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15
TEENS’ FANDOM COMMUNITIES
Making Friends and Countering Unwanted Contacts

Julián de la Fuente and Pilar Lacasa

Introduction

This chapter is dedicated to digital fan communities (Duffett, 2013). Of particular interest are online practices that allow teenagers to build a community of interest around an idol and thus establish friendships (Chambers, 2013). The analytical framework of contact management is applied, understood to be types of people’s relationships and the voluntary selection of these through direct or indirect strategies (Hinton & Hjorth, 2013). Usually, these practices come about through the creation of multimodal discourses that mark the belonging to or exclusion from the community through the fanfiction remix (Navas, Gallagher, & Burrough, 2015).

Taking into account these principles, the main goals within this research are as follows:

1. To explore how teenagers use social networks, and where they select their contacts from by looking for common interests to participate as active citizens in the fan community;
2. To analyse how they build friendship between fans, when interaction processes are established between the fan community framework and the personal relationships that followers maintain;
3. To examine the role of multimodal texts in the formation of the community insofar as they become instrumental in the engagement between fans in online and offline contexts.

For this research, a three-year ethnographic study was carried out from digital creation workshops that took place in a city lab, and which grouped together young people between 8 and 14 years of age. In this chapter, the focus is on a group of girls who regard themselves as fans of celebrities, such as One Direction or Harry Styles, as an example of a relationships community. These fangirls were selected by their active participation and the public commitment to their music idols. As a result of the analysis of their mobile phone contents and in-depth group interviews, their material practices can be connected with the meanings created around the fan community. In this chapter, the mechanisms these communities use to guide contacts management will be explored.
Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the research allowed an approach to fans’ internet practices (Ito, 2010; Marwick & boyd, 2014) that explored the interaction between macro and micro communities (Hinton & Hjorth, 2013), and strategies that fans carry out to manage their contacts (Chambers, 2013). The research refers to desired contacts when there is a positive selection of them, in online and offline contexts. It refers to countering mechanisms for unwanted contacts, alluding to those relationships between people who avoid each other or relationships which finally fail to be established.

Fan Communities as a Source of Contacts

The activity of young people on the internet is marked by the use of social networks (Cortesi et al., 2015) that allow them to interact with people beyond the family or the school as physical places of socialisation. In many cases, this is where teens explore and get access to new contacts. Searching for information or content creation are preferred activities that lead young people to participate through social networks (Hinton & Hjorth, 2013). Fan communities appear within this context as interest groups who share a hobby or admiration for an idol.

If, originally, fans were regarded as a transgressive minority (Fiske, 1992), more recently these communities have been gaining more prominence in digital media and can be considered an increasingly common context for adolescent relationships. To reach this point, fandom studies have gone through several stages: from a focus on the fan community as interpreters of texts (Jenkins, 1992/2013), to a perspective based on social practices (Barton & Lampley, 2013), and then to a more individual analysis focussed on the identity established between the idol and their follower (Duffett, 2013).

Regarding the focus of this study, the interaction between the fans from musical groups has previously been studied by authors such as Kibby (2000), and especially the friendship relations developed between musical fans by Beer (2008). There are also numerous studies that link these fan communities with age and gender groups like fangirls (Trier-Bieniek, 2015).

Moreover, although it is primarily a certain idol, such as a celebrity or hobby, that brings these fans together, their community progressively develops and becomes more complex in terms of the contacts participants establish with each other (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2017). As a result, each case must essentially be studied in great detail in order to understand the dynamic participation strategies occurring in communities of fans and particularly those among young people.

The researchers, therefore, understand that fan communities are not just cultural phenomena, since their activities range from civic engagement (Jenkins, Ito, & boyd, 2015) to social learning (Holland & Lave, 2009). These activities are closely related to the strategies with which community participants establish relationships among their members. To understand how these relationships come about, the practices that are carried out through social networks will now be examined.

