

In external public spaces such as Facebook, where data is obtained without needing to be a friend of a member, through sharing of a group affiliation, such as the ‘fans of Buffy-boards.com’ group, the data has been used without permission, but retaining the anonymity of the offline identity, shielding the tie to the community member. Communications such as status updates or messages that could only be obtained through personal communications have not been used in the data set.

Although this covers the semi public or private data users provide out of the context of the boards (and any potential understanding of their research subject position) the question of who owns a post once it has been posted remains. Judging the forums as public and using the data is one matter, but to do so without the consent of the webmistress/master who owns the content of all of the pages at the site is, if not unethical, at least discourteous to the provider of the research site and owner of the data. Therefore, I sought the permission of the board owner privately, and was responded to with the following provision:

I only ask two things: one, if anything contains personally identifiable information on any of our members, that you ask them first before using it (which to be honest, I doubt you will really come up against) and also, that you will let me read your thesis when it’s completed! Buffy Summers, private post

I approached the soliciting for participants by posting a thread requesting interested parties to contact me via PM for a questionnaire. I was responded to via posts and PMs; the questionnaire sent to participants included a plain language statement of the research topic, the research questions to be examined, my credentials, a confidentiality statement and a withdraw clause. Privately
acquired data therefore had informed consent, whilst public data had the consent of the board owner as long as I remained contextually sensitive.

One final ethical consideration should be made here. Rutter and Smith (2005: 88-89) talk of a negotiation of absence and presence required in research online. In contrast with an offline site, where the researcher would announce their presence through an introduction and then ask for the researched to ‘forget’ their presence and act as if the researcher was absent, online, in order to request an absence the researcher needs first to have established a presence. Without a physical co-presence the researcher would be absent through the invisibility of non-posting, the shifting of membership, the continual new intake of members. Even if regular posts that announce your position as researcher are made, or biographical details entered in the user pages, the researcher is transferring the responsibility to the researched of an awareness of their position.

However, some question the need for such announcements of presence when public social sites with mundane data content are the focus for research. ‘Must researchers identify themselves if they are only participating in the electronic equivalent of hanging out on street corners or doughnut shops where they would never think of wearing large signs identifying themselves as “researchers”?’ (Garton and Wellman, 1999: 93). However, just because talk occurs in a public space does not equate to all talk that takes place in public being public. In co-present situations there is a difference between talk amongst friends in a pub, or between a cashier and customer, or a nurse and patient. Context, as ever, remains the guiding principle. As Rutter and Smith succinctly put it, ‘the decisions that need to be made are to be done so topically and contextually and they are essentially reliant upon the researcher’s sensitivity towards the environment’ (Rutter and Smith, 2005: 90).
Autoethnographic statement

Researchers encounter problems examining spaces they have a strong personal interest in, and yet connectedness to the research group is arguably one of the strengths of insider research. For example, through my fan status I have an insight into the subtleties of the group’s social interaction through knowledge of the characterisations employed and my own understanding and use of Buffy-speak - whether it is used to convey a sentiment, an attitude or take a position - but this is dependent on my subjective reading as a fan, which in turn is influenced by my personal biography. The length of my group membership amplifies my potential for reading the subtext in ‘ping-pong’ postings between members, as a history of interactions exists in my personal data bank, but it also means I can potentially read more into a conversation than one or both participants intended. These problems apply to all members reading the same conversations, as we all bring our subjective interpretations to a reading. I, and others, read public text and assess whether people are speaking ‘in character’ as a fan, as their composite online identity, or as a character from the show in the context of their conversation. In my case, I then relate what I have analysed during my experience to others outside of the community and culture, and so to balance my research it is important to recognise the interrelated degree of influence between my researcher role and personal role as a fan community member. This is one straightforward way the two roles affect each other, but there are other ways my member status has affected data gathering and selection, and other ways my research role has affected my membership.

Perceptions and expectations

As a community member I read public text with a pre-existing social network
and friendship groups, and as researcher I read with a private knowledge not available to all readers; this move between researcher and member position results in a tension. Whilst careful attention is paid to my awareness of membership experiences with others when I am analysing their interactions, my position as researcher means interview and questionnaire data colours my perceptions when I engage as a member, altering my interactions online; not only am I privy to information that may provide greater understanding of online performances, blurring the public/private and researcher/member roles, but inevitably I build up a rapport with participants and find myself steering towards their threads, engaging more in conversations with those with whom I have built loose relationships. In part, this is motivated by maintaining relationships to aid my research, but from a member position, it simply becomes easier to interact with those with whom you have more personalised dealings with, a claim that is supported by board data illustrating the intensity and quantity of posts repeatedly occurring between smaller groups and ‘pairs’ - specific individuals who more often than not engage in a sub-conversation within a larger thread, suggesting a close relationship between them.

Information passed to me away from the main forum as ‘house’ member or offstage as a confidante of clique members also affects both researcher and member positions, further obfuscating the issue; this causes tension and indeterminacy in my reasoning for following a specific vein of research, and calls into question my justification for following one thread and not another, or including this set of data and not that set. But it also provides more cognitive content for the researcher, one better reflecting community members’ real experiences, as people who interact with motivations and loyalties simultaneously pulling them in different directions when they perform.

My researcher reading also affects my perception of the generalized other’s readings of the text. Whilst I can retain the confidentiality of my participants and privately read information given at interview into public message content,
as my reading is subjective I am never sure of whether other members are privy to the same information, or, whether based upon my subjective analysis of the content and reactions, I am surmising the same knowledge is possessed by myself and others. Whilst it is reasonable to assume the majority of members are reading and reacting to posts at face value, in practice, any one member will in all likelihood know more about another specific member than I do, due to friendship groups, ‘pairing,’ participation in sub-forums and external contact; thus they will be altering their responses accordingly. One weakness as researcher is therefore that it is impossible to judge to what degree my knowledge of the individual affects my reading, as some others will likely be reading with more information than I have, and many with less. This is countered to some degree by the fact that as member, I am not privy to some information that other participants are, and all of us are reading subjectively. In effect, we are all reading variants of the board on a continuum from insider to outsider, connected to unconnected, active to inactive, passionate to disinterested, depending on the thread, active participants and sub-setting. Like satellites around a planet, we are all viewing and engaging at the boards from a multitude of positions. As researcher I am merely potentially more aware of it and challenged by it than others.

In addition, online performances, although taken as authentic, provide an idealised identity. As in Goffman’s co-present encounters, the audience’s perception of an identity can be subsequently challenged by the provision of additional information. In my case, interview data influences my perception of members from both my member and researcher positions. The challenge to my perceptions provoked by my thread for research participants is one illustration of this. My delight in one member’s agreement to take part was countered by disappointment with their research data. The member was well respected for their provision of good quality, forthright and frank posts, and I anticipated quality data, as clear and standardised instructions were made at the beginning
of the questionnaire to provide the same quantity and quality of information provided in posts. However, responses to their questionnaire were monosyllabic and dry, challenging my perception of their online performance from both positions. When I followed up the data with further questions, I received the same type of responses as the initial questionnaire, reinforcing my disappointment and confusion. As a member, this person now felt less interesting to me than they had been before, to the point where I had a heightened analytical attitude to their posts; rather than being drawn in by the entertaining content I looked more at who they were responding to, and what it regarded – in short, whether they were saying the right things for their role to the right people. My inevitable fall back position was therefore that of researcher, and I entered my comfort zone in an attempt to analyse and establish patterns in performance by looking for the target audience; notwithstanding, my prior disposition towards them as a member changed. This taught me that whilst it appears cynical, there is a necessity of retreating behind the researcher role to analyse data as it can compensate for a tendency to be swept along by a performance as member.

This in itself is not without problems. My own performance as ‘researcher’ was ‘skillfully’ managed, though publically understated in comparison to my performance as ordinary member, illustrating a degree of performance layering, or in Goffman’s terms, context specific ‘laminations’ (1974), depending on the situation and the type of interaction one wishes to have with fellow participants. I was consciously aware (and became increasingly so during the breakdown of community, covered in the final chapter) of the necessity to provide a cohesive performance that neither challenged the accepted roles of the community nor threatened the stable self I performed. This was necessary to simultaneously assure research participants I was a ‘researcher’ and fulfilled the routines of the role with regard to academic rigour, but also one of them, performing correctly as a fan and engaging in the socially prescribed fan
activities that build the community. This tension between the two types of performance was particularly challenging, as the need to ensure my continued membership and guarantee completion of my research restricted my ability to perform for the audience as a fan and individual.

I was initially aware of keeping a researcher’s critical distance from the members, and held relations with participants at arms length; I did not initiate external communications for fear of breaking tacit social conventions, preferring to reduce the influence of the research group through over-familiarity with the individual participants away from the setting of the boards. Unless the length of responses prevented contact in private messages, for the majority of the time I had no external contact with participants at all, which was very different to my performance at other boards where I was not ‘researcher’ and was not as conscious of maintaining tight expressive control over every word. This distance may have allowed me to analyse fandom in the context by establishing patterns of performance for individuals and the function of interaction between the community and the members, but it made my own performance one-dimensional.

As I began to notice a huge surge in self-referential talk in performances and nascent cliques form, I felt it was time to alter my strategy in pursuing the research topic. Finding common ground with one influential member who acted as gatekeeper, I discovered how small performances that promote social capital open up seams of information previously inaccessible to me as researcher; adding to my fan performance gave me the capital and community status to ‘schmooze’ (Putnam, 2000: 93) my existing participants and be approached by new participants. My own performances were therefore tailored to my perceptions of my appearance to my audience, and the objectives of my research.

I became more aware of how important backstage/off stage contact is for some
member’s community experience when there was evidence of clique members acting externally *en masse* to inflame conflict, collaboratively posting in such a manner to challenge board rules without breaking them and enhancing their own experience in the process. I had previously thought my own use of the board’s internal functions (such as IRC, private messages and karma) and the degree of contact I had with members external to both the site and our shared fandom was a low to average example of how individuals communicated with other participants outside of the jurisdiction and constraints of the norms, limitations and conventions of the board, but I came to realize I could not extrapolate from it as my contact was idealized; my researcher position distanced me from those I engaged with externally to a great degree and there was no real parallel with the experience of the average member who could engage at a highly personal level with fellow members. Whilst I was aware of potentially offering frank and honest information from a member position that should not be linked to me as a researcher (as it could be cut, copied and pasted to the boards and jeopardize my membership and my continued research), I was less prepared to admit that by attempting to retain some critical distance and prioritizing my researcher position, I underestimated the depth of involvement some members had.

The challenge to my perceptions as member from my researcher role had positive results as well. Members whose participation I had been less excited about followed questionnaire instructions regarding expressive responses, surpassing my expectations and altering my opinion of them accordingly; the more data I received, the more favourably I read their online performances as member. Interestingly, I found it more difficult to reconcile the differing presentations from the member who had offered nothing at interview and closed their performance down, than from the rank and file members whose posts were generally unassuming, but who had opened up and given me good quality data. Although not the only participant who provided ‘flat’ interview
data, one member’s performance displayed a greater disparity; online they appeared open and transparent, offering data about their offline self without prompting, and yet when given an opportunity to open up and reveal their self, they retreated behind factual data. The few who provided a bare minimum of data generally offered one-dimensional board performance; receiving dry data was almost expected, again reflecting how my member position affected my expectations as researcher. This supports Goffman’s idea of continuity in performance assisting in its believability and how consistency between personal front, the setting, what is given and given off and the dramatization of performance are essential to convince the audience the performer is who they say they are. Offering less information in a more relaxed and private setting made one performance appear less believable, conversely, by offering more information, gaps could be filled out that added to the believability of the online performances that were previously lacking. It would appear both members and researchers feel more comfortable with people who have revealed and confirmed enough about themselves to appear authentic and honest.

Perceptions of individual online identities from my member position affected my researcher position’s anticipation of good quality data. In researcher role, good quality data from members I expected less of raised my estimation as a member during subsequent engagement at the board. Interviews and questionnaires offered an off camera opportunity for members to open up away from the scrutiny of the moderators and community and make available to me more of their personal identity, but it also removed a barrier between their online persona and the self; whilst most were happy with this, some were less comfortable with it. Both positions arguably changed participants’ relationship with me, as they were more conscious of being analysed, even if only when directly responding to my posts or threads.
Reading and responding from researcher/member positions

I simultaneously read threads, karma and messages from a number of positions. Whilst some posts my whet my appetite as a fan and offer an opportunity to perform my response accordingly, others interest me from a community level, and make possible community engagement, by giving support, congratulations or words of advice for fellow members. Threads occasionally come up that interest me primarily as researcher, but many threads interest me multi-dimensionally. I have remained acutely aware of jeopardising my research by transgressing norms, of having consent withdrawn by the board owner, or being exiled from the community, and so I have put my researcher position first; this has not always been an easy task, and has pulled me in different directions for a number of reasons.

On occasion, an academic reading has been stimulated by debates I can offer a sociological or audience studies explanation for - posts regarding sexuality and gender, or auteur theory and what counts as cult media, for example. Although I have responded from an academic standpoint, the potential remains for performing in a way alienating me from fellow community members, by inadvertently ‘giving off’ an elitist or superior attitude, and so responses were tempered to remain as tactful, plain and straight with content as possible, whilst still engaging in the community. This supported my claims to belonging whilst authenticating my credentials as a researcher of fans and a sociologist, factors important to those who trusted me with their personal data. It must be stressed that occasions to flex cultural capital were few and far between, and the vast majority of posts were in the same vein as other members, as fan/community member first and foremost, perhaps because I avoided threads where I felt the reception of my performance might be difficult to manage.

Conflict between these positions arose when threads I contributed on within the first few responses later developed from seemingly innocuous content into
lengthy and impassioned debates, occasionally turning into sub flame-wars between participants. Where these developed antagonistically I steered clear of engaging past my initial posts unless a question or ‘quote’ function was directed at me, but continued observing, in part thanks to the board function permitting email updates on subscribed threads. Where a thread was already contentious, I contributed only where my analysis of the current posts suggested the expectation for long standing community members to respond, keeping my post as concise as possible. This was necessary in order to prevent my involvement in a flame war that could undermine or threaten the research’s completion. I remained within the constraints of those individual performances whose reception I could more reliably manage instead.

Prioritising my research standpoint resulted in my retreat from participation in the threads which intrigued me the most. Rather, I observed the interaction from both my member and researcher positions; being all to conscious of the implications of interfering with the object of my study, I was unable to participate in things I would like to have weighed in on as a community member. This was a source of some personal distress, which increased as the hostilities grew and the submission deadline predominated my thoughts; thus alterations to my participation levels were directly affected by the necessary requirement of modifying my social and cognitive relationship with the research group in order to achieve completion of my PhD. It forced me to change my framing of events, and so this retreat can also be read as a form of virtual ‘footing’ (Goffman, 1981b: 128), the primary tactic used in conversation to ‘affect task, tone, social roles and interpersonal alignments (Wine, 2008: 2). Goffman argues

a speaker’s budget of standard utterances can be divided into function classes, each class providing expression through which he can exhibit an alignment he takes to the events at hand (sic), a footing, a combination of production format and participation
status... [providing] the most defensible alignment he can muster (1981b: 325).

By selecting the ‘least self-threatening position’ supporting my prioritised research position in interactions, but also satisfied the drive to maintain a cohesive sense of self, as this is the ‘core motivational unit’ in interactions (Collins, 1988:57). Going full circle, by fully embracing an academic role and performing as such also assists in the prioritisation of my researcher status; distancing myself and making a shift in footing ‘affect[ed] task, tone social role and interpersonal alignment’ (Wine, 2008:2) protecting my position and sense of self in the process.

The Great Boards Debacle exemplifies this tension, as it was the most challenging period during my research and the most demanding for testing the theory underpinning my thesis; whilst it was fruitful as a researcher (to the point of oversaturation in quantity and quality of data), it was the most distressing as a member. My position during this time will be discussed in greater depth in the final chapter, but will be briefly summarized in terms of the challenge to my research.

The Great Boards Debacle

During this time I was conflicted in many ways, the greatest of which was the challenge to my thesis and my idealized notion of online community from both member and researcher positions, an almost cut and dried conclusion which had been supported by eight years of community experience, six of which were
at Buffy boards. Whilst I have a strong investment in finding community in online fan cultures, an approach perhaps deemed necessary to redress some of the negative associations attracted by both fandom and the internet, my experience thus far supported this sentiment; throughout the majority of my involvement with online fandom it was a space where contact was amicable, people were welcoming, and all performed as united in their appreciation of their fan object, feeling happy to be ‘at home’ with others who shared their interest and mutually engaged in talk about their fandom.

Towards the end of the research this experience was challenged, prompting a reanalysis of my argument concerning the stability of online community. As the debacle developed and the atmosphere changed, I was torn whether to include the data or not; whilst I was aware this could give my research a distinct edge by testing performance theory online and its function in the creation, maintenance and shaping of community in context, offering something different to the field in the process, I was also aware of potentially undoing the theoretical underpinning of my research and undermining my argument. Whilst that period was not typical of the majority of my time at the board, it was the most fervent, more so than when Buffy the Vampire Slayer was on air and new episodes were eagerly debated and analysed by the community. The board had more passion, more intensity and a greater episodic feel to it, and there was always a sense of great curiosity concerning what would happen next. This was difficult to ignore, as the re-energisation of content generated a huge draw towards the board, and probably more so as a member than researcher. From an academic position I almost wanted to ignore the reinvigoration of content as though it was exciting and provocative, the lack of goodwill it created amongst participants threatened the community feel and thus my conception of online community. This period also coincided with the writing up of my thesis, a time when extreme focus and intense engagement with writing is required, and so my research prevented me from more closely attending to the situation as a
This turn of events challenged me; I was excited theoretically by the change in the interactions, but apprehensive about the potential for contradicting my own findings; I was aware time was running out to analyse the change in communal atmosphere, knowing this was the last chance to use anything obtained, and thus worried about missing valuable additional data; I was saddened emotionally to think of the community disintegrating and the ‘home’ I had as a member vanishing, and guilty about not making any attempt to smooth troubled waters due to my preoccupation with finishing the thesis and prioritization of my researcher role. Therefore, at a time when I felt I should have helped retain continuity by working communally towards restoring goodwill between the members, I perhaps retreated more fully behind my academic status in order to quash feelings of resentment towards the research and my incapacity to act, instead adopting a definite distanced stance through changing ‘footing’ towards the object of study. Feelings of guilt increased when the board owner threatened closure of the board. As two boards I had been a member of previously were axed overnight without warning, this threat was tangible, with an emotional resonance attached through prior personal experience.

My conflict was compounded by the desire to get involved in the community debate, to show solidarity by trying to calm the situation, which many other longstanding members initially attempted to do. However, prioritizing my research position, I stepped back from intervening and observed without participating, attempting to remain as emotionally detached as possible. Questioning every piece of data, I attempted to establish what was occurring backstage and off stage through contact with a trusted number of confidants; through my initial research participants, through members whose prior performances and position suggested to me that they would give a reasonably fair appraisal of the situation, through newer members who had only...
experienced interactions within the previous year or less, and through those who had been directly involved but had subsequently left the boards. Therefore my data collection at this time was necessarily more selective than during my initial collection, but this was required in order to assess the situation without being publically involved, which I believed would interfere with and skew the naturally occurring data given by participants at the source, namely, public performances at the board itself.

As I watched the community ambience disintegrate and combating factions appear, I was fascinated to see individual and group performances mutate, tactical alliances form and a number of personal strategies adopted by people struggling to maintain their idealized identity in the hostile environment; these strategies involved the continual transgression of boards norms from members whose previous performances were at odds with their current engagement, and this added to the unease. When individual performances changed, the mutually defined communal routines of the fan role in context were unstable. No longer held together by specific and reliable routines, the perception of community held together by socially situated and sanctioned performances became tenuous. Discord was further fuelled when transgressors failed to receive public reprimands; here regular members stepped into the breach, following the same compulsion to act and intervene I had resisted. When those who had previously been quiet and meek gained confidence through their clique involvement in their challenge and questioned the authority of the moderators or transgressed norms, or those who had been vocal and heavy contributors became conspicuously absent, it provoked questions about the authenticity of their previous online performances and their community commitment. The data suggested this issue was not only what I witnessed as ‘external’ observer, but also that participants themselves now felt their own performances were less authentic, and their sense of self was challenged. Whilst some appeared resolute to change the nature of the board by ‘acting out’ and pushing
boundaries, others withdrew and went elsewhere, avoiding the conflict and the community when stability and continuity was most required, with a handful never returning.

Throughout my research and during the Great Boards Debacle I have attempted to remain reflexively aware of my own position as member and researcher, and remain contextually sensitive in my use of the data. As a loose yardstick, I considered my subjective feelings of what is appropriate if the data were mine to give. This turns the emphasis back on the researcher, and I believe the insight gleaned from my insider status has allowed me to remain faithful to the experience whilst responsive to the needs of the group.
Chapter Two:

Literature Review: Media Audiences and the positioning of Fan Studies.

Sociology’s concern with the consequences of modernity and the rapid decline of traditional communities brought about the examination and critique of the mass media by the academy; in particular mass media’s effects on audiences came under closer scrutiny. Therefore, issues centrally related to this thesis have beckoned the emergence and subsequent ‘waves’ of fan studies; community, identity, media products and the transformative power of modernity, highlighted in the case of this research by the internet. It is against this backdrop that theoretical forays into fandom are played through the larger context of audience studies; the tenor of initial examinations of the mass audience and media effects, the subsequent reactions to it through the ‘first wave’ of fan studies, have echoed throughout the majority of fan studies.

With its canonical texts less than twenty years old, a fledgling status is held by fan studies as an academic category. Challenging clearly defined models and persisting preconceptions, fan scholars now attempt to dispel the stereotypical image of fans through the detailed study of who fans are, and what fans do. Starting with the first wave of fan scholars epitomised by Jenkins (1992), Fiske (1989, 1992) and Bacon-Smith (1992), fan studies has moved away from the over celebratory tone it was critiqued for, now adopting a more realistic stance concerning fan consumption and fan practices. However, the tone was a necessary and direct response to themes inherited from initial studies of media audiences, examinations that provided the forerunning theoretical motif subsequently positioning fan
studies; the negative representation of fans as cultural dupes and hysterical teenagers.

Studies of media audiences can be grouped into four broad theoretical themes, with each theme developing from the previous position to provide alternative and layered perspectives; these themes are tied to wider theoretical eras, where the tone of debate within the academy coloured the way the question of fandom was framed. The view of audiences as passive, malleable and vacuous is the first theme encountered in audience studies; as a segment of general media audiences, fans’ attributes are implied to be the same, if not more exaggerated than the general media audiences’ as an attachment to the fan object is pathologically framed through excess, fanaticism and hysteria. This I term exaggerated model one. The second theme views audiences as active, engaging with texts; originating out of the uses and gratifications model of audience research, and from the Birmingham School’s Cultural Studies ‘resistance’ model. This, where the first true wave of fan studies is positioned, I term exaggerated model two. These themes are partly historical, and partly successive, although their reverberations are occasionally still felt in less discipline specific essays or some media portrayals of fans.

The third theme is that of a middle ground, neither pessimistically negative about the consequences of wholesale absorption of media products, nor over-enthusiastic of what the tightly organised or extraordinary audience member may experience as a result of fan activity. The second and third wave of fan studies recognises the inaccurate portrayal of fans as heavily involved in the subversion of media products, instead concentrating on a demonstration of ordinary fan activity, and how it is significant to personal identity and a sense of self. Within this, some scholars find performance becomes the new terrain for examining fans; it is of great relevance to this thesis and its focus on identity and community, particularly in light of web
2.0 (and 3.0) technologies where mediated identities and media convergence are celebrated and take centre stage.

**Exaggerated Fan Model One**

Sociological concerns about the decline of traditional community, the unfixing of identity and the influence of the mass media are central to the first theme in audience studies, the precursor to fan studies. As the transformative power of rapid industrialisation and rationalisation leaves in its wake a society of isolated and alienated individuals, unmoored from the supportive framework of their kinship group, unprotected and disconnected from the people and places which give them a sense of identity and belonging (Giddens, 1991: Gergen, 1991) the results of modernity are a vulnerable and atomised society where, crucially, people are malleable (Curran, Guerevitch and Wollacott, 1982: 11). This, combined with the rise and influence of the mass media, where the now helpless and culturally ignorant mass man is susceptible to suggestion and is defenseless against the external forces of the elites controlling the production of images, text and sound, becomes the battleground for social control.

This model originates from two ideologically distinct positions where different pessimistic theories are proposed with conflicting media effects via opposing ideologies. Right wing interpretations argue the dangerous masses will mobilise, invade and interfere with the democratic principles upheld by the good section of society, namely the learned and educated elite, with the media at the forefront of a dismantling of traditional values; left wing interpretations use the model to argue that control of the powerful media over the mass of individuals making up society will easily lead to
manipulation by the elite, as consumerism and a false consciousness are inculcated on the powerless masses.

As individuals are seen to be without the traditional ‘moorings’ of a latter day class system, possessing fewer ties to their community and family, becoming more insular and atomised, the media is seen by both ideologies to provide the only input guiding people’s character and social behaviour; blank individuals without a cohesive identity are ‘assumed to be a somewhat ‘empty vessel’ into which knowledges and experiences flow’ (Staiger, 2005: 18). It is the lack of cohesive identity, either through isolation from membership of a stable family or community, or as an impressionable mass individual, without the strength of real ties to socially concrete influences, that result in the media’s ability to control the desires of the masses; notably, it is only the masses who are seen to have suffered the results of alienation and atomisation, whilst the intellectual classes, specifically the academy, are above the challenges of modernity and able to maintain a fixed coherent self. With the break up of the traditional order and the social ties that guide individuals in society, social opportunities to balance this by guiding and molding individuals in the community wither, leaving both ‘mob’ and ‘loner’ perceptions of the audience open to the direct effects of the media.

Through its critique of mass culture, thinly veiled ideologically conservative analyses of mass audiences provided a backdrop on which to project fans as aberrant and profligate individuals with the capacity to destabilise morality and democracy. ‘At worst’ asserts Rosenberg, ‘mass culture threatens not merely to cretinize our taste, but to brutalize our senses while paving the way to totalitarianism’ (1957: 9). Mass audiences are cultural morons, either uninformed or obtuse concerning the cultural artifacts deemed to be important by the elite ruling classes. A conception of mass culture eroding the elite’s intellectual agenda and its dissemination to the masses
emphasises a lack of control over the uneducated and irrational common folk, who would free fall into excess and fantasy without the guiding hand of the established moral authority.

While, Horton and Wohl (1956) state ‘obsessive’ fans are attempting to imitate ‘normal’ social relations in their para-social relationships with celebrities, becoming pathological ‘when it proceeds in absolute defiance of objective reality’ (200), Schickel (1985) asserts the ‘middle-aged, middle-class woman first-naming talk show hosts in the beauty parlour’ is a self-deluded individual engaged in false intimacy with a celebrity, one only different in degree to failed assassin John Hinkley Jr. – ‘assuredly a psychopath’, in Schickel’s eyes (1985: 7). This decline in standards and the corruption of values is still reflected in more recent examinations of media audiences, such as the ‘emotional hitchhiking’ of fans, where their curious behaviour ‘remedies anomie, fills gaps of decaying solidarity, substituting imagined fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, spouses, friends, councillors, comrades and heroes, for ones lacking in real life’ (Klapp, 1991: 79).

The Frankfurt School’s critique of mass culture offered by Horkheimer and Adorno (1973), Adorno (Adorno and Bernstein, 1991), and Marcuse (1964) propounds:

[t]he sociological theory that the loss of the support of objectively established religion, the dissolution of the last remnants of precapitalism, together with technological and social differentiation or specialization have led to cultural chaos is disproved everyday; for culture now impresses the same stamp on everything (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1973: 120).

Lambasting the idea of consumer choice liberating individuals through a vast array of media offerings, their examinations of the culture industry and its anaesthetising effect also influences examinations of fans. Adorno
himself wrote that jazz fans attempting to distance themselves as individuals and revolt against the passivity of the general audience ‘rise up from the masses of the retarded who differentiate themselves by pseudo-activity and nevertheless make the regression more strikingly visible’ (Adorno and Bernstein, 1991: 52). Here, he suggests that the fan, as the most avid of consumers, is the most deluded of all.

Distinct from real ‘popular’ culture made by the people (such as folk music), the products of the culture industry standardises and commodifies, creating undemanding products, controlling the means of production and therefore the direction of artistic creativity and what is available for audience consumption (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1973). The mass media is seen to provide an escape, a fantasy world, one removed from the realities of everyday life, where the message transmitted deflects attention from the issues that are imperative to the conditions of peoples’ existence, those questions concerning the distribution of power. The culture industry’s products fetter consciousness, ‘imped[ing] the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide for themselves’ (Adorno and Bernstein, 1991: 106), instead, mass media offerings become an opiate, pacifying the masses with the glitz and glamour of the star system (Marcuse, 1964) as ‘[t]he hypnotic power of the mass media deprives us of the capacity for critical thought, which is essential if we are to change the world’ (Marcuse, cited in Trowler, 1988: 50). This critique of audiences implies that to be a fan is to be unaware of, or at the very least indifferent to, the real issues and processes governing society as they are the most hypnotised of all audiences as a result of the degree of their media product devotion.

Although now historic, this model’s character has directed subsequent studies and as a result a negative positioning of mass audiences, fans are implied. Mass audiences are viewed as dupes, exposed to an industry that
provides information to be absorbed wholesale, in a ‘media as narcotic’ (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 5) effects model of mass communication. The effects tradition proposed a “‘hypodermic” model of the media which were seen as having the power to ‘inject’ a repressive ideology directly into the masses; the ‘pessimistic mass society thesis’ hypothesized by the Frankfurt School ‘stressed the conservative and reconciliatory role of a “mass culture” that ‘suppressed potentialities,’ Morley writes (1980: 1)

Adorno, writing about Jitterbug fans in the 1940s, argued that people enjoying popular music were aware on some level of the ‘phony’ (sic) nature of their pleasure, but as ‘mass reactions are very thinly veiled from consciousness’ they were unable to control it – the media were in command (Adorno and Leppert, 2002: 468.) The commodification of fandom as extreme and ‘other’ behaviour from the norms of society itself plays a part in the construction and appropriation of a fan identity; as Adorno argues:

[i]n addition to some genuine response to rhythmical stimuli, mass hysteria, fanaticism and fascination themselves are partly advertising slogans after which the victims pattern their behavior. This self-delusion is based upon imitation and even histrionics (Adorno and Leppert, 2002: 467).

Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) offer a two-step flow model within the tradition of media effects. Critical of the notion that all audiences were unable to control the ‘direct and powerful stimulus to action which would elicit response’ (1955:16), they propose that although a top-down model of communications effect exists, it is passed on interpersonally, through social connections to those active, participating members of primary groups, through their immediate social environment, to the ‘politically inert’ mass
audience (1955: 3). Mass media’s influence in effecting the audience is at least matched by the influence of those close to the individual:

in addition, influences from the mass media are ... refracted by the personal environment of the ultimate consumer [which does] not depend only upon the relation between the two, but the manner on which they were imbedded into circles of friends, relatives or co-workers (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955: 7-8).

This is important, and worth highlighting, as it takes a symbolic interactionist’s perspective of how personal influence in the primary group affects the attitudes, choices and behaviours of individual audience members. Applying this directly to fandom, it can also be argued the influence of leaders in the group, in the context of this thesis, fans who participate heavily in their fandom and the community, disseminate the message of the product and help shape the canon, the norms and the behaviour of new fans.

Research concerning mass audiences and the effects model was challenged in direct relation to fans in the 1980s, and will be discussed shortly, however, a general critique of how these exaggerated effects frame fan studies through its preceding framework is useful here. The ‘historical propensity to treat media audiences as passive and controlled, ... to privilege aesthetic superiority in programming, [a] reluctance to support consumerism, [and a] belief in media industry manipulation’ (Lewis, 1992: 1) has influenced both the denouncement and defence of fans. When fandom is first encountered in writings of mass culture from this heritage, is is a denigrated form of self-expression, controlled by the media, with individuals vulnerable to suggestion, an ‘other’ in comparison to the rational, enlightened, critically aware follower of high culture. It is associated with the disempowered, the dispossessed, the lowest and least
critical of the populace, too unsophisticated and vulgar to know better than to revere popular culture, uneducated in the canon of high culture, and lacking in the ability to discriminate between the two; Brower, argues fans in this model are viewed as ‘foolishly obsessed, lacking education and critical distance’ (1992: 163). Along with an analysis of fans as ‘powerless other,’ there is an emphasis on fans as abnormal, dangerous, emotional and irrational beings, not only from within the academy, but also from the media, as ‘the popular press … has stigmatized fandom by emphasizing danger, abnormality and silliness’ (Lewis, 1992: 1). Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs (1992: 88-89) discuss how Beatlemania was portrayed by the press, with *Variety* distancing the girls, commenting it was ‘closely linked to racial rioting’ whilst *Science News Letter* posited it was an uncontrollable ‘release of sexual energy,’ both accentuating danger and hysteria.

Studies with academic leanings, such as Hinerman’s *I'll Be Here With You* (1992) on Elvis fans and Vermorel’s and Vermorel’s book *Starlust* (1985) paint the picture of fans as excessive, fantasy driven, deluded. Categorising fan letters into chapters called “Ecstasy”, “Possession” and “Delirium” (Vermorel and Vermorel), or discussing how a fan knows a deceased Elvis came to their daughter moments before her death and ‘escorted her to heaven’ has hardly helped dispel the conception of fans as irrational, absurd and deranged, despite good intentions (Jenkins, 1992: 15).

Jensen (1992) contends the two most often encountered caricatures of a fan are that of the psycho loner, the assassin, the stalker, the isolated deviant with a lack of self worth and no connection with society; and the frenzied mob, the rock concert throng, the football hooligans unable to control themselves in the contagion of the crowd, emotionally undisciplined and morally suspect (1992: 11, 13). She opines:
each fan type mobilizes related assumptions about modern individuals...about alienation, atomization, vulnerability and irrationality – [these] are central aspects of twentieth-century beliefs about modernity (1992: 14)

However, producing such a ‘mythology’ about fans is little more than a thinly veiled attempt at othering. As ‘the provenance of the term ‘fan’ is ‘fanatic,’ emphasising excess, Ross and Nightingale (2003) argue our attention is continually drawn to the ‘aberrant and often hysterical’ behaviour of fans as portrayed in popular culture (122). Jenkins also highlights how the linguistic roots in fanatic mean the term has:

never fully escaped its earlier connotations of religious and political zealotry, false beliefs, orgiastic excess, possession, and madness, connotations that seem to be at the heart of many of the representations of fans in contemporary discourse (1992: 12).

This othering has the effect of partitioning those whom, according to the powerful and educated, ‘deserve’ a place in their dominant cultural hierarchy, from those who do not.

Fans are seen to behave differently to academics and the arbiters of high culture’s canon and its concomitant aesthetic taste in two respects, argues Jensen (1992: 19). Firstly, their objects of desire are in opposition to each other. High culture’s objects equate with exclusivity, rareness, and are expensive, either in terms of the cost of owning an object, or the personal sacrifices that need to be made in order to become an aficionado, dedication to the object through time consuming study and appreciation. Its objects represent prestige. Low culture’s objects are reprints, simulacra, they are cheap and produced in quantity, boasting no exclusivity at all (19). These objects signify consumption. If an object is popular with the wealthy and
well educated, it is a preference or taste; if it is associated with the lower classes and is inexpensive (or less expensive, as some fan artefacts are highly priced), it is a fandom. Secondly, the modes of enactment are distinct. High culture is deemed a rational pleasure; its appreciation is a worthy commitment that enriches those who understand it. It is high calibre and requires a measured and reasoned approach to recognise the importance of the artefact. Its admirers follow a specific path of appreciation, and understand the correct way to voice their enjoyment, and what they are expected to understand from the text. For example, Fiske (1989: 138) uses Bourdieu’s comparison of popular culture and bourgeois entertainment to illustrate how distance and ritualised responses are concomitant with taste and aesthetic appreciation, whilst direct and unmistakable undisciplined participation is attributed to popular culture. In alignment with Jensen, Fiske also states that high culture’s emphasis on an aesthetic reading requires the reader to understand ‘how its elements relate and contribute to its overall unity’ as the desired purpose of its evaluation (2005: 217).

Importantly for Jensen, high culture’s devotees are in deference to the text, venerating it. Low culture, on the other hand, is considered an irrational gratification of low status and inane material, a dangerous compulsion taken to excess, where fans own the text, and do with it what they will, including making their own interpretations and generally forming free readings of it. Fiske concurs with this view, asserting that popular culture’s readers use a different approach to the aesthetic readings of high culture, they are ‘undisciplined, dipping in and out of a text at will’ with pleasure and making meaning driving their interpretation (2005: 217). He summarises:

The reader of the aesthetic text attempts to read it on its terms, to subjugate him-or herself to its aesthetic discipline. The reader reveres the text. The popular reader, on the other hand, holds no
such reverence for the text but views it as a resource to be viewed at will (Fiske, 2005: 217).

Jensen states the implication is that ‘it is normal and therefore safe to be attached to elite, prestige-conferring objects (aficionadohood), but it can be abnormal, and therefore dangerous to be attached to popular, mass-mediated objects (fandom)’ (Jensen, 1992: 20) Observing the distinction between culturally imposed sets of objects and maintaining this set of rules for the ‘right’ or rational way of appreciating the text is imperative to preserve high culture and its devotees’ elevated position in the debate; from this position no fault can be found with their reception of the text, as ‘aesthetic discrimination work[s] socially as a self-confirming conservatism’ (Fiske, 2005: 219). Even within the first fan studies literature there are warnings to those who observe the correct mode of enactment that a rational and measured appreciation must be maintained, as there is a thin line separating ‘us’ from ‘them’. Once emotions are left unchecked, even the most orthodox high culture aficionado is much closer to ‘cross[ing] the line into pathological behaviour’ and becoming the deviant ‘other’ than they would wish (Jensen: 1992: 14).

It is apparent that the first critiques of mass audiences as cultural dupes offered by Adorno (Adorno and Bernstein, 1991, Adorno and Leppert, 2002), Horkheimer and Adorno (1973) and Marcuse (1964), or the likes of Horton and Wohl (1956), Reisman (1963) centre on many of the familiar assumptions of class and gender stereotypes sociologists have been refuting for years. Evidence of their influence is available through the fan studies undertaken and the people who make up those fan bases, even in later studies. Jensen argues the myths of the loner deviant and hysterical mob persist, as ‘[d]ark assumptions underlie the two images of fan pathology, and they haunt the literature on fans and fandom’ (1992: 15). As a result of the continuing
waves in fan studies the subjects of research may now be portrayed in a more favourable light than in the negative fan studies described, however because researchers continue to investigate the same types of fandom (and here, I include myself) fans are branded with the same iron, as investigations invariably start with the same defence of fans. Fan studies are often based on the following: women reading soap or romance novels (Ang, 1985: Radway, 1984: Harrington and Bielby, 1995: Baym, 2000); music fans (Cavicchi, 1998: Bailey, 2005); science fiction fans (Jenkins, 1992: Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995: Bacon-Smith, 1992: Gatson and Zweerink, 2000); sports fans (Sandvoss, 2003: Brown, 1998: Dell, 1998).

However, even those who are caught up in an appreciation of Bach or Shakespeare, the old ‘aficionados’, who were seen to follow ‘normal’ practices are now being analysed by fan studies scholars. Previously subject to a different type of critical investigations from those who followed ‘low’ culture artefacts such as popular music, television series or comics, Pearson, in Gray’s (2007) collection, argues ‘Bachies are every bit as emotional as their popular culture counterparts’ (108). Brooker (2005) says the Lewis Carroll Society ‘shares its fundamental structure, pleasures, activities, and a sense of identity with communities who celebrate lower status texts’, although they shake off ‘much of fandom’s stigma’ (2005, 879-880). The ‘scandal’ and ‘excessiveness’ categorizing the fan therefore:

stems from the perceived merits of these particular works, rather than anything intrinsic to the fans’ behavior. Would these same practices ... be read as extreme if they were applied to Shakespeare instead of Star Trek, Italian opera instead of Japanese animation, or Balzac instead of Beauty and the Beast? (Jenkins, 1992: 53).

Although it has been argued that such an approach offers an overly simplistic portrayal of how people absorb information from the media, the
framing of audiences in these terms has had far reaching consequences, particularly for fan studies. Challenging these assumptions and positing alternatives provides later studies with the tools to dismantle the pathologisation of fans as ‘other’, brings to the fore the moral dualisms encountered within fan analyses of what are ‘good’ and ‘bad’ cultural objects, and deconstructs the ‘imagined subjectivity’ of the academy, where specific approaches centred on enlightenment’s ideals of systematic rigour, critical analysis and reasoned argument are valorized and valued, even – perhaps particularly – when exhibited by those being studied (Hills, 2002: 19). This is because the foil used to critique the pessimistic view of fans as dupes has been the reification of fans as resistant users of texts, appropriating what they will from the culture industry’s offerings. I will now turn my attention to this by examining exaggerated fan model two.

**Exaggerated Fan Model Two**

The second model can be read as a reaction to the first. As a subsidiary of the larger audience of popular culture, it is reasonable for fan studies to have started from the point of a challenge to theories posited in the first model. How audiences were studied in light of the concern over mass media and its effects has left a heritage, and so the first wave of true fan studies is positioned as oppositional to this model; influenced by the effects tradition’s counter argument, the uses and gratifications approach to studying audiences, and the Birmingham School’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) theories critique the polar opposition positioning of producers and consumers by the Frankfurt School. This model views audiences, and eventually, fans, as operating on a continuum from active,
picking meaning from texts to gratify specific needs, through resistant, using the meaning to subvert the text and use it for their own purpose in a shadow economy (Fiske, 1989, 1992), to productive, claiming, owning and eventually even producing their own version of the text (Jenkins, 1992). This in itself is not unproblematic, as will be discussed in due course.

The uses and gratifications model favours the reader rather than the text, and presumes the audience is ‘goal-directed’ (McQuail, Blumler and Brown, 1972) hypothesising that audiences use media offerings to gratify four clusters of needs; **diversion** from their routine or problems in order to gain emotional release; **personal relationships**, in the form of either what Horton and Wohl (1956) had termed a ‘para-social relationship’ with a media personality or as a means to instigate and continue social interaction with their primary group; **personal identity**, whereby the media is used as a personal reference, where features of the individual’s life are related to, their own problems understood through, and their values reinforced through, the media product; **surveillance**, in terms of understanding the world outside of the context of personal interpretations. The idea that media products are used in the construction of personal identity, and to interact with the product and their social environment is particularly useful in the understanding of ‘the internet age’ audiences required by this thesis, and deserves some credit. McQuail et al. advocate:

[t]his [audience] orientation is reminiscent of the perspective of symbolic interactionism, according to which a central element of the world of every person is some notion of himself, and such a notion is formed in great part by looking at oneself through the eyes of others. Apparently, not only interpersonal exchanges but mass communications can help some people to form or reassess impressions of their own ‘selves’ (2000: 450).
Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch analyse uses and gratifications research, identifying at least three distinct sources from which audiences derive gratifications: ‘media content, exposure to the media per se, and the social context that typifies the situation of exposure to different media’ (1974: 514). Concluding that only media content has been analysed in great depth, they also opine:

the need to relax or to kill time can be satisfied by the act of watching television... that the need to structure one’s day may be satisfied merely by having the radio “on”... [that] the wish to spend time with one’s family or friends can be served by watching television at home with the family or by going to the cinema with one’s friends (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1974: 514).

Uses and gratifications approach can therefore be viewed as the analysis of audiences’ media consumption being organised by gratification, rather than as a response to stimulus, as directed through needs being met socially, emotionally and aesthetically, rather than as the result of the industry deciding what the audience should derive from the product.

Throughout, it is reasoned that audiences do something with the text, rather than merely absorb it wholesale and react to a message, emphasising the individual’s agency (Burton, 2005: 89). Instead of being unwitting dupes swept away by the power of the Culture Industry, audiences are active, engaging with mediated messages. The approach allows theoretical space for response and interpretation to vary as each individual responds to different texts in different ways. The critiques of this model, namely the difficulty in producing sociological theory about audiences from such individual interpretations, the emphasis on individuals being able to coherently assess how they are using the texts and relate those actions to the researcher, and the audience’s insulation from any external influence, meant
that neither the effects or uses and gratifications models were without their limitations (Elliot, 2000: 457, Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 7-9, Lacey 2002: 171).

From this summary, it is possible to see how the history of audience studies research up to this point is:

characterised as a series of oscillations between two different, sometimes opposed, points in this ‘chain’ of communication and command. …[M]essage based studies, which moved from an analysis of the content of message to their effects on audiences; …[and] audience based studies, which focused on the social characteristics, environments, and subsequently, needs, which audiences derived from, or brought to, the message. (Morley, 1980: 2)

The problems of the two models are efficiently summed up by Liebes and Katz; ‘As [effects] theorists became aware that they were studying texts without readers, gratifications researchers came to realise they were studying readers without texts’ (1990, cited in Watson, 1998: 65).

The theorists’ debate concerning passivity and activity, where proponents decry one position and laud another whilst neither is able to fully assess the complex interactions between individuals, audiences, texts and institutions, eventually gave way to the encoding/decoding model of communication developed by Stuart Hall at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University, which has been adapted and augmented by subsequent theorists.

Hall’s encoding/decoding model (1980) is a ‘halfway house’ between the previous models, providing a theoretical framework which combines, the notion of agenda setting and the media’s power to define issues for the audience from the effects tradition, with the concept of an active audience where the viewer makes meaning from signs and symbols based on their
ability to interpret from the uses and gratification model. Elaborating on Parkin’s (1972) theory of meaning systems and social class with its dominant, subordinate and radical system variants, he argues structured polysemic media messages are interpreted in one of three ways. The viewer decodes the message, through their own meaning structures, based upon their frameworks of knowledge, relations of production and the technical infrastructure, thus, encoding/decoding operates in ‘a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments – production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction’ (Hall, 1980: 128). Although they are interconnected, the meaning structures of the producer and receiver differ, as the codes chosen to decode the message can take a different position to the dominant hegemonic one produced and sent through the meaning structures of the broadcaster. Hall writes ‘[p]roduction and reception of the television message are not, therefore, identical, but they are related: they are differentiated moments within the totality formed by the social relations of the communicative process as a whole’ (1980: 130). However, the viewer can take one of three positions when decoding. They can operate within the dominant code and take the ‘preferred’ message ‘full and straight’ from the broadcast in a type of ‘fully transparent communication,’ they can take a negotiated position, one where the legitimacy of the hegemonic code is accepted, but ‘shot through with contradictions’ brought about by the application of situated elements – those ‘local conditions’ affecting the decoder, or they can take an oppositional code and use their own preferred code to ‘retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference’ (1980: 136 – 138).

Although highly influential in reconceptualising the space between the effects and uses and gratifications traditions, the work of the Birmingham School ‘tends to ‘assume’ the audience, preferring to concentrate on the text’s ideological and semiotic constituency…[it] retreats from direct
analysis of audiences, tending to assume responses rather than directly interrogate them’ (Lewis, 2002: 261). Generally, as the analyses from Hall and his fellow academics progress, more emphasis is placed upon gender, employment status, ethnicity and sexuality, and less on the social class of the decoder, due in part to the changes taking place in British society and British youths’ reaction to it, particularly at a subcultural level. Later work from the Birmingham School based on Hall’s encoding/decoding model focussed on the analysis of particular audiences, rather than the loosely defined audience as discussed by Hall, one that had proved problematic for research.

Morley’s study of the news programme ‘Nationwide’ (1980) provides empirical data about audiences, rather than the speculative assumptions in Hall’s theory. He adapts Hall’s encoding/decoding model with its preferred reading, the alternative reading, and the oppositional reading. He uses twenty-nine groups of people who already had a ‘social entity’ existing outside of the methodological framework of the study (1980: 36). Differing group responses to the programme illustrated how messages can be encoded in different ways, but can never be ‘wholly closed around one reading’ as they are interpreted in opposite ways by divergent groups (1980: 10). Decoding the message is, therefore, a complex process; this offers to audience and fan studies evidence that response to the media is no longer simply an effect as offered in pathological analyses, or as simple as straightforward encoding/decoding. Within these categories there are different degrees of acceptance, negotiation and opposition, and use of each response often relates to the external distribution of socio-cultural power. For example, lab technicians wholly aligned with the dominant code and delivery of the message, managers were more likely align with the dominant code, although disagree with the delivery (1980: 59, 107), shop stewards were more likely to take an oppositional reading although accepted the style
(1980: 113), and trade union officials exhibited a mediated position (1980: 102, 112). At a later stage Morley rejected the encoding/decoding model of general audiences in favour of localised struggles for meaning in the domestic environment, turning more towards qualitative, empirical data (Lewis, 2002: 264).

It could be argued a fan’s process of encoding/decoding is employed at a greater depth than a general audience member with relation to their fan artefact as they are ‘excessive readers’ (Fiske, 1992: 46); despite appearing on the surface to have similar readings based on their ‘social entities’ Jenkins argues this model ‘impl[ies] that each reader has a stable position from which to make sense of a text rather than having access to multiple sets of discursive competencies by virtue of a more complex and contradictory place within the social formation’ (1992: 34). Although there may be a consensus regarding the canon of key episodes, fandoms are not monolithic; within the communal fandom of any single fan object there are many interpretations, as though meaning is encoded at the point of production, the fan’s understanding, focus and preferences are all subjective and dependent upon the individual’s experiences. As the socio-cultural positions of the individual fan changes throughout the life cycle of their fandom, their model of interpretation alters with it reflecting developments in their ‘meaning systems,’ and although they may stick with their cultural artefact, their fan performance, participation and reading of their fandom will often be reshaped as a consequence during their rereading of the text throughout their lives.

As CCCS analyses turned towards subcultures and resistance as their overarching theme, the tendency is ‘to celebrate the extraordinary against the ordinary – a binary opposition between resistant “style” and conformist “fashion’ (Storey, 2006: 164) Commencing with Hebdige’s Subculture, the Meaning of Style, its examination of ‘spectacular’ consumption (1979: 97) in
the formation of subcultural identity ‘investigate[s] the semiotic resistances of creative consumers’ (Moores, 1993: 134). Stating that the development of youth subculture in the postwar period was ‘part of [a] process of polarisation’ brought about by changes in society, including, but not limited to, the destruction of the local community, a relative change in the positions of leisure and work, changes in the education system and a rise in the disposable income of the working classes, all combined to provide the social conditions for ‘the seemingly spontaneous eruption of spectacular youth styles’ (Hebdige, 1979: 74-75). Hebdige argues there are two ways in which subcultural groups are managed as ‘potentially threatening phenomena’; they can be ‘trivialised, naturalised, domesticated’ and therefore brought back into the dominant parent culture in a sequence of resistance and incorporation, or ‘transformed into meaningless exotica’ and relegated outside of the culture (1979: 97).

Initially conceived of as predominately the working class youths’ need to create ‘an alternative identity’ (Hebdige, 1979: 88), the continued diversion into more ethnographic investigations by the Birmingham School led some members to deflate the notion of subculture as a working class phenomenon, and instead look at how all youth create identity and make meaning out of the cultural resources available. Willis argues in Common Culture, the historical and economic features of race, gender, ethnicity and geographics of location are ‘relations and resources to be discovered, explored and experienced…lived and experimented with’ rather than mere determinations (1990: 12). His work on symbolic creativity positions the young as ‘involved in the active construction of meaning, identity and lifestyle. They are credited, through their consumption of [the] popular…with creating a vibrant and resonant culture’ (Moores, 1993: 138).

