

**“Don’t Forget To Be Awesome”. The role of social
learning as a component of belonging in virtual
communities: a case study of the YouTube fan community
“Nerdfighteria”**

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ABSTRACT

The growth of the Internet has allowed fans who consume various media products, to interact and convene with other who share similar interests in online fan communities. Historically the study of fans has focused on pleasure and enjoyment as the main motivating factors why individual fans join, stay and participate in fan communities. This study, however, suggests that learning as a component of belonging has been underestimated within contemporary fan studies. Close examination of the literature of fan studies and the social practices of online fan communities reveal that these spaces may serve as fertile spaces for learning and the sharing of knowledge.

Daily learning occurs within multiple spheres, including personal interests, peer culture, and academic content; all elements which can be found within fan communities. This study used the social learning theory “communities of practice” (CoP) model developed by Wenger (1998) to understand of this element of learning and knowledge sharing that seems to take places within fan communities. This study explores learning as a component of belonging to online fan communities by using the fan community of the YouTube personalities *Vlogbrothers*, which has named itself Nerdfighteria, as a case study.

Through a qualitative research approach, which includes participation observation methods and qualitative interviews, this thesis has analysed the fan community Nerdfighteria, and used two Nerdfighter fan Facebook groups, the global NERDFIGHTERIA and local Nerdfighters South Africa, as case studies to evaluate whether the elements of learning taking place within these spaces serves as a motivating factor for belonging and participation.

The results of this research support the idea that learning plays a role within the fan community Nerdfighteria and thus that it functions as a CoP. Fans within the global NERDFIGHTERIA Facebook group use this fan space to discuss and debate content related to their media of choice; thereby learning and acquiring knowledge as a CoP. The Nerdfighters South Africa Facebook group, despite the learning potential, fails to function as a CoP because it is no longer functionally allows for shared learning. Online fan communities, this research found, have the potential to serve as functioning communities of practice (CoP) only if they embody the characteristics and practicalities consistent with a learning space. Overall these fan groups may be categorised as communities of interests but sub-sections within these communities fit the criteria of a community of practice due to the

kind of learning that is taking place. This research supports an alternative, yet promising, approach to the study of fan online communities which prioritises learning.

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

1.1. Introduction

Fan studies, a field that grew in stature and complexity in the 1980s and 1990s, focuses mostly on fan practices and the way in which fans consume, interpret and derive meaning from the object of their fandom and their media of choice. Fan studies scholars noticed that rather than merely selecting media content to fulfil their individual or social needs, fans often invest a great deal of time and intellectual energy in their chosen media texts. These fans often collect artefacts related to the object of their fandom, forming loose associations with other like-minded individuals into fan communities (Sullivan, 2013:187). The recent development of technology and social media has had a substantial impact on the way in which individuals interact and participate within their media of choice and with the fan communities of choice. The expansive, malleable nature of the Internet has allowed audiences to easily extend their media or fan experience beyond the mere reception of the original text or object and into a much more active form of participation.

Fans studies have focused extensively on these fan practices and the way in which fans have been perceived, both by themselves and by others. Seminal Fan studies theorists, such as Jenkins (1992) and Bacon-Smith (1992) in their ethnographic studies of *Star Trek* fans, were particularly interested in the way in which fans individually and collectively interpreted their favourite media objects and how members in fan communities developed a sense of social identity. Many media theorists have also focused on the pleasure and enjoyment elements that encourages individual fans to cohere socially in ‘fan clubs’ of greater or lesser coherence and form (Bayme, 2000; Hills, 2002). This study will draw on a key current area in recent theorising of fandom by considering how communal involvement extends beyond mere enjoyment and involves more active interaction and connection with other fans. The study suggests that learning, in a collective, can transform some fandoms into Communities of Practice (CoP). Through drawing on CoP theory, this research illuminates the rich sense of community that develops in some online communities and the shared, social learning that seems to be an important part of sense of belonging in these communities.

This study focuses on the YouTube fan community that has developed around two prominent “YouTubers” known as *Vlogbrothers*. Fans of brothers, Hank and John Green started to convene together in an online group called “Nerdfighteria”. *Vlogbrothers* has been ‘broadcasting’ on YouTube since 2007 and, as of late 2017, 2.9 million people, globally,

subscribe to the *Vlogbrothers* YouTube channel. These subscribers could be described as fans (subscribing is arguably an act of fandom, albeit a small one) but 19,000 fans have gone further and become members of the global NERDFIGHERIA Facebook group. About 300 members have joined the South African Nerdfighters subgroup Nerdfighters South Africa. This is a substantial fan base with a large global reach and significant local presence. This research explores what motivates some individuals to join NERDFIGHERIA and Nerdfighters South Africa, and what motivates them to stay and participate in this online fan community. This study argue that it appears that many members of this fandom remain active for long periods of time because of the shared learning taking place within these spaces, in addition to other affordances of membership.

Using a qualitative research framework, and drawing on participant observation and qualitative interviews, this study explores how notions of social learning and Community of Practice theory as developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) and further by Wenger (1998) help illuminate these fandoms and the motivations and gratifications of those who join them and stay active in them.

This introductory chapter provides a preface of how I came to be interested in this study, general background to the study and prefigures the theoretical and methodological approach of the study. This chapter also outlines the objectives of this study and provides an outline of the rest of the thesis.

1.2. Preface

I am a fan. I am a fan of classic literature, sci-fic and fantasy television shows, indie music, superhero movies and many more media products. I live-tweet about episodes of *ABC's* hit show about zombies, *The Walking Dead*. I own a small collection of Harry Potter merchandise and once I even dressed up as Harry Potter character, Luna Lovegood, for Halloween. I regularly watch my favourite YouTubers' videos and own a number of books written by these YouTube stars. I actively participate in my fan identity. This is starting point of my interest in this field, and of the research questions explored in this thesis.

In 2009, when I was 16, our family got its first Internet connection and I started to navigate YouTube and I discovered *Vlogbrothers*. I was drawn to their thoughtful discussions, positive attitude and their appreciation of all things nerdy. The label of "nerd" has often been a negative identifier in both popular culture and in academic settings. However, there are

groups and individuals who understand nerd identities using a positive lens, aiming to view participation in these communities as something to be celebrated rather than shamed.

As someone who felt a little socially awkward and sometimes ashamed of my nerdy interests, which differed from those of my sporty siblings, I felt connected to these two American brothers broadcasting from across the globe. I started following *Vlogbrother's* content for several years and felt that I was becoming a fan, and joined the fan community, Nerdfighteria. On YouTube, I subscribed to their main channel, *Vlogbrothers*¹, as well as several other channels that they create or produce, such as the educational channel *CrashCourse*²; the sex positive channel *Sexplanations*³ hosted by Dr. Lindsey Doe; and an art appreciation channel called *The Art Assignment*⁴ - sometimes hosted by John Green's wife Sarah Green, as well as John Green's 2017 health and fitness channel *100 Days*⁵. I have enjoyed and engaged with their content, such as their *Thoughts from Places*⁶ series and the *Lizzie Bennet Diaries*⁷, Hank Green's Emmy-Award winning adaption of *Pride and Prejudice* in the digital age. I have also read many of John Green's novels, such as *Looking for Alaska* (2005), *An Abundance of Katherines* (2006), *Paper Towns* (2008), and *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012). In one of John Green's *Thoughts from Places* videos, during a tour of Amsterdam he comes across the Emily Dickinson poem "To create a prairie" engraved in a stone wall. John's reading and explanation of the poem meant so much to me that I got a line from the poem tattooed on my foot⁸.

I am a Nerdfighter. Part of why I am doing this study is to explore what this really means. For me, and for others. I was drawn to the community's emphasis on acceptance and intellectual discussions. *Vlogbrothers* openly embraced their 'nerdiness' and this allowed me to do the same. In 2014, I discovered the Nerdfighters South Africa Facebook group and suddenly there was a group of South Africans who could relate to being a Nerdfighter in South Africa when previously it was not a very well-known community in South Africa.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/user/vlogbrothers>

² <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCX6b17PVsYBQ0ip5gyeme-Q>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCkxMIA7rt-mnIc1AjbyAsPw>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCmQThz1OLYt8mb2PU540LOA>

⁵ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1RVRAdiSH4qxjBgxm_plng/featured

⁶ Thoughts from Places playlist:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DVXH8E_e_7M&list=PL9EF0C1C9A93295C5

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCXfbQAimgtbk4RAUHtIAUww>

⁸

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3V7BmClzEQ&index=35&list=PL9EF0C1C9A93295C5>.

Once I became a member of this group, I noticed that members shared content, not only about their shared interest in *Vlogbrothers*, but also content relating to various other fandoms and social issues. Through this group, I was slowly exposed to other fandoms that I had previously not had an interest in. But this South African group, although initially very active, with multiple posts per day, started to become less active and this continued after I had already started my research. It was then that I re-discovered the global NERDFIGHTERIA Facebook group (Hereafter this Facebook group will be referred to in All-Caps.) I noticed that the NERDFIGHTERIA group, despite being a global group, is mostly made up of Americans and their discussions revolved mostly around politics and social issues. Nonetheless I've been, since 2016, an active member of the global NERDFIGHTERIA group.

From my observations of this fan community I noticed that members seemed to join not only because they like *Vlogbrothers'* various productions, shows and books, but also because the *Vlogbrothers* various projects resonated with the fans. As this study outlines various scholars have looked at the reasons individuals join fan communities, such as seeking out a sense of pleasure (Zillemann, 1988, 2000); or out of a desire to seek out entertainment and enhanced appreciation of the source material (Tsay-Vogel & Sanders, 2017: 40); and for the communication, creativity and civic power provided by these fandoms (Bennett, 2014: 5). All of these aspects can be constitutive of elements of a fan identity and such identifications can be differ in intensity between fans. However, this study argues that individuals also join and participate in fan communities because of the collective learning and knowledge sharing occurring within these online spaces and that at least some fan communities can be better understood through using a Community of Practice (CoP) approach.

1.3. Background and general context of the study

1.3.1. Communities

In the past communities were understood as groups of people often geographically bounded, and often fairly homogenous, but with the spread of information and communication technologies (ICTs) new communities can form that are able to be much more interconnected, heterogeneous and often containing conflicting perspectives (Strangelove, 2010: 104). Indeed, current rapid developments in digital and social media technology make it possible to dispense with limitations of space and time (Ward, 1999: 1) when thinking about communities as well as our traditional understandings of the concept of community (Rotman & Preece, 2010: 319). The notion of community can have a range of meanings, and

embody a range of concepts, ranging from particular types of concrete social relationships to more abstract concepts where groups of people ‘imagine’ themselves as being part of a community. Even though Anderson (1991) focuses on the issues of nationhood, his concept of “imagined communities” is a useful starting point when looking at online fan communities, because, according to Anderson (1983:18), all communities larger than primordial villages of regular face-to-face contact are by necessity ‘imagined’ by its members. Community is imagined because even the members of the smallest nation will never know or meet all their fellow members, yet in the minds of each participant there is an *image* of their shared communion. Thus, “some sort of virtuality,” (Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004: 37) is a normal aspect of community life, regardless of the nature of the medium on which the sense of community relies.

Social organisations, in the digital age, become untethered from place, and are able to span the globe (Levine, 2013:1). Several theorists (Levine, 2013; Rotman & Preece, 2010; McMillain, 1986) argue that despite wide variations, online communities are often formed around many similar elements, most notably a shared purpose or clear common interest. These elements can also be applied to fan communities, often referred to as fandoms, which are develop around a common set of interests, such as specific products, celebrities, activities, a particular film or series of films, or ways of thinking (Levine, 2015: 3).

1.3.2. What is a fan?

The term “fan” originated from an abbreviated form of the word “fanatic”. This term first appeared in the late 19th century in journalistic accounts describing followers of professional sports teams (Jenkins, 2013: 12), but it was expanded in the early 20th century to incorporate any devotee of sports or commercial entertainment. This term “fanatic” and notions of ‘obsession’ and ‘infatuation’ however, had several negative connotations. A “fanatic” is characterised by “excessive and mistaken enthusiasm” (Sullivan, 2013: 192). Negative notions of fans dominated popular consciousness in the early stages of Fan studies (Siuda, 2010: 13). However, some fans studies scholars set out to counter these negative stereotypes associated with fans and fan activities by suggesting that audiences bring their own interpretive frameworks to popular media, and that they have deep and emotional investment in their chosen media content. The concept of a “fan” will be further explored in Chapter Two.

1.3.3. What are fan communities?

Scholars have also been interested in the “social aspect” (Sullivan, 2013: 195) of fandom, trying to understand how and why fans band together in either informal or more formally structured groups to share their interest with others. This can be contrasted with someone who likes something (a sports team, a pop star) but keeps that preference private and personal. Although the definition of “fandom” has been contested amongst researchers, most fan scholars agree that it involves at very least a collective of people *organized socially* around their shared appreciation of a popular culture object or objects (Jenkins, 1992, 2006; Baym, 2000; Hills, 2002). In the digital era, the ways in which fans organise themselves socially has changed significantly. Increasingly individual fans are finding their entertainment or fan interest on new media platforms such as YouTube; which is primarily a video sharing site that consists of, among many other things, different fan communities, each with their own distinctive mode of responding, interpreting, rearranging and recreating the texts and symbols of their community (Stranglove, 2010: 104). Almost ten years ago, the notion of a “YouTuber” was not conceptualised as a serious profession, because YouTube was seen as a space for amateur videographers and “home videos” (Stranglove, 2010: 104). Founded in 2005, YouTube has grown to be one of the most influential social media and video platforms globally. This free, public, online video archive, with built-in social networking features, has created a platform for countless virtual communities, many of which are focused on transmitting knowledge in users’ areas of interest and expertise (Head (2013:3). YouTube is a home for numerous individual content creators, whose posts range from educational projects, gaming videos, make-up tutorials and daily video blogs. Today, YouTube celebrities or YouTubers, many whose popularity stems from video blogs of them merely talking to the camera, are regarded, alongside mainstream celebrities, as important cultural arbiters (Freberg et al, 2010: 90). These YouTube personalities often have large and devoted fan bases who convene socially online.

1.3.4. YouTube fan bases: *Vlogbrothers*

Many of these fan bases, and their fan practices and activities, have attracted academic attention. This study focusses around the specific fan community centred on YouTubers John and Hank Green (*Vlogbrothers*). In 2007, brothers, John and Hank Green started a video blogging (vlogging) project called Brotherhood 2.0 to repair, as they characterised it, their waning sibling relationship. They signed up to YouTube under the channel name *Vlogbrothers* and agreed that for the rest of the year they would only communicate via daily videos to one another discussing their various interests, which varied from light-hearted videos about their everyday lives, discussions about the Harry Potter books and films, to

more serious topics such as science, literature or politics (Baker-Whitelaw, 2013). Six months after launching their YouTube channel in 2007, *Vlogbrothers* had 202 subscribers.

Within that year, however, the brothers had unintentionally created a global virtual community. On July 18, 2007, Hank Green uploaded a video of himself playing and singing his song “Accio Deathly Hallows” in honour of the seventh Harry Potter book. This video was the first *Vlogbrothers* video to trend YouTube, and the starting point of the brothers' success. Their fan community celebrates friendship, reading, creativity, and all things nerdy, while acting as a platform for fans of the brothers to virtually gather and converse (Gibaldi Mathur, 2013).

This community is called Nerdfigheria reference to the brothers' so-called nerdy interests. As mentioned above the label “Nerd” has gained considerable more positive associations and this might partly due to the Green brother's efforts. This term is defined in different ways and depends on the context. The Oxford Dictionary defines nerd as a person who is “a foolish or contemptible person who lacks social skills or is boringly studious.” However, this definition is outdated for many. More frequently, nerd is being associated with intellectualism, individualism, and various external identifiers, such as interests and hobbies, scholarly pursuits, and indeed with participating within various fandoms (Gabriel, 2015: 13). The term “Nerdfighter” itself was originally just a joke. Early in 2007, Green filmed one of his vlogs in the Savannah, Georgia, airport, in front of an arcade game whose logo appeared to read “Nerdfighters.” Quickly, his viewers, in their own vlogs and blogs, began to refer to themselves as Nerdfighters, and something of a social movement was born. The Green brothers and their viewers have developed particular internal jargon defining Nerdfighters as individuals that are “made entirely of awesome” and who “fight against World Suck”. “World Suck” covers a multitude of topics, from the persistence of poverty and the prevalence of malaria to ignorance of world affairs (Wilson, 2011: 20). One of the aspects that attracts people to *Vlogbrothers* and Nerdfigheria, Proulx (2011) suggests, is the belief that it is a fandom full of people with similar interests, hobbies, values and/ or beliefs. Nerdfighters can be diverse and have diverse interests, but they share core values such as acceptance and the desire to “decrease world suck” and increase global levels of “awesome” (Proulx, 2011: 13). While a lot of energy is focused on increasing positivity globally, there is also a great deal of effort into fostering a positive environment in the community itself. Within the community there is a steady emphasis on accepting yourself for who you are and others for who they are by embracing “nerdiness” (Proulx, 2011: 16).

