Digital Fandom and Cyber Identity Construction through Language Use "The Song of Ice and Fire" Fandom

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Abstract

This article explores the digital fandom surrounding "The Song of Ice and Fire" on Discord, focusing on the intricate interplay of identity, community, and media engagement within online fan communities. Drawing upon definitions and key concepts of fandom, as well as insights from scholars in the field, the study investigates fan typologies and societal perceptions, highlighting the diverse ways in which fans are classified and understood. Additionally, the paper delves into the dichotomy of "Good Taste" versus "Bad Taste" in media content consumption, examining how individuals are perceived based on their affiliation with specific media productions. With a narrowed focus on "The Song of Ice and Fire" digital fandom, the study explores the construction of identity and cyber identity within this online community. Through discussions on user motivations for learning and teaching Dothraki and High Valyrian on Discord, the research uncovers the multifaceted reasons driving fan engagement and participation in language learning endeavors. Insights gleaned from personal interviews with linguist David Peterson and Reuben Hayslett (known as Khal Tihi – his Dothraki name), a prominent member of the fandom, provide depth and context to our understanding of fan motivations for constructed language learning. In conclusion, the study underscores the complexity of digital fandom spaces, revealing the diverse array of motivations that shape fan engagement, participation, and interactivity within online social platforms.

Keywords: *fandom, fan typologies, cyber identity, Game of Thrones fandom, constructed language use.*

Understanding "Fandom": Definitions and Key Concepts

In this segment of the present study our main focus lies on the concept of "fandom" providing a review of the varied definitions and descriptions found in scholarly literature by various authors. Before exploring the reasons why fans participate in different activities, such as learning constructed languages created for entertainment purposes but not originally intended for real-world use, or any other fan-related pursuits, it is necessary to define several key concepts. These

include "fan", "fandom", and "digital fandom" which are relevant to our discussion.

According to Jenkins (1992, p. 12), "*fan* is an abbreviated form of the word "fanatic," which has its roots in the Latin word "fanaticus." In its most literal sense, "fanaticus" simply meant "of or belonging to the temple, a temple servant, a devotee" but it quickly assumed more negative connotations, "of persons inspired by orgiastic rites and enthusiastic frenzy *(Oxford Latin Dictionary)*." Similarly, Cochran (2008, pp. 239-240) states that 'the root of the term "fan" can be found in the Latin word *fanaticus,* meaning "insane, mad, possessed by the gods", which may explain some of the widespread "otherness" connotations of fans still evident today. Jenkins (1992, p. 12) states that

> *its abbreviated form, "fan", first appeared in the late 19th century in journalistic accounts describing followers or professional sports teams (especially in baseball) at a time when the sport moved from a predominantly participant activity to a spectator event, but soon was expanded to incorporate any faithful "devotee" of sports or commercial entertainment.*

As per Booth (2010, p. 18), "from the 1930's onward, groups of people who all enjoyed the same media entertainment were referred to as «fans», from the pejorative meaning of the term «fanatic»." Jenkins (1992, p. 12), further elaborates on this point by stating that 'the term "fanatic" moved from a reference to certain excessive forms of religious belief and worship to any "excessive and mistaken enthusiasm", often evoked in criticism to opposing political beliefs, and then, more generally, to madness "such as might result from possession by a deity or demon" *(Oxford English Dictionary)*." Jenkins cites Jewett and Lawrence (1977) who claim that 'science fiction television and its fans constitute a kind of secular faith, "a strange, electronic religion… in the making." Jenson (1992, p. 9) agrees by admitting that "the literature on fandom is haunted by images of deviance. The fan is consistently characterized (referencing the term's origins) as a potential fanatic. This means that fandom is seen as excessive, bordering on deranged, behaviour." Jenkins (1992, p. 11) states that "fans are characterized as «kooks» obsessed with trivia, celebrities and collectibles; as misfits and «crazies»; […] as childish adults; in short, as people who have little or no «life»." Harrington and Bielby (1995, p. 112) somewhat agree, claiming "according to most accounts, to be a fan is to be abnormal: the normal fan is the lunatic fan." Thus far, it is apparent that the term "fandom" often carries negative associations. As previously mentioned, various descriptors such as "kook", "obsessed", "crazies", "childish", "lunatic", and "people who have no life" are commonly used to characterize individuals who harbor strong passions for certain subjects. According to Jenkins (1992, p. 12),

> *if the term "fan" was originally evoked in a somewhat playful fashion and was often used sympathetically by sports writers, it 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.*

The fairness and ethical considerations surrounding the use of such terms to characterize individuals with specific interests may be subject to scrutiny. This approach seems to exhibit bias and subjectivity in some cases. While a definitive answer to this question remains elusive, it is evident that there is a prevalent tendency among individuals to criticize or reject ideologies, activities, or enthusiasms they do not comprehend or with which they cannot identify. While studying individuals' responses to such phenomena may merit independent research within a distinct field, our primary focus remains on comprehending the "Game of Thrones" digital fandom's inclination not only towards expressing enthusiasm for the TV show but also towards actively participating in the study and teaching of the two constructed languages showcased in the series. This particular phenomenon captured our scholarly curiosity and served as the primary motivation for undertaking this research endeavor. While fan studies hold significant appeal within academic circles, it remains a vast and intricate subject demanding further scrutiny and research efforts. However, our study primarily falls within the domain of sociolinguistics, necessitating a concentrated focus on the linguistic dimensions of the "Game of Thrones" fandom's engagements, rather than delving into other facets of fan behavior associated with this designation. Contrary to our findings, our target fanbase does not align with the fanatic or "obsessed" fan category we will subsequently elaborate on in this paper.

Fan Typologies – A Brief Account

Prior to delving into this topic, it is imperative to establish a clear understanding of the concept of "fan" itself. Booth (2016, p. 19) contends that "in traditional parlance, a fan is a person who invests time and energy into thinking about, or interacting with, a media text: in other words, one who is enraptured by a particular media object." In "Fan Phenomena: Star Trek", Drushel (2013, p. 5) cites the forerunners of fan phenomena, noting that "these devotees did not invent fandom" and refers to Bacon-Smith (1992), who argues that "media fandom as it is now practiced originated in *Star Trek* fandom." Booth (2010, p. 19) references Jenkins, who categorizes television media consumers into three generalized groups: "Zappers", "Casuals", and "Loyals". He explains that

> *Zappers flit around the television channels, flipping between shows, but watching no program in particular. Casuals enjoy watching different television shows when they are on the air, but rarely schedule time to watch. Loyals as fans, actually watch fewer hours of television each week than the general population: they cherry pick those shows that best satisfy their interest, they give themselves over fully to them, they tape them and may watch them more than one time; they spend more of their social time talking about them; and they are more likely to pursue content across media channels.* (Booth, 2010, p. 19)

Jenkins's classification appears to offer a pragmatic and plausible framework. It is evident that the term "fan" encompasses a diverse range of individuals, making it impractical for scholars to lump every type of fan into a single category. Such an endeavor would be overly simplistic and unfeasible. Therefore, we concur with Jenkins's delineation of fan categories, recognizing the need for a nuanced examination to ascertain the appropriate classification for the "Game of Thrones" fandom. Drawing from Jenkins's definitions and our research findings detailed in a preceding study, it is reasonable to position the "Game of Thrones" fandom, notably the "The Song of Ice and Fire" subgroup, within the "Loyals" category. Nevertheless, this categorization represents a broad assumption. Based on our observations, the extent of active involvement in language learning or teaching activities among fandom members remains undetermined, given the diverse outcomes reflected in our data. Nevertheless, according to Vilela (2019), the "Game of Thrones" TV show's popularity,

> *coupled with the cultural and technological factors that precede it, is symptomatic for understanding the development of the so-called "series culture" (see Silva, 2014a, 2014b), which has in the fans one of its biggest catalysts. Through different levels of engagement, fandom constructs critical and interpretive practices, cultural productions, and the formation of an alternative social community through active consumption.* (Jenkins, 2007, 2015; Fiske, 1992).