In this regard, we again see the provenance of fan studies through the larger context of shifts in academic concerns; with the group management of fans
accomplished by othering, exoticising and trivializing their ‘abnormal’ cultural practices and the ‘mindless’ products they engage with, fans, like their subcultural youth counterparts, can be positioned as ‘refus[ing] to conform to the passive commercial tastes of the majority’ (Storey, 2001: 184). The first wave of fan studies’ celebratory or ‘fandom is beautiful’ stance (Gray, 2007: 8), emphasising resistance, appropriation and difference from mainstream therefore descend from this subcultural model. It is no great theoretical leap to see how the conception of ‘symbolic creativity,’ in particular, the importance of our control over language, power which provides us with ‘interaction and solidarity with others’ (Willis, 1990: 208), has been taken up by fan studies in their analysis of fan practices and their relation to structures of power.

Gradually, the idea of subculture as a working class resistance as argued by Hebdige and the CCCS lost authority, as it became recognised that ‘[a]uthentic’ subcultures were produced by subcultural theorists, not the other way around’ (Redhead, 2000: 25). Hebdige’s own subject of examination, punk, was reincorporated, mainstreamed, commodified and naturalised; ‘punk, the last subculture, was dead’ (Clarke 2003: 223). And yet, the work remains influential. Thornton’s work on subcultural capital in club culture expands and critiques the class based model of subculture initially offered by the CCCS, combining it with the cultural capital of Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (1984). Used by some of the second wave fan studies, for example, Jancovich (2002), *Club Cultures* accounts for the influence of the media in realigning the boundaries of authentic and inauthentic, therefore providing subspecies of capital which are not in line with the emphasis on institutionalised cultural capital offered by Bourdieu; instead ‘hipness’, in groups and out groups become the new exchange system (1995: 12).

What was subcultural can become mainstream, in Hebdige’s terms, ‘trivialised, naturalised [and] domesticated’ (1979: 97) and in an ironic twist,
there can also be a kitsch subcultural value in commercial mass culture of a previous era. To add to the fuzziness of the term, some theorists posit mainstream as the dominant bourgeois aesthetic and locate deviant working class culture as the antithesis, whilst others position mass working class culture as mainstream and middle class student culture as subcultural. What Thornton emphasises is these distinctions are used to give shape to the clubber’s own social world; they have rich mental maps full of cultural detail and value judgments, which are used to measure their own and other’s cultural worth, in a way similar to fans, particularly the mattering maps of Grossberg, that ‘tell us where and how we can become absorbed… potential locations for our self-identifications, and with what intensities… They are the places at which we can construct our own identity as something to be invested in, as something that matters’ (1992: 57). These maps also serve to demarcate who is within the boundary of the group, and who is not. As Bourdieu says ‘nothing classifies somebody more than the way he or she classifies’ (1989: 19).

Arguing that ‘popular culture is made in relationship to structures of dominance’ and can take ‘two main forms – that of resistance or evasion’ (Fiske, 1989: 2). Fiske, arguably the first of the true fan theorists, has provided fan studies with influential material. Using the work of de Certeau (1984) and the tactics of resistance, as does Jenkins, Fiske asserts that the polysemic nature of texts is what provides the audience, with the ability to ‘evade, modify, or challenge [the] limitations and controls’ of cultural determination (1989: 59). This is made possible because cultural commodities are part of concurrently running economic and cultural systems, with the latter’s emphasis on ‘meanings, pleasures, and social identities’ (1987: 311). Although the economic system, the production, distribution and selling of commodities may be controlled by the producer,
the cultural consumption, the meanings and pleasures the consumer derives, cannot (Storey, 2003: 32-33, Moores, 1993: 131).

Selecting a performer, genre or narrative from the cornucopia of popular culture texts, fans rework them into ‘an intensely pleasurable, intensely signifying popular culture that is both similar to, yet different from, culture of more ‘normal’ popular audiences’ (Fiske, 1992: 30). The continuous reworkings of the text ‘means that audiences are able to experience a pleasure that frees them from the instrumental rationalities and order of patriarchal capitalism’ (Lewis, 2002: 273). Reading, viewing, listening and using texts pleasurably, and not in a way necessarily intended by the producer is a form of tactical resistance, of, borrowing from Eco, ‘semiotic guerilla warfare’ (Eco, 1986). Reworking the theory from Bourdieu’s cultural economy, he argues fans use a parallel set of subcultural discriminatory practices that function to create new classes, hierarchies that exist outside of the usual economic constraints of a class based system, and instead use cultural capital of popular cultural artefacts as their value system.

Semiotic and social resistances are used against the powerful; in the domain of popular culture, it is almost entirely semiotic resistances that transpire in opposition to power and the continued struggle against homogenisation and consensus, as ‘the popular is conceived as necessarily political and transgressive’ (Lewis, 2002: 274). Storey summarises Fiske’s argument succinctly:

> Popular culture is a semiotic battlefield in which conflicts are fought out between the forces of incorporation and the forces of resistance, between imposed sets of meanings, pleasures and social identities, and the meanings, pleasures and social identities produced in acts of semiotic resistance (Storey, 2003: 33).
The cultural economy and its emphasis on resistance and difference directs attention to the many small tactical resistances popular culture’s audiences engage in during their consumption. These strands of theory are important for Fiske and thus, have been influential in fan studies, although his work has been criticised for ‘want[ing] it both ways’ through his celebratory rhetoric and optimism about textual reading and consumption, whilst maintaining a degree of ‘ideological power for the text itself’ (Lewis, 2002: 276). Critiqued for his part in the ‘drift into uncritical populism’ by McGuigan (2006), Fiske is seen to ‘back popular culture study into a narrow corner of the field, breaking with any effort to explore the complex circuits of culture, including production as distinct from productive consumption’ (2006: 602, 605, author emphasis).

McGuigan’s point here makes a critical distinction, for although fans undoubtedly produce and consume their own versions of the text as well as those offered by the industry, it is more in line with Toffler’s idea of the prosumer, those people who produce and self-consume their own products in a process of self-actualisation (Toffler: 1984, Toffler and Toffler: 2006). He argues individuals or groups ‘who create goods, services, or experiences for our own satisfaction, rather than for sale or exchange… both produce and consume our own output, we are “prosuming”’ (Toffler and Toffler, 2006: 153). In this way, the specific productions of fans discussed by Fiske, and others, such as those offered by Jenkins (1992) and Bacon-Smith (1992) can also be reframed as acts of prosumption, which somewhat lessens their celebratory stance, diffuses some of the critique, and allows aspects of their work to be taken forward into the internet age, specifically with reference to collaborative communities directed towards fan content. As opined by Kozinets (2007), fans are prosumers:

who identify as the members of a particular group that collectively uses a culture of consumption — and whose “use”
includes the individual and collective consumption of overlapping and even conflicting practices, identities, meanings, and also alternative texts, images, and objects (Kozinets, 2007: 205).

The use of alternative texts is also of particular importance in the work of Jenkins (1992) whose book *Textual Poachers* exploits the notion of ‘nomadic poachers’ of content to the full. It is often cited as one of the most influential book in fan studies, in many ways, canonical, mainly because of its location in a particular space and time theoretically, although with its celebratory focus on Star Trek media fandom it is a part of the wider analytical trend for scrutinizing specific fan bases rather than fans generally. Positing fans as excessive readers of texts who are ‘active producers and manipulators of meaning’ (1992: 23), he draws on de Certeau’s idea of ‘poaching’ (1984) to illustrate how fan processes transform texts, utilising them to their own ends; fans ‘appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture’ (1992: 23). He uses de Certeau’s poaching to:

emphasise the process of making meaning and the fluidity of popular interpretation’ as “‘poaching” is a theory of appropriation, not of “misreading”… [the latter] is evaluative and preserves the traditional hierarchy bestowing privileged status to authorial meanings over reader’s meanings (1992: 33-34).

By giving weight to reader’s appropriations, rather than authorial meanings, he is able to challenge the idea of there being a preferred way of reading a text, (in a manner echoing Hall’s encoding/decoding model) i.e. the way taught by the academy, one which results in popular readings being of lesser value ‘even in the most charitable version of this formulation’ and
scholarly readings being ‘objective’ (1992: 33). Readers are also nomadic, moving in on texts, intertextually reappropriating and combining works. He argues ‘fans, like other consumers of popular culture, read intertextually as well as textually and their pleasure comes through the particular juxtapositions that they create between specific program content and other cultural materials’ (1992: 37).

Identifying that fans use particular modes of reception, preferred reading practices, constitute an interpretative community, and are engaged in cultural production which helps them to form an alternative social community, he theorises these dimensions offer fans an opportunity. Fans, as the poachers, are engaged in an ongoing battle for control over the meaning of texts with the producers, those who are in positions of power. Through active reading fans reappropriate meaning to claim the text, although they will remain positioned marginally as they are not in possession of the economic means to control cultural production. As with Toffler, where ‘[i]nstead of ranking people by what they own... the prosumer ethic places a high value on what they do’ (1984: 403) it is how people recombine what is available that makes them productive and resistant, not their production of goods or services for sale.

Within the cultural economy, fans are peasants, not proprietors, a recognition which must contextualise our celebration of strategies of popular resistance... controlling the means of cultural reception, while an important step, does not provide an adequate substitute for access to the means of cultural production and distribution (Jenkins, 1992: 27).

Fans, therefore, may have a specific intensity of emotional involvement in the text, interweaving it into their daily lives, displaying a huge commitment, organising schedules and sharing gossip with keen levels of attentiveness, reworking the narratives to suit their lives; all of this allows
the fan to participate fully, but they remain unable to ever have full mastery over the object of their desire as they do not own it. However, as ‘consumers of a vast media culture,’ fans are nomadic readers who possess the wherewithal to draw from various genres and texts, and use critical practices to construct a canon, to make meaning from the texts available.

In Jenkins’ analysis a specific type of fan is identified outside of the poacher/nomad model – that of the fan producer. Some fans are already involved in small-scale productive processes; in earlier years fanzines and small-scale video montages, latterly with internet publishing and YouTube movies. In the process of rereading the text and poaching it, appropriating it for their own ends, there is space for fans to rewrite the narrative in a way more in keeping with their own idealised versions of the text. As fans become more involved in the text and internalise it, they move away from the ‘tacit contract’ held between fans and producers and therefore, those predetermined responses to the text made possible through a disciplined audience’s unquestioning consumption. They begin to realise the text can be recombined in any manner of ways, in formats that please them, filling gaps they believe exist in the ideology, narrative, or metatext. These fans write new texts, reconceptualising, expanding timelines, refocusing the protagonist’s narrative or changing the protagonist entirely. They realign the moral base of the narrative, shift and combine genres, crossing over between different series and actors, even write stories with emotional intensification and erotic content. Other fans visually rewrite stories, combining clips of specific episodes, story arcs, many seasons worth of favourite moments or character led montages, setting them to appropriately chosen music to add further value to the new narrative. These textual and visual productions serve two purposes, one for the fan’s identity within their chosen artefact, the other for the fan’s identity within the larger fan community. These productions act as a fan-sanctioned stopgap in the narrative, predominantly
where fans feel the story would benefit from expansion. This is of particular use when a production or distribution company decides to terminate a series before a fitting conclusion to the hyperdiegisis is allowed, when a favourite actor is replaced, or where fans’ interpretation of the text differs from that provided by the writer. Secondly, it gives the fan prestige within the community; their enthusiasm for distributing well written ‘fannish’ or ‘proper fan’ content adds to their cultural capital, as it proves their knowledge of the text; their social capital, as it displays their desire to cooperate and support other fans and the group; and their symbolic capital, as it demonstrates their authoritative voice and officially sanctioned position in the fan hierarchy. An addition to fan’s symbolic capital is the possibility of their storyline influencing their fan object and being taken up by the official producers, even the fan ‘poacher’ turning ‘gamekeeper’ and becoming the cultural producer.

Although fans ridicule mass culture consumers for buying into lifestyles or the latest trends and fashions, fans themselves often spend a considerable amount of money and time buying fan merchandise, either in quantity, collecting over and above what others would seem reasonable, or in quality, buying rarer pieces with higher worth, or older pieces to provide cultural capital and prove fans longstanding commitment. Of course this in itself is part of the trend for moral dualisms, this time from the position of the fan. Fans are seen as ‘specialist’ consumers, who reject the ephemeral and mainstream media offerings available, instead choosing from within their own canon, or looking for new analogous texts to insert into it. Hills (2002) argues this is not just a theoretical inconsistency – it is one lived by fans on a daily basis as they negotiate their fandoms and the right way to be a fan.

On the one hand, we are presented with a view of fans as (specialist) consumers, whose fandom is expressed through keeping up with new releases of books, comics and videos. On the other hand, we are told that fans whose practices are ‘clearly
linked with’ dominant capitalist society (e.g. they may be trying to sell videos recorded off-air) are likely to be censured within the fan culture concerned’ (2002: 29).

The two are not mutually exclusive, as above all, fans consume over and above the usual amount of material on the road traveled in their fandom, consuming with narrow focus very specific types of texts, in great depth, negotiating their identity and cultural capital in the process.

This is part of a shift in consumer culture and in the academy, as a theory of identity as consumption based also occurs at this time, equally in terms of a social and communal identity (Bourdieu, 1984: Bauman, 1993: McRobbie, 1994: Baudrillard, 1998, for example). Fans are as likely to use commodities as any other group of people in a material driven society. In fact, in many respects, fans are more likely to add subjective value to an item than non fans, as their affect, as Grossberg (1992) would have it, makes a more compelling motivator in their identity production than the pleasure involved in consumption for the average consumer. Fans attach symbolic and sign value to objects concerned with their fandom as much as anyone else, using them socially, for prestige or affiliation, or to claim one identity whilst refuting another. Particularly with fans’ predisposition to aestheticising practices and excessive consumption, if we truly are living in an increasingly commodified age, it is no surprise that fandom, with its niche markets of avid consumers, is becoming nothing out of the ordinary.

Hills argues that in the area of fan as consumer, the use-value and exchange-value of commodities, those remnants of Marxist theory, have to be reconceptualised away from the intersubjective and public towards the personal and private, as the fan’s final consumption converts the two into private use value (2002: 34). Fans’ reappropriation of the text, their consumption of merchandise, their circulation of fan products, all become
infused with their own subjective measure of worth, their importance to the fan’s cultural identity, and its financial and social worth within the fan community. This of course, is immeasurable, and explains why seemingly worthless items no longer in production have a value in fan markets far outstripping their reasonable worth. It is because of an intensified personalised use value, one considered through the cultural lens of an individual’s fandom, that mass produced items can achieve the sort of incongruity with their use and exchange values witnessed on Ebay and at conventions.

Within these analyses, I would argue the element of fans as prosumers should be stressed and brought forward in our examinations, rather than the over-optimistic ‘fan as producer’ described by Fiske (1989, 1992), Jenkins (1992), and Bacon-Smith (1992). Although fans can cross over and make money out of their fandom, this has been overemphasised by some. The vast majority of fans are not engaged in rewriting texts, producing videos or writing filk songs, but they are heavy, specialised users of texts, finding common ground with other similar users, making community out of their fandom, in ‘a non-money economy’ centred around knowledge, services and experiences (Toffler and Toffler, 2006: 153).

Reframing fan productivity in this way may answer some of the criticism levied by Hills (2002) who challenges Fiske’s notion of ‘productivity’ in fans semiotic and enunciative displays, stating there is:

the suspicion that the term is being pushed to do too much work, since, short of not watching a programme at all, there appears to be no way of not being ‘productive’ in relation to it (2002: 30).

Productivity is used as a rhetorical tool to deflect attention away from the idea of consumption as central to fan practices, instead allowing for the
imagined subjectivity of the researcher to conceal distaste for anything commercial with far more noble and creditable activity, one operating at a resistant, subcultural level, but it serves its original purpose; the depiction of fans as productive, resistant and canny media consumers provides a sharp contrast for the mass culture critique’s positioning of fans as passive cultural dupes.

The Balanced Approach

In recent years, fan studies has turned its attention towards exploring the less extraordinary, less resistant activities of fans, those more in keeping with what all people who are engaged with the pursuit of a pleasurable activity do, how that define themselves through their interests, consumption, and community. Jenkins contended in *Textual Poachers* that ‘[t]here is no sharp division between fans and other readers. Rather I would insist upon continuities between fan readers and a more general audience’ (1992: 54); thus, the resistant/prosumer stance of the previous model has lessened, as it became more acceptable to study fans and their activities as normal.

Recognition of the previous two models inappropriate portrayal has led to a theoretical expansion in fan studies, heralded more generally by a shift in how we conceive audiences, best discussed by Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998), which will be covered shortly. As the need for the active academic pursuit of analytical space has waned, one that allowed fans to be understood on their own terms, albeit in an over celebratory way that reflected only a small proportion of fan activity, there is gravitation towards the idea of fandom as everyday; fandom itself (perhaps, in part as a result of
fan studies) has become more acceptable and mainstream, no longer the domain of loners and losers. The questions now, are no longer what are fans, specifically, what activities set them apart from the general audience, particularly viewed in terms of public organised engagement, but who are they, and how do they become, what does the individual do to derive fannish pleasure and interiorise their fandom, and what does this say about them and those they want to feel a sense of belonging with through their associations?

Perhaps the most obvious way of looking at this is what is it that fans do that keeps them returning to their fandom, what emotions drive their passion for their fan object. One of the key criticisms of the first wave of fan studies is that, with the exception of Grossberg, (1992), there is a general absence of the emotional, ‘affective’ element of why fans engage with their fandom; instead, meaning production and rational, cognitive processes are used to explain the attachment and involvement of fans, from Jenkins (1992), Penley (1992), Radway (1984), Bacon-Smith (1992) amongst others. As Hills asserts, ‘[w]ithout the emotional attachments and passions of fans, fan cultures would not exist, but fans and academics often take these attachments for granted, or do not place them centre stage in their explorations of fans’ (2002: 90). This stems from the problem of reacting to the exaggerated fan model one, as even the defence of fans needed to occur in as ‘rational’ a frame as possible in order for fans stories to be heard. In many regards, this was a necessary and fundamental compromise in order to open the space for consequent waves of fan scholars’ examinations, and make passage for their spread and balance.

Other factors have also affected the demise of the ‘fandom is beautiful stage,’ as the theoretical tools of that era no longer fit fans’ current experiences; for example, media convergence and technological innovation allows easier, instant access to fan communities, in a ‘mediated quasi-
interaction’ that may ‘be slotted into the time-space niches of one’s life at will’ (Thompson, 1995: 219) and the elevating of fans as consumers of niche products gives fans a precious place in the market for the producer’s niche franchised goods (Kozinets, 1997; Tankel and Murphy, 1998). The general move towards identity and consumption, as mentioned previously, combined with information technology’s continued influence on our interactions, may also have contributed in the mainstreaming and acceptance of fan activity. Jenkins himself has progressed from ‘theories of audience resistance and appropriation’ towards ‘audience participation and collective intelligence’ (2006: 5), where audiences are neither ‘autonomous’ nor ‘vulnerable’, but subject to interplay between similar fans, other texts, and the producer (2006: 135-136). This trend has been greatly enhanced by the internet, where the enlarged community and shortened response time where fans ‘interact daily, if not hourly’ (2006: 142) intensifies the affective connections fans have to their ‘knowledge culture’ (2006: 142), whilst providing a perfect, passionately loyal community for product marketing (2006: 148).

Second and third wave fan scholars have broadened their enquiry from meaning production, instead looking at the way cultural hierarchies are reproduced between and within fan communities, and the significance of fandom to identity. Harris’s work on Viewers for Quality Television (1998), or Jancovich’s on cult film audiences (2002) illustrate how distinction is used to set apart products and fandoms from each other, in a reworking of Thornton (1995) on subcultures (from Bourdieu, 1984) not dissimilar to Fiske’s subcultural economy (1989); in the third wave of fan studies, it is no longer strategies of resistance, of identity politics of a group of powerless, dispossessed fans that are the issue, but of identity itself and fandom’s significance to it, as the focus becomes the specific choices of why one fan object and not another, why one consumption and not another, but others
have analysed from the standpoint of the self, like Harrington and Bielby (1995), and the more personalised interactions between the fans and their object of fandom, for example McKinley (1997), Cavicchi (1998), Lancaster (2001), Sandvoss (2005), or facilitated by technology and performed to a community, best exemplified by Baym, (2000).

If fan studies questions now centre on the everydayness of fandom, on identity, personal attachment and the more psychological aspects of self-identification with the fan object, particularly in the way fandom is performed, they develop in part from the wider theoretical context of the self as reflexive project, where an authentic self builds a trajectory through narratives and lifestyle sectors, involving ‘clusters of habits and orientations…a unity… that connects options in a more or less ordered pattern’ (Giddens, 1991: 82). Thompson (1995) adds that the self is built through the appropriation of a vast array of ‘mediated symbolic materials’ (1995: 207), and that systems of expertise are employed to negotiate the ‘symbolic overload,’ where the opinions of media networks’ critics, or significant others, the primary group similar to the intermediate in Katz and Lazarsfeld’s two-step model (1955) shape choice and selection. As Slevin states, ‘[s]ocial relations and social contexts are thus reflexively incorporated into the forging of the project of the self’ (2000: 159). Fandom, whether emphasising a social or collective identity, can thus be viewed as one way of negotiating experience and constituting identity symbolically as a reflexive project, as the performances engaged in to adopt the identity of a fan, through consumption, collective association or communication, help organize experience.

Performance has only recently become related to audience research through a broadening of analysis in terms of audiences activity in private rather than in public as a result of mass media, as it privatizes performance due to its consumption taking place in the domestic sphere. This renegotiation of
‘audience’ fosters a greater understanding of the private and personal rituals people carry out whilst engaging with a performance, and how a degree of the sacred and extraordinary is invested in its act even in the environment of our own homes, albeit in varying degrees and with different amounts of seriousness. Furthermore, it is the secondary performance, i.e. the mass consumed, recorded, broadcast event that is more important than the original performance in modern society, meaning that performance is increasingly privatised and personalised by its audience. This can be seen at a global or local level, as the performance is no longer contained by a physical place, and is only constrained by the cultural limitations of the audience. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) implement a new spectacle/performance paradigm to audience studies, making identity rather than resistance to power the most prominent part of activity; this has a direct effect on fan studies, as it responds to the criticisms levied against the subcultural model, where the affective element was underplayed or absent. The emotional link between a sense of self and the pleasurable pursuit of a fan object sees the individual internalise their fandom to make meaning of their lives through creating associations with the fan object. (Cavicchi, 1998: 135).

Abercrombie and Longhurst argue performance is ‘critical to what it means to be a member of an audience’ as it defines both what an audience is engaging with, i.e. the concert or theatrical production, and what the performer is doing, the activity they undertake, the heightened form of expression used by a person where the ‘accentuation is deliberate, even if unconscious’ (1998: 40). This provides a liminal space, a place of reflexivity and ambiguity where the audience can examine individual and culturally sensitive issues safely and experiment with their identity through the viewed performance. Drawing from the work of Turner (1982) and Schechner (1988) in the field of performance studies, they extend the
straightforward notion of the theatrical performance/audience and apply it to other settings, including public events where ceremony and ritual are central to the performance, for example sporting occasions, funerals, religious worship, political rallies and so on. They further argue that everyday life is constituted from little performances, varying in degree and kind. Goffman’s dramaturgical metaphor of the stage has been used to explain exactly this; how people use elements of performance to manage the impression given to others across assorted settings, particularly those involving ritual and ceremony, and yet Abercrombie and Longhurst mention him only once.

Defining a new type of contemporary audience-experience, the diffused audience, Abercrombie and Longhurst claim we are all audiences all of the time. ‘Being a member of an audience is no longer an exceptional event, nor even an everyday event. Rather it is constitutive of everyday life’ (1998: 68-69). Goffman’s position is that ‘life itself is a dramatically acted thing’ and whilst the world itself is not a stage in the Shakespearian sense, ‘the crucial ways in which it isn’t are not easy to specify’ (1959: 78); Abercrombie and Longhurst look at the everyday performances people are exposed to as audience and performer, the mundane and the spectacular, and use it to explain how suspending text/reader interaction as the driving force may prove fruitful in analysing audiences, and therefore, fans.

The framing of performance as everyday has audiences experiencing simple or mass types routinely, blending into each other, with each spectacle self-referentially influencing the other, in what Thompson describes as ‘extended mediazation’ (1995: 111). The diffused audience is one which spends a great deal of time consuming a variety of mass media, in a way that makes it constitutive of their daily lives; it has become integrated, natural and familiar, a locator in terms of our nationality, culture, tastes and preferences, an ‘entertainer and informer’ (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 70).
Furthermore, the modern age is performative in the sense that we are always immersed in performances in terms of what we are exposed to as spectators, from direct, local events such as displays of flowers at road accidents, to the plight of people in war torn countries on television that stimulates collective action without the active participation of those whom the war affects, but also at an almost invisible level when we perform narcissistically in our daily practices, as performance to an imagined audience is inculcated and naturalised. ‘Life is a constant performance; we are audience and performer at the same time; everybody is an audience all the time. Performance is not a discrete event’ (1998. 73). Of vital importance to this argument is that contemporary society differs from earlier societies as performance is now more widespread and has a greater library of media resources on which to model behaviour and therefore, interact with the external world as an event.

Lasch (1979) contends a culture of narcissism exists in contemporary society, and the self is seen to be constantly performing to an audience, one who is focused solely on the performer, then constructing and reconstructing based on the reception of performance as reflected back by the audience, further supporting the performance paradigm Abercrombie and Longhurst offer. Adding to this analysis of modern life is narcissistic society’s affinity with the projects of the self, particularly self narratives (Thompson, 1995: 210), and so the link between performance (what is happening), audience (who is engaging with it) and fandom (how it operates in practice) becomes transparent, as it is way of constructing a mediated self-image in a feedback loop, with each element supporting the other. By fans using specific patterns of consumption, selecting very specific items from a broad range of media offerings, selected though processes of distinction, writing self-narratives, reusing texts and performing in certain ways to specific audiences, it becomes a way of projecting the self, of realising an identity. In other words,
what a fan experiences as an audience member bleeds out of the confines of their consumption and into their daily lives, from a multidimensional mediascape to a socially constructed identity.

As Jenkins says, ‘[t]here is something active about identity that cannot be ignored: it isn’t ‘just there’, it’s not a ‘thing’, it must always be established’ (Jenkins, 2004: 4). Therefore, by self-identifying, or being identified by others as, a fan establishes something about a person. The term ‘fan’ is never neutral as it is part of the way the individual’s performed identity is framed, because it positions them apart from the casual audience; its use is always performative (Hills, 2002), and multi-referential. To be a fan claims one identity and renounces another, commits to one group and foreswears some others, depending on the cultural work required from it. For example, performing a fan identity can gain the individual attachment and inclusion from displays of fan knowledge, as their fandom is performed to an audience of other fans. As in the case of Fiske’s cultural economy of fandom, deep knowledge of the text can be used to enhance social status, by improving the individual’s cultural and social capital within the context of the group. Fan performances can be used to accomplish a direct rejection of mainstream culture and high culture norms through an appropriation of subcultural norms, perhaps in a way similar to the resistance model as described by the CCCS. It can also be used to claim what could be viewed by the outside world as ‘improper’ identity, as it is one based on ephemeral media or seemingly unimportant texts. Furthermore, the performances change as they shift across cultural sites. Elements such as patterns of consumption or preferences for elevating specific parts of performance may be downplayed in one location and emphasised in another, even within fandom’s of the same cultural artefact, as each ‘setting’, in Goffman’s terms, has diverse cultural norms.
Fan performances are both internal and external. Fans perform externally – to others within and outside of their fandom, projecting the self with a social identity. Fans are audiences of other fans with the same aesthetic taste, and other fandoms, all of which help train the fan in the correct way to perform a fan identity. Hills, for example, discusses how fans use ‘discursive mantras’ in their performances, by which he means the culturally accepted discursive resources used by fans to describe their affection for their specific text (2002: 67). These are all part of a fan’s training in how to be seen to consume in the right way, the ‘collectively negotiated’ understandings used to protect and deflect away suggestions of irrationality as discussed in exaggerated fan model one. But fans perform internally too – drawing on their fan identity in the formation of their self; their social identity infuses their individual and group identities. By performing a fan identity, the individual brings the specifics of their own life narrative and imbues it with their fan performance, but their fan performance also used to make sense of their own inner world.

A fan may be a ‘true fan’ but they cannot escape the material conditions of their existence, so there is an inherent sense of conflict between facets of their identity; on the one hand they are consuming the right way and following the consensus view of the community, but on the other they are subject to the social specificities of their gender, age or class, and bring elements of their performances in these other areas with them, in ways which may conflict with their fan performance. If we return to Jenkins’ producers, we can see the two purposes served by the rewriting of narratives dovetails with these performances. Firstly, the fans who produced video montages or new narratives, according to Jenkins, were using these recombinant forms to fill gaps where they felt the narrative lacked something, stories which were not being told, or narratives that needed to continue past their cessation of production. These gaps are the ones where
the inescapable factors of race, gender and sexuality and power hold influence over fan performances, and the spaces where the fan internalises the text. External performances framed by Jenkins would serve to empower fans as a whole, as a group of people with a voice and an identity, a community of skilled readers who were able to appropriate and understand texts. Performing externally provides a larger fan phenotype, and validates fan identities as it displays to non-fans the diverse people involved in fandom.

Sandvoss articulates that in the intense relationship fans have with their chosen artefact, the reality of the fan object as an external object disappears; instead, ‘the object of fandom forms part of the self, and hence functions as its extension’ (2005: 100). Fans connect at a fundamental and highly personal level with their fan object despite its widespread circulation. For example, sports fans often say ‘we’ when speaking about their team; other fans prioritise their fandom over and above personal relationships, instead favouring a stable and enduring relationship with a performer or television show. Sandvoss illustrates how the conflicts between the internalised fan object and the individual’s own material position are resolved in their self-reflective interpretation of their fandom and their fan performance. Subjective reading positions result in a rewritten narrative, one where fans’ socio-economic background, age, race, values and beliefs influence their interpretation of the text, which accounts for the varied and dissimilar understandings and uses fans adopt as ‘the readings correspond with the sense of self and self-image’ of the individual (2005:104). However, no matter how disparate the readings are, fans will still perform a group identity as part of an imagined community of other fans, enacting the role for their fandom by ‘doing’ what their fans ‘do.’

Sandvoss (2005a, 2005b) argues the openness of modern media texts makes possible an endlessly diminishing signification value, to the extent they become
absent of meaning to a greater or lesser degree, ultimately reducing to an almost blank slate on which fans write their own meaning. My experiences with online fan communities show that when engaging with a text a consensus exists, regardless of whether it is contested, developing, or goes without challenge. Online fandom in particular is not as freestanding as Sandvoss suggests, because it is performed before and evaluated by an audience who can directly denounce or support the interpretation of meaning, communally affecting the fan’s perception of the text and the way they build their identity around it in the process. This thesis challenges Sandvoss’s notion of neutrosemy and underscores the explicit relationship between the self and community in the construction and maintenance of individual and communal identities in online fan cultures.

The weakness in his argument stems from the overly broad definition of fandom employed, as it envisions a self-determined individual isolated from others, or at the least indifferent to self-reflections made on other fans’ perception of them and their right to call themselves a fan; this is what I will direct my attention towards first. For Sandvoss, fandom is defined as ‘the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text in the form of books, television shows, films or music as well as popular texts in the broader sense such as sports teams and popular icons and stars ranging from athletes and musicians to actors’ (2005a: 8); belonging is not mentioned, merely consumption, although Sandvoss acknowledges the significance of fandom as a form of Heimat. This definition could be used for any casual to semi-casual audience, as whilst an affective attachment to an object that organizes and shapes one’s sense of self may arguably be the domain of fans, emotionally involved consumption is something both fans and audiences engage in. To think otherwise would be naïve; in effect, network executives, script writers, musicians and athletes all desire and depend upon an audience that commits to their particular talent or production in order to promote its
regular consumption and their continued employment, but it does not mean that all of their audience are ‘fans’. King (2008) argues Sandvoss’s definition ‘renders them indistinct from consumers’, which I would agree with, supported by existing fan studies research. Abercrombie and Longhurst’s continuum of audience engagement suggests consumers are also involved in detailed talk concerning media objects, but differ from fans (in their terms, cultists) with regard to the ‘dimensions of object of focus, extent and nature of media use and degree and nature of organization’ (1992: 138). The authenticity of my own and others’ positions as fans are predicated upon knowing there is a difference in the scope, degree of intensity and focus of fans when compared to the average audience. Arguably Sandvoss’s definition downplays the fan’s sense of knowing they are more than, or at least other to, general consumers of a given text, and are distinguished by their specific knowledge of their fan artefact, what is within the boundary of their fandom, the right way to consume it, and, more explicitly, their sense of being apart from the masses and part of something more special and specialistic.

Sandvoss offers a model of fandom where it is ‘a form of narcissistic self-reflection not between fans and their social environment but between the fan and his or her object of fandom’ (2005a: 98) which paints the individual as marooned in their appreciation of the object; whilst it is true the majority of an individual’s consumption as an audience may occur privately, fans are aware of a network and are likely to organise their consumption and tastes according to the preferences of the fan audience in terms of the broader genre, or the external projects of key actors/musicians/writers and producers, even if their community is only imagined. In online communities, that audience is still imagined, but a more direct link to their tastes, opinions and interests is offered. Despite underlining the ‘sharp division between ‘us’ and ‘them’ implied by Heimat (2005a: 65), Sandvoss does not reflect enough upon the influence of an imagined generalized other in the fan’s self-construction, but it is central to
authentic fan status; whilst fans exist in a system of consumption, there is always a sense of engaging more frequently or more intensely than an average consumer of the product which requires the construction of an imagined audience and the fan’s relative position within its hierarchy.

Furthermore, at every stage, the individual reflects upon the way they are perceived by others and moderates their behaviour by emphasising or backgrounding elements of their performance to better conform to their audience; through continually reinforcing their performance, the individual internalizes the behaviour and adapts their self accordingly. Friends, colleagues acquaintances and fans assess whether a person is a fan or not based on their own imagining of the audience and their assessment of the individual’s performance.

For example, as I judge fan status relative to my consumption and knowledge of other fandoms I am engaged in I do not consider myself fan of a specific group, although I listen regularly to them. I do not ‘do’ what I have been instructed fans ‘do’, and so to claim a fan status would be inauthentic and disrespectful to those who perform and engage with the same intensity, focus and organization of experience as I have with BtVS. However, those judgments are also made by those outside and inside the fandom based on my performance and management of specific data and their own audience position. Though I own less than half of their back catalogue, if I over enthused someone with limited or no interest in them might consider me a fan in comparison to their own consumption; those within the fandom would be more inclined to consider me a casual listener or average consumer, as I own too little of the music and possess limited specialist knowledge about the group in comparison to their understanding of what a fan should ‘do’. I may instead suggest my position as belonging to part of a more generalized fandom of the genre, where my lack of specific knowledge is compensated for by the breadth and duration of consumption, made possible by saying the right things, using the right terms,
knowing other similar musicians. But this positioning performs other functions; not considering myself a fan publicly rejects or denounces my ‘fannish’ tendencies to prevent undermining my position in other fandoms.

I could understate my appreciation in order to ‘other’ authentic fans, dismissing my use of the object as an ironic appreciation or nostalgia, in order to distance my consumption from those who perform more ‘obsessively’, ‘crazily’ or ‘extreme’ (a contextual example of this is given in Chapter Five, where Buffy fans ‘other’ Twilight fans). It could also be used to heighten my sense of belonging to media fandom rather than music fandom, championing the geekier and more derided of the two fandoms. All of these positions, though, illustrate three things; an understanding of the relationship between my own subjective position and relative consumption, as I know whether or not I belong; a sense of other audience members and other audiences, whether they be consumers, fans or even anti-fans, and their tastes, preferences and intensity of focus; and, as the way we act towards an object is dependent upon the meaning we ascribe to it, the unequivocal link between our performances of fandom, our meaning and interpretation of an object and social interaction.

Reducing the influence of the other in the fan’s reading and consumption patterns allows Sandvoss to promote the condition of a textual neutrosemy, which he argues is the logical continuation to polysemy. By this, he means the multiplicity of meaning in polysemy exponentially increases until there is no signification value to meaning and it becomes theoretically absent (2005b: 825), or at least miniscule, though Sandvoss acknowledges the differing degrees to which fan studies research ever supported a genuine polysemy. He uses McKinley’s (1997) study of Beverley Hills 90210 fans to illustrate how the teenaged audience shared their interpretations of the text with a dominant hegemonic reading, and yet he maintains the constitution of modern and fluid media texts makes them neutrosemic. In particular popular culture texts lack the physical or textual boundaries of literary or cinema texts which have their
limitations defined at the point of production; in popular media texts, the consumer determines which parts are included in their fandom from a ‘voluminous text’ spanning many episodes, seasons and occasionally, incarnations (Star Trek, Doctor Who and Star Wars for example). Boundaries are set at the point of consumption, and meaning is decided upon and personalized by the fan’s self-reflection in the text. Cavicchi (1998), Jenkins (1992), and others, myself included, give greater recognition to the influence of belonging to a community in the fan’s self-construction. For example, distinct patterns of fan ‘training’ are evidenced, where the significance of specific texts are passed on, and the fan changes their performance accordingly to better correspond with the right way to be a fan, whether these take the form of developing and maintaining an online performance as described in my this thesis, in ‘becoming a fan’ stories that change over time (Jenkins: 1992, Cavicchi: 1998 and Baym: 2000), or fans’ own adherence to the discursive mantras of their fandom where ‘internal fan community understandings are collectively negotiated’ (Hills: 2002: 68) and circulated by ‘zines, fan media and the internet. As Sandvoss places a much lesser emphasis on fans’ sense of belonging to a imagined community of others who take pleasure from the same text, there is little need for them to conform to the ‘socially-licenced and communal’ discursive justifications Hills talks about, or reflect on the imagined community’s influence in the fan’s self construction and evolution.

Sandvoss’s lack of consideration of the fan in relation to an ‘other’ promotes an overly psychological approach in which the fan reads the self into the text narcissistically. Whilst this possibly may be true of some of what he considers fans to some degree, in online fandom, there is a definite sense of a collectively defined interpretation of the fan artefact (partly made possible by the physical layout of the board) and the performance expectations of a fan role sustained by continued interaction; though there may be some fuzziness around the periphery, if the way individuals make sense of their world is only made
possible through social interaction, shared meaning is inevitable. Though other cultural influences may influence meaning in other contexts, in the specific situation of an online fandom, the boundary markers are clear and the roles well rehearsed. Whilst there is no singular idea of what fandom contains, online fandom remains a communal experience, and neutrosemic validity is doubtful.

An individual’s fan performance defines their identity, for example, positioning them as fan, and part of a larger group; as a ‘shipper, who has a preference for a specific relationship in the narrative of a show; or a provider of gifts to the community, in terms of fan art (and here I include the production of banners, avatars, wallpapers), well written role-play involvement, or as a person who is abreast of gossip about the fandom; it reinforces cultural norms of the fan group, particularly those concerning non-money gift or knowledge exchange, where reciprocity and generosity engenders a sense of community with the audience it is performed in front of, which for the majority of performances, are other fans. This process feeds back to the fan, bolstering their fan identity through feelings of self worth and belonging, and reinforces the performance, in a powerful cycle. This is particularly pertinent to online fandoms, as time can be taken to correctly hone the performed fan identity, through the mechanics of the medium, which will be covered in greater depth in later chapters. It must be noted though, that the individual’s performances are also guided by those conventions of their community external to fandom, their lived social conditions. Fans are, after all, individuals performing their identity across various settings, and not all of them are as obvious as the fan performances engaged in at one cultural site.

Cavicchi (1998) offers perhaps the most detailed explanation of fandom as performance in his examination of the ‘becoming a fan’ stories told by Bruce Springsteen fans. Fans ‘become’ a fan in a number or overlapping ways – through the way casual consumption gradually becomes more compelling
and routine practice, through to different stages of initiation, learning the ropes of how to be a ‘true’ fan – but it is the frequent and regular sharing of ‘becoming a fan’ narratives with other fans that is the most persuasive argument for fans as performers. Within these narratives, fans offer a reflexive, introspective story that shapes experience and changes their reality, giving them new beliefs and norms. Furthermore, their narratives change over time, not only in a move to conform to the culturally specific ‘becoming a fan’ model for the community, but also as personal factors influence various aspects of their fandom. Performing their roles as permanent fan, rather than a temporary audience, necessitates specific rituals, required responses and for the fan to always remain in frame, using specialised language, the proper type of consumption, the correct fan point of view as sanctioned by the community, the right emphatic pauses. At a concert, this is more apparent, as the fan will have a specific way of performing their identity compared to an ordinary audience member, as they ‘are people whose role before a stage never ends; a concert is not a break from, but a continuing reaffirmation of, their everyday lives’ (Cavicchi, 1998: 95).

This reaffirmation, according to the model provided by Abercrombie and Longhurst, is made possible through the ongoing cycle of spectacle and narcissism, with ‘the nodes on this circuit being performances of one kind or another (1998: 99). Additionally, it is argued that not only is performance central to identity construction, it is recognised as such by the people performing the identity. Gauntlett notes in his study of Lego identity that participants ‘tak[e] for granted’ that people are performing an identity, and have ‘public face’ and ‘backstage’ private areas which need to be managed in order to present a coherent self (2007: 187-188). Participants also understood the idea of self-narratives forming a means of representing a unified identity; Gauntlett argues both these assumptions by the
participants signify not that the theoretical arguments are proven, but that people are aware of them and accept them as part and parcel of how identity is constructed in everyday life. Performing a fan identity, that is, knowing which parts to keep private and which parts to emphasise in a public, externally performing an individual social identity and fan group identity, internally drawing from the external fan identity, creating becoming a fan narratives, all of these combine to produce a unified identity, one which is accepted by the imagined fan community and is appropriate for the awkward juxtaposition of internal and external influences encountered in our current age of mediated identity and media convergence.

Technology has altered the way fans engage with their fandom, as well as the way we engage more generally with other people. Baym’s work on online fan communities (1995, 1998, 2000) shows how in online fandom, fan performances and the relationships built up through them are the fabric that sustains community, whilst acknowledging ‘we have far too little understanding of the spontaneous interpersonal interaction and social relations that make an audience a community, although these interactions are crucial to being a fan and incorporating mass media into our everyday lives’ (2000: 209). In the case of Web 2.0 technologies, the ‘web as participatory platform’ of Wikipedia, Facebook and Twitter, and to a lesser extent, bulletin boards where the content is user generated, offer interactive ways to perform to a community and communicate one’s fandom in a multi-media environment. Using technology to facilitate the many small ways in which fans communicate the mundane character of their fandom, the small performances across many platforms, from posting Wiki content, to updating status messages on Facebook that allow their fandom to bleed across settings; from taking content and news from the membership of one site, for example, the ‘become a fan’ facility on Facebook, through limited membership, semi-officially sanctioned sites that maintains direct contact
with cast and crew, or the ‘tweet’ from following a cast member, and posting
it on a fan community bulletin board that position the fan in a hierarchy,
from choosing themed music or desktops on mobile phones to homepages
upon launching browsers, all of these contribute to the total impression
fostered by the fan, to others both within and separate to their fan
community.

Read as evidence of the many ways in which small, everyday performances
occur in fandom, and how through the advance of technology and the
multiplication of platforms media convergence facilitates the blending of
contexts and audiences, it seems performance is a viable paradigm for
studying how fans construct their identity and project it to others through
their fandom. Having established that we are all performing to greater or
lesser degrees all of the time, Goffman’s absence is conspicuous in the
literature on fan studies, only being mentioned in passing. As the progenitor
of performance and impression management, this seems strange. Perhaps
this is because in comparison to Butler’s (1990) post-structuralist discussions
on performance, his work appears passé, or at least unfashionably
untheoretical. With the turn towards performance in audience studies and fan
performativity in fan studies, the use of Goffman’s theory of performance over
Butler’s theory of performativity in this thesis needs to be explored and
rationalised.

Goffman and Butler share common ground as both adopt an approach
emphasising the social construction of our lived experience; Lawler argues ‘it is
clear both see individual actions as responses as part of a wider social order that
permits some actions and disallows others’ (2008: 104). Although Goffman did
not examine gender the same depth as Butler, he is ahead of Butler’s
performative curve, reasoning in 1976 ‘there is no gender identity… only a
schedule for a portrayal of gender’ (Goffman et al., 1997:208). Some theorists
note the connections between the two, stating ‘[t]he persistent social
constructionism of Goffman’s analysis seems to anticipate certain core themes and accents in Judith Butler’s (1990) celebrated performative conception of gender’ (Smith, 2006: 94), or ‘retrospectively, … Goffman’s insights can be seen as a precursor to the contemporary notion of gender performativity (McIlvenny, 2002: 143). Whilst this is true, overemphasising the similarity can also be seen as a tactical manoeuvre employed to draw the attention of a larger audience to the value of Goffman’s work by tying it to the ‘theory star’ Butler (Hills, 2002, 202).

Whilst Goffman is critiqued for a lack of method, Butler suggests ‘theoretical clarity… on the basis of rigorous philosophical argument’ (Hills, 2002: 159). Though differences are evident in style and approach in comparison with Butler, Goffman’s work stands on its own merit. The most patent distinction is the scope and direction of their analysis, which in turn affects their position concerning the self and individual agency. Goffman’s heavily detailed descriptions of micro level interaction and specific contexts provide a basis for theories of the socially grounded agent rooted in social interaction, whilst Butler is less descriptive of events, emphasising instead the abstract, macro level, and political, to theorise the discursive construction of gender. Method and contextual data are sacrificed for a focus on theory in Butler’s performativity, with data from participant observation lacking; the reverse is true for Goffman, who concentrated on exploring conceptual distinctions through ethnographic evidence, producing concepts that may later be developed into theory as academic understanding of the interaction order progressed.

The abstractness of Butler’s writing fails to account for individuals’ agency in performing social action, a key recognition in this thesis. Online fans are socially situated, and their identity construction and performance simultaneously relates to and generates from their community and the media product. The structural forces at play in Butler’s analyses of gender are not clearly reflected in the construction of fan identities; online, fans carefully construct identity utilising a high degree of agency, and perform social actions according to a
mutually defined set of norms and values that relate to the context, and the fan object.

Butler’s gender performativity does not support this degree of agency, leading some to argue that her theories are too abstract and rooted in the primacy of structure to explain social interaction. Brickell’s examination of masculinity justifies using Goffman and not Butler for this reason; he argues that since the ‘cultural turn’ in the social sciences there has been an implied logic in reading social life and texts in the same way. However, ‘once we concern ourselves with agency, action, interaction and institutionalized social practices, … the inadequacy of a culturalist perspective become apparent.’ He concludes that although Butler offers insights into gender politics, her ‘theorizing of performativity… proves rather more well-suited to literary analysis than to social theory’ (2005: 39). Speer and Potter critique Butler’s work on similar grounds, but add that a lack of concrete data renders the theory nonrepresentational of lived experience, stating it is:

‘a theoretical abstraction, based on made-up decontextualised or idealised typifications that are considered outside of their use in actual setting… separated from features of interaction in specific contexts … [with] no sense of a peopled world in which participants interact and speak with one another’ (2002: 158).

Early internet work describing online identity performance is reflective of this. Butler’s theory has been applied in spaces where levels of social situatedness do not correspond to those in online fandom, for example in MUD, MUSH and MOO environments where interactions are based on fictive role play, identities are potentially fluid and transient, and do not related to daily embodied lived experience in the same way as online fandom communities. Fan cultures make meaning through shared appreciation of the fan artefact; thus, in this regard, Goffman and his heavily embedded social interactions are a better fit for explaining identity in online fan communities. However, Goffman’s work is
critiqued for being too rooted in the specifics of interaction and context to draw theoretical conclusions about social systems and methodologically too undefined to provide theory (Gamson, 1975: Schegloff, 1988, for example).

The superficially related theories of performance and performativity are the starting point for most comparisons, and so at this point it is useful to make the distinction between the two. In her examination of gender, Butler argues it is a historically constituted, socially shared performative act, one which ‘constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority’ (1988: 528) through ‘discursive practice[s]’ (1990). Butler’s performative acts resemble Goffman’s dramaturgical model of performance on the surface, but performance and performativity have different foci. Butler’s performativity is a ‘top down’ model that examines the construction of individuals through discourse and the repetition of discursive practices in the social system, whilst Goffman is concerned with how through performance, the tiny details of individual selves in social interactions can be developed ‘into an account of how such exchanges constitute lives’ (Hacking, 2004: 278). Perhaps the most clear distinction has been made by Brickell, who states ‘[w]hile the term performance implies enactment or doing, performativity refers to the constitution of regulatory notions and their effects’ (Brickell, 2005: 28).

Differences between the two theorists also initiate from the concept of the self. Firstly, though both agree there is no essential or innate self and the self comes into being through social acts, Goffman notes how individual possesses a sense of the settled self they become, a reasonably reliable personal and social identity that acts in concord with experience and the constraints of an expected role to provide the base and reference from which the subject projects a consistent and believable self performance. Butler argues the ‘appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment’ though she does recognise that ‘the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief’ (1988: 520).
The reasonably settled self is a discursive illusion for Butler; who instead contends the existence of quiddative traits is fantasy because gender, and therefore assumedly other identity markers that constitute a ‘seemingly seamless’ self, are achieved ‘through a series of acts which are renewed, revised and consolidated through time’ (1988: 523). Whilst there may be nuanced ways in which one does gender, or performs it, ‘that one does it, and that one does it in accord with certain sanctions and proscriptions, is clearly not an individual matter’ (1988: 525); in gender, we are all performatively acting ‘an act that that has been going on before one arrived on the scene,’ facilitating the production, reproduction and maintainance of the construct discursively. As Speer and Potter (2002) succinctly summarise for Butler:

‘the performance of gender does not embellish some authentic, original referent beneath it, nor is it wilful and deliberate. Instead, performative agency is both constrained and enabled through repetition, or the iterability of signs’ (2002: 153).

In effect, Butler is arguing Goffman’s performances are performative and are constrained by discursive practices. For Butler, there is ‘no doer behind the deed’ but ‘merely an illusion of a subject constituted by discourse’ (Brickell, 2005: 39), whilst Goffman argues the individual is constrained by mutually defined appropriate behaviour and practices, but they have some agency in the way they perform – there is an active subject pre-existing behind the performance (ibid.) that can choose whether to comply with the mutual definition of the situation, or not.

On the surface, Butler’s weakening of reflexive action is too rigid for the purpose of this thesis, as the data clearly illustrates how individuals possess a great degree of agency in constructing their online selves, agency which has parallels in offline contexts. Unlike Goffman’s performance, using Butler’s performativity to explain identity construction in online fandom limits the
ability of the subject to navigate their way through the complex and contextually defined social encounters people engage in every day, particularly when engaging in different environments simultaneously is sometimes encountered in a multi-dimensional, technologically driven society. Though Goffman has focussed on face-to-face interaction and his work predates a heavily technologically saturated society, he is more cognisant of an individual’s ability to shape their performance and moderate it accordingly in social exchanges, which is a more realistic approach in analysing encounters where the individual has greater reflexive control over ‘public’ appearance and manner, like the internet. Instead of discursive practices, Goffman argues role provides individuals with a blueprint, a receptacle in which their perceptions of social expectations are poured and drawn from to derive generalisable and transferrable routines and nuances that set the boundary for interaction and constitute the self when repeatedly enacted.