1.3.5. Nerdfighter values

The best part of being a Nerdfighter, for me and according to Castellini (2013), is discovering that there are other fans of *Vlogbrothers* and knowing what those other fans can do when they come together, under the “responsible leadership of Hank and John,” (2013: 218).

Nerdfighteria has become known for their charitable contributions, owing largely to their “Project for Awesome” venture (Castellini, 2013). Since 2007, every December *Vlogbrothers* run the Project for Awesome; during which they encourage their fans to post videos advocating for charities of their choice. Hank and John then encourage other fans to promote these videos and raise money for these charities. Some charities that *Vlogbrothers* are actively involved with include water awareness group Water.org and “This Star Won’t go Out”, a cancer awareness charity started by the parents of a teenage Nerdfighter who passed away from cancer in 2010. Each year the project has grown, and in 2010 YouTube- the company- got involved in the project by organising a live show with major YouTubers and by featuring certain videos on their home page. Nerdfighteria has developed, as this study explores, its own culture, a sense of common identity and shared symbols, such as their own recognisable handshake, as well as branded merchandise, slogans and jokes. For example, their slogans, “Don’t Forget To Be Awesome (DFTBA)” and “Decrease World Suck” serve as positive mantras for members to embrace.

From the beginning of their project, John and Hank have tried to reclaim the term “nerd”, often considered a negative term referring to someone viewed as intelligent, but lacking in certain social skills (Liao, 2015: 5). This negative definition has become quite out-dated and more frequently “nerd” is being associated with intellectualism, individualism, and various identifiers, such as specific hobbies, scholarly pursuits and participation in fandoms (Gabriel, 2015: 14). In a video⁹, John Green himself defines nerd identity by linking it to enthusiasm:

Because nerds like us are allowed to be un-ironically enthusiastic about stuff. We don’t have to be like “oh yeah that purse is ok”, or like “yeah, I like that band’s early stuff.” Nerds are allowed to love stuff, like jump-up-and-down-in-the-chair-can’t-control-yourself, love it. Hank, when people called people nerds mostly what they are saying is “you like stuff” which is just not a good insult at all, like, “you are too enthusiastic about the miracle of human consciousness.”

9 “Harry Potter Nerds Win at Life” John Green. Jul 9 2009.

This quote illustrates that, in John's opinion, nerdiness requires enthusiasm, thoughtfulness and intelligence. The term "nerd" is very important to Nerdfighteria, and serves to empower those who identify themselves as one, including the Green brothers themselves. Through reinforcing the positive aspects of being a nerd, John and Hank Green subvert negative understandings of what it means to be a nerd.

The broader Nerdfighter community grew and developed in its earliest days using Facebook groups, in which fans from all over the globe could bond over common interests (DiGiorgio, 2013). This remains the case today, as this study explores in some depth. Amongst themselves, and with the Green brothers, *Vlogbrothers* fans can exchange ideas and engage in discussions not only on the comment section under videos, but also through various other social networks, such as Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram and Facebook

1.3.6. Nerdfighter off- and online gatherings

In 2010, *Vlogbrothers* founded VidCon, a convention that celebrates online video entertainment found on YouTube; held annually in Southern California. The convention gathers thousands of online video viewers, creators, and industry representatives from across the globe. Although many Nerdfighters gather at Nerdfighter meetings, such as VidCon or NerdCon, this physical interaction is just a derivative of what is and what remains mostly an online community.

Fans' relative sense of community, Obst, Zinkiewicz and Smith (2002) found, did not differ based on whether they met face-to-face or communicated only through text. This means that a strong sense of community is possible even when geographical proximity is not possible. It is not necessarily the case that social networks and the Internet create large fan bases or change how fans communicate their admiration. Rather, Coppa (2006) finds that the Internet and technology provide a global space for interaction. In the digital age, fans actively employ media to interact with like-minded peers, finding new ideas and interpretations.

1.3.7. Approaches to Fan studies

As mentioned above, and as is further explored in Chapter Two, historically Fan studies previously characterised fans as "deviant" and as the stereotypical "others". This one-dimensional view of fans, Jensen (1992: 24) argues, blocked analysis and proper understanding of how people interact with the media they consume in contemporary society. Fan cultures should not be reduced to a collective of others, but should rather acknowledge that different fandoms have specific dynamics both with the content creators, the stars, the 'works' or fan artefacts and within the communities (Liao, 2015: 3). This study will analyse

these social dynamics within the Nerdfighter communities and critique the various reasons individuals join and participate in these communities and what value they garner from this participation.

It is, therefore, important to outline which areas of fandom do and do not apply to this research. As discussed above, negative notions of fan dominated the popular consciousness when scholars first began to examine the phenomenon of fandom. For example, media fans were often portrayed as unthinking consumers, willing to buy anything with a logo or image of their favourite media text (Sullivan, 2013: 193). Several theorists (Head, 2013; Smith, 2009) have debated whether the renewed interest in fandom had commercial and consumeristic implications. Fans can be seen as the 'ideal consumers' since their consumption habits can be highly predicted by the cultural industry, and are likely to remain stable. Fan identities, Hills (2002:29) argues, can be viewed alongside consumer identities. For example, the creation of and demand for specialised retail outlets, such as comic stores, or merchandise retailers, reflect both fan and consumer identities. This argument thus presents as a view of fans as some kind of 'specialist consumers', whose fandom is expressed through keeping up with the new releases of books, comics or videos, etc.

However, amongst fans there is a certain amount of hostility towards commercialisation, Hills (2002: 27) argues, due to these negative stereotypes of fans as mindless consumers. This one-sided view of fans minimises the extent to which fandom is related to wider shifts within consumer culture, such as the increase in consumption-based social and communal identities. Fans whose practices, such as buying merchandise and tickets to events, are clearly linked with dominant capitalist society are likely to be censured with the fan culture concerned.

Vlogbrothers do sell merchandise through their e-commerce merchandise company DFTBA Records, that was co-founded by Hank Green and Alan Lastufka in 2008. Originally a record label, its main focus was music generated by prominent YouTube personalities and now focuses on selling all form of merchandise for prominent YouTubers. On DFTBA Record's website Hank Green notes that, as of 2014, they had paid out over \$400,000 to fan-art creators who designed products for YouTube creators. Although there is a commercial aspect, this study will argue that this is not dominate element of this specific fan community.

1.3.8. Examining fandom through the lens of Social Learning Theory

When fans connect to other fans either though face-to-face or online interactions they share a common bond of interest and knowledge of a particular media text (if these are text fans:

sports fans, for example, have different ‘texts’ such as games, commentaries etc). Through close reading and re-reading of the text and debates and discussions with others, fans develop an extensive repertoire of knowledge about their chosen media. The utilisation and trading of these extensive volumes of knowledge about their favourite media are thus key sources of fan pleasure (Sullivan, 2013: 198). Individuals within Nerdfigheria also turn to each other when embarking upon informal educational pursuits, such as discussions of novels, as well as relying on one another for critical thinking and analysis (Wilson, 2011:6).

This study therefore argues that one of the aspects that makes fandoms, and in particular this Nerdfigheria fandom, appealing is the element of knowledge sharing and collective learning. The scholarly paradigms for thinking about learning have evolved beyond traditional classroom transmission models to include synchronous and asynchronous learning. Asynchronous learning refers to forms of education, instruction, and learning that do not occur in the same place or at the same time, such as digital and online learning; whereas synchronous learning refers to a learning event in which a group of students are engaging in learning at the same time. Web 2.0 tools and social networking approaches have extended forms of learning that are more interactive and collaborative. A promising way of formulating questions about fan communities is through drawing on theories built around the social learning theory model Communities of Practice (CoP). This model was initially conceptualised by social learning theorists Etienne Wenger (Wenger, 1998) and Jean Lave (Lave & Wenger 1991). The CoP model was not originally devised to look at online spaces nor at participants in what are predominantly leisure activities, but was rather a framework devised to understand how deliberate learning takes place within groups and how this might be applied to educational or institutional settings. Wenger (1998) later went on to develop the CoP model for use in more formal business and governmental contexts. Even though informal groups, such as online communities, are mentioned briefly, they have not been explored to the same extent by Wenger (1998). Other theorists, such as Eckert (2006) and Estephan (2008) however, have started to explore how the key insights of CoP theory might apply to these more informal and ostensibly social and not ‘learning’ spaces.

Individuals can, Lave and Wenger (1998:2) theorised, choose to belong to a number of different CoPs through which learning can take place. Within these CoPs individuals engage in the pursuit of common enterprises of all kinds. They engage in the pursuit together, interact with one another and establish their relations with others and society as a whole. As will be more extensively explored in Chapter Two, all these elements form a part of the process of learning (Wenger, 1998: 45). Over time collective learning practices become a

kind of property of the community that is created by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. Even online, people in virtual spaces exchange knowledge, and can, in some contexts, create a sense of identity and engage in a process of learning.

1.4. Research Objectives

Popular culture scholars have examined numerous factors to explain audiences' attraction to media, such as identification with characters (Cohen, 2001, 2006), involvement with narratives (Green & Brock, 2000; Green, Brock & Kaufman, 2004), enjoyment (Zillmann & Vorderer, 2000) and appreciation (Oliver, 2008; Oliver & Bartsch, 2011). However, these theories do not adequately, on their own, necessarily explain why individuals join and participate, and particularly why they remain within, their chosen fan community. This study suggests that beyond enjoyment and a sense of belonging, there is an important and under-researched component of knowledge production and an element of learning within these communities which many members value highly. There is, this study suggests, much more collective learning taking place within fan communities more broadly than is acknowledged, and this seems to be especially the case for the Nerdfighteria fandom. *Vlogbrothers* encourage debate and discussion regarding their own content and a variety of other nerdy interests. This research therefore explored the idea of social learning as a particular component of 'belonging' to an online fan community online fan community by using the online fan community of the YouTube channel *Vlogbrothers*, Nerdfighteria as a case study.

Seminal Fan studies theorist Jenkins (1992) argues that fan communities can serve as what he calls 'interpretative communities' which embark on collective "meaning-making processes" but he does not analyse in depth whether the component of social learning is an integral part of fan communities. Social learning theorist, Wenger's (1998) CoP model, based on his work with Lave (1991), provides a framework that helps establish whether the collective learning is taking place within these communities and whether an aggregation of people qualifies them as a CoP. There are three dimensions to a CoP Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest: a domain of knowledge, a set of relationships via a community and a set of practices of that community while acquiring that domain of knowledge (Wenger, 1998). This study is particularly interested in the domain of knowledge shared collectively by individuals within the fan community Nerdfighteria. This study, thereby, argues that the domain of knowledge within fandoms is very often the object of the fandom and the ethos of the fandom itself. Through their interactions with other fans within their community individual deepen their knowledge about that fandom and the object of the fandom.

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002: 2) developed seven principles to serve as a guide for those who wanted to establish and keep CoPs “alive”. Even though Wenger et al (2002) originally designed these principles as a guide for those attempting to design CoPs which focussed on deliberate and intentional learning, they are helpful for understanding what makes a CoP functional, because they focus on the various elements and dilemmas at the heart of a functioning CoP. By applying them to fan communities, these principles illuminate fan communities and this study argues that some fan communities are successful precisely because they become a CoP, i.e. they intentionally or unintentionally adopted some of the practices and ‘ways of being’ of CoPs. This study goes further to suggest that those online communities that do not adopt or conform to these elements of being a CoP often fade or stall and even cease to operate. When people stop learning, their interest wanes even though, as this study suggests, declines of interest are not necessarily expressed in terms of learning and knowledge.

The three structural elements of the CoP model (Wenger, 1998) and Wenger et al’s (2002) seven principles of cultivating a CoP thus provide a theoretical and analytic framework for understanding for how shared learning takes places within online fan communities and suggest why this might be a critical element of these groups thriving or struggling.

1.5. Thesis Overview

This thesis comprises of six chapters. Chapter One presents a general background to the study. It highlights the research question and spells out the significance of the study. It also outlines the objectives of this research and its chosen methods, as well positioning the research within a broader scholarly literature.

Chapter Two explores the history of audience and reception studies and in particular the development of Fan studies, and the of Fan studies in the broader field of media and cultural studies. This chapter provides and overview of the literature and the key theoretical framework of this study. As suggest above, social learning is an under-developed area of research within Fan studies and this chapter explores in some depth theory about social learning and meaning making within fandoms. The chapter unpacks the three structural elements of CoPs, namely domain, community and practice (Wenger et al., 2002). Within this, the chapter also discusses the seven principles of cultivating a CoP; conceptualised by Wenger et al (2002) in order to establish whether fan communities can be successful CoP.

Chapter Three discusses the methods, procedures and techniques employed in this research.

This chapter gives a rationale for the adoption of qualitative techniques of data collection, observation, semi-structured interviews and the process of their application in the study. It also discusses and gives a justification for the selection. The chapter will also look at case studies a method of qualitative research. The chapter lastly addresses the researcher's position as an academic and a fan and thereby addressing some of ethical considerations of the study.

Chapter Four presents the findings and analysis of data gathered from the global NERDFIGHTERIA Facebook group, mostly from postings made over the past few years. This chapter draws the global Facebook group as a case study and applies Wenger's (1998) CoP model in order to see what kind of learning and knowledge acquisition is taking place within this group and whether this group can serve as a reflection of the fandom as a whole.

Chapter Five has a more localised focus and analyses the data collected from the Nerdfighters South Africa Facebook group. This includes postings made over the past few years, and interviews with group members.

Chapter Six serves as the conclusion of the study. This chapter concludes that even though the Nerdfightereria community as a whole can be usefully thought of a CoP (and that by doing so, this has illuminated and helped answers the key research questions of this study), that the local Nerdfighters South Africa group does not function as a CoP and that is partly why this group has dwindled, in 2017 at least, to a barely functioning Facebook community.

CHAPTER TWO: A review of the literature and theoretical overview

2.1. Introduction

This chapter will outline the development of Fan studies as a field in order to situate this study within the broader academic media and cultural studies field, as well as compare and critique some of the ways in which online fan communities have been defined and studied. As discussed in the past Fan studies theorists have explored the motivations, meanings and gratifications that influence individuals to join fan communities. Even though those factors do play a role, the areas of knowledge acquisition and shared learning have been comparatively neglected. This knowledge acquisition takes the form of discussions revolving around the fandom's media of choice. In order to better understand why individuals join, stay and participate in these fan communities, this study will make use of Wenger's (1998) social learning "communities of practice" (CoP) model.

2.2. Comparing Fan studies literature

2.2.1. Cultural Studies tradition and audience studies

This study draws on several theories and methods from the Cultural Studies tradition and thus it is important to contextualise this research within the development of critical Cultural Studies. Theories of the media and culture are, according to Kellner (2003: 3), best understood through specific studies of concrete media phenomena, which are contextualised within the changes of contemporary society and history. Cultural Studies is centrally concerned with the construction of meaning and how meaning is produced through particular expressive forms, as well as how it is constantly negotiated and deconstructed through the practices of everyday life (Kellner, 2003: 2). A significant interest within Cultural Studies is on the analysis of texts and how these texts, particularly texts produced by media industries, produce meaning (Kellner, 2003: 2). Cultural Studies is also concerned with the way in which audience members interpret media products and how they incorporate them into their worldview and lifestyle (Kellner, 2003: 27).

During the rise of critical Cultural Studies in the 1980s, the study of media audiences went through two important shifts. Firstly, theorists moved towards a more critically oriented approach to audience studies that critiqued earlier theories. Seminal Cultural Studies theorist Stuart Hall (1982) argued that there was a shift from a "behaviouralist" paradigm, including theories such as uses-and-gratification, to a more critical approach to media and culture. The

focus on immediate short-term of communication messages on individuals, Hall (1982) reasoned, ignored the historical shifts, questions of power and social domination, and the role of economic and other institutions on social structures. Another critique of behaviouralists' theories is that they left questions about audience engagement and interpretations of texts fairly unanswered. Therefore, the relative autonomy of media audience became a focal point amongst critical media scholars.