Relationship Practices between Fans

The practices within a community of fans must be addressed in relation to the public and private activities of its members, which are characterised by connecting the online and offline worlds (Ito, 2010; Miller, 2016). Therefore, this research is interested in the community activities that extend beyond social networks and private relationships maintained by the fans. In this sense, friendship practices (Chambers, 2013) are particularly significant as is countering unwanted contacts (Marwick & boyd, 2014).
To describe these practices, first a definition of their role within the fandom is presented. For this, Mizuko Ito (2010) proposes the concept of 'genre of participation', connecting this category of textual analysis with social activity. She explains how the context of the media is in itself a model of community involvement and therefore contact selection. In fact, two modes through which this participation is organised are established.

The first genre of participation is characterised by personal interests, which leads many children to seek contacts through social networks (Willett, 2017). This means, in practice, participation in communities that at first have nothing more in common than the interests that bind them as fans, but that over time develop personal relationships that often translate into offline contacts.

The other genre of participation centred on friendship refers to communities that transfer relationships established in the offline world to social networks. Therefore, the decision to accept a contact or not conditions the nature of the sociability that the children perform, but, at the same time, encourages more intense and continuous friendships (boyd, 2014).

The community can also be approached from macro or micro perspectives (Hinton & Hjorth, 2013). In the first case, the focus of interest is placed on culture, in the second on personal relationships. In both, these forms of participation lead to mediatisation of a fan community (Chambers, 2013) that suddenly becomes a list of contacts to manage. Now, which discourses enable this participation process in the fan communities are examined.

**Fans Engagement through Multimodal Discourses**

It has already been demonstrated that social networks are the preferred expression space for fan communities (Burton, 2017). Within these networks, young people use different language modes to communicate, whether through text, images, videos, sound, or emoticons. The creation of messages using these different languages together is called multimodality (Kress, 2010; Rowsell, 2013) and is configured as a preferred form of discourse within the fan communities, used to strengthen engagement between members of this community.

This multimodal discourse used by young people to build messages in fan communities and establish engagement among participants is called remix (Navas & Gallagher, 2014). It is a practice of appropriation of content distributed over the network, preferably images, texts, or songs that are easily edited and redistributed through social networks. But at the same time, the mere recontextualisation of these contents generates new meanings (Knobel & Lankshear, 2010) that are interpreted as completely new messages by the fans. In this way, the fans not only relate to each other, but also generate discourse models that predefine the content created by followers who want to join the community.

Among those types of multimodal discourses that use the remix to create new material are memes, fanarts, or fanfictions. In this study, special attention is paid to fanfiction, as a community-mediating element that contributes to engagement between fans (Hellekson & Busse, 2014). These discourses start from the elements exhibited in the canon of the idol, from which they explore narrative worlds that often connect with personal experiences, their own cultural traits, or shared desires in the community (Thomas, 2006).

Multimodal discourses are the means of participation not only in the fan community, but also in moving the fans’ initiative out of the community (Daugherty, Eastin, & Bright, 2008). This is how social learning and civic engagement arise from fandom, and this is particularly reflected among the young (Soep, 2014).

The researchers have found fan communities which, thanks to friendship and countering practices, develop strong engagement that allows them to tackle challenges that would otherwise be impossible to carry out in offline spaces such as in the family or at school. Social networks allow young people to build their own identity (Lacasa et al., 2017) and develop meaningful participation in their interests.
Methodological Approach

The researchers adopted an ethnographic approach (Pink, 2012) for this study which allowed them to specifically locate the fan communities they wanted to study in online and offline scenarios (Boellstorff, 2012). The interaction between these two worlds is facilitated by technology, the use of multiple platforms and profiles, as well as the special protection required by the privacy rights of young people (Livingstone & Bovill, 2013).

Fangirls around One Direction and Harry Styles

This research looked at the One Direction and Harry Styles fan community. One Direction is a British band that rose to fame in 2010 thanks to a television contest and whose presence through social networks is particularly prominent. The band announced their temporary separation in 2016, which has not prevented any of its members from continuing their solo career. Such is the case of Harry Styles, actor and singer, who has brought together many of the One Direction fans.