The concept of role is key to the distinction between Butler and Goffman; Butler’s analysis of gender opposes Goffman’s concept of ‘a self which assumes and exchanges various “roles” within the complex social expectations of the “game” of modern life’ (1998: 528). This thesis demonstrates how fans adopt a fan role, internalising it through the repetition of routines and practices to become a constitutive part of a cohesive self; this position is contrary to Butler’s assertion that ‘the self is not only irretrievably ‘outside,’ constituted in social discourse, but that the ascription of interiority is itself a publically regulated and sanctioned form of essence fabrication’ (1988: 528). Rather than Goffman’s self performance, Butler reads gender as a performative act, stating ‘the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts’ (1988: 521), acts which ‘tenuously constitute an identity…. through a stylised repetition of acts’ (original emphasis, 1988; 519). The ‘act’ is still repeated, but whilst Butler sees gender acts as being discursively constrained, Goffman’s theoretical framework sees a self defined by social expectations of
role and context, dependent on ascribed value learnt through social interaction, made possible by seeing the self through the eyes of the other and modifying performance accordingly.

As noted in Chapter Three, overemphasis of Goffman’s theatrical analogy in *The Presentation of the Self* (1959) misrepresents his work and detracts from its usefulness; he clearly states his theoretical framework is illustrated by pushing to the limits ‘a mere analogy,’ that it was ‘a scaffold,’ a device used in order to illustrate his theory about ‘the structure of social encounters’ in which ‘[t]he key factor is ... the maintenance of a single definition of a situation, this definition having to be expressed, and this expression sustained in the face of a multitude of possible disruptions’ (1959: 246). Butler, with others, seems to have focussed on theatrical analogy in her critique, the imagery rather than the substance. Goffman does not say we are *playing* a role like an actor, but instead, that we become ourselves through *enacting* roles in the context of our social encounters; as the self is constituted through personal and social identity all roles are aspects of the individual and the sum of roles and experiences constitutes the self.

This brings us to a second distinction. Goffman’s analogy unintentionally promotes the idea of a cynical and skilful manipulator, an agent who has knowledge of the social order and strategically manages their performance. The blame for this lies with Goffman, whose style of writing can detract from the message it is intended to convey, as in the case of the theatrical analogy. As Psathas says ‘[i]f Goffman’s actor has been accused of being calculating and managing his actions and appearances with deliberateness, it is because Goffman’s own language allows such interpretations’ (Psathas, 1996: 390). Whilst that may be the case with some performances and some contexts (and is particularly evidenced online by my data in some individual instances) the performance he conceives is far subtler. Lawler argues:
Goffman is not suggesting that (confidence tricksters aside) people are consciously manipulating or tricking one another. Rather, he argues all social life is artificial; it is just we bracket off some aspects as ‘real’ or ‘true’ and others as artificial (2008: 107).

Rather than acts, self performances are ‘an inevitable process and, indeed, we could hardly be a part of the social world without it’ (Lawler, 2008: 107).

This is in sharp contrast to Butler’s gender performativity, where the body ‘acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives’ (1988: 526). The scope for the individual as an originator of action is nullified, as the discursive construction of gender is so iterative, it directs all action and negates agency. Butler’s suggestion that the individual lacks agency and is discursively determined seems counterintuitive to performances of fan identity online and experiences of fandom, a position supported by others; as Hills asserts, fans:

seem to reverse Butler’s view of the ‘performative’ and ‘performance’; fans are ‘performative’ … when they describe the beginnings of their fandom’s… [but] claim fan agency and thus volitionally ‘perform’ and express their (now communal) fandom (Hills, 2002: 160)

after they have claimed it as their cultural identity. This thesis shows how by those claims are supported by adopting the role of fan in a socially sanctioned setting, and performing it repeatedly.

Whilst Butler’s theory is useful in conceptualising gender construction, it is perhaps not as useful when applied to the roles and identities individuals choose. As Hills says,

Fans do not claim ‘agency’ in their becoming a fan stories, but they do claim agency in their later ‘performances’ of fan identity… Fandom, perhaps unlike gender, possesses a moment of
This thesis shows how we can address this issue through use of Goffman’s theory of performance, rather than fan performativity. Goffman’s self is constantly evolving, but remains centred by the sense of a settled self that develops over time through experience, new roles and interactions, and new social groups. Agency is allowed, as ‘[t]he capacity for action does not depend on a self that is already fully existent, so our sense of ourselves … is both constituted and constituting’ (Brickell, 2005: 39). Goffman’s recognition of individual agency and concept of performance derived from socially rooted illustrations is favoured over Butler’s abstracted discursive self for the purposes of identity construction in online fan cultures.

Having justified this thesis’s application of Goffman’s concept of performance over Butler’s theory of performativity by examining their positions on the self and agency, the pitfalls and critiques of Goffman’s work need to be recognised. I will therefore briefly examine the content of Goffman’s academic corpus in order to advance the use of his endeavours in fan studies.

Goffman is a paradox for sociology; his work is well read and influential outside of the discipline (for example in Conversational Analysis, Health Studies, Criminology and Discourse Analysis), yet it is not received well by many of his peers, nor is the area to which he directed his energy, his lifelong attempt to establish the case for interaction order as a valued area of academic enquiry. This is something Goffman was acutely aware of, stating in his never delivered, posthumously published presidential address to the American Sociological Association, ‘[m]y colleagues have not been overwhelmed by the merits of the case’ (1983: 2). Synthesising the critiques his work has weathered offers an explanation of this.
Bourdieu opines Goffman ‘produced one of the most original and rarest methods for doing sociology (1983: 112-113), whilst Strong says ‘[i]n neither its style nor its content does [his work] fit the disciplinary norm’, though he concedes ‘many problems in its reception can be traced to its academic oddity’ (1983: 346). Goffman holds a unique place in sociology, and is almost viewed as *sui generis* (Lemert, 1997: xiii) with his easily identifiable writing style and his micro analytical focus on co-present encounters; however, there are problems with his work. Williams’ loose analysis observes critiques are directed through ‘three lines of attack – on the lack of cumulativeness in his work, the cavalier nature of his definitions and his deployment of data’ (1988: 72). To some degree these overlap and are indistinct in critiques, however the outcome ‘is to throw doubt on the credibility of Goffman’s substantive discoveries – the criticisms are of method but ultimately have their effect on substance’ (1988: 73). Goffman himself admits this, stating in the introduction to *Frame Analysis* (1974):

> there are lots of good grounds for doubting the kind of analysis about to be presented. It is too bookish, too general, too removed from fieldwork to have a good chance of being anything more than another mentalistic adumbration. (1974: 13)

Many critiques focus on his lack of consistency in terminology, muddy conceptual distinctions and his ever-changing approach towards the objects of his study. Sharrock is one such outspoken critic, clearly articulating his problem with Goffman.

My main difficulty with Goffman’s work has to do with the relationship of part to whole. Open each of his books and read them as entirely self-contained entities and you will find that they each consist in a well-made essay, elegant, structured, sardonic, insightful, coherent and well written. Read those same books as part of a unified intellectual production and you will likely begin to find yourself wondering what is going on (Sharrock, 1976, cited in Williams, 1988: 70).
Giddens supports this view; though an admirer, he recognises Goffman ‘can appear light-weight, brimming over with acute and delicate insights’ (Giddens, 1988: 251). However he adds a critique concerning Goffman’s refusal to investigate structural issues, stating he ‘lacks the overall intellectual power that derives from the endeavour of an author to grapple with general problems of society and history’ whilst avoiding ‘any sort of engagement with issues concerning the large scale or long term’ (Giddens, 1988: 251).

Gouldner, one of Goffman’s most outspoken critics, perceives this lack of macro level investigation to be a fundamental flaw. Some theorists draw attention to similarities between Goffman and Parsons, highlighting elements of analysis compatible with a kind of inward looking functionalism, a microfunctionalism of sorts (Collins, 1983: Chriss, 2003), yet Gouldner asserts Goffman;

fails to ask the central questions that a functionalist would pose, concerning the presentations of self that are made. He does not explain, for example, why some selves rather than others are selected and projected by persons, and why others accept or reject the proffered self. That is, seeing this largely as a matter of maintaining a consistent image of self, he does not ask whether some selves are more gratifying in their consequences, to self and other, and whether this shapes their selection and acceptance. Nor does he systematically clarify the manner in which power and wealth provide resources that affect the capacity to project a self successfully’ (Gouldner, 1970: 385)

These are valid criticisms which should be addressed in the context of this thesis; for fans online, the self projected by the member and accepted by the community is, for the large part, tied to the media product as it is frames the interaction, but also defined by the community, as the community acts simultaneously as interactant and audience and guides the performance. It is precisely because the correctly performed self is receiving positive feedback that
the performance and therefore, the fan role, become more gratifying to the individual, encouraging further acceptance of the performance and adoption of the routines the role entails. In the context of online fandom, performing the self correctly may be less directly bound to the macro-level structural power and wealth that Gouldner talks of, but it is still dependent on access to resources to correctly manage an idealised self – for example, near ubiquitous access to technology, the financial resources to own the fan product and associated merchandise, the temporal capacity to repeatedly engage and a sufficient understanding of both context specific and general English language to minimise misunderstanding and maintain expressive control.

Gouldner argues the dramaturgical model ‘[invites us to live situationally; it invites us to carve a slice out of time, history and society, … rather than offering a world view, it offers us “a piece of the action”.’ (Gouldner, 1970: 385). But he is extremely critical of performance guiding interactions, as it paints a picture of a world in which appearances are more important than reality, where individuals are not products of the system, but are instead ‘working the system for the enhancement of the self’ (1970: 379).

This is a point worth noting; critiques often direct their attention to the situational emphasis in his work, partly because presentation is the most heavily detailed concept articulated in The Presentation of the Self; however, a large proportion of the book discusses team and group performances, and roles within those subgroups, as will be discussed in later chapters. Giddens defends Goffman on this point, clarifying that the individual in The Presentation of the Self:

is not some sort of mini-agent, standing behind and directing various role performances. Such performances are integral to what agency is and to the demonstration of agency to others. The self consists in an awareness of identity which simultaneously transcends specific roles and provides an integrating means of relating them to personal biography: and a set of dispositions for
managing the transactions between motives and the expectations ‘scripted’ by particular roles’ (Giddens, 1988: 259).

The situationalist critique may be true of earlier Goffman, however, by the latter part of his career no single position seemed to be satisfactory in explaining social interaction; he did, though, become more structured in his thinking, offering a middle ground by reflexively reappraising the exclusive emphasis on the definition of the situation in defining social reality, ultimately tempering his interactionist approach, or as Denzin and Keller argue, abandoning it completely in favour of structuralism (1981). By Frame Analysis (1974), Goffman had established ‘a way to mediate between the mentalism and hyperrelativism rampant in the intellectual world today and the objective of conventional sociology’ (Collins, 1988: 58); Goffman therefore remains in the same area of enquiry and extends the scope of ‘symbolic interactionists, ethnomethodologists, structuralists and deconstructionists… [but] is also explicitly critical of them’ (Collins, 1988: 58).

However, Rawls is clear we need to be careful as by ‘reducing an understanding of his work to a choice between situationalism and structuralism... fails to appreciate Goffman’s originality in attempting to understand the interaction order’ (1989: 150) though concedes if given a choice, ‘the only way to save Goffman from contingency is to call him a structuralist’ (153). Goffman himself was against any categorisation, deriding those who review others work by ‘proclaim[ing] one’s membership in some named perspective, giv[ing] pious mention of its central texts’ in order to then condemn the reviewee by positioning them as opposite, arguing it is not ‘as if a writer’s work is a unitary thing and can be all bad, because he or she does not subscribe to a particular doctrine’ (1981a: 61). What Goffman recognises, a sentiment that appears to be accurate, is that one of the problems for his peers is the tension between his occupation of a space outside of conventional academic doctrines where he was
able to develop concepts as he saw fit, and their attempts to ‘rope him back into range’ (Lemert, 1997: xii).

In addition, Goffman’s ‘haughty disregard for examining in a concrete way the level of likely generality of his observations compromises the alleged autonomy of the interaction order’ (Giddens, 1988: 273); thus thwarting his own attempts to establish his case for it being a distinct area of enquiry. This was in part because he was modest concerning his work; self-scepticism of his achievement in framing and explaining co-present social behaviour, and his rejection of self-promotion lessened the impact of his scholarly endeavour (Lofland, 1984: 32). His critics relegated his work to exposition, the descriptive work of clever, witty essayist, but not cohesive social theory. Goffman was aware of the problems inherent in the reception of his understated concepts and underdeveloped theory, but nonetheless felt it was the right way forward.

I am impatient for a few conceptual distinctions (nothing so ambitious as a theory) that show we are getting some place elementary variables that simplify and order... of course nothing gets proven, only delineated, but I believe that in many areas of social conduct, that’s just where we are right now’ (Goffman, personal communication, cited in Strong, 1983: 349).

Ironically, as a scholar of performance in the interaction order (or possibly because of it), he may have fuelled his critics through his refusal to ‘play the [academic] game’ (Strong, 1983: 348), one which he obviously understood judging by his aforementioned address, which combined with his abnegation to follow ‘conventional canons of scholarly self-presentation’ (Atkinson, 1989: 60). Goffman ignores the usual academic conventions and the jostle of peer positioning, with:

no formal retrospectives, replies to his critics, critiques of the works of others... and hardly any reviews... most of the normal ways through which academics try to state their position and
Throughout his lifetime he remained ‘uninterested in connecting his own theorizings with those of others’ (Psathas, 1996: 391). Instead, Goffman singlemindedly followed his self-defined trajectory and resisted ‘the intergalactic paradigm-mongering which conventionally passes for really serious sociology’ (Psathas, 1996: 347), particularly defying classification by or subscription to sociological themes espoused by the then dominant models of social enquiry (Giddens, 1988: 251, Atkinson, 1989: 59).

Strong (1983, 1988) states Goffman was an ‘essayist’, a writer freely able to ‘to develop his or her own style, to make jokes, be whimsical, to digress, to employ both the tragic and the comic modes; to use, that is, all the literary devices which the writer of the scientific article can, at best, only smuggle in surreptitiously.’ Goffman did those things, and to an extent it detracted from the seriousness of his work, making it seem less worthy of academic prestige. ‘Those who proclaim scientific truth must dress in sober apparel; essayists may wear whatever they choose’ (Strong, 1983: 348).

Goffman was without question ‘a stylist’ whose analyses were ‘rhetorical, in that it depended so much upon the persuasive power of his written style, the elegance of his use of figures and tropes, and the wit with which he used those resources’ (Atkinson, 1989: 61, original emphasis). And yet, he wrote in ‘plain language,’ and his work did not ‘abound with the strange-sounding neologisms favoured by those who are more self consciously “theorists”’ (Giddens: 251). These things, however, should not detract from the usefulness of his concepts and his recognition of previously unexplored area for social enquiry.

A final critique of Goffman is that he is seen to be politically conservative, representing the status quo, and apathetic about the potential for social change.
His understanding of gender was discussed earlier and will not be repeated here, but in other ways, he has been challenged for being old fashioned, traditionalist, and possessing more of the ‘exhortatory tone of the moralist than the modern sociologist would wish happily to acknowledge’ (Atkinson, 1989: 61). Goffman is criticised for his ‘conservatism’ but he is aware of his shortcomings in this area, arguing:

that to focus on the nature of personal experiencing... is itself a standpoint with marked political implications, and these are conservative ones. The analysis developed does not catch the difference between the advantaged and disadvantaged classes and can be said to direct attention away from such matters. I think that is true’ (174: 13 – 14).

Williams argues the ‘mildest’ negative label he has acquired is conservative, but the more important factor making him unpopular within academia is that ‘the picture Goffman paints of mankind and society is not a very pretty one, nor is it an issue that seems to concern him’ (Williams, 1986: 356); not only does this make him appear pessimistic and cynical, he is also seen to be neglecting the responsibility of his academic entitlement, as the majority of his peers ‘believe that it is the obligation of sociologists to right the wrongs of the social systems they study, or at least to pay lip service to the liberal egalitarian myth’ (Williams, 1986: 356). Goffman argues he was ‘not in that business’ (cited in Marx, 1984: 657). Instead, he states:

I can only suggest that he who would combat false consciousness and awaken people to their true interests has much to do, because the sleep is very deep. And I do not intend here to provide a lullaby but merely to sneak in and watch the way the people snore (1974:14)

This quote illustrates the way in which Goffman’s choice of language suggests he is the detached observer of society; his position is ‘cool, with sufficient irony
on occasion to seem more amused than sympathetic… [showing] a sense of
detachment, not engagement (Friedson, 1983: 359). Yet anecdotally, Goffman
was seen to live for data and regularly ‘hazed’ his colleagues and companions
to test out comfort levels in social exchanges and experience his concepts
through social breaches (Lofland, 1984: Williams: 1986).

Giddens notes how Goffman is viewed as ‘primarily nothing more than a
cynical observer of white American middle-class mores [whose insights] only
apply over a very restricted milieu, to the self-seeking activities of individuals
Furthermore, this has been exacerbated by the lack of interest Goffman showed
in generalising ‘beyond certain restricted cultural contexts of American
society’ (273), as described earlier. If we accept there is a reasonable foundation
for critiquing his work as conservative and socio-historically rooted, using a
Goffmanesque approach in an internet forum, where technologically savvy (and
as mentioned in the methods chapter by Markham (2008), culturally
privileged), Westernised participants’ communal point of focus is an American
TV show does not perhaps stretch his theory that far from its original limited
referent; it could be argued his ‘restricted milieu’ (Giddens, 1988: 273) are the
natural antecedents of the very focus group this thesis has studied, and no
essentialist claims have been made about a universal use of his theory in either
fan studies or the internet, merely tentative ones concerning ‘transferable’
generalisations (Gobo, 2004) and ‘fittingness’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 124), as
in other internet fandoms (as mentioned in chapter One). Notwithstanding, his
theories do require ethnographic evidence grounded outside of the cultural
contexts he studied in order for them to hold up, and this is the intent of this
thesis. The reframing of his work here has been undertaken through its
application in an online socially proximate setting instead of a co-present one,
in a space that has control over the context specific, mutually defined fan role it
expects will be claimed and enacted there, rather than roles that are wholly sanctioned and dictated by macro level structures.

Although critiques of Goffman often highlight his lack of method (Gamson, 1975: Schegloff, 1988, for example), Goffman himself saw his work ‘as fundamentally exploratory in character’ (Smith, 2006: 111) whilst being concerned not with systematic strategies of deception in performance (which his work is often misconceived for suggesting), but as observing ‘naturalistic’ phenomena which ‘denotes both an attitude of the observer and the trait of the interaction that is being observed’ (Giddens, 1987: 114). Goffman also looks at co-presence, of people’s interaction in groups of many or few, in specific settings, framed by schemata of interpretation to analyse and respond to situations. This appears analogous to the training a fan goes through and the learning of a group’s cultural norms, the canon, the ‘discursive mantras’ fans execute in the course of honing their identity performance, and facilitate belonging to a group, although in an online context, this may have been hard to support. However, many users do not see a distinction between online and offline, as explored in the methods chapter, and with media convergence, what was offline is now online and visa versa.

Despite the emphasis on performance in fan studies, and the greater discussion of identity performance on the internet (Turkle, 1995; Danet, 1998: Reid, 1998), there is a dearth of literature directly applying Goffman to either; therefore, this thesis will, in Goffman’s term, be exploratory, to see how applicable Goffman’s conception of performance is to fandom, particularly when encountered through an internet setting, and how those performances fans engage in online are as telling about the self in their contexts as those that occur in co-present settings. Furthermore, the continually evolving technologies of the age result in the boundaries between those settings collapsing, challenging even more our conceptions of
idealised performed identities, and the reality and contrivance of online and offline contexts, as what would have been reserved for one setting can now be seen by audiences from another. The following chapter will explore Goffman’s definition of performance, and how it will be applied to this thesis.
Chapter Three:
The Self in Symbolic Interaction

Academic analyses of online identity have a history of centering on the premise of a fragmented self, of disembodied interactions, of a postmodern escape from the constraints of the experience of the body and lived world’s social order. Since people’s first internet forays, studies of online persona and the virtual reconstitution of identity have concentrated on the individual’s ability to transcend their bodies and reconfigure themselves as whoever or whatever they desire online, with an emphasis on play and the projection of splintered and unrelated identities as compared to their offline existence (Dibbell, 1998; Danet, 1998; Stone, 1996; Turkle, 1995). This view of online ‘persona’ through a postmodern lens as part of a project of self-realisation (Cavanagh, 2007) or the self as symbolic project (Bauman, 1995; Giddens, 1991; Thompson, 1995) has integrated theory into the representation of online selves theorised as fractured and lacking continuity. The destabilising forces of modernity have led some to argue (Giddens, 1991; Sarup, 1995) that the subject itself is unshackled, which enables a reconstitution of narratives in terms of individual and collective identities. For these reasons, Butler’s (1990) post-structuralist theories of performativity have been drawn from in examinations of online identity. However, whilst at first glance a post-structural framework may appear an innately logical fit for the fragmentation associated with internet identities, if in practice the shattered self is empirically unsupported (which appears to be the case in the majority of instances encountered in this research) we should look at other ways of examining identity online, towards theory which could be particularly useful in the heavily detailed and socially nuanced micro-environments provided by internet fandom.
For many people involved in online communities, social networking sites and instant message systems, there is little or no distinction between on and offline selves; instead there are just degrees of engagement and connectivity with the medium and subject matter. As the internet has increasingly become a part of daily practices, the distinct and fragmented identities spoken of by Turkle (1995) et al have failed to fully materialise, and instead the common identity is one where certain elements are underplayed, others emphasised, depending on the setting, audience and community, the degree of immersion, the type of environment and the medium used to perform, which bears a remarkable similarity to the performances Goffman argues we engage in during co-present encounters every day. This call for a shift in our approach is largely as a result of changes in the purpose and use of online environments since rudimentary examinations took place, as developments have made access to mediated interactions more user friendly; this thesis therefore argues that the transformations occurring as technology naturalises in the user’s daily practices calls for a modified approach, one that more conservatively appraises users employment of play and disregards the online/offline dichotomy to understand mediated identity formation.

Having already established the turn towards performance as constitutive of everyday life in a modern mediated society in the previous chapter, this chapter will look at the thematic heritage underpinning Goffman’s dramaturgical metaphor, detailing both dramaturgy and elements of performance, evaluating in the process how effectively a Goffmanesque approach can be used as a practical supporting structure to explore identity performance outside of co-present settings; in the process, this chapter and the next will show it is the image of a cohesive, rather than a fragmented, self that is projected in online fandom, with performances directed and maintained through collective expectations and norms of performance.
Although Goffman’s framework appears to be not a modern enough theoretical premise for the internet, (even, due to the lack of face to face interaction, arguably counter-intuitive), its usage allows more flexibility in the way an individual’s various performances intermingle and interrelate with each other in different situations through mixed media. Goffman’s approach allows for the actor to remain relatively cogent in terms of performances within one setting, whilst adjusting information given to the different audiences in separate environments as they become available. Rather than performing as different persons, Goffman’s performance theory suggests an individual’s performance reflects aspects of the same person in different settings, who choose to present certain attributes, personality traits or consumptive practices to some audiences and not others, whilst using mutually defined roles as a blueprint for the social encounter. As Branaman argues, Goffman’s central point ‘has become far more commonplace since he proposed it... that the identities of participants in social situations are constituted through such performances’ (2003: 88). Postmodernity’s fragmented self suggests a shattering, a splintering into many disparate identities, however a multiplication of identities built from the same set of experiences and knowledge is a more accurate representation, whilst it reflects the way mediated technologies are used in both co-present and virtual encounters. In fact Branaman asserts that Goffman is ‘especially compatible with postmodern perspectives on the self’ (2003: 88), as he pays attention to the number of potential identities one can employ from the same self: rather than atomisation and splintering, Goffman focuses on multiplicity, with the individual operating a number of fronts in their roles and identity performance.

Furthermore, Goffman highlights that the social construction of reality is a grey area even to those performing. Identifying that what is ‘real’ and ‘authentic’, and what is staged and put on, is a theoretical distinction; in practice performance operates more on a continuum of degrees of belief in the performance by the performer and the audience, of convincing or unconvincing
roles and attributes (1959: 28). For Goffman, reality is contrived, and as such, the sharp distinction made between online and offline selves can be overturned, one that identifies an ‘authentic’ self as the physically bound subject, positioning the virtual self as play, masquerade, or inauthentic role play. If in all social encounters we are playing a role to one degree or another, constructing multiple realities for the present audience, the offline as authentic/online as inauthentic dichotomy becomes redundant in theorising self-performance online (1959: 81). Taking Goffman’s stance on reality assists in rebalancing the theoretical overemphasis of online/offline selves as discussed in the methods chapter, and represents a more realistic appraisal of how people perform their identity in different settings.

The consideration of an online community’s social reality and its sustainability through encompassing fandom roles from individual performances of identity is at the heart of this thesis’ inquiry; therefore Goffman’s central preoccupation with the question ‘how does social reality sustain itself?’ (Lemert, 1997: xi) is a particularly useful foundation. In investigating this question, Goffman unpicks the routines, techniques and rituals used in co-present social encounters and their influence on the individual’s sense of self, taking as his central premise that the individual cannot think without accounting for the other, as the self/other constitution is a fundamental condition of human existence. His work clearly builds on themes from pragmatists Cooley and Mead concerning the mind and society’s interdependence of influence in constructing the self, theories which heavily influenced symbolic interactionism and the Chicago School, although Goffman himself never identified as a symbolic interactionist.

Symbolic interaction conceives of social reality as socially produced as it argues humans are capable of shaping their own behaviour and that of others, taking each other into account in the process of presenting their self-identity (Denzin, 1992). As we behave in accordance with the significance attributed to the various symbolic resources available to conform to and uphold norms and
values in the society, the role of language and meaning are central in the social construction of reality. Meanings are processed, reinforced and developed through interpretation and daily experiences of language, thought, shared symbols and social acts, according to Blumer (1969) and Boden (1990). Influential in the development of symbolic interaction’s school of thought, Cooley (1902), Mead (1934) and Goffman (1959) offer theoretical principles that support this thesis’s perspective on fan identity performance constructing the self in relation to others.

Cooley’s looking glass self posits the self as constructed through the process of the individual imagining how they appear in other’s mind’s eye, interpreting from that position how the other would judge their appearance, feeling the emotion the judgment would engender in them, then altering the self’s social image to better present their self (1902). He states:

[m]any people of balanced mind and congenial activity scarcely know that they care what others think of them... [b]ut this is illusion. If failure or disgrace arrives, if one suddenly finds that the faces of men [sic] show coldness and contempt instead of the kindliness and deference he is used to, he will perceive from the shock, the fear, the sense of being outcast and helpless, that he was living in the minds of others without knowing it. (1902: 208)

The individual’s own feelings concerning those who judge implicitly influence their interpretation of the judgement, as the assessment of the other’s authority to judge transfers greater or lesser importance to their opinion. This perception of society’s evaluation of individuals constitutes their self; a similar relationship occurs during the interaction between the individual and the community within the context of online communities. For example, through performances, members are judged by other community members, as their posts and comments are evaluated in terms of their usefulness, how funny, interesting or original the text by the member is in terms of stand alone or aggregate
performance. Greater importance is endorsed to threads and post responses by certain people, with members using knowledge of their own and others’ place within hierarchies when evaluating whether to react and attempt to change the perception of the other, or not. Goffman is influenced by this in his elements of performance, particularly with regard to the ramifications of poor presentation, as performers will be less concerned with poorly executed performances to people whose opinion is of little concern to them.

Cooley implies there is a core self from which an identity is projected; one that may modify through the course of interaction, but always reflects an essential essence. Goffman instead sees the self as a combination of performances related to roles one settles into, building up a self gradually through the taking on of attributes and repeatedly enacting them. An essential self is also disputed by Mead (1934), who argues that the self is produced entirely through interaction as ‘it is not initially there at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process’ (1934: 135). Here, again, the pragmatists’ influence can be seen in Goffman’s view of the self as constituted through performance, arising out of the interaction between the self and the other. Instead of imagining the core self who interacts with others as possessing traits present from birth, Mead challenges Cooley, stating the individual’s development in understanding verbal and symbolic language is key to the self’s construction, as ‘we do not discover others as individuals like ourselves. The mind is not first individual and then social. The mind itself in the individual arises through communication’ (Mead, 2003, xxix). Language process is essential for the development of the self, as it is through the agency of language that the self engages with the society of which they are a part, using culturally significant symbols to interact. Through language, the self is articulated, as ‘[one] inevitably seeks an audience, has to pour himself [sic] out to somebody’ (Mead: 1934: 141). Through thinking, the individual prepares
their self for social action. Understanding text based communication as an articulation of the self is a useful premise for the purposes of this thesis, as Mead’s conception of the self is one comprised through an interchange in which the self communicates thought by first expressing it in language and then acting, Mead says:

One separates the significance of what he [sic] is saying to others and gets it ready before saying it. He thinks it out, and perhaps writes it in the form of a book; but it is still a part of social intercourse in which one is addressing other persons and at the same time addressing one’s self, and in which one controls the address to other persons by the response made to one’s gesture (Mead: 1934:142).

What the individual expresses in language is simultaneously being addressed to an audience, and to the self, in a continuous dialogue. In an environment where all communications are text based, thought is produced at leisure for audience consumption, with selves editing and re-editing until a satisfactory product is achieved, for both the self as object, and as the generalised other of the audience. Goffman too argues that performance is ‘dramatically realised’ in order to make an ‘effective showing’ of the self in context (1959: 40, 43).

Mead formulates the self as a bifurcated entity comprised of the social ‘me’ that interacts and experiences the social environment, although is also subject to social control, and the active ‘I,’ the individual who learns how to respond by taking on of the attitudes of the environment enabled through experiences and reactions encountered by the ‘me’ (1934: 173-178). They are a ‘mutually enabling pair’ rather than two aspects working in opposition to each other (Bailey: 2005: 31), as the ‘me’ makes the action of the ‘I’ possible through its experience, with neither holding a superior position over the other. As Bailey points out, ‘this interdependent character avoids both the possibility of a pure authenticity of the ‘I’ and the total conformity of the ‘me” (2005: 31). The self learns from
childhood how to conceive of the generalized other’s impression initially through role play, by taking on individual roles of another to understand how actions are performed, and later through games which involve teams, a more strategic understanding of a group feeling (Mead: 1934: 149-54). Within online communities, there are often teams of players, friendship groups and administrative groups that guide the individual towards certain types of performance and roles. For example, members can choose to be sorted into a ‘house,’ one of four private areas, where they have a closer relationship with fellow house members, take part in inter-house challenges and games, intensifying connections, building camaraderie and team spirit in the process. Inclusion in a house and the role played within it can be seen as a team game, played out under observation of the generalised other. Issues relating to individual and group identity performance in separate private areas inside of the Buffy-board community, or in external communications between individuals and groups result in different performances; this will be discussed in the final chapter.

Online, fan community members perform in accordance with roles of characters in their fandom in addition to taking on various social roles in the group: by acting as Faith, Buffy, Willow or Giles would, or as geek, class clown, bad boy/girl, artist or nurturer, the member is role playing in the group, imagining themselves as the other as it learns how to conceive of them in the way Mead argues a child would (1934: 150) by performing actions associated with the role, but in the more complex environment of mediated online interactions. The self has an opportunity to play with roles through the taking of a role in the community, using the media as a resource for constructing performance, whilst the bulletin board’s mediated nature means the performance will be interpreted and judged by the generalised other according to its collectively imagined culture. How effectively an individual performs the role, whether of helpful individual, a shoulder to cry on, or the acting out of roles directly related to the
show by projecting a persona or an attitude of a character is judged and explicitly evaluated by karma comments attached to posts.

Community members have the opportunity to agree or disagree on the reflections of the generalised other of the community, but also to publicly validate the performance to both the performer and the community. Employing a symbolic interactionist perspective allows for a detailed analysis to occur in the context of the symbolically constructed micro-environments typical of online communities. The responses to ‘me’ are from a much wider range of sources in a media saturated society; the ‘I’ therefore modifies its identity shaping tactics as the social environment the ‘me’ acts within encompasses a much broader range of attitudes and experiences. Although the principle is the same with the ‘I’ and ‘me’ acting in support of the other to produce the self, the weight given to each layer of influence in different environments is more ambiguous, thus negotiation of the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ becomes a more complex process. Meyrowitz notes that in using a Meadian analysis of modern life and the influences people are exposed to:

> the “mediated generalized other” includes standards, values, and beliefs from outside traditional group spheres, and it thereby presents people with a new perspective from which to view their actions and identities. The new mediated generalized other bypasses face-to-face encounters in family and community and is shared by millions of others. (1985: 131-132)

In fan bulletin board environments, the geographical spread of the community and its members means the mediated self is subject to influences outside of the traditional group sphere of the workplace, family and home, but is also subject to influences of themes in the show as played out through the series, the relationships between characters and their positions in the hierarchy, the narratives, metaphors and season arcs, and the resolution of conflicts and emotional trauma. The object of fandom provides a readymade philosophy for
the self to draw from, and base action upon. For example, feminist readings of
the show provide representations of mother/daughter relationships and
patriarchal structures (Kaveney, 2001; Williams, 2002), queer readings are made
of the relationships between the central characters (Beirne, 2004; Mendlesohn,
2002) spirituality and magic are explored and used as the focus of arcs and
episodes (Keller, 2002; Winslade, 2001). The series, the geographical spread of
the fan community, the individual’s home and family and being a fan all supply
sets of influences, for the culture of the community as the generalised other, and
for the self.

The value of Mead’s work is weakened by the under development of many
parts of his theory, partly because of their posthumous publication as a
collection of student notes and manuscripts without direct authority, but also
because ‘the breadth and complexity of the social-symbolic environment was
far narrower’ at the time he was writing (Bailey, 2005: 29) which means Mead’s
theories have mainly been discharged as unsuitable for a technologically
complicated society. His work is critiqued for reflecting a simpler, less mediated
time, failing to recognise the social situatedness of language, instead naively
viewing it as a fairly transparent phenomena (Kogler, 1996: 217). However, I
would argue that the principles of his and Goffman’s theories on the self are as
pertinent today as when they were written. In the same way the self has
adapted to the technology and evolved, these theories can be updated in online
environments, and as such, become a constructive means for analysing the
interplay between the self and the larger community in mediated settings, as
these environments offer near perfect conditions for identity performance with
the self constituted through acts made in relation to others using symbolic
language, core themes in Mead and Goffman.

Goffman’s pragmatist lineage is illustrated by his assumption that social acts
are part of a feedback loop occurring in interaction; identity performance is
modified as a consequence of one’s interpretation of its reception, revising
future behaviour accordingly, using the norms of the context defined by the individual as a guideline. Accounting for the behaviour of others and of their performed roles in the setting, the individual uses their skills at impression management to pitch the performance at the right situational level. Essentially, people manage elements of performance to foster a favourable reception, using their own experience to ‘read’ others performances to give clues on what is appropriate for the context. The performance must be authentic enough to function for both audience and performer, as it sustains the social reality.

Performed identities also work to shape the self; identities are not face value expressions of a core self, but are instead, a performed aspect of the self, mediated through the setting and the expected roles as defined by the situation. Repeated performances in areas such as relationships, or indeed in fan communities, in which the self is motivated to identify with the role to facilitate an increase in their connection with the other results in the individual’s assimilation of the traits and characteristics, or ‘the hardening of identities into selves’ to quote Branaman (2003: 88). Blumstein concurs with this, adapting Goffman to show how in marriage-like partnerships the self is shaped by individual and pair performance, using the term ‘ossification’ to describe how in the closest of personal relationships, identity and role performance slowly and gradually transform the self. ‘[I]f identities are projected frequently enough, they eventually produce modifications in the self...we enact the identities with great frequency and we become the person whom we have enacted’ (Blumstein, 1991: 307, original emphasis). Blumstein’s work also overcomes critiques of Goffman’s concerning the myopic focus on interaction orders ‘unanchored, situationally-bounded, evanescent exchanges’ that underplays the role of ‘durable social structures’ in shaping identity performance, structures including ‘relationships that, even if not always intense, have histories and futures (1991: 307). Continued, close, group and pair interactions at bulletin boards must arguably fall under this category, and so the feasibility for using a
Goffmanesque approach in analysing individual’s performance and the effects of the other in communities online is well founded.

Having shown the theoretical precursors driving Goffman’s conception of performance and how it has influenced some subsequent work, the remainder of this chapter will provide an overview of Goffman’s dramaturgical metaphor; later, through use of data from the bulletin board, this chapter will strive to challenge critiques of Goffman, whose thematically unrelated data and often anecdotal evidence fails to offer practical demonstrations of the theory in one context. In the subsequent chapter, performance work relating to management of personal front within the setting will be explored, employing data from the research group to test how the self is created digitally, and in the process, represent how a fan identity works to offer common ground as a mutually understood role. This allows social meaning between participants to dovetail within the environment; by fostering norms a mutually constructed definition of the situation develops, making it possible for a sense of community to flourish.

Goffman, the self, and dramaturgical metaphor

The dramaturgical metaphor Goffman uses in *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1959) is often interpreted as a literal description; as such, in literature seeking to describe performance’s utility in constructing an identity it is nodded towards in a token like fashion, being skimmed over in favour of work whose tone is more abstract and theoretical, like Butler (1990). Upon examination, however, Goffman’s conception of a dramaturgical metaphor is subtler than it would first appear. He highlights that rather than the dramaturgical metaphor equating human interaction to the stage, instead,
actors on the stage are employing the same techniques we all use on a daily basis, using an albeit exaggerated and more ‘staged’ or scripted performance in their work:

A character staged in a theatre is not in some ways real, nor does it have the same kind of real consequences as does the thoroughly contrived character performed by a confidence man: but the successful staging of either of these types of false figures involves the use of real techniques – the same techniques by which everyday persons sustain their real social situations (Goffman, 1959: 246-247)

This is the key; not that we are all actors in the most axiomatic sense, but that actors are all people, whose human skills are finely honed, using with great dramatic effect the elements of performance Goffman identifies in The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life (1959). Furthermore, Goffman notes the inadequacies of the dramaturgical model advising it is part ‘rhetoric and manoeuvre’ (1959: 246). He makes it patently clear that unlike in real life, in the theatre, events are obviously contrived, rehearsed, and performed in relation to three parties, the self, the other, and the audience. Co-present encounters see the collapsing of the other and audience into one, as there is no other actor with whom to collude or combine a performance with in order to present a show to the audience, (Goffman, 1959: see also Smith, 2006: 44); however, in online contexts, this collapse into two parts may arguably be reframed multidimensionally, as the self is at all times self, other and audience, either engaging or merely observing others and their own performances from other positions.

Whilst introducing the elements of performance Goffman’s use of Park’s (1950) text is worth quoting in full, because its thrust not only is central to understanding Goffman and the consequences of impression management, but
also supports my argument that performances in fan environments have a
correlating effect in other environments the member engages in. Park states:

[E]veryone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously,
playing a role... It is in these roles that we know each other, it is in
these roles that we know ourselves... In a sense, and in so far as
this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves – the role we are striving to live up to – the mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be. In the end, our conception of our role
becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality. We
come into the world as individuals, achieve character, and become
persons’ (Park, 1950: 249-250)

As Lawler (2008) contends, through use of this quote, Goffman is not asserting
that performance is the individual feigning to be something that they are not,
undertaking to deceive or pretend to the other party in the social encounter, as
is suggested in critiques of the dramaturgical metaphor; on the contrary,
Goffman is profoundly arguing ‘that roles, or performances, far from masking
the ‘true person’ (as it is commonly assumed) are what makes us persons’ (Lawler,
2008: 106, original emphasis). For Goffman, roles are what constitute the person,
each an aspect of the individuals’ self; as Hacking comments, some roles are
‘more owned, some more resented, but always an evolving side of what the
person is’ (Hacking, 2004; 290). In fan communities, roles are being played in
the same way individuals are performing their roles in workplaces, homes and
families, however, fans are choosing their roles as fans, owning them, embracing
them, intertwining them with other roles they possess. As such fan roles are as
much a part of the person as any other role they perform, in some respects, they
are arguably reveal more concerning the type of person and character they wish
to represent than other roles, particularly ‘resented’ roles which are imposed
upon them.

Echoing Mead’s (1934) bifurcated active ‘I’ and social ‘Me’ constitution of the
self through the terms ‘performer’ and ‘character,’ Goffman illustrates how the
performer, ‘the harried fabricator of impressions engaged in the all-too-human
task of staging a performance’ (1959: 244) and the character, somewhat equated
as one’s self, ‘a figure, typically a fine one, whose spirit, strength, and other
sterling qualities the performance was designed to evoke’ (1959: 244) are related
to each other through dependence upon the self’s effective presentation and the
individual’s skills in the techniques of performance:

[T]he performed self...[is] seen as some kind of image, usually
creditable, which the individual on stage and in character
effectively attempts to induce others to hold in regard to him... a
correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to
impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation – this
self – is a product of the scene that comes off, and is not a cause of
it (Goffman, 1959; 244-245).

If people are always performing roles to greater or lesser degrees depending
upon our familiarity with and acceptance of them, and our understanding of
the context they are received in, it is imperative to recognise a performance
would serve no purpose unless it accurately reflected the role it was intended it
to and was recognisable and accepted by the audience, as roles are comprised of
pre-existing patterns of social behaviour, characteristic personifications bringing
with them status or the authority to act in one way or another within the social
hierarchy. The self is therefore seen a social product of both the individual’s
performance, where ‘a sense of self arises as a result of publicly validated
performances’ (Branaman, 1997: xlvi), and the roles performed, as their
performances are dependent upon ‘images of themselves that can be socially
supported within a given hierarchy’ (ibid).

As the self is a social product, social identity is achieved in relation to others
rather than isolation from them, and therefore, acceptance of claims to
ownership regarding specific attributes or the possession of authority
concomitant with roles, the very efficacy and credibility of social identity, is
dependent upon the reception of performance by the audience. For Goffman, the crucial factor we should attend to regarding performance is not the fact that we are performing; instead, the techniques used in the roles’ dramatic realisation should be categorised and explored, in how we make those performances credible, which is the art of impression management itself.

**Performance**

Goffman’s starting point is that of an imagined exchange, which details the subtle techniques, strategies and assumptions occurring in interactions between performer and audience.

When an individual enters into the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire about him (sic) or to bring into play information about him already possessed. They will be interested in his general socio-economic status, his conception of self, his attitude towards them, his competence, his trustworthiness, etc. (Goffman, 1959: 13).

The performer offers information to the audience to encourage that acquisition of information, attempting to control or guide reaction to the performance in their favour. This is achieved through ‘sign vehicles,’ carriers of information that offer the audience clues that help them to anticipate what type of encounter and what kind of person they are likely to be engaging with based on the situation, as ‘they can ... assume from past experience that only individuals of a certain kind are likely to be found in a given social setting’ (Goffman, 1959: 13).

A ‘promissory character’ is awarded to the performers activity, as it is given that people are (for the most part) who they say they are; the audience ‘are likely to
find that they must accept the individual on faith, offering him (sic) a just return while he is present before them in exchange for something whose true value will not be established until after he has left their presence’ (1959: 14). In other words, the performer is awarded the benefit of the doubt and the performance is trusted to be a fair and true representation of their character, even though it cannot be immediately proved their performance is genuine. This faith in the performer and the performance helps in the mutual production of a relatively compatible definition of the situation, opening up space for a social exchange to occur; mistrust would hamper even the simplest of social exchanges.

Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he (sic) will expect of them and what they may expect of him. Informed in these ways, the others will know how best to act in order to call forth a desired response from him. (Goffman, 1959: 13).

Accurately defined through his use of Thomas (1931: 189 - 190), this trust is inferential; based on prior experience of similar situations, deductive reasoning is used to assess the risks involved in the exchange, whilst security in its authenticity varies based on knowledge of the person. Therefore, although this initial trust in people may appear blindly naive, the playing field is leveled somewhat through the audience’s advantage in reading extra carriers that lie outside of the immediate control of the performer that combine with their prior experiences in similar situations. As Goffman succinctly puts it:

As members of an audience it is natural for us to feel that the impression the performer seeks to give may be true or false, genuine or spurious, valid or ‘phony’. So common is this doubt that, as suggested, we often give special attention to features of the performance that cannot be readily manipulated, thus enabling ourselves to judge the reliability of the more misrepresentable cues in performance (1959: 66)
Goffman argues expressive behaviour gradually fills out the performance, either in favour of the performer as the audience compile validating information, or to their disadvantage, as their unintentional sign carriers disclose conflicting information. In effect, the more experience the audience has with the performer, the more likely the performer is to let their guard down and let discrepancies slip, which works to the audience’s advantage as ‘we are always ready to pounce on chinks in his symbolic armour in order to discredit his pretensions’ (66). Inadvertently disclosing cues that are incongruous with the performance therefore has effects on its overall impression.

This has a correlation in online fan environments. When the online ‘audience’ enters the setting, information provided by the performers will be looked at, the sign vehicles used to convey information, the history of exchanges (in the case of online bulletin boards, the majority of which will have a degree of searchability and permanence), whilst it will generally be accepted that performers engaging in the environment are fans. From the performer’s point of view, the audience are perceived of as a generalised other with values and motivations similar to the performer, offering a common definition of the situation that means each knows what to expect of the other. Through the course of continued exchanges, the performer will begin to reveal the authenticity of their claims to fandom, their right to belong to the community, to be accepted as a bona fide member through their posts; posts are read and/or responded to by the audience, offering a response to the initial performance, but also offering information about the audience and individual’s within it through their own performances.

For example, the following post is a new fan entering the environment.

Hello everyone I’m Angel.😊 (I know, I know.) I’ve been a Buffy fan since the beginning! (I’ve only watched a few episodes of Angel.) But, I didn’t really remember much of BTVS, so a few weeks ago I
started all over. Yesterday, I finished the entire series! 😊 My favorite episode is Becoming Part 2. Followed by Innocence, Tabula Rasa, and The Gift. I favor seasons 1 through 3 out of the whole series. & I’m on the Bangel side of the argument, for future reference lol. I’m insanely obsessed with BTVS, so I happily joined this forum to meet and get to know other fans! 😊

GrrArghx3, post.

This tentative step into the forum uses both sign vehicles appropriate for the environment such as emoticons, and those that will show fan status, giving the right impression through a rendering of fan knowledge, stating the canon appropriate episodes and seasons to be favoured over others, to control the impression given, whilst offering themselves as a ‘shipper (supporter of certain romantic pairs) and therefore inviting allegiances. Other members respond with the appropriate salutations, ‘Welcome to the boards!’ (Buffy Summers), ‘Welcome to the boards! Your name is Angel! That is uncanny! Haha you’re gonna love it here ’ (Fredsicle). The audience engages in the performance, showing the performer how favourably other fans have interpreted it: ‘Welcome to the forum. Bangel is the only true way’ (Dancing Man), ‘Hey and welcome to BB! Woo, more Bangels! ’ (Flannen), ‘Welcome to the Boards. Like Flannen said, yaaay more Bangelers. Hey we have the same favourite episode!’ (PrincessBuffy16). Individual audience members are performing their own identity, but also, through positioning themselves as rival ‘shippers, they are engaging in group performance – Bangels (fans favouring the Buffy/Angel relationship) versus Spuffys (fans favouring the Buffy/Spike relationship). This performance of rival bantering illustrates how community norms work to allow space for different ‘shipper positions, although when in support of objects positioned as rival to Buffy-boards or Buffy fandom, such as Twilight, Charmed or other bulletin boards, community norms are less
welcoming, in some ways viewing rival positions as divisional markers for acceptance in the community. Therefore, the mock ‘shipper wars performs some work at sustaining the community, in addition to adding to the individual’s performance, though as these are one of the few community defined legitimate sources for exhibiting strong disagreements, occasionally conflicts arising in other areas are channeled here.

Hi! I’m Becky. Welcome to BB. Oh no, another BANGL!? Uh, oh. Just what we need. *rallies the Spuffy troops*We’re ready. Bring it on! No, really though. I’m glad you found us. TB is one of my favorite eps, too (as you can probably tell by my sig and username). Joan the Vampire Slayer, post.

This post has a dual purpose, it responds to the new member’s performance and reinforces the sign vehicles and information offered to the audience by Joan the Vampire Slayer in other posts at the bulletin boards, pointing towards elements in her performance, the personal front used to create an online persona. Goffman terms this the information *given*, symbols or their substitutes and verbal signs used ‘admittedly and solely to convey the information that he (sic) and the others are known to attach to those symbols’ (1959: 14). There is also the issue of the information that is *given off*, the unintentional expressions that serve to contradict the impression given, or consequences of poorly executed performance. For example, what can be read from the initial post is that the ‘newbie’ occupies a lower position in the fan hierarchy because of her fledgling status, however, because community norms expect more commitment, more depth in knowledge of the fan artefact, other areas of her performance will need to compensate in order to move up the hierarchy, perhaps through taking on a role of always being helpful, or comedic. In short, performance work will need to be undertaken to rectify those deficiencies that make her claims to belonging precarious, as the community defines what is required of a fan to authenticate the individual’s status and inclusion, in terms of their
identity, and the values they will extoll. Of course, these are idealised and implicit values that are subjectively understood, and so not all members will conform to the majority’s expectations at all times; this can be a source of conflict affecting the cohesion of the community, and will be discussed in a later chapter. Joan the Vampire also gives off an unintended impression through poorly executed performance; her name, user title and banner all refer to her favourite episode, Tabula Rasa, and yet she incorrectly abbreviates it to TB, giving off the impression of a lack of diligence in her performance.

Elements of Performance

Goffman splits performance into elements that are all applicable to online environments; what follows are the elements detailed and illustrated in context with the data. Remembering that individuals expect their performance is received in good faith from the outset, through implicit codes of interaction, performers ask their audience ‘to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he (sic) appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that in general, matters are what they appear to be’ (1959: 28). However, the performance is not only for the benefit of other people; the actor also must have a belief in the role they are playing. The performance operates on a continuum from sincere to cynical, but it is only the actor who knows where on the continuum their performance lies. The audience can only judge the performance based on what is presented, and they have no way of knowing the actor’s true state of mind, or how well their performance correlates to performances outside of that particular context. The performer has a better chance of being received
favourably if they have confidence in their ability to pass for who they say they are, regardless of whether or not that is the case.

The second element of performance is the *front*, used to determine the encounter’s context for the audience by ‘intentionally or unwittingly’ standardising the kinds of expressions used, ‘that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define a performance for those who observe’ (1959: 32). There are two aspects to the front. The *setting*, the ‘scenic parts’ (34) of the expressive equipment, is the usually fixed place the actor performs in, encompassing the décor, furniture, the physical layout and background items, in effect, the props used to project the right look, all of which remain in the actor’s absence. In the context of fan bulletin boards, this is the site, the design and graphics, the IP address, the structure of the board, the colour, tone and theme of the environment. Although this would remain physically fixed in face-to-face interactions, the performer can bring forward an online environment’s setting wherever there is an internet connection, which makes us recognise it has issues of place. The setting travels with the actor in terms of space and so it would appear fluid, however, despite personalising the graphics and colour of the board through choice of specific ‘skins’ the *social setting* is embedded in the consciousness of the member through the norms and the overall look of the environment.

Goffman defines the other aspect of the front as the *personal front*, which incorporates the ‘items we most intimately identify with the performer himself and that we naturally expect will follow the performer wherever he (sic) goes’ (1959: 34). Arguably performance’s most important characteristic through its irrefutable influence on first impressions, it incorporates the *look of the actor* and the *manner in which they perform*, expressive equipment that in co-present situations would usually remain with the actor, but in internet communications, remains enduringly visible in the actor’s absence, providing an almost permanent state of performance to the audience; in the same way the performer
imagines the audience, the audience evokes the performer’s presence in their mind’s eye, calling forward a composite performance through reading (and rereading) a series of expressive equipment and sign vehicles. Although it would seem obvious that avatars represent an online ‘face,’ providing for the audience a symbolic visual marker for imagining the member, other aspects of the personal front are more preciously performed to provide a persuasive appearance. In the same way a make over can transform a person and change the way people interact in co-present situations, online, properly executed presentation of the self can attract interaction, which will be discussed explicitly with reference to the personal front in the next chapter.