The second shift within Cultural Studies was more methodological and started developing a more ethnographic audience-centric approach to the study of popular culture to focus on the interplay of interpretation and everyday social practice. Within this shift theorists also focused on understanding how audiences made sense of the media that they were consuming and started viewing audience members as active interpreters of texts rather than merely passive consumers. The active audience concept was particularly clearly articulated and theorised in Hall's (1982) discussion of 'Encoding' and 'Decoding', which was primarily concern with the nexus between textual production and consumption. Through this, Hall was able to theories various forms of audience responses to a particular media production that Hall (1982) ranged from accepting to highly critical.

Formative work regarding the study of popular culture and audiences was undertaken by the Frankfurt School during the 1930s and Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham in the 1970s (which Hall was a key leader of). The Frankfurt School is associated most notably with Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Max Horkheimer and embraced critical communications studies in the 1930s. The Frankfurt School is also known for combining the political economy of the media, cultural analysis of texts, and audience reception studies of the social and ideological effects of mass culture and communications (Kellner, 2003: 25). Importantly, these theorists also argued that the media at the time had invaded and subverted the world of traditional or bourgeois culture, by making it more widely available to the masses.

The now classical period of British Cultural Studies from the early 1960s to the early 1980s adopted a Marxist approach to the study of culture, one especially influenced by the diverse strands of thinking of French 'structuralist' Louis Althusser and Italian activist Antonio Gramsci (Hall 1980). Responding to social struggles and movements of the 1960s and the 1970s, the Birmingham group focused on the interplay of representations and ideologies of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality in cultural texts, especially concentrating on

media culture. They were among the first to study the effects of newspapers, radio, television, film, and other popular cultural forms on audiences.

Theories of culture were brought in from anthropology, via the work of Levi-Strauss (1963), and so were more ethnographic methods, such as those used by Willis (1977), Hebdige (1979) and Morley (1980). In particular, Morley's (1980) study of the sense-making processes around current affairs television signalled the major ethnographic turn to qualitative audience research which rose to prominence in the 1980s. The Birmingham School engaged in how assorted audiences interpreted and used media culture in varied ways and contexts.

2.2.2. Development of Fan Studies

As Cultural Studies started to direct more attention to the process of reception by audiences an interest in fan cultures started to develop. Despite the familiarity of the term "fan" within everyday life and within popular culture, in academia the theorising of 'fandom' is complex (Hills, 2002: ix). Early literature of popular media fandom perceived fans negatively, as 'obsessive loners' or hysterical fanatics for example. However, as more attention started to be given to the area of reception the status of the fan also started to shift. Theorists noticed that instead of audiences' viewing choices being determined by institutional constructions, viewers developed their own interpretations of their own media consumption alongside and even in opposition to these institutions' intentions. This challenged the perceived negative stereotypes of the passive, unimaginative or uneducated mass audience. The study of fandom developed largely out of the scholarly attention given to so-called "cult television" and its fan bases. Cult television audiences can be defined as "television viewers who are intensely engaged with particular programs, performers, and/or genres and whose reception practices extend well beyond merely watching television" (Allen & Hill, 2004: 459.) Researchers started constructing more precise accounts of both historical and contemporary audiences and therefore started to probe "what makes popular culture popular" (Jenkins, 1992: 1). Fiske's (1992) work, for example, is one of the chief links between early Birmingham research on TV audiences and subcultures and Fan studies.

2.2.3 Three historical waves of Fan studies

2.2.3.1 First Wave of Fan Studies

Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington (2007) usefully distinguished between three waves of Fan studies. They described the first wave as an attempt to establish Fan studies as a legitimate

part of popular and academic literature. This early literature of the first wave is diverse, and fans were consistently characterised as potential “fanatics” and were viewed through negative stereotypes with a focus on their “pathological reception tendencies,” (Siuda, 2010: 3). Fans were traditionally viewed as either ridiculed or considered pathological people with signs of uncontrollable behaviour, such as sports fanatics (Jensen, 1992). Fans were viewed as deviants and thus this wave is often referred to as the “Deviation wave,” (Siuda, 2010:2). In this initial set of Fan studies, the fan was seen as the stereotypical ‘other’ as opposed to ‘us’ and often generalised as the “silent individual” or a part of “the hysterical crowd” (Liao, 2015: 2). Fans were also negatively stereotyped due their low visibility in mainstream culture.

2.2.3.2 Second Wave of Fan Studies

Scholars of the second wave of Fan studies ‘allowed’ fans to speak of and for themselves more often and more and more scholarship was undertaken by those who have an ‘insider perspective’ of fan cultures (Hills, 2002; Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995). Gray et al (2007: 3) describes the wave of Fan studies as the “Fandom is Beautiful” phase. This wave is also often referred to as the “Resistance wave” (Siuda, 2010:7) and recognised the inherent social element of the fan experience and more appropriately “allowed fans to speak of and for themselves and was often written by those inside respective fan cultures,” (Gray et al, 2007:3). Theorists of this so-called “Resistance wave” did not consider fans to be manipulated or pathological individuals but rather saw them as active and creative members of their own communities. The second wave of Fan studies helped establish fandom as a researchable topic concerning the analysis of individual fan consumption, and shifted scholarship towards a deeper analysis of the social dynamics within fan communities (Staps et al, 2014: 10).

The appearance of Henry Jenkins’ influential book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992) is often cited as the start of the second wave of Fan studies, which positioned fans as active consumers of media products constructing their own cultures and subcultures from popular culture. Jenkins (1992) challenged the still prevailing view of fans as ‘cultural dupes’ and suggested that they actively and consciously consume media products that they choose. Jenkins (1992) was interested in the idea of “textual poaching” which refers to the subversive appropriation of mass media texts, or of the characters within them, by fans for their own enjoyment and purposes. “Poaching” (Jenkins, 1992: xxi) is the negotiation process over the meaning of a text for individual and collective purposes, and the terms of their relations with the original producers. The term also refers to how fans relate to

how other fans and producers interact with their “poached” materials. Fans interpret media products in a variety of interesting and unexpected ways (Hills, 2002: ix). Even though the official text constitutes a common origin of interest, fans often collectively interpret programs, characters, and actors in ways that expand on and move well beyond the official narratives.

Even though Jenkins (1992) popularised the term “poaching” it was originally conceptualised by de Certeau (1984). De Certeau (1984) and other Cultural Studies theorists increasingly started to challenge the traditional distinction between high, or elite, culture and low, or popular, culture. This line of thinking was started by Williams (1961) who argued for the need to overcome the division between high and low culture. Scholars argued that these distinctions could not be purely understood in aesthetic terms, but rather that, that which is deemed high or low culture must be understood in relation to power relations within society. This second wave of fandom was strongly influenced by Marxist idea of power struggle. Fandom and fan responses started been seen as a subversive act on the part of audiences who are often marginalised by their perceived power struggles against the power bloc (Thomas, 2011:7). Fandom is associated with “the cultural tastes of subordinate formations of the people, particularly those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class or race,” (Fiske, 1987: 30). The fact that fandom appeared to appeal to “subordinated groups,” (Sullivan, 2013: 193) transformed fan participation into a form of political resistance. In that way fandom was “a vehicle for marginalised subcultural groups to pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations,” (Jenkins, 1992:40). Therefore the study of fandom was automatically considered worthy, according to Gray et all (2007: 2), because it represented and championed the disadvantaged in society.

The choice of media and the fan internalisation of these cultural materials in their own personal lives distinguished the individuals as a unique subculture (Sullivan, 2013: 196). In the 1970s, theorists such as Hebdige (1979), argued that communities of punks, Rastafarians and other groups dedicated to specific musical genres were distinctive cultural entities unto themselves. These theorists also argued that these groups challenged the authority of mainstream culture through visual signs of their affiliation and style that was disruptive to the status quo. Cultural Studies increasingly became concerned to draw attention to how subcultural groups resist dominant forms of culture and identity, creating their own style and identities. Individuals who identify with subcultures, like punk culture, or hip-hop subcultures, look and act differently from those in the mainstream, and thus create oppositional identities, defining themselves against standard models. Therefore, media fans

are members of subcultures, because they too adopt their own linguistic codes and symbolic forms that delineate them from mainstream culture. Even though early Fan studies scholars suggested that media fans did not pose the same kind of ‘threat’ to traditional cultural authority and social norms, as punks were perceived to do, for example, they still challenged existing hierarchies by redeeming and celebrating media objects that were typically found at the low end of the cultural hierarchy of popular mass media (Sullivan, 2013: 196).

Second wave scholars established that fandom was more than merely being fan of something, but rather that it was collective of individuals who communally formed, what these scholars called, “interpretive communities” (Jenkins, 1992) that in their “subcultural cohesion evaded the preferred and intended meanings of the power bloc represented by popular culture” (Gray et al, 2007: 2). Contemporary scholars recognise the inherent participatory nature and collective activities of actual fan communities and the emotional connection between fans and their particular fan object, or set of interests. Fandom necessitates relationships with others: fellow fans with whom to share interests, develop networks and institutions, and create a common culture (Duncombe, 2012: 1). Fandom can thus be seen as a network: as a collective identity and mode of community organisation (Jenkins, 2012: 1). There is a distinction between “fans” who are active participants within fandom as a social, cultural and interpretive institution and “followers” who are audience members who regularly watch and enjoy the media but who claim no larger social identity on the basis of this media consumption (Jenkins & Tulloch, 1995:23). This confusion between “fans” and “followers” is partly to blame for why fandom has been traditionally misunderstood by many academics as being “reclusive” and “private.”

2.2.3.3 Third Wave of Fan Studies

The third wave, also referred to as the “Mainstream Wave” (Siuda, 2010: 10), was roughly linked to the publication of Jenkins’ 2006 work *Convergence Culture* and started looking at fan communities that had migrated to or were native to, the Internet. This wave also introduced more concerted attempts to remove the oversimplified division between “evil” producers and “good” fans. Researchers within this wave suggested that fans no longer felt the need to oppose producers and producers have, over time, learned to listen to audience in much less arrogant ways. Whereas the first two waves focused on the interaction between members of particular audience groups, the third wave focused more centrally on fan identity and the expression of this identity on various platforms.

Since *Textual Poachers* (Jenkins, 1992) was published, the most striking development within fan culture and Fan studies has been the arrival and widespread adoption of digital technology. This technology has blurred the lines between producers and consumers, creating symbiotic relationships between powerful corporations and individual fans, and giving rise to new forms of cultural production (Pearson, 2010). From the mid-1990s, Fan studies started increasingly focus on the Internet as the locus on fan activity. Fan used the Internet to discuss their favourite texts, to connect with other fans and to share their work.

The so-called third wave also focused on the intermingling of fans and fandoms and how individuals can belong to several different fandoms at the same time (Siuda, 2010: 11). This intermingling of fandoms was largely the result of the development of the Internet where it is easier to find fandoms similar to specific interests and for individuals to become a member of new communities (Siuda, 2010: 11). In his ethnographic account of a particular group of media fans, which he refers to as “media fandom” Jenkins (2012: 1) deconstructs its social institutions and cultural practices. These kinds of fan group do not embrace a single text but rather many texts or media products such as American and British dramatic series, Hollywood genre films, comic books, Japanese animations and popular fiction. This more general understanding of a “media fandom” captures some elements of the fan community Nerdfighteria, which started out as a small fan community centred around *Vlogbrothers*, but which has developed to include those interested in several different media products, such as Harry Potter, anime and science-fictions.

Fandom is a complex “multidimensional phenomenon, inviting many forms of participation and levels of engagement” (Jenkins (1992:2). To be a fan is to participate in range of activities that extends beyond the private act of viewing to include public interactions with other fans and public expression of fan identity. The growth of the Internet has also allowed individual fans to join online communities and thus become even more visible and active. Building on these insights, this study will focus on why individuals join, stay and participate in online fan communities by proposing that they do so because those online fans spaces provide a space for shared learning and shared knowledge acquisition.

2.2.4 Shared Learning in Fandoms

As mentioned above, in the past Fan studies theorists have looked at the various enjoyment factors that motivate individuals to join these communities. However, much of the scholarship that has examined online communities have, this study argues, under-accounted for the learning dimension of these communities. Close examination of the literature of Fan

studies and the social practices of online fandoms reveal that these spaces may serve as fertile spaces for learning and the sharing of knowledge.

Fans have always been inherently social; enjoying the discursive interactions that come with discussing and debating their area of interest and they have fully embraced the affordances of the digital world (Price & Robinson, 2016: 3). In a study of *One Direction*'s fan community Korobkova (2014) argues that these online fan communities serve as spaces for “connected learning,” (15). Daily learning occurs within multiple spheres, including personal interests, peer culture, and academic content. As its name implies, connected learning occurs at the nexus of these three spheres. The connected learning approach posits that personal interests, such as those within fandoms, can promote learning through igniting the drive to gain knowledge and expertise (Korobkova, 2014: 15). The theory of connected learning reveals these fan spaces are indeed fertile spaces for collective learning and knowledge acquisition. To expand the collective learning as a component of belonging to an online fan community this study will make use of social learning theories.

2.3. Social Learning Theory: Vygotsky and Wenger

Social learning theory suggests that learning is at the core of human existence and asserts that it is fundamentally a *social phenomenon*. Learning is thus a social process where interactions with others are central to all learning. Up until the 1920s, learning was considered an individual activity and it was often assumed that learning has a beginning and an end and that it is best separated from the rest of our activities. It was also assumed that learning was the result of teaching. Lev Vygotsky (1962), a Russian teacher and psychologist, first stated that we learn through our interactions and communications with others. Vygotsky (1978) started developing a social development theory of learning which suggested that learning comes largely from our experience of participating in daily life. This theory tried to explain consciousness as the result of socialisation. The major theme of Vygotsky's (1978) theoretical framework was that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. It includes three major concepts. Firstly, the theory conceptualised that social interaction plays a fundamental role in understanding child development and how children come to understand themselves and the world around them. Secondly, learning involves interacting with “the more Knowledgeable Other” who has a higher level of knowledge or expertise than the learner. Thirdly, Vygotsky (1980) developed the concept of ‘zone of proximal development’, which he understands as the distance between the child's potential development level and actual development. All three of these major concepts link socialisation with the process of learning and of cognitive development. Etienne Wenger

(1991) uses Vygotsky's (1980) notion that learning and social interactions are intertwined and dependent on each other. With Jean Lave, he developed elements of Vygotsky's theory of socialisation to develop the social learning theory model of communities of practice (CoP) in order to clarify exactly what learning is and how learning takes place among practitioners in a CoP.

2.4. Communities of Practice (CoP)

Building on Vygotsky's (1980) theory of social development, the Communities of Practice (CoP) model has resonated across several academic fields including organisational studies and education. During their examination of the apprenticeships of tailors, Lave and Wenger (1991) developed the concept of "Communities of Practice" as a learning model.

Apprenticeship is usually thought of as a relationship between a student and a master, but Lave and Wenger's (1991) studies of apprenticeship reveal a more complex set of social relationships through which learning takes place. The CoP model examines issues of power, meaning and subjectivity, because participants derive meaning from their interaction with the collective, as well as expressing agency within the collective and is subject to the collective's power structures (Rebaza, 2009: 4). The CoP approach focuses on the social interaction dimension of what Lave and Wenger (1991) call situated learning. Conceptually situated learning is based on the notion that knowledge is contextually situated and fundamentally influenced by the activity, context and culture in which this knowledge is used. Situated learning theory argues that learning is fundamentally a social process. Lave and Wenger's (1991) seminal analysis and later augmented works of Lave (1995) and Wenger (1998) established significant research into the practices within organisations.

Wenger (1998) later went on to develop the CoP model for use within business and government institutions. Even though they are mentioned briefly, informal groups, such as online communities, were not explored to the same extent. The growth of the Internet as a platform for networking and collaboration presents new opportunities for CoPs to exist (Roberts, 2006: 624). For example, social networking sites, such as Facebook, have emerged as possible forums in which CoPs can exist and grow.

There are varying kinds of learning theory. The CoP model, for Wenger (1998:3), is not a replacement for other theories of learning, which attempt to solve different problems or address different areas. CoPs have their own focus and assumptions. The assumption most useful for this research suggests that:

Learning takes place partially through social participation and therefore a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities (Wenger (1998: 4).