Booth (2010, p. 20) concludes that

> *whether or not we are fans of cult television, chances are good that everyone is a fan of* something. *We may not be the fans of* Doctor Who or Star Trek, *(…) but we might be fans of music, of sports, or even food.*

He continues along the same line and states that "whatever we are fans of we base part of our identity on our appreciation of that fandom" (Booth, 2010, p. 20). Booth references Sandvoss's (2005) concept that a media object contributes to a fan's sense of self, suggesting that some fans utilize their fan identity to distinguish themselves from other media audiences (Booth, 2010, p. 20). In his work "Textual Poachers" (1992, p. 15), Jenkins discusses the emergence of distinct fan categories, including the "orgiastic", "groupie", "comic", "psychotic",

and "eroticized' fans, and highlights how these labels have developed over time. He ultimately observes that, within contemporary culture,

> *the fan still constitutes a scandalous category in the contemporary culture, one alternately the target of ridicule and anxiety of dread and desire. Whether viewed as a religious fanatic, a psychopathic killer, a neurotic fantasist, or a lust-crazed groupie, the fan remains a "fanatic" or false worshiper, whose interests are fundamentally alien to the "realm" of normal cultural experience and whose mentality is dangerously out of touch with reality.* (Jenkins, 1992, p. 15)

In Lewis's edited work, "Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media", Jenson (1992, p. 9) also describes two fan types, namely "the obsessed individual" and "the hysterical crowd". She suggests that "these two images of fans are based in an implicit critique of modern life" wherein "fandom is seen as a psychological symptom of a presumed social dysfunction." She continues along the same line stating that "once fans are characterized as deviant, they can be treated as disreputable, even dangerous «others»" (1992, p. 9). Jenson provides an insightful perspective on this phenomenon, claiming that

> *fans, when insistently characterized as "them", can be distinguished from "people like us" (students, professors and social critics) as well as from (the more reputable) patrons or aficionados or collectors.* (1992, p. 9)

Jenson's perspective is intriguing as she draws a comparison between two distinct social categories with varying preferences in media content consumption or hobbies. One of these categories, such as art collectors or patrons of specific restaurant chains or cuisines, is often regarded as respectable or reputable, while the preferences of the other category are deemed wrong and are subject to societal rejection. However, according to Jenson,

> *respectable social types could also be defined as "fans", in that they display interest, affection and attachment, especially for figures in, or aspects of, their chosen field. But the habits and practices of, say, scholars and critics are not deemed fandom, and are not considered to be potentially deviant or dangerous.* (1992, pp. 9-10)

It is quite natural to ask why this phenomenon occurs. Jenson's conclusions claim that "the characterization of fandom as pathology is based in, supports, and justifies elitist and disrespectful beliefs about our common life" (1992, p. 10). It is evident that labeling fandom as a mental disorder can lead to negative perceptions about our everyday lives. This perspective is concerning because it implies that millions of people who share common interests, such as enjoying the music of a particular band or following a TV series, are somehow abnormal. This raises the

question: when does being a fan become viewed as problematic? Are individuals who passionately support a rock band or a rap artist automatically categorized as having a mental disorder? Certainly, it is important to recognize that there have been instances of extreme behavior among fans, including criminal acts and even homicides directed towards celebrities. While there are well-known cases of such incidents, we will not delve into them here as our research is primarily focused on a fandom that hasn't been associated with scandalous or dangerous behavior.

In specialized literature, there exists a tendency to link fans primarily with music or movie celebrities. The concept suggests that fans are, implicitly at least, a product of celebrity culture, defined as a response to the star system (1992, p. 10). Jenson provides an illustration of a psychologist's perspective on the subject, as outlined in an article from *People Weekly* concerning the tragic killing of television actress Rebecca Schaeffer by an obsessive fan:

> *The cult of celebrity provides archetypes and icons with which alienated souls can identify. On top of that, this country has been embarking for a long time on a field experiment in the use of violence on TV. It is common-place to watch people getting blown away. We've given the losers in life or sex a rare chance to express their dominance.* (Jenson, 1992, p. 10)

Jenson also offers an alternative viewpoint from a security guard, who was also cited in the article:

> *It's because of the emphasis on the personal lives of media figures, especially on television. And this has blurred the line between appropriate and inappropriate behavior.* (Jenson, 1992, p. 10)

We concur that extreme behaviors are not considered healthy or acceptable, particularly when they involve serious offenses or crimes. However, evaluating the behaviors of obsessive fans and providing specialized explanations is beyond our expertise. Instead, we can refer to scholars who have conducted thorough research in the fields of Fan Studies and Psychology and present a brief account of their insights on the subject. Jenson (1992, p. 11) cites Schickel (1985), who compares deranged fans and serial killers to "us"; he concludes that we "dare not turn too quickly away" from "these creatures" who lead "mad existences" because "the forces that move them also move within ourselves in some much milder measure". Jenson concludes that "these academically-oriented accounts develop an image of the pathological fan who is a deranged version of «us»." Jenson also presents Caughey's perspective (1978a.), who describes how "in a media addicted age, celebrities function as role models for fans who engage in «artificial social relations» with them" (1992, p. 11). Evidently, the media played a significant role in shaping these fans' behaviors, ultimately leading to actions, some of which were

tragic. According to Jenson (1992, p. 11), "one model of the pathological fan is that of the obsessed loner, who (under the influence of the media) has entered into an intense fantasy relationship with a celebrity figure. These individuals achieve public notoriety by stalking or threatening or killing the celebrity." Jenson explains that "this loner characterization can be contrasted with another version of fan pathology: the image of a frenzied or hysterical member of a crowd" (1992, p. 11). Here we observe a unique manifestation of enthusiasm among fans and their behaviour. Jenson illustrates this by describing fan types, citing instances, such as the screaming, weeping teen at the airport catching sight of a rock star, or the roaring, fervent sports fan causing disturbance at a soccer game. She concludes that this portrayal of the frenzied fan prevails in conversations about music enthusiasts and sports fans (1992, p. 12).

We agree that when individuals have an affinity for something, such as a song, music genre, or the band performing the music, it is common to react to these stimuli. Typically, this involves moving one's body, nodding along, singing along to the lyrics, and generally feeling uplifted. If the song is melancholic, people typically respond by listening to it and perhaps feeling nostalgic at most. However, upon reading specialized literature discussing various fan typologies, we became intrigued by why some fans feel compelled to express themselves so intensely, dramatically, and in some cases, extremely violently in response to their passions. Why is it difficult for them to simply enjoy the experience and derive happiness from it? One of the explanations could be Jenson's example, namely "the influences of the music's supposedly licentious lyrics and barbaric rhythms" (1992, p. 12). According to her,

> *crowds of teen music fans have been depicted as animalistic and depraved, under the spell of their chosen musical form. Heavy Metal is the most recent genre of youth music to evoke this frightening description of seductive power: Metal fans are characterized, especially by concerned parents, as vulnerable youngsters who have become "twisted" in response to the brutal and Satanic influence of the music.* (Jenson, 1992, p. 12)

In Jenson's aforementioned classification of fans, she also illustrates the sports fan archetype. Specifically, she mentions the category characterized by exaggerated and aggressive behavior during sporting events, by pointing out that "obviously, not all soccer fans engage in spectator violence, the association between fandom and violent, irrational mob behaviour is assumed" (1992, p. 13):

> *Concern over fan violence in crowds also appears in relation to sports. There is an academic literature, for example, on football hooliganism. This literature explores*

> *the reasons for violence at (mostly) soccer games, where "hard-core hooligans" engage in violent and destructive acts, often against the opposing teams' fans.* (Jenson, 1992, p. 13)

Jenson concludes that,

> *there is very little literature that explores fandom as a normal, everyday cultural or social phenomenon. Instead, the fan is characterized as (at least potentially) an obsessed loner, suffering from a disease of isolation, or a frenzied crowd member, suffering from a disease of contagion. In either case, the fan is seen as being irrational, out of control, and prey to a number of external forces. The influence of the media, a narcissistic society, hypnotic rock music, and crowd contagion are invoked to explain how fans become victims of their fandom, and so act in deviant and destructive ways.* (Jenson, 1992, p. 13)

The phenomenon of fandom, which encompasses individuals' deep dedication to diverse subjects or entities, constitutes a complex and broad field of study, underscored by the extensive scholarly research carried out in this domain. Scholars have thoroughly explored the phenomenon of fandom, spanning both traditional and digital forms, yielding a wealth of literature on the subject. As Jenson noted, there is a limited amount of literature examining fandom as a typical, everyday cultural or social occurrence. Nonetheless, the objective of this study is to investigate the activity within the "Game of Thrones" fandom, particularly the language-related engagement of one of its subgroups, the "The Song of Ice and Fire" digital community. Specifically, we aim to explore the motivations and incentives of its members to learn a constructed language, while also uncovering the social and psychological aspects underlying their choices. The fandom under consideration belongs to the category of "ordinary" fans, showing no signs of violent or extreme behavior, either in online or offline settings. However, what adds intrigue and warrants examination is their unconventional hobby preference: the pursuit of learning and, eventually, teaching constructed languages. This atypical social behavior merits scholarly investigation and analysis. While our study cannot cover all facets of "fandom", we aim to delve into one significant aspect: *taste*. Therefore, we will briefly examine this topic, a subject also scrutinized by Jenkins (1992) in the subsequent segment of this paper.