Appearance markers such as sex, age, race, and insignia of office or rank, size and looks are the Goffman’s focus in terms of their looks, ‘stimuli which function at the time to tell us of the performer’s social statuses... and their temporary ritual state’ (34); seen on bulletin boards as the biographical details a person provides for their profile, viewed to the side of their posts, it includes those details they choose to disclose, and the sign vehicles they select to support their performance as authentic, such as their avatar, signature, banner and user title. This can also include community sanctioned functions or positions held on the board, in terms of rank such as ‘Junior Partner’ (moderator) ‘Senior Partner’ (super moderator or administrator), ‘Head of Special Projects,’ ‘Member of the Month’ awards or holding a ‘Buffy-Boards Official Banner maker’ position. Their ‘temporary ritual state’ can be identified by the current status update, mood indicator, karma levels and ‘last seen online’ fields in their profile, indicating their recent level of activity at the bulletin board.

The manner in which the actor performs includes more expressive behaviour suggestive of the anticipated role a performer will assume, based on their posture, demeanour, gesture, expression and speech patterns, ‘stimuli that function at the time to warn us of the interaction role the performer will play’ (35); this is the other half of Goffman’s personal front. Seen on the bulletin
boards in its most obvious form as the adoption of ‘Slayer-slang’ or ‘Buffy-speak,’ using words, phrases or quotes from the character that would best illustrate a specific point in an argument and show fan worth, or by assuming the persona of a character to give off a certain quality to the performance whilst maintaining a specific manner of performance over a number of posts, it also can be seen in the way people will dominate exchanges, or adhere to an implicit social hierarchy. Goffman states where:

> a haughty aggressive manner may give the impression that the performer expects to be the one who will initiate the verbal interaction and direct its course. A meek apologetic manner may give the impression that the performer expects to follow the lead of others, or at least that he (sic) can be led to do so (Goffman, 1959: 35).

In order to support the performance’s credibility and give the actor more belief in their role it seems evident that appearance and manner should remain generally complementary with each other, but Goffman argues it is not only appearance and manner that require ‘confirming consistency’ (36); setting should also remain congruous with the front, as this assists in constructing a mutually harmonious definition of the situation. All aspects of the front should support the overall impression.

There is a mix of fixedness and flexibility in co-present encounters that are more complex to perceive in online environments, however parallels can still be drawn, as advantages in face-to-face interactions can be compensated for in performance work in other ways. For instance, age, class and gender are fixed in co-present situations, whilst online they are not; conversely, facial expression and tone of voice offer co-present performers subtle and spontaneous expressive tools unavailable to online encounters, but these same unthinking and seemingly instinctive responses in face-to-face encounters can also betray something about the self that the performer may prefer to downplay.
Geographical barriers can debilitate a performance’s effectiveness, such as language and disharmonious cultural interpretations. Online we see the performer is in control and can actively deceive the audience if they wish, or at least manage the impression they give to a higher degree than possible in face-to-face interactions, particularly with regard to controlling the disclosure of real life markers such as gender, age or other biographical details, and their online appearance, such as their avatar, banner or signature. Cultural barriers imposed by language and local norms place some membership groups in globally spread online communities at a disadvantage, leading to a disparity between the impression given and that received by the community. There is an active European sub-forum at the boards, and here in particular, posts by non-native English speakers often note and apologise for misinterpretation in advance of a post’s substance. Therefore, the online individual is in charge of their personal front in ways unrealistic in face-to-face interactions, but a trade off is made; greater control over profile is counteracted by the loss of subtle nuances of gesture, tone and colour of conversation that would be feasible in co-present communications. Cultural barriers can seriously impede the ability of the performer to control all aspects of their performance simultaneously, as although the generalised other of the community can be gauged, based on the social norms and expectations of the fan group, the performer cannot imagine the permutations of audience members’ geographical norms.

The performer can, however, expect there to be a level of ‘abstractness and generality’ to the front, as few expressive elements of fronts are exclusive to specific roles; instead, knowledge of how to perform in a manner conveying authority or creating an aura of trustworthiness are general to fronts associated with many roles, whilst the role itself has a tendency to ‘become institutionalised in terms of the abstracted stereotyped expectations to which it gives rise’ (Goffman, 1959: 37). This is useful for the performer as it offers a blueprint for the role, whilst its general and abstract nature accommodates
personal adaptation in performance made according to routines in other roles the performer may have experience of. Knowing what is expected of the role assists in an authentic performance, as:

a given social front tends to become institutionalised in terms of the abstracted stereotyped expectations to which it gives rise, and tends to take on a meaning and stability apart from the specific tasks... performed in its name. The front becomes a ‘collective representation’ and a fact in its own right (Goffman; 1959: 37).

In this, we see how through choosing the role of fan, a preassembled front is ready with which the performer can interact with the audience; as fans favour specific elements of front and expressive equipment, directing their performance through selective sign vehicles, both parties know what is expected.

Goffman does argue that sign vehicles used in social fronts can cross over from one setting to another. He discusses the way in which the lawyer’s suit can be utilised in a meeting, but also at dinner, or with a spouse at the theatre (40). Correspondingly, sign vehicles used in the personal front can be transferred to other settings. In a heavily mediated environment, where signifiers are employed more explicitly and intensively to compensate for lack of co-presence, it is possible to argue the self learns to cross-transfer not only sign vehicles but attributes; through using signifiers to embody the performance online, the manner of their personal online front becomes a part of the person’s self and their performance in face-to-face interactions. This is supported by interview data, as the following comment by Lyri shows; as a result of being a moderator and adopting the front for the online role her confidence grew, confidence that transferred to her sense of self which was eventually exhibited in roles held in co-present situations:
As the earlier quote from Park (1950, quoted in Goffman, 1959: 30) declared of individuals achieving character through a role, supported by Blumstein’s work on pair performance (1991), by performing her role as moderator and maintaining an appropriate manner in the personal front, her confidence and authority became a part of her sense of self. Internalising her online role affected offline interaction, as the generality, abstractness and crossing over of sign vehicles bolstered her performance in other spaces.

Moving on to other elements of performance, Goffman then discusses dramatic realisation, idealisation and maintenance of expressive control. Dramatic realisation is the effort made by the performer to stress those specific elements they want the audience to know, particularly where those aspects incorporate and exemplify the values of the community, as ‘if the individual’s activity is to become significant to others, he must mobilise his activity so that it will express during the interaction what he wishes to convey’ (1959: 40). Online, activity must be mobilised accurately first time, as the permanence of performance and invisibility of the audience means performances continue to build up into a composite picture after the post has been made: at Buffy-boards, some longstanding members have post histories that stretch back to the board’s inception, offering concrete displays of performed acts for years. It is therefore necessary to ‘dramatically highlight and portray’ confirmatory signs that support the performance, particularly obscure facts and details about the performer that might otherwise come to light, but could be of use in the setting (40).

Goffman mentions how individuals are forced to make a choice between action and expression; defining action as ‘activities that are consequential’ (1967: 185)
and expression as the socially learned and patterned ‘situationally bound features... generated in social situations’ (Goffman, 1997: 223). The analogous situation online is evident in the way members need to balance the consequences of actions, particularly those involving displays of character, against potential damage to their social identity, identity which is constructed through dramatic realisation of the context’s norms and values. ‘Those who have the time and talent to perform a task well may not, because of this, have the time or talent to make it apparent that they are performing well’ (Goffman: 1959: 43). The attention paid to managing performance to cultivate the right audience impression can mean the action is of a lesser quality than the performer is capable of. In online environments, a correlating situation can be found; the more time and effort spent by members constructing their persona and crafting their posts results in them performing less often, as the more time they spend engaged in impression management, the less they spend in the activity of community participation. Goffman states with dramatic realisation, only the end product is shown, not the work that went into it; the potential for error is corrected before performance commences, for example, in the case of radio shows, ‘the speaker may have to design his script with painstaking care, testing one phrase after another, in order to follow the content, language, rhythm, and pace of everyday talk’ (1959: 43). In the thread ‘This Mask I Wear’ members discussed how similar their offline and online performances were, providing some interesting data with regard to how performance work occurring backstage enables dramatic realisation:

I type the same as I write but alot of the time it doesn't make sense so many posts dont actually get posted. Aussie, post

I don’t talk as much in real life, mostly because this medium gives me time to think out my responses and articulate everything I want to say without getting steamrolled by people who are more belligerent and louder than I am… it’s harder for
me to express myself spur-of-the-moment like that, so I verbally stumble all over myself and sound like an idiot if I try to have any kind of impassioned discussion IRL. It’s much easier to get my point across here. Blondie Bear, post.

From this member’s comment, it can be seen that the medium helps dramatic realisation, as the ‘off camera’ work put in to the post results in the presentation of a performance the member is happy with before it is made public. Blondie Bear’s occupation of college lecturer means she desires to appear competent and give posts of a specific calibre. However, this can result in the expression being concentrated on over and above action, and can result in less participation, as this comment illustrates.

I think too much on here about what I am saying, who I will offend if I say a certain thing, how stupid I sound etc. to the point where I end up writing posts and then deleting them because I am too afraid to post. I find the problem is that when you are typing something on the net, you have to think about it, and in order for it to come across well you it is no longer your initial thoughts, but your edited thoughts, which to me, when read back always sound stupid. Rebecca, post.

Of course, Goffman’s point is that we are performing edited thoughts through dramatic realisation in co-present encounters on a daily basis, except they are not written, but thought, as noted earlier in Mead’s addressing of social intercourse to the self and an audience (1934: 142).

Another member alludes to the same situation in face-to-face interactions, demonstrating how the individual’s confidence in their impression management skills conflicts with their dedication to presenting the right
performance, comprehensively affecting interactions in both text based and verbal environments.

I also often skip posting because I can’t manage to write down my thoughts properly. Some of it is due to my lack of english skill though. The difference is that I do pretty much the same thing irl even when speaking. SK73, post.

Goffman argues the amount of importance allocated to the setting by the individual has a direct result on the extent of dramatic realisation; the degree to which their sense of self is attached to the specific context will dictate their commitment. He states ‘a professional man may be willing to take a very modest role in the street... but in the social sphere which encompasses his display of professional competency, he will be much concerned to make an effective showing’ (1959: 43). In fan environments, fans are much more interested in showing others that status and assimilation within the group is warranted, as it is through their performance that their standing is calculated. As Goffman says, in dramatic realisation, the individual is concerned with that from which ‘occupational reputation derives’ (43); in online fan communities, the ‘occupation’ is fandom, one in which a sense of self is derived and thus, dramatic realisation in this context is crucially impelling.

Idealisation is the next element of performance Goffman describes; in idealisation, the performer exemplifies the officially accredited values of the society, displaying ‘expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the official values of the community’ (45). As this expressive bias of community sanctioned values is celebrated and accepted as reality, to stay in one’s room away from where the party is given... is to stay away from where reality is being performed. The world, in truth, is a wedding’ (45). In online communities, staying away in one’s room, as Goffman puts it, becomes one of the ways one enters the party. Idealisation assists in the performance’s success as a whole,
helping to prevent misunderstanding by strengthening the previous elements; aspects of the front and dramatic realisation. The ability for the performance’s perfection before audience reception allows presentation of an idealised version of the self, as (for the most part) any trace of editing prior to posting is concealed and the end product is near flawless.

Goffman argues the richest example of idealised performance is provided by examinations of social mobility. The aspiration and desire to be recognised amongst the higher strata of a group inspires ‘proper performances’ from people whilst:

- efforts to move upward and efforts to keep from moving downward are expressed in terms of sacrifices made for the maintenance of front. Once the proper sign equipment has been obtained and familiarity gained in the management of it, then this equipment can be used to embellish and illumine one’s daily performances with a favourable social style (Goffman, 1959: 45-46).

In online communities with functions and structures such as Buffy boards, performances emblematic of community norms are offered to the audience by moderators and long-standing members, or by those members with a large number of posts, which proves their conformity with the expectations of community commitment through either duration or intensity. Some members may be more careful with idealising their performance than others, particularly those who are perceived to have status within the community, whilst members who post infrequently may be less concerned at keeping up appearances of self-confidence or witty repartee, as they have no body of performance work to protect. My own experience has been one where careful attention has been paid by idealising my performance to conform to the norms for other reasons, in order to maintain my position and retain the cooperation of the community and staff members alike, though this may not be the case for all participants: the
motivation to conform is in part driven by the need to preserve interactions with the group.

Goffman’s argument regarding the desire for an idealised performance to look natural and as though it has always been the case is supported by my data and experience. He states ‘performers may even attempt to give the impression that their present poise and proficiency are something they have always had and that they have never had to fumble their way through a learning period’ (56). It is apparent the majority of active members conform to this element of performance, as online even a ‘newbie’ will attempt to follow the conventions and values of the community to prevent a flawed performance, whilst most people will have lurked to ascertain the tone and culture of the community for a short time prior to posting or deciding to become a member.

I lurked for around a week or two. I actually joined another site before... but that one wasn’t quite as welcoming ...Then I found this one, and I was hesitant to join because I wasn’t sure if I was gonna fit into the mold, but after a little while, I realized I was lurking excessively so I went ahead and registered. Crazy Flakes, post.

For some participants, discussing the act of lurking can become a performance in itself, and a way of building an online identity.

I lurked here for ages. Watching you all. Taking notes. Learning all you likes and dislikes, keeping track of every little detail, all your good and bad habits. Just sitting here. Lurking away in the dark with nothing but the deranged scribblings of my mind for company. Waiting for the next post to dissect. Just waiting for the next poor victim. Just waiting to make my move. Just waiting for the right time to strike. And none of you were any
CotA’s commitment to performance underscores two things: it flatters the audience by fostering an idea of this relationship being ‘special and unique,’ in order to curry favour (57), positioning himself as attentive to the community in a tongue in cheek way. But there is also the suggestion that this is his most essential routine, an attempt to get the audience to ‘assume that the character projected before them is all there is to the individual who acts out the projection for them’ (1959: 57), that this ironic ‘evil genius’ persona is the same in all settings. Made possible through audience segregation, the performer manages their audiences carefully in order to prevent the performance from appearing inauthentic, controlling the likelihood of roles and performances played in one setting contradicting performances in another. Goffman uses James (1890, 2007) who argues:

>a man (sic) has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognise him and carry an image of him in their mind... as the individuals who carry images fall naturally into classes, we may practically say there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups. Many a youth who is demure enough before his parents and teachers, swears and swaggers like a pirate among his ‘tough’ young friends (James, 2007: 294)

James argues that in effect, the production of multiple performances gives rise to the individual divided into several selves. CotA’s ‘pirate swagger’ in the community is unlikely to be the case across all settings and with all of his performances, and the tactics he uses to control reception of disparate performances are the point Goffman expands on in audience segregation.

Extremely pertinent in the heavily mediated social networking age, audience segregation is perhaps best illustrated by ‘filtering’ facilities, the technological
turn which facilitates a separation of performances with self-contradictory content on Facebook, LiveJournal and MySpace. Audience segregation is evident at Buffy-boards in terms of the differences in norms of communication and group camaraderie in general, but also operates between internal and external settings, where the focus of role in context is no longer fandom, and between people from the community in private areas, where social controls relax and the idealised self presented through the personal front softens to the social norm for that sub-context, all of which change performance in groups and individuals to the more informal norms enacted in smaller, closer groups. Of course, the transferability and permanence of text based environments combines with overlapping audiences to challenge the performer’s audience segregation tactics. Problems arising from this will be discussed in the final chapter.

Audience segregation is related to an element of performance Goffman calls the maintenance of expressive control. People attempt, wherever possible, to remain in character, send the correct signals and resist the urge to perform in a way that would compromise the impression received. Performers therefore attempt to offer a complete ‘synecdochic performance’ to downplay flaws as ‘a single note off key can disrupt the tone of an entire performance’ (60), and so they perform in a way which means the unforeseen consequences of even minor events are neutral or positive, to maintain the audience’s positive impression. Joan the Vampire Slayer’s inadvertent slip mentioned earlier is a good example of a single off note that detracts from the overall performance; it has not changed the audience’s impression of her to any degree as the slip was minor, but it suggests that all might not quite be as it appears. Discordant events jar with the performance, as its dissonance startles the audience. This leads Goffman to argue ‘we must be prepared to see that the impression of reality that is fostered by a performance is a delicate, fragile thing that can be shattered by very minor mishaps’ (1959: 63). Thus, the ‘on faith’ (65) principle ruling small cues abstract
and general nature and the extrapolation of that information to other roles and performances, the ‘convenient fact’ (59) assisting in the initial performance’s reception, also has ‘inconvenient implications’ (ibid), as unwanted characteristics can be inadvertently evoked ‘from minor events in the performance, however instrumentally inconsequential these events might be’ (59) and generalised to the person’s identity as a whole. Even remaining in character and attempting to convey the same impression, or one at least consistent with impressions defining the previous performances, can have unforeseen effects, as the following example illustrates.

oh and speaking of airheads I finally got that movie! yah me.. not seen that in a coon’s age.. coon.. woof! **grrrruff runs after the coon** must be a huntin’ dog as well. scobro, post

Although not publicly chastised, the member received an official warning privately in a moderator message. In an attempt to act ‘in character’, language and cultural differences between the UK and the US had not been accounted for.

Please could you choose your turns of phrase more carefully in the future? The word ”coon”, when not referring to racoons, is generally considered to be incredibly offensive, and as such isn’t the best of abbreviations to use… Most members of the boards would associate your phrase with the offensive term. Lindsey McDonald, by private message to scobro

After the British moderator checked with an American counterpart, he withdrew his objection.

I spoke to Lou about this, and she was as oblivious as you were, so don’t worry…[here] that word is up there with the n-word in terms of racial slurs. But, evidently, it’s not where you live….
Now that I have a more in depth view of the context, take it more as a friendly warning...According to Lou, you couldn’t really have known, so I’m not blaming you or anything. Lindsey McDonald, by private message to scobro

This incident’s resolution was amicable, resulting in little public loss of face; with the transaction occurring away from the generalised other of the community, only those audiences to whom the exchange was transferred have added information relating to their perceptions of the two interactants to their personal data bank. It does show though how even the most experienced and skilled of performers are unable to anticipate a performance’s reception by illustrating how something as small as one word may upset the community’s reception of an otherwise flawless performance, changing individual’s opinions about a member in the process.

Moving on to the remaining elements of performance, the use of strategic ambiguity and innuendo misrepresent without lying, with performers making crucial omissions in order to impart the right slant on the overall impression received. Goffman asserts the audiences’ tendency towards sign-acceptance in good faith puts them ‘in a position to be duped and misled, for there are few signs that cannot be used to attest to the presence of something that is not really there’ (1959: 65). He does though state that whether the front is ‘false’ and the performer’s intent is deception is not the issue; the real concern is whether the performance is authorised and the performer has the qualities and status they claim to have. In uncovering a deception, the biggest cause of anxiety is not caused by the person’s intentional misrepresentation, but instead by how closely their performance could approximate to a genuine one as it challenges social reality, ‘for a competent performance by someone who proves to be an imposter may weaken in our minds the moral connection between legitimate authorization to play a part and the capacity to play it’ (1959: 67), whilst bringing our own judgment into account in the process. However, he is clear
that the context and claims made have a greater impact on this anxiety than the level of deception. For example, competently masquerading as a qualified doctor performing their duty would cause more distress than a person laying claims to a status that cannot be formally ratified – being a ‘friend’ or a ‘true fan’ for example – which instead ‘can be confirmed or disconfirmed only more or less’ (68).

This is also true in online fan communities, the authenticity of a fan’s identity claims can be judged through cues observed during continued interactions, and the threat made by imposters to the community’s social reality and one’s own sense of self is on the surface inconsequential. Goffman states the ramifications for the performer are not as serious with claims to some statuses in some contexts as others, as ‘[w]here standards of competence are not collectively organised to protect their mandate, an individual may style himself an expert and be penalised by nothing stronger than sniggers’ (Goffman, 1959: 68). In the context of online communities members accept that claims to fan status may be both heavily managed (and potentially revealed as inauthentic) through performance; for example, a member may check fan trivia before making a post, read blogs or others’ reviews of episodes or research in other ways how to perform as a true fan before engaging in threads; however, when false claims to authenticity are made by those whom members had perceived to be good friends with regard to embodied experience, where roles, status or friendship are claimed outside of the context of fandom, individuals who have associated on a personal level with the deceiver can feel very threatened.

Goffman makes it quite clear that in every role or performance, even those where the performer and audience both feel nothing is misrepresented, there will always be some detail that is left obscured. Arguing that ‘somewhere in the full round of [the performer’s] activities there will be something he (sic) cannot treat openly’ the discovery of false impressions in one small routine of a performance ‘may be a threat to the whole relationship or role of which the
routine is only a part, for a discreditable disclosure in one area of an activity will throw doubt on the many areas of activity in which he may have nothing to conceal’ (1959: 71). The consequences of a discredited performance, of misdirection away from a small social fact the performer wants to obscure from the audience, is the potential for the entire performance to be called into question, no matter how legitimate and authentic the performer’s claims to competency and ownership of a status are. In turn, the potential for a discrediting revelation can affect the performer’s skillful management, as even the small likelihood of a turn in the conversation or an unfolding of events will infuse the entire performance with anxiety. The potential protection offered online by an audience’s segregation from an individual’s other performances might make it appear that there is little chance for a false impression’s discovery, as discrediting information that challenges authenticity claims are more controllable online; however, in online communities, particularly those exhibiting significant levels of external and/or private communication, this distinction can be superficial, as the extended nodes of social network, the knowledge of real names and locations, of Facebook or Myspace and the overlapping circles in friendship groups combine with data’s transferability and permanence, and thus the audience’s discovery of a discrediting clue can be disseminated as easily as in co-present encounters.

The performer can counter this by retaining social distance, which serves to control the audience’s perception of their performance. Goffman voices ‘control over what is perceived is control over contact that is made, and the limitation and regulation of what is shown is a limitation and regulation of contact’ (1959: 74). Therefore, performers can withdraw or remain aloof to prevent damage to the performance, using mystification to achieve this by retaining the distance required. Online, there is more opportunity to strategically control the degree of individual integration and veil performance through misdirection or by disregarding reactions to comments made. The capacity for mystification varies
depending on whether the communication is ‘live’ in chat, or asynchronous in
the form of posts, though online it is easier for the member to sidestep a direct
question, or regulate their language to provide an answer vague enough to
leave its meaning purposefully open to interpretation by the community. In
mystifying their performance through role distance, performers are interpreted
more by a specific role’s routines that their own personalised inflection, and are
less likely to compromise an idealised performance. By concealing specifics, the
performer simultaneously piques interest, puts the audience in awe of them and
maintains social distance, protecting the performer from damage (1959: 76).

Online, the member has another option, to withdraw completely until factors
that may damage the idealised performance have passed by, such as incendiary
posts dropping out of circulation (as norms dictate threads should not be
‘bumped’ back to the top of the forum once interest has started to wane) or the
departure of members who may have been challenging the authenticity of the
performer or performance have left, or of new targets appearing in the sights of
members troubling to the performer. An audiences tendency towards awe,
respect and deference of mystified performers ‘allow the performer some elbow
room in building up an impression of his (sic) own choice and allow him to
function’ whilst protecting the performance from destruction through ‘close
inspection’ (1959: 76).

There is one final element to Goffman’s concept of performance, one that is
useful to keep in mind in analyses of online interactions. As discussed in my
methods chapter, previously there has been emphasis on the authenticity of
online interactions, and whether identity as performed online is ‘real.’ He
asserts that usually performances are viewed dichotomously, as either reality or
contrivance, but as reality is socially constructed this is a false separation.

We tend to see real performances as something not purposely put
together at all, being an unintentional product of the individual’s
unselfconscious response to the facts of the situation. And
contrived performances we tend to see as painstakingly pasted together, one false item on another (1959: 77).

The line of argument where face-to-face experiences of identity are viewed as authentic and honest, and virtual ones are manufactured and fraudulent untruths is often alluded to in CMC research, and used as a warning against the seductive powers of internet communications. However Goffman clearly states ‘an honest, sincere, serious performance is less firmly connected with the solid world than one might first assume’ (78).

The wrestling match has been used to explain the conventions of a staged performance (Barthes: 1972, Goffman: 1959). Barthes asserts ‘[a] wrestler can irritate or disgust, he never disappoints, for he always accomplishes completely, by a progressive solidification of signs, what the public expects of him’ (1972: 22). Both acknowledge that whilst the number of falls and the rightful winner may be fixed in advance, the subtle gestures, the gouging, snarling and invitation for audience interaction come ‘from a command of idiom, a command that is exercised from moment to moment with little calculation or forethought’ (Goffman, 1959: 80). The specifics of the performance may be pre-determined, but the meticulously coded cultural signs belong to a role and are part of the larger context in which the performance takes place. This is compounded for Barthes in the physical appearance of the wrestler as a basic sign conveyer as different types of physical specimens elicit different audience responses.

In the same way, the choices of avatars, banners, speech and the manner performed online are particulars used to draw out certain reactions from the audience. What is key here, is that there is no intrinsic reality between appearance and performance, all aspects of performance are impression management; even when the performance appears to be an honest one, as close
as possible to the individual’s own sense of self as they perceive it at that time, it is still a socially constructed reality.

A status, a position, a social place is not a material thing, to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated. Performed with ease or clumsiness, awareness or not, guile or good faith, it is none the less something that must be realized (Goffman, 1959: 81).

Online performances and those in to face-to-face interactions are equally as ‘real’ or ‘contrived’ as each other and yet internet identities are often critiqued in CMC research for their lack of authenticity. Goffman shows through this final element of performance how the distinction between real and false is the same in offline environments, because all of social interaction is rooted in performance. To move the current debates about online identity forward, the shared characteristics of reality and contrivance in both offline and online performances must be recognised. To illustrate how Goffman’s co-present performance theory can be used to analyse the presentation of the self in mediated environments, the next chapter will examine in greater detail the individual elements a person engages in to perform their role as a fan, using it to construct their personal front.

As a greater amount of the data available at the research site is about to be encountered, it seems wise at this stage to offer some of Goffman’s specific ideas concerning his methodological approach in evaluating social situations as they have guided this research’s approach to interactions. Although criticised for not having transparent enough methods, or at least, no concrete definition of how to execute a Goffmanesque analysis of a sociological setting, Goffman does offer insight on what participant observation is, what constitutes good fieldwork, and how by following a pragmatic approach to the recording and representation of sociological encounters, one can present the data to more
accurately reflect the situation as conceived of by those being studied. For Goffman, participant observation is:

subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their ... situation (1989:125, cited in Rogers).

Although perhaps more resolutely cynical than the approach I have taken here because of his emphasis on institutionalised and spoiled identities, he does propose that good fieldwork:

“tunes your body up” and with your “tuned up body” and with the ecological right to be close to them (which you’ve obtained by one sneaky means or another) you are in a position to note their gestural, visual, bodily responses to what’s going on around them and you’re empathetic enough – because you have been through the same crap they’ve been taking – to sense what it is they’re responding to. To me, that’s the core of observation (1989: 125, cited in Rogers).

Throughout this research’s involvement with Buffy-boards.com, the participant/observer role has been performed by pulling back into analysis when the community atmosphere became charged, in order to counter the desire to weigh in and becoming emotionally invested to such a degree it operates to the detriment of one’s ability to ascertain the group dynamics at play; however joining in with the interactions that constitute the sense of community, such as the games, fan topics and off-topic posts about people’s lives, has provided a bona fide presence in order to achieve Goffman’s ‘ecological right’ to be involved with the community and represent their socially constructed reality.
Goffman justifies the representation of reality as experienced by its members as fundamental to understanding the situation as in order to represent the position of the other, one takes upon oneself their position; thus, field notes should be written:

as lushly as you can, as loosely as you can, as long as you have put yourself into it, where you say “I felt that” ... [T]o be scientific in this area, you’ve got to start by trusting yourself and writing as fully and lushly as you can (1989: 131, cited in Rogers).

Therefore, the data chapter that follows attempts to reflect as accurately as possible the social reality of the participants and how ‘real’ it feels to them by illustrating the rich social environment community members write within, as it is fundamental in understanding their performances, the social structures underpinning the context’s hierarchies in shaping the self.
Chapter Four: 
Performing the Online Self

In Sandvoss’s (2005) examination of fandom, he argues the ‘significance of fandom to the self and its representation to others’ must be addressed in order to understand its use as a symbolic resource in the formation of identity (2005: 43). Through participant observation, questionnaires, follow up interviews, e-mails and chat, this research has endeavoured to discover in what ways people use their fandom as a symbolic resource in performances of a social identity, how performing identity in an online fan community influences performance, and how fans draw on what is reflected back to them from the community in their ongoing development of the self.

The working hypothesis is that people use fandom to perform different routines of self-identity within the context of the forum’s subject matter, norms and culture, in the process, using the online environments of fan bulletin boards they collectively create community, though this is a fragile construction, that is subject to challenges made by its own members through the transgressions of norms and values the community holds dear. Symbolic interaction regards the individual’s definition of the situation as being of utmost importance in understanding the relations between internal thoughts and beliefs, social behaviour and collective action (Cooley, 1902 and 1909; Thomas and Thomas, 1928; Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959); rather than wider societal reasons for behaviour, it is the context the performance takes place in and the individual’s socialisation within it that are paramount in guiding the individual to present the online self in the way they do. As Goffman would put it, the context acts as a frame for the interaction, defining norms and enactment of anticipated roles within the environment (1974).
In this analysis, instead of internet identity allowing the amorphous or ephemeral construction of multiple identities, a coherent online self develops and offers a continuity of performance in the setting; rather than identity possessing an evanescent quality, the individual’s perception of their place in the community and a sense of what is expected for the context acts as an anchor, retaining the member, shaping their self. An individual’s performances may vary in tone from post to post or in relation to the subject matter as the performer can engage on a number of fronts, however, once the member has created their personal front and commenced their performance in an acceptable way within the context of the community, the fandom role and personal front combine to offer a coherent projection of the self, and on the whole, the performance remains within the expectations of the community and its members, although this is dependent upon an understanding of the shared values and expectations and the individual’s motivation to conform to them. With respect to ideas of online experimentation and play, this thesis shares a little common ground with earlier examinations of online identity (Turkle, 1995: Reid, 1998 and 1996: Donath, 1998: Danet, 1998), however, the employment of ‘play’ in internet identity performance often overemphasises fragmentation and transience, and underestimates the pull of community or enduring social relationships as motivators to continue ‘knowable’ performances of the self.

In the fan communities encountered during this research identity performance and ‘play’ is a much more subtle and continually reflexive process than the postmodern framework suggests; this includes research at sites that are unconnected to Buffy fandom. As fans engage with other fans, their individual performances afford them a place in the community’s hierarchy and bring peer recognition and acceptance, which is a strong motivator to maintain the expectations of the community, though when other frames of personal influence cause conflict, performances can reflect the expectations of sub groups rather than the community as a whole, which will be discussed in a later chapter.
Performances are defined by the individual community members’ collectively perceived definition of the situation, with the norms of the community and the fan culture being the primary, but not sole, locus of the principles guiding and reinforcing their performances. Members engage as both performer and audience within the fan community, they evaluate their own and others’ performances based on their interpretation of the prescribed norms; in addition, being an audience to others’ performances provides them with a pattern for acceptable social acts. This reflects how when individual or group norms of performance change, the expectations of the community as a whole modify. As argued by Goffman, reception of performance guides the modification of aspects incongruous with the image individual’s desire to project until performance is perfected for the specific context (1959: 15, 24). Individual’s confidence in exploring less well-developed sides of their personality is furthered by reactions to and engagement with their performance by the audience, and so with this positive affirmation and feeling of acceptance, the individual feels free to engage more with different character quirks, or disclose aspects of the self they may normally obscure in co-present situations.

Performances are complicated to categorise; this holds true equally in co-present and online encounters. In co-present social exchange, each role or encounter is likely to occur with the bleeding out of some aspects of front into others or a distancing from the role momentarily, a gesture or inflection used to break the performance for dramatic effect to different parts of the audience, perhaps a raised eyebrow directed at a friend concerning a shopkeeper’s inadequacy, or a nervous look directed to a colleague when called into the presence of a superior. Similarly, in each post, IRC communication or message a member performs multi-dimensionally; personal identity and aspects of the self in different roles overlap with blurred audiences, with audiences simultaneously comprising of the generalised other, friends from more tightly
knit friendship groups, or individuals with whom they have the closest of relationships.

The interviews, chats and posts from members illustrate the intricacy of performing the self, but also show how members are reflexive about their own identity explaining their motivations, feelings and, unbeknown to them, their use of the elements of performance Goffman describes. Fan practices play a part in this reflexivity, specifically the practices that are concerned with the ‘institution of theory and criticism, a semi structured space where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed, debated and negotiated’ (Jenkins, 1992: 86). This analytical stance lays forth ground for critical evaluation to be applied more generally to the self. The internet’s potential for rapid access to great quantities of quality fan analysis intensifies the effects of fan experience; the quicker turn around in debate prompts fans to respond in a timely manner, whilst the high amount of broadly defined culturally specific content in fandom illustrates what fans do, modelling fan behaviour. For example, paper ‘zines fan culture requires time, patience and commitment, and a long apprentice period before mastery of the role is achieved; exploring a vast range of topics immediately, rapidly picking apart an argument in full, reanalysing, expanding on points and defending a position under fire from fellow fans cannot be achieved in the same time frame in ‘zines fan culture. Online fandom’s intensity is unrealisable in ‘zine fan exchanges due to the slower pace of debate, whilst localised face-to-face meetings may offer similar speed, but not the variety; local cultural norms influence the participant’s opinion, in addition to the effect of demographic factors on face-to-face participation rates such as age, stage in life cycle, status and gender. The internet shows fans how to behave, offering them an ‘abstract, stereotyped expectation’ of the front (Goffman, 1959: 37), giving fans an intensive training in fan practices, whilst allowing fans to dip in and out of their fandom at any
convenient moment. In short, it changes fandom, making it more readily accessible.

The internet environment is much more visually appealing and engaging as the pictorial clues and signatures members use to express the self online stimulates a specific combination of reading textually as well as symbolically. These factors need to be accounted for to explain fans’ ability to read, interpret and adopt the setting’s specific style of engagement to perform to the best of their ability – visually, textually, in terms of fan practices, but also in terms of the tone and content of self-reflexive off-topic revelations. Goffman argues context is imperative in understanding social interaction (1959, 1974), and so it must again be reiterated that the object of fandom has an influential role in the shaping of dialogue in online communities. Particularly in shows like *BtVS* where reflexivity, irony and self-deprecation are central to its distinctive flavour, fans seem to be very aware of how to self analyse.

As noted by Williams (2004) in her study of ‘shippers, Buffy fandom has a strong female presence; in comparison to forums concerned with sport, gadgets or cars, Buffy-boards has a more feminised environment, with fan debate exhibiting the gendered reading practices Jenkins discusses (1992: 108), focussing on ‘a narrative’s “world” rather than on its plot.’ This is corroborated by Baym’s argument where women dominant groups were ‘more likely to self disclose and try to prevent or reduce tension’ stemming from ‘the gendered nature of the form around which they rally [that] come[s] right back to the soap opera’ (2000: 139). At Buffy-boards talk is viewed as a form of social exchange; thus female dominated environments like Williams’ sites and Buffy-boards provide a much more feminine and self-revelatory setting, fostering the right conditions for deep analyses in a non threatening environment, whilst the subject matter itself adds scope for playfulness in interactions.
Reality and Contrivance

People’s participation in environments, relationships and encounters online are as much a part of their daily experiences of social interaction as those occurring in co-present settings. Social interaction, Goffman argued, ‘can be identified narrowly as that which uniquely transpires in social situations’ where an individual is in the ‘response presence’ of one or more others (Goffman, 1983: 2), with ‘reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another’s actions … when a given set of individuals are in one another’s continual presence’ (1959: 26). Although discussing physical presence, the influence of other’s responses on individuals is indisputable as the context is built upon responding to posts of others and to provide a flow of one-to-many and one-to-one communications. Furthermore, as the audience imagine the performer as ever present, an audience who are comprised of a core of active members similar to Goffman’s ‘continual presence’ (1959: 32), it is reasonable to conclude Goffman’s definition of social interaction can be extended to online interactions. The thrust of his argument about performance is that the context and perceptions of the audience imagined by the performer frame the interaction, which in turn shapes the self; therefore, there are grounds for using his theory of performance in the context of the internet.

Internet identity and face-to-face identity are often portrayed as being dichotomous, however in practice, people’s offline and online performances overlap as the abstractness and generality in performance Goffman highlights (1959: 37) provides routines that can encompass attributes of many roles in many contexts, and so, selves are more integrated than it would first appear. Contrary to the notion of a distinct split in online versus offline performances of the self, data suggests rather than the internet allowing a free space in which the individual’s projected self is an image of whoever they want to be without constraints, in many respects, the internet offers a space for them to be who they
feel they are, but are not confident enough to fully express in co-present encounters, or unable through circumstance. For example, one member goes as far as to say the ‘real’ self is the one seen by the community, and not the one performed in real life:

In real life, I’m very fake. If you know my home life, you’d know that I’m the black sheep of the family and that I’ve opened my eyes a bit more and seen that the people who I trusted aren’t really my friends. So, with them I smile and I agree agree agree even if I really don’t. However, when I get online I’m much more relaxed and real with people. Hero, post

In effect, the online identity offers them the opportunity to present performances for themselves of an idealised self-image, one unencumbered by Hacking’s (2004) ‘resented’ roles or the fixed elements of fronts that are associated with them, permitting the self to test out how changes to their performance might be received. Goffman discusses how belief in the role one is playing encourages the performer to:

be taken in by his (sic) own act, convinced at the moment that the impression of reality which he fosters is the one and only reality. In such cases the performer comes to be his own audience: he comes to be performer and observer of the same show (1959: 88).

In environments where one’s performance can be witnessed daily through the permanence, visibility and searchability, of one’s social interactions, it could be argued it makes the reality that much more believable for the self.

Media convergence’s accelerating pace results in an uneasy bifurcation of online and co-present encounters. As Smith recently commented concerning mobile phone and internet use in co-present social encounters ‘[I]t is no longer necessary to bring Goffman to the Internet; the Internet is coming to Goffman…
It is certainly possible to extend Goffman into these Internet spaces. But now Internet spaces are extending themselves into the Interaction Order’ (2009). Individuals can be engaged in professional or family activities whilst accessing their online fan community from computers or phones, thus interaction in online environments often has correlating even contiguous effects in co-present encounters. Online performances can change an individual’s frame of mind or mood, in addition to instantaneously and simultaneously producing enduring consequences for offline life as a result of the reactions, positive reinforcement and acceptance of a performed fan identity.

The data reveals a number of patterns with relation to reality and contrivance in online and co-present performance, but for the purpose of this thesis, two will be focussed upon. Firstly, the need to feel online selves are authentically performed, accurately reflecting who they feel they are is of extreme importance to the members, supporting Goffman’s argument regarding belief in the role one is playing (1959: 28). Secondly, differences that are acknowledged are trivial, regarding confidence, which members can counteract through offering an authentic performance; or regarding dramatic realisation, for example sarcasm, flirtatiousness, or humour, both of which will now be explained in greater detail.

The individual enters the setting through the threshold role of fan; as ‘all roles can be performed in a manner giving them a particular personal stamp, and allowing the individual to utilize particular means of self expression’ (Giddens, 1988: 258) fans then start to perform an idealised fan identity projected through their personal front, gradually moving along a continuum, incrementally increasing access to their personal identity and backgrounding fan displays (unless applicable to the thread or sub-context) as they become more comfortable with levels of trust in the community. Trust is gained through positive reinforcement of performed roles and personal identity, eventually
leading to embodiment of the role, performing a self that is both fan and personal identity enmeshed in co-present or online contexts.

I created the persona of Lyri to be an extension of my real personality. But, overtime, the personalities have merged. I have become Lyri. I’m more confident than I was, I speak when I want to, I stand up for what I believe in, and I rarely back down. Lyri

Offline and online identities are in harmony with each other for most members, although Aussie’s post admits that the degree her performance converges with her co-present self may be specific to the context of Buffy-boards.

I think on this forum Im very similar to how I am IRL but on another forum I am alot more quiet and reserved and sensible:
.... Its too much like hard work to make up another persona, Im just not that energetic. Aussie post

Personality wise, what you read is pretty much what you would get if you met me in person... except maybe add a tad more sarcasm and TONS more cursing... my f-bombs tend to get a little out of control. Airam, post

No (don’t be scared people!). I’m as “crazy” as I seem to be in my posts... Poor people... XDruX

With regard to the tweaking of different aspects of the self, and how the internet changes the consequences of performance for the individual, Jonut commented:

I think it’s safer to say that I am probably a lot more open online than I am offline... The basis of who I am is the same, regardless of medium, but I do show different sides of my personality online and play up to them more than I would offline and vice versa, it’s a hard thing to explain. Jonut
This is explicitly Goffman’s argument; alluding to an individual’s sense of a ‘core,’ the self is imagined as the same across settings, whilst claims supporting an authentic identity are accomplished by identity performance through idealised and dramatically realised roles and fronts, allowing a multiplicity of identity performances to express different aspects of ‘personality’. Jonut states this ‘playing up’ occurs online and offline, supporting this thesis’ argument regarding the redundancy of a precisely defined online/offline split and the lack of a clear a distinction between authentic and contrived selves.

When members were asked if they felt they acted like a different person offline to online, they argued their performances mainly converged.

*No, I don’t [play with my identity]. I hate it when people do that. I feel like you should have the integrity to be yourself always. Stuck in Traffic*

*Not really, no. I used to, when I was younger, but that’s just a phase I went through and seemed to grow out of as I learned more and more about myself. Now I act generally the same though (or at least as far as I know), I suppose there may be a few differences here and there, as I know I’m not perfect, but I find that acting different is too much work and too much to worry about for me. ~angelic slayer~*

*No. I am pretty honest about my beliefs and attitudes on the boards. I don’t hold anything back or lie to make myself seem ‘cooler’. Spiked Buffy*

The context of the boards, the way people communicate, the personal front and the roles members play in the functioning of the community combine to allow members to emphasise specific elements of their personality, whilst retaining their sense of self. A Goffmanian analysis would view this as evidence of the
community’s norms and values coming through in an idealised version of the self, as members are alluding to their consistency and veracity with their offline selves. However, relationships to subgroups and pairs can modify these performances and challenge the community’s cohesion, as the expectations and norms of relationships the individual has more personalised dealings with can cause a tension between who the performance is for, and the larger audience.

The majority of people state identity performed online quite closely echoes their offline identity, even in relation to their fan performances. Members who did suggest there were differences performed this admission with comedic intent, in ways that supported their overall identity performance of ‘geek’ or socially inept.

*I sure hope I’m not different online than offline… two differences are obvious to myself … I’m still a lot more talkative on the boards than IRL; I’m definitely more of a writer than a talker… And, of course, all that hugging and kissing online, well, I don’t IRL. I’m very reclusive, and very physically reserved. Last time I hugged a woman in real life was June 2003. ^^ Never made a secret out of it that the net is where my social life happens, while RL is for eating and sleeping. Insane Mystick, post*

The idea of a coherent self still abides for the great majority of members. For the most part, people want to be seen to be the same online and offline, in addition to offering cohesive performances in the setting, as it suggests stability and trustworthiness, factors that will ultimately affect their ability to contribute to the community and form stable relationships. But it also serves a purpose in stabilising the self. Turkle notes that when online persona and the self merge, they ‘join to comprise what the individual thinks of as his or her authentic self’ (1995: 186). Although she takes a psychological perspective on identity
online, focussing mainly on the fragmented self, the outcome is the same using Goffman’s multiplicity of identities, as each routine and role constitutes their sense of self.

For example, keeping fellow members’ spirits up is a key part of this member’s fan performance and community activity; as their self is based upon the idea of helping others through entertaining the community, the member is able to fulfill their fan identity, social identity, relate it to the primary goals that guide their face-to-face interactions, and boost their ego.

Everyone wants to be cheerful, my ‘skits’ if you will are the easiest way to accomplish that on a large scale basis. The funny aspect is not central, the desire to enrich another’s life is the core basis on how I see myself. Its an ego boost only in the fact that I feel good for making someone smile… to a degree it makes my day better only in that I feel I am making theirs better. The more I can make them laugh the better ‘job’ it seems I am doing… I imagine how to present myself TO the audience for maximum approval rating. It’s all about marketing! scobro, chat

That the member is seen to fulfill a role by the generalised other of the community as a comic, able to make the community respond to his performance or engage them in a witty debate has ramifications, as his sense of self is build on ‘enriching another’s life.’

Members may be more playful or comical online, but the remainder of their performances appear to correspond to their co-present performances. Playing with certain aspects may be common; data suggests performance tweaks are undertaken to suit the context, whilst the majority of offline self-performance are reflected in the forum, and visa versa. However, members will admit aspects
of their personality are toned down or ramped up in online settings, in order to achieve dramatic realisation of their online identity.

Aware that misinterpretation caused by a lack of co-presence may inhibit their performance’s reception and discredit their identity, this member moderates their sarcasm:

*The only difference is that I’m always sarcastic in person but not so much here because I’m afraid that some people might take it seriously when I’m really just joking.* Blaze, post

Others admit that they may be more forward or feisty online, perhaps matching their textual performance to their overall personal front as presented through their avatars and signatures, although this member suggests the online self may be more ‘real’ than the one usually performed in co-present settings.

*Some people would say the real you emerges online… I’m pretty reserved when I’m first introduced to someone. But later I become a bit sarcastic, I try to be funny… I’m very sexual in nature … meaning I enjoy the occasional flirtations, and my humor tends to run toward the risqué side… So I guess I am similar to the person you view here everyday, but not a mirror image.* 4.0.cious Miss, post

Perhaps here, Goffman’s idea of the individual travelling a continuum between cynical and sincere selves is relevant; through belief in the role one is playing, the online identity is transferred to co-present situations, a theme which runs through much of the data. Goffman argues ‘we must not rule out the kind of transitional point that can be sustained on the strength of a little self illusion. We find that the individual may attempt to induce the audience to judge him and the situation in a particular way, and he may seek this judgment as an ultimate end in itself’ (1959: 32).
Even if the co-present self is not confident enough in their sincere performance, by getting others to believe in it, the self can embrace it as genuine. Generally, the aspects of personality people cited as being unequal in comparison with their offline performances are those involving confidence, openness, friendliness, the ability to articulate and kindness:

*I think I am a lot more confident in my opinions and whatnot online though than I would be approaching people face to face.*

Jonut

Online identity can be used to augment offline identity; confidence brought about in online contexts can be drawn from in order to bolster confidence in co-present exchanges. Members who have been online longer and built up an online status through repeated performances in communities, or those with an official position, report there is a great deal of convergence with what in seen online and offline, with one performance borrowing from the other. Two moderators specifically drew attention to the importance of aspects of their online roles in face-to-face exchanges. For example, Lyri, whose user name integrates her fan role and her real name, has produced an online identity that is inextricably connected to her sense of self, so much so that in awkward co-present situations she now thinks ‘what would Lyri do?’

*Being Lyri...I think it has given me more confidence, but only in regards to speaking my mind and not holding back. I was already a pretty confident person, but for some reason, now, if I find myself in a weird or difficult situation, I start referring to myself as Lyri instead of Aly. It helps me feel that I can do what needs done...[as a moderator] I’ve had to be authoritative, make decisions and explain my actions later.... I’ve always managed to do the right thing, and the taken the actions the others*
[moderators] would have. So that’s given me a boost knowing that I can be trusted to do the right thing. Lyri

Confidence gained through the effective enactment of routines of her moderator’s role can be transferred to her co-present encounters, as they are still a part of her experiences of social interaction; this sentiment is also supported by ~angelic slayer~ a long time member and moderator at Buffy-Boards:

I am [through being a moderator] now a lot more eager to try new things, help people out, etc in an offline environment. So as I’ve done that more online I’ve been able to take the confidence I have from doing those sort of things and use it in my offline life… ~angelic slayer~

The majority of research participants are clear that their on and offline identities are in harmony with each other, and their performances on the boards are representative of those in co-present situations, although will admit a greater degree of playfulness is exhibited online rather than the play emphasised in early CMC research. However, some research participants did allude to identity play at previous sites, when ‘play’ occurred in their earliest forays into online forums, or at an age where identity play is more common.

For example, ~angelic slayer~ categorically states her online identity was initially at odds with her sense of self; as she has matured the two have become more congruent, whilst her online identity has provided scope for her self development:

When I was younger, I used to try and act more “cool” online … I’d choose usernames and avatars that didn’t suit me at all and would even sometimes agree with opinions that I myself disagreed with in hopes that people would “like me” (I didn’t do
this on BB, this was way before I ever became a member here).

... I do (unknowingly!) use the internet as a place to use certain aspects of my personality, which really does help me use them more in my offline life. ~angelic slayer~

~angelic slayer~’s first forum membership occurred at age twelve; she suggested this may have been why there was initially a greater disparity between her online and offline identity. As she matured, the inconsistencies in her performances became less; with a performance similar to her offline personality, through the internet, she has developed her self and more of what she exhibited online was replicated offline. Now choosing avatars to ‘suit’ her sense of self, rather than performing in ways seemingly alien, she has abandoned identity play, instead using the environment to develop the self, a pattern echoing the fall of the fragmented self narrative of early internet identity theory; as users have matured in the environments, there is greater parity between identities. It could be argued that the performed online identity needs to be similar to one’s sense of self in order to extract use from the reactions of others to personality tweaks; Goffman quotes Kroeber (1952, cited in Goffman, 1959: 32) about ‘self-illusion’ in performance, whereby the shaman uses a little smoke and mirrors to enhance the performance, but considers it sincere, nonetheless. Online, the self feels the role is sincere, but adds a touch of gloss to help themselves to gain as much positive feedback as is possible. This supports the argument that a sense of self enmeshes with the settings, roles, social identity and the audience’s reception to produce a self contextually performed with no one factor superseding the other.

Discussing how she had ‘played’ a completely different self at a previous board Lyri comments:

When I first started on forums, CoA, I was Aly. And while that is my real name, I didn’t want to be ME. I was very insistent
that I wanted to be a completely different person, so I told everyone that I was American, and changed other details. Lyri

After interacting and building close relationships with members (some of whom relocated with her to Buffy-boards with CoA’s demise), she gradually found that:

…when I got close to BoTD and Randian, that persona fell slightly, and the real Aly crept in. Lyri

This suggests that the self’s ‘perduring moral character’ (Goffman, 1974: 573) emerges through the interchange with other members as the individual becomes more involved with the community and comes into direct contact with the generalised other, irrespective of how distinct the performance is from one’s sense of self when communication commences. Although biographical data changed, the characteristic personality of the self endured.

Online identity permits a few members to speak or perform in ways they are uncomfortable with in their offline life, offering the freedom to convey themselves in a manner very different than that in which the communicate with people in a face-to-face environment. Danet (1998) comments that online, ‘people allow themselves to behave in ways very different from ordinary everyday life, to express previously unexplored aspects of their personalities, much as they do when wearing masks and costumes at a carnival or masked ball’ (131). However my data shows there is a much more subtle emphasis on play than postmodern accounts suggest, and often these are rooted in reasons that have real offline consequences.

it’s just easier to type without having to say the words and it definitely gives you the confidence to explore different parts of yourself in a way that if you don’t like the outcome, you don’t have to see those people day in and day out. Jonut
At its most basic level, Jonut’s comment is true, but as in the case of co-present encounters, the majority of social exchanges transpire within the constraints of implicit behavioural norms exhibited by the community, framed through the individual’s interpretation of how others are interacting; this illustrates how the individual’s perception of the shared reality and what is acceptable for the context are subjectively constructed and precarious. People mainly attempt to remain within the social boundaries of acceptable behaviour, as in order to reap the rewards offered by community in terms of acceptance, a sense of belonging and shared values, the individual must abide by the context’s conventions. Notwithstanding, it does give rise for potential explorations of the self, the trying on of different social roles or identity fronts both within and outside of fandom that can challenge the community feel, but particularly, of those aspects that have had to remain hidden in co-present encounters.