This assumption indicates that the primary focus of the CoP model is on learning as a process of social participation. The aspect of social learning within the CoP model is helpful when exploring and understanding fan cultures, as explored further in this research. Wenger (1998:5) developed and examined several components of social participation as a process of learning and of knowing; namely meaning, practice, community and identity. Firstly, meaning refers to the way in which we talk about our changing ability, individually and collectively, to experience our life and the world as meaningful and to make sense of our experience through our interpretative abilities. Secondly, practice refers to the way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action. Community refers to a way of making sense of social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognisable as competence. Lastly, identity refers to a way of conceptualising how learning changes our sense of “who we are” and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities (Wenger, 1998: 5).

CoPs, Wenger (1998) suggests, are everywhere and that we are generally involved in a number of them in different spheres of our life. In some groups, we might be core members and in others we are more on the periphery. We can belong to many CoPs at any given time and they change over the course of our lives. They each have their own practices, routines, rituals, artefacts, symbols, conventions, stories, relations and histories. These practices thus become the property of the community that is created over time by the sustained pursuit of a joint enterprise. Members become involved in various relationships and communities develop around things that matter to people.

CoPs are not necessarily stable or static entities (Wenger (1998). They evolve over time as new members join and others leave. Members are brought together by joining in common activities and by what they learn through their mutual *engagement* in these activities. In this way, a CoP differs from a community of interest or a merely geographical community. Use of the term community does not “imply necessarily co-presence, a well-defined, identifiable group or socially visible boundaries” (Lave & Wenger, 1991: 98), rather the term ‘community’ refers to “participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means for their lives and for

their communities” (Lave & Wenger, 1991: 98). The characteristics of such CoPs vary. An orientation is a typical pattern of activities and connections through which members experience being a community. These communities can have different orientations toward the process of learning together.

A CoP can be understood, Wenger (1998) suggests, along three dimensions; namely joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire. Firstly, a CoP is shaped by what is about; its joint enterprise that can be understood as having some stability but can be continually negotiated by its members. Secondly, it is defined by how it functions; its mutual engagement that bind members together into a social entity. Lastly, it is defined by its shared repertoire of communal resources that members have developed over time. For a CoP to function it needs to generate a shared repertoire of ideas, commitments and memories. Communities can also develop various resources such as documents, routines, practices, vocabulary and symbols that in some way carry the accumulated knowledge of the community (Wenger, 1998: 73). For this study, the engagement of fans with one another within a fandom can be seen as the joint enterprise of the fandom. Their mutual engagement revolves around the object of their fandom and the fandom itself.

2.4.1. Structural Elements of CoPs

There are three structural elements of the CoP model, conceptualised by Wenger and Snyder (2000); namely the domain, community and practice. The domain represents, for Wenger (2000), the common ground where members can share feedback, ideas, knowledge and stories. The community element refers to a group of people who learn and interact together and who build relationships that result in a feeling of belonging and mutual commitment. Whereas the domain represents the topic the community focuses on, the practice is the specific knowledge the community develops, shares and maintains. In coming together in online discussions and interactions, this study argues, the fan community, Nerdfighteria, expresses their interest in cultivating and interacting with other fans.

This online fan community has opened a space for exploring a specific fan knowledge domain; namely knowledge around the media object of their fan interest or their specific fan community. Sustaining a process of learning together over time depends on the definition of such a shared domain and it provides an identity for the community (Wenger, White & Smith, 2009: 5). Passion for the domain is crucial because this passion is often a part of the members’ personal identity. The practice dimension refers to the sharing of a practice within the domain of knowledge. Lastly, the community dimension refers to the community itself

and the quality of the relationships that binds the members. The feeling of community is essential because it provides a strong foundation for learning and collaboration among diverse members.

This study argues that within online fan communities, and in particular Nerdfighteria, all three structural elements of CoPs (domain, community and practice) are evident. The fan community's domain of knowledge is the media object of their fan interest. The fan community is thus formed via the practice of engaging with the media object and the fandom itself. Fan practices, within Nerdfighteria, as is explored in Chapters Four and Five, include all the interactions and fan activities within the community, such as: discussing the *Vlogbrothers* videos, discussing John Green's novels, debating about the film adaptations of his novels, discussing theories relating to other media of interest, such as Harry Potter, going to fan conventions, writing fan fiction or make video responses. These fan practices also involve learning the shared language of the community and understanding the "in-jokes" and the values of the community. One of the fundamentally aspects of being a fan, according to a number of theorists (Jenkins, 1992; Duncombe, 2012) is that fans are inherently social beings and are thus drawn to being a part of, and participating in, fan communities. This participation is an encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities. Across a worldwide web of computers people congregate in virtual spaces and develop shared ways of pursuing their common interests. Communities learn together in different ways: some meet regularly, some converse online, some work together, some share documents and some develop deep bonds.

Fans communities, according to Jenkins (1992) can be understood as "interpretative communities" because these fandoms negotiate meanings within their chosen object of fandom through their collective interpretative abilities. This aspect of negotiating meaning is another element found with CoPs, which are created by members who have a "passion, commitment and identification with the group's expertise" (Wenger & Snyder, 2000: 142) and members who personally wish to build and expand the community's knowledge. Negotiation of meaning is characterised, by Wenger (1998:53), as the process by which we experience the world and our engagement in it as meaningful. Even routine activities can involve a negotiation of meaning; however, it is even more prominent when we are involved in activities that we care about or that present us with challenges. A key characteristic of CoPs is that they provide a forum where members can negotiate the meaning of their practices through the everyday ongoing actions of the community. Within CoPs individuals

come together only to engage in pursuing an enterprise, but also to make sense of how those engagements fit into the broader social context. One of the defining features of a CoP is that its members identify with the group's expertise or knowledge field. In other words, members are knowledgeable about and familiar with the practices that are at the basis of the community. Similarly, fandoms, despite the conflicting definitions discussed in earlier in the chapter, are created by individuals who share a joint passion and interest in a specific media product. Shared learning is a key part of what keeps these communities together. Communities cannot be forced into existence and only exist as long as participation has value to their members.

2.4.2. Seven Principles to cultivating a CoP

Even though CoPs are often voluntary, part of what makes them successful over time is their ability to generate sufficient excitement, relevance, and value to attract and engage members. Although many factors, such as managerial support or an urgent problem, can inspire a CoP, “nothing can substitute [a] sense of aliveness” (Wenger et al, 2002). However, Wenger et al (2002) does note that this sense of “aliveness” cannot be designed in the traditional sense of specifying a structure or process and then implementing it. Rather it needs to develop organically. The design to evoke aliveness is different from organisational design, which traditionally focuses on creating structures, systems and roles that are meant to achieve relatively fixed organisational goals that fit well with the other structural elements of the organisation. In these kinds of organisations, even though some may be flexible and responsive to the environments, organic growth and aliveness are typically not their primary design goals. For CoPs, however, they are of prime importance.

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002: 2) developed seven principles that guide CoPs so that they can be successfully kept “alive”. Even though Wenger et al (2002) originally designed these principles as a guide for those attempting to design successful CoPs, they are helpful for understanding what makes a CoP functional, because they focus on the various elements and dilemmas at the heart of a successful CoP. By applying them to a fan community, these principles can serve as a guide for understanding whether that fandom can serve as a successful CoP. Each of these principles will be explored in Chapter 5 in reference to the success and “aliveness” of the Nerdfighters South Africa Facebook group.

2.4.2.1. Design for evolution

The dynamic nature of communities is key to their evolution, because as the community grows, new members bring in new interests, ideas and knowledge that may pull the

community in different directions. A CoP needs to allow for community's natural evolution. As they develop, communities usually build on pre-existing personal networks and new members are drawn into the community through these networks. A well- designed CoP allows for participating in group discussions, having one-on-one conversations, readings and exploring new ideas, or engaging with experts regarding their domain of knowledge being discussed. This aspect of CoPs which allow for the community to grow and evolve organically ensure that members feel as if the community will continue to exist even if the structure of the CoP changes. An "alive" community is constantly reflecting on and redesigning elements of themselves throughout their existence to ensure that it retains an element of this "aliveness." Designing for evolution as entails the consideration of the issues of control and how these issues impact the conceptualisation, implementation and functionality of the community, as well as the relationships among those involved in the community.

2.4.2.2. Open dialogue between inside and outside perspectives

A functioning community needs what Wenger et al (2002) calls an "insider's perspective" to lead the purpose of what the community is about. Only someone who is an insider can appreciate the issue at the "heart of the domain", the knowledge that is important to share, the challenges of the field and the potential in the emerging ideas and techniques. This insider knowledge also includes knowledge regarding the relationships, networks and dynamics within the community. This kind of knowledge requires a deep understanding of community issues. However, it often takes an outside perspective to help members see alternative possibilities for the community. To develop a successful community, it requires an understanding of the community's potential to develop and steward knowledge and often it takes an outsider perspective to help members see the community's possibilities. Therefore, a successful CoP brings information from outside the community into the dialogue about what the community could achieve. By creating a dialogue between insider and outsider perspectives, people who understand the issues insider the community and have legitimacy within it are also able to see new possibilities and can effectively act as agents of change.

2.4.2.3. Invite different levels of participation

Good community architecture invites many different levels of participation. People participate in communities for different reasons - some because "the community directly provides value, some for personal connection, and others for the opportunity to improve their skills" (Wenger et al, 2002: 9). That means that people have different levels of interest in the community. There are three main levels of community participation (Wenger et al, 2002).

Some member may make up the core group of people who actively participate in discussions, and even debates, within the community. They often take on community projects, identify topics for the community to address, and move the community along its learning agenda. The next level outside this small core group is the active group. Other members can be a part of an active group, who participate occasionally without the regularity or intensity of the core group. Lastly, many members may be on the periphery and rarely participate. Some remain peripheral because they feel that their observations and participation is not valuable to the community. Others do not have the time to contribute more actively. The key to good CoP is a health degree of movement between these levels of participation.

2.4.2.4. Develop both public and private community spaces

Dynamic communities are rich with connections that happen both in the public places of the community and the private spaces. Most communities have public events where community members gather to share knowledge and interact. These events are public in that they are open to all community members, though they are often closed to people outside the community. Public community events serve a ritualistic as well as a substantive purpose. Through such events, people can tangibly experience being a part of the community and see who else participates. However, communities are more than mere occasional events. The heart of a community of the web of relationships among community members and the day-to-day interactions. These informal, every-day interactions help to orchestrate the public spaces and events. The public and private dimensions of a community are interrelated, because when individual relationships among community members are strong and then public events are richer. Participants know each other well, they often come to community events with multiple agendas, ideas and experiences. A key element of a successful CoP is that it allows for there to be activities in both public and private spaces that can strengthen individual relationship which can then, in turn, enrich public events.

2.4.2.5. Focus on value

Communities thrive because they add value to the community and the community members. Value is key to community life, because participation in most communities is voluntary. Communities need to create events, activities and relationships that help their potential value emerge and enable them to discover new ways to harvest it. Many of the most valuable community activities are the small, everyday interactions, such as informal discussions to solves a problem, or one-on-one exchanges of information. The value of a community may not be fully recognised until the community has had time to develop. In order for the community to thrive community members need to be encouraged to be explicit about the

value of the community through its lifetime. Wenger et al (2002) found that the real value of a community is often more personal and less qualifiable than simply a presentation of the data that the community has accumulated.

2.4.2.6. Combine familiarity and excitement

Successful communities offer familiar comforts similar to those of a traditional community, but they also have enough interesting and varied events to keep new ideas and new people cycling into the community. Familiarity within communities creates a comfort level that invites for candid discussions, vibrant communities also supply divergent thinking and activity. CoPs are, what Oldenberg (2001), calls “neutral places”, which are separate from the everyday work pressures of people’s jobs. Vibrant communities supply divergent thinking and activity. Routine activities provide stability for relationship-building connections, while exciting events provide a sense of common adventure. Communities need to engage in activities that allow comfort and stability to emerge, while simultaneously offering opportunities for the group to engage in challenging activities that foster critical and divergent thinking. Lively communities combine both familiar and exciting events so that community members can develop the relationships they need to be well connected as well as generate the excitement that need to be full engaged.

2.4.2.7. Create a rhythm for the community

Vibrant CoPs have a rhythm. The rhythm of each community may differ; however, a vibrant community needs a regular, strong rhythm. At the heart of a community is a web of enduring relationships among members, but the tempo of their interactions is greatly influenced by the rhythm of community events. A balance within the community needs to be established. Community events give the community a beat around which other activities find their rhythm. The rhythm of the community is the strongest indicator of its aliveness.

This study draws on these seven elements and the three dimensions outlined earlier to illuminate why large numbers of people have joined and stayed active in the global Nerdfighteria group, and why the South African group was less successful in reproducing itself.

CHAPTER THREE: Research Methodology

3.1. Introduction

In exploring the question of whether shared learning is a component of belonging to an online fan community this research used the fan community of the YouTube channel *Vlogbrothers* Nerdfighteria as a case study and analysed two Facebook groups of the fan community: NERDFIGHTERIA and Nerdfighters South Africa. In order to do so, this study employed a qualitative reception research approach with its roots in ethnography. This includes, more specifically, participation observation, qualitative content analysis and qualitative interviews. This chapter discusses the research design and procedures that were followed within the study and explores the philosophical underpinnings of this kind of qualitative research.

3.1.1. Methodological choices

Qualitative methods, this chapter argues, are particularly useful for examine fan communities and account for the nuanced, dynamic, and socially negotiated nature of these communicatively constructed phenomena. When researching a specific case study, such as this specific online community, participate observation and unstructured interviews are often the best research procedures to follow (Huysamen, 1994: 168) and thus whether employed in this research. Methods of data collection used in this research include general observation recorded through notes and screenshots of discussions, semi-structured interviews, official document collection, electronic communication and visual media. At the beginning of my research I had planned to make use of cyber-ethnographic methods by observing three Nerdfighteria fan Facebook groups, however upon further research it became clear that there are certain problematic elements regarding a cyber-ethnography, because it is almost impossible to do a full cyber-ethnography ethically within such large spaces. This study will therefore contain elements of cyber-ethnography, such as participate observation, but does not constitute fully as a cyber-ethnography. By using the fan community, and these specific fan Facebook group, it was easier to observe and collect evidence of interactions to evaluate whether shared learning was indeed taking place. There are numerous places online for fans of the *Vlogbrothers* to gather and interact, however due to the social aspect of the online platform, Facebook, NERDFIGHTERIA and Nerdfighters South Africa were chosen.

3.1.2. Philosophical Underpinnings of Qualitative Research

3.1.2.1. Qualitative and Reception Research

How do people perceive their own objects of fandom, fan communities and their own place within that community? Media technologies and content, within our contemporary context, has burrowed themselves deeply into our everyday lives, permeating even the most private moments and spaces. Therefore, a full account of audience reception of mass media would be incomplete without specific attention given to the context or “situatedness” (Sullivan, 2013: 161) of these media in our routines and habits. To explore this, this research project relies heavily on qualitative “reception research” approaches, such as observation and ethnography. The focus of critical reception scholars beginning in the 1980s was centred on the *local*, *situated* and *contextual* aspects of media usage. Context refers to both a space and a web of interpersonal relationships and interactions that occur within that space (Sullivan, 2013: 163)

Qualitative research attempts to study human action and behaviour from “the perspective of the social actors,” (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 15). It thus aims to ‘see’ through the eyes of one’s subjects and tries to understand social behaviour in its social context. Qualitative research also allows one to retrieve experience from the past and to gain insight into the everyday practices of social actors (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Qualitative research draws from natural settings as researchers believe in the merit of investigating a phenomenon where and when it occurs as opposed to subjecting it to artificial settings that may alter the data generated. There is also an emphasis on creating a deep and layered description, often referred to as a “thick” description” which is the detailed description of phenomenon under study.

The study of media audiences underwent two important shifts during the rise of critical cultural studies as a set of approaches in the 1980s. Firstly, there was theoretical shift towards a more critically oriented approach to audience reception of the media. Qualitative reception analysis offered insights into the way in which audiences’ makes meanings within the media that they are consuming. This involved a shift from seeing audiences as mere “cultural dupes” who accepted any media that was presented to them to active audiences who interpret media according to their own frames of culture context. A fundamental aspect of reception theory within qualitative research is the need to study the consumption of media usage or social behaviour within social contexts (Jensen, 1987: 39).

Reception theory is always concerned with people’s engagement and entanglement with mediated texts, but this does raise several empirical challenges for researchers in the digital

age when texts are found online (Press & Livingston, 2006: 186). Firstly, there are large volumes of texts online, and secondly, some of the material may only exist temporarily, among many other challenges. New ways of interpreting online texts have been developed and considered, and, as such, this project proposes drawing on the emerging methodologies of virtual or cyber-ethnography. Online research methods have been developed quickly in response to rapid changing technological and social changes (Press & Livingston, 2006: 186). Most online research methods draw heavily from on an onsite methodological tradition. However, the technological possibilities of these online spaces also exert their own influences on methodological development.