The fan phenomenon of this boy band has been the subject of numerous studies (Direction, 2013; Korobkova, 2014), standing out especially for its particular commitment to celebrity, to the point of identifying with separate names those fans who participate in the community as ‘directioners’ and those who simply declare themselves followers of the group as ‘directionators’. This is an example of a fan community where it is not enough to identify with the celebrity, one is also required to establish relationships with other fans. For this, there are multiple strategies that force the ‘directioners’ to participate in those activities that are considered essential to demonstrate that they are true One Direction fans. Otherwise, the tendency is to exclude themselves as ‘directionators’. All of the above makes this community a particularly significant example for analysis of the processes through which participants seek or exclude contacts.

For this longitudinal study, a group of girls between 13 and 14 years of age were selected when the study began in 2015 and they have continued to be in the study to this day. They go to the same school and regard each other as friends (Lacasa, Méndez, & de-la-Fuente, 2016). All of them have participated in digital creation workshops around the fandom developed in a city lab called ‘Matadero Madrid’ (Spain). These workshops were carried out by researchers to collect data by creating content around popular idols. Those participants who regarded themselves as fans and agreed to share their activity through social networks were selected. Their online evolution was observed over a period of three years (Gair & Van Luyn, 2017; Pink, 2012), whilst at the same time periodic interviews were also simultaneously conducted to explain their offline relationships. In the interviews, which took place in informal contexts closely connected to everyday life, the researchers monitored the girls’ development and shared their ‘zone of proximal development’ in order to get closer to what was of interest to the girls at any given moment (Holzman, 2010). This approach allowed the researchers to relate the activities of the fans’ community to their interpersonal relationships, offering a model of practices that will be analysed next.

The Analysis Process: Unit and Levels of Practices

Analysis of the girls’ activity inside and outside the fan community, relating to the strategies that facilitate the establishment or the containment of contacts, enabled the researchers to reconstruct their practices holistically. For this, an interpretive paradigm was used (Bourdieu, 1972; Flick, 2018) that led the researchers to superimpose successive levels of analysis from the practice concept unit. They
were able to extend with this unit of analysis (Matusov, 2007) from the context, through the activity, until they reached the discourse:

1. The first level of analysis focuses on the socio-cultural context, that is, on social networks as spaces for socialising available to teenagers to build fan communities (Gray et al., 2017). In this case, the researchers analysed how they carry out contacts within this community and what rules are followed to maintain these relationships;

2. The second level involves analysing the activities that girls develop inside and outside the community, as genres of participation (Ito, 2010). For this, the analysis focused on the interpersonal relationships that arise between fans and how they specifically occur in the offline world;

3. The third level is dedicated to discourses, especially the use of the remix as a multimodal discourse that helps to build the identity of the idol and the social engagement of the community (Duffett, 2013). The selected examples refer to the creation of fanfictions and the rules that govern their distribution through social networks.

The tool used to process all this data was NVIVO software, which enabled analysis of the audiovisual recordings of the workshops, the audio recordings of the in-depth interviews, and the investigators’ reports, all on the same platform. The participants’ own interpretation of their activities and the evolution in these data over time was particularly important for node classification. This method (Lacasa, Martinez-Borda, & Mendez, 2013) allowed the researchers to create a narrative and, at the same time, a conceptual explanation of the results which is presented below.

**Results**

Young fans participate in the community by establishing contacts through social networks. This practice involves the selection of these contacts directly or indirectly. This chapter discusses processes and genres of participation in social networks (Chambers, 2013; Ito, 2010; Marwick & boyd, 2014) as a starting point to analyse engagement with the community through diverse communication settings, immersed in specific social and cultural contexts and mediated by multimodal discourses. As indicated, this study’s data comes from musical communities, whose participants share interests around One Direction, when the study began in 2015, and currently around Harry Styles.

**Social Networks and Fans: Interest, Friendship, and Commitment**

The process of seeking and excluding contacts among teens when they participate in the community, associated with the use of certain cultural instruments – social networks in this case – will now be looked at. We will look at a community of practice understood as a social environment mediated by technology, in which people unfold their daily lives, sharing common goals and interests (Holland & Lave, 2009).