For example, members whose sexuality is underexplored in offline environments find they can express their voice online. At Buffy-boards, they feel at ease with embracing elements of the self they would usually downplay, because the culture of the site is guided by the themes in the fandom; as Buffy has a central lesbian character, sexuality is often discussed.

I was always so sure that I was straight. But lately I’ve been thinking that I’m more bisexual. OMG! That’s the first time I’ve *ever* said that! Morbid Much, post

The internet is a very good place for people to be who they are without being judged by others. It’s very easy to come out and admit to being gay or bi or whatever online, but can be very difficult to do it face to face with family and friends. Angel, post

I’m bisexual… Not a lot of people in my life know, but I have no problem with online friends knowing. I’ll admit that I have flat
out lied when asked if I was… because you’re so scared how a
certain person will react… My father… and my brother are both
very religious people, and they see homosexuality as a very
wrong lifestyle. Literally, my life would probably be a living hell
if I ’came out’ to them. FivebyFiveB, post

These excerpts confirm that in circumstances where offline it may be difficult to
deal with the face to face nature of direct communications and the
repercussions of revealing the self fully, online it can be a release, and a way of
beginning the process of embracing a gay identity.

If performing an identity in this context can be a way of starting a process of
self-acceptance, when aspects of the online identity are performed in co-present
settings, elements of the personal front can be carried with it. This member’s
custom user title is ‘Mikey:’ its use in co-present and online performances
illustrates the degree to which her offline and online identities are congruent.

my irl friends today call me Mikey, and I’m not sure all of them
know my ”real” name is Johanna. I never really identified as
”Johanna”. Johanna isn’t more real than epo – they’re both part
of whatever it is that I call ”me”. Mikey – what I’m usually
called now and how people see me in the queer sub culture in
Stockholm – isn’t the same as Johanna, and not the same as epo,
but it’s definitely ”me”. Whatever ”me” means, you know.

eponinethen

eponinethen is the only participant who specifically mentions fluid identity,
influenced by her academic study embracing Butler’s theories of gender
performativity, and her identity as a feminist and lesbian.

I don’t believe in fixed identities – the poststructuralist that I
am. I think identities are – partly – created in the meetings with
other people etc., they depend on context. ... And maybe these
days – when I’m less online and more irl – Mikey affects epo
more than epo used to be affected by what happened irl in
Johanna’s life, if that makes sense at all. eponinethen

Epo’s comments are unusual in respect of her embrace of postmodern notions
of the self, although she does agree her performance is contextual. However, her
use of Mikey/Epo in co-present and online settings, and her lack of
identification with what would be considered her ‘real’ or authentic self
highlight how in practice, the real self is the one the performer has most
invested their sense of self in, in the context in which they feel most comfortable
and accepted. Jonut’s interview does suggest comfort at being authentic is
contextually related to the setting, the sense of membership gained through the
fan role, and the feeling of the generalised other understanding their position,
as their experiences and outlook are perceived to be similar:

*I tend to be a very passionate person about things I like, some
may say a little obsessed... so when I’m online and among
people who think how I do I find myself able to discuss things
more openly...* Jonut

To summarise, members may perform more playfully at Buffy-boards than in
coopresent encounters, it is mainly because the setting is purely recreational, one
in which they can participate in some enjoyable repartee with fellow fans,
rather than it representing a distinctly different identity.
The Front

Introduced in the previous chapter, personal front has the greatest influence of all on first impressions: a member’s personal front is interpreted for the first time upon entering Buffy-boards by the existing audience, similarly, in a new member’s first encounters, existing member’s personal fronts provide their first impression to the new member. Goffman raises this point in *Stigma* (1963); arguing a social identity is both ‘virtual’ and ‘actual, with the former resting on assumptions about the identity made from other aspects of the performance, and the latter is identity experienced through interaction (Goffman, 1963: 12). ‘When a stranger comes into our presence, then, first appearances are likely to enable us to anticipate his category and attributes, his ‘social identity’ (1963: 12). A front therefore, must be well maintained in order to provide the most persuasive performance, because it has the potential to be the permanent primary performance a person makes. The personal front, comprising of the items the audience most associates with the performer, such as user name, avatar, signatures, banner, but also manner, status markers and demeanour, are equivalent to an individual’s appearance and use of items of expressive equipment in co-present situations (1953: 34).

The personal front’s importance in explicitly laying claims to authenticity and rightful ownership of a role cannot be underestimated, as authentic claims to a fan identity can be manipulated to great effect by careful impression management, skillfully exhibiting the ‘right’ way to perform. As such, it becomes a matter of great significance to members, who pay considerable attention to their visual presentation.

In particular, user names, avatars and signatures are a denotive and enduring interface between the member and the audience. They are online representations of the self channelled through the fan role in the most obvious sense, as they perform the individual’s interpretation of fandom within the
community’s confines of the expected role; they are abiding markers, as even if the member is established, the visual markers attached to the text are a convenient cognitive hooks for other members, including new ones, to gather together accumulated knowledge and assessment of the performer. More than that, they combine to provide an impression of a person’s self from the perspective of others, their personal identity.

Goffman (1963) argues a personal identity, the conglomeration of experiences and performances by which we are known to others, our individuality in our ‘primary groups’ (Cooley, 1909), is comprised of two things:

[one idea involved in the notion of ‘uniqueness’ in an individual is that of a ‘positive mark’ or ‘identity peg’, for example the photographic image of the individual in others’ minds, or the knowledge of his special place in a particular kinship network… and the full set of facts known about an intimate is not found to hold… for any other person in the world… Sometimes this complex of information is name bound… sometimes it is body-bound as when we come to know the pattern of behaviour whose face we know, but whose name we do not know (Goffman, 1963: 73-74, author emphasis)

The labelling of these pegs through avatars and user names give the audience a ready made place to deposit a ‘single, continuous record of social facts… to which other biographical facts can be attached (1963: 75). Thus, the importance of continuity between personal front and setting is again emphasised, as a name, avatar and signature facilitates in others’ mind’s eye the self’s construction in the setting.

Usernames are powerful tools in the performance of identity, as it is the item of the personal front that remains most consistent for each member. In some communications, the user name is the only part of the personal front on display, for example, in IRC, the chat-box, post quotations and karma points. The user
name is the starting point for how the self interacts with the community, and sets the stage for the performance. The first consideration a new member makes when creating a profile at the bulletin boards is their user name; control over the personal front starts with the construction of the online identity, and names are as relevant online as in co-present situations in identifying an entity or object. Names are very revealing, as Strauss argues; close observation ‘speaks volumes’ (1967: 322). A name is:

that *distinctive appellation by which a person is known*… any name is a container; poured into it are the conscious or unwitting evaluations of the namer. Sometimes this is obvious… sometimes the position of the namer has to be sought and one’s inference buttressed by other evidence (Strauss, 1967: 322, original emphasis).

Just as some parents attend carefully when naming their offspring, checking baby name books to infuse the child’s image with an attitude or an outlook connoted by the name, assisting in their choice of a name suggestive of ‘their ideals and aspirations’ (ibid), Buffy-boards members can also use the same degree of consideration when they choose their user name.

*I always find that usernames are the hardest part about joining a board. You can sit there forever and try to think of a name.*

SpikedBuffy

SpikedBuffy’s comment is reflective of the consideration many members make when choosing their own name. Strauss goes on to argue that ‘[t]he names that are adopted voluntarily reveal even more tellingly the indissoluble tie between name and self-image’ (1967: 323) supporting the argument that names, as they are self chosen, are a key part of identity in the context, tying the individual’s sense of self to their fan identity. The initial assumption made in primary research undertaken at Buffy-UK in 2000-2001 was that fans’ user names were a
way of exhibiting ‘fan capital’ (Fiske, 1992), but as many fans now choose names unrelated to Buffy fandom this no longer holds true; members have a variety of different ways of expressing their fandom, and their name is only one element.

Membership at Buffy-boards has steadily increased despite the series’ demise, but as the turnover of fans continues, the potential for the more obvious displays of fan allegiance through user name has diminished. The pattern has now shifted away from fandom specific user names to ones with more personal significance. Primary character linked user names have already been chosen in their various incarnations; even if taken by members now inactive, accounts are rarely deleted, and so there is reduced scope for having character related names. At Buffy-boards, there are hundreds of variations of the name Buffy registered, including those involving initials, stars or symbols. However, it is the webmistress who has the name Buffy Summers, members of the administrative team have taken the names Faith, Wes, Cordelia and Darla over the years, whilst one of the moderators recently changed their name to Cordy before reverting to a variation of their original user name. Newer members who desire a name linked to the Buffy character have chosen names such as The Buffster, Buffinator, Little Miss Likes to Fight, nicknames other characters on the show have given to Buffy. Therefore newer members with character preferences find they have to choose less obvious user names to reflect their fandom regardless of whether they want to display fan capital or not, and so they opt for names involving a degree of show trivia knowledge, or names more related to their personal identity.

Members’ user names are selected and constructed from a mix of personal and fan reasons, both in terms of the overall division across the boards, and combined in the individual use of a hybrid name. Some user names are fandom specific, some user names reflect something about life extrinsic to a Buffy fan identity; others chose a combined fan/personal name. The following examples
are indicative of the types of name used on the boards, reflecting names from seemingly random inspirations, through to those exhibiting fan ‘capital’ (Fiske, 1992).

A few users have whimsical names that are unrelated to either their offline names or their fandom. Seemingly innocuous, when interpreted with the remainder of information performed in the personal front, their user name suggests a desire to be interpreted as a person possessing a certain type of personality – perhaps off the wall, eccentric, or ‘geeky’ – particularly when a composite identity is read from the user’s avatar, signature and performances of the personal front added to performance in posts and IRC.

SpoonsAreCool: this is true. Knives and forks are just, shit.
Spoons are cool! Really though, when I registered it was the first thing that came into my head, so really, no thought went into it at all.. SpoonsAreCool, post

Its my attempt at being cleaver... and aint it. Just A Thought, post

It honestly doesn’t stand for anything. It’s nonsensical, which is how I tend to live life. =] buffetofsporks, post

I really like browsing dictionaries and looking for new interesting words (some people consider it as strange hobby). One day I found the word ”starlet”, it sounded nice and I liked it. Starlet, post

The use of seemingly random names performs work with regard to identity, as is projects the member as distinct from the majority of other members. By choosing a zany or absurd name, particularly when it is not one attached to the object of fandom, the member is making a statement about the way in which they wish other members to view them, superficially exhibiting from the start
that they are more than just a ‘fan.’ However, the impression given from other parts of the personal front also performs identity work; for example, SpoonsAreCool self-portrays as ‘insane’ or ‘mad’ in her performances in other areas, where she often performs her part highlighting use of drugs or alcohol whilst posting, choosing mainly Faith as her avatar (a character initially portrayed as off-balance in earlier seasons, from which the images are chosen), or on occasion, using Sarah Michelle Gellar images with heavy, dark menacing make up. Starlet’s admission of ‘browsing dictionaries’ is suggestive of a ‘geek’ identity. Fans would recognise Willow as the most likely character to engage in this with her academic capability and love of research. This is where inference can be taken from other items of Starlet’s personal front, as information here strengthens her performance of a fan role, and supports her image of her self. Starlet’s biography states she is a student, who enjoys reading and writing, whilst Willow is her favourite character; her avatar is a glamorous picture of Alyson Hannigan, Willow’s actress. Dramatic realisation is therefore used here to ‘infuse ... activity with signs which dramatically highlight and portray confirmatory facts that might otherwise remain unapparent or obscure’ (Goffman, 1959: 40). This also expresses how performance relates to reality and contrivance, and belief in the role one is playing. Whether Starlet performs the act of ‘browsing dictionaries’ to make her appear more like her favoured character, or whether through sensing a degree of confluence between their personal attributes she can relate to Willow and has chosen her as her favourite character is impossible to answer (arguably even for Starlet herself), however, whichever of these produced the affective tie to the character, belief in her role sustains her characteristic Willow-like performance. These aspects of personal front work together to perform her fandom, even in the absence of a fan related name. As Sandvoss (2005) points out, ‘if what we are attracted to in the fan object is in fact our own image, then the object of fandom is always read and interpreted against the framework of the self’ (114).
In some instances, by choosing non-fan related names and instead confirming fandom through the remaining elements of the personal front and dramatic realisation, it can be interpreted as a way of fans ‘othering’ themselves from those whose user name is related to the context’s fandom, as if the more obvious displays of fan identity are something the ‘obsessive’ or ‘less cool’ fan does, echoing themes from the exaggerated fan model one encountered in chapter two, but also it imposes a hierarchy of seniority and reasoned fan practices, with fans replicating Bourdieu’s (1984) ideas of taste and discrimination in confirming authentic status.

This may be a reason why many members choose names related wholly to their offline selves, making no reference to their Buffy fandom. Their names can vary from offline nicknames, traits, pets names, Christian names and initials, hobbies and their nationality, through to the member’s other object’s of fandom.

mostly im a dork, usually im a freak. Any questions?
FreakyDorky, post

My user name is fairly simple. When I used to DJ it was as ScoBro which is the first three letters of my name. Original, I know. scobro, post

I’m sorry to say that I have no imagination at all. So I couldn’t come up with anything good. Instead I took my initials, but you’re not allowed to have only 2 letters so I added the numbers. Which I had something cooler. Or my initials without the numbers. SK73, post

I think mine is painfully obvious which makes me just want to change it. It is funny when you are first establishing these kinds of things because I did not really think about it. I just wanted something I could remember hannahfngrl26, post
The latter responses almost suggest embarrassment at how uninspired their user names now appear in the community’s context, and how their fan identity’s personal front compares to others. This can be rectified by performance work in other areas, through avatars, signatures, banners, the taking on of roles within the community or performing their fandom textually, using dramatic realisation to highlight and portray their authenticity and right to call themselves a fan, in order to gain acceptance within the community, or at least, to reinforce their identity in sub contexts.

Members who construct a mixed user name attempt to simultaneously embrace their love of the show and display information about their offline identity. Fan related user names may initially bring some kudos as it is an outward performance of fandom showing Fiskean ‘subcultural capital’ (Fiske, 1992: 34), demarcating their specific fandom preferences and the extent of their knowledge, helping to map hierarchical positions within the community. These examples show the thought individuals put into constructing a ‘mixed’ username:

"I’m French (it seems) and i love the character Faith (OBVIOUSLY)... and I love English language and you find "y" in the end of everything in English so here you go... Frenchy Faith post"

"Coming to BB, I didn’t want to be Aly, but I didn’t want to be someone else either, so I created the name ‘Lyri’ which had two meanings, the first being the name Lorne uses for Illyria … and the second, ‘LY’ is the last two letters of my first name, and ‘RI’ are the first two letters of my middle name. Lyri"

The consensus ‘shap[ing] fan reception’ evident within fandom noted by Jenkins (1992: 95) can also be applied to fan’s choice of user name. Jenkins states fans’ backgrounds and motivations fashion their critical practices and how they
interpret the text. He writes that in fan analyses, variations in opinion are tied generally to ‘the different social orientation of specific subsections of the fan community as much or more as they reflect individual differences in taste.’ In Star Trek fandom, fans interests either stemmed from a broader appreciation of the Science Fiction genre, or from an interest in ‘the “buddy” (Kirk-Spock-McCoy) or “family” (the whole crew) aspects of the series (95-96). Buffy fans can be fans of the wider horror genre, or fans of the ensemble nature of the show and the relationships that occur within. A number of members have names that although not related to Buffy fandom, are related to the vampire genre, thus exhibiting a wider knowledge of media fandom and a commitment to the broader canon specific requirements of being an elite fan of Buffy, or an ‘uberfan.’ These names illustrate the way in which fans perform their tastes to the community on a broader, genre wide level.

well i am a huge comic geek (i think so but not realy) and i watched the first blade movy and he was the Day Walker a vamp that was half human and could walk in the day light. liked the name Day Walker hated the movie. day walker, post.

Well, the Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter book series by Laurell K. Hamilton is my absolutely favorite book series (besides the Meredith Gentry series) and I admire Anita, so I decided to steal her name. If you haven’t read the books, you should. I highly recommend them. Anita Blake, post.

User names directly tied to Buffy fandom can display a strong connection to a character or a Whedon show’s relationship, episode titles and so on. When canvassed about what motivated their choice of user name, members replied:

Because NOBODY ELSE HAD IT. Show the guy some LOVE people! Lindsey McDonald post
Members can perform in a way that aligns their self with a character through use of fan knowledge, but it also requires a corresponding level of audience fan knowledge in order to be understood, helping to separate those with inauthentic claims to their fan identity. For example, members use simple quotes from the show as user names, such as Yam Sham, GrrrRruff, (un)Pansy Assed, Screw Destiny and ~"Hell Mouth"~ to show their knowledge of the fandom. Names allying oneself to a specific relationship in the show are a also strong theme in fan identity performances; ‘Shippers are quite loyal to their chosen ‘ships, using them to perform an individual identity, through their avatar, username, banner or signature, and also their group identity through association with others with similar preferences, pairings, or membership of official appreciation societies on the boards.

Its pretty obvious how I chose my name! haha, I love bangel!

Bangelxx, post

Because Cangel is the supreme and superior love in the verse

Cangel post

I chose my name SpikedBuffy because at the time I joined I was a heavy supporter of Spike and Buffy’s relationship (still am!)... I have obviously gone through many avatar changes, but they have all had either Spuffy on them or just Buffy alone herself. I have never had anything else... Spiked Buffy

When fan related user names identify with sub-groups, a number of cliques within the community become available for the individual to ally with, through distinction from others and a connection with a character or relationship. These
cliques are themselves part of an overall hierarchy of power within the community and the fandom generally (for example, Spuffy vs. Bangel and Tillow vs. Woz. ‘shippers perform their rivalry through their preferences as a group across Buffy fandom as a whole, rather than exclusive to Buffy-boards). The user name becomes a part of the role’s dramatic realisation and idealisation, bringing with it the status the clique holds. Goffman’s argument concerning idealisation’s best illustration in data concerning social mobility encountered in the last chapter is applicable here, as where there is:

some aspiration on the part of those in low places to move to higher ones. (One) must be careful to appreciate that this involves not merely a desire for a prestigeful place but also a desire for a place close to the sacred centre of the common values of the society (1959: 45).

This desire may explain why in the few instances of user name change, the member’s choice of new name reflects both their own enmeshing of self and fan role, but also their movement through the board’s hierarchy, and proof of their place in smaller subgroups. However, strong displays of affiliation to tight knit groups can also cause tension in the community, as it diffuses the community feel and can make people feel excluded, the effects of which will be covered in greater depth in the final chapter.

Through use of the user log function of the member’s profile, the evolution of a name can be tracked. A name change can illustrates movement through the community’s hierarchy and reflect the perception of the self in the context. For example, one member joined the boards using the name Social Suicide; after eight months, the name changed to Cangel, to better reflect fan performance through her identification with ‘shipper cliques within the fandom. Already established within the board community as Cangel, after the introduction of the chat room (IRC) she regularly took part and maintained a strong presence. The
repercussions of the clique produced by the IRC, its distinct setting and the
culture’s effect on the overall sense of community at Buffy-boards will be
covered in the final chapter; however, of note is Cangel’s subsequent name
change to her Christian name Kristine after commencing involvement in the
IRC. Use of Christian names is common in Buffy-boards IRC, and the culture
overlaps with groups of members using external communications such as MSN;
the IRC setting provides a different culture to Buffy-boards, with the context’s
communications generally more aligned with conversations in co-present
settings. Having influence from and within the clique, her online name changed
to better represent her own sense of self and her IRC identity performances,
rather than her fan performance as a whole at Buffy-boards. Her user name also
reflected her improved status in the board’s hierarchy, as those with high levels
of personal and IRC communications distinguish themselves from others by
performing as a clique to the rest of the community, highlighting their group
camaraderie, though this has repercussions for the community feel for non
clique participants and diminishes the sense of cohesion. Audience feedback
and the sense of belonging received in the course of IRC performance changed
Cangel’s performance overall, as the balance shifted towards a sense of self
closer to one portrayed in the IRC, adopting the routines used in that setting.

Members who have changed user names have thought carefully about doing so,
and have been motivated to change for a few reasons. As the name is part of an
established identity, the idea of changing a user name can seem unthinkable to
most members, but sometimes a name change can mark a rite of passage, or a
shift in one’s own mindset. Offline, a person would be unlikely to change their
name unless compelled to do so. People can undergo a sense of transformation
through their names to some degree online, even if continuities in other aspects
of their personal front means their identity performance remains the same, as
appearance in avatars and banners or their manner and tone retains a sense of
cohesion with the old name. In some instances, the name change will change
the performance; if the performer uses it as a way to play with roles and adopts a distinctly new personality, audience perception is changed through interaction. For example, scobro changed user name for a period; the corresponding change in his performance altered how people engaged with him. Already holding status divided between comedian and serious analytical critic, his performances shifted to more comedic routines through referring to himself in the third person.

… after several months I had built up a fairly strong reputation and wanted to change up my status a bit. I decided to go with, to a degree, a Buffy related screenname, which is a playful attempt at humor and creating a new pseudo-self. The screen name is GrrrRuff and it a phrase, if you will, that a character on occasion says when feeling frisky.

I have already noticed that I refer to myself in third person more often than I ever have in the past. It almost seems as though I am playing the role of GrrrRuff and behaving as a dog would, granted a cartoon dog that has opposable thumbs that can type, but a dog nonetheless. It’s scobro with a bit more bite. scobro,

Using the initials of his name was an adequate reflection of his identity in less communal, unmoderated forums he had belonged to previously; since joining Buffy-boards, his performance has developed and he has acquired a reputation as being both risqué and opinionated in posts. Allowing the comic side to overwhelm his serious, analytical side, he argued he no longer wanted his real name associated with the type of performance he was engaged in. At Buffy-boards, the exchanges are of a more humorous or lighthearted nature, and he felt comfortable enough in the environment to change user name to one that reflected his fandom and the spirit of debate:
because I feel like it’s a community…people know me. They know ME me, and so I can allow myself to be a different name.

scobro, chat

Using GrrrrRuff offers leeway to perform in more mischievous ways. He can perform with animal drives and morals, whilst user name ties him to Drusilla (portrayed as insane and unpredictable in the series), thus licensing playfulness and a pushing of the boundaries of community convention. The new name also serves to protect the reputation built up prior to his comic turn through role distance: in effect, supporting a mystification of performance by ‘provid[ing] a way in which awe can be generated and sustained in audiences – a way… in which the audience can be held in a state of mystification in regard to the performer’ (Goffman, 1959: 74).

scobro is me, GrrrrRuff is my humorous side, but if I had shown that without playing a ‘role,’ I felt it would damage what scobro was. scobro, chat

This separation into distinct identities controls potential contamination of his identity performance as scobro. As it is difficult to accurately gauge what type of dialogue one will engage in when initially registering a user name, often, people will revert to using the same name, or variations of it across a number of environments (see Bechar-Israeli’s 1995 study examining the continuity of nicknames in IRC environments where the majority of regular users maintained the same name or versions of it for long periods of time). When debates surrounding fan analysis exhausted, the boards became stale, and so, the comedian aspect of his self was given free reign. The need to distance his self from the name closely tied to his sense of self through his performances at Buffy-boards and other forums, and through the connection to his real name, illustrates how user names reflect an integral part of identity. Retaining the
potential to revert to his original name should the board’s fan debate be reinvigorated also provides role distance for scobro from GrrrrRuff.

In a Meadian analysis, referring to himself in the third person provides an opportunity to dissociate GrrrrRuff from the ‘me’ and the ‘I’ used to construct the self: instead, he is able to view his performance from the position of the generalised other. If, as Bailey argues, ‘situated media experiences [are] symbolic engagements that act as an encounter with a ‘generalised other’ and… enable forms of self understanding’ (2005: 50); by detaching his self from the performance, he has used the understanding gleaned in the environment to protect the self, insulating his reputation for debate and the status his performance has worked hard to achieve.

In an offline environment, it would be unusual for a person to change their name to reflect a change in circumstance or outlook. However, online the possibility is there, and members have embraced it to signify a change in their sense of self whilst simultaneously signposting it to others. One long-standing member stated she would never change her name.

\textit{No, I’m Miffed and I always will be! Stuck in Traffic}

When follow up interviews were initiated, there had been a name change and an absence from the boards. When asked what had precipitated the change, she replied:

\begin{quote}
I just started feeling like I wanted to be someone new... it was time for a change, you know what I mean? ... I got into Jake Gyllenhaal... and there’s a movie of his that I just LOVE... he’s talking to his friend about his girlfriend, kinda going on about how they’re stuck in a rut...and he says something like, “me and ?? ... are stuck in traffic in Jersey.” At the time, I was
\end{quote}
Reinvigorating offline identity to break loose from the routines and roles one may be tired of is a difficult thing to achieve, as a person’s embodied self is rooted very firmly to solid details such as employment, family commitments, community roles etc. However, Goffman argues that temporary ritual states can be deduced from sign carriers in a personal front, including ‘whether or not he (sic) is celebrating a new phase in the season cycle or in his life cycle’ (1959: 34). Online, this is achievable, and so for some participants, changing usernames may be used to wrest control of their self in other areas, to compensate for resented roles, or to reflect a qualitative transformation in other areas of their self.

This does again reflect issues of context, as at Buffy-boards sister forum, where the audience is different and some, but not all members overlap, Stuck in Traffic retained the name Miffed67. When commenting about her original user name in other contexts, she was clear that:

I do feel like that’s MY name and if anyone else used it, it would be like identity theft….you know….will the REAL Miffed/SiT please stand up, and all that. Of course, I can’t copyright it….but I wish I could! Stuck in Traffic

As user names are tied with other items of the personal front to form a sense of self, the majority of people retain them.

I’m sure some day I’ll change it so that it’s just “Angelic Slayer” without the cool symbols, but I’ve had it so long that I could never change the username. I respond to it the same online as I do “Katie” offline, it would be like changing my offline name? it just wouldn’t be “me” anymore ~angelic slayer~
People who experiment with trying out new user names often change them back, as their presence is partly established through their username, tied through avatar and signature and cemented through establishing their fan role identity, which gradually evolves to reflect the self. For this reason, some members fix specific aspects of the front to retain a cohesive, identifiable, visual self.

My signature changes... [but] the reason I keep my avatar, username, and usertitle the same though is so that people always know it’s me. SpikedBuffy

Despite requesting the change, so strongly did one member feel their new name was alien to them, her user name changed from Keanoite, to Cordy, back to Kean, her commonly used nickname over the course of a weekend.

... it felt wrong...almost foreign even. I have only been here a year but I am Kean here. In the same way I am Sinéad in the RL. It is not so much a different persona but an extension of who I am. Kean, private message

Comments from the generalised other of the community as audience, ties to her moderator peer group and connection with her friend and fellow moderator Lyri also influenced her decision to reinstate her user name.

At least 10-15 people either pm’d me of vm’d me or posted in Merrick saying how ‘wrong’ Cordy was and how it wasn’t me, and I had to agree with them. The minute I logged in and saw Cordy where Keanoite should have been I felt lost, for a split second I didn’t even realise it was me...I thought who is this Cordy bitca stealing my av and sig lol. Little things bugged me like, how wrong Cordy sounded when said with Lyri. We are like
As stated earlier in the analysis of usernames, a name is the element of performance most likely to be retained across the board’s settings and regions. It is the primary identifier in social exchange, and as such, it is key in setting the tone for the performance. A user may change their name repeatedly during the course of interactions at the IRC at the stroke of a key, however, a change in name at the bulletin board requires administrator approval. User profiles are equipped with a user log function, facilitating recognition by the audience of users’ name changes. Performers will often betray their original identity before the name change is publicly announced, through retention of banners, avatars, signatures and user titles, or more explicitly through their manner, tone, and familiarity with friendship groups with whom they maintain close connections. Despite what postmodern theory suggests, in a community, reinventing an online identity is more complicated than merely changing names and avatars. As the self is constituted through performance, imagining and receiving others’ perception of us and correcting future performances accordingly, the self is embedded in more than the name; the self comprising of personal front, experience, routines, roles and displays of personal identity in the interaction. Thus, as the performances of individuals who change names retain other characteristics of the front and the experiences of the user, they maintain continuity in the overall impression given. Their manner, dramatically realised attitude and idealised performance will remain. Therefore, although changing names may be seen as a way of playing with identity, of reinvigorating performance, or reflecting a new phase of life, audience members with whom the performer has previously interacted with will still react to the performer in the same way, as the elements and history of exchanges are tied together in the imagination of the other.
As touched on by Kean, other aspects of the personal front tie in with the username to present the fan to the community. If choosing a user name is the first step in setting up the performance of an online identity, the second part is choosing an avatar, a small thumbnail picture that is displayed underneath the username. Some users state they would prefer to have a consistent avatar across unrelated forums, using the same username and avatar consistently in multiple sites, which indicates how the thumbnail image is tied to the identity in the mind of the user, the extent to which the element of the personal front is as tied to the self as outward appearance in offline performance. Users can select an avatar from thousands of images available at Buffy-boards, but they are all related to *BtVS*, actors or products of Joss Whedon; they are unable to select ‘custom’ avatars with the exception of a handful of people with special privileges. The bulk of members state they choose their avatar based on images suggestive of their own personality.

*I try to just be myself as best as I can. I try and pick … avatars
… that suit me, rather than suiting myself and the way I act,
around [it]. ~angelic slayer~

Avatars can combine qualities the member wishes to project concerning fan knowledge, their fan identity and the self; as Goffman would argue (1959: 34-35) through the member’s interpretation of a character’s personality and the composition of the picture, the avatar may function as both appearance, suggesting characteristics and their social status, and manner, ‘to warn us of the interaction role a performer will expect to play in the oncoming situation,’ as this data illustrates:

*I choose my avatar based on the atmosphere/mood …[choosing] avatars with softer colours/ facial expressions because I don’t see myself as a very “harsh” person. …the character Tara would be the one that I think I’d relate to best, but the photograph of SMG
that I have for my signature implies qualities that I think I possess: so that’s what I chose. Soft colours (softer, fairly calm personality), hard at work (busy, hard worker, eager to finish tasks), wearing glasses (inquisitive about the world around me) and she looks fairly approachable in that picture, despite being in her own little world (just like I think I am). It’s hard to explain, but there really is a fine art for me to choosing an avatar. It’s like choosing a painting that I would use in my home: it’s not so much what the content of the painting that I focus on: it’s the qualities that it implies. ~angelic slayer~

The forum’s software links the avatar to the user. When avatars are changed, the impression given off is altered as a consequence, whether the post is archived or current. The avatar can provide conflicting information when combined with post content as some members change avatars to suit their mood, using fan knowledge to interpret the avatar and perform an expression of their disposition at that time.

If I’m feeling angry, I will pick a picture of a bad guy intent on destroying the world. If I’m feeling good or just okay, I’ll have a colourful picture of one of the heroes I like. When I feel melancholic, I’ll pick someone sweet. When I feel epic, I’ll choose a picture that shows power. I won’t pick an avatar of Andrew to show my sexual ambiguity or anything like that. (Sorry)

AllyCat

The audience ties together the avatar and overall performance in their imagination of the member, seemingly attempting to construct an image of the online other through the avatar, signature and banner. This can be used to effect by the administrative team if members need to be reigned in, as one member commented:
Buffy Summers (and Faith when I busted her balls in drogyn) would routinely change their avatar to a stern faced 'persona'

scobro

Using the avatar to dramatically realise an authoritative role is a useful tool to communicate the policing of community norms. It is also useful for keeping new members in line, as for the majority of members, items of the personal front provide a composite picture of the poster’s personality.

I do kind of get a first impression based on an avatar, or if they have a sig banner or a quote or something. Until you get to know someone, they’re choices in these areas are all you have to go on, it’s hard to not get an impression. Stuck in Traffic

Thus, the continual cycling of avatars by some members, or use of female avatars by male members and visa versa, can be challenging.

What I don’t like is when people change avatar all the time. I always connect the username with the avatar and when it change (username or avatar) I get confused. SK73, post.

Comments on this post:

InsaneMystic agrees: I totally feel with you. *giving Cangel a sharp look ^^ *

The audience can quickly establish who has posted in the thread by skimming for the avatar of members they are familiar with. For many members, the avatar is a way of building a picture of the member, as the combined elements of the personal front are used to create an impression of how the they want to be received.

you look first at the avatar and say 'i know this person' rather than looking at the poster themselves... one poster had one set avatar, ... I associated that avatar with that person. ...I saw the
avatar of the person I knew and responded to their post, as I would to that particular member, [but] someone else was using the avatar at that time. … the post I made to them made little sense as I was responding to the avatar (and who I perceived the owner to be) and not the actual poster. scobro

Audiences invest heavy significance in members’ avatars and user names, as illustrated by their reactions to avatar change, and so these elements of the personal front are of significance to members’ perceptions of others performance.

Signatures, user titles and status updates offer members additional opportunities to bolster the continuity between appearance and manner by expressing information about their self.

Signatures I change from week to week (mostly to show off artwork!) … the username I use is one that I just randomly picked one day and it somehow managed to stick around, but my avatars are that little more personal ~angelic slayer~

The uniform size of banners and avatars also cements the setting from the audience’s perspective, as additional graphics and quotes create and sustain the environment’s overall ambience. Encompassing Goffman’s performance elements of belief in the role one is playing, front, dramatic realisation and idealisation, banners add depth to the individual’s performance and the community environment. They provide another dimension to the audience’s imagined conception of the performer, (a strategy the performer can also use from the position of other to imagine the audience’s perception of them) whilst adding to the overall idealised impression helping to sustain the performer’s belief in the role they are playing.
Banners and user titles are explicitly linked to the performer; whilst multiple members may use the same avatar (although it is customary for members to refrain from selecting avatars used by established members), banners are custom created for or by the individual. Through banners, members perform their identity as distinct from others by using visually unique identifiers. Members can show proficiency by creating their own banners, recombining the fandom’s available screencaps, jpegs and quotes, prosuming in a way similar to the fanfic writers and fan artists spoken of by Jenkins (1992); others will request one from a board sanctioned banner maker, or approach a member whose banner they admire. Artists add to their social capital and enhance their community role performance through exhibition of their name in the banner.

Thus, banners ‘mobilise activity’ for the member who uses it, highlighting and portraying additional information about them that supports their performance, whilst the artist also makes an ‘effective showing’ through upholding routines with which they construct their social and personal identity, support which is fundamental to a sense of self, as ‘people tend to invest their egos primarily in certain routines, giving less stress to other ones which they perform’ (Goffman, 1959: 43). Banners are often commented upon through the karma reputation function, adding officially to the status of the member, publicly applauding the artist, but also providing feedback on the overall performance’s reception by the audience.

lovely banner :)

HEY, nice banner!!

Love the new banner. I tried to make one with a similar theme a little while ago, but it turned out looking like my poo.

Members perform their individuality by providing information about the self with reference to external roles or activities, or more general popular/media
cultural appreciations, but they also perform their group membership through developing their fan status. Through the retention of avatars, banners and user titles, some members’ personal fronts remain static, but many more augment their performance, continually developing it as a work in progress, transforming as the individual travels the continuum of role, fan identity and self identity.

People choose their sig as a representation of their state of mind, attitude or general place in life at any moment. … these are – or can be- a true representation of a persons view of themselves at any given time. You can see pessimism as well as optimism come through with signatures and banners. A signature or banner can be as telling as a trip to a shrinks couch, or as frivolous as the morning comics, depending on whom the banner belongs. It is a look inside the mind and thoughts of the group member. scobro

To convey a specific aspect of their fandom members ‘theme’ banners, signatures, avatars and user titles, performing, for instance, support of the Bangel (Buffy/Angel), Spuffy (Spike/Buffy) or Tillow (Tara/Willow) ‘ship, to commend a specific season or narrative arc, or to highlight their house member status as prefect or official artist.

I used to keep my UT and my av fixed, whilst going crazy with the banner. Now, since I got my name, I occasionally change my av, but you know I’ve only really got 3 favourites. I would definately change my UT to go with a banner or av now though. It’s nice when it all matches, and it’s not as immediately noticeable as an Av, so it doesn’t really matter if you do change it. I have found myself changing it more recently though, what with my sig staying the same. I’m getting antsy. Lindsey McDonald, post
This unity in personal front, through user name, user title and signature, is often present, however, members also use it to break out of the Buffy fan role, and perform something of their self in relation to other fandom’s, favourite performers or songs.

I like cohesiveness... so usually I change my UT whenever I get a new av/sig combo. Right now my UT doesn’t match my Bones/Booth/Xmas theme though... it's from Grey’s Anatomy, an Addison quote. Derek calls her Satan she says, "Actually, I prefer to be called ruler of all that is evil." And it's that right now cause I’ve been on a Grey’s kick and I’ll hear something and want to change it to that... random yes, but USUALLY, I do like for it to match Airam, post

I try really, really ANALLY hard to get my av and my sig to match, but my usertitle is usually the one thing I have fun with...because I can...This UT probably fills the theme thing the best, though – Amy Lee/Wes Borland, Jack/Sally, Nightmare Before Christmas and specifically ‘Sally’s Song’. That song is near and dear to my heart and it’s lyrics are also in my sig, so I thought I’d be matchy for once. Now, if we wanna start at thread about av/sig themes, we can have a serious discussion about anal retentiveness. Mesektet Ra, post

For some users, themed presentations of the personal front are fan based, offering an opportunity for their identity to be performed in the context of the fan community. Yet for others, it is a way of performing an overall impression of their self, allowing the community to view the person outside of the fan context, providing details about other fandoms and preferences that may permit new relationships to be formed based on other cultural resources. Finally, banners, user titles and signatures can be used to perform a group identity, most
noticeable in terms of ‘house wars’ and displays of house pride, or in sub-
groups and cliques, performing ‘in jokes’ or titles bestowed upon them by fellow members.

User names, avatars and signatures have significant weight in the performances members engage in; through performance of the personal front, an identity is being claimed and shaped as belonging to the named individual, using the environment’s shared cultural symbols to produce an image recognisable and distinct from others to the audience. Prolonged reiteration stabilises the online performance; based on prior performances, it is expected for people to generally perform in ways compatible with their self, both in terms of their own reading of their performance from the position of other, and in the performance anticipated by the greater audience, the generalised other as community. This incorporates Goffman’s idea of the continuity of personal front where manner, appearance and setting are expected to overlap and support performance harmony, or at least offer one in which aspects reinforce and support each other. Personal front is explicitly used to access an authentically performed fan role; through sustained interactions the ‘newbie’ fan identity learns the community’s accepted rules of performance, revealing increasing amounts of information concerning routines from other roles whilst moving along the continuum towards expression of their self integrated with fandom, but this also has an effect on the personal front. Members will continually develop their personal front as a work in progress, modifying banners, avatars, signatures and user notes, amending biographies and user messages to better reflect their enmeshing of roles and routines outside of Buffy-boards.

This chapter has examined the self-performances fans engage in on a daily level, their basic online presentation of the self. The internet has complicated an already elusive concept, but in online performance, we can see how the mediated self uses the cultural resources available to project and perform an identity, how the reception of that identity is conditional on the audience’s
understanding of media texts and their place in society. Online, fans are equipped with a number of tools that combine to provide them with a new and exciting ways to experience their fandom, encourage community and make connections with other people. The following chapter will examine how members experience a sense of community through performing fandom in online bulletin boards.
Chapter Five:
Experiencing community

Tönnies’ often cited Gemeinschaft (1887) holds much emotive power in debates about community; his traditional kinship based society in which social solidarity, companionship and support maintain the group paints an idyll in which reciprocal protection and care are established between community members. Bauman (2001) argues this view of community evokes the feeling of ‘a ‘warm’ place, a cosy and comfortable place... Out there, in the streets, all sorts of dangers lie in ambush... In here, in the community, we can relax’ (2001: 1-2). Community symbolises a social environment that is supportive, safe, good-natured, tolerant, forgiving, amiable – a place where the communal duty is to help each other, but the emotional weight it carries has ‘nostalgia for the perfect pastoral past that never was’ (Wellman, 1999a: 1). The attraction is understandable, and so, many theorists attempt to explain community, no matter how misplaced the romantic yearning for a pastoral community idyll may be.

[T]he word community sounds sweet. What that word evokes is everything we miss and what we lack to be secure, confident and trusting. In short, ‘community’ stands for the type of world which is not, regrettably, available to us – but which we would dearly love to inhabit and which we hope to repossess... ‘Community’ is nowadays another name for paradise lost – but one to which we dearly hope to return, and so we feverishly seek the roads that may bring us there (Bauman, 2001: 3).

The term community is now used to describe any number of groups outside of this model, which adds to the ‘century old controversy’ concerning the nature of community (Wellman and Gulia, 1999: 167). It is debated by many disciplines, further confusing its definition, leading Hobsbawm to opine ‘never
was the word community used more indiscriminately and emptily than in the decades when communities in the sociological sense become hard to find in real life’ (1994: 428). Characterisations reflect varied motivations as disciplinary and business perspectives clash, with marketing, business studies, code developers, sociology, psychology and politics all analysing community. Community now has a ‘buzzword status,’ where its use is brought into non-specialist discourse, creating a woolly and distorted leitmotif (Preece, 2000: 9). This leads us to the current situation, where ‘community is a term which seems readily definable to the general public but is infinitely complex and amorphous in academic discourse’ (Fernbank, 1997: 39). However, a view offered by Jenkins is that perhaps as the ‘general public’ are those who are directly involved in communities, they may be the best judge of what community means:

‘community’ does not belong to intellectuals. It is a powerful everyday notion in terms of which people organise their lives and understand the places and settlements in which they live and the quality of their relationships. It expresses a fundamental set of human needs... ‘community’ is one way of talking about the everyday reality that the human world is, collectively, more that the sum of its individual parts... [and] is among the most important sources of collective identification (2004: 109).

Community is an intangible concept to define, but it is further complicated through annexing it with ‘online’ or ‘virtual’. Whittaker’s, Issacs’s, and O’Day’s sociological research from a CMC perspective (1997: 137, cited in Preece, 2000: 13) suggests physical and virtual communities share core objectives; their primary draw is a goal, interest, need or activity, with members engaging in repeated and active participation to sustain strong emotional ties that demonstrate reciprocal support. This is achieved through individuals interacting within a mutually defined context of shared social conventions, language and protocols, supporting Goffman’s notion of the individual performing appropriately for the context. This hints at equivalence between
virtual and physical communities, and yet, the notion of a physical place persists in our conception of community; its use in an online context seemingly contradicts the collapse of geographical boundaries theme inherent in a heavily mediated age. In addition, postmodern analyses of the internet have focussed not only on the placelessness of the internet, but also the amorphous and fluid identities inhabiting its virtual territories, factors which it would not easily appear combine to provide a rich basis for the social solidarity suggested by community. The non-geographical character of computer-mediated groups thus presents more problems for those studying the ‘social aggregations’ that occur on the internet (Rheingold, 1993: xx), but these problems are not insurmountable.

This chapter will argue that the kinds of social relationships experienced in online settings are comparable in effect to those experienced in offline settings, in terms of influence on the self, on the construction of social identity, and the sense of belonging to a ‘community.’ Community will be used emblematically, as it is the term the research participants themselves use about Buffy-boards; thus this use resists the urge to throw out the baby with the bathwater through abandoning the concept entirely. At Buffy-boards, members naturally identify what they experience as community, as this post illustrates:

what makes me come back every time … are the members and the community. Which is not to say that I like every single member on this board, but I do feel a connection to them. Both [BtVS and Angel] feature strong themes of self-made family and I guess that is what applies to the members of this board too. Coming on this board after being away for a while, really feels like coming home. Allycat, post

Allycat’s statement is evocative of many members’ interviews and posts; through a collective fan identity, they sense a community like connection to the
people and the space. This is important in the development of their self, as when ‘[p]eople collectively identify themselves with others... they conduct their everyday lives in terms of those identities... they are intersubjectively real’ (Jenkins, 2004: 87). This research therefore focuses on the experience of community, what elements are essential for the members to believe community exists, what activities they take part in that build community, what it feels like for the individuals involved and the sentiments evoked from belonging to a group, rather than entering into the debate on what a community is and what it is not. Of course, the paradox is, that the same activities that can help build community for the individual, the small performances of social capital, the building of close relationships and the portrayal of the feelings it evokes, can also work to diminish the community feel for the community as a whole, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

By focussing on the what exclusive opportunities the individuals’ feel an internet fan community provides for its members, it is possible to establish why surrendering individuality and autonomy for the greater good of the group is worthwhile. Bauman (2001) argues that the cost of belonging to a community is personal freedom; in real life communities, interaction with ‘strangers’ would threaten the community by introducing new ideas, prevent common understanding through a bastardisation of the language, and jeopardise the fraternal nature of the community. He says ‘[t]he price paid is the currency of freedom, variously called ‘autonomy,’ ‘right to self assertion,’ ‘right to be yourself’ .... Missing community means missing security; gaining community, if it happens, would soon mean missing freedom’ (2001: 4). Installing freedom and security as diametrically opposed values may work in geographical communities, but in communities of interest and internet communities, the case is not so clear-cut. In online fandom people maintain a great degree of autonomy, particularly with regard to expressing agency through the stamp of individuality that ‘allow[s] the individual to utilize particular means of self
expression’ in their performance (Giddens, 1988: 258). In addition, new and diverse membership keeps the community dynamic and interesting through the generation of new debate, whilst differing opinions are welcomed, as this post illustrates.

*a forum can't exist without people, regardless of who or what they are. different opinions also goes into making a community work. it'd be pretty boring if we all thought the same thing and this place would close pretty quickly.* Lyri, post

However, fans do learn the right way to perform in the context of their fandom and the wider role of what fans do, giving weight to Bauman’s argument. For people to actively adopt the right mantle for the context, to want to perform an idealised version of the self, to perform appropriately for the environment and play down their idiosyncratic traits, a corresponding gain must be made.

Though this research has mainly steered clear of the larger debate concerning community, it employs the term community to reflect the members’ feelings, using their definition of the situation as the guiding principle. This symbolic interactionist position is supported by Jenkins, who states ‘[i]t is an article of sociological faith for all but the most obdurate positivists that if people think that something is real, it is, if nothing else, real in terms of the action it produces and in its consequences’ (2004: 82). Complementing symbolic interaction’s theoretical framework with online ethnographic research methods I have focussed on the experience of the group’s members in the micro-social sense, their sense of belonging, how they perform their identities to become a part of the community, of their roles, their friendships, the creation of and inclusion in cliques and hierarchies, and the pull they feel towards their online social group, as these factors have the greatest effect on their self and social identity, but also on their experience of community. As W. I. Thomas opined ‘if men define situations as real, then they are real in their consequences’ (Thomas and
Thomas, 1928: 571-2), and so as members of online groups describe their aggregations as community I have concentrated on those potential effects as if real. Those involved in communities make their own value judgments on the feel of it based on their experiences, and it resists the more crisp categorisations applied by an empirical approach. And yet, as difficult as it is to articulate a community feel, academic research and anecdotal evidence suggest you will ‘know when you have it, and when you don’t’ (Sarason, 1977: 157). What matters to its members is the experience of community, not an absolute definition.

What follows are the overall thematic issues drawing the link between community, identity performance and fandom used in this research’s approach to community. Thus, this chapter will start with a slight but necessary tension; having said engaging in the debate concerning community’s definition is an ineffective strategy to use in order to understand people’s experience, it is, though, necessary to briefly outline how community is represented in the context of internet groups, as the decline of place based community definitions has resulted in a shift from geographical groups to group boundaries, communities of interest and connections to others; this overlaps with themes in fandom and community generally. Following from that, the way a sense of community is advanced through an individual’s feelings about their group experience will be explored, illustrating how responses to an individual’s role and social identity performances generate a sense of belonging to a community, affecting the self’s continual development through identity negotiation. Finally, an illustration is provided of how through fans’ self-identification, ethnographic research in fandom overlaps both of these areas, evidencing how performance in fan communities mutually reinforces the self and a community identity, through the maintenance of contextually defined norms and conventions. Whilst those conventions are subjectively interpreted and therefore can cause a conflict of interests between smaller sub groups and the community as a whole,
for many fans the community feel is an important element in their enjoyment of online fan cultures.

**Community boundaries, engagement and connectivity**

Most studies of community proceed with a ‘universal, essentialist definition without regard for the *process of community*’ (Fernbank, 1999: 205). Since the debate of what does and does not constitute community has been relocated to the online environment, more emphasis has been made of what the meaning of community is when removed partially or fully from its geographical ties. There are a number of approaches used in this renewed debate, but for the purpose of this chapter I will concentrate on the idea of community as *imagined, symbolically constructed* and *maintained through interpersonal relations*, multidiimensionally situated in a number of overlapping contexts. Furthermore, I will show how reinforcing a sense of belonging involves the individual’s negotiation of identity through the binding of their self-identity to community norms. These two strands reflect the community and identity aspects central to this research; their application to online fandom will be discussed later. What will be highlighted throughout is the theme of the individual’s experience and sense of belonging as being central to their sense of community, but it must be noted that this is a fragile construction, as their sense of belonging is predicated upon the dependability and understanding of the social reality, which can be challenged from within.

Theorists engaged in the debate about online community (Rheingold, 1993; Fernbank, 1999; Baym, 2000) or, virtcoms as it is sometimes termed, draw on Anderson’s suggestion that since the ‘primordial villages of face to face contact’ were superseded by larger social aggregations, all communities have been
imagined (1983: 6). ‘It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’ and accordingly, they should be distinguished ‘by the style in which they are imagined’ (1983: 6). As with Mead’s generalised other (1934), it is impossible for the individual to know all the members, although they are aware of their existence and are required to ‘take their attitudes towards the various phases or aspects of the common social activity or set of social undertakings in which, as members of an organised society or social group, they are all engaged’ (Mead, 1934: 155).

Baym (2000) argues that close analysis of interpersonal interaction is an especially suitable way to understand the attitudes and style of the group as suggested by Anderson (1983); her study of an online soap fan community concludes that ‘[i]t is in the details of their talk that people develop and maintain the rituals, traditions, norms, values and sense of group and individual identity that allow them to consider themselves communities’ (2000: 218). In accord with this, and taking from Cohen’s (1985) thesis of community as symbolically constructed, Fernbank argues community ‘has descriptive, normative and ideological connotations… [and] encompasses both material and symbolic dimensions’ (1997: 39); consequently, its ‘conglomeration of normative codes and values … provide community members with a sense of identity’ (1999: 210). A community is an organic, social system, possessing ‘an elastic character as it expands and contracts to accommodate fringe elements, to incorporate new symbolic meanings into its lexicon, and to withstand threats from its boundaries’ (1999: 205); in the case of this thesis, even if those threats come from within. In view of its symbolic construction, ‘community should be studied as an entity of meaning’ (210) in a localised context from the viewpoint of its membership, which this thesis has sought to do throughout.
Boundaries are an important factor in community, being ‘found in interaction between people who identify themselves collectively in different ways, which can occur anywhere or in any context’ (Jenkins, 2004: 102). Anderson argues no matter how large a community, it is always imagined as possessing boundaries, with other communities lying outside of it. As mentioned in chapter three, in performing a bulletin board identity the individual claims membership of one fan group whilst rejecting affiliations with another, but this also happens in terms of performing a group identity, which will be discussed later in the chapter. The individual’s dramatic realisation (Goffman: 1959: 40), provides the opportunity to exemplify and uphold the norms to reinforce the community boundary through their performance, as ‘performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his (sic) behaviour as a whole’ (Goffman, 1959: 45).