The second shift that the study of media audience undertook was methodological: critical media scholars began adopting the approaches and technique of ethnography. This form of study offered audiences the opportunity to ‘speak for themselves’, instead of having their voice and sense of agency suppressed by institutional market research and scholarly investigation (Sullivan 2013). As mentioned in Chapter 2, earlier Fan studies shifted towards a more ethnographic approach to studying fandoms because it allowed them to see fan communities as active in the ways in which they interpreted and used the media texts of their choice.

3.1.3. Case Study as a Method

This thesis examines the fan community Nerdfighteria as a case study to understand shared learning as a neglected component of belonging to a fan community. The case study method is a qualitative research approach and pertains to the fact that a limited number of units of analysis, often only one, such as an individual, group or institution, are studied intensively. This method is often used to understand or explain a phenomenon and thus case studies are directed at the understanding of the “uniqueness and the idiosyncrasy” (Huysamen, 1994: 168) of a particular case in all its complexity. This empirical inquiry uses multiple sources of evidence to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context in which the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context is evident (Yin, 1984:23). Through case study methods, a researcher can go beyond the quantitative research and understand the behavioural conditions through the actor’s perspective. Unlike quantitative analysis which observes patterns in data at the macro level based on the frequency of occurrence of the phenomena being observed, case studies observe the data at the micro level. Usually the objective of a case study is to investigate the dynamics of some kind of single bounded system, typically of a social nature, such as a family, group, community or practice. This research made use of the case study method to understand the social dynamics within the

online fan community Nerdfighteria. Within this resource this evidence refers to observations of the interactions and discussions taking place within the Nerdfighteria fan Facebook groups.

The advantages of using the case study method is that this method often provides a detailed understanding of a research topic and is thus often used to gather descriptive and explanatory data. This method also affords the researcher the ability to deal with a wide spectrum of evidence, such as documents, historical artefacts, systematic interviews, direct observations, and even traditional surveys (Wimmer & Dominick, 1987: 156). Within this research, as mentioned, this case study is the fan community Nerdfighteria and in order to fully research the element of shared learning within the fandom various online evidence has been considered, such as official *Vlogbrothers* video content, fan created content and fan interactions. Throughout the Internet, on various platforms, there is evidence of *Vlogbrothers* fans gather, and thus, possibly learning collectively. However, when conducting a case study, it is important that the boundaries of the case be defined and demarcated. In some instances, these boundaries are more obvious. In other cases, the researcher may, during the study, find it necessary to adjust the boundaries.

To study learning as a component of belonging to an online fan community, this case study was confined to specifically the fan community Nerdfighteria and two of its Facebook groups. Evidence from other online fan spaces were, however, used in this research to simply valid and support data collected already from within these Facebook fan groups. At the beginning of this research the Single Adult Nerdfighters Facebook group was also included as a platform to collect data, however, it soon became evident that that group functioned primarily as a support group for individuals with similar interests. Due to this aspect of the group it was also difficult to remain an objective researcher. For this ethical reason, and since there was enough data collected from other groups, this group was removed from the study.

There are three categories of case study, namely exploratory, descriptive and explanatory case studies (Yin, 1984). First, exploratory case studies set to explore any phenomenon in the data which serves as a point of interest to the researcher. Second, descriptive case studies set to describe the natural phenomena which occur within the data in question. Third, explanatory case studies examine the data closely both at a surface and deep level to explain the phenomena in the data. Based on these definitions this research makes use of the descriptive case study method, because it aims to describe and analyse the element of learning as a component of belonging to a fan community by describing this shared learning

in Nerdfighteria. This method, however, is not merely concerned with a description of what is being observed, but to search, in an inductive manner, from recurring patterns and consistent regularities. As will be discussed in Chapter Four and Five throughout the observations of the two Facebook group recurring themes of discussion were observed. In terms of the CoP model these themes relate to the fandom's "domain of knowledge" (Wenger, 1998) and were therefore included in this research. To discern patterns found within case studies triangulation or mixed methods are often used. Within this study participation observation, qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews were used.

3.1.4. Ethnographic Methods

Ethnography – a research process developed involves extended periods of observation is a useful research method for understanding naturally occurring human behaviour such as the type found in a spontaneously organised leisure groups such as a fan community. Geertz (1973) believed that the way to study the cultures of a community is through ethnography. For that reason, this study makes use an ethnographic approach to the online fan community Nerdfighteria and its various social media platforms, as this study's goal is to produce a holistic description a culture being observed. Media researchers study only one aspect of a culture, attempting to relate it to a social identity (Seiter, 2004: 462). The primary advantage of the ethnographic method is the ability to place in context specific activities and ideologies expressed by a cultural group, as well as acknowledging the role that the researcher plays within the study itself. In conventional ethnography a researcher immerses themselves in the community they wish to study and become familiar with the people ad participates in routine activities in order to gain insight into the experiences of their subjects. During these interactions, they attempt to grasp the significance of the language used and action performed in the studied community (Maanen, 1988). Cyber-ethnography refers to the study of online interactions and operates on the premise that the subject and the researcher develop a dialogue. It differs from conventional ethnography precisely because it avoids holding preconceived notions concerning the existence of a community (Ward, 1991: 96). In his seminal *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins (1992) looked beyond popular stereotypes of fans by letting fans speak for themselves, conducting interviews, and examining fan textual production. Other theorists, such as Bacon- Smith (1992), similarly tried to counter these negative stereotypes with their own ethnographic research into fans. This kind of ethnographic research is therefore suited for research on fan communities.

3.2. Participant observation

One of the methods of data collection in this research is participant observation of member communications on various Facebook groups. Online spaces draw upon physical world cultures in multiple ways yet at the same time create possibilities for the emergence of new cultures and practices. This raises questions about how these new cultural contexts can be studied. The Internet is a useful medium for collecting data, because it provides access to potentially large numbers of research participants and news and interactive ways of interacting with these participants. Ethnographic methods need to be reframed for online environments, in recognition of the radical shifts that are necessary when the field of study appears as text on a screen and the group of people involved scattered globally. For members of these kinds of communities the ability to connect, despite geographical distance, adds interest and depth to the community. The method of observation allows the researcher to slightly alter ethnographic research question or interest during the observation while online in a manner that may be difficult with other methodologies, such as experimental or survey approaches.

This study made use of some cyber-ethnography techniques by doing a participant observation of the online fan community Nerdfighteria, by observing the Facebook groups: NERDFIGHTERIA and Nerdfighters South Africa, which serves as an online space for fans of *Vlogbrothers* who live in South Africa to gather. Through Facebook, and similar social media/ social networking sites, users can share information, customise their own profiles and post photos, videos, notes and status updates. Members can also join groups based upon similar interests in order to connect and start discussions with other members in those groups. Within qualitative research the researcher should be transparent in their research and fully acknowledge their role as a tool in the research process, rather a participant in the social action they are observing. Participant observation, as an approach, requires the researcher to observe interactions on a website, or social media site, to gain an understanding of the nature of those spaces. The method of participant observation is fundamental to ethnographic research and it refers to the “embodied emplacement of the researching self in a field site as a consequential social actor (Boellstorff et al, 2012: 65) and thereby step into the social context in which the activity is taking place.

The adaptability of the ethnographic method for online spaces, as mentioned earlier, is one of the reasons fieldwork requires a significant time investment. I have been a follower of *Vlogbrothers* and following the Nerdfighter community for a few years and I have been part of the Nerdfighters South Africa group since 2014 and a part of the other two groups since

starting my research in 2015. I have also been in contact with the two administrators of the Nerdfighters South Africa group to gain permission to observe and document the activities on the group and to ask for research participants (interviewees) in the group itself. I used this connection to the fan community to interrogate the domain of knowledge and observe whether collective learning and knowledge sharing was taking place in order to determine whether these online fan community serve as CoPs. This method was used because it allowed for me to understand the ethos and discussions on the group to evaluate whether collective learning was taking place. The data gathered via my cyber-ethnography will be analysed via a qualitative content analysis.

3.3. Qualitative Content Analysis for Online Texts

Qualitative Content analysis was employed in this study to gather and analyse the content of two Nerdfighteria Facebook groups, namely NERDFIGHTERIA and Nerdfighters South Africa. I have observed what individual members of the various groups in my study post and what they comment on other member's posts. Krippendorff (1969:103) defines content analysis as "the use of replicable and valid methods for making specific inferences from texts." It adopts an interpretative approach, which involves exploring the meanings that are imbedded in the texts. It is a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005: 1278). This technique uses a set of codes to reduce volumes of verbal or print material into more manageable data from which researchers identify patterns and gain insight. There are numerous procedures in qualitative content analysis, including the inductive category development. Inductive content analysis is a qualitative method of content analysis that researchers use to develop theory and identify themes by studying documents, recordings and other printed and verbal material. The materials are then read and categorised and these categories are then used to interpret the texts. In the case of this study the criteria refer to the aspect of collective learning and whether it is taking place in these spaces in order to constitute them as CoPs. By analysing the posts, and comments of members of the three mentioned Facebook fan groups, this study can evaluate whether the debates and discussion on these online groups constitute as collective learning and knowledge sharing.

Since this is a study of an online platform the data I will be collecting will mostly be in the form of screenshots of discussions and close observation to discover trends and patterns emerging from the discussions taking places within the various fan communities within this

study. Screenshots are a useful aspect of online data collection because they can be used as visual explanations of cultural phenomena (Boellstorff et al, 2012: 115). Screenshots should, though, be treated a representation of aspects of cultures and not recordings of whole cultures or “of symbols that will have fixed or complete meanings” (Pink et al, 2007: 75). They can serve as rich data points for in-depth analysis when used in the context of other materials. The screenshots used in this study were used to understand the domain of knowledge within these groups.

The research methods of data collection and data analysis support each other and often happen concurrently. In light of the preceding insights, throughout the data collection phase- the cyber-ethnography- I was careful to observe the emerging themes and to see whether my observations could be tied to the theory that informs this study.

3.4. Qualitative interviews

The final element of data collection for this study has been individual interviews. I supplemented my online observation with face-to-face interviews and online interviews via the video conferencing platform, Skype. Fornas et al (2002 in Press & Livingston, 2006: 191) advocates for this approach, because it helps to contextualise online texts and behaviour, which may differ from online behaviour. This approach also ensures that the researcher does not simply draw conclusions about how subjects are interacting online. Interviews have the potential to offer balance and corroboration where observed phenomena are complex or involved several factors. The purpose of data collection through in depth individual interviews in this study was to get detailed descriptions of first hand experiences from interviewees. Interviewing provides the most direct, research focused interaction between a researcher and participants. An in depth individual interview is a process of obtaining detailed data on how and why interviewees construct meaning (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:291). Due to the personal nature of fan communities and fan identity I believed that this would be one of the revealing research methods to use in this study to corroborate and expand upon the data collected via the cyber-ethnographic methods.

3.5. Profile of the Interview Process

I conducted eight interviews with confirmed members of the Nerdfighters South Africa group. While this may seem like a small sample, given that the group itself only, currently, contains 223 members the data gleaned was adequately to address my research questions. It proved very difficult to set up interviews within the time and resource constraints of this project. A small sample size also allowed me to conduct a more focused analysis. Two of

these interviews were done face-to-face, with individuals based in Grahamstown, and other six were done via the video conferencing platform Skype. Interviewees ranged from the ages of 24 to 42 and came from different cities throughout South Africa. All interviews were recorded with the interviewees' permission and later transcribed for the purpose of the study.

Each interview started with an explanation of the research and obtaining informed consent from all the interviewees. Interviews in this study proceeded as semi-structured conversations with questions intended to guide participants' discussion towards specific areas of conversation, while leaving adequate room for participants to discuss unanticipated elements of their Nerdfigher experience. I used non-random and snowball sampling techniques for my interviews (both online and offline). It was non-random because I purposively selected sampling units from subjects who willingly chose to be a part of the Facebook group. I made a post on the group asking for participants and some individuals responded. I also contacted several individuals by consulting the group's member list. I also used snowball techniques, because those who I interviewed directed me to other participants and encouraged them to also participate. I, however, discovered that the problem with snowball sampling is that even though I was directed to other members of the group by participants those individuals were often not willing to talk or did not have a lot to say about the group.

One of the limitations of using Skype in order to do interviews is that interviews were sometimes interrupted by technological failures or interviewees did not have web-cameras, thereby, it was not possible to interpret facial expressions or gestures from some of my interviewees. Another limitation that impacted this research was that the interviews ended up being shorter than expected and it soon became clear that many of my interviewees felt more comfortable expressing themselves online than in relatively face-to-face conditions. It is for this reason that the research rather heavily shifted to analysing data collected via cyber-ethnography and participant observation.

3.6. Personal reflection

It is important that I consider the relationship between fandom and academia when considering the way in which fans and fan communities are studied; the researcher needs to consider their own positionality. Hills (2002:2) first theorised the fan-academic, who can be described in two ways. Firstly, as the fan who uses academic theorising within their fan writing and within the construction of a scholarly fan identity. Secondly, defined as the academic that assumes a fan identity. Fans themselves carry a lot of intellectual capital; they can be good critics and thus good theorists within their own practice (Jenkins, 2001).

Similarly, to Jenkins (2006:61) I did not have the option of distancing myself from this particular fan community. I learnt about fandom from the inside outward. I choose to research this fandom, because of the powerful personal effect it has had on me and my personal sense of identity. Has it done the same for others?

For Jenkins (2013: xii) the fan-academic has to consider three elements: the acknowledgement of their own personal stakes in the forms of popular culture that they study; the accountability of the ethnographer to the community being studied and lastly the sense membership or affiliation with the populations at the heart of their research. The fan academic must conform to the regulative ideal of the rational academic subject by being careful not to present too much of their enthusiasm while recounting fan interest nor letting their writing become too confessional. Writers on popular culture often gain their authority from speaking about their own subjective experiences of it, thereby referencing their own memories (McKee, 2007: 213). From their own individual and subjective engagements with popular culture texts they can begin to move outward towards a constructed community of fellow “fans”.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

Various ethical protocols were observed throughout this study, such as obtaining informed consent: for my qualitative interviews: upon introduction, the purpose, nature and scope of the study was explained to participants, who were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage – or, to request not to have their group interactions included in my observations. Online spaces and communities comprises of a range of individuals with varying agendas and levels of participation, and this diversity can complicate the negotiation of access and informed consent. Some researchers (as such as Barratt & Lenton, 2010; Im, Chee, Tsai, Bender & Lim, 2007) have suggested that instead of gaining consent from individuals members of online spaces researchers should seek to gain consent from the gatekeepers of those spaces. Permission was granted to observe the various groups within this study by the administrators and moderators of those groups. Participation in this study was voluntary. Since the Harry Potter series was mentioned numerous times within the interviews, all my participants Harry Potter character names as pseudonyms.

As a member of this group being studied, I made my research overt and ensured that all the members of the group knew that I was observing their interactions, as well as asking members to contribute to my research.

CHAPTER FOUR: NERDFIGHTERIA Facebook group: a transnational CoP?

4.1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on the dynamics of the global NERDFIGHTERIA Facebook group, while Chapter 5 will analyse the Nerdfighters South Africa Facebook group. This chapter draws on the key elements of the communities of practice (CoP) model (Lave & Wenger, 1991 & Wenger, 1998) to explore whether the activity and interactions amongst fans on the group can be better understood through the prism of the CoP's model of shared learning and knowledge acquisition. As outlined in Chapter Two, CoPs are conceptualised as groups of people who share a “concern, a set of problems, or a *passion*” (own emphasis) for a topic, and who “deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting [with one another] on an ongoing basis” (Wenger & Snyder, 2000: 2). Passion for the “domain” is crucial because this passion is often a part of the members’ personal identity. This element of “passion” for a domain of knowledge and a sense of connection to that (and other people connecting to that) is clearly reflected in fan communities and in this fandom, Nerdfighteria.