"Good Taste" vs. "Bad Taste" in Media Content Consumption

According to Jenkins (1992, p. 16), "concepts of «good taste», appropriate conduct or aesthetic merit are not natural or universal; rather, they are rooted in social experience and reflect particular class interests." Fundamentally, it entails more than merely an individual's specific selection of whom or what they favor, become a fan of, and demonstrate their appreciation for. Jenkins underscores the

diverse social experiences that vary from person to person. He states that "taste distinctions determine not only desirable and undesirable forms of culture but also desirable and undesirable ways of relating to cultural objects, desirable and undesirable strategies of interpretation and styles of consumption" (1992, p. 16). The author argues that

> *taste is always in crisis; taste can never remain stable, because it is challenged by the existence of other tastes that often seem just "as natural" to their proponents. The boundaries of "good taste", then, must constantly be policed; proper tastes must be separated from improper tastes; those who possess the wrong tastes must be distinguished from those whose tastes conform more closely to our own expectations. Because one taste is so interwoven with all other aspects of social and cultural experience, aesthetic distaste brings with it the full force of moral excommunication and social rejection. "Bad taste" is not simply undesirable; it is unacceptable.* (Jenkins, 1992, p. 16)

It is intriguing to explore the significant role one's taste plays in their inclusion or exclusion from diverse social circles, as well as its influence on how they are perceived by society at large. Personal preferences can elicit both positive and negative reactions from others and may seemingly assign individuals to various social categories. However, we find this labeling to be overly harsh and dramatic, considering the inherent diversity among people. Each individual's choices regarding clothing, diet, music, romantic preferences, language acquisition, residence, occupation, and more should be respected. If these preferences are not shared by others, they should at least be disregarded or not subjected to intense scrutiny and criticism. The specific inclination or preference of many members within the "Game of Thrones" fandom to learn one or both of the constructed languages featured in the TV series, rather than opting for a natural language – a choice that might be more widely accepted and considered conventional within society – is precisely the focal point of our research. We embarked on this investigation due to its intriguing and, frankly, uncommon nature: the active involvement of individuals in the study of artificial languages, which were originally crafted solely for cinematic purposes, rather than for fostering universal communication, as seen in the case of the widely recognized Esperanto. In essence, Jenkins's theory, as discussed earlier, validates society's tendency to react strongly to the unconventional, the unfamiliar, or anything that deviates from the perceived norms of "good taste" in terms of hobbies or interests. Jenson (1992, p. 20) frames this notion similarly, while also pondering whether "the existence of passion" serves as the defining factor distinguishing a fan from

an aficionado, delineating between harmful and benign, and between deviance and conformity. Jenson establishes that

> *one aspect of the distinction between "them" and "us" involves a cultural hierarchy. At least one key difference 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-media objects (fandom).* (Jenson, 1992, p. 20)

Several fandoms face scrutiny, characterization, and at times, criticism due to their preference for particular media content. It is reasonable for members of these fandoms to respond to the assumptions made about them and their pursuits. Jenkins (1992, p. 20) states that

> *Star Trek fans often find themselves arguing from a position of weakness in attempting to defend their fascination with the program. For many, the only legitimate defense is to assert the "normality" of their lifestyle, professing their general conformity to middle-class culture as a way of creating common ground with non-fan friends.* (Jenkins, 1992, p. 20)

Jenkins cites Kulikauskas (1988, p. 5) who exemplifies one of the Star Trek fans' reactions, 'in response to an incendiary sketch on Saturday Night Live wherein "Star Trek" star William Shatner tells "Trekkies" to "Get a Life!". Here is the excerpt of the fan's response:

> *I resent having those assumptions made about me. I have "got a life". I have a husband and children. I do volunteer work and have opinions on a wide variety of matters, both political and religious. I do shopping, vote in elections and change diapers. I do live in a real world, with all of its tensions and stress. That is the reason I am a Trekker.*[1] *A hobby is necessary for mental health. Star Trek helps me from burning out in all the "important" things I do. It helps me relax. It helps me retain my perspective. It is fun. It is not my religion. I already have a perfectly good religion. (Well, I'm Catholic). And I suspect that the majority of fans are more like me than the stereotype.* (Kulikauskas, 1988, p. 5)

In society, various aspects such as cultural practices, traditions, culinary tastes, and especially individual preferences towards specific media content often become subjects of stereotyping. Stereotyping involves forming fixed notions about someone or a particular group of people, often inaccurately. Generally, the term "stereotype" carries negative connotations and is frequently linked with certain fandoms, as illustrated earlier. We will not explore this topic further at the moment, but it is important to acknowledge that even devoted followers of the

[1] "Trekker" or "Trekkie" – someone with a special interest in the television show "Star Trek" (Cambridge University Press & Assessment).

"Star Trek" franchise, often referred to as "Trekkies", encounter stereotypes and unwarranted criticism. According to Gibson (2000, p. 9),

> *most often, a fan's relationship with a cultural text is based in a consumerist sensibility emphasizing the production of pleasure. Pleasure comes through the enjoyment of choosing to engage with a text, feeling a part of something bigger than oneself, entertainment through surprise and anticipation, escape from life challenges, temporary fulfillment of desires, the excitement of vicariously sharing the intimacies of another person's life, and the feeling of camaraderie through identification with a character.* (Gibson, 2000, p. 9)

Upon encountering the above-illustrated excerpt detailing a "Star Trek" fan's reaction to Shatner's "Get a Life" statement, we observed a parallel between this individual's response and Reuben Hayslett's (Khal Tihi's) reaction when we asked him in our interview about the motivations for learning Dothraki or High Valyrian (Dothraki, in his case). Khal Tihi, a dedicated admirer not particularly of the "Game of Thrones" TV series but specifically of the Dothraki language featured within it, offered a straightforward and coherent response to our inquiry. It is not uncommon for people to anticipate intricate explanations from fans, and some struggle to comprehend why individuals invest considerable time and effort in fictional media content. This skepticism extends to our research queries as well; many individuals outside the realms of fiction or languages, particularly constructed languages, find it challenging to grasp or acknowledge that for some, studying languages like Dothraki is just as ordinary as learning Spanish or Swedish, for example. Below is Khal Tihi's response:

> *Back in 2013, I was living in NYC and working a very demanding job in state and local electoral politics. I was getting burned out and turned to TV as a way to de-stress and relax. […]. I wanted/needed a hobby, I had little money to put into a hobby, and I already had a background in linguistics.* (R. Hayslett (Khal Tihi) personal communication, March 3, 2014).

Upon scrutinizing Tihi's response, it becomes evident that there is nothing questionable or unconventional about choosing a hobby, regardless of its nature, as a means to unwind and relieve stress after prolonged work hours. In Khal Tihi's case, his decision to learn Dothraki, a constructed language intended for cinematic purposes rather than real-world communication, is especially understandable, considering his academic background in linguistics. This choice may represent a desire to explore language diversity and indulge in a mentally stimulating activity outside of professional responsibilities. Upon inquiry regarding his longstanding interest in constructed languages or whether it emerged solely following the airing

of the "Game of Thrones" TV series, and if there were additional constructed languages that intrigued him, Tihi provided the following response:

> *I studied Linguistics in undergrad and in one class we had a semester-long group assignment to create our own language and attempt fluency. To date, this is still one of my favorite class assignments ever. My group got an A and I think everyone really enjoyed the process. I certainly did. I was aware of other conlangs from film and television, like Klingon from Star Trek, but was not interested in either the language or the franchise. In my linguistic classes Klingon often came up and we studied some examples of the language but that's as far as I went.* (R. Hayslett (Khal Tihi) personal communication, March 3, 2014)

It is worth noting that there is no inherent problem with the decision to learn a constructed language; in fact, it is quite intriguing and commendable. The essence of having a hobby lies in indulging in activities one finds enjoyable and investing time and effort into them. If others fail to comprehend or appreciate this pursuit, it is more a reflection of their perspective than the validity of the individual's engagement in the activity. Diversity ought to be regarded with interest and curiosity as long as it is not considered to be harmful to anyone. Participation in activities within the "Trekkies" or "Game of Thrones" fandom, for instance, does not inflict harm upon others. This holds particularly true when such engagement occurs online, within dedicated platforms or servers that generally are not publicly accessible. Regarding the categorization of "Game of Thrones" fandom members and their alignment with previously described fan categories, is a topic that will be addressed later in this paper. Proceeding, Gibson (2000, p. 7) references Grossberg (1992, p. 54), who suggests that fans may exhibit interest not solely in the media content they favor but also in additional dimensions. Here is an excerpt:

> *audiences never deal with only a single cultural text, that is, just the music or the film or the television show. At any given time, audiences may be fielding information related to musical texts and practices, economic and race relations, images of performers and fans, social relations (for instance, of gender, of friendship), aesthetic conventions, styles of language, movement, appearance and dance, media practices, ideological commitments, and, sometimes, media representations of rock-n-roll itself.* (Grossberg, 1992, p. 54)

Drawing from Grossberg's examples, we can discern at least two facets that Khal Tihi referenced during our interview concerning his personal intrigue with the world of the Dothraki, vividly portrayed in "The Game of Thrones" television series, namely race relations and styles of language. His response is exemplified in the subsequent excerpt from the interview:

> *I was drawn to "Game of Thrones" because of the way the show (and the books, though I've never finished any of the books) dealt with politics and political intrigue in a fantasy environment, something I hadn't seen before in media. I felt an affinity to the Dothraki people early on because they looked like me, and my family. I come from a long line of interracial and multiracial marriages and couplings and today identify as Multi-generational Mixed-Race (or MGM). That means that I am a person of color with dark brown skin and that, to most people, I appear racially ambiguous. There's not a lot of depiction of racially ambiguous people in mainstream media so I was very fascinated by the Dothraki people in the show. Jason Momoa is obviously native Hawaiian, but I noticed that other Dothraki characters look like different kinds of ethnicities, and that there's no single phenotypical "look" of a Dothraki person. Some extras were lighter skinned, some were darker, and there was a wide of hair texture within them. This stood out to me. When I found out that the language had been created for the show I was very curious. I studied Linguistics in college and had played around with conlangs before and I desperately needed a hobby since I was burning out at my job. So I decided to try to learn on my own and very quickly fell in love with the language.* (R. Hayslett (Khal Tihi) personal communication, March 3, 2014)

To conclude, in response to our inquiry about his interest in the Dothraki language, Khal Tihi provided a response that went beyond surface-level explanation. Instead of giving a straightforward answer such as "I just liked it", he elaborated on a more profound connection. He perceived a likeness between his own physical attributes and the fictional Dothraki people described by George R. R. Martin – a barbaric tribe characterized by an ambiguous racial background – thus feeling a sense of affinity with the franchise despite its fictional nature. Additionally, he was drawn to their language, intrigued by its novelty and uniqueness, especially given his existing linguistic background. However, it is important to note that Khal Tihi emphasized the subjective nature of motivations, stating, "everyone has different reasons and motivations, so I can really only speak to mine". Therefore, his reasons may not necessarily apply to other fans. Each individual may have found distinct motives for embracing the "Game of Thrones" fandom. In Khal Tihi's case, racial identity and language played pivotal roles in his interest in learning a constructed language. Advancing further, we aim to allocate the subsequent section of this study to exploring the notions of "online community" and "digital fandom"

Considering the digital scope of our research, our main emphasis lies on digital fandoms rather than traditional ones. As stated by Booth (2016, p. 10), "it is *«digital»* fandom not because it assumes that there is some inherent difference in the way digital technology affects fans, but rather because many creative fan

practices rely on the characteristics of the digital." According to Pearson (2010, p. 2),

> *the digital revolution has had a profound impact upon fandom, empowering and disempowering, blurring the lines between producers and consumers, creating symbiotic relationships between powerful corporations and individual fans, and giving rise to new forms of cultural production.*

She continues along the same line stating that "some fans revel in the new opportunities presented by digital technologies, while others lament the digitally enabled encroachment of corporate power into every space of fandom" (2010, p. 2).

Moving forward, our next section will be dedicated to exploring the "Game of Thrones" digital fandom, with a specific focus on identity formation in the online realm. We will commence by providing an overview of pertinent theoretical frameworks and conducting a literature review on the topic of "identity". Next, we will explore identity construction through language use and interactivity within "The Song of Ice and Fire" Discord group, particularly emphasizing group social identity. Additionally, we will investigate user motivations concerning the utilization of Dothraki and High Valyrian on Discord, incorporating insights gleaned from interviews with key figures such as David Peterson and Reuben Hayslett (Khal Tihi). Finally, we will present our conclusions based on the findings.

Identity and Cyber Identity – Definitions and Key Concepts

When addressing a nuanced phenomenon or concept, it is crucial to offer clear definitions and elucidate essential ideas to have a better understanding of that particular concept. In this section of the present chapter, our aim is to explore "identity" and "cyber identity" and briefly examine several theoretical frameworks proposed by scholars in the field. Prior to delving deeply into the concept of cyber identity, we propose an initial discussion on identity in a broader context. Given the complexity of the concept, scholars have proposed diverse definitions for identity, indicating the absence of a universal definition. Therefore, we aim to present multiple interpretations to gain an understanding of the central topic in this sub-chapter. According to Cover (2023, p. 6),

> *at its most, identity usually refers to the set of traits, beliefs, appearances, experiences, memories, attitudes and behaviour that characterise a person – what makes a person seem to themselves unique and individual but also related to other people in our everyday belonging and social participation. Identity is inseparable from a concept of cultural identity, which is how a person perceives themselves (or is*

> *perceived by others) in relation to a range of categories and demarcations, such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class affiliations, social generation groups, shared histories and so on.* (Cover, 2023, p. 6)

Poletti and Park (2014, p. 8), define "identity" as 'the process of knowing oneself by an interplay of difference and similarity; at the same time it is also about knowing one's social place due to a host of technologies outside of one's self, which authenticate and delimit one's existence, such as identity cards, dog tags, or PIN numbers.' As stated by Doise (1998), "identity is conceived of as a very peculiar set of opinions, judgments, evaluations, attitudes, manifested by a person towards him- or her-self." As per Sullivan (2011, p. 6),

> *identity has traditionally been a nebulous notion and in referring to "identity" without defining it, much of the legal literature in this area lacks precision. It gives the impression that "identity is identity" whereas the constitution, function and nature of identity depend on context.* (Sullivan, 2011, p. 6)

Proceeding, Cotoc (2017, p. 191) references Jenkins (2008, p. 17), who notes that

> *the verb "to identify" is a necessary accompaniment of identity because identity is active: it is not something that is "just there", it's not a "thing" or a product, it must always be established. This adds two further items: to classify things or persons: to associate oneself with, or attach oneself to, something or someone else (such as a friend, a sports team or an ideology, etc.).* (Cotoc, 2017, p. 191)

Wood and Smith (2005, p. 52), state that identity "is a complex personal and social construct, consisting in part of who we think ourselves to be, how we wish others to perceive us, and how they actually perceive us." As per Cotoc,

> *in what cyber-identity is concerned, the focus is more on how we wish others to perceive us and on the process of setting forth an image we want others to perceive (online self-presentation), but also on how we contribute to the perception of other users and how other users contribute to our perception. Hence, online identity is the social identity encountered in cyberspace, what users display on SNSs, Websites, Weblogs, public chats, emails, etc.* (Cotoc, 2017, p. 206)

However, what precisely does the term "social identity" entail? It "refers to similarity between/among people" Cotoc (2017, p. 193). The author draws on the work of Deschamps and Devos (1998, pp. 2-3), who underline that

> *the feeling of belonging to a group and the phenomenon of identification are only possible in connection with groups or categories one does not belong to. Thus, social identity refers to the fact that the individual perceives him – or herself as similar to others of the same background (the "we"), but social identity also refers to a*

> *difference, to a specificity of that "we" in connection with members of other groups or categories (the "them").* (Cotoc, 2017, p. 193)

In connection with the sense of affiliation with a collective and the process of identification, Windley (2023, p. 7) references the insights of Minuchin (2009, p. 47), who claimed that "the human experience of identity has two elements: a sense of belonging and a sense of being separate". Windley continues along the same line and states that "this is as good a description of digital identity as it is of our psychological identity. A digital identity contains data that uniquely describes a person or thing but also contains information about the subject's relationships to other entities" (2023, p. 7). According to Cotoc (2017, p. 193), "Belonging to a group does not only trigger the construction of a social identity, but also allows individuals" "to develop a sharper and better defined self-image, to perceive themselves as being quite specific and highly distinctive individuals" (Serino, 1998, p. 25). Windley (2023, p. 12) underscores the concept of multiple identities, asserting that:

> *we usually speak of identity in the singular, but subjects, especially people, have multiple identities. From an internal point of view, these seem like different facets of our singular identity, but other entities have a specific view that corresponds to only a subset of our internal view. […] My multiple identities represent different perspectives on who Phil Windley is and what attributes I possess.* (Windley, 2023, p. 12)

Cotoc (2017, p. 194) mentions Deschamps and Devos's notion of "self-permanence" "pointing to Goffman's idea that individuals play different roles for different audiences [1956] and to Gergen's idea that the self is «fluid»" [1965, 1982]. They argue that it is necessary to think about identities in the plural form because every individual or collective social agent can actualize, mobilize or produce identities according to a specific context (see 1998, p. 3). Cotoc agrees with the above-cited scholars, concluding that

> *a user participates in different SNSs and constructs a different representation on each of them: he plays a professional role on LinkedIn, a friend role on Facebook, a host/guest role on Couchsurfing, a music lover role on MySpace, etc. Furthermore, he can actualize all these identities from his mobile while he is also participating offline, constructing a real-life identity as well.* (Cotoc, 2017, p. 194)

Cover (2023, p. 6) draws a parallel between identity and the concept of "cultural identity", which he considers to be inseparable. According to him, this is

> *how a person perceives themselves, (or is perceived by others) in relation to a range of categories and demarcations, such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class affiliations, social generation groups, shared histories and so on. And these all involve practices of identification to varying degrees, meaning there is always a process of*

> *communication, reading, interpreting and engaging that operates across different settings, not always consciously.* (Cover, 2023, p. 6)

Given these theoretical considerations, our intention is to focus our study on a specific digital fandom and examine how its members shape their cyber identities on Discord through language usage. We aim to explore the concept of "participatory digital creativity" and "interactivity", as proposed by Cover (2023), given its relevance to the online activities of our target fandom. Furthermore, since our research centers on language involvement within the "Game of Thrones" fandom online, our aim is to guide the discussion towards the notion of group identity and membership in digital communities initially. According to Doise,

> *personal identity is often considered as unique and singular. On the other hand, shared group membership involves common characteristics. Hence, individuals would be considered similar to the extent that they belong to the same or similar categories. In this sense, group membership would result in homogeneity and individual differences would correspond to personal characteristics which are not shared by other group members.* (Doise, 1998, p. 14)

Furthermore, Doise also claims that "identity emerges from the relationships between the individual and the group and that different situations signal different relationships and different identity dynamics" (see Cotoc, 2017, p. 195). Cotoc (2017, p. 195) draws on Worchel's work (1998), who describes social identity and claims that "groups satisfy the individuals" desire to be accepted and recognized by others. However, groups also require obedience and conformity, the placement of group needs above personal needs and giving up some of their personal identity (see Idem, p. 55). In the context of cyber identity, Baym (2000, p. 144) states that, "it is the *content* posted by digi-participants in different Internet environments and one cannot create a recognizable identity in any digital space or group without posting". Cotoc (2017, p. 207) explores further the concept of group identity and the construction of identity in cyberspace. The author proposes several terms that can be employed to describe cyber identity, among which she mentions: "online Identity, Internet Identity, cyber-identity, digital identity, electronic identity, e-identity, CMC identity, Internet persona, Cyber persona, etc." (Cotoc, 2017, p. 207) According to her, "all users construct an identity in cyberspace, regardless of the Internet situation in which they are in." Thus far, the scholars we have examined typically refer to online social platforms like Facebook or, in Cotoc's instance, MySpace, Couchsurfing, Facebook, and Gmail. However, Discord has not been extensively explored as an online platform in these studies, further narrowing the focus of our research. Cover (2023, p. 17) states that

> *the early Internet allowed new kinds of "virtual" communities to form across newsgroups, forums, websites, chat programmes and email. Although these were often represented in idealistic ways as a future world of harmonious, online settings for belonging and engagement (Rheingold 1993), they had an important impact on the relationship between belonging and identity.* (Cover, 2023, p. 17)

According to Worchel (1998, pp. 72-73),

> *groups, like individuals, must establish their own identity. This identity has two dimensions: the identity of the group (similar to the personal identity of the individual in social identity theory) and the identity of the group as it relates to other groups in its universe (similar to the social identity of individuals'.* (Worchel, 1998, pp. 72-73)

Cotoc (2017, p. 198) draws on Worchel's (1998) theory, according to which

> *groups are dynamic units that develop through a series of stages: identification, group productivity, individuation, decay. These stages are cyclical as some members might no longer be part of the group and new members take their place. There is an amount of time spent on each stage, depending on intragroup and intergroup factors. The transition between stages can be abrupt and clear or slow and gradual.* (Cotoc, 2017, p. 198)

Having reviewed the perspectives of several scholars on individual and group identity and their development, we now turn our attention to the "The Song of Ice and Fire" Discord online fandom. Our objective is to explore how its members shape both their cyber and group identity. Cotoc (2017, p. 201) argues that, "identities emerge from the narrativization of the self which implies «suturing into the story» that is partially imaginary." The author considers that "in cyberspace, there are three situations of the narrativization of the self: exclusively imaginary, partially imaginary, and the imaginary is excluded altogether" (Cotoc (2017, p. 201). Cotoc cites Baym (2000, p. 173), who states that

> *various online discursive strategies and identity-building resources. Some examples are: filling in basic profile information, frequent posts, names and signature files, relevant knowledge transmitted through the users' repertoires, distinctive roles that users can take on, performances that build distinctive styles.* (Cotoc, 2017, p. 201)

However, "these strategies differ from one digital space to another and cyber-identities are shaped by the online contexts in which they are created and which change very fast" (Cotoc, 2017, p. 207). The author draws on Weber and Mitchell's idea, stating that

> *like youth identities, new technologies keep changing, converging, morphing – seemingly always in flux, and like youth identities, young people's own digital production facilitate a blending of media, genres, experimentations, modifications, and reiterations.* (Cotoc, 2017, p. 207)

"The Song of Ice and Fire" Fandom – Digital Group Identity Construction

According to Cotoc (2017, p. 199) "in cyberspace, users join groups of discussion that are already created or they open a new group and others join in." This situation is precisely exemplified by the "The Song of Ice and Fire" Discord community, where certain members transitioned from pre-existing Facebook groups to Discord. Cotoc (2017, p. 199) suggests that scholars have termed this migration from platforms as an "exodus" phenomenon (refer to Hogan, 2011). Cover (2023, p. 17) offers a notable example concerning the formation of diverse online communities, particularly highlighting the "furries" community. Cover cites Dobre (2012), who defines "furries" as a "subculture within science fiction and fantasy fandom, and practices involve dressing as non-human anime characters." Dobre explains that

> *the identification as a Furry – that is, as a person whose sense of selfhood is defined by the engagement in such play – is deeply felt, an attachment that is subjective and meaningful. Such play, of course, may involve more serious identification with animals themselves as some choose to live lives in an everyday sense through the theatrics of being a wolf or a cat.* (Dobre, 2012)

However, how does Cover's example of the "furries" community relate to the discussion of online identity, which is the focus of our current topic? Cover states that

> *the Furry community and the construction of identity did not simply emerge by itself. Nor was it about pre- existing furries suddenly finding they had an opportunity to talk to each other through digital means and thereby, as individuals, coming together as a community. Rather, the community itself came about, developed and gained a shared sense of identity because the affordances of digital media allowed the gathering online of very dispersed voices of those who were otherwise disenfranchised from identity norms and forming the name, language and shared symbolic belonging that stabilised as an identity.* (Cover, 2023, p. 18)

Following, we will concentrate on the latter aspect of Cover's theories and establish a comparison between the fandom he discusses and our chosen fandom. Upon examining the formation of "The Song of Ice and Fire" Discord community, we concur with Cover's assertions. Since the debut of the "Game of Thrones" TV series and the introduction of the two constructed languages, Dothraki and High Valyrian, we posit that individuals, even if not initially fans, developed a keen interest in these languages and their associated cultures. However, merely harboring passion for something or transitioning into a fan role proves inadequate for many individuals. They seek out others with similar or identical interests, a

task that can be challenging and even unfeasible in offline settings for some. In the case of our chosen fandom, comprised of members dispersed globally, frequent in-person meetings for language learning would be nearly impracticable. As Cover suggests, "the early Internet was therefore a setting that had an impact on identity and belonging but in complex ways". (Cover, 2023, p. 18). The digital realm provided an ideal platform for these individuals, as all they required was internet access. Through this medium, they could connect with fellow fandom members and establish an online community open to anyone sharing their interests. Cotoc (2017, p. 199) states that in cyberspace,