Anderson adds there should be a feeling of sovereignty and the perception of a level of equality in comradeship (1983; 15-16). From this, Anderson’s definition can equally be applied generally to internet communities, physical communities and fandom; the internet culture’s narrative has a long history of a digital divide which includes some into its community and excludes others, of freedom from intervention, at least in respect of preventing corporate interests and the interference of the state, and an egalitarian ethos, even if this does not translate to equal rights in practice. In fan forums, as noted in the members’ comments shortly to be discussed in relation to fan camaraderie, there is a distinct sense of who is within the boundaries of membership of the boards (and of cult fandom generally), a dislike of heavy handed authority (which is of significance for the final chapter), and an implied level playing field through equal access to fan conversations, which are the primary pursuit at fan bulletin boards. However, in building social relationships online, cliques inevitably form, with groups excluding some members and intimidating others. The level of engagement and
conversation is increased for those involved in tight groups, and their feelings of belongingness intensify as a result.

Virtcom’s studies focus on conversation as the chief activity, of talk as symbolic of community, is probably even more relevant now than when Fernbank and Baym first offered their opinion, as the following posts about online activities indicate.

You can’t catch a movie, grab a drink, or just chill on the couch with a good movie [online]. Basically, the only thing you do is talk... and a lot at that. It’s often times easier to share the heavy stuff from your life on MSN, because you’re not face to face with the people you’re telling it to. I’ve done so with a few people I’ve met through this board Allycat, post

I was online posting on the boards every day, and I talked to my close BB friends on msn probably almost every day. So to me, online communities can be very social... eponinethen, post

The increase of social network sites such as Twitter, Facebook and MySpace, or links to blogs such as LiveJournal, result in publicly overlapping performances of members from the same and different internet communities in one space through their social networking, with boundaries and expected norms becoming blurred between the different settings and connections.

If we recall how community’s construction and maintenance is made possible through interpersonal relations that negotiate the community’s and individual’s identity through the norms of the context, and Baym’s (2000) assertion that the communal activities occurring within a community are constitutive of its atmosphere and the expectations of performance, a great deal can be understood by observing and participating in the community’s ebb and flow. This is of relevance to the next chapter, but suffice to say internet communities
do seem to offer a space where talk, play and ‘hanging out’ are not held in
disdain by its participants and are part of community norms. Although not a
mandatory part of the community’s expectations of its members, participation
in the off-topic or game threads adds to the community feel. The off-topic
threads serve a different purpose in comparison to the more purposeful ‘fan
critic’ based activities undertaken in the context, however, participation does
evidence the member’s wish to belong to the community, and shows the
researcher another way in which members use identity performance to
negotiate the intersection between community norms and the self. At Buffy-
boards, ‘Rate my (signature, avatar, banner),’ ‘Survivor,’ ‘Murder, Marry, Shag’
or ‘what are you listening to now’ have been some of the most popular threads
to run, all of which serve no purpose other than to reinforce the community
through game playing, self-disclosure or the solicitation of praise. None of the
threads were specifically, or at least wholly, related to fandom, but were instead
about reinforcing the community atmosphere by communing with other
members at play.

Voicing a similar sentiment, Rheingold argues what members experience in
internet communities is ‘the power of informal public life’ (1993: 10). He uses
Oldenburg’s 1991 book ‘The Great Good Place’ to defend internet communities
as third spaces existing outside of the serious endeavours and citizenship of
formal society;

Third places exist on neutral ground and serve to level their
guests to a condition of social equality. Within these places,
conversation is the primary activity and the major vehicle for the
display and appreciation of human personality and individuality.
Third places are taken for granted and most have a low profile.
Since the formal institutions of society make stronger claims on
the individual, third places are often open in the off hours, as well
as at other times. The character of a third place is determined
most of all by its regular clientele and is marked by a playful
mood, which contrasts people’s more serious involvement in
other spheres. Though a radically different kind of setting for a
home, the third place is remarkably similar to a good home in the psychological comfort and support that it extends (Oldenburg, 1991, cited in Rheingold, 1993: 10).

Although Oldenburg’s third space refers to cafes, book shops, bars and beauty parlours, he accurately describes what keeps members of virtual communities returning – emotional attachment promoted by interesting and sustained conversations, and a support network outside of the public and private domains. This notion is supported by members at Buffy-boards, who said they repeatedly return to the boards, because of ‘the people’ (JollyApe), ‘the interesting discussions, and people’ (AngelsBaby 101), ‘I made friends there’ (FrenchyFaith) and ‘I was interested in the conversation about a topic I enjoyed’ (KillerDwarf).

Akin to Rheingold’s emphasis on informal public life, Putnam’s analysis of the decline of community in America describes how informal connections made through social engagements make huge contributions to social capital, the cornerstone of community spirit. Whether through:

- getting together for drinks after work, having coffee with regulars at the diner, playing poker every Tuesday night, gossiping with the next door neighbour, having friends over to watch TV, sharing a barbecue picnic on a hot summer evening, gathering in a reading group at the bookstore, even nodding to another regular jogger... each of these encounters is a tiny investment in social capital (2000: 93).

Both he and Oldenburg suggest the informality, the removal of a purpose and engaging for nothing more than pleasure is what defines the type of community feel that is found in third spaces. Putnam goes on to say as adult civic life cuts into the available time and resources for informal social connectivity, the number of schmoozers, those people who spend ‘many hours in informal conversation and communion’ decline as the pressures of parenthood and social
standing increase (2000: 93). However, one can make the case that the internet goes some way to restore the potential for those groups whose personal circumstances reduce their capacity for social connectivity, as the technology allows for social connectivity in the home. A reasonable number of mothers of pre-school children have been prominent members at Buffy-boards, whilst at one time, the sheer number of pregnant members inspired the creation of a Buffy-boards baby thread to support them through their pregnancy and connect the new mothers in ways other than their fandom.

Many of the spaces and activities described by Oldenburg and Putnam are recreated virtually for members at Buffy-boards; they engage in book reading clubs; weekly globally synchronised group DVD viewings; socialise in virtual ‘bars’ with a nominated member as barkeeper and host, where members chat whilst having virtual drinks and food (represented through others posting images on threads, again an instance of ‘play’); members attend awards parties and games nights. All of these are informal and social, even within the context of the environment. Regardless of their occupation or stage in the life cycle, there is something about online communities that accentuates social connectedness and feelings of a communal identity for its members through its availability. Horn comments:

> From my experiences online and off, I’d say that everybody – from executives of large corporations to out of work actors, from know-it-alls to know-nothings, everybody has a trace of an ache – some eternal disappointment, or longing, that is satisfied, at least for a minute each day, by a familiar group and by a place that will always be there (1998: 94).

The instant connection to people with similar interests is certainly key to online fandom. When multiple and more widely spaced networks of physical contacts are combined with less available resources or time to undertake social activities, a safe communal place to summon at a moment’s notice is an attractive
prospect. Fulfillment of the type of yearning described by Bauman (2001), for social interaction that meets the individual’s needs is often referred to in debates about internet communities. Developing a successful online community is difficult; successful ones have to ‘satisfy their members’ needs and contribute to the well being of society’ (Preece, 2000: 25). Of the countless communities launched each year, many falter at the first hurdle, some just survive transiently, without ever becoming successful, yet others disappear entirely. Preece says people talk of:

a wide spectrum of experiences. Some report their lives changing in remarkable ways as a result of participating in online communities. Others describe empty chat rooms, unanswered messages, shallow comments, excessive advertising and junk mail. Some tell stories of receiving empathy and support from total strangers, while others report being victimised by unwarranted verbal attacks (2000: 26).

The collective expression of individuals’ sense of belonging is fundamental to the general atmosphere of the community, which helps explain why some virtcoms flourish and others fail. Poor design may cause some to disintegrate as user friendliness and ease of navigation facilitate a community atmosphere, other communities may fold for financial reasons. However, attracting people and maintaining their feelings of belonging is the overriding principle for success as the essential element in any community are the individuals’ self-identification with the group and a commitment to performing within the expected norms, though allegiances with other members of the community can mean this commitment is not always adhered to. Experts may know how to physically construct an environment, but without the members, it is just architecture. Developer Preece argues ‘[p]eople are the pulse of any community. Without them, there is no community. Vibrant discussion, new ideas, and continually changing content distinguish online communities from Web pages’ (Preece, 2000: 82).
Nonetheless, those critical of internet groups’ framing as communities usually suggest the most contentious part is measuring the degree of immersion and repeated participation required to make a community, particularly when applied to online social groups; this opens up a different slant to analyse online groups, which will now be examined through work on social network analysis. Garton, Haythornthwaite and Wellman (1997), Wellman and Giulia (1999), and Wellman (1998; 1999a; 1999b, 2002) offer the most useful perspective for quantitative study in this area; in Wellman et al’s studies the patterns of exchanges between nodes (the groups, organisations or individual social actors) and the respective strengths and weaknesses of relationships are analysed, focussing on the ‘content, direction and strength,’ and the mechanism or tie that ‘connects a pair of actors by one or more relations’ (Wellman, 1999b: 94).

Wellman argues that there is more than one way to study groups, including community. ‘Social network analysis does not assume that the world is always composed of normatively guided individuals aggregated into bounded groups or areas’ (1999b: 94); instead other phenomena become the primary focus. This is useful because researchers concentrating on groups rather than connections invariably discover it is difficult to set a boundary defining the research site or to analyse membership as a whole because of turnover rates, or to define which interactions transpire as a direct response of belonging to the group, and which occur as a result of looser connections between individuals. Researchers using social network analysis find those problems are less important, as it assumes the network will be sprawling and limitless; they instead focus on the quality and depth of the interactions. Wellman argues:

\[\text{contemporary Western communities rarely are tightly-bounded, densely-knit groups of broadly based ties. They usually are loosely-bounded, sparsely-knit, ramifying networks of specialised ties... Hence analysts should find communities wherever they exist; in neighbourhoods, in family solidarities, or in networks that reach farther out and include many friends and acquaintances (1999b: 97).}\]
Wellman concludes that as social relationships are multidimensional, communities are multidimensional too, existing in physical, occupational and social locales (2002). Wellman’s theory has clear parallels within the research site on a micro level, with strong and weak ties in social relationships operating across a number of overlapping networks; in the community, fans commune with each other at a broad level as members of cult media text fandom, as members of internet culture, as members of Buffy fandom, but also in increasingly narrowed groups as a result of their prosumption of fan related artefacts and preferences in the environments within which they perform. For example, fans will know people on a more personal level in their dormitories than those who post in the Buffy Season Eight Comic forum, whilst those who post in the Role Playing Games forum might know other participants there, but not know those who spend a lot of time in the board’s own IRC Chat room, or post their fan art or fan fiction in a separate area. Therefore their performance affects their community experience, as they will perform to different elements of the generalised other, in different ways, in separate settings within the context. This means there are more than one set of influences on a performance, which can threaten the cohesion of the community and challenge its social reality, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

The internet is just one of the places community can be found, although technology makes the prospect of finding similar others a greater likelihood. This affects identity, as it allows validation of chosen roles, identity performances, preferences and values. ‘Cyberspace, with its myriad of little consensual communities, is a place where you will go in order to find confirmation and endorsement of your identity’ (Robins, 1999: 169) so it seems natural that people will seek out those groups with whom they identify. Identification is a key component in the next theme in this chapter, as it unites
self-identity and group identity for the purpose of promoting community experience.

Experiences of community.

This research has avoided engaging in the unproductive task that too narrowly focuses on whether or not a research site reflects traditional sociological definitions of community, as it is an endeavour that surely fails to understand community from the members’ point of view. By focussing instead on people’s experience, questions concerning what promotes the community-like feel, what engenders a sense of belonging, and what encourages members to return can be addressed. With this research’s objective being the examination of performance in the context of online fandom in order to understand how online community is sustained by identity performance’s enactment of roles and routines, I have followed the maxim of the Chicago School, who direct sociologists to ‘not bother themselves too much with ontology and get on instead with the pragmatic business of trying to understand the intersubjective realities in terms of which people act’ (Jenkins, 2004: 83).

Members instinctively talk about Buffy-boards based upon their feelings, not whether it resembles an academic definition of community. Angel’s Baby argues the boards are a community, although admits ‘it might not start out that way, but after a while you just start feeling as though it is,’ suggesting although a new member may witness the same kinds of social interactions before participating, they do not feel a sense of community until they experience them firsthand. Continued social interaction is thus imperative in building a sense of community. Demonstrating a community feel requires intersubjectivity, as it is based on a commonly agreed definition of the situation, with shared norms,
values and symbolic language, and yet community needs to be experienced by
the individual. Therefore, rather than an approach structured around
organisation of groups, this thesis tentatively suggests instead looking towards
the field of community psychology to examine an ego-centred view of
community, as the individual’s ‘affective attachment’ (Grossberg, 1992: Hills,
2002: Sandvoss, 2008) binds them to the community, illustrating the importance
of their perceptions and their feelings; in addition, research concerning science
fiction fans and communities of interest has already published from this
perspective.

Starting from a perspective of the feel of community, researchers in social
psychology, and community psychology in particular, have looked to define a
psychological sense of community (PSOC). Their framework is useful to
understand how members come to feel belonging in community and experience
it. Sarason argues there should be a:

perception of similarities with others, an acknowledged
interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this
interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one
expects from them, the feeling that one is part of a larger

This shares commonality with a symbolic interaction theoretical framework,
albeit from the other side of the fence; parallels can be drawn as both are
connected via the discipline of social psychology. In symbolic interaction, the
self is fashioned through the perception of our appearance to others, how it is
judged, how we modify our appearance to belong (PSOC’s acknowledgment of,
and willingness to, maintain interdependence through the performance of
expected norms) and self-feeling of others judgment (PSOC’s sense of
belonging, maintained through the emphasis of similarities and stability in
performance). However it must be stated that community psychology does not
emphasise the socially constructed nature of reality through harmonious
definition of the situation in the same way as symbolic interactionism; nonetheless, PSOC neatly summarises the required feelings for members to experience group interaction as a community, and to feel they belong, albeit from the individual’s perspective.

Belonging has an important function in self-development; in a social encounter the self is expressed through role and our personal identity combined; through the threshold of role, we negotiate our own and others’ view of the self. A personal identity, as Goffman calls it, is more an:

“expression” of personal identity, of matters that can be attributed to something that is more embracing and enduring than the current role performance, and even the role itself… his (sic) personality, his perduring moral character, his animal nature (1974: 573).

A personal identity is built through layers of experiences and encounters. When combined with the adoption of idealised fronts and sets of beliefs associated with roles that are shaped by community expectations (or our primary groups), these aggregate to realise the social self, achieved during our engagement with and socialisation from others in social interaction. Like symbolic interaction, PSOC is concerned with roles, norms and behaviour of groups, with focus aimed towards the self in relationship to, rather than with, others. Though a PSOC acknowledges the need of the individual to feel influence in their community, and recognises the role of the group in influencing the behaviour of the individual, it underestimates the delicate maneuverings required in social interaction to facilitate social reality’s proper functioning, and its dependence upon performance. Without the proper functioning of social reality, social interaction would prove difficult, leaving little scope for the feelings of belonging, perception of similarities and the stable social structure required as a basis for achieving a sense of community. Symbolic interaction’s recognition of this provides better explanations of why such effort is made to maintain the
correct front for the context, as through positive reception, their performed identity is achieved, reinforcing the self and conferring the individual’s place in the community. However, the reinforcement is also produced by performing to sub-community level groups, and so the pull from belonging and attachment to the smaller social aggregations can impact the community’s cohesion.

Individuals are defined through and define themselves through their connection with others; thus, the consequences of experiencing community are very important to the construction of the self. Groups with which one has the closest of associations have the greatest influence, such as Cooley’s ‘primary groups’ (1909: 23). He states primary groups, those community groups, family settings and playgroups of children involved in intimate cooperation:

are fundamental in forming the social nature and ideals of the individual. The result of intimate association, psychologically, is a certain fusion of individualities in a common whole, so that one’s very self, for many purposes at least, is the common life and purpose of the group (1909: 23).

In this regard, identity and community intertwine; if in modern life identities are malleable and context dependent, by affiliating with a group, identifying their social identity as one’s own, one aligns oneself to one group and not to another. As Jenkin’s (2004) argues, ‘[c]ollective identification evokes powerful imagery of people who are … apparently similar to each other… However, this similarity cannot be recognised without simultaneously evoking differentiation’ (2004: 79). By accepting and correctly performing the norms entailed with membership of a specific set of people, we identify ourselves as different to another group whilst joining in the common purpose of the one with which we seek allegiance. Therefore, identity and community become two sides of the same coin, with the construction of the self occurring through, in the case of this thesis, a community of fandom.
Close, continual interaction offers the greatest degree of influence on the self, with the groups who most impact upon identity performance being those whose positive affirmation and acceptance we most desire – the members of the community we choose to belong to. The individual’s attachment to their community is a very powerful motivator in sustaining an appropriate performance, but there are other factors relating to a sense of belonging identified by community psychology, aspects of which are directly implicated in the relationship construction of the self has with the group.

An individual’s sense of belonging is inherent in forming their sense of community. The promotion of belonging through membership and boundaries has been a key theme in community research since Park and Burgess’s (1921) sociological analyses of Chicagoans – research that founded the first Chicago school. Community psychologists McMillan and Chavis (1986) provide an influential theoretical framework, one that also sees belonging as key to a sense of community; thus, they share a basic perspective with symbolic interaction’s antecedents. Dimensions through which individuals can achieve a sense of communal involvement are interrelated, but MacMillan and Chavis (1986) propose the primary component to a PSOC is the participant’s feelings of membership. Group identification is established and maintained through the possession of a shared symbolic system in an environment where members feel emotionally secure. This safety is upheld through the management of deviants, who come under the scrutiny of the community and are judged according to their compliance with norms of acceptable behaviour in the context. Feelings of membership are good identity motivator; the individual who correctly performs their identity within the norms of the context reaps a feeling of belonging, a sense of similarity with others, as they share the same symbolic lexicon and conventions, whilst being protected by the community from any continued assault. Goffman states:
a necessary condition for social life is the sharing of a single set of normative expectations by all participants, the norms being sustained in part because of being incorporated. When a rule is broken restorative measures will occur: the damaging is terminated and the damage repaired, whether by control agencies or the culprit himself (sic) (1963: 152).

Knowing a transgressor of community norms will be cautioned promotes their safety, but also, community responses to acts directed towards the member as an individual promotes their feelings of influence. Again, through appropriate performances extolling the maintenance of norms within the group, the individual augments their ability to be heard and respected through their continually reinforced personal investment in the community’s norms. However, it can be argued due to the flow of information, the larger the online community, the more difficult it is to be heard; thus, at Buffy-boards, smaller groups often provide greater feelings of influence than the board as a whole, which can cause tension within the community, as the dispersion of interests and loyalties it dilutes the community feel.

McMillan and Chavis argue there are two more dimensions in a PSOC. Members need to feel a sense of integration through fulfillment of needs; status, recognition of their mastery or competence in the community functioning and the mutual fulfillment of needs are rewards the member receives in exchange for paying their dues through continued membership and compliance with the shared value system. This has parallels in bulletin board environments; responding respectfully to other’s posts, making community members feel welcome, awarding ‘reputation’ points or recognising others contributions, in short, the qualities of ‘idealised’ performance that upholds the community’s values confers status on the member and promotes self confidence through ‘belief in the role they are playing’ (Goffman, 1959: 28, 45), though this can also be accomplished through smaller groups.
Finally, members must feel a shared emotional connection which develops from continued high quality interaction; thus if a member has positive feelings about the previous aspects, it is likely a ‘spiritual bond’ will occur through their shared history of events and experiences of the effects of honour and humiliation in the group, particularly those at times of crisis. The latter dimensions are of particular importance, and will be discussed in greater depth in this chapter, and the case study chapter. Overall, these dimensions are apposite to our understanding of the feel of online communities, but also highlight how a sense of community enmeshes with the individual’s performance and reflections from the other; if the member performs appropriately for the context, their sense of community is likely to be high.

Using McMillan’s and Chavis’s theory in communities of interest, Obst, Zinkiewicz and Smith (2002a: 2002b) analysed science fiction fandom, arguing the initial dimensions should be extended to include conscious identification as a contributory factor in an individual’s sense of community. Using social identity theory, they examined the role of identification in a sense of community where it is impossible to interact with or know all group members, similar to Anderson’s theory of imagined community (1983); this is useful for this thesis as it is seen in geographically spread internet communities and the imagined community of fandom. Though their research was instigated in a co-present context (at an international fan convention) the authors recognise the potential application in online fandom through noting the increase in internet fan communications, arguing the internet ‘has become its major communication channel... bring[ing] a whole new meaning and application to the word community ’ (Obst, Zinkiewicz and Smith, 2002a: 93).

Obst et al’s research suggests that a sense of community can be felt to a high degree by participants in communities of interest, emphasising that contrary to the rhetoric of communities destroyed, ‘a strong sense of community can exist among those interacting in cyberspace (2002a: 99). Furthermore, their research
found that compared to their geographical community, participants felt higher levels of a sense of community in their fandom and were more aware of their membership in that community (2002b). In stark contrast, the weakest predictor for a sense of community were the involuntarily identifications made through a shared geographical setting, which hints that perhaps consciously identifying with a group is the strongest component of all in PSOC, reflecting Hacking’s ‘some more resented, some more owned’ assertion concerning roles (Hacking, 2004: 290) from the identity side of the coin. Members mutually adopt the defined role and claim a fan identity through performing their fronts in the fandom’s context, thus, similarity with others is a key uniting factor, through their shared fan object and group fan identity. Obst, Zinkiewicz and Smith conclude that ‘[i]dentification… seems to be more important in the communities to which we choose to belong, than in those communities that we have made a less conscious decision to join’ (2002: 115).

Consciously identifying with a community through a shared purpose and the roles associated with its members is connected to how a sense of self is invested in and develops from the roles and identities we perform. Returning to Goffman’s statement concerning dramatic realisation, he says:

we can consider an interesting fact about the round of different routines which any group or class of individuals helps to perform. When a group or class is examined, one finds the members of it tend to invest their egos primarily in certain routines, giving less stress to other ones which they perform (Goffman, 1959: 43)

A personal front’s construction works to idealise self-performance in the context of the community’s roles and norms. Through their performance the individual enters into and engages with the fan community and makes claims to an identity, but they must identify with it and be motivated to perform effectively as it is voluntary. This promotes their belief in the role, but it also serves to validate the group identity; the desire to perform in a way that conforms to the
generalised other’s community and its individual performances indicates a recognition of the group’s identity and a conscious identification with the roles that inhabit it.

At Buffy-boards, for example, the valorization of a geek or nerd stereotype is reinforced by the cult nature of the show, and its characters’ positioning as outsiders; thus, through the context, the object of fandom and the role of fan, the pathologised outsider itself has a strong subcultural appeal. Members’ comments support their appropriation of fan identity as a positive thing, with remarks such as

_I do love seeing the look on people’s faces when I come out with some reference be it Trek/Wars/Buffy/Lotr. The best for me was our IT guy was explaining what he meant when he ‘was up most of the night chatting mIRC’....his face when I told him I not only knew what it was but that I use it regularly_ Faith, post

_Comments on this post:

_Floop695 agrees: Geek is the new black

_NightBird agrees: Tell me about it, I tire of seeing ‘new gen’ geeks in comic shops. Yes, i’m a comic snob but people should know who created Catwoman without google._

But this fan identity performance belongs to a more general celebration and adoption of a geek community identity inherent on the internet, again setting the boundaries for us and them; as the need for a technologically astute society has become a prerequisite for success, the positive portrayal and subsequent validation of the ‘nerd girl’ and ‘beta male’ stereotype has allowed a previously ‘othered’ group to obtain a degree of cultural legitimacy.
I’m a Computer Science student. I’m financing this by working
in a video game store. Game, set, match. Booya. Jill_Valentine,

post

In the relatively enclosed space of the internet, fandom performances can have
carnivalesque qualities, ‘eliminating the need for a materially public display of
one’s geek tendencies’ (Bailey, 2005: 195), as they can be fully realised online.
Fully unleashing one’s geek qualities online does allow for people to moderate
performances that are disparate with their identities in other contexts.

i think all of us are nerdy in one crowd and cool in the next. Or
at least, have an element of cool in us. With my snowboard and
climber friends, i fit right in, but that doesn’t make me any less of
a nerd when i meet someone whos seen buffy, Silum, post

Obst et al’s point regarding conscious identification is therefore significant. As
fandom shapes the self (Jenkins, 1992: Cavicchi, 1998: Bailey, 2002: Sandvoss,
2005), through conscious identification and choosing to belong to a fan group,
the individual will shape their identity to conform their performance to
community expectations. Through interactions with the generalised other, they
will have their identity shaped by the community, but also by closer and more
intimate relationships with smaller groups within in, whose norms may not
correspond with the wider community. In a way analogous to the primary
group Cooley describes, the fan group functions to shape the self through its
negotiation with others.

Buffy-boards, is almost like a family in a lot of ways.. You might
only share one single interest with a given person, but that just
adds to the community- feel. There’s rules, people, personalities,
people who make sure you follow the rules, and most
importantly topics covering a huge range of topics and opinions,
it really is sometimes like having a large group conversation, just as you would in real life. ~angelic slayer~

These conversations though, are framed by the context of the community and the norms of fandom.

I do try and stay more up to date with the history/plots/characters of both AtS and BtVS, more-so than I used to. Partially because it really helps me to comprehend what other users are talking about on BB, but also just for my own personal interests. I like to try and understand character development, why the writers may have changed that part of the plot, etc. Just an interest that I seem to have developed! ~angelic slayer~

Using PSOC and the work developed from it are useful in addressing this research’s challenge, namely how identity performance sustains online fan communities. It explains how membership, influence, connection and conscious identification are necessary elements in an individual’s sense of community, which allows room for Goffman’s theory of performance to act as the point of convergence for the individual and the community. Individuals perform their identity in ways that make them belong in terms of a fan identity and the community’s context specific group identity; by attending to the individual’s motivation to facilitate belonging by matching their identity performance to the generalised other’s expectations of community norms, it also brings full circle a symbolic interactionist’s perspective of the self and social reality being continuously negotiated through interactions with an other (Mead, 1934: Blumer, 1969), though it does open up questions regarding the depth and degree of influence from the individual’s more intimate immersion with smaller groups and its effects on the primacy of community norms. It evades problems regarding the physical world’s superiority in definitions of community by focusing instead on the experiences of its members. In this regard, it is also
useful when related to examinations of the internet, where it can begin to
address the dispute of whether a community can exist in a disembodied non-
place, without face-to-face interactions, in a non-geographically defined place,
deconstructing the online/offline distinction.

Self-identification is intrinsic to feelings of membership; one is more likely to
realise a sense of belonging if one identifies with the group and attempts to
perform an identity appropriate to the norms of the context through continued
interaction with other members. Fans actively and ‘successfully seek out each
other in order to validate their status as cult TV fans’ (Hill and Calcutt, 2007: 70)
displaying ‘a strong propensity to self identify as members of fan
cultures’ (Thorne and Bruner, 2006: 65). For Thorne and Bruner, this level of
fans’ internal involvement is the most important of fan characteristics, as
without this drive, the other characteristics – external involvement, the wish to
acquire, and the desire for social interaction – would have little significance.
Claiming a fan identity and performing as such within an online fan culture are
therefore mutually reinforcing. Supporting their fan self-identification through
continued interaction in the fan community, members are exposed to an
increasing amount of fan culture, through speech, norms of the group, fan
gossip and the acquisition of fan knowledge and trivia, fan interaction in
events, conferences and participatory media. As the member becomes more
experienced and integrated in the community, the development of fan aesthetics
and practices promotes, and consequently deepens, the immersion and internal
involvement required to further self-identify as a fan, completing the feedback
process and supporting the claimed identity.

Identity negotiation theorists (such as Swann et al, 2000: Hogg, 1996: Turner,
1984) assert group cohesion is achieved through the community’s
encouragement of members to view ‘themselves through the lenses of their
membership in the group’ (Swann et al, 2000: 239). As a consequence,
individuals will perform their identity in ways that will extol the virtues and
sentiments typical of the group’s norms, and downplay any facets of personality or personal tastes that would appear incongruous or are of no consequence. Additionally, individuals ‘base their liking for others on similarity to the prototype of the group, rather than on qualities that they might otherwise deem important’ (2000: 239). This reflects Goffman’s ideas of role, and upholds this thesis’ assertion of the cycle of performance commencing with the individual’s entry into the community through the role of fan, with the individual gaining acceptance through other’s reflections of acceptable performance, gradually exhibiting more of their self through their enmeshing of fan role, social identity and the self.

The group influences the behaviour of members, stimulating the shaping of identity to conform more closely to the general idealised other. However, Swann et al. argue some people reverse this trend and demand their identity is verified by the group; instead of the group influencing the individual, the individual carves a niche and is dependent on the group to verify that identity. As such, ‘[i]dentity negotiation processes thus serve as the “thread” that holds the fabric of social interaction together’ (238). In earlier work, Swann identified behaviour mostly conformed to group expectations, suggesting self-confirmatory evidence provides existential security, as ‘in a world in which one’s surroundings, interaction partners, and rules governing survival may change rapidly, stable self-conceptions may play an important role in organising experience, predicting future events, and guiding behaviour’ (1987: 1039).

Fans support their self-identification and stabilise their self-conceptions through continued interaction in the contexts that most value those specific preferences, values and artefacts. The more exposure fans have to other fans, through norms of the group, discussion about the right products and the acquisition of knowledge, the mindset of the community and their favoured participatory media, the more the fan identity is cemented into their performances and the self. Their immersion and involvement in fandom allow the enmeshing of self-
identify and fan roles as individuals and in relation to wider society; this completes the feedback process and supports their identity. In internet fandom in particular, this is made possible through the fan object’s symbolic lexicon and through those technological capabilities that enable a stable performance to be maintained in text and pictures, through posts, conversations and fan talk.

Members often retain their nicknames across environments, and seek to recreate the same cliques within the new communities they seek out, evident during Buffy-board’s hiatus and in previous boards examined in the course of this thesis; this may in part be explained by the need for stable self-conceptions. Publicly performing clique solidarity through referrals for new members, member profiles showing the user’s associates and friendship groups, and the capacity for public comment through such channels as karma, virtual messages, IRC and the ‘shout-box’ add to this, as they are performances of individual identity and friendship groups made within the context of the community, with both seeking to reaffirm the other.

Swann argues that individuals ‘preferentially solicit... self-confirmatory feedback,’ to verify their self-conceptions, paying attention to what is said and remembering it to act upon it (1987: 1039). This is a three pronged strategy, involving interacting in selective contexts where self-confirmatory feedback is likely to occur, (either through the people or the setting), the individual’s display of controllable identity cues invoking the desired response from those exposed to it, and interaction strategies to correct poor feedback as a result of the first two. In Goffman’s terms, the individual who believes their self to be helpful and knowledgeable will seek out environments containing people with whom they can fulfill that role, upholding their performance through mobilising activity, providing identity cues through the personal front to support their claims, using maintenance of expressive control to counteract discrepancies in performance (1959: 40, 45, 60). This has a correlating effect offline; as the identity performance at the bulletin board affects the sense of self.
in all contexts, members will therefore seek out environments within which they can reinforce their online identity. When applying this to this research, the individual’s self identification as a fan draws them towards environments where they can effectively perform a fan identity through skillful management of their personal front, as correctly performing the appropriate identity will give the self-confirmatory feedback they desire.

**Fandom as community**

Belonging to a unit, a group with a particular function, is imperative to the construction of the self; as Abercrombie says ‘[a] sense of who we are is inseparable from a feeling of belonging to some social entity larger than we are’ (2004: 100). Fans seek to communicate with others like them and create community in the process. Thorne and Bruner’s (2006) study of fan consumer behaviour recognises fans’ desire for *external involvement* through conventions, reading fan literature, engaging in fan talk at events or on the internet, and a desire for *social interaction* with others of like interests. Through membership of internet fan communities (made possible by high degrees of internal and external involvement and a ‘curatorial consumption;’ see Tankel and Murphy: 1998) the desire for social interaction is fulfilled.

Fans thus explicitly achieve a sense of belonging through their voluntary membership of fandom. Fans share their specialist cultural resources to perform, develop and negotiate their own identity in settings such as online forums with subtle differences when compared to co-present interactions; nonetheless, these are similar in function and effect. This also helps create a sense of belonging, with fans forming cliques, friendship groups, hierarchies and subcultural communities based around their fandom. Fans’ sense of
camaraderie is achieved through self-identification with the group, through the continual recognition and performance of mutually defined roles and the maintenance of boundaries, of showing that ‘we’ as fans do something different to ‘them’ as non-fans.

If one of the ways fans claim their identity is through performing fan consumption in the right way, then in terms of sci-fi or cult-media fans’ role in society, claiming to be a fan places the individual in a larger community than their immediate group. Performances of cult media fans’ intertextual consumption are central to claims of membership; this is achieved by showing knowledge of the genre, proving their breadth and depth of knowledge of the cultural objects surrounding their fandom. Fans are expected to show solidarity at a wider community level, with the imagined community of other fans. This excerpt illustrates this very well:

I was a nerd long before there even WERE nerds. In fact, all nerds just may be patterned after me in the 60’s. Of course, there weren’t any computers back then, at least none smaller than a good sized truck, but there were comic books. And Robert E Howard, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Robert Heinlein...and then there was Star Trek. We gathered around the televisions on Tuesday nights like worshipers before a shrine. (Of course, Star Trek didn’t come on until Wednesday, but we were patient. We were devoted. We waited) White Avenger, post

White Avenger’s emphasis on ‘we’ informs the immediate community that the larger community of fans perform their allegiance to fandom by highlighting similarity with others involved in the wider enjoyment of cult media products, the community of other cult media fans. Fiske’s (1992) argument is of use here, as it concerns sub-cultural capital’s ability to position the fan as a consumer of the right cultural products in the right way, through the comparative analysis of
the different fan objects, pointing to a hierarchy, a seniority of fandom, one that reinstates the order of officially sanctioned culture in a sub-cultural context. As Fiske argues:

Fandom offers ways of filling cultural lack and provides the social prestige and self-esteem that go with cultural capital. As with economic capital, lack cannot be measured by objective means alone, for lack arises when the amount of capital possessed falls short of that which is desired or felt to be merited (1992: 33)

In fan cultures, the community measures the amount of desired capital, as it is they who will set the standards for fandom, and bestow the corresponding status and prestige, though the immediate social groups of the individual also play a part in certifying authenticity. This member goes on to illustrate that there is a sense of history involved, through use of classic science fiction, and clues the audience to look at his age (61). Having paid his dues to the right cultural texts, he shows his fandom as being weaved intertextually; the reference to Buffy’s Turok-Hahn draws all of the material back to the object of fandom, to give members without broader sub-cultural fan knowledge the reference tools required to understand his claim to status.

\[ Star Wars, Battlestar Galactica, James Bond after the immortal Sean left the role, Dungeons and Dragons, video games, PC’s and the internet, cell phones...mere trappings. Johnny-come-latelies. My friends and I were the Turok Hahn of nerds: the nerds that even nerds fear. We are the (mostly) living legends. White Avenger, post \]

This camaraderie is exhibited between and within communities; fans recognise that devotees of other cultural products are still similar to them in terms of their ‘affective’ attachment (Grossberg, 1992: Hills, 2002: Sandvoss, 2008), but differ in practice or intensity, whilst maintaining their own community boundaries
through emphasising similarity within their specific community and other groups of the same fan object.

*The Scooby gang! ^_^ … not that we’re “above” or “below” anyone else, but the buffyteers seem to gather pretty well, and seem for the most part loyal to the show, and we are quite a special group... ~angelic slayer~

BB is great because most of the members are of my generation because we all found Buffy at the same time. The members aren’t as immature as they are at some boards and they are all generally educated people. There are always good conversations going on and most people are on the same wavelength.

Summers Blood.

As these members indicate though, a boundary is drawn through distinguishing themselves from other groups of fans, ‘othering’ fans in different communities; by imagining the generalised other of their own group as possessing values, characteristics and a degree of intelligence akin to their own, as similar to themselves, members simultaneously reinforce their self identification with the community, idealising their generalised other, even when comparing their group to others with the same fan object on similar bulletin boards. When comparing Buffy-boards to what the community perceive as ‘rival’ fandoms, those that threaten the boundaries and membership of the community, the group performs en masse to repel borders. This is exemplified by the following thread concerning *Twilight* fans and the marketing of ‘Edward underwear;’ these excerpts clearly define the group’s boundary:

*By the looks of this, those Twilight fans will do anything to feel like they have Edward’s mouth in the general area of their crotch...* Joan the Vampire Slayer, post
I feel kinda bad for the guy. Don’t think it’s exactly a good feeling knowing there are thousands of crazies walking around with your face on their crotch ... Mumrick, post

I know, right? This whole Twilight craze is getting way out of hand Joan the Vampire Slayer, post

They call Angel a pedophile, and Edward Cullen is on girl’s private places. World gone mad! PrincessBuffy, post

I used to think about buying Mrs Marsters panties on ebay, but I found out at that moment that I wasn’t quite that obsessed. Skytteflickan88, post

Buffy-boards members are here performing both as Buffy fans and board community members; by treating Twilight fans as a community, imagining and positioning them as an ‘alternate’ generalised other through their emphasis of ‘those Twilight fans,’ as ‘obsessed’ ‘crazies,’ it reflects the ‘exaggerated fan model one’ encountered in chapter two, showing how persistent the framing is within and outside of fandom. It also shows how boundaries are essential in drawing the membership together and maintaining a sense of division between ‘us’ and ‘them’ through the performance of a group identity. Even between fandoms, there is a feeling of one group being more strange, more obsessive or less tasteful than another, similar to Jensen’s (1992) argument concerning fans and aficionados. This distinction between communities upholds the values of the community, whilst offering the opportunity for fans to perform their allegiance to group norms, adding to their dramatic realise[ing] during the transaction what he (sic) wishes to convey (Goffman, 1959: 40, original emphasis), which in this instance, is group allegiance. The performance also reinforces interpersonal relationships between members of the boards: symbolic interaction recognises how communication cements social contexts, as ‘it is through the recurrent and recursive properties of interaction that actors both
produce and reproduce social relationships across time and space’ (Boden, 1990: 246).

A sense of belonging is important to fans, and the shared fan object provides a symbolically common lexicon between people from otherwise disparate backgrounds, creating a context for social interaction to occur within, whilst simultaneously demarcating what it is to be a fan of that product, providing a boundary for the community. As Cavicchi says:

The Bruce fan community is not a village, it’s not on a street, it’s not affiliated with an institution or organisation, but it brings people together with a remarkably strong commitment and goodwill. Fans create community or a “sense of belonging together” not with actual shared experience, but with the expectation of shared experience... this sense of belonging together is part and parcel of fans’ social world. It shapes the tenor and quality of fans’ interactions not only with each other but also with other nonfans (1998: 161).

The expectation of shared experience is a theme that rings true in the online fandoms experienced during this research. Members recognise that Buffy is the starting point for building the social context they interact in, one that remains long after the show’s demise and their performances have moved on to greater emphasis of self-performance, Buffy remains the unifying factor in their continued dialogue.

*Common interest in Buffy is an important thing that links us.*

*One thing that people offline share is a common history/memory.*

*Their relationships might not be built on common interest but they are definitely linked by something in common (assuming that they have been part of a community for some time). [Is] common memory/history is something that we share?* Elmo, post
Allycat agrees: It applies in the sense that we’ve all experienced watching Buffy and Angel.

I do find myself discussing, debating, PMing, and Karma sharing with some of the same people over and over again. As with any social club, the members of online communities are bound by a common purpose or interest. Unlike a physical community, members are not constrained by set-in-stone schedules. … They can do it in their pajamas, if they so choose. That makes it less of a commitment, which I, personally, find appealing. Ironically, because it is less of a commitment, I spend more time participating in online groups than I do in similar groups in the “real” world. palabravampiress, post

Palabra’s comment supports a point raised by Cavicchi (1998), concerning the relevance of physical proximity in maintaining a sense of community. His interview data suggests ‘the absence of geographical ties, rather than leading to a loose association based on a common interest, causes fans to develop even closer social ties than they would ordinarily’ (160). This is because although they are physically distanced, fans are socially proximate. Cavicchi goes on to argue that ‘the lack of acceptance from members of a fan’s immediate social world and the intolerance and distortion from much of the media function as “background factors” which create an association and set the stage for community’ (1998: 162). This is a recurring topic at Buffy-boards. Fans state only another fan can understand the type of attachment they have to their fan object, or the intensity with which they feel it. When fans start to discuss Buffy, any differences are irrelevant, as they become embedded in the text. This leads to feelings of close connection, which are then replicated across the off-topic threads.

Cavicchi writes ‘as a … fan myself, I have felt an immediate familiarity and friendship during interviews with complete strangers,’ discussing how his research participants described ‘invisible magnets’ and a sense of ‘immediate connection and knowing’ that occurred when they met others and became
aware of their shared fandom (1998: 158). Cavicchi contends this feeling of connectivity may be akin to that of a small town or neighbourhood where people intermingle and share their experiences, obeying the same laws and social conventions, which gives it a community feel, an opinion which seems almost inexplicable considering the phenomenon pulling fans together is neither one of a shared environment or a simultaneous communal experience. However in online fan environments, there is a tangible sense of shared norms, customs and place, which adds to the fans’ feelings of connectivity, and although fans do not share the same locale when they engage with their fandom, they are still sharing the memory and interpretation of the experience of watching Buffy, albeit on an individual basis. Geraghty states that the interpretive practices of fandom, the collective resources of the fans’ specialist data and their interpretations are a process that ‘offers the feelings of community through the experience of shared pleasure’ (1991: 123). Therefore, shared experience of the fan object functions as community.

Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) argue one reason for this is because diffused audiences’ everyday lives are constituted through the consumption of media products in media saturated environments; whilst individual’s exist in an ‘altered relationship’ with other members of the audience, which itself becomes a community. Other audience members are conceived of as an imagined community ‘of significant others who are of like mind and have similar tastes and attitudes’ (114), but with the ‘essential connexion with the formulation and sustenance of identity’ (117). Possessing a group identity as a fan within a community, even if in an imagined sense, is made easier through the sharing of symbolic resources available to the fan culture such as patterns of speech, specific language, the consumption of specific music and films (Jenkins, 1992: 39). At Buffy-boards, fans admit to consciously and unconsciously slipping into Buffy-speak, on and off of the boards.
when I do speak to someone who knows what am talking about, I go red with joy, because am not the lone weirdo who is muttering Dr Horrible lyrics when working. Lorney Tunes, post

The joy is of discovering another member of their extended community in offline contexts, emphasising the sense of belonging through not being ‘lone’ or othered.

Goffman describes this process as ‘feeling out,’ where the individual, on behalf of their team, can ‘extend a definite but noncompromising invitation to the other, requesting that social distance and formality be increased or decreased’ (1959: 188). Lorney Tunes use of Buffyspeak is a way of subtly disclosing membership of her ‘team’ when away from it. Goffman states:

> When individuals are unfamiliar with each others opinions and statuses, a feeling-out process occurs whereby one individual admits his (sic) views or statuses to another a little at a time... By phrasing each step in the admission in an ambiguous way, the individual is in the position to halt the procedure of dropping his front at the point where he gets no confirmation from the other (1959: 189)

Thus Lorney Tunes’ use of Buffyspeak is a symbolic code, a secret signal used to test the waters in external contexts, to check if others are of like mind in daily interactions; like a fannish Polari, using Buffy quotes and patterns of speech is a way of making tentative claims about a group membership to those who may also be ‘in the know’ whilst masking what may be seen as a stigmatised identity.

On the boards however, it is very much a part of claiming an identity and showing one’s worth as a fan.
Being a member of BB has definitely added to it, yes. And I’m sorry to say that I still use it. “____ much?”, “What’s your childhood trauma?”, “You don’t have to go all ____ on me”, “bored now” and many more BTVS phrases have managed to work their way into my day to day speech patterns! ~angelic slayer~

I don’t make the effort...however sometimes I catch myself saying certain things...like adding much to the end of things.

Billy Hunter

I don’t make an effort, it just happens whether or not I wish it to. Like I said, it’s such a big part of my life that I can’t help it.

JollyApe

As described in the previous chapter, on the internet, the visual symbols of fandom in terms of avatars, quotes, fan art, banners and signatures, add to the available lexicon to provide a unified system for fans to share their group identity, whilst maintaining their own uniqueness through their own interpretations of the text.

Jenkins (1992), extrapolating from Fiske’s (1987: 168-171) popular culture/folk culture argument, argues fan cultures are consistent with the characteristics of folk culture as fans are active manipulators of meaning, rather than consumers who accept a cultural product at face value. Both fan and folk cultures ‘construct a group identity, articulate the community’s ideals, and define its relationship to the outside world’ (273). In this we see a comparison with those factors contributing to a sense of community as described by McMillan and Chavis (1986). For example, in becoming a fan, neophytes are shown ‘the right way’ to perform their fan identity, as they are ‘responsive to the somewhat more subtle demands placed upon them as members... what narratives are
“appropriate”, what interpretations are “legitimate” (Jenkins: 88). This happens within contexts as well as between them, as the following excerpt illustrates:

I spend most of my time on the main boards. I have fun at Raiden, though, and tend to be more of my own personal Palabra over there rather than the let’s-debate-or-analyze-a-scene sorta of Palabra that I am on the main boards.

Palabravampiress post

Clear patterns of expected performance are provided through the community by watching what other fans do, what makes a person a ‘fan’, rather than a member of the casual audience. Thus, the fans’ sense of belonging in the community is achieved by conforming to community norms, though the problem with loyalty to smaller groups norms remains lurking beneath the surface. Arguing that fans’ conversation with non-fans ‘often proves unfulfilling, as they fail to approach the subject with the same level of intensity’ (2006: 55), Thorne and Bruner illustrate how the process of becoming a fan involves guidance and stimulation by others to move from dilettante to experienced fan, in much the same way Jenkins (1992), Cavicchi (1998) and Hills (2002) discuss in their observations about ‘becoming a fan’ stories. McMillan and Chavis (1986) argue members justify the pressures of conformity through the need for consensual validation and cohesiveness in their community, which augments the clear boundary to members of what it is to belong, and what it is not.

McMillan and Chavis also talk of a spiritual bond amongst members, and the link between ‘cult’ and fandom or at least the perceived semi-religious fervor of fans concerning the object of fandom, whether pathologising or not, has been inherent in debates about fandom since the beginning. As Hills (2002) indicates, characterising fandom as community seems possible when fans use neo-religious metaphors to discuss their fandom, suggesting they may feel the
spiritual bond with other fans akin to that felt by those involved in the communities discussed by McMillan and Chavis (1986), and Whittaker, Isaacs and O’Day (1997). Jindra, (1994) Brooker (2002: 5-11) and Bailey, (2005: 120-121) are examples of the many fan studies writers who have pointed to fandom as having a religion like quality for participants, partially stemming from their analysis of fans of cult media objects.

In particular Hills (2002) argues that although this seems an odd approach, ‘all it does is open up a metaphor employed by fans’ themselves (117). He contests it is neoreligiosity occurring as ‘an effect of fan discourses and practices’ that are masquerading as religion in fan studies; and we should consider how ‘cult’ discourses reflect emotional and affective processes in culture’ (118). It is a fact that fans themselves frame their own experiences in terms of religious devotion. Cavicchi (1998: 43-44, 51-57) talks of ‘conversion,’ and the occurrence of a quasi-religious sense of belonging when fans ‘become fans’, and he maintains it is because fandom and religion ‘are both centred around acts of devotion’ (51). On the boards visited during this examination, fans talk of their own conversion, and of friends they are ‘in the process of converting’ (Fly on the Wall, post), engendering debate about which episodes are most likely to convert new fans, whether it is better to offer canon standard episodes valued by fans, start with a complete fan favourite season or from the beginning. This in itself is a way of consulting the community on the approved canonical way of training dilettante fans.

*It’s like I’m a born-again Christian, except that I feel like I’m proselysizing something worthwhile. And converting many of the people I know … is not an unlarge task.* dagojr, post

*…converting someone to Buffy is a process* WannaBlessedBe, post
... I was a late comer to this grand old religion we follow

HABEAS CORPSES, post

I feel vaguely like a Jehovah’s Witness, going around knocking
on my real life folks’ ... and attempting to get them to see the
light. Palabravampiress, post

Members feel there is a responsibility to advocate the series to potential new fans, although this is not solely for the purpose of passing on the series to a prospective imagined audience who they perceive may have similar tastes. It is often also about sharing it with people they already have an emotional connection with at some level, whether they are roommates, friends or family. For example, Palabravampiress writes, ‘I love you internet people and all... but sometimes, I just wanna have a nice Buffy discussion with, say, my Dad. ... I spend a lot of time trying to convert my real life loved ones.’ This illustrates how although belonging in a group is an important facet of fandom, for this member and some others, sharing an emotional connection physically and socially can enhance their fan enjoyment. It also illustrates how the self-confirmatory feedback loop described by Swann (1987) operates from online to co-present relationships, as Palabra is seeking offline environments and relationships in which can verify and support her online identity and stabilise her self conceptions.

Fans’ desire to bring other members into the community with whom they can jointly experience their affective attachment is a strong pull, particularly if the person is one whom they have an existing emotional connection with. This is most evident by the ‘meets,’ conventions and communal viewings fans partake in, as it adds to the sense of community, and ties in with Thorne’s and Bruner’s (2006) characteristics of external involvement and social interaction prevalent in fans. But it also relates to Mead’s (1934) idea of the ‘I’ and ‘me’ fusing through social activities, as ‘[w]e get into an attitude in which everyone is at one with
each other in so far as belonging to the same community,’ (274) an attitude in which acts of devotion (in the case of Mead, through religion) ‘involves the successful completion of the social process …[and] involves this relation of the social stimulus to the world at large, the carrying over of the social attitude to the larger world’ (275).

This chapter has shown how community is imagined, existing in the minds of its members, symbolically constructed through the continued performances of roles and identities supported by the community’s membership that reinforce a sense of group belonging and maintained through a network of multidimensional interpersonal relations in a number of overlapping contexts. As the individual negotiates their identity through community norms, overlapping performances in different contexts have an effect on both the community and the individual, and changes group dynamics. This will be discussed in the next chapter, and related to the performance of identity and community as discussed here, and in my previous chapter.

Using a symbolic interactionist’s perspective, the way in which fans use online communities, the variety of performances they engage in and the depth and content of their debate is as important to the social construction of their identity as performances are in their offline encounters, as the context drives the performance. Making use of Park’s analogy (cited in Goffman, 1959: 30), as people begin to interact on a regular basis and become immersed in the ebb and flow of the boards, the individual, who entered the environment through the role, finds their character develops; through meaningful and prolonged engagement with others, they become persons in that environment, building strong bonds with others as fans, but also as housemates, as people with other common interests, similar circumstances, shared roles or a mutual outlook.

One final thing should be noted in order to possibly compensate for communities being painted in too golden a glow. Self-identification and feelings
of membership may be essential, but it should not be assumed that shared norms and community spirit means concord or affection. Cooley’s theories concerning the social aspects of the individual mind offer insight here. In his discussion of the role of primary groups (namely those involving intimate co-operation and association) he states that:

it is not to be supposed that the unity ... is one of mere harmony and love. Is it always a differentiated and usually competitive unity, admitting of self-assertion and various appropriative passions, but these passions are socialized by sympathy... under the discipline of common spirit (1909: 23).