At the time of writing the NERDFIGHTERIA group has 20, 643 members from across the globe and describes itself as the “Official Unofficial Facebook Nerdfighter Group” (Group Guidelines, 2017). Due to its large size the group is quite active, even though it is not often clear how many people visit on any given day, and to what extent some fans dominate the discourse. There are several common themes that are often discussed on the NERDFIGHTERIA Facebook group, and while there are several other areas such as politics and other fandoms explain, however, I have chosen to focus on the above-mentioned themes because these themes revolve around the main domain of knowledge within the fandom, namely *Vlogbrothers*. These include:

- 1) *Vlogbrothers* YouTube channel and videos
- 2) *Vlogbrothers* extended media content
- 3) Literature and book recommendations
- 4) Mental health

4.2. A thematic analysis of the domain of knowledge dimension

As discussed in Chapter 2, not all online communities can necessarily be considered a CoP. There are three specific characteristics that are key to the formation and sustainability of a

CoP: the domain (of knowledge), the community and the practice. These elements are defined as:

1. The kind of knowledge the community shares (domain)
2. How closely the integrated sharing of knowledge is with the everyday active of the community (practice).
3. The degree of connection and identity among members (community)

(McDermott, 1999)

The domain represents, for Wenger (1998), the common ground where members can share feedback ideas, knowledge and stories. Whereas the domain represents the set of *topics* the community focuses on, the *practice* is the specific knowledge the community develops, shares and maintains. In coming together in online discussions and interactions, this study argues, the fan community, Nerdfighteria, express their interest in cultivating and interacting with other fans. This online fan community has opened a space for exploring a specific knowledge domain, namely knowledge about *Vlogbrothers*.

4.2.1. *Vlogbrothers* YouTube Content

Individual fans on the group often engage with one another regarding their favourite *Vlogbrothers*' videos or reflect on the latest *Vlogbrothers*' video that has been released. Some felt that it was "hard to narrow down" their favourite videos. Many fans, based on observations of the group, gravitated to videos that contain positive messages, those that made them laugh or those that intellectually engage them, such as John's "Thoughts From Places" series in which he reflects upon the various places his travels take him. One fan, in a 2014 post, mentioned that her favourite videos are the "informative videos...like the ones of mass incarceration, the ones explaining the health care system and the conflicts in other countries." These informative videos and the "jokes and rant" videos are both frequently discussed on the group.

For example, one member of the group recently reflected that they needed cheering up and asked the group for useful *Vlogbrothers* videos for "harsh times" and other individuals responded with their choice of favourite videos that had positively affected their mood, such as the *Vlogbrothers* videos "50 jokes in 4 minutes" or "15 of my favourite videos". Other fan also suggested "We are all Bat people", a fan-made music video which turned John and Hank's debate regarding the value of Batman into a song. In this way, an individual fan used the group as their source of knowledge concerning *Vlogbrothers* videos that contained a

positive message. Another example is the very personal connection that fans seem to have with *Vlogbrothers*.

4.2.2. *Vlogbrothers* extended media content

Individuals join the Facebook community when they are exposed to it through the *Vlogbrothers* (either the YouTube channels or through John Green's novels), which often serves as the initial link to an interest in Nerdfighteria. An individual can then, once they join the Facebook community, learn more about *Vlogbrothers* and other fandoms that the community is drawn to. The fan community is open to other fandoms and are drawn to anything "awesome", especially if it is endorsed by the Green brothers.

Based on comments made on the group, John Green's novels have drawn several fans into Nerdfighteria and, once in the fandom, many fans support his writing. John Green's first novel *Looking for Alaska* (2005), inspired by his experiences as a high school student, cemented him as a respected Young Adult author. The story is told through the eyes of teenager Miles Halter as he enrolls at a boarding school to try to gain a deeper perspective on life. The novel is a coming of age tale that deals growing up, faith, young love and loss.

Based on observations of the NERDFIGHTERIA Facebook, many Nerdfighters found their way to Nerdfighteria through *Looking for Alaska* and thus strongly connected to the book and its conflicted love interest, Alaska Young. It is John Green's most 'banned' and challenged book (as of 2015), according to The American Library Association, because parents felt that it promoted underage drinking, smoking and sexually explicit situations. Fans, however, felt that it was an accurate portrayal of growing up and thus actively promote and discuss the novel online and within Nerdfighteria. It has also inspired several fans created content, such as pictures and fan fiction.

One particular aspect of the novel that has been debated within the fandom is whether Alaska is a likable character, because of her dismissive behaviour towards the protagonist, Pudge. On a post regarding the debate a participant commented that she could not find the character relatable and therefore did not enjoy the novel. Similarly, someone else felt that she was "detestable" and that it made it hard for them to empathise with Pudge, who was in love with her. Another fan, however, argued that it not Alaska's fault that Pudge romanticised her character. This is supported by another member who pointed out that, because the novel is written from Pudge's perspective, the readers only experience one side of Alaska: "How she is written is the whole point of LFA" (*Looking for Alaska*). Other fans argue that it is precisely her "flawed" characterisation that makes her, and the novel, appealing: "Alaska was flawed in so, so many ways and yet she still managed to be someone we all loved." Through

these kinds of discussions and debates individual members share their knowledge of literature and narrative to make their arguments.

One another debate within the group that illustrates the kind of knowledge shared, revolves around the ending of the novel and whether the character Alaska's death was an accident or a suicide. John Green does not explicitly state within the novel what the cause of her death was and left the question of her death unanswered for the characters and his readers. In the book, Alaska's friend spends the last part of the novel investigating her death, but going to the crash site, calling to her boyfriend about their last phone call and retracing her action on the night of her death. Many fans find this investigation to be like their own search for closure and ultimately neither the character nor the readers know the truth by the end of the novel. In a post, for example, a group member expresses their frustration with this ending. However, other members responded that they interpreted this ending as purposefully "vague" or "uncertain" because of the nature of the narrative and the themes of the novel itself, such as the protagonist Pudge's search for life's meaning. For others, the uncertainty surrounding her death was meant to reflect the uncertainty that the character of Pudge feels, which adds to his pain and confusion:

"When he tries to figure out what really happened, he's miserable, but when he confronts his feelings and begins to remember her as a flawed, vibrant, living person rather than an object of his affection...he grows as a person."

Other fans who have lost loved ones themselves clearly feel very emotionally connected to the books because of its "honest" portrayal of that loss. For example, one member felt that this uncertainty regarding the ending powerfully connected to the way she felt because in her life she has had experiences with loss which also did not provide closure.

These debates are interesting examples of the way in which individual fans makes use of other fans on the group's knowledge and experience of the novel as well as knowledge and experience from their own frame of references to collectively interpret the ending of the novel. It also allows them to express and discuss their own opinion regarding the narrative device that John Green used at the end of the novel. One fan felt that the book did provide closure for them because Pudge, who write's an essay trying to make sense of Alaska's death, had begun to make sense of his purpose and the value of life. Throughout these debates members also make a point to ensure that "spoilers" for the novels or the movies are not posted on the group and often reprimand each other when "spoilers" are posted or when the original poster fails to post a "spoiler warning" at the beginning of their post.

Such localized interpretations, Jenkins (1992:137) argues, are the raw materials from which fans construct a more global analysis of the media of their fandom. Fans may engage in, often heated, debates at this level of local interpretation and may thus disagree about how they read or interpret individual scenes or moment within in the media of choice (Jenkins, 1992). However, these disagreements occur within a shared frame of reference; a common sense of the novel's generic placement and a "tacit agreement about what questions are worth asking and what moments provide acceptable evidence for answering such questions," (Jenkins, 1992: 137).

Similarly, John Green's 2008 novel, *Paper Towns*, is also discussed often within the Facebook group and, like *Looking for Alaska*, also deals, to a certain degree, with the romanisation of another person. *Paper Towns* is written primarily for an audience of young adults, and was published on October 16, 2008. The novel is about the coming-of-age of the protagonist, Quentin "Q" Jacobsen and his search for Margo Roth Spiegelman, his neighbour and childhood sweetheart. During his search, Quentin and his friends Ben, Radar, and Lacey discover information about Margo. A film adaptation was released on July 24, 2015. Fans seem conflicted about whether they enjoyed the film adaption; many felt that Cara Delavigne (who was casted as Margo) was an inappropriate choice because she was "too conventionally pretty" to play Margo, who is often describe in the novel as being an "unusual beauty." Margo is also a very disliked character, because both in the novel and the film she is portrayed as being a self-centred and sarcastic character. Despite this, fans seemed very positive about the casting of Nate Wolfe in the role of "Q", because they knew him as "Isaac" from the "Fault in Our Stars" film. Fan were also excited about John Green and Ansel Elgort (Gus in TFIOS)'s cameos in the film. The film was also discussed a lot by fans due to its decision to remove the controversial Sea World scene. Fans felt that strongly that the Sea World scene had to be removed because they felt there were ethical concerns to consider. Some fans, as mentioned above, felt that *Looking for Alaska* or *An Abundance of Katherines* should have been the next of John Green's novels to be adapted into films, instead of *Paper Towns*.

After the release and success of the *Fault in Our Stars* and *Paper Towns* movies there has been a lot of discussion around the possibility of John Green's other novels being turned into film adaptations including *Looking for Alaska*. The film rights to the novel were acquired by Paramount Pictures in 2005 but, due to a lack of interest by Paramount, the production had been shelved indefinitely. It had been reported that Paramount was putting the screenplay in review due to the success of the film adaptation of Green's breakout novel, *The Fault in Our*

Stars. Later in 2016, John Green announced in a *Vlogbrothers*' video and on social media that the film adaption has once again been shelved indefinitely. Fans often discuss the possibility of this movie being made and often debate possible casting choices and whether the unusual narrative structure of the novel would make a good movie. These kinds of debates relate to Hills' (201: 361) argument that fandom "know-how" can involve both an expansive knowledge of the narrative universe and a detailed awareness of the production context of the media object of their fandom.

One discussion on the NERDFIGHTERIA group was particularly interesting in terms of discussing, debating and learning about John's book was when one post complained about John "recycling" narrative devices in *The Fault in Our Stars* that he has previously used in *Looking for Alaska*. One fan commented that even though they found the novels to be similar they are still different enough to be enjoyable. They pointed out that they work at a book store and when customers come in after having read *The Fault in Our Stars*, they would recommend John's other novels, particularly *Looking for Alaska*, due to the similar tone. Thereby prompting other fans to argue that concepts such as death are an overarching theme in John's books because it is such a powerful and inevitable element of life. These kinds of debates and agreements are reflective of Jenkins' (1992) argument that fandom involves a set of critical and interpretive practices. Part of the process of becoming a fan involves learning the community's preferred reading practices and being able to understand their own interpretations within that context.

4.2.3. Literature and Book Recommendations and Discussions

As mentioned a large focus of the fan community as a whole, and thus a part of the community's domain of knowledge, is the acceptance of "nerds" and so-called "nerdy" interests. Even though there is this initial link, *Vlogbrothers* make, and are affiliated with, a variety of different content and thus there is a variety of different kinds of Nerdfighters who may have different interests, but who all identify as under this umbrella term. Within the fandom, those two nerdy interests can be divided into two categories: book\ literature nerds, represented by John, and science nerds, represented by Hank. Obviously, there can and is an overlap of interests, but for the sake of this research I have divided these into categories. It is important to note that the label of "nerd" is used very loosely here and refers, in John Green's words-mentioned earlier- as anything that someone can be "enthusiastic" about and which adds positivity into the world.

One good example of this is book recommendations and discussions around literature. As mentioned earlier this community greatly values intellectualism and with that comes an

interest in literature. Throughout the 10 years of *Vlogbrothers*, John often does “Question Tuesdays” and many of these answers have been turned into jokes and memes. However, occasionally he does do book recommendations and reviews. His fans similarly often provide book recommendations and often discuss the value various books on the group. I have come across several posts in which fans offer and asks for book recommendations on the NERDFIGHTERIA group. I have also observed several librarians and authors offers suggestions and guidance for those looking to improve their reading lists. This behaviour this thus an example of what Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as “legitimate peripheral participation”. However, in his more recent work Wenger (1998), Lave (2004) and others have critiqued this concept of legitimate peripheral participation and the strict dichotomy between ‘periphery’ and ‘core’ participation. They challenged this dichotomy by proposing that participation may involve learning trajectories, which do not lead to an idealised “full” participation. There may be many forms of participation, Wenger (1998) suggest, including ‘marginal’; which is an important note, because it became clear that not everyone within a CoP aspires to (or can achieve) full participation. Within these learning trajectories, ‘masters’ and ‘experts’ are critical for ensuring participants’ learning and for identifying and confirming existing knowledge and new developments within a community (Wenger, et al, 2002). Those who have been members of the fan community for a long time and know more about the community and the practices of the community therefore making them more “active” members.

4.2.4. Mental health

Another reason individuals seem to join and participate in Nerdfightereria is due to the support they receive on a more personal and personalised level. Throughout their years on YouTube both John and Hank Green have openly talked about their own mental health struggles and have encouraged their fans and community to do the same. This year John disclosed his struggles with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and anxiety in a video and it encouraged Hank to talk about his struggles with ADHD. In 2016 John Green announced that he and his long-time friend Chris Waters would start a 100-day health and fitness project at the beginning of 2017. Green and Waters’ goal was to establish habits that outlast the 100-day online journey. As part of that goal, they consulted with fitness experts and nutritionists. Through the video series, the viewers seen John and Chris struggle and complain and crack jokes. Both become more and more positive about fitness and health as the project continued. Throughout his exercise and fitness project, 100 days, John also talked about openly about his anxiety and about how exercise and meditation had helped him cope with their mental health struggles.” Nerdfighters on the various groups often discuss their mental health struggles and

offer support and guidance to one another. I have observed the sharing of mental health resources amongst members of NERDFIGHTERIA and that members often share very personal experience of their own mental health struggles. Often these posts are not phrased as a question but rather serve as a way in which those individuals can express their frustrations with their mental health struggles.

On one post sharing a news article in which John discusses mental health, four members expressed their excitement regarding his frank confession; saying that they “needed this” and that “it gave [them] hope. John’s 2017 novel’s *Turtles all the Way Down* also deals with a teenager coming to terms with her mental health struggles. Within the group there is a lot of discussion regarding mental health concerns. For example, one member asked the group about whether they had any ideas for discussion points for her mental health blog. The first member to respond that perhaps the original poster should consider the way in which physical treatments effected mental health. This person noted that they are a masseuse and that they are often researching the correlation between them. They are an “expert” in their field knowledge field and via the group they are relaying their knowledge.

One commenter even asked the original poster about her qualification to ensure that the blog ethically deals with mental health concerns. This comment hereby combines their knowledge regarding of mental health issues and their knowledge concerning ethical blog writing. As mentioned, based on my observations, members of the group sometimes used the group as way of covering “mental health tips” and resources. I observed that one a number of these posts asking for “tips” other members would make suggestions like “exercise”, “journaling” and consistent therapy, as well as being honest and open about mental health struggles. A clear example of knowledge sharing is the sharing of mental health resources. One member posted an info-graphic that they found “very inspiring” because it encourages those struggling with mental health and with suicidal thoughts to seek out therapy and to not given in to the struggles.

Another example, of sharing resources was when one member, who is a grade 8 English Literature teacher, ask the group for quotes and resources about celebrities who, like John, who have been open about their mental health struggles so that she can make an inspiration poster for her class. Other members responded when various inspirational quotes and information regarding specific celebrities, such as quotes by Demi Lovato or Pete Wentz. One member made specific mention to John’s video about mental health in which he says: “I hope for you is that you have a rich, full life and that you are not marginalized by your illness.” Once again members referred to their own knowledge of popular culture and their

knowledge of specific *Vlogbrothers*' quotes and videos to share that knowledge with one another.

Members used the group to discover these “mental health tips” and resources and used the group as a space to voice their challenges and experience with mental health issues; thereby using the group as an online support group. In some cases, the term “community”, Brown and Duguid (2001) argue, does not fully encompass what is happening within these spaces and that the term “community” can be problematic because it has strongly and unqualified positive undertones. They query whether the term “commune of practice” would fare better in explaining the mixture of shared emotional connections and learning; while still leaving room for conflict and disagreement. This concept of a “commune of practice” can be seen in the Health/Fitness/Body image discussion point that was also observed within the NERDFIGHTERIA group.

John's *100 days* project also inspired several their fans to also get involved in the fitness journey and discussions around body positivity and self-love increased on the social media platforms. There was even a fitness event at the annual NerdCon Conference in which John and Chris and their trainer Lindsey did a workout with many their fans. Based on observation of the Facebook groups currently a part of my research, the NERDFIGHTERIA group, many of the fans are strongly against body shaming and believe that everyone, regardless of appearance, sexuality, gender, etc., should be respected. Nerdfighters on the groups openly support body positivity and often talk about way in which to stay health and ways to lose weight and get fit. Throughout 100 days John also talked about openly about his anxiety and about how exercise and meditation had helped him cope with their mental health struggles.