> *the identification is achieved in the moment when users join the group and productivity depends on the number of posts, shares, comments and likes. The posts and the shares represent the young authors' input and the comments and the likes are the qualitative/or quantitative feedback. The number of comments and the number of likes is important because they assure validation, social approval and group social identity.* (Cotoc, 2017, p. 199)

Cover adds that 'social media was obviously one of the most significant affordances made available to everyday users, and it is perhaps this most of all that has had an impact on how we practice online identity' (2023, p. 19). Certainly, each social media platform offers distinct affordances, and Cotoc likely delineates Facebook's affordances employed by its users in crafting their online social identity. Nevertheless, Discord bears similarities with other social media platforms. For instance, users can create posts that others can react to through comments, similar to Facebook. Similarly, Discord offers features such as the "like" option, where users can express approval of posts and comments using various emojis. Another shared feature is the option to react to specific comments rather than the entire post. Nevertheless, there are notable differences as well. From both a researcher and user standpoint, Discord proves to be a more convenient platform for engaging in fandom activities due to several reasons. Firstly, it enables users to establish distinct servers, akin to separate rooms where subgroups can discuss their specific interests. For instance, within "The Song of Ice and Fire" Discord, numerous servers exist, each with its unique focus. For High Valyrian language enthusiasts, servers such as "high-valyrian", "valyrian-for-beginners", "valyrian-duolingo", "valyrian suggestions", "valyrian-djpedia", "valyrian-only", "high valyrian voice chat", "valyrian-lessons-and-learning", and "valyrian-glyphs" cater to various aspects of language learning. Similarly, for Dothraki language enthusiasts, servers like "dothraki-general", "dothraki-only", "dothraki-for-beginners", "dothraki voice chat", "dothraki-learning-resources", and "dothraki-djpedia" serve as dedicated spaces for discussion and learning the

Dothraki language. Secondly, Discord offers additional convenience for language learning through its chat rooms, allowing users to gather and coordinate voice calls. This feature holds particular significance for language learning, especially for constructed languages with limited resources. Learners can exchange insights not only on grammar and vocabulary but also on pronunciation, accent, and tone, fostering a more complex learning experience. This functionality also facilitates the cultivation of a more intimate relationship within the fandom. Through oral communication via voice chats, individuals can develop a stronger sense of personal connection with their fellow members of the fandom. Thirdly, Discord is designed as an online platform that encourages ongoing discussions rather than limited interactions through comments on specific posts. We presume that the "exodus" phase mentioned earlier occurred when members of the "Game of Thrones" fandom, particularly those interested solely in the two constructed languages rather than the TV series itself, sought to sustain dialogues with fellow fandom members without engaging in endless commenting on the same post. Indeed, Discord facilitates continuous dialogues among its users once they access their preferred server. Upon entering the server, users can freely post content, ideally related to the server's theme. For instance, in the "Valyrian-Duolingo" server, one anticipates discussions related to studying the High Valyrian language on Duolingo. However, users also understand that they can sustain or initiate new discussions within ongoing conversations by replying to other users' responses. While such interactions are not impossible on Facebook, they are less common. In our observations, Facebook discussions in "Game of Thrones" fandom groups typically consist of a post by a user followed by a few brief comments. Certainly, this method does not provide an optimal means to interact with fellow learners and share insights on language-related subjects.

Fundamentally, the various features offered by the digital platform Discord coalesced to create a cohesive community dedicated to learning and instructing the Dothraki and High Valyrian languages. Over time, this community expanded, attracting additional members and nurturing a collective identity based on their mutual interest in these constructed languages. The "Song of Ice and Fire" Discord fandom unifies under a cyber-identity reflected in their chosen name, which draws from the series, thus establishing a symbolic connection to this online community.

Moving forward, we wish to explore the concept of participatory culture proposed by scholars. Theorist Terry Flew, cited by Cover (2023, p. 28) explains the shift from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 as one characterized by

> *a move from personal websites to blogs and blog site aggregation, from publishing to participation, from web content as the outcome of large up - front investment to an ongoing and interactive process, and from content management systems to links based on tagging.* (Flew, 2008, p. 19)

According to Cover,

> *in a Web 1.0 environment, most everyday users tended to retrieve information, with only a few who were building websites and generating their own texts. In the Web 2.0 environment that emerged from 2005 onwards, platform architecture was more frequently being built around the idea of users as participants.* (Cover, 2023, p. 29)

Considering the attributes of the Web 2.0 landscape, we acknowledge the resemblance between our digital fandom and its environment. Specifically, the platform architecture is structured with the user as an active participant. Members of this online community are not mere consumers of content but rather contributors, actively shaping discussions and generating their own textual material to share within the group. In this manner, they collectively construct a digital environment centered on shared interests and a dedication for learning constructed languages. Through their active engagement, they foster ongoing interactions and cultivate meaningful connections with fellow members. Referring back to Cotoc's (2017, p. 199) framework discussed previously, it becomes evident that the identification of members within the fandom occurs almost seamlessly upon their integration into the group. Our research findings (see Chapters IV and V) further illuminate the active nature of "The Song of Ice and Fire" fandom in the digital realm. Here, members consistently generate new content and engage in ongoing discussions, particularly within specific servers, on a daily basis. Cotoc's notion that "the posts and the shares represent the young authors' input and the comments and the likes are the qualitative/or quantitative feedback" is resonant within our observed dynamics. Notably, our investigation reveals a continuous exchange of feedback within our focal group. Active participants consistently respond to others' posts, offer assistance, and notably, exhibit active interaction with David Peterson. They seek clarification on language-related matters or await his validation on certain linguistic issues. According to Cover (2023, p. 29), Facebook or Instagram, have no real purpose for most people if they are not generating content for distribution and engaging with other people's content through commentary and sharing. Cotoc extends this notion by underscoring the significance of comments and likes, which serve as indicators of validation, social approval, and group identity (2017, p. 199). We concur with these perspectives. Consider a scenario within "The Song of Ice and Fire" Discord group where members post content on the servers. If these posts receive minimal

engagement, lacking likes or comments from other members, the original poster may perceive a lack of feedback. While it is not obligatory for every member to immediately react to others' posts or comments, consistent disregard for such interactions can disrupt the group dynamic over time. Active engagement with others' content is pivotal for securing validation, social approval, and reinforcing group identity. Encouragingly, our research findings suggest that members within our focal digital community adhere to these unspoken norms, fostering a culture of acknowledgment and validation within the online collective. In this context, it seems fitting to explore the notion of "interactivity" as delineated by Cover (2023). According to the author,

> *we often use the term interactivity to describe the face-to-face conversational way in which people engage with each other, and that metaphor of interactivity began to apply to the early Internet because digital engagement was marked by the shift from engaging with earlier, traditional media that did not have a mechanism to allow us to change or utilise the text in different ways (e.g., radio, film, books).* (Cover, 2023, p. 27)

Cover defines the notion of interactivity as

> *some of the ways in which digital communication and networking re-figured practices of authorship, co-creativity or co-participation in the production of texts, remixes and mash-ups, thereby producing new texts and new ideas and the changing nature, role and function of audiences.* (Cover, 2023, p. 27)

At this juncture, we find it appropriate to briefly introduce the concept of online "relationality", a topic that has garnered attention from scholars. Cover (2023, p. 43) cites Lewis, West, and Green, who argue that online rationality is developed through 'the creation and maintenance of friends lists through reciprocal adding and accepting of friends (Lewis & West, 2009, p. 1210), and "engaging with those friends to varying degrees through interactive communication such as updating, commenting, responding and tagging" (Green, 2008, p. 7). Cover adds that

> *just like profile management, both of these are performative acts of identification that occur in relation to others and in terms of belonging. They are specific activities which produce, constitute and stabilise our identities.* (Cover, 2023, p. 43)

Subsequently, we will illustrate one of Cover's forms of performativity which, according to the author is "through friendship and relationality, where identifications are *stabilised* through commentary, updates, discussions and communication with those in our network" (2023, p. 44). The author states that

> *the performativity of relationships and belonging in social networking is, in other words, not limited to (a) owning a list of friends and/ or (b) being on another's list of friends but on maintaining flows of communication through the multifarious vectors of friendship and relationality on social networking sites*. (Cover, 2023, p. 44)

According to Lewis and West (2009, p. 1222),

> *communication and comments are not always necessarily simply updates on one's actual status, thoughts and feelings; responses to others' comments; and other engagement with networked friends. Rather, they operate within various sets of connotations and significations that may be recognised by others – common experiences, shared amusements, in-jokes among a close inner circle.* (Lewis & West, 2009, p. 1222)