Community and identity are inextricably interlinked and, as a result, the fate that befalls a community can also have consequences for the individual. This is the subject of the final chapter.
Chapter Six:

Evolution in Fan Communities: When Fans stop being Fans and start being People

Buffy-boards has been the primary point of engagement and focus for this research for a number of years; during this time the community atmosphere has evolved as a result of external factors. The fan community’s interactions have been impacted by the demise of both *BtVS* and *Angel*, by improvements in board functions that foster greater sociability with the traceability of friendships made possible through developments in software, and by external innovations, such as social networking. In the past year, these combined factors have brought about implications for social interactions in the community, affecting the environment to such an extent it altered the research’s perception of this fan community and the nature of performance within. In this chapter, the key elements of what some members have termed the ‘Great Boards Debacle’ and how it relates to the theoretical underpinning discussed in earlier chapters will be summarised in the form of a case study.

The significance of maintaining authority and demonstrating a clear power structure cannot be underemphasised in communities. Groups without clearly defined boundaries and norms have difficulty functioning as a community, as it undermines the dimensions required for a sense of community, as offered in chapter five. Members need to feel they belong to an environment where needs are met and deviants are managed, as this engenders security, which facilitates trust and companionship (McMillan and Chavis, 1986; McMillan, 1996). Policing a community is necessary for its functioning as it maintains social norms, thus, minor infractions that are not publicly reprimanded show a weakness in the authority structure. Therefore, moderators need to be vigilant
and present to perform their function in the community and uphold both their position and community norms.

This chapter will show how through failing to publicly address deviants’ repeated minor infractions, the community’s stability was compromised. Starting with the framing of flame wars and their performance in the context, the chapter will then move on to an analysis of team performances (Goffman, 1959) in relation to the moderators and the IRC clique, and how the latter challenged the norms upholding the social reality of the board.

In a way reflecting Garfinkel’s breaching experiments (1963), by minor infractions revealing the fragility of the community’s underlying social reality, a challenge to the authority was made. As summarised by O’Brien (2005) ‘[b]reaching entails making the underlying structure of reality explicit by acting in a manner that is inconsistent with the taken-for-granted rules of interaction that maintain the reality’ (2005: 342). When this occurs, the interaction struggles, grinds to a halt, or takes a hostile turn. This is an interesting proposition for fan studies, as although there is a decline of the ‘fandom is beautiful’ theme (Gray, 2007) as explored in the exaggerated fan model two, fan communities, and to a lesser extent, internet communities, are still portrayed positively, as egalitarian, democratic, and emancipatory. Community, as this chapter proves, is not amorphous and naturally evolving organic structure, but instead is an assumed entity, dependent on relations of power within it.

Before commencing the Great Boards Debacle case study, it is necessary to explicitly state the way my researcher/member position was negotiated during the crisis, and the effect this had on the research and my relationship to the community. The debacle was a challenge to the existing understanding of the board’s community feel, but also to my techniques of managing tensions between participant and researcher roles. As discussed in the methods chapter, my perceptions and expectations of interactions at the board were affected by
my friendship groups and social network, whilst private knowledge concerning participants gleaned both from research findings and an increase in external private communications meant I had existing relationships with specific individuals that coloured my engagement, guiding my interactions in terms of responses and readings at the board. These relationships were altered as a result of the debacle; some were concluded as the members left, some became comparatively closer, and some new relationships were formed with people I had previously only had superficial contact with. The idealized performances offered by some participants came under scrutiny, whilst others with whom I had little dealings with in the past became more obvious to me through their upholding of community values and a reinvigorated idealized performance. In addition there was a definite sense of wanting to protect and defend research participants who came under attack, a feeling I had to dismiss in order to prevent increased emotional involvement; this facilitated a more objective reading of the breakdown of community feeling than would have been possible had I engaged in the community debate.

Thus, my public involvement during the debacle was strictly that of observer, having already withdrawn from posting on any contentious threads for nine months in order to complete writing my thesis, the situation was closely observed, but not performed in. It was as if in conversation with the self, my researcher role validated this ‘outsider’ position, justifying my withdrawal from participation was necessary in order to finish the task of writing up my PhD, but my fan role also made an appeal through my adoption of the mantra ‘the mission is what matters’ from *BtVS* Season Seven. During this time, I maintained my presence and links to participants and the community for the majority of the time through the games/what are you listening to/virtual tea party style threads. These are high volume threads that e-mail updates to the subscribers frequently, maximising my visibility, but minimizing active content. Whilst I had some external contact in order to analyse the breakdown through
the provision of extra data with a few members (some moderators, existing research participants and fellow house members) I did not engage in debating the condition of the board in public spaces, either at the site, or through facebook or myspace etc. I generally refrained from looking for content to add to the data other than the six or seven threads that contained hundreds of responses, mainly because of time contraints, but also because there was little additional material required by the thesis body. For the purpose of examining the great debacle, the vast majority of posts were contained in those threads and reiterated the same points, however some of the ten participants I interviewed to dissect the chain of events on occasion drew a new post or thread that could interest me to my attention, which was then assessed for relevance, to see if it offered something new or pointed to another strand of data.

The debacle challenged both my member and researcher roles. As a member, I was appalled to see the home I had felt so comfortable in rip itself apart, and members turn on other members; however, this was countered by the recognition that this period was the most exciting the board had been for years, almost certainly since the departure of *BtVS* from network television. Through disregarding what had been the norms and values of the board and redefining it according to the norms of their usual interactional setting, a new blood were generating more content, and more *interesting* content, than had been produced for a long time, moreover, it was only when posts made the departure from friendly bantering to outright hostility that things become uncomfortable. Until that point, many people, myself included, had started to have more fun. As researcher, there was a recognition that my development and testing of Goffman’s concept of performance online required significant redevelopment, necessitating a closer examination of the need for explicit policing and structure in order to offset the precariousness of mutually constructed realities, the extent of influence of external contact in online performances, and how even the most committed of community members could divorce themselves when the
situation became intolerable to them: in other words, when the anxiety and aggravation of participating outweighed the level of support and camaraderie they received for their effort. Some of the questions raised by the change in nature of the boards have remained underexplored; for example, though I attempted to find out how walking away from a community affects an individual’s sense of self, it remains unanswered by this thesis, as those who cut contact with the board and its associated members were reluctant to talk to an existing member, even for research purposes, making it difficult to analyse.

The uncertainty during this time was offset by a period of previously unparalleled invigoration in both roles, where excitement and anticipation concerning overnight events combined with the unpredictability of players’ performances and their unseen communications to expand theorization concerning community cohesion and conjecture over what would happen next, activities which evoked feelings analogous to those a fan experiences when a season finale approaches, or a when new book is released. This contributed to the growth and strengthening of the thesis theoretically, but also forced recognition of the shakiness of online communities. Going full circle, my researcher reasoning twisted my existing conflict as a member – but it was compounded by my inability to react or engage and jeopardise my research, meaning my responsibilities as member to support the community were not fulfilled. However, in reflecting as fairly as possible the problems through a researcher’s lense, I hope to fulfill my duty in another way by being responsible for the community’s fair portrayal whilst throwing some light on the issue.

In truth, I wanted to see how intense the hostility could get, to the extent that I felt the inevitable conclusion was the demise of the boards, and even desired it to an extent, to draw a line under the research. This was conflicted by the hope that as a member I could return ‘home’ and finally be ‘myself’ free from the worry of threatening my academic endeavour. The logic of this is, of course, flawed; having performed a composite online self for so long in the setting, it
would be difficult to split the role and be solely a member. As performance online has permanence to it, it becomes embedded in the setting, therefore changes will challenge other members opinion of my online self and alter existing relationships. But also, as the self is a composite of the roles we repeatedly enact, my research position is a part of my identity I can never surrender; this means it will always influence my actions and temper my enjoyment as, particularly in that setting, I will be ever conscious of missing the opportunity to use ‘rich data’ because the thesis has been submitted.

To Flame, or not to Flame

Flame wars are not generally encouraged in fan forums, as it undermines the sense of community; as discussed in the previous chapter, the prerequisites for a sense of community are feelings of belonging, influence, having needs met and conscious self identification. In hostile conditions, requirements for a sense of community are unlikely to be satisfied, and so community is likely to flounder. Having invested considerable time and energy into the community dynamic, it is in the interests of members to maintain norms as their feelings of influence support their integration and continued fulfillment of needs. As McMillan and Chavis (1986) describe, the way deviants are managed is fundamental to maintaining feelings of membership, as it ties into the sense of emotional safety garnered through clearly defined boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

Social interactions at Buffy-boards deteriorated acutely over the course of a year, to the point where the community imploded; factions emerged, splinter groups formed, public discontent was rife, subtle sub-flame wars commenced; as the content from individual and splinter groups discussions’ in external
spaces become publicly available to all members, the inevitable result was a strict and sudden renegotiation of the terms of membership and acceptable communications, implemented through the banning of a number of members, the board’s closure and a subsequent change of rules and functions when it reopened. The deterioration of the norms and values of a community that had previously maintained a cordial atmosphere supports the argument regarding the internet’s disinhibiting effect (see Suler, 2004; Kiesler and Sproull, 1986); despite the increase in connectivity between participants, the nature of communications in the environment simultaneously fosters more intimacy and, paradoxically, more hostility from participants than would be the case in face-to-face encounters.

Although strictly speaking not a flame war, what happened at Buffy-boards closely resembled it, and importantly, research participants comment they experienced the same degree of distress that results from conflict associated with flame wars (indeed, many suggested it was) so it is useful to look briefly at how it affects the community, and how it was brought about in this context. In Millard’s discussion of flaming it is argued that in discursive communities, ad hominem attacks are seen to ‘transgress the norms of debate’ as they cheat the implicit conventions of rationality and reason, and so the model in debate becomes a ‘contempt of contempt’ as the ‘ground rule of civil discourse’ (1997: 145). Without wanting to overemphasise and impose academic conventions on fan communities, with previous analytical emphasis on the rationalising practices associated with academic debating tactics (Jenkins, 1992; Hills, 2002) and the enunciative productivity of fans (Fiske, 1992) it can be seen that fan cultures are discursive communities by nature, as they ‘exist only because of and through, the enunciation of the texts they produce and release’ (Maingueneau, 2002: 124), with enunciation defined as ‘the production of meaning in the natural world’ (Nadal, 1990: 357).
Secondly, as we are socially constructed and the contexts we exist in and have been socialised in influence the shaping of the self, the disparity between the lived cultural contexts of globally dispersed participants will skew individual’s interpretations as their range of experiences will never fully assimilate into a unified unambiguous rule of discursive engagement; despite their understanding of the specific cultural traditions of their online fan environment, the amalgamation of customs, civility, norms and rhetorical shrewdness from all areas of their experience are instrumental to their performances.

The board’s administration recognise the problem with misunderstanding a post’s content and the potential for other’s responses compounding the misinterpretation by framing it as hostile and furthering negativity in debate, to the extent that the current version of the FAQ and board rules states:

*Disagreements are fine, but they should be conducted in a civilized manner – we have faith in your ability to discuss issues without resorting to personal attacks. Please remember that it’s about the argument, not the person. If you see a personal attack on the board, please use the report post button and do not retaliate. Retaliation just inflames the situation and makes it more difficult for the staff to punish the real offender.*

When a performer’s maintenance of expressive control slips, it is expected that they will be given the benefit of the doubt as to their intended meaning, rather than what is read. Goffman states ‘even sympathetic audiences can be momentarily disturbed, shocked, and weakened in their faith by the discovery of a picayune discrepancy in the impressions presented to them’ (Goffman, 1959: 60). However, in examples of misinterpretation, data points to exchanges in unrelated posts reflecting the public voicing of the audience’s shock and dismay; thus reactions can be seen as an avenue to ‘pounce on trifling flaws’ performed elsewhere (59).
Finally, users now have more overlapping settings in which to perform, each with different norms of participation and varying levels of public, semi-public and private communications, internal and external to the specific community they have initially become acquainted in. Through my experience as a participant, backed up by my research data, there can be no doubt that this fundamentally changes the community dynamic as the boundaries containing each performance and the norms of acceptable behaviour for the context become incoherent to the group and individual.

That performances overlap is relevant, as many people from the same group were witnessing varying performances, with individuals acting out of character for their normal community performance, and in relation to previous performances in different settings within and outside of the community. There was a sense that people’s “true colours” had emerged on the boards and that their performances in the past did not fully reflect the people they were.

‘I started to see more than one side to some people, and not always a flattering one. It made me reconsider the identities that people were projecting onto the forum, and how honest they may or may not be’ participant 1

With the best intentions of enlivening the community through added functions, Buffy-boards made access available to a number of disparate settings, which compounded the conflict. The increase and change in communications external to the boards brought with it issues of trust between members. External communications facilitated by external contact fields in user pages allowed members to communicate their contempt for other cliques or members with friends, away from the boards, amplifying the problem. This is to be expected, according to Millard, as:

[r]hetorical performances (abusive and otherwise)... are shaped by both social and technological circumstances; the history of
rhetoric has a prominent material component. As the characteristic medium of the latest phase in that history, online writing combines certain features of previous media that have allowed *Homo incinerans*, the habitual (or, on occasion, expert) flamer to thrive (1997: 146).

By having a number of overlapping settings with competing performances, what would have been private or contained in face to face communications (or at least, dependent on hearsay and gossip) became publicly available and targeted at a specific audience, for example on the Buffy-Boards Members’ group at Facebook, via Twitter or the MySpace page. Audience segregation has an effect here, as whilst the performer can direct their performance to specific friendship groups, they have limited control over who can directly and indirectly witnesses the performance in the network, as a result of others’ privacy settings, and data’s transferability and permanence.

The extra degree of interpersonal communications brings with it greater feelings of connectedness, with participants articulating their communications’ sincerity and earnestness rewards them with heavy and deep personal relationships. This is not without effect, as such, the flaming can be seen as symptomatic of member’s social ‘situatedness’ (Goffman, 1983). What Millard says is of note here, as the data suggests heightened hostility coincided with an increase in members’ feelings of connectedness. Although flaming is seen to be cheating, ‘cheating in any game may be seen as an indication that the game has become serious, or as a way of reframing the rules’ (1997: 146). This is supported by members’ own views of the Great Boards Debacle.

*I felt that people were taking BB too seriously, it became part of people’s lives, became their lives. Especially when people started meeting up regularly, travelling to see each other and documenting it on BB.* participant 8
This ‘situatedness’ and the increased familiarity of members’ interactions with each other also produced problems within the context of the board’s normal administrative methods. Staff perform mainly housekeeping tasks ‘front-stage’ and rarely do members see punishments or warnings issued for transgressions. Goffman states that some roles require more dramatic realisation than others to show what is being done behind the scenes, as:

> the work that must be done by those who fill certain statuses is often so poorly designed as an expression of desired meaning, that if the incumbent would dramatise the character of his (sic) role, he must divert appreciable amount of his energy to do so (1959: 42).

During the preliminary stages of the debacle, staff were seemingly absent from posting in threads; this is not to say they were inactive, as a great deal of work by moderators and communications between staff and members take place backstage, but front-stage, their performances were mainly limited to those of cast members, rather than leading roles. This appearance of absence leaves scope for the popularity of individuals with personal magnetism and skilled performances to gain higher status with ordinary members, which brings issues of power forefront. Roles are made up of ‘recurrent interactions [that] form patterns of mutually oriented conduct’ (Gerth and Mills, 1967:185) and their maintenance by nature requires reciprocal communications; they are interpersonal, and as roles are ‘enacted to meet the expectations of others’ (ibid, 185) moderators of a forum are expected to behave in predictable ways to fulfill expected routines of a moderator’s role in their interactions – one of these being involvement.

When official control appeared absent and members became increasingly involved in self-policing the community, two things occurred. As the usual business of the forums became subsumed by the community’s normally polite interactions unravelling, the community’s trust floundered in the
administration’s ability to manage deviance and members stepped outside of the boundaries of ‘rank and file.’ The role of the ordinary board member does not include admonishing or reprimanding perceived transgressors, as it is not within the expectations of other members of similar status; data suggests other members saw this as overstepping the boundary of social exchange in the context.

Secondly, member’s individual performances in the setting (and for their main audience of the community) suffered a breach in their maintenance of expressive control, calling trust between members into question. This was not exclusive to front stage community performances, as it also happened backstage in administrative forums, in the moderators’ space; participants commented on the change in tone or of the language used by peers talking moderator to moderator about interactions on the boards, so it was not exclusively reserved for normal members moving between regions and settings.

This inconsistency in maintaining performance boundaries left latitude for charismatic individuals with status to co-opt their more tractable peers, as their skills permit manipulation of information given to their advantage. This situation became extraordinarily difficult for the administration to police having formerly taken what was interpreted by the members as a backseat role in the day-to-day activity of idle chatter and fan dialogue.

Contextualising Conflict as Performance

The following post is one example of many, but is illustrative of the flow of conversations that occurred when ordinary members intervened and attempted to police the community. Concerned with conversations occurring at the board,
a longstanding member initiated a thread; the debate descended into his eventual position of standing on the *ad hominem* line, although not fully crossing it. This shows how the context of what was occurring elsewhere combined with the perceived absence of staff and power play between personalities affects community and feeds the disintegration of norms.

*Am I the only one to have noticed that the boards have gotten really quite ‘gay’ recently?... I’m not goona point anyone but I have to say that some of the comments are borderline and there does seem to be some underlying issue, maybe even a small (very small) amount of homophobia... Now, I’m ordering a big gay pizza (plenty of sausage on it) anyone fancy joining me?*  
Edmund Blackadder, post

This member has highlighted an issue that he was becoming increasingly concerned with, partly because of his own sexuality, and partly as the boards has always had a positive stance concerning debates around homosexuality; having a central lesbian character and ‘camp’ performances from more than one recurring role, the show is perceived to be gay friendly and has a good proportion of gay fans. As this member is often in the thick of disturbances context is important, so this can also be read as a performative act, as a clever way of stirring up some agitation, under the guise of serious concern.

Over the course of a day the thread became heated, and the discussion of labels and stereotypes came up.

*Labeling is something we always do, whether we like it or not. It’s just, some of these labels are hurtful or have a negative connotation, so they should be replaced by relatively neutral ones. But the labeling itself will never stop* (itsxpaperdoll post)
Once the post started to get philosophical, the opportunity for performing a display of cultural capital opens up.

_Sorry, but I think you are wrong on that one. All labels are hurtful and negative. As Kirkegaard says ‘if you label me, you negate me’ the idea of labeling a person, even a ‘neutral’ label is still hurtful and damaging as it puts them in a predefined hole, thereby removing the individuality of the person to which the label has been applied._

Blackadder’s genius IQ and degree from Oxford have been declared in previous posts; thus his reputation is partly built upon a well-maintained performance emphasising intelligence. As such, he is often involved in any debate that involves serious consideration, as it is a way of performing the self in a hierarchy of officially sanctioned capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Over the next 45 minutes a series of posts occur. The duration and time are important as it is another way the internet affects the debate. One participant is in the United Kingdom, two in the United States; these exchanges occurred at 3.00 am, a time when the most active moderators (based in the UK) were absent, meaning the hostility quickly intensified. During this exchange the performance becomes an illustration of how the _ad hominem_ line can be manipulated through status.

_I have not contradicted myself. I label you a ‘dick’. You’re a ‘dick’. I don’t know you well enough to say you’re anything else, so it’s up to you to show me what else, other than a ‘dick’ you are. Have I impeded you in anyway by using this label on you? Nope, because you are still you. Please note: This is entirely an assumption that you are more than just a ‘dick’. Better insert an emoticon before someone takes this wrong_
By using the term ‘dick’ the poster is increasing the stakes, through avoiding use of less inflammatory terms. By communicating and specifically drawing the audience’s attention of his labelling of scobro as ‘a dick’, he has as Becker would say, ‘set in motion several mechanisms which conspire to shape the person in the image people have of him’ (Becker, 1963: 34). The language has been carefully chosen to impute a less than subtle insult, performing a number of functions in the process. It tells observers Blackadder’s opinion of scobro, and draws a battle line which indicates to people which side they should be on to remain in his good graces and not suffer similar attacks. The posturing attempts to position Blackadder as superior, whilst informing the community and scobro what a member of standing feels about his performance, placing scobro in a hierarchy. Use of a bat symbol underscores the insult; for example a sardonic wink would deflate the insult by changing the tone. All of these combine to change the norms of the community’s communications, as if a long-standing member is allowed to perform in such a way, then new members feel it is acceptable behaviour. According to Mead, ‘the attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the whole community’ (1934: 154), as community members learn the pattern of engagement for the context through witnessing the generalised other’s performance.

Defending his position and reputation as a member, scobro responds in the following way.

And that is why labels are wrong. Because it sets your mind as to the state of a person, and, if only in your mind you are limiting me. So yes, you have contradicted yourself. If I were to label you an egotistical pompous ass it would be wrong as well, even if it would explain your inability to admit your shortcomings. (scobro, post)
Having refrained from using more derogatory terms than Blackadder, scobro’s post is closer to community norms; the new member is unsure of how far he can personalise the attack without retribution as he is less experienced in the context, thus his own identity is performed as less antagonistic than his peer. Again, the hostility elevates; like a game of poker, the next post from Blackadder both ‘sees’ and ‘raises’ the stakes of the performance implicating that both the community and scobro should agree with Blackadder’s opinion, asserting his status and assumed position in the hierarchy. scobro responds by arguing his point with a positive example, in part, to highlight to the community how Blackadder’s popularity is giving him licence to insult outside of community norms.

At this juncture, sk8rj04, the member initially admonished by Blackadder intervenes. This reminds Blackadder of how his performance is being viewed by the generalised other of the community. As a result, he tags the following onto scobro’s last post:

Comments on this post:

Edmund Blackadder agrees: There was no malice intended with the ‘dick’ just gentle joviality that I believed you would take/understand

This comment made through the ‘karma’ function at the bottom of the post can be read as an attempt to bring down the tone of hostility between the two members. However, his comment was made after sk8rj04’s intervention, which illustrates how the perception of the audience has an effect on the fluidity and boundaries of performing the self. Blackadder then steps away from the debate with Scobro, and brings the thread back on topic.

In ‘Where The Action Is’ (1967) Goffman argues that ‘[a]ction consists of chancy tasks undertaken for “their own sake” Excitement and character display… become in the case of action, the tacit purpose of the whole show’ (cited in Lemert and Branaman, 1997: 140.) In this and many other similar exchanges
between different participants and across various settings, position in the hierarchy is being fought for and influence in one’s power to shape community norms is being tested out in the apparent absence of the administrative staff. That the ‘chancy task’ backfired slightly and Blackadder was forced to make a token gesture of civility cannot be ignored, as it supports Goffman’s argument regarding the maintenance of expressive control and its effect on the continuity of performance (1959; 59, 35), regardless of whether this was initiated by the norms of the community and the remark from sk8rj04, or a private, unseen reprimand from a moderator.

Verbal games surrounding the performance of the self are often played out by positioning the self against others. This is not exclusive to online communities; Goffman opines:

> the sanctioned occurrence of these aggressions seems to be one of the defining characteristics of our convivial life... two persons will engage with each other in a sparring conversation for the benefit of listeners and that each will attempt, in an unserious way, to discredit the position taken by the other (1959:201).

This banter is usually undertaken with combatants of relatively equal status. Online, this is a frequent occurrence, but it can also be used as a way of establishing a pecking order when directed at a newbie, or one whom is perceived to be of lesser status by the aggressor. In an earlier, smaller flame war at the boards in 2004, one participant (who was later banned) aptly summed up the problems regarding the performances people engage in.

> I think most people get mad about "flame wars" because they try to start a fight and then realize the person they are sparring with is more wittier/intelligent than they are. Prophecy Girl, post

As Goffman states ‘[e]ach person will be at least incidentally concerned with establishing evidence of strong character, and conditions will be such as to
allow this only at the expense of the character of other participants’ (cited in Lemert and Branamen, 1997, p.140). This is as true online as in face to face encounters, with the added factors identified by boyd (2008) of persistence, searchability, replicability and invisible audiences on the internet; performances are transferable (at least in theory) as conversations are copied to parties not involved in the debate. Thus individuals, unaware of a position taken against them, can be sent details of barbs aimed at them to other audiences by a third party.

How the Spirit of Community brings about Cliques and Hierarchies

McMillan (1996) discusses the ‘spark of friendship’s’ importance in maintaining a sense of community, in the process, he supports Goffman’s argument concerning the requirement of an audience in performances of the self. ‘Each of us needs connections to others so that we have a setting and an audience to express unique aspects of our personality. We need a setting where we can be ourselves and see ourselves mirrored in the eyes and responses of others’ (1996: 315-316). At Buffy-boards, an individual’s deep investment in the community results in a greater amount of interaction and response; echoing Grossberg’s affective relationship to fandom concerning the enjoyment and consumption of a cultural product, often it is ‘the most mundane aspect of everyday life… giving ‘colour’, ‘tone’ or ‘texture’ to our experiences’ (Grossberg, 1992: 56-57). The quality, intensity and significance of members’ regular, emotionally involved consumption of the narratives and textual performances of the community means that in some ways, fans transfer a part of their fandom and attachment from the show to the boards and the characters performed there, as it
sustains, heightens, and creates new ways for them to connect to their fandom in the absence of new episodes.

Whilst forming relationships with others, members perform differently in different contexts within the structure of the boards. There are a number of assorted groupings that occur as a result of overlapping tastes within the fandom, such as informal appreciation groups, ‘shippers, fans of particular actors or characters. There are groups that occur as a result of pre-determined boundaries set by the board administration, such as formal discussion groups, the art and creative writing forums, devotees of the comic book series or role playing games. Groups imposed upon members also encompass the dorms, or, as they are informally termed by the members, the houses. Members can request to be sorted at random into a house; through my own experience and interview data, members feel the houses are a social grouping, as threads often have little weighty discussions of fandom, although the members continue to perform their mutual appreciation of the fan object through their personal front. But groups also occur naturally inspired by overlapping interests outside of the fandom and outside of the board’s defined categories, such as wrestling, gamers or horse riders. As they would in co-present social settings, people will gravitate towards others when they recognise similar philosophies on life, backgrounds, locations or tastes.

Buffy-boards members can step away from the more serious fan performance and the business of fan aesthetics through their allocation to the four houses. Houses are private sub-communities that promote a more relaxed and frivolous feel between its participants, with ‘dorm pride’ playing a large part in the overall spirit of the group. Rivalry between the houses and the different atmosphere has the implicit permission of the administration and house, communicated, projected and supported by the norms of the area, norms that allow members to provide a different type of performance in the sub context, one where the social side is important and promoted by the participants.
Members know that only a small percentage of the board can view what is posted in the houses. In addition, only a small number of regular players perform repeatedly, which helps build up strong friendships. The ‘main’ boards, as members term it, are amicable and welcoming, but still require the individual to remember that the community at large witness performances. This supports Goffman’s statement concerning region behaviour, as different levels of performance and sociability are exhibited in the various spaces at the boards.

A region may be defined as any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception. Regions vary… in the degree to which they are bounded and according to the media of communication in which barriers to perception occur (1959: 109).

Like the different setting of the IRC, participation in the houses is of a different tone.

Every participant who commented on the houses felt that the primary point of participation in the forums was more geared towards the serious issues of fandom because of the public nature of engaging with the generalised other; in the social areas of the site, for example the main off topic forum Social Studies, or Slaying Practice, the forum for games, members engage in more playful performances than in other areas. Particularly in the houses and Social Studies, members often let rafts of information about their daily lives and personal situations slip into their performance, but it is these revelatory discussions that make a strong attachment to the boards and their fellow members; as each piece of information is generally received without repercussion or criticism, a level of trust is built up suggesting a safe environment to explore the self.

This appears to contradict the official justifications fans give for their participation. When asked, members emphatically state they are attracted to the community because of the fan debates, and yet, under closer observation of participation trends and interview data, contrary to their reasoning for
continued participation at the board, it appears the OT threads are the ones that keep the members’ interest and encourage participation rather than the Buffy related threads

if not for the OTs I would not be there as often, or post as much
as I do. scobro

The repeated, small self-disclosures appear to add to the community atmosphere, bringing with it the opportunity for shared personal experience. This contradiction may be related to what Hills argues are the ‘discursive justifications’ that ‘causes the fan to cut into the flow of experience’ (2002, 66-67); when asked, members give a stock response to the researcher and the community because it is expected that their primary reason for passionate engagement must be their fandom. However, what they experience through taking part in OT threads cannot be rationalised through their fandom’s ‘discursive mantras’ (Hills 2002: 67). As fans, they have a duty to uphold the role and identity associated with it, and yet as people, social interaction in the community may have less to do with an intense personal attachment to fandom, and more to do with an attachment to the intensely personal.

In settings such as fandom, where there is a consensual validation centred on the fan object, the sense of an existing bond with others means members are more likely to feel safe to self disclose other aspects of their lives. This is supported in McMillan’s (1996) comment ‘[b]onding begins with the discovery of similarities. If one can find people with similar ways of looking, feeling, thinking, and being, then it is assumed that one has found a place where one can safely be oneself’ (McMillan; 1996, 321). He argues in part, communities are based on a social economy whose currency is the risk involved in shame from self-disclosure. In sharing one’s feelings, the most valuable, but at the same time, most risky currency is being exchanged. The internet rearranges the boundary for social self-preservation, Reid argues, which means that people
‘assum[e] that the dangers associated with intimacy – the possibility of hurt and embarrassment – can be avoided,’ thus, online fandom fosters a feeling where participants can become very close to each other, and increase their sense of self worth through their community (1999: 113).

Baym (2000) agrees self-disclosure not only stems from a personalisation of the fan object, as ‘people often self-disclose simply to let more of themselves seep into their messages and to promote the interpersonal atmosphere’ (152). By revealing themselves to their fellow members through posts, the participants strive to create and reinforce their community. In some areas, such as the social (i.e. non fan related) parts of the bulletin board, the ongoing interactions can be viewed almost as a communal blog. When this combines with the trend towards higher levels of external communications on Facebook and Twitter, the self develops in relationship to an actual other, one who exists in an embodied sense, external to the fan environment.

One member is particularly aware of this, and used this knowledge to get to know members and get them to engage more with the forums.

One trait that is inherent about most people is they love to talk about themselves, especially when they are in either a bad or good mood. They just need to share it with others. And the best way to get to know someone is if they talk, personally, because they tend to drop any facade if they ever in fact had one. So I made two threads… where people came and just talked, briefly about their day. These have been, arguably, the two biggest and most replicated threads on the forum. Multiple incarnations of both have been made when the size limit has been reached. Time after time for over a year, everyone, even the Admin posted on one or both of those threads, giving a glimpse into what makes their lives tick. Participant 3
Certainly, since these threads (and others, such as ‘What music are you listening to?’; ‘What was the last DVD you bought?’; ‘What are you reading?’ and ‘Skills to pay the bills’) have gathered their own momentum and been reproduced across the houses, there has been an increase in performances of the self unrelated to Buffy fandom, focussing instead on other sub-cultural factors and details of lived experience, such as what genre of music one is a fan of, the type of work one does, identity performance through consumptive practices such as the car one drives or Mac vs. PC, career aspirations and so on. As Marcuse said ‘[t]he people recognise themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment’ (1964:11); in performing the self in the community, the fan now hopes the audience recognise their self as well.

Knowing a little more about fellow members and their drives and motivations not only changes the performance, the change in norms means people begin to perform in order to attract others like themselves external to fandom, but also as a result of the internet’s disinhibiting effect (Suler: 2004), they begin to reveal more about themselves than they are likely to in face to face situations. This is an issue, because revealing such explicit data about their lives and deepest feelings leaves them vulnerable to attack from other members.

Reid theorises that the ‘safety of anonymity encourages users to be expressive, which enmeshes them in a web of relationships’, (1999: 114), but this in turn means people can become very familiar with their fellow members, becoming comfortable in the environment to the detriment of their social self preservation. In particular, if trust is fundamental in supporting a sense of community, as McMillan (1996) suggests, when members have bared their souls to their board fellows, the level of intimacy they have entrusted to the community can make people feel extremely uncomfortable about other’s vulnerability; the strong need to protect fellow community members is challenged by the public availability of sensitive communications and the boundaries of internet communications,
particularly in spaces where the settings and boundaries overlap with performances in other areas such as Facebook, where information disclosed on the boards can be referred to in full view of family, work colleagues and friends.

There was a thread a while back called ”The Honesty Thread” that really I thought was absolute poison. The things people were sharing were, in a normal RL situation would have been cathartic and perhaps a bonding experience, on BB it was a ticking time bomb. I found people were increasingly acting in a way that a group of people would act if they were together in the flesh, it was no holds barred and that just doesn’t work for a forum Participant 8.

Reid notes that in MUD friendships, people find that the ‘safety… increases their self worth, and users can, ironically, become extremely dependent on such relationships. The lack of factors inhibiting intimacy, and the presence of factors encouraging it can induce deep feelings of attachment’ (1999: 113). This is equally as applicable to those who engage in sustained conversations on bulletin boards, and has been the case at Buffy-boards between some participants, particularly those that have built up relationships in other social settings, such as IRC or off site message systems. That they have built up deep friendships speaks of how authentic participants feel the communications between them are, but the boundaries of self-disclosure for the individual are not the only boundaries that are at issue here. As the individual performs in groups, the team can come under pressure, through issues of audience segregation. Overall, the general performance of the community and the exhibition of intimacy and self-disclosure conflict, depending on the relationship one has to specific groups of cliques.
Moderators

Moderators perform an essential component of maintaining a community; by providing an officially sanctioned definition of the situation, it is their role in upholding the norms that help to create the bubble containing the community’s social reality. Moderators are involved in the creation, reproduction and enactment of the expected roles, routines and behaviour that facilitate the smooth running of the community. However, moderators are also in a position of power, which carries responsibility and consequences, factors that are challenged when they interact multidimensionally, performing fan, personal identity, social identity and their role across settings.

Performing differently in each context and overlapping group has a correlating effect to that witnessed in social interaction in co-present settings; as the fandom community alters the individual’s skills and expertise in dealing with mediating their performances to satisfy the requirements of the generalised other in the specific groups, members realise a similar proficiency in their impression management offline. These moderators commented about how their performance online enhanced their offline confidence.

*Online you have to learn to communicate with people just as much as you do offline, and I think that the more experience I get communicating/socializing online, the more comfortable I am doing so offline.* ~angelic slayer~

Lyri commented specifically with regard to a position of external authority and how her moderator role gave her more self-assurance in performing to an assembly of co-workers.

*Being a Mod and dealing with awkward situations has helped with that, especially in work when I recently got a promotion*
and now have to lead my own discussion workshops, something I would never have done 3 years ago. Lyri

As discussed in chapter three, confidence through experience in their role online bolstered their confidence in external settings, supported by the transferability of sign vehicles (Goffman, 1959: 40). As the reception of their performance and the actions they took on behalf of the board increased their confidence, it allowed their identity to grow through opportunities perhaps denied to them in offline settings.

Interacting with those with the role of moderator has a correlating effect on the shaping of the self for the ordinary member too. As a specific generalised other with official status, moderators, and an association with them, can boost confidence to perform in certain ways, because those most likely to edit and delete posts have a better grasp on the performing member’s character; fostering relations with them, either through public connections made through sharing a house, time spent in IRC or communicating privately through PMs and email affect the member’s perception of their place in the hierarchy; publicly flattering through VMs, karma and responses to posts, or in some cases through a thread, alters perceptions of the member’s place by the community as a whole.

Although it cannot be denied that moderators fulfill a vital function at the boards, as their role involves power, it does bring with it issues concerning the community’s trust in the moderators’ abilities in balancing their performances in different settings whilst retaining an overall air of fairness and flexibility in their posts and decision making. Goffman recognises that:

we often find that the personal front of the performer is employed not so much because it allows him (sic) to present himself as he would like to appear but because his appearance and manner can do something for a scene of wider scope (1959: 83).
This nods towards the complexity of the individual performing more than one role. Members on occasion complain publicly that some people are given more leeway than others, and that there is an element of a double standard, based on whom the member is affiliated with and the way their performances interact with others:

*T*he moderators see fit to edit or delete, perfectly reasonable posts of mine, whilst leaving posts of similar nature of other members. Schillaci, post

Yet other members will stand up for the moderator’s decisions and standards, arguing that it is a difficult job, which will always leave one party feeling aggrieved. These members seem more able to recognise that sometimes, a moderator’s ‘performance serves mainly to express the characteristic of the task that is performed, and not the characteristic of the performer’ (Goffman, 1959: 83).

As senior staff appeared to become increasingly absent, and younger, more inexperienced moderators began undertaking more of the disciplinary work, the criticisms increased, voiced in other settings on the boards and away from public consumption. One participant commented that when the administration and super moderators took various leaves of absence:

Lyri, Angelic Slayer and a bunch of newbie mods who hadn’t been on the job long and hadn’t really found their feet yet [were left in charge]… This is when all the fighting between the members started… [members] felt that they could do anything they wanted as there was no one to punish them… they were downright rude and abusive to newbies, they sniped and bitched at each other … or questioned something someone related as fact participant 5
The public absence of punishment in members’ exhibitions of minor transgressions and the perceived lack of junior staffs’ authority led to a community feeling of a lack of security, which had the effect of both old and new members leaving the board; as some assailed the chink in the authority’s armour to let loose their aggressions, those who were left either voiced an unwillingness to participate in topics that took a hostile tone, or attempted to police the community in the moderators perceived absence, defending the norms, and the implicit and explicit social rules governing the community.

Analysing in deeper context, this feeling of absence and uncertainty is added to by the way staff annually ‘play’ with the community at April Fools. Over the years, many ‘official’ pranks have been constructed by the administration, that although meant in good humour, serve to confuse members as to their intentions (as one participant put it, ‘no smoke without fire, huh?’) but also undermine the authority of the staff through their enactment as they challenge their own team performance and community role. Buffy Summers has elaborately hoaxed the members in the following ways; in 2004 by making a public accusation and subsequently banning a moderator, Faith, who was accused of poaching ideas to start her own board; in 2008, the signing over of the boards to Kean, (a new member who was made moderator quite quickly upon arrival); Kean as ‘owner’ subsequently revoked moderator status and privileges on all other moderators, changed board rules and skins, throwing the community into turmoil as the norms, hierarchy and setting were commandeered; in 2009 and in collaboration with Faith, Buffy Summers became aware of two moderators involved in pulling their own prank on Buffy. Publicly rescinding their moderator status as punishment and transferring the prank to the main community, she played the role of victimised board owner, but the members became disaffected when the hoax was revealed.

The final April fool’s prank appears to be one of the key events in the disintegration of community spirit. The initial hoax was directed privately at
Buffy and the moderators and involved a repeat of the hoax of 2004. The double cross brought the members into the fray, who rallied to the defence of the boards, defending Buffy Summers, spamming the fake boards with posts.

The construction of such an elaborate hoax not only served to confuse and upset those members who battled in public for Buffy and the boards, it humiliated members who posted unfavourable opinions in front of the community concerning the two moderators:

I first noticed that something was going on when the Aprils Fools joke happened, the one were Buffy said that Kean and Lyri had started up there own board and she was mad and was going to ban them. There was a lot of angry feelings floating about and people were in my opinion really upset about it. Some nasty things were said about Kean and Lyri and everyone fully believed it until Buffy revealed a few days later that in fact she knew all along that it was really Kean and Lyri Aprils fools joke and she’s flipped it around and turned their joke back on them

Participant 9

Lyri and Kean adopted temporary user names and they appeared invisible to the community, and thus read the derogatory posts concerning their conduct; the community had acted as a team, united in their performance against the transgressors of community norms. As Goffman says of a team’s treatment of the absent audience, those ‘who are treated respectfully during the performance are often ridiculed, gossiped about, caricatured, cursed and criticised when the performers are backstage’ (1959: 169). Through changing the region and no longer being absent, this mortifying event was performed in front of the entire community.

This seemed an abuse of power and very poor decision making at best, at worst, by scapegoating the two moderators, data suggests the feeling prevailed that a
gauntlet was being laid down and directed towards members who were challenging them in other areas.

It also projected the possibility of a divided administration and a power vacuum, as it left the boards without two of their most active moderators.

*After they logged off for the night… there were no head mods at the time. There was no-one to un-ban them… It was four days before they got their accounts back, and by then everybody was pretty pissed off … I think this is when things took a dive… The members lost confidence in the mods and admins. Participant 5*

In this team performance, amongst others, moderators also cultivated a notion of their superiority – although this may have been motivated by irony or a joke, the reception of such performances is subjectively read by the members who bring existing factors concerning the role of moderators, their perception of the hierarchy, existing grievances or disagreements with their interpretations. The Buffy-boards awards party thread was a place where senior staff in particular put on a ‘show’, writing a narrative of the events in a fan fiction style to create ambience.

*With Buffy [Board owner] back at the head table the party is in full swing, drinks flowing, laughter non stop, it really is the table to be at. Faith [board admin] beckons for Lindsey McDonald [moderator] and Christian Kane to join the privileged few.*

Faith, post

As one participant said, ‘the staff by it’s very nature is a clique. There’s really no avoiding that without making everything [said] public, and that can’t possibly happen.’ But no matter how legitimately required their role is by the board, my data suggests in doing so they create a feeling that they are a special group, that there are conversations happening that ordinary members are not privileged
enough to be a part of, and that through ordinary members lack of status, they are missing out on something, even if only jokingly alluded to, as the following post on the boards illustrates; a similar sentiment is held about the IRC participants I will introduce shortly.

Yay Keano! I already said congrats in the mod forum (oh, that place, the things they get up to in there) but if a thing’s worth doing it’s worth doing twice Mr. Pointy, post

To the new members, moderators perform as a team, a group with status, but upon interacting with them in the various settings, it becomes apparent to members that they are individual characters within a group linked by function, as flawed, divided and with as much variance in commitment to the boards as other ordinary members in groups.

Because of their status, fear of reprisal means ordinary members feel they are unable to challenge moderators, whilst the moderators themselves are seen by some to be above the rules of the community.

The biggest clique ever was the mods, they did everything they wanted to participant 10

In some respects, it is no real surprise that members sought to bring about their own cliques, their own unofficial hierarchy in order to feel empowered. As Jenkins analysis of fans indicates, fans are often skilled at appropriating, at ‘poaching’ in order to subvert legitimate authority and ownership of text; ‘[f]ans recognise that their relationship to the text is a tentative one, that their pleasures often exist on the margins ... and in the face of the producer’s own efforts to circulate its meanings’ (1992: 24). Ordinary members thus tried to subvert the authority of the community’s ownership, whilst reacting to what they perceived to over-policing, a factor McMillan and Chavis (1986) argue can detract from a sense of community.
There were other ways in which a few members felt constrained by conventions requested by the administration; particularly members who had a grievance elsewhere on the forum from other encounters with administrative staff, ‘Boards News’ threads or reminder threads concerning board guidelines posted across the forums were used as a way to publicly attack the authority of the staff and their perceived clique. At Buffy-boards, threads were often started that reminded members they should use proper punctuation and capitals at the beginning of sentences, with no shorthand or ‘kewl talk’ written in posts. Administrative staff stated it was to make things simpler for the non-native English speakers, and to show that care was being taken in the construction of posts. Data shows members felt Buffy Summers’ thread was aimed at the IRC clique, where the norms of communication differ from properly constructed posts because of the speed of interaction. With the problems encountered with the cliques at the IRC, officially regaining some control through the manner in which members posted in the publicly and most idealised areas of the board is a particularly useful way for moderators and administrative staff to reinforce community norms. As Jenkins summarises of De Certeau’s (1984) Practice of Everyday Life, ‘[t]he “mastery of language” becomes... emblematic of the cultural authority and social power exercised by the dominant classes within the social formation’ (1992: 24). By presenting an officially sanctioned form of language, Buffy is trying to set the standard for performance and the community, and reign in on the breach of the IRC clique; however, members reacted to it, and used it as way to argue against authority.

In unmoderated, unmonitored or settings external to the boards, the performances of members are much less subject to control. When the boards no longer own the text or setting, they are also no longer able to dictate what performances are acceptable. Specifically, the clique in IRC eventually made a large impact on the community’s norms, and this is what I will now turn my attention to.
IRC

Whilst the atmosphere of flaming disrupted the community norms, changes in the board’s functionality exacerbated it. The function that appeared to most challenge community spirit and the nature of performance was the introduction of Buffy-boards Internet Relay Chat channel (IRC). It enhanced board experience by offering other officially sanctioned avenues for members to engage with their fellow fans and increase a sense of community through greater integration, and also to provide a potential space for ‘events’ such as a Buffy-boards globally synchronised *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* showing, where the chat function was used to debate the show in real time with other members, framed in direct relation to the fandom, in a manner fulfilling the shared experience expectations Cavicchi describes (1998: 161).

As an unmoderated space, the IRC ‘team’ developed their own norms and conventions, producing a specific style of communication that differed to the culture of the board. Through heavy posting and intense presence of the IRC these norms were performed in front of the community, which placed great pressure on the already fragile social reality, providing the opportunity for a breach in the conventions. As social reality is created through ongoing interactions, a change in nature of interaction will shape the social reality; when a small minority are seen to be dictating the social norms, it illustrates to the community how fragile their reality is, causing hostility. As O’Brien says, ‘[c]ultural realities … break down much more than people acknowledge’ (2005: 341). The IRCs breaching experiment was thus instrumental to the disintegration of community.

In the same way close and intense relationships with others are brought about through threads that encourage public disclosure of personal information, or through affiliations such as the houses; spending time in a setting with members outside of the visually rendered stage of the boards changes the style
of interpersonal communications and individual performances, as performances are less tied to a ‘fannish’ board identity, and more congruent with the mundane aspects of daily life. This occurs, because the removal of the board’s setting makes irrelevant many of the visual aspects of personal front the participant has spent time constructing and presenting, reducing the front to a user name (that can be changed at will), whilst the removal of the structured forums guiding topics concerning fandom limits opportunities to perform a fan identity textually without it being perceived as inauthentic or contrived.

Furthermore, there is a high degree of overlap between those members that tend to disclose private information in their posts and the participants in the IRC, so this amplification of self-disclosure exacerbates the trends towards members becoming deeply enmeshed in each other’s lives as described earlier and in chapter five. This is apparent in IRC, where the members often refer to each other by their real names, not board names, and continue to do so at the board.

In general, proprietorial carvings at the board had increased to the extent there were entire series of self-referential buttons, banners, usertitles and status messages being utilised to perform boundaries, to demarcate inclusion. The IRC clique also used a series of banners and code in signatures to refer to their co-participants. These ‘secret signals’ mean that ‘performers can affirm a backstage solidarity even while engaged in the performance, expressing with impunity unacceptable things about the audience’ (Goffman, 1959: 175). Each clique performed claims to ownership of areas of the board, whether the group stemmed from IRC, or from houses, Facebook or MSN. Although it is expressly stated in the board rules, it is difficult to police when the reference is subtle, as it is not without insidious effects.

Please also do not include lists of names of board friends – while we are happy that you have made friends on the boards, this can
(and does) make other members feel excluded and is contrary to the community we wish to have here. (Board FAQ and rules)

Often, conversations in IRC can be centred on questions such as ‘what are you doing now?’ ‘what did you do today?’ ‘what are you eating?’ or ‘what’s on TV?’. IRC is often something members dip in and out of, or engage in whilst undertaking other daily activities. Communication often uses descriptive action, to provide a textual description of a face-to-face interaction and give the interaction some texture that is absent without the setting of the boards, similar to the MUD environment.

[15:07] <Kemy> Hey everyone

[15:07] <Bluebird> 5LOL

[15:07] Action: LorneyTunes waves to kemy

[15:07] <Kemy>


[15:08] <Kemy> Hehe, I already just had tea

[15:08] <Kemy> Even more food

[15:08] <Bluebird> 5we’re having a party!

[15:08] <Kemy>


[15:08] <Kemy> At your house or the IRC

[15:08] <Bluebird> 5irc party (sw)

[15:08] <LorneyTunes> 03hehe
It is immediately apparent that IRC chat differs greatly from the usual linguistic style members use in posts. Millard argues that:

Textual cyberspace filters away all qualities of personal self save the highly mediated, acutely self-conscious elements that appear in written language. Phatic or metacommunicative cues, the linguistic and paralinguistic signs that maintain cognizance of the social relation between the sender and receiver of a message are drastically reduced in this medium (Millard: 1997: 147).

The excerpts from chat show how individual performances are different to the carefully constructed performance on the forum. There is a rhythm, language and fragmentation more linked to a group interacting in face-to-face conversation, where any number of smaller sub conversations and quips are playing in the background. Thus, the very nature of IRC is phatic communication, as its form and function differs so much from the reasoned and well thought out posting on the board, bringing with it a different type of performance.
In IRC, members perhaps previously unknown to each other on a personal level at the forum commence interaction in forms different to the more ordered text of threads. For those involved, it intensifies the experience and bond with other members; for those uncomfortable with the stochastic conversations that occur or who prefer to keep their fan performances directed towards the organised discussion and play in the forums, not taking part provokes issues of exclusion, which detracts from the sense of community. Many IRC members refer to events from the IRC in posts, as it is apparent there is a sub-cultural or unofficial status attached to membership of the IRC clique, non-membership suggests a lack of influence:

All the posts about things that happened in IRC, inside jokes, SHPS buttons – I felt totally like an outcast participant 1

Membership of a clique brings with it feelings of closeness with others, even to the extent members wish to meet face-to-face, as this post illustrates.

Loving: The “Clique” in IRC.. Face it loves, we are SOOOO a clique. Hating: That I’m not near ANY of you lot Perny, post

Like the moderators before them, IRC clique members public performance of a group identity can foster feelings of alienation for those not involved; using posts to name check participants, particularly using real names, alluding to events that happen in less public and private areas ‘others’ those not a part of the clique by accenting their lack of status in that hierarchy, even if they have status in others.

I don’t think that most of the folks who were in it necessarily meant it to be a clique; they were just having a good time with their pals. But what a lot of folks in that circle of friends didn’t realise is how excluded some members were feeling when their comments were looked over in … IRC. Or when we’d see friends
wearing the same signature buttons based on a joke that happened off-boards, we had a lot of members feel excluded—like they weren’t “cool” enough to know the meaning of the buttons. Again, even though most people in the clique had good intentions, I just don’t think they realised just how excluded a lot of … members were feeling. Participant 1

When unofficial cliques have equal amounts of members and/or status, this is not as much of an issue. But when one clique has a voice that is able to challenge the official hierarchy’s authority and the norms of the community, even smaller cliques and individuals with status have to make alliances in order to be heard or included. This is relevant for frame alignment of smaller groups, which will be discussed shortly.

It is time spent in IRC that appears to build status, rather than the quality of performance; generally, greater duration is the key as it equals exposure to more members, whilst the more a member gets acquainted with the IRC clique, the better their chances become of following the implicit rules, conventions, in-jokes and games played there.

Initially, the IRC was unmoderated and unmonitored; no permanent record remained on the server once the chat finished. Officially, the norms of the community prevail, but without interference from the administrators the core group’s confidence increased in challenging the PG13, friendly community, and chats began to take a more gossipy or salacious tone, which changed members’ perceptions of the generalised other and of individual members on the boards.

I’ve noticed a lot of people fall victim to the “mob mentality” in the chat room, more so than on the boards. I’m not sure why, but people seem to let others influence the way they act much more in there participant 1
Overall, in the same way the houses provide members with a change of setting, bringing with it a different level of seriousness to engage in their performance, the IRC has a different feel to that of the main boards. Data indicates the result is that members unfamiliar to the environment feel left out or excluded, particularly when combined with the inability for the self to maintain indexical cues concerning personal front from their avatar, signature and biography in which to frame their performance and reinforce manner and appearance; the different linguistic forms and rhythms of the communications compound the problem, as in addition, unlike threads, conversations that occurred before joining the IRC channel cannot be read and joined in on without fear of misinterpretation and humiliation in front of participants who appear to almost be talking in shorthand with each other.