4.3. Induction and Shared Repertoire: Practice dimension

The following short section deals with the practice dimension of CoPs and deconstructs some of the fan practices observed within the NERDFIGHTERIA Facebook group. The practice dimension refers to the sharing of a practice within the domain of knowledge (Wenger, 1998). Their practice, within Nerdfighteria, includes all the interactions and fan activities within the community, such as: discussing *Vlogbrothers*' videos, discussing John Green's novels, debating about the film adaptations of his novels, discussion theories relating to other media of interest, going to fan conventions, writing fan fiction or make video responses. It also involves learning the shared language of the community and understanding the “in-jokes”. Learning a practice is learning how to be a certain kind of person with all the experiential complexity this implies: how to “live” knowledge (Wenger et al, 2009: 7). Participation is central to situated learning because it is through participation that identity and

practices develop. Participation is thus a process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities.

Members develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short, a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction. Fans who have been watching *Vlogbrothers* since the beginning of the channel know the established lingo and symbols of the community. Even identifying a Nerdfighter and understand what it means to be a Nerdfighter is a part of the communities shared repertoire. A symbolic marker, such as associating with the Nerdfighter label, is an indication of self-presentation, self-awareness within a group and how an individual wants to be perceived (Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic, 2004). Nerdfighteria has started to develop its own “shared repertoire” and throughout the posts observed on the NERDFIGHTERIA group members make use of the “shared repertoire” of the community. Such as, the terms “French the Llama” or “Giant Squid of Anger”, which are exclamations that indicate either excitement or frustration respectively.

Members of the group, especially new members, also often use the NERDFIGHTERIA group to ask other fans within the fandom to clarify in-jokes and references made in *Vlogbrothers* videos. For example, a new fan, in 2015, mentioned that she was catching up with *Vlogbrothers* videos and was uncertain about the “scavenger hunt” that Hank had mentioned in a recent video. Older fans explained that in 2007, when *Vlogbrothers* only had a few thousand members, they hid various treasures around their respective home towns. Others, however, pointed out that there was another scavenger hunt planned for that year and *Vlogbrothers* are recreating that original scavenger hunt through their online platform. Similarly, many fans on the group make use of specific “in-jokes” that can only be understood if you have been watching *Vlogbrothers* for a while and understand the context of those “in-jokes.”

As mentioned within a CoP there are different kinds of knowledge, data, information, tools, procedures, know-how, understanding. Some knowledge can easily be written down or made “explicit”, such as tools, resources, procedures. The mental models, understanding, insights known by individuals in the community, but which are not documented elsewhere. Since explicit information can be documented, it can be organised, distributed and managed. Tacit knowledge, on the other hand, is more difficult to communicate in a way that is useful to others. To become aware of this knowledge, individuals often need a problem or issue to draw it out. Based on my observation of the NERDFIGHTERIA Facebook group I have

noted evidence of both “explicit” and “tacit” knowledge being shared. For example, some fans who have been inspired by *Vlogbrothers* to start their own YouTube channel ask for advice on how to make videos. Other members provide tips or ask the person to contact them privately so that they can have a discussion.

Not everything we know can be codified as a documents and tools (Wenger et al., 2002:9). The tacit aspects of knowledge are often the most valuable because they consist of embodied expertise. Sharing tacit knowledge requires interaction and informal learning processes such as “storytelling, conversation, coaching and apprenticeship” (Wenger et al., 2002:9). Similarly, meaning within fan communities is “not data, trivia or [mere] information,” Jenkins (2006: 24). Meaning is contextualised and grows out of an affective set of experiences and is the vehicle for creating social connections with other people. The affect experience of the fan object is vehicle for creating social connections with other people and therefore meaning is embedded and embodied in all kinds of affective experiences (Jenkins, 1992).

4.4. Community Values: Community dimension

Within Nerdfighteria fans value intellectualism and positivity and these values are evident in the Nerdfighter slogans: “Don’t Forget to Be Awesome” and “Decrease World Suck” and many fans have embraced these slogans fully. The integration of the communities’ values into one’s individual experience of the world is an important because CoPs do not merely reduce knowledge to an object, but rather they make it an integral part of their activities and interactions (Wenger et al, 2002:9) Individual fans, therefore, serve as a living repository for the community’s knowledge and values. A good example of these values being ingrained in a community is the charitable aspect of Nerdfighteria. *Vlogbrothers* are both very activity involved in charity work as a part of their efforts to “decrease world suck” and improve our world. In 2012, they started the non-profit organisation *The Foundation to Decrease World Suck*, which works closely with several other organisations, such as Water.org, *Save the Children*, *The Harry Potter Alliance* and Kiva.org. Annually, in December, *Vlogbrothers* host The Project for Awesome, or P4A. The P4A is a YouTube-wide event in which anyone can create and upload a video about any charity they believe deserves recognition. The videos are then submitted to theprojectforawesome.com where anyone can vote on them until the most popular charities are left, and those charities each get portions of however much money is made throughout the two days this event happens. On the NERDFIGHTERIA group members do discuss various charities and often ask one another about which charities to donate to or get involved with.

The community dimension of a CoP refers to the community itself and the quality of the relationships that binds the members. The feeling of community is essential because it provides a strong foundation for learning and collaboration among diverse members. This study argues that within online fan communities, and Nerdfighteria, these three dimensions are evident. The fan community's domain of knowledge is the media object of their fan interest and their community is formed via the practice of engaging with the media object and the fandom itself. One of the fundamental aspects of being a fan, according to several theorists (Jenkins, 1992; Duncombe, 2012) is that fans, as social beings, are drawn to being a part of, and participating in, fan communities. This participation is an encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities. Across a worldwide web, people congregate in virtual spaces and develop shared ways of pursuing their common interests. Communities learn together in different ways: some meet regularly, some converse online, some work together, some share documents and some develop deep bonds.

As mentioned earlier in the chapter some theorists have argued that the term "community" is problematic because of the positive connotations with the term. However, in his later work Wenger (1998) does clarify that in his conceptualisation a CoP is not necessarily friendly or harmonious. As discussed, this concept of "community" is based on a practice not a locality; meaning that it can be a community of people who differ, have different skills and expertise and which has an internal structure, unlike traditional communities. This later conception of a CoP does allow for conflict and disagreements. Wenger (1998) acknowledges the possibility of conflict and does not presume that his conceptualisation of 'mutual engagement', 'joint enterprise' and 'shared repertoire' generate fully shared understandings. Potential for tension and conflict exist because, during their lifetime, individuals participate not within one community but within several communities- each with different practices and identity structures. This is evident in fan communities because, as Jenkins (1992) points out, an individual can belong to several overlapping and intersecting fan communities and therefore have different interpretations and readings of various fan objects due to these overlaps.

Despite NERDFIGHTERIA common unity around the object, and objects, of their fandom, on the group there are a few disagreements and there is often tension and conflict. Especially when it comes topics such as politics, religion and social justice, where individual fans have a lot of conflicting opinions and experiences. Members would refer to the fandom or *Vlogbrothers* themselves when reprimanding others in the group for perceived bad behaviour

with comments such as “that is not a very Nerdfighter thing to say” or “what would John and Hank say”. Sustaining a process of learning together over times depends on the definition of such a shared domain and it provides an identity for the community (Wenger, White & Smith, 2009: 5). A strong community “fosters interactions and relationships based on mutual respect and trust” and CoPs should create an atmosphere of “openness and trust” and a place where it is “safe to speak and ask the hard questions,” (Wenger et al.,2002: 28).

4.5. Conclusion

Based on the above analysis of the interactions and discussions taking place on the NERDFIGHTERIA Facebook group and the thematic topics that has emerged it is clear that there are clusters of discussions and interactions within the group which do constitute a complex, multifaceted ‘domain of knowledge’. It appears, therefore, that this group does function, at least partially as a CoP. There is good deal of sharing of knowledge and learning taking place.

CHAPTER FIVE: Deconstructing the Nerdfighters South Africa Facebook group as a possible CoP

5.1. Introduction

This chapter analyses the data collected from observations of discussions and interactions taking place on the local Nerdfighters South Africa Facebook group, supplemented by a number of face-to-face and Skype interviews with various members of the group. The Nerdfighters South Africa Facebook group is a social platform, originally created in 2005, where 273 (as of 2017) individual South African *Vlogbrothers* fan gather to interact and communicate. Originally the group, based on data collected, was very active (multiple postings per day with multiple participants) generating a lot of discussion, engagement and knowledge sharing. This indicate that it had at least the potential to be a sustainable CoP. More recently this group has become less active. Less content is being shared and there is, from even causal observation much less engagement and interaction amongst members.

This chapter will argue that it is precisely this lack of ‘learning together’, i.e. the social learning component that caused the decline of the group. Members of the South African group still strongly associated with the Nerdfighter fan community as a whole and their engagement on global Nerdfighter groups indicates that there is an element of interaction and activity within those spaces that is lacking in the South African group. This chapter will analyse the areas in which it has the potential to function as a successful CoP, but in which it fails to do so, drawing on Wenger, McDermott and Snyder’s (2002) seven principles of a successful CoP.

5.2. Dimensions of CoPs

As discussed in Chapter Two, Wenger (2000) defines a CoP along three dimensions, namely their joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire. Members are bound together by their collectively developed understanding of what their community is about, and they hold each other accountable to this sense of joint enterprise. Members build their community through mutual engagement and interact with one another, establishing norms and relationships of mutuality that reflect these interactions. CoPs thus produce a shared repertoire of communal resources and to be competent in this CoP is to have access to this repertoire and use it appropriately. These three dimensions need to work together for the CoP to be successful.

This chapter will discuss the way in which the global Nerdfighteria community encompasses all three of these dimensions, but the Nerdfighters South Africa group does not fulfil all the requirements of these dimensions. These dimensions form a part of the potential shared learning that can take place within these online fan spaces.

As outlined in Chapter Four, *Vlogbrothers* make, and are affiliated with, a variety of different content and thus there is a variety of different kinds of Nerdfighters who may have different interests, but who all come together on in NERDFIGHTERIA Facebook group. When asked about which of the Green brothers each of the participants related to, all participants suggest this was strongly linked to the brother who create content in line with their specific interests. For example, Tonks, who is a web developer, enjoyed more of Hank's content, because he makes a lot of content about science and technology. Similarly, Fleur, an environmental science major, is drawn to Hank's environmental activism. Ginny, on the other hand, is a Psychology student working with teenagers and is more drawn to John and his creative content. On the Facebook group one of the "pinned" posts (which means it constantly appears at the top of the pages) is a discussion around the sharing of electronic books and link to an online storage space for copies of e-books so that members can upload and share them. Other than this pinned post there are minimal discussions revolving around literature and books and there is no evidence of discussions revolving around the topic of science within the span of two years.

Despite the different perspectives amongst members of Nerdfighteria they are all fundamentally linked by their interest in the *Vlogbrothers'* content. As Myrtle highlights:

There are all kind of different Nerdfighters, but it is this beautiful umbrella [term] over a huge group of people that aren't connected by space. They're aren't connected by anything other than the fact that they have an Internet connection and the fact that they engage with the world. Even if people disagree with John or Hank it's ok, because it is not about agreeing. It's about being a part of something bigger.

Myrtle, a Nerdfighter from Grahamstown's, comment about "engaging with the world" is reflective of the fact that learning and critical engagement with the world is valued within this community. This is echoed by Ginny who shares a similar view:

I don't think that Nerdfighters are a homogenous group. So, it is difficult to say Nerdfighters are this way or that way. But I think it is an overall interest in geek or nerd culture. You know John once said, "Not being afraid to really love things". There is that sort of spirit in that.

These comments reveal that there seems to be an element of curiosity and engagement within the larger Nerdfighter fan base. It indicates that the domain of knowledge of the fandom transcends merely an interest in *Vlogbrothers* but also extends to other areas of knowledge acquisition.

CoPs are also defined by how they function, ie the quality of its mutual engagement that bind members together into a social entity (Wenger, 1998). Members are brought together by joining in common activities and by what they learn through their mutual *engagement* in these activities. To be caught up on the latest projects or discussions points in the fan community are, it is advisable that members watch the latest *Vlogbrothers* video. This act of watching the videos is the initial engagement and then starting or joining discussions on the Facebook group serves as the second layer of engagement. Members are therefore engaging with the domain of knowledge, namely *Vlogbrothers*' video content. An example of this on the Nerdfighters South Africa group is when a member posted a link to a John Green video and commented on the video in which John Green discusses make-up and his feeling towards having to wear make-up during his press tours for his books. This member, who admits that they are “pretty...into make-up”, enjoys this video because she enjoys John's subversion of gender norms regarding men wearing make-up.

Several participants in this study stated that they were first introduced to *Vlogbrothers*, and thus the community, through a friend or fellow Nerdfighter. After the initial exposure to the community participants in the study stated that they actively sought out other content affiliated with them, such as their educational platforms, John's books or their gaming channels. These participants, therefore, went from being marginal members to more active or core members of the community through this exposure and engagement with other community members.

Throughout this study several core themes emerged as being a key element to the popularity and influence of Nerdfighteria, and thus a part of their mutual engagement. One such theme is naturally the community's appreciation of content usually associated with being a “nerd”. Even though participants have conflicting views of on what being a nerd was several felt strongly connected to John Green's own description of a nerd: “Someone who is unironically enthusiastic about something (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rMweXVWB918>). Hermione emphasised that for her the core part of Nerdfighteria was the acceptance of the “nerd” part:

At the end of the day Nerdfighter are nerds to their core and they are there [in the community], because they have the same passions and interests. This is how we

identify with each other and how we come together to talk about other issues. We can then open about other things that we care about.

Even though she touched on many other themes within this quote, other participants, such as Myrtle, disagreed with this notion and believe that you do not have to adhere to “nerd” stereotypes to be a Nerdfighter; as long as you adhered to the culture and values of the community: “It is not about being a nerd or a geek. It’s about being someone who critically engages in the world.”

Two other themes that were mentioned by participants regularly was acceptance and inclusiveness. Participants echoed *Vlogbrothers*’ sentiment that “anybody” can be a Nerdfighter as long as they wanted to be. Some of the participants mentioned that anyone can be a Nerdfighter if they were open to new opinions and new knowledge. Ginny described the Nerdfighter identity as being “self-defining” and this sentiment was echoed by several of the other participants. For Luna, it is about the way in which you interact with the community, the values that you hold and the way you see people” that makes you a Nerdfighter. Ginny, Myrtle, Fleur and Tonks all mentioned *Vlogbrothers* theme of “imagining others complexly”, which is closely related to their theme of inclusiveness:

Fleur: “The community is so accepting. As long as you are not a jerk then you can be a Nerdfighter. As long as you want to be a Nerdfighter then you can be a Nerdfighter.”

Myrtle: “In many ways I think that is what the *Vlogbrothers* are all about. Recognising and acknowledging the humanness and humanity of a person.”

Ginny: “I think that we don’t often imagine people complexly and that does fuel a lot of misunderstandings we have, either on personal levels or in terms of more global issues. It is importance to imagine others complexly and realise that we are all human beings and not just two-dimensional.”