Cover (2023, p. 45) argues that, "what this means, is how we perform our identities is recognised in different ways by others, and the intelligibility of the self may be more *easily* recognised by some in our network as opposed to others." The author concludes that

> *belonging becomes not a thing but a momentary intersection between different dimensions of identification managed but always persistently in flux. Online relationality, identification, mutuality and performance, then, are constituted by a structural logic of "nodes and hubs"* (Castells, 2000, p. 443) *whereby we relate in complex ways to others across a fluid network of relationships.* (Cover, 2023, p. 45)

We agree that for an online community to be recognized as such, it is essential to exhibit the four main characteristics outlined by Cover (2023): relationality, identification, mutuality, and performance. Lacking these components makes it challenging to perceive it as an authentic digital community where individuals actively cultivate relationships and uphold a sense of community and belonging. Being part of a fandom encompasses more than mere admiration for someone or something; it also entails actively engaging in the community and playing a role in its continuity by utilizing the diverse interactive features offered by digital social platforms. Subsequently, we aim to discuss the users' motivations with learning and teaching Dothraki and High Valyrian within the "Song of Ice and Fire" digital fandom on Discord in the last section of the present sub-chapter.

User Motivations for Learning and Teaching Dothraki and High Valyrian on Discord

When it comes to leisure activities beyond work-related responsibilities, individuals encounter a plethora of options. Whether one delves into a chosen pastime for relaxation, personal passion, intellectual curiosity, the urge to explore

new avenues, emotional fulfillment, seeking excitement, fostering social connections, or aligning with specific social circles, whether in virtual or physical spaces, each person harbors a motivation for their engagement. Needless to say, it is within everyone's right to pursue such activities. Yet, an intriguing dynamic arises when those who do not share the same interests find such hobbies both strange and intriguing. Common inquiries include how one developed an interest in a particular pursuit along with the recurring "Why?" question that consistently arises in such conversations. In numerous instances, grasping individuals' decisions proves challenging, often leading to not only query but also pass judgment on their interests. Consider, once more, the example of "Trekkies." This expansive "Star Trek" fanbase has faced considerable criticism over the years merely due to the fervent dedication of its members to the franchise. According to Jenkins (1992, p. 10), there are many popular stereotypes about fans who:

- *devote their lives to the cultivation of worthless knowledge;*
- *place inappropriate importance on devalued cultural material ("It's just a television show");*
- *are social misfits who have become so obsessed with the show that it forecloses other types of social experience ("Get a Life");*
- *are infantile, emotionally and intellectually immature;*
- *are unable to separate fantasy from reality.* (Jenkins, 1992, p. 10)

Interestingly, similar descriptions apply to other franchise fandoms, such as the "Game of Thrones" fandom. Much like Star Trek enthusiasts, GoT[2] fans exhibit a passionate devotion to a television series, devotion that some may perceive as placing undue importance on culturally devalued material. Moreover, they may face unwarranted accusations of blurring the lines between fantasy and reality. Additionally, many within these fandoms harbor a significant interest in learning the constructed languages featured in the respective series – Klingon in the case of "Star Trek" and Dothraki and High Valyrian in the case of "Game of Thrones." As our study focuses on the "Game of Thrones" fandom, particularly the "The Song of Ice and Fire" digital fanbase on Discord, where members gather to further their knowledge of these constructed languages, our discussion will revolve around the motivations driving their engagement in language learning within this fandom setting.

At the outset of our investigation, we initially relied on assumptions to discern the motivations of these dedicated fans. However, recognizing the limitations of mere conjecture or hypotheses, particularly in scientific inquiry, we

[2] *Game of Thrones*

deemed it imperative to gain firsthand insights from individuals intimately involved with Dothraki and High Valyrian, as well as members of "The Song of Ice and Fire" fandom. In order to delve deeper into the motivations behind individuals' pursuit of learning a constructed language – particularly one confined to the realms of fiction or digital environments, and distinct from natural languages, as well as to understand their choices regarding leisure activities, we reached out to David Peterson, the linguist responsible for crafting Dothraki and High Valyrian for the HBO series "Game of Thrones," and Reuben Hayslett (known as Khal Tihi), an avid and involved member of "The Song of Ice and Fire" Discord community. When queried about the motivating factors driving members of the "Game of Thrones" fandom to attain fluency in Dothraki or High Valyrian, despite the abundance of natural languages suitable for communication in diverse social contexts (such as Spanish, French, Dutch, etc.), Khal Tihi provided the following response:

> *I think "The Languages of Ice and Fire" community is motivated by the want to feel like a part of the franchise, and a desire to engage with the franchise on a deeper, personal level. As I said earlier too, there's an element of play here as well. To be able to play around with the world-building of the franchise, which is quite rich.* (R. Hayslett (Khal Tihi) personal communication, March 3, 2014)

One motivating factor involves a sense of belonging to the franchise and a desire for deeper association with it. This incentive may be shared among many fans who actively participate in a fandom. Nonetheless, numerous other motivations likely exist, and our aim was to gain insights into as many of these as possible. Another motive we deemed probable was that individuals' primary motive for acquiring proficiency in the Dothraki or High Valyrian languages was practical in nature, similar to learning any other language, with the aim of engaging in real-world interactions with fellow Dothraki or High Valyrian speakers. Consequently, we included this query in the interview, and Khal Tihi provided the following response:

> *I think most people like the idea of a shared language among a small community. Almost like a "secret code." Being a "Game of Thrones" fan is almost like a gateway into the community, but eventually that fades. For instance, I personally don't like the show anymore and don't recommend it to people who haven't seen it. I do love the language, though. After the initial interest in the show fades, what keeps speakers active is the idea of playing around in the language. Learning how to talk about your life and express yourself in a Dothraki way, rather than your native language. This hasn't come up in any other questions so far so I'll just insert this here: The depiction of Dothraki people on the show is much more barbaric, violent, and patriarchal than their depiction in the books, and in the language itself. Most new speakers are surprised and comforted by how the Dothraki language subverts the assumptions*

> *people have about the Dothraki people.* (R. Hayslett (Khal Tihi) personal communication, March 3, 2014)

What we found particularly intriguing in Khal Tihi's response was the observation that while enthusiasm for the show may diminish over time, the dedication to learning the constructed languages from the series persists. As a result, another motivating factor for members of the fandom is the acquisition of this "secret code", which they exclusively share with fellow community members, thereby enabling them to creatively engage with the language.

Naturally, we were curious to learn Khal Tihi's personal perspective on the two constructed languages. Consequently, we inquired about his preference between Dothraki and High Valyrian, and, of course, the rationale behind his choice. Here's an excerpt from the interview with Tihi's response:

> *Dothraki. Apart from the pseudo-cultural ties of it being a language spoken by racially ambiguous brown skinned people, I prefer Dothraki because it's a more developed language than Valyrian, which in many ways; David Peterson is still creating and developing.* (R. Hayslett (Khal Tihi) personal communication, March 3, 2014)

As previously discussed in this paper, individuals may possess various motivations and rationales for learning a constructed language. One of Khal Tihi's principal drivers was the perceived racial parallels between himself, his family, and the Dothraki people within the "Game of Thrones" universe. This alone sparked his initial interest in their language. In the subsequent segment of our interview, we asked Khal Tihi regarding alternative motivations that individuals might harbor when undertaking such an endeavor. Assuming someone lacks inclination to learn Dothraki or High Valyrian for practical conversational purposes and does not share Khal Tihi's personal reasons, such as hobbies or racial associations, what other incentives might drive them? During our interview with David Peterson, he expressed, "I imagine that people study High Valyrian for the same reason I create languages: They enjoy it. There's nothing mysterious or nefarious about it." Subsequently, we inquired whether Khal Tihi shared Peterson's perspective, to which he responded as follows:

> *I agree. There's not much to be gained or to be lost in learning Dothraki or Valyrian. I see it as a fun, unique, and interesting hobby that helps color my life. On a slow, boring day, I can translate a favorite song and learn how to sing it in Dothraki. Not to perform for others, but just for my own enjoyment of doing it. That said, I am aware that I'm a steward of the language and that that in itself has some significance. Every February, for Black History Month, I translate something written by an African American into Dothraki, so that the work of African Americans is predominantly*

> *featured in the "corpus" of Dothraki translations.* (R. Hayslett (Khal Tihi) personal communication, March 3, 2014).