I go in quite often, though I can’t keep up lol. The randomness just confuses me so I don’t really post lol. I’m an IRC lurker I guess. Rebecca, post

Many members agree that IRC can be difficult to follow, and the tightly woven performance of an already existing ‘team’ can confuse, even deter, a new member from participating.

This next member also alludes to the feeling that the ‘hip’ youngsters have colonised the space, something which was backed up by interview with participants, as there was a sense the core of the clique comprised of those whose personal circumstances afforded them unlimited time online.

I used the chat a lot in the beginning. Before it went all cool and popular. ... I’ve been in once in the last weeks. ... Yes, many people makes things funny and crazy but my brain don’t like the image of new messages popping up every 5 seconds (if one’s are lucky). Talking to a few people in a rather slow pace (not the same as dead) suits me more. But for the most part it usually ends
up in crazy randomness and it just gets too much for me. And if it’s busy it takes all of my concentration, can’t even browse the net on the same time. Which I still manage to do if I’m on msn…

Quote: Spoons are Cool – don’t forget all the stoned ppl

As said. All the cool kids are in the chat....

The Kinslayer, post

The age difference also seemed to affect the level of engagement with more serious issues, even those not relating to fandom, or those participatory exchanges flexing the member’s linguistic or sub-cultural capital, which in the context of the boards, generally involves quipping, quick wittedness and debating skills. Post construction permits dramatic realisation, idealisation and the maintenance of expressive control; in comparison, the IRC’s emphasis on triviality, merriment and a lack of verbal wit and clever wordplay. Wasting time in such idle chatter seems to some member as almost a dumbing down.

the problem I had with the IRC was the age difference; I think partly because the age of the participants were in the early 20’s but most teens or late teens the amount of games played and frivolity which took place- while endearing in the short term- wore thin and there was very little actual substance. I have never been keen on small talk and increasingly I felt that is all the IRC was or became. Participant 3

This relates to performance in a number of ways. Firstly, the conventions of the board are challenged; for the clique member, the norms provided by the generalised other become skewed as a result of a new setting, whilst because it is an unrepresentative subset of the whole community, it has a different authority and norms. For potential new members of the clique, it becomes a
novel front for the audience to engage in with others, emphasising both play and self-disclosure, two themes that attract a good percentage of the boards’ younger membership in the forums. This reinforces the normalisation of the kind of revelatory and intimate behaviour that is already divisive in the larger community, and makes some members uncomfortable.

For existing members of the clique, it becomes what Goffman would term a team performance, a place to exhibit their language and style (1959: 85); as with the moderators, certain conventions need to be agreed upon in order to ‘own’ the textual space, and so the preservation of their unique rituals, games and rhythms become important, particularly when the majority of the clique are present, as it sets the standard for communications by repetitively reinforcing the norms and developing the intensity of the interaction. In this regard, when non- and potential clique members are absent from the IRC it also becomes the ‘backstage’ for the clique, where they have the opportunity to ‘evidence to themselves that they do not take the same view of their activity as the view they maintain for their audience’ (1959: 172). It can also be read as an outside area to the clique, as when the rest of the team are absent, it provides an opportunity for individual clique members to meet new members away from both the team and the main setting of the board, as it segments the audience and brings about live one-to-one conversations with people who previously would have been unknown on a personal level.

In this way it fosters greater sociability. But it also brings with it issues of maintaining performance to preserve status and a place in the hierarchy. For many members, there are varying personal levels of comfort with familiarity in contexts where the personal front cannot be managed as precisely. Particularly with regard to mystification, audience inhibitions give leeway in the performance ‘for his (sic) own good or the audience’s, as a protection or a threat that close inspection would destroy’ (1959: 76). This may not only explain why individuals with status such as The Kinslayer and Edmund Blackadder
preferred to steer away from those environments and mainly support close communications with members through carefully constructed communications like posts, VMs, PMs and e-mail, it may also explain why there was a lack of moderator activity in the IRC which affected the divisive attitude of the clique, making it an ‘us’ and ‘them’. Feelings of social inclusion and boundaries are thus as evident in groups as they are in communities as a whole. For moderators to engage in the rituals, routines and communications that differed so entirely to the structure and norms of the boards setting is akin to pulling back the curtain on the great and powerful Oz, undermining the moderator team and their official authority over the ordinary member, contaminating their individual and group performances.

Already compromised through the change of setting, the lack of either an immediate presence or archived monitoring made the possibility of maintaining community norms problematical. As previously evidenced, some members like to challenge the boundaries of acceptable performance, and without a strong moderator presence, the appropriate analogy would be viewing the IRC setting rather like a classroom when the teacher is absent; those present know how they should behave, but depending on who is present and what their agenda is, the atmosphere and maintenance of norms can vary greatly.

The lack of monitoring was rectified after a virtual raid from a rival board took place in IRC. The raid was hostile, causing a great deal of upset to the members in attendance, who said of the events ‘tonight just made me feel sick to the stomach,’ ‘It was crazy, but, on a positive point, I feel even closer to everyone, I appreciate you guys.’ This supports Chavis and McMillan (1986) and McMillan’ (1996) argument of how shared events, particularly crisis, help to build a sense of community. Without the official power of the boards behind them, and no moderator present to take control of the situation and ‘boot’ the offenders, the secluded world of IRC came under attack.
Realising that although they had status, they had no administrative power to expel offenders, the need to protect the boundary led to the call for a stronger moderator presence in the IRC; the clique suggested a compromise, framed benevolently, by suggesting that moderators might be overworked.

Moderators on the boards usually don’t have all that much time to get in chat I believe, please correct me if I’m wrong. A set of members who the staff feel can be trusted who use the IRC should be selected. (Mozya, post)

As a result, Lou, a member of the IRC clique, was given special privileges in the chat room, which provided her with the power of some administrative function; at the next round of moderator appointments, Lou became a moderator, plus two other members who frequented chat. The promotions were a result of the raid and the request for a stronger presence, but in a more subtle way, as the IRC clique members individual and group performances on the board grew in confidence and visibility, their influence and presence could not be ignored, particularly when it began to shape the communications. This occurred through self-referential chatter, heralded by IRC speak; the increase in and normalisation of a more general change in the language conventions that imply self-action, such as ‘/me konks herself’ (itsxpaperdoll) or ‘/me will not try to be helpful again’ (Fake Shemp).

In turn, the officially sanctioned status of members of the clique affected the community through IRC participants’ associated status with those now in positions of authority.

it was as if when some of the members of IRC gained Mod status the entire IRC clique got power by proxy. Some of the other IRC members became more active on the boards and more board discussion were laced with ‘in IRC’ and using conversations in IRC in board posts (participant 3).
Secondly, the older moderators who did take part in IRC encountered problems with a conflict of their roles as member and as moderator. This happened in two respects. For the general non-clique members, the audience found it difficult to separate the individual’s performances in the role of moderator from their performances in the IRC as member where they took part in IRC games and followed the conventions of the setting; as both construct the self in the other’s mind’s eye, when the same member later undertook duties of their moderator post, it was difficult to separate the role function that disciplined them from the member they had previously been playing games with. This meant the member was confused about both performances, as the motivations for disciplinary moves could be interpreted in any number of ways. One member commented that

> Another forum I was at, everyday members were moderators as well, however they were labeled as MOD1 and MOD2. You never knew which ‘norm’ was a MOD as MOD was not a title but a job description. (Participant 3)

This may explain why the two existing moderators who appeared to engage more than others in the IRC games were both loved and reviled by different groups of the boards, as their performance could be as interpreted as insincere by those both inside and outside of the IRC clique.

In a similar vein, the member’s conflict in separating their role of moderator from the self and their friendship ties can be seen as an issue for Lou, the member of the IRC clique who became moderator; eventually she acted as ‘informer’ in the role to the IRC clique, feeling a sense of loyalty to them concerning a disciplinary situation. Goffman (1959) describes the informer as ‘someone who pretends to the performers to be a member of their team, is allowed to come backstage and acquire destructive information, and then openly or secretly sells out the show to the audience’ (1959: 145). Her actions
had a considerable impact on the gathering of public momentum during one of the key events in the debacle, the ‘Time Out.’

During the Time Out, which will be covered shortly, some members were placed on a temporarily banned list (tempban), not all of whom were from the IRC clique. Unable to log in to the boards, many of the ‘The 29’ then accessed the IRC and were asked to leave. Left without the facility to communicate with the community or as a group en masse, and with no explanation of the banned status, they spread news via e-mail, MSN and Facebook of a second IRC channel for the twenty-nine members and their board community peers to congregate. This further exacerbated existing problems, as external communications were already redefining the community’s culture and excluding members, as noted by this participant:

*People talking all the time in IRC or facebook or MSN (instead of the boards) was beginning to shape the “norm” on BB – and that left a lot of members out* participant 1

As a result of the persistence and transferability of the textual data, discrepancies between the different performances in the various settings were viewed by audiences for whom it was not originally intended; when the text was antagonistic, it stirred up greater feelings of duplicity.

A level of emotion and hostility was transferred back to the boards via those who could still post when the perceived injustice of the tempban became the subject of their assembly,

*the feeling in the second IRC at the time was one of anger, frustration and confusion. Some were planning on ways to ‘get even’ some were resorting to school-yard comments, and others were confused and wounded. There was nothing positive in the room. The fact that it took so many by surprise did not help*
matters and the continual reports of what was going on in the Buffy forum that we did not have access to only served to heighten everyones emotional state participant X

Whilst those on the tempban list gathered in the new space alongside friends who were still able to post, members spent time moving between the spaces, transferring details, copying and pasting from the Buffy-boards posts and chat room to the ‘other’ chat; Lou, in addition, was able to move backstage in the moderator forum, which challenged her loyalties further; as a result, after the time out had concluded her tenure as moderator ended.

Irrespective of whether informant status was premeditated from the start, or whether, which is more likely, Lou’s dilemma was caused by the conflict generated through her double status of moderator and her self identification as an IRC clique member, having two unaligned statuses and their concomitant influence groups brought about decisive action when the battle lines were being drawn. Participants commented that moderators were perceived to be disunited concerning the handling of bullying, rudeness and the general disintegration of community norms; comments were copied from one chat room setting into another to support this. In this way, the implied potential for replication of backstage information provided the IRC clique with leverage against the administration and the authority of the moderators.

The Time Out.

To reestablish authority and work on restoring community spirit by repairing the breach in social reality damaged by the IRC clique’s actions, and the subsequent reactions to them, the administration implemented a cooling off
period. The community as a whole agreed usual measures had failed, for example, public warnings to the community, the removal of individual member’s posts, virtual messages and ‘karma’ comments, or ‘booting’ from the IRC channel. Heavier and stricter moderation commenced in order to reassert authority. This was implemented in a temporary ban, called The Time Out.

The disintegration of trust and belonging required in maintaining a sense of community were thus addressed by removing a number of members from the community, those who had been involved in the IRC clique and those self-policing the community. The power structure, which had always appeared to patrol the boundaries of convention implicitly, thus began to perform explicitly, by disabling those who were a threat to their authority, either through their challenging of the norms of the community and attempting to renegotiate the social norms, or, in the case of those who objected to their infractions, by stepping outside of the role of normal member and providing a conflicting interpretation of the rules; two sources of conflict were thus removed from the game through the ban. The names were agreed upon by the administration; those members accessed the board home page to discover a message advising they were banned from the boards for three days.

The rest of the community found a thread posted by Buffy Summers ‘staked’ at the top of the forum entitled ‘The State of the Board;’ it described the current situation, how warnings about behaviour were being ignored, and how attempting to keep disciplinary matters private and not humiliate members led to the perception amongst the community of little presence from senior staff, and as moderators had restricted power, individual members and cliques were dictating the norms and in an attempt to tone down hostility between groups, but members self-policing of the community was adding to the tension.

*we see bullying, mob-mentality, in-fighting, cliques. Members telling members (inaccurately) ”how things are” on the boards*
and how they “should” act. Name-calling. Nastyness. Our poor mods have had their hands full while we were offline with personal matters. Now that we are back, it falls on us to decide what to do about all of this.

We’ve tried posting, reminding, pming. Asking, coaxing, cajoling. But all of that has fallen on deaf ears … Saying no more has ceased to work. Deleting posts and threads and visitor messages and karma comments has ceased to work. All the things that we do behind the scenes – which cause us to be accused of “doing nothing” – have in fact ceased to work. Buffy Summers post

She went on to add that the decision was not taken lightly, and that it was likely to be unpopular with a number of members, whose friends were affected.

Those who we feel need it the most are going to have to take 3 days off from the boards and the chat; there is no assigning of right or wrong here – we have included people from BOTH sides of the problems Buffy Summers, post

Though meant with the best of intentions, staff and members comments categorically state the situation was not handled well. Members from both the IRC and moderator cliques commented that although the post explained the motivation and called for members to gain perspective from the situation, highlighting how there needed to be some distance for those constantly at the centre of power struggles, failure to directly contact members personally by PM did nothing but ferment an already agitated community.

Of the twenty nine self-identified members, seventeen could be classed as core IRC clique, whilst of the remaining eleven, six had a strong individual board performance that gave them status, although a few of those overlapped to a
degree as they also spent some time in IRC. There may have been more members banned who did not come forward, as it is only through the research of remaining clique members and self-identification ‘The 29’ publicly became a group. The administration did not provide a public list of those who were tempbanned. The members who were banned were noted as being at least part of a hierarchy, one whose remaining members would protest at the perceived unjust treatment of their clan:

you can’t just ban the cool kids and expect no negative affects.
You just made it worse. Floop 695, post

Buffy responded to this by arguing that indeed this was the issue, indicating how the action was designed to shoot a warning shot to the entire community by reasserting her status as head of the board, the moderators as the authority, reminding the community it was they who controlled the boards and not the clique, who had begun to have more status than the staff.

the fact that you referred to them as the "cool kids" shows that there’s a problem here. People don’t get special treatment because they’re "the cool kids". Everyone here is supposed to be equal. Buffy Summers, post

Buffy’s comment upholds the need for equality and feelings of influence McMillan and Chavis (1986) argue is necessary for a sense of community, but also highlight a recurring theme – that one group were ‘cool’ and another were not. This reinforces feelings of exclusion, but also affects the way smaller groups need to react in order to challenge the status quo.

Goffman’s theory of frame analysis, and its analytical extension by Snow et al (1986) works on the premise of frames being used as ‘schemata of interpretation’ containing varying degrees of organisation, from those ‘neatly presentable as a system of entities, postulates and rules... [to most others that]
appear to have no apparent articulated shape, providing only a lore of understanding, and approach, a perspective’ (Goffman, 1974: 21). Frames ‘function to organise experience and guide action, whether collective or individual’ (Snow et.al. 1986: 464), and as such, the performance of a group identity through banners, buttons, user titles, self referencing and status messages functions to frame the individual in relation to their affiliation with the group, whilst framing the group for members of the larger community. In addition, Snow et. al (1986) identify four processes of frame alignment; frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension and frame transformation. These work together to mobilise aggregates of individuals or small groups with shared grievances by clarifying position, underscoring values, such as democracy, equality, freedom of speech, or beliefs such as where blame lies with a grievance or standing up for values whilst minimising differences and expanding the frame to incorporate other groups to increase its support base.

During the time out, there was an emphasis on how the aggrieved championed tolerance, freedom of speech, fairness, justice and loyalty; the extolled community norms were upheld in public by the banned by proxy, rather than by the administration, though it did not go unnoticed that by clothing it in liberal values, the rhetoric provided an opportunity for some poorly motivated actions.

I was fairly disgusted by some of the behaviour that was advocated under the banner of “loyalty”. Participant 11

As a result of yellowcrayon’s and her husband Seraphim’s pushing of a sense of injustice, both in the ‘Thread for Questions Regarding the Time Out’ ‘Let’s all talk Peaceably’ and ‘Welcome Back’ threads, communications became increasingly bitter and aggressive.

We were told that we needed a "time out" to get "perspective"

but we weren’t told what, so I am sitting here, wondering, to get
perspective on what?... Are we really that cliquey? Are we bullies? DrusillaRox, post

Supporting the view proposed by this thesis concerning how seriously members integrate the board community, their performance and the communications they engage in into their sense of self, Buffy again reiterated the position of the staff concerning the time out:

"it was supposed to make everyone appreciate what it’s like to NOT have you on the board with them. But also that, what people do on a message board does not affect who you are or your worth as a person… There are a lot of your fellow members who think that cliques are a big problem. A lot left the board because of it long before this weekend. . Buffy Summers, post"

As a result of the tempban, the twenty-nine members did what Buffy suggested on the ‘State of the Board’ thread and called their friends, however they were now ‘loyal’ friends drawn from the new clique, brought together as a result of unfair treatment, communicating externally because of their unjust exclusion.

Alluding that the battle lines had now been drawn, yellowcrayon espoused the values of loyalty throughout, whilst stirring the already troubled pot.

"The banning drew those banned closer together. "If" you thought they were a clique before, you’ve more reason to think so now. They were all banned and didn’t know why, so of course, the common factor drew them together. They were determined to stand up for each other, and loyalty to one another was only increased. What the banning ALSO did was further whatever divide that may have already existed on the parts of some with the administration." (yellowcrayon post)
The double status of Lou as moderator and clique member exacerbated problems. As Goffman argued in Strategic Interaction (1969) ‘[h]ierarchical organization means that one man [sic] “in place” near the top can render the whole establishment vulnerable’ (p.78). Lou’s status directly affected the dissemination of information.

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\text{instead of discussing their issues with the staff, they went to their friends and told them all what was happening, and even went so far as to quote to them what was being said about them in the Mod forum. (Participant X)}
\]

It was known that there were individuals with more skill in manipulating groups and advantage from their status. Functioning as an alternate hierarchy, Lou and yellowcrayon fulfilled their clique’s leadership roles in the same way Buffy Summers and Faith fulfill the administrators’ lead roles for the moderator clique. Lou, having had officially sanctioned status as a moderator, was able to bridge the gap between the clique and the ordinary members because of her performing of a motherly demeanour and propensity to act in a compassionate and understanding manner; whilst yellowcrayon, whose age closely resembled those in the IRC clique, used her willingness to speak her mind, and opinionated posts to be a magnet for those less skilled in conveying their thoughts through posts.

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\text{there were some clear “ringleaders” in the clique, yes. People who would take on a leadership role within the cliques. But I don’t think they created these cliques so much as they became a key player in them later on (they maybe just had the stronger leadership-like personalities to begin with). (Participant 1)}
\]

As a result of the Time Out and officially sanctioned posts regarding the IRC clique being posted by the admin, the final act in winning influence and status would be the acknowledgment of the clique and the assigning of leadership.
But, I can do ONE thing. Perhaps it will get me banned, and I will say that is okay and I understand, but my statement will still stand, regardless. I will step up as head of this aforementioned "clique", as I doubt it comes to much surprise to anyone. I’m not fond of it being referred to as such, as it seems to ME to be just a group of people who like each other, love the boards and move like mad to see the sorting tome and welcome newbies. But, I can believe that at some point, someone has felt "on the outside looking in” or daunted by a group of people who seem to know each other so well when they don’t.- Lou Post

Buffy-boards rules and FAQs state that no club or group can exist on the forum unless officially sanctioned by the administration. One could therefore view such an act as a statement of being above the rules of the forum which those not in the IRC clique are obliged to follow. Goffman however, would perhaps explain this as occurring from the debacle, as ‘at moments of great crisis, a new set of motives may suddenly become effective and the established social distance between the teams may sharply increase or decrease’ (1959: 167). With the formal announcing of a clique, and assigning a clique leader, the IRC clique were officially raised to power in a manner which circumvented the standards set by the board.

In addition to trolling the IRC room for potential members, a concerted effort was made to ingratiate newbies, or new members to the IRC clique and inform them of its prestige, as Lou alluded to in her post. The newbie introduction section served as a space to openly promote IRC on the main boards.

Hey Steve! Welcome to the board! This is a great place, and if you ever want to talk to other members, you can check out our IRC. It’s awesome! (HisMrs, post)
To the casual observer HisMrs post would seem unassuming, but the choice of words is performative; considering this new member joined a bulletin board in which ‘talk’ is so central, one would assume their purpose was to talk to other members, and yet they are being guided towards IRC as a superior form of communication; as opposed to ‘the board’s IRC’, by a member of the clique laying claim to ‘our IRC, it’s awesome,’ the suggestion is made that it belongs to the group she is a part of, and that it is as Goffman would say ‘where the action is’ (1967) – the place to be to belong to the community, that acceptance there means acceptance on the boards. But it also offers the advantages of the clique’s influence, their protection and the anonymous plurality of allies who through the increase in external communications may or may not be known to the moderators.

Ah Ha... I think I’m beginning to see the problem with board families. Correct me if I’m wrong. If you allow them, little cliques start to form. Before you know it, you get what I call sw’acking. That’s where groups of members swarm to attack points of view that differ from the dogma of the clique. Is my theory correct? Nerd4Hire, post

Nerd4Hire’s theory was correct, and its practice dissolved the forum into subsets groups, families and cliques. That his post used the term sw’acking is also relevant, as ‘sw’ is an abbreviation used to bring up a smiley emoticon in chat rooms, and has been adopted by the IRC clique across the forum, thus recognising and drawing attention to how the IRC clique in particular quickly swarmed to attack.
The Time-Out Aftermath

The time out did not solve the problem, but exacerbated it. Hostility was directed towards moderators, further breaches occurred, the moderator and maintainer of the BuffyBoards Facebook page viewed negative status messages made on Facebook, directed at and regarding forum moderators. When no action was taken to punish the offenders, the moderator and another stepped down.

This was the final straw for the administration, which needed to take decisive and drastic action, and permaban a number of members.

We know that all of you have been waiting for the staff to take action with regards to the events leading to Kean and Lyri leaving us. The staff has taken the past week to debate, research, and review those involved in the most recent attack ... Thank you to everyone who offered their opinions, insight, and support to us during this time. It has meant more to us than you could possibly know. It’s clear that things have not been right over the past year. ... especially recently, some of the longer-term members have posted how different things have become around here. We have lost very good members as well as staff over the behaviour of certain people. This behaviour includes bullying, inciting trouble on the boards and spending the majority of their time upsetting and harassing others. This is not good for the community as a whole and as a result we have implemented some permanent bans. (Buffy Summers, post)

Responding to criticisms that the necessity for this was predicated on the staff’s poor handling of the Time Out and the subsequent and continued decline of community spirit that ensued, Buffy was quick to point out:
this is not just aftermath of that moment. As has been said previously, this had been going on long before the time out.

There have been at least 5 mods to leave in the past year because of member behavior (Buffy Summers, post)

Of the banned, six were members of ‘The 29,’ two more were IRC clique members, but importantly, Lou, yellowcrayon, and shortly after, Seraphim were banned, as a result of his public agitation of the board concerning the bannings. This resulted in a further flame war with two new moderators brought in from outside of the board to support Buffy. At the end of the flame war, yellowcrayon herself attempted to make amends via a third party through posting on facebook, an apology that was transferred to the boards with the permission of the administration. Goffman argues:

‘insufficient attention has been given to the effect upon his [sic] earlier biographers of a blameworthy present... of the importance to an individual of preserving a good memory of himself among those with whom he no longer lives (Goffman, 1963: 99).

Despite having been banned, and the subject of a very heated thread which resulted in the further agitation and alienation of the community, yellowcrayon felt compelled to proffer an apology to redress the damage done to her reputation and the community. This is important to note, as on one level, it shows the depth of her commitment to the performance and how much the affair affected her sense of self, challenging her own assumed ability to impression manage; that she sent a Facebook message to another board member to transmit her apology to the board shows the degree to which her sense of self was enmeshed in her sense of community, and how what she drew from the boards profoundly affected her.

In addition, Homens (1958) theories of social exchange illustrate that no social action is taken without balancing the potential benefits and costs. So, we see
that on another level, context again rears its head, as information that not all members were party to plays an important role.

When Kinslayer was involved they had TK speak for them because he was perceived the one in the best graces and if he spoke for banned members, giving messages from them to the rest of the board, that he would not be banned whereas a member such as lou, who was considered as a trouble maker, would be banned for doing that- even that was thought out and planned (participant X)

Few members knew that YellowCrayon and Lou were in the process of jointly setting up an ‘invitation only’ board up for the clique. By repairing the discrepancy in her characteristic performance made public by people who had previously been part of her inner circle, she attempted to control her reputation in order to attract the ‘right’ members to the new forum, outside of the contiguous group. In this regard, her post was a carefully executed demonstration of impression management that would manufacture an image of contrition, atonement and humility, whilst fostering the impression of her as a benevolent person.

This final decisive action on the part of the administration helped to restore some balance to the boards, and was a clear indication of the refusal of Buffy Summers to allow the behaviour to continue without permanent ramifications for those involved in infractions. As a result, the thread was closed with a final flourish from one of the most respected former moderators, recently having been reinstated to the position.

Members have spoken...the thread is now closed and grievances have been aired...and aired...and bloody well aired. If you have anything further to say take it up via PMs with the admins and head mods...I’ve been Mr Pointy and I’m a total fascist mod
This stamp of authority once again placed the administrators in charge of maintaining the social reality of the community, and repairing the damage caused by the breaching experiment. With the key members of the IRC clique’s removal, the threat from the other team disappeared.

Goffman succinctly opines the conclusion of affairs since the IRC clique’s breach of norms and the power play’s rectification. Publicly, the normal activity of the board has been resumed, with a tacit understanding from the community that the administration are, and will remain, in charge of the board, guide the norms and conventions and shape the interactions that occur through their control of the context. Whether that remains the case behind the scenes, is a matter for debate; both teams have closed ranks and are more aware of their audience segregation.

It may be true that backstage activity often takes the form of a council of war; but when the two teams meet on the field of interaction it seems that they generally do not meet for peace or for war. They meet under a temporary truce, a working consensus, in order to get their business done (1959: 173).

The business of the forum as centrally motivated towards fandom has been reinstated through the removal of some aspects of social connectivity, and the reduction in the power base of the IRC.

The breaching experiment offered a unique opportunity to understand the fragility of social reality. Whilst fan studies and internet studies both communicate the celebratory aspects and the strength of community, rarely is it mentioned that the fabric of social reality of even the strongest and most
supportive of communities is delicately woven, with norms established, negotiated and accomplished, concealed by a veil behind which lies the community’s power and authority.

Through attending to maintaining some critical distance from the members, relations with participants were held at arm’s length; external communications were avoided for fear of breaking social conventions or losing academic objectivity through over-involvement with the subject. Unless the restrictions of the software and length of responses meant participants could not be interviewed through private messages, no external contact with them was made. As the huge surge in self-referential talk and nascent cliques formed at the beginning of the powers shift, the research strategy altered. Until that point, the degree to which members gossiped externally about the activities of the board, and how the strength of their overlapping individual performances and their tightly knitted social bonds influence and ultimately alter the community dynamic was obscured from the research lens.
Conclusion

This thesis has examined the role of performance in an online fan community to understand how fans of a media product perform their individual and group identity in those settings in order to maintain the environment; and how those performances work to situate, develop and continually renegotiate the self and the community as symbolically mediated works in progress, existing in both online and offline contexts. I have illustrated how users of those communities can move easily between their experiences in online and offline environments, regarding them as different in context rather than substance or spirit. Moreover, those engaged in online fan communities emphasise the continuities in their performances, believing them to be true to their self-conceptions. Through examining fans in their online communities, this research has shown contradicting evidence to the exaggerated postmodern conception of internet identity as amorphous and ephemeral, and modern identities as fragmented.

Maintaining stable performances, the members’ social interactions build a community environment, one in which the self benefits from positive reinforcement of their identity through their membership of the group; a sense of belonging which motivates the creation of a mutually harmonious definition of the situation. Performance work lays the ground for positive self-affirmation through its successful negotiation of norms, roles and context appropriate interpersonal exchanges. Sustained immersion in the community enables the fan to move beyond the performance boundaries of their fan role by engaging their social identity in the forum; performing greater amounts of their personal identity as they become comfortable in the environment.

This comfort gives them confidence to enmesh their self and social identity, revealing a performance and disposition more analogous to encounters with others in close co-present relationships; this can, however, lead to an over-
familiarity between participants that whilst providing strong ties and a sense of belonging for those involved, undermines others’ sense of inclusion. In addition, through communicating intimately in separate or more secluded areas where the setting differs from the community’s main social environment, the mutually defined norms and conventions of the context become skewed. Thus, individual participants’ definition of the situation is no longer in concert with the community as a whole, but of the smaller clique with whom they closely associate, which challenges the community’s sense of social reality.

Fandom

The internet means the geographical boundaries once imposed upon the fan are no longer relevant to their capacity to communicate with others. Fandom takes on new dimensions in online contexts, allowing the fan to engage with a globally spread audience in a community of like minded others, communally bound through the internet and their fandom. This supports claims that mediated identities and media convergence are collapsing the boundaries that existed in previous generations.

In previous decades, a fan identity was slowly incorporated into a sense of self through repetitive encounters with other fans, the fan artefact and fan culture, as illustrated by the ‘becoming a fan’ stories spoken of by Cavicchi (1998) and Jenkins (1992); the implications of multiple and mixed media are that fan identity can be created instantaneously, whilst the self becomes slowly revealed in the new context through the fan role.

While in the past fans relied upon an apprentice period in fan cultures, learning the role through experience, or pursuing their fandom in smaller peer groups
with gradual forays into fandom, now fans create an online fan identity with
premeditation and purpose, perform it in front of many, presenting their
devotion and claims to a fan identity through performing the self symbolically
in relation to the fan object. Fandom performance online circumvents the time
establishing oneself previous generations of fans would have invested. Today,
claiming recognition as a fan is instantaneous upon joining online fan
communities, but fan worth and status in the hierarchy can only be proved
through correctly performing aspects of the personal front.

Changing paradigms in audience research have positioned performance as
central to fandom; internet fandom provides an exemplary illustration of fan
performance, as it is the sole means by which members develop, reinforce and
claim their individual and group identity in the context. Challenging clearly
defined models and persisting preconceptions, fan scholars now attempt to
dispel the stereotypical image of fans through the detailed study of who fans
are, and what fans do.

A question often directed at fan scholars is this: why is something as mundane
as fandom worthy of academic analysis? Or, in the instance of this thesis, why
would a sociologist want to understand fans? The answer is simple; through
recognising that some individuals’ develop and define their sense of self
through fandom, using it as a means to coordinate the self and shape activities,
we can begin to understand what it is individual’s gain from being a fan, and in
the process, establish whether fandom provides a sense of belonging and an
identity powerful enough to effect the sense of self in contexts external to
fandom.

In popular culture there is a trend towards identifying strongly as a fan; as Gray
et al. suggest, ‘the public recognition and evaluation of the practice of being a
fan has itself profoundly changed over the past several decades’ (2007: 4). Many
people engage in fandom, yet fans are still chiefly characterized as loners and
losers, nerds and geeks, othering the fan as the idle escapist with too much time on their hands, any title that implies separation from the engagements of the real world.

The forerunning theoretical themes that framed earlier analyses of media audiences sets the tone of fan studies, and influences the characterisation of a fan role. Fan studies focus has been directed towards a direct response to the negative representation of fans as cultural dupes and hysterical teenagers moving away from the conception of fans as the ‘othered’ cultural dupe, via strategies of resistance to performer. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) state that ceremony and ritual are central to performance, and performances are constitutive of daily life (68-69), as everybody is at the same time both performer and audience.

Online fan cultures have this principle at their core, as the vast majority of fan performances are in front of the idealised and generalised other of the fandom, with the remaining fan performances in smaller, semi-private or private groups. In addition, paradigm shifts in fan analysis posit that identity is now the primary function of audience activity, with fans engaging across many different levels and with varying degrees of absorption. However, the role of fans as culturally othered now has value in subcultural reappropriation, illustrated through fans reclaiming of the term ‘geek’ in the construction of self and community identity.

Throughout this research’s use of symbolic interaction’s perspectives, I have been able to examine how a fan identity and the self are symbolically constructed through interaction with others. With audience studies’ recent emphasis on the centrality of performance and identity in fandom, fans offer a natural group against which Goffman’s dramaturgical theory can be tested. Undertaking this online adds a new dimension as it challenges the idea of co-presence so fundamental to Goffman’s conception of the interaction order;
however, this research has proved the association is productive, and offers an updated vantage point from which researchers can explore the self’s internet-age interactions with the other, and support the theory of performance as central to modern mediated identity.

**Identity**

Symbolic interaction argues the self arises out of interaction with the other; Goffman (1959) develops this by theorising social interaction is maintained and achieved through the continual and careful management of performing an identity to the other as an audience. The creation of a believable personal front is essential for both the performer and the audience, as it gives the performer confidence in playing their role, and provides the identity peg upon which the other can continually add information about the performer in their mind’s eye; the performers distinctiveness and polished presence gives them the opportunity to make a long lasting good impression.

However this is a continually negotiated, and can be compromised at any stage through poorly executed performance or slips in dramatic realisation. Furthermore, audience segregation is important in maintaining a believable personal front, thus, when compromising interactions with others outside of the setting are replicated within the context that contains their personal reputation, the glue that binds their identity to the community is weakened.

Entering the setting through the threshold role of fan, the individual manages their impression to the community, dramatically realising the role and idealising the performance to uphold the community’s mutually defined norms. Through their user name, avatar, signatures, banners and posts, they use the
personal front to manifest a consistent self performance, striving to retain an appearance and manner by which they can be identified as individuals, using the fan artefact’s symbolic lexicon interpreted through technology to mark their personal front with a stamp of individuality.

The personal front combines with other elements of performance to mobilise activity in such a way it provides a composite, multilayered performance that acts as a platform from which to invite social interaction. Members endeavour to show their claims to membership of the group are authentic, and they are eligible for inclusion in the community, as the boundaries of the group are key to maintaining a sense of community cohesion.

Positive reception of performance allows explorations of routines and roles from both a social identity and a personal identity external to the context. Through this, members gain a sense of trust and confidence and reveal more of their self, reinforcing their position in the community. This has parallels in co-present contexts, as the abstractness and generality in the fronts and routines associated with roles can transfer from one situation to another; through positive reception of role performance, the feelings of prestige and self worth gained are absorbed into the self and can be drawn from in other social encounters.

Thus, the fan role, particularly those involving status and peer recognition, can bring with it a correlating rise in feelings of self worth and confidence in co-present contexts, as evidenced by the data from moderators, fan artists and those who perform other social roles at the forum. This peer recognition is not solely limited to those with officially sanctioned community roles, but arises out of the ‘normal’ members’ appreciation, affection and respect for members who uphold quality performances as well; those who are supportive, comical, knowledgeable, put forward a show of community spirit in generating debate,
or are simply very active and continually present, reinforcing others performances through posts, reputation points, IRC and messaging.

Community

The internet offers new ways for social boundaries to be defined, helping to support multifaceted networks of strong and weak ties, replicated on a large scale, or within the setting of an individual community. In this thesis, experience is seen as central to our conception of community, as the individual’s feelings about their sense of belonging are strong motivators for their performance, whilst it remains a key unifying factor driving interaction in co-present, online, geographical and imagined communities.

Using a psychological sense of community theory helps to translate the specific dimensions of members’ experiences that are relevant to the individual’s sense of belonging, which in turn sustains community. This provides an understanding that illustrates how internet communities are equivalent to offline communities in terms of the effects on its members; whilst retaining a sociological perspective, this research supports the comparison by showing both online and offline communities are imagined, symbolically constructed and maintained through interpersonal relations. In addition, both internet and fan groups can be considered communities, in terms of their status as imagined, symbolic constructions in the minds of those that belong within them. However, by appropriating the theory from the standpoint of symbolic interaction, the behaviourist perspective associated with psychological interpretations of community is replaced by the mediation of symbols and interpretation of others’ action to fulfil the requirement for a mutually harmonious definition of the situation. Community is not physically located, but accomplished through
the continuous negotiation of norms, roles and the performance of the members within it. An individual’s sense of belonging within a community has a fundamental effect on their sense of self, as it is through their continued interactions with a primary group that they develop their personal and social identity. Therefore, ‘[h]ow people define the situation(s) in which they find themselves is thus among the most important of sociological data (Jenkins, 2004: 83). However, when the established conventions and roles alter or are no longer being maintained through challenges to the member’s social reality, a sense of community quickly disintegrates, which has effects on the stability of the individual as well as the community as the self is dependent upon those stable self-conceptions defined through the social reality it is most invested in.

The powers that be

Online fan performance within the forum is the means by which the casual observer of the object of fandom is separated from ‘true’ fan by the community. As levels of fandom are established, a perceived pecking order or hierarchy is, at the same time, being created. This hierarchy is the first element of developing a community atmosphere for the fan forum, as it creates friendship and peer groups who act as teams to generate more activity within the community. These stem from official groups such as houses or appreciation groups, or settings such as the IRC, but also include the moderators, who act as a team.

As much as levels of fandom are influential in establishing a hierarchy for the community atmosphere, cultural capital is important in creating and sustaining the community. Through the use of fan performance, with members being elevated in status within their peer group a result of their dramatically realised
role. While fan performance can elevate one’s status, it does not allow the fan to cross the threshold held by those in the official hierarchy

As time, shared experiences and means in which to express fan performance grows, the community can flourish with increased posts, contests and off-topic subsections. This growth spurt requires more emphasis and effort to be placed on the moderators to police, offering fewer occasions for fan performance, over a course of time segregating the moderators from the rank and file, habitual posters. The policing, and backstage actions can limit the online presence, the moderators had to this point, altering their appearance to that of staff versus rank and file forum member.

The need to moderate the environment to maintain norms grows as the community expands and moves into different settings, but when those in a position of power are not seen to be active on the forum a struggle for power can then occur. Performers within cliques positively reinforce each other’s performances; through their familiarity with each other and continued intimate interactions they alter the definition of the situation between the participants, challenging the boundaries of community defined norms in the form of small breaching experiments. As this is played out in front of the community it threatens feelings of security and inclusion, whilst the authorities’ lack of discipline and failure to manage deviants brings trust into question, requisites necessary for maintaining a sense of community. When the performances also seem inconsistent with the impression the other has of the participant, the social reality of the community becomes tissue thin. In challenging the authority and their ownership of the production and maintenance of the norms of the community, its precariousness is revealed; to use Marx’s statement, the community discover ‘[a]ll that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind’ (Marx and Engels, 1848). Though fan communities evolve from a shared passion, they are shaped by competing
hierarchies who challenge the authority’s right to define the social reality of the community, to be the source that influences the norms and conversational convention within it.

As Mead states that the self arises in the process of social experience and activity, fandom is important in the regards that the sense of self established through a communal setting can be amplified through carefully crafted and executed fan performance. Fans accomplish this through performances of identity, and the prosumption and discussion of fan artefacts. Fandom is therefore a way of mediating one’s identity aside, and away from, one’s physical community. The device which assists to coordinate the self, shape one’s experiences and guide activities whilst providing a purpose in the case of fan is not the community but the object of fandom.

As fandom provides individuals with an identity in relation to an external, shared media object it engenders a sense of belonging and acceptance in a community of like minded others. In an internet context, fans are given clearly defined examples of what a fan does to rightfully claim an identity, through patterns of consumption and involvement spread across a multitude of fan sites that illustrate what fans do, as individuals, and as a community. By establishing whether fans are stirred to such passionate attachment to their fan object because their sense of self is embedded in the performance routines and rituals of consuming their fan artefact, as individuals, or in imagined communities with which they consciously identify, we can understand why fans involved in online communities feel high degrees of attachment to both the community and the fan object. Particularly when fans engage online, they show high levels of commitment and trust, which supports this research’s argument of how experiences of online community shape the individual’s fandom and allow them to reflexively evolve a sense of self in relation to others and a fan artefact. It has also demonstrated that as the sense of self evolves through interactions with others, positive reinforcement from the group one self identifies with has
correlating effects in other social contexts: correct presentation management in one social encounter has effects on the self which carry over into other social encounters.

**Goffman**

This work has appropriated Goffman’s concept of performance to analyse the production, maintenance and development of online selves in fan communities. Using Goffman has been productive at helping to unravel some of the social activity of fans underscoring their fandom, particularly as it provides data from fans interacting with their peer group in a ‘natural’ social setting. Goffman argued that social interaction ‘uniquely transpires in social situations’ with ‘presumably, the telephone and the mails provid[ing] reduced versions of the primordial real thing’ (1983:2). Had Goffman lived to the internet age, it is reasonable to assume he would have had a fascinating take on virtual social encounters and the characteristics of performance online and its relationship to co-present encounters. This examination does not replace his theory in co-present encounters, which has strengths in different areas, but it attempts to develop a Goffmanesque approach to virtual settings, whilst offering ethnographic data testing Goffman’s ‘exploratory’ work on the self, social interaction, and the precariousness of social reality. Some re-conceptualisation and strengthening of research method has been undertaken in order to achieve this reflexively, as there are differences between virtual ethnography, ‘insider’ participant observation and identity and community construction in communities that are socially proximate, rather than physically grounded in co-present interaction.
Though a ‘dedicated empiricist’ (Lofland, 1984: 34) Goffman’s data collection and methods appear unstructured and woolly, thus, in order to test them his concepts require clear and defined analyses of ethnographic evidence grounded outside of the cultural contexts he observed. The adaptation of performance used in this online examination is one way to achieve this; this thesis provides strong ethnographic evidence supporting his concept of performance, but also advances it through application to an environment he could not have considered. Reframing the work for internet fandom challenges the genus of physical groupings considered by Goffman in face to face interactions, but this online culture’s desire to maintain a cohesive performance and retain continuity is relative to their social proximity and sense of community, with the group exhibiting a disposition similar to offline interactions and the need to save ‘face’ in co-present encounters. Identity performances in online fandom are guided by the individual’s perception of both an imagined audience’s relationship to a media product, and to the community they perform to; this necessitates an adjustment to the forces guiding social interaction as used by Goffman, as the pervasive nature of modern media alters social interaction through both the availability and breadth of media offerings. Notwithstanding, his concept of performance has shown to be applicable to the online environment, with the internet perhaps offering a better degree of congruence with his dramaturgical metaphor in comparison to co-present encounters; though by more obviously and explicitly illustrating the way performance is managed in environments where rigorous attention to detail is possible, it also exemplifies how all social encounters are embedded with this propensity.

This examination does not confine online performances of the self in the same way prior examinations of online identity have through their positing of internet selves as mere representations of identity, as simulacrum. Instead, adapting Goffman illustrates how the self is created in a cycle of role adoption, performance and positive reinforcement, with the individual imbuing the role
with their own personal stamp; in online fandom contexts the adoption of role offers an explanation for the construction of mutually harmonious fan identities, with role acting as the blueprint for behaviour and appearance, defined by the product and community, a role whose repeated re-enactment embeds in the fan’s personal identity with its continued practice motivated by gratification derived from audience appreciation and belonging. Thus, the practices of fans are influenced through the online setting, affecting the community they are socially situated in and their sense of belonging (particularly, as evidenced by the data, through an increase a sense of camaraderie and connection), but in turn the individual sense of self is affected. Online fan culture intensifies the individual’s fandom in a continual cycle of performance, community reinforcement and developments of the self incorporating the fan role; more generally, it can be argued the self is affected by the individual’s use of new media technologies which permit performances to peers in online social spaces, as they foster relationships with social networks and exaggerate performance practices in order to interact. Giddens asserts ‘social changes that are of a deep-rooted kind, by their very nature, involve alterations in the character of day-to-day social practices’ (1988: 279); the internet is one such deep rooted social change that fundamentally alters the shaping of interactions and performances of the self across multiple spaces in daily experience.

Using Goffman in online settings cannot be undertaken indiscriminately; there are distinctions that need to be made for the environment, the first of which is the absence of a physical body, and the way this alters elements of performance. Goffman does not argue that we are all actors who perform, but that that the self is socially enacted and we perform to effectively express the parts of the self most fitting for the context in which interaction is required; each individual has routines and rituals that support front stage performance, whether dressing a specific way, applying make up, adopting a swagger to denote demeanour, or
using appropriate language for the context. Online, without the physical limitations of the body, front stage performance is more carefully executed and the front more purposefully constructed, tailored through explicit examples obtained during the consumption of other community members’ performances. The data illustrates that as digitally mediated identities are the sole means through which the member interacts with the community, great care and attention to detail are undertaken to overtly express identity and hone performance though avatar, signatures, banners, user status and the manner in which they engage, mobilising activity to convey the right impression; though the processes are the same online and offline, no direct correlation can be made with offline settings where performance is tied to a body. Online performance allows the individual to be their ultimate imagined self, and to be treated and interacted with accordingly, motivating the individual to perform in the right way. A belief in the role they are playing, Goffman’s first element of performance, is intensified by the individual’s ability to witness their own performance and analyse it from the position of audience, an effect of technology adding an extra layer of reflexivity for the individual concerning the effectiveness of their presentation. Ultimately, the physical body limits the capacity for a believable performance of ‘Buffy Summers’ offline, but online this is reversed, as there is a greater capacity for the individual to imbue their performance with a character’s manner through correctly appropriating symbols supporting its believability. Particularly upon first contact, online encounters emphasise the imitative aspects of performance over wholesale representations of the self, though this perhaps reflects modern society’s narcissistic tendencies, as argued by Lasch (1979). This gradually decreases as more of the personal identity of the individual comes through in their performance, but the lack of a body, the ability to use symbolic resources and the technology all converge to offer a type of performance different from, though related to, Goffman’s conception. Therefore, Goffman’s offers an explanation for the factors influencing the construction and maintenance of
online identities and fan cultures, but the expression and reception of performances are not codified in the same way as in physically co-present encounters.

The absence of co-presence is the biggest challenge facing internet adaptations of Goffman, but looking more generally at his view of human interaction can support the development of his theories in online environments. He argues when an individual purposefully engages in a social encounter it is a ‘focussed interaction’ (Goffman, 1966: 88), a process that ‘presumes and calls forth a monitoring by each individual of other or others’ responses in relation to their own’ (Giddens 1988 258). Whilst co-present encounters may be distinct in form, offering nuanced refinement in terms of gesture, facial expression and the ability to read the same details in others’ performances, it also limits the actor’s ability to control the scope of physical nuance and the efficacy of some aspects of performance; control over online identity symbols and the potential for idealisation of performance does not compensate for this absence, but the audiences’ expectations, their understanding of interaction and reading of performances have adjusted to communicate in symbolically mediated environments. For the audience, the inability to read specific clues about the authenticity or contrivance of performance is countered by an increased voyeuristic capacity, which allows them to build up greater biographical information and detail about an actor; if motivated, this provides a prime opportunity to disprove ‘facts’ given in performance, made particularly effective by the permanence and transferability of electronic data. Performances online are a type of focussed interaction, as they anticipate the need to monitor and reflect upon performance to produce an effective showing of the self.

Goffman offers more for understanding online environments than is commonly appreciated. His analysis of encounters identifies that human activity takes place in fluid and ambiguous interaction settings, organised by the individual through laminations of frame, and engaged in through performance; his
recognition of human interaction’s complex construction may help answer questions regarding the effects of the phenomena defined in the introduction as central to our experience of the modern age; media convergence, mediated identities, the redefinition of social boundaries, and the transcendence of geographical boundaries. In the modern age, more than one definition of the situation is in play at any one time for each individual depending on the various social realities they engage in, particularly as technology allows the individual to be simultaneously interacting in more than one environment; Goffman explains how multiple realities are built up layer after layer, from primary frames concerning the physical world, through social frames based on relationships and networks, finally to strips of activity that ‘try on’ other frames temporarily, the sum of which laminate individual experience. This illustrates how ‘each participant can be in several complex layers of situational definition at same time’ (Collins, 1988: 58), building a complex picture of how an individual’s reality is organised and experienced, but it is one that may better reflect the worlds inhabited by heavy media users. The activity of an online fandom member is defined by the social norms of the community and their fandom (or, multiple social groups and fandoms and their respective relevance to the individual at that time), but are also limited by the structure of the forum and the time they have available to engage in activity, resulting in a repeated dipping in and out of immersion. Goffman clearly states that ‘temporal and spatial brackets’ frame individual’s experience (1974: 252) thus recognising the ‘significance of time and space in relation to human activities,’ and how social interaction has an episodic character, being ‘strung-out’ through the individuals lived experience and their ‘daily collaboration in social settings’ (Giddens, 1988: 260). This makes Goffman particularly relevant to analyses of online fandom members’ experiences.

This thesis can then be said to tentatively advance Goffman’s work in terms of virtual co-presence, a phenomenon reflecting how interactions have expanded
(for culturally privileged Westernised participants at least) beyond the restraints of a physical setting and roughly homogenous participants, into an imagined space where participants are defining the boundaries of their reality in new ways and bringing varied cultural interpretations to the setting, albeit still framed by their collective consumption and interpretation of an American cultural product.

It has tested Goffman’s concept of self presentation, and used it to show how individuals build online selves and community through repeated performances conforming to the norms and expectations of the social group, a position that was latterly challenged by the Great Boards Debacle. However, this was a trial with positive results, as it shows how the online communities interactional rules are equivalent to those in the offline world, namely implicit, socially governed and fragile. Goffman explains the individual’s need to be ‘where the action is,’ where they feel ‘a plane of being, an engine of meaning, a world in itself, different from all other worlds’ (Goffman 1961a: 26), directs their agency, but he argues the most serious thing to consider in gatherings where focussed interaction is the participant’s perception of ‘the fun in them’ (ibid.):

something in which the individual can become unselfconsciously engrossed is something that can be real to him...[whilst] joint engrossment in something with others reinforces the reality carved out by the individual’s attention [sic]. (Goffman 1961a: 26, original emphasis).

Enjoyment then, is the factor that sustains involvement and engrossment, which is certainly the case in online fandom, but it is still bound by rules that guide acceptable kinds of performance. The data supports a perception of the boards becoming more fun when the IRC clique were fully engrossed, with higher levels of participation and playfulness from all members in the beginning. However, the increasing conflict caused by the group’s norms and their definition of reality had a large impact on community feel and the cohesion of
individual and group performances. Goffman argues there are only so many transgressions that can be passed off as irrelevant before reality becomes unstable, as the:

rules for the management of engrossment appear to be an insubstantial element of social life, a manner of courtesy, manners and etiquette. But it is to these flimsy rules, and not to the unshaking character of the external world, that we owe our unshaking sense of realities (Goffman, 1961a: 30–1)

The Great Boards Debacle proved how the definition of a situation online, including its affect on the roles and identities performed within the context, is a delicate thing, that has correlations to real lived experience. When the rules disintegrated, the cohesion for self and community came under threat. However, as encounter is not a fragile thing but ‘is an extraordinarily robust structure, capable of ignoring all kinds of routine trouble [and] only in the most exceptional of circumstances is it seriously and overtly threatened’ (Strong, 1988: 232), the board continues to be a place of convergence for communal appreciation of the fan object, whilst the implicit rules governing interaction in the community have been strengthened as a result of the conflict.

This thesis’ examination of themes in the study of media audiences, and the subsequent positioning of fan studies concludes that not only can communities exist online, but the same rules and order that construct, maintain, and negotiate social reality in offline communities govern internet ones. As with offline communities, when the structure and norms change, the community needs to adapt. Fan communities are adept at negotiating relationships of power, and striving to maintain a sense of community through mutually harmonious definitions of role and performance. As this research has shown through its employment in an environment where performance is in plain sight, there are applications for the marriage of Goffman to internet contexts, though
it is possible their results will be less definitive; performance remains, as Goffman would say, context specific.
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