**Friendship and Interest Practices between Fans**

In the example below, in transcript 1, the researcher asked about people with whom the fans maintained contacts because they shared common interests. Teenagers do not explicitly refer to exclusion mechanisms, but they point out the selection criteria used to include other participants among their contacts. In this regard, boyd (2014) refers to the construction of what
she considers ‘networked publics’, partly supported by technology and partly by the fan communities. Feelings of tolerance and respect towards others may develop there.

Transcript 1 The meaning of a contact (2015).

Ana: So for example, I follow an account and if you retweet something, I get into your account, take a look, and see what it is like, what it is that you like, what opinion you have about that relationship and all that ... Of course, in the real world, it is more complicated . . .

Researcher: ... but you have reached those virtual friends because you are both fans.

Luisa: Yes, of course, because we had something in common.

Ana: But then you do not talk to them just about One Direction or some other celebrity ... in the end you end up talking about your opinions about other things. I mean, in the end it’s not just that, you start talking about that.

To interpret this transcription, researchers identified the need for interaction between the two participation processes proposed by Mizuko Ito (2010), alluding to ‘interest driven’ and ‘friendship driven’ processes. The first process would take place in the fan communities themselves, the second leads to forms of interaction that can be considered as personal. Both forms of participation interact, establishing a continuous feedback between them so that relationships can be established with the same people in the two participation genres.

The online world gives fans the possibility to choose between people who would be difficult to approach in offline situations. This chapter has first shown that social networks are an instrument to establish genres of participation, and now this chapter will explain how these genres are immersed in other types of practices. The researchers were interested to know how the participants interpret their participation in a fan community.

Contacts, Participation, and Social Engagement

Taking into account several studies (Burton, 2017; Soep, 2014), the focus here is on the strategies that lead young people to select certain social networks they participate in, and which will condition who they will establish contacts with. More specifically, in this case, Rosa relates civic engagement to the obligations of those who have to maintain the commitment to their audiences on the network. Once again, positive rather than exclusive implications of this participation in the network are sought. The transcript below refers to a writer they follow who writes fanfiction:


Researcher: And why do you think she does it?

Ana: Well, I think she likes writing a lot and of course she likes Harry too! Because she’s a fan of Harry.

Researcher: Because she’s a fan of Harry, right?

Rosa: I don’t know, she likes to write, it’s her hobby, but there comes a point when if you have an audience of 9,000 followers, you cannot stop posting photos, you have that commitment.

The researchers are interested in exploring the girls’ opinions about an author related to fanfiction as a form of citizen participation (Korobkova, 2014; Soep, 2014). In the case of the author mentioned by Rosa, the commitment is to the author’s audience, evidently fans of One Direction.
This author, on the other hand, contributes to the fact that adolescents can select their contacts in that community where they expect to find other people with similar interests. It is a positive selection of contacts, of people with whom they will interact on the internet.

**Interpersonal Friendship and Countering Relationships**

The focus of this section will be on analysing how girls move in another universe of personal relationships, which Ito (2010) calls ‘friendship driven’ and which has been analysed in depth by other authors (Chambers, 2013). In this case, it is about relationships that they maintain with friends and peers in both online and offline environments. In some instances, they support each other and use strategies to strengthen the community, both by seeking or establishing new contacts and excluding others, generally indirectly.

**Social Media Profiles and Relationships**

The girls talk about a relatively common practice among them which is that of maintaining different accounts in social networks. In transcript 3, Ana is explicit about the differences between her fan profile and another one she considers personal. She prefers to keep what she calls her ‘fan profile’ well away from her usual contacts. In this profile, she expresses her feelings towards Harry and it even sometimes becomes a diary of personal feelings and experiences that she wishes to keep in a private setting (Marwick & boyd, 2014). On the other hand, in the profile that she considers personal, she identifies herself, she mentions her usual friends who are mostly her schoolmates, and she also recounts her daily activities.