For individuals uninvolved with a TV franchise or the study of constructed languages, such a pursuit may seem utterly absurd. Let's consider the scenario where studying constructed languages is viewed as a typical hobby – an activity devoid of any extraordinary attributes. However, the question arises: why invest significant time and effort into mastering a language spoken by a limited number of individuals, especially when proficiency is not guaranteed, and its usage is primarily confined to digital spaces? Naturally, one may ponder: is the investment worthwhile? Khal Tihi's perspective on this matter was:

> *I believe it is worthwhile. For one, there's the enjoyment factor. But there's also an immense sense of joy I get when I can more accurately express myself in Dothraki than I can in English. While traveling I often journal while waiting at airports, and I've found over the years that I can be more honest, forthright, and vulnerable while journaling in Dothraki than I can in English. And I enjoy revisiting journal entries written in Dothraki from my past travels. It's hard to put this precisely to words but there is a certain kind of fulfillment from having "Dothraki language speaker" as an identity. I include Dothraki on my resume when listing the languages I'm proficient in. We have a Dothraki holiday (April 29th) that I observe every year since it started in 2020.* (R. Hayslett (Khal Tihi) personal communication, March 3, 2014)

Drawing from our research findings and insights provided by one of the most active members of "The Song of Ice and Fire" community on Discord, who possesses a high level of proficiency in Dothraki, we discovered that engaging in constructed language learning transcends mere conversation with fellow speakers. As depicted in Khal Tihi's response, individuals often utilize such languages for deeply personal reasons. For many, language serves as a vital instrument for self-expression, whether through verbal communication or written expression, as exemplified by Khal Tihi's journaling. Utilizing a constructed language for this purpose is no different from employing song lyrics or poetry; each individual must determine the most suitable means of expression that works best for them. Additionally, it is essential to acknowledge the enjoyment derived from such endeavors. Many people immerse themselves in activities that bring them joy and fulfillment, and constructed language learning is no exception. While some may perceive fandom as merely expressing fondness for a specific franchise, language, or interest, for many enthusiasts, it evolves into an integral aspect of their lives, ingrained into their daily routines, and eventually woven into their identity. Khal Tihi's experience exemplifies this phenomenon. Through our interview, we discovered that he has adopted a Dothraki name, by which he is commonly addressed, despite not having formally changed it yet:

> *I've been successful in changing my name (not legally, yet, but interpersonally) to my Dothraki name, and have faced very little pushback from people. But again, I'm a racially ambiguous person of color and "Tihi" appears to most people as an ethnic name of some kind. I've been going by Tihi since 2017 and most people I know now aren't aware that it is not my legal name. Even my family refer to me as Tihi, although they occasionally dead-name me.* (R. Hayslett (Khal Tihi) personal communication, March 3, 2014)

As previously stated, we also sought to obtain insights from David Peterson regarding the enthusiasm of "Game of Thrones" fans for his constructed languages. His response was somewhat unexpected and diverged from our research findings thus far. Here is an excerpt:

> *Honestly, I find the focus on these two languages to be a kind of epiphenomenon of the myth of their popularity. At this point I think my name has a higher status (whether it's lauded or derided) than any of the languages I've created. […] I really and truly do not think either language has a huge following, and neither has very many users (certainly not Dothraki). […] Maybe one day there will be an actual community around one of my languages that isn't Trigedasleng, but I sincerely doubt it. They're only going to become less relevant, at least as languages, as opposed to art pieces.* (David J. Peterson, personal communication, June 5, 2023)

It was rather intriguing to discover Peterson's sense of disappointment regarding the level of engagement with his constructed languages within the fandom, particularly as it contrasts with the data we gathered from online platforms. Our observations revealed a significant level of fan involvement with both Dothraki and High Valyrian on Discord. While there appears to be a higher number of High Valyrian enthusiasts, this can largely be attributed to the availability of language learning resources such as the Duolingo app. As a closing mark, we were keen to understand both Peterson's and Tihi's perspectives on the influence of Dothraki and High Valyrian on popular culture and the broader community of language enthusiasts. Peterson's response to this inquiry was as follows:

> *I don't know if it's had a large impact. The fact that people know that Dothraki and Valyrian exist has had some impact (i.e. people know created languages exist, that they can exist, and that people may enjoy learning them), but neither have made the footprint of Klingon, or even Na'vi. My fondest hope is that their presence has demonstrated that language learning can be fun; it need not be a chore. The fact that language study has been turned into a chore is one of the more senseless crimes of the 20th century. There's nothing about elective language learning that should require it to be a source of stress, and yet for so many it is, and that is truly a shame. Dothraki especially has also been used as fodder for cranks who want to complain about people learning "fake" languages instead of "real" languages. None of their*

> *arguments withstand scrutiny, as it essentially boils down to "I only want people to do things I approve of". Of course, if it wasn't Dothraki, it would be Klingon, or whatever other conlang is en vogue. The guilty will always find a ready weapon with which to bludgeon the innocent.* (David J. Peterson, personal communication, June 5, 2023)

Tihi's response was succinct and conveyed a degree of disappointment similar to Peterson's sentiment, however stating that,

> *there is some influence. We are usually regarded with fascination, but not always given a platform. I think that proficient Dothraki speakers have just as much, if not more, to say about Dothraki people as George RR Martin, Jason Momoa, and/or other actors who spoke the language on the show, because we actually live with the language full time.* (R. Hayslett (Khal Tihi) personal communication, March 3, 2014).

The sense of disappointment evident in both Peterson's and Tihi's perspectives is understandable. From the standpoint of the language creator, Peterson likely anticipated a sizable fanbase for Dothraki and/or High Valyrian, akin to the popularity experienced by Klingon. However, this expectation was not met. Conversely, Tihi, as an active member of the Dothraki fan community, may seek greater validation and recognition, similar to the acclaim garnered by actors who spoke Dothraki in the TV series. However, despite their disappointments, both Peterson and Tihi persist in their respective pursuits: Peterson continues to construct languages, while Tihi remains actively involved with fellow Dothraki language enthusiasts, utilizing the language in various contexts. Nevertheless, when queried about considering proficiency in another constructed language, Tihi answered negatively.

Conclusions

In exploring the digital fandom surrounding "The Song of Ice and Fire" on Discord, we traversed through various dimensions of fandom culture and identity construction. Beginning with an examination of the foundational definitions and key concepts of fandom, we delved into fan typologies and societal perceptions, shedding light on the diverse ways in which fans are classified and understood. Our exploration extended to the nuanced dynamics of taste and media consumption, elucidating the implications of identifying with specific media productions. As our focus narrowed to "The Song of Ice and Fire" digital fandom, we delved into the intricacies of identity and cyber identity construction within this online community. Through discussions on user motivations for learning and teaching Dothraki and High Valyrian on Discord, we uncovered the multifaceted reasons driving fan engagement and participation in language learning endeavors. Among these reasons, fan members are drawn to the allure of immersing

themselves in the rich fictional world of "Game of Thrones", seeking to deepen their connection with the narrative by mastering the languages spoken by their favorite characters. Additionally, the desire to communicate with fellow enthusiasts and express their passion for the franchise in a unique way serves as a compelling motivation. Moreover, some fans view language learning as a form of cultural exploration, embracing the opportunity to delve into the linguistic intricacies of a fictional civilization. These varied motivations underscore the diverse and dynamic nature of fan engagement within the digital landscape of "The Song of Ice and Fire" fandom on Discord. Further motivations expressed by Khal Tihi include the pursuit of a hobby, the identification with racial and cultural aspects portrayed in the franchise, the desire to connect with the storyline on a deeper level, the need to be part of a community that shares a "secret code", and the quest to find a means of expressing thoughts and feelings in a unique manner. These additional motivations enrich our understanding of the multifaceted reasons driving fan participation in language learning activities within the "The Song of Ice and Fire" digital fandom on Discord.

Integral to our investigation were the insights gleaned from personal interviews with linguist David Peterson and Reuben Hayslett (Khal Tihi), a prominent member of "The Song of Ice and Fire" Discord fandom. Their perspectives provided invaluable depth and context to our understanding of the motivations, challenges, and aspirations of individuals within this digital community. In summary, our research highlights the intricate interaction between identity, community, and media involvement in digital fandom environments. Through an analysis of fan culture and language learning behaviors, we have provided insight into the diverse array of experiences and motivations that influence the "The Song of Ice and Fire" online fandom. As digital technologies evolve, the dynamics of fandom and cyber identity will undoubtedly evolve as well, presenting numerous opportunities for further exploration and analysis within the continually expanding sphere of online communities.

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