**Transcript 3 Relationships between accounts (2015).**

Researcher: Do you follow the same people that you have in one place in another?
Ana: No, not the same but . . .
Researcher: So the messages that you post are different?
Ana: Sure.
Ana: In that account (personal) I am more, because I do not know . . . (stops).
Researcher: In which one?
Ana: Well, who I am and things like that. I mean, if I’m meeting up or something, then I’ll say that I’m doing that and say who I’ve arranged to meet up with.
Researcher: In your profile?
Luisa: In the real one.
Ana: In the personal one.

It is clear that Ana maintains two independent worlds that try to exclude each other. In each, there are clear differences between the contents that are published or explored and also the people at whom it is aimed. Chambers (2013) points out how technology allows this intimacy, shortening barriers in space and time. But what is perhaps more relevant is that each communication channel has a set of attributes that makes it more suitable for conveying one message or another, and they are selected based on those characteristics.

**The ‘Hangouts’ and the Presence in the Physical World**

Various studies have insisted on the fact that physical contact contributes properties to human relationships that are not present in online life (Turkle, 2011). In this case, the researchers observe
how offline relationships are established in the macro and micro communities, and how they are maintained in differentiated areas, although it is difficult to establish any separation between them.

In transcript 4 Luisa and Ana differentiate between two types of relationships that take place in offline spaces. The first ones are what they call ‘prestige hangouts’, which have been organised by staff directly related to One Direction. In those meetings that are accessed through a contest, the fans listen to music, play, or exchange objects. The fans are selected in such a way as to increase their interest in attending the events. Other ways to physically interact among fans is what they call ‘hangouts of people’, implying that the selection is made by those who follow a particular fan account through Twitter, and from which contacts are subsequently established through WhatsApp. These smaller groups can physically interact with one another if they live in the same city, but, in any case, they establish personal friendships between participants:

Transcript 4

Researcher: And what are these hangouts like?
Luisa: Some are prestigious, so to speak, because they are for draws.
Ana: Oh yeah!
Luisa: Like the one Ana and I went to, and then there are others that are hangouts but with people . . .
Researcher: And how do you know about them?
Ana: On Twitter.
Luisa: There was the big group and then another smaller group and then those of us who did a lot, a lot, more friends.
Ana: Sometimes someone says, do you want to make a WhatsApp group? Or you say tell is there any WhatsApp group to get into?
Ana: They put it on Twitter, the fan account says who wants to make a WhatsApp group, then you say, yes, I want to follow it back.

Luisa explained clearly how participants are selected in a fan group who are also friends, by simply privately sending phone numbers and following the person proposing the creation of that group. It should be kept in mind that, at that time, to send private messages to someone it was necessary for both people to follow one another on the social network. In this sense, it is obvious that the communication channels will condition the messages sent by them.

Multimodal Texts as Mediators in the Fan Community

If anything has been clarified so far it is that the relationships that are established through the community are mediated by multimodal texts (Kress, 2010), including those that contain multiple expressive written, visual, or sound signals. The next section discusses some examples of how the use of these texts also contributes to generating links between those who participate in the community, and how they can also indirectly generate inclusion and exclusion processes when establishing engagement (Owens, 2015).

Fanfictions in Wattpad

The first focus is on texts produced through the Wattpad application, in which teenagers create and reconstruct stories related to fan communities. This application facilitates the self-publication of texts similar to novels, written in chapters and narrating the adventures of the character. Participants become followers of certain texts, keeping up with new contributions by the author. In
this way, fans not only establish contacts but also commit to their relationship. Transcript 5 includes comments from Lucia, author of a number of chapters on Wattpad. Lucia had started writing in 2014 and has 43 followers, among whom are schoolmates and some participants in fan communities.

**Transcript 5 Fanfiction in Wattpad (2015).**

**Lucia:** Have you seen my book?
**Researcher:** I loved it! I’ve seen that you had three or four chapters! I saw it recently.
**Lucia:** No, I have 17 chapters . . .
**Researcher:** And how did you come to write it?
**Lucia:** It’s because I like to read, and I guess I wanted to try. If everyone does it, well, why not me?

This fragment highlights the importance of multimodal discourses and fanfiction in particular (Hellekson & Busse, 2014; Thomas, 2006) to strengthen relationships between fans. Lucia shows her commitment to the community when producing these texts that allow her to expand her number of contacts, as well as to deepen her relationships and status within the community.

**Remix: Twitter and Instagram**

The narratives around the idol are also built around audiovisual discourse. Kress (2010) noted that the image is displacing other forms of expression in public domains. The girls refer to an author who appears in different social networks with the user name ‘hsxallthelove’. Again, the discourse is a narrative whose character is Harry Styles, who had previously been a band member of One Direction. This is now not just a remix of images, but more of a contribution with a text on the escapades of the characters who belonged to the band. The author has 8,298 followers in a closed account to which it is necessary to be accepted, although she only follows the official account of Harry Styles.

**Transcript 6 Remix on Instagram (2018).**

**Researcher:** Well, tell me a little bit about it.
**Rosa:** Well, this girl writes stories and the characters in the stories are Harry, Liam . . .
**Rosa:** As you can see each picture is like a part of the story, then if you look here, each picture is like a piece of text.
**Researcher:** She does not write very long text, does she?
**Rosa:** No, no . . .
**Researcher:** That’s what I was going to say, there is great coherence here.
**Rosa:** It’s really good, because not only does she really work on the story, it is very good because it is all . . . you see here there are messages and also pieces of news and things like that, you know? Which is all highly consistent with the story.

The girls also explain how the coherence of the story is achieved, when the chapters take place or another book is started. The author plays with the typology or even with the colours, from real photographs of the characters (Navas et al., 2015). In addition, the author uses diverse strategies to achieve audience immersion, for example by allowing the person to become the protagonist of the story and even including his or her own name. For this, each time the protagonist is mentioned the name is blanked out.
These data demonstrate how fanfiction and remix represent a form of expression that helps to strengthen the One Direction community. Harry Styles followers have selected a cultural production generated by a member of the community with whom they share values, knowledge, and feelings. This research has identified ways of engagement that cause the selection of community contacts between fans.

Conclusions

The conclusions of this study focus on how adolescents who participate in fan communities organised around musical celebrities establish their contacts through certain strategies that also contribute to the maintenance and transformation of the aforementioned communities.

First, the fan communities to which young people belong rely on the social networks that are projected in online and offline areas. Within these networks, contacts are sought by exploring the information provided by the participants in these two areas. It is this information that allows them to select who they want to interact with or which containment mechanisms they can use to avoid certain participants.

Second, the strategies that allow fans to establish contacts with other people, whom fans have considered as ‘wanted contacts’, rely on friendship and shared interests. However, these contacts can be established on a double level, which the researchers have called macro and micro. The macro level focusses on the broader fan community and the micro level deals with the interpersonal relationships, with interaction taking place between the two levels.

Third, the countering practices that teens establish can be related to the concept of ‘unwanted contacts’ and include at least three processes. First, certain practices lead them to focus attention on those who share interests, excluding the rest. Second, the way online social networks work guides their exploration and selection of contacts to those with similar interests. Finally, the lack of an offline relationship or even a change in one’s interests is also a mechanism that may inhibit contact.

The fourth conclusion is that the creation of multimodal texts mediate the relationships established between fans. In this case, it is necessary to go beyond the reconstruction of canonical texts. New meanings are generated through remix that allow fans to associate their own contexts with the celebrity. The creation of fanfiction is an example of participation and contact management. In this way, the engagement of the participants with the community is reaffirmed, helping to establish ties among the fans and thus further affirm the teen fandom community.

Notes

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2 www.mataderomadrid.org.
3 Her account can be found at www.instagram.com/hxallthelove/?hl=en.
5 Lucia’s participation in social networks can be found in several pages of her account in Wattpad:
   www.wattpad.com/user/Lucialds7
   www.wattpad.com/user/Lucialds7/following
   www.wattpad.com/list/91077228-Lucialds7s-reading-list.

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