The last theme that was emphasised by participants as a core part of the Nerdfighteria fandom was that of intellectual engagement and critical thought. This element is important in the context of this study. As discussed in the previous chapter, learning and sharing of knowledge is an integral part of Nerdfighteria. However, this element of shared learning and knowledge acquisition is lacking in the Nerdfighters South Africa group, which will be discussed later in

the chapter. In her study of nerd in an American high school Bucholtz (1999) found that the many positive identity practices in which “nerds” engage contribute to the display of intelligence. Similarly, the emphasis on intellectual pursuits is one of the main reasons participants were drawn to *Vlogbrothers*. Some participants stated that they enjoyed *Vlogbrothers* content, because they “are smart and funny” and that they are “thought-provoking. For example, Myrtle, who is a private tutor, often watches *Vlogbrothers*’ educational platforms, Crash Course or SciShow, to understand how to explain certain concepts or ideas. Ginny particularly enjoys BrainScoop, a natural sciences channel produced by *Vlogbrothers*, even though it deviates from her usual interests. Ron also felt very strongly connected to the intellectual engagement on the *Vlogbrothers*’ various channels:

“I love learning stuff, but I’ve always hated tests and things like that. I could not stand the pressure. I’m not good with that sort of tense situation where you have to prove that you learnt something. This is a way to learn without having to prove you learnt something. “

A CoP is, lastly, characterised by a shared repertoire of communal resources that members have developed over time. For a CoP to function it needs to generate a shared repertoire of ideas, commitments and memories. Members develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems; in short, a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction. Fans who have been watching *Vlogbrothers* for a long time already seem to know the established lingo and symbols of the community. Even identifying a Nerdfighter and understand what it means to be a Nerdfighter is a part of the community’s shared repertoire. A symbolic marker, such as associating with the Nerdfighter label, is an indication of self-presentation, self-awareness within a group and how an individual wants to be perceived (Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic, 2004). Both Tonks and Ginny demonstrated the Nerdfighter hand sign during their interviews, which again highlights their link to the signs and symbols of the community. When asked about their favourite element of this community’s repertoire participants had a variety of different answers, such as John Green’s expression of anger and injustice the “Giant Squid of Anger” or “Pizza John”, a T-shirt design of a moustachioed John Green and the word PIZZA below it that has become a popular symbol in the community. Other symbols participants enjoyed were “French the Llama”, an expression John uses instead of swearing and their standard greeting of “Good morning John” or “Good morning Hank.” The community’s slogans are Don’t forget to be awesome (DFTBA) and “Decreasing world suck”; values that the community embrace:

Myrtle: “I love the line ‘Fight World Suck’”, because it’s something that I am very attached to the idea that whatever you do in your life, you should be doing it in order to better the world.”

This quote speaks to the implicit elements of the community. On the surface, it is easy to discuss the explicit shared repertoire of a community, however this this shared repertoire expands further than merely knowing the lingo of the community. During regular joint activity, a CoP develops ways of doing things, views, values, power relations, ways of talking, etc. Participants engage with these practices in virtue of their place in the CoP and of the place of the CoP in the larger social order. This speaks to the ethos and culture of the community which will be discussed later in the chapter.

As described in Chapter four, there is evidence of shared learning and knowledge acquisition within fan communities and in this fan community, Nerdfighteria, and that section of this fan community does function as a CoP. Sustaining a process of learning together over times depends on the definition of such a shared domain and it provides an identity for the community (Wenger, White & Smith, 2009: 5). From the observations above members of the Nerdfighters South Africa recognise that learning and engagement are important aspect of the Nerdfighter community and of being a fan of *Vlogbrothers*. However, there seems to be missing elements from the South African group which limits or restricts this kind of knowledge acquisition; thereby indicating that members join and stay within the group for other reasons.

5.3. Seven Principles to cultivate a CoP

A CoP should be purposeful to function properly. To evaluate whether the Nerdfighters South Africa Facebook group does is a functioning CoP, and whether shared learning is taking place within this space, this study will apply Wenger, McDermott and Snyder’s (2002) seven principle of a functioning CoP. A CoP is not merely a community of interest, it is a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, and learn more about that passion (including more skills, knowledge and dispositions about their chosen area of interest) as they interact regularly. For Ron “it is important to have something to chuckle about together”, but he felt that the Nerdfighters South Africa group did not harness its full potential:

There needs to be more interaction. I think we would have to do more than just share silly pictures and things. You have to have group discussion or actually do something together. There has to be a purpose.

Several other participants felt similarly, because, as discussed above, intellectual engagement is central to the ethos of Nerdfighteria and being a Nerdfighter, yet that kind of engagement was not being witnessed within the group. Members of the group may have “learned by lurking” and “picked up ideas” (Gray, 2004: 24) even when they only read the online postings but do not contribute themselves. This aspect of lurking can be seen within the Nerdfighters South Africa group, because several participants, such as Fleur and Luna, felt that they were participating in the fandom on the “side-lines” of the community. Despite this they did not feel that this hindered their fan experience. Rather they felt that it was merely an addition to their fan experience. In that way, these members did not experience the group as a CoP but rather as a space for mere enjoyment, as per Jenkins’ (1992) understanding of fandom as a communal space where individual fans gather to discuss and enjoy their object of fandom.

Even though CoPs are often voluntary, what makes them successful over time is their ability to generate enough excitement, relevance, and value to attract and engage members. Although many factors can inspire a CoP, “nothing can substitute [a] sense of aliveness (Wenger et al, 2002). As discussed earlier based on my observations this “sense of aliveness” is missing from the Nerdfighters South Africa Facebook group, in its current state, despite being very active in the past. This sense of “aliveness” cannot be designed in the traditional sense of specifying a structure or process and then implementing it; it needs to develop organically. Wenger et al (2002: 2) developed seven principles that need to be applied for a CoP to be successfully kept “alive”. Even though Wenger et al (2002) originally designed as a guide for CoP coordinators to enhance the potential and productivity of CoPs, these principles are a helpful lens through which to analyse why this group, with the potential to function as a CoP, is not productive.

The following principles were used to analyse the Nerdfighters South Africa group: Design for evolution, open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives, invite different levels of participation, develop both public and private space, focus on value, combine familiarity and excitement and create a rhythm for the community.

5.3.1. Design for evolution

When considering the evolution and sustainability of a group Goodnough (2008) emphasises the importance of considering issues of control and how they impact the conceptualisation, implementation and interpretation of learning within the community, as well as the relationships among those in the group. Unlike the global NERDFIGHTERIA Facebook group, the Nerdfighters South Africa does not have the same restrictions and rules that inform the daily functioning of the group. As mentioned in Chapter Four, the administrators of the NERDFIGHTERIA group have constructed and enforce the “Code of Awesome” as their set of rules that new members need to read and adhere to in order to stay a part of the group. Member may be reprimanded, or even removed from the group, if they disregard the restrictions of the “Code of Awesome”. Some of those rules refer to the kind of posts that are allowed and the kind of behaviour that is expected from members in the group in their interactions with one another. The South Africa group, within the description, does have a short list of rules which does restrict the posting of “advertising, anything illegal.... Spam, spoilers, thoughtless ‘hey look at this’ posts” (Group description, 2017). However, no situation was observed a in which these rules have needed to be enforced and the group, in fact, does has an influx, often by only one member, of what may be considered ‘hey, look at this’ posts; hereby referring to posts that have no context or discussion associated with them. These kinds of posts effect the dynamics of the group by limiting discussion and interactions.

The dynamic nature of communities is key to their evolution, because as the community grows, new members bring in new interests, ideas and knowledge that may pull the community in different directions. It CoP needs to allows for community’s natural evolution. CoPs evolve over time as new members join and others leave. The more they learn about the function, rules and culture of the community the more expertise they gather and thus become more established members of the community. This is linked to an important aspect of CoPs, which is its focus on fluidity of social space and the diversity of experience. CoPs have their own “regimes of competence” (Wenger, 1998:136), because they recognize that forms of expertise can shift over time. Initially people join communities and much of their learning takes place the periphery. As they become more knowledgeable they move more into the centre of that particular community. Lave and Wenger (1991) conceptualised how newcomers are socialised into a practice community, through what they describe as legitimate peripheral participation. Peripheral participation refers to a new member’s ability to participate within whole-heartedly committing to the process. Wenger (1998) later critiqued this concept of legitimate peripheral participation in favour of learning trajectories, which considered how members move from being “marginal” participates to more “active” or

“core” members. These learning trajectories can, to an extent, be explained using the following qualifying terms: peripheral (for newcomers permitted to participate to a limited extent in simple, relatively discrete tasks and relationships), full (for so-called old-timers who participate at the core of the community), and marginal (for participants who are kept at the periphery of the community (Wenger, 1998: 165). As mentioned in Chapter four, due their deep investment and knowledge of the fan community and the group itself, and their frequent engagement in the group, the administrators of the global NERDFIGHTERIA group serve as the “core” members of the group. Despite there being two administrators on the Nerdfighters South Africa group, they rarely interact with the group.

Within the Nerdfighters South Africa Facebook peripheral or “marginal” participation (Wenger et al, 2002) was easily identified. However, some definitional confusion arises because Wenger states that marginal participation can be a form of ‘non-participation’ (Wenger, 1998: 116). The danger is that of potentially conflating those who participate (though marginally) with those who, technically, do not. Only those individuals who successfully navigate a path from peripheral to full participation, Hanely et al (2006: 650) suggests, can be categorized as ‘participating’. Therefore, the group contains a majority of non-participants or “lurkers”, with only 5-7 active participants. These participants also moved between being “active” and “marginal” levels of participation. Fritsch (1997) developed the notion of “witness learners” (i.e., students who are not actively participating in written contributions at a particular point, but who nevertheless are still engaged in the process as observers (witnesses) of the written exchanges taking place online between other students). Learning, even in this more passive and less visible mode, is still occurring.

All the participants interviewed stated that they were not active on the group and prefer to rather view the content being shared. When asked about whether there are different varieties of Nerdfighters Fleur stated:

“I think that it involves your level of involvement. Some people probably secretly watch the videos, and Crash Course, etc., and would never tell anyone that they are a fan. Then there are the kind of people who go to Vid-Con and John’s book signings and are part of Facebook groups and do all the things, like the Census and donating. “

Other participants, such as Hermione and Ron, only started identifying as Nerdfighters when they actively gotten involved in the community. Ron only felt like an “official” Nerdfighter

once he had started supporting them and their content on Pateron, a crowd-funding platform for creators:

“In my mind I was like: Ok, I’m now physically doing something to promote this and I’m helping. And at that point I could say I’m definitely a Nerdfighter, I could claim the name for myself. I’d earned it from my perspective.

Similarly,

Researcher: When did you start identifying as a Nerdfighter?

Hermione: When I joined the Facebook page. It was a step. I mean I have always been a nerd. When I first started watching [the Vlogbrother] videos the word [Nerdfighter] was there, but I wasn’t a part of it. Joining the Facebook page actually makes me a part of that community.

These quotes speak to Wenger’s concept of “regimes of competence” (1998:136) and trajectories of learning and membership within CoPs. These members felt that there were steps they had to take to be a part of the overall Nerdfighter fan community; with Hermione specifically mentioning her joining of the group as a set towards being a “full member” of Nerdfighteria. Despite taking these steps to feel a part of the Nerdfighter community, as mentioned earlier, there are only about 5-7 members who regular post and communicate on the South African page and one member that posts almost daily, often without getting any responses. It is important to note that these 5-7 members have had long discussions revolving a certain post, often relating a particular fandom of interest within Nerdfighteria, such as Dr. Who, Harry Potter or the superhero television series, Jessica Jones or relating literature or book recommendations. One cannot completely disregard these kinds of interactions, even though they rarely happen. This is evidence of the potential for continual shared learning to take place, however these kinds of interactions do not reflect of the whole group and it is difficult to fully establish or determine how much “witness learning” (Fritsch, 1997) is actually taking place.

5.3.2. Open dialogue between inside and outside perspectives

This second principle is directly connected to the first principle and Wenger’s (1998) concept of learning trajectories. A functioning community needs an insider’s perspective to lead the discovery of what the community is about. However, it often takes an outside perspective to help members see alternative possibilities for the community. Therefore, a successful CoP brings information from outside the community into the dialogue about what the community could achieve. Diversity of opinion within a group enriches the overall functioning of a CoP, allowing for insider perspectives to be shared, while at the same time connecting those

perspectives to the broader context of the group. As mentioned earlier in the chapter only a small number of members regularly communicate and only one member who posts and comments almost daily. This member posts regularly about her own fandom interests, such as Dr. Who and other niche interests, such as alternative anime or videos. Most of her post do not get any responses and those that do get responses usually involve more mainstream media fandoms, such as Harry Potter. Fleur stated that one of the reasons she rarely posts, or comments, is due to the lack of discussion and interaction on the group:

People post stuff but there is not really a discussion, or very rarely is. And it is sort of the same person a lot, which is what I think makes people not want to engage.

A CoP should enable its members to engage in the negotiation of meaning; the community only exists through a common enterprise, in this case participants' engagement with Nerdfighteria through the Facebook group, and thus the practice become endowed with meaning. Learning, in whatever form it takes, changes individual's ability to participate, to belong and to negotiate meaning. However, with these limited experiences of discussion and interaction the members of Nerdfighters South Africa do not have opportunities to negotiate their shared understandings of the object of their fandom or of their community.

From the discussions with members of the Nerdfighters South Africa Facebook group some minimal elements of "negotiated experiences" were observed. As mentioned most of the conversations revolved around other fandoms, with minimal mention of *Vlogbrothers*. One post discussed John Green's 2017 up-coming book and another discussed John Green's *100 days* fitness project; each post with very few comments and most of the comments did not add any value to the discussion beyond expressing their enjoyment. The discussion around other fandoms seemed to be a lot more fruitful. One member as an example posted about the latest episode of the hit BBC television series *Sherlock*. This post prompted other members of the group to discuss the episode and how closely it referenced Sir Arthur Doyle's original *Sherlock Holmes* novels. Other examples of these kinds of discussions is when members discussed theories relating to the story direction of season two of *Jessica Jones* or the discussion around the 2017 series *Preacher*, based on a graphic novel. Clear examples of shared learning involve book and podcast recommendations. One member noted that she regularly listens to John and Hank's podcast, *Dear Hank and John*, as well as several other similar podcasts, and asked the group for suggestions for other podcasts. She got a number of responses, in particular many educational podcast suggestions.

5.3.3. Invite different levels of participation

The key to good CoP is a health degree of movement between these levels of participation or learning trajectories. Some member may make up the core group of people who actively participate in the community. Other members can be a part of an active group, who participate occasionally without the regularity or intensity of the core group. Many members may be on the periphery and rarely participate. As mentioned most of the members of the Nerdfighters South Africa group never comment and very rarely interact. Therefore, there is almost never an opportunity for an individual member to move from being a marginal member to a more active member. A key success factor is the dedication and skill of people who take the initiative to nurture the community. Many CoPs fail not because members have lot interest, but simply because nobody in the community seems to have the energy or time to take up the responsibility to nurture the community and hold the space for inquiry. The clear leaders of Nerdfighteria are John and Hank Green and they stimulate community activities such as Project for Awesome, Pizzmas and Vid-Con. They are involved in a number of different projects, despite having so-called “day jobs” and endorse various projects driven by Nerdfighters. They post videos twice a week and this sense of reliability ensures that their fans constantly know which projects they are involved with. They ensure that the community stays active. However, CoPs depend on internal leadership, and enabling the leaders to play their role is one of the ways which help the community to develop. Within the Nerdfighters South Africa group there is a lack of leadership. There are two administrators of the group and some participants, such as Hermione, felt that it is there responsibility to nurture the group:

“I think the admins should be posting more. The person who started the page should upkeep it and stoke the flames of conversation. You need somebody who is willing to put in the effort and start discussions.”

On the other hand, other participants felt that it the responsibility did not lie solely with the admins, but rather with all the members of the group. Which leads to the last factor of a successful CoP: time. Time is a challenge for most communities, whose members have to handle competing priorities. Theoretically, time should not be an issue if the interest is there, but practically it remains a challenge to CoP members. A key principle for community cultivation is to ensure “high value for time” (Wenger-Trayner, 2015) for all those who invest themselves. Again, this factor is related to the purpose of the group. As is seen above members of Nerdfighters South Africa have not left the group yet feel as if the group is very inactive:

Ginny: “I’ve noticed that the page is only active when somebody really likes a video that was uploaded or somebody sees a John Green quote with a pretty background.

Even though it is not a key factor, Wenger-Trayner (2015) also mentions self-governance as a contributing factor to the success of a CoP. This factor is also linked to the factor of time and participants such as Myrtle felt that “each of us [in the group] are responsible for making it more vibrant. Both those quotes indicate that the participants themselves feel that it is their own responsibility and the responsibility of others in the group to put in effort and time to ensure that the group functions as a learning space, such as the global Nerdfighteria group does.

CoPs have multiple levels and types of participation and the interplay between experienced members and newcomers in a dimension of passing on knowledge as well as facilitating the creation of new knowledge and insight. All participation, even at the periphery, is considered legitimate learning and it is through participation that “we learn not only *how to do* but *how to be* (Gray, 2004: 23). Learning is more than simply acquiring knowledge, but rather that it is also about an identity change and a process of understanding of who we are and in which CoPs we belong and will be accepted (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Through learning the practice of the community your identity as a member of that community is formed. Rather than seeing identity as static Wenger considers identity as fluid within varying social contexts.

Another key characteristic of a CoP is that it provides for the ‘enculturation’ of newcomers into the practice. More experienced members, through the social process, help newcomers to understand and learn various aspects of the practice. New members gradually acquire knowledge and skills as they are learned from the experts in the context of everyday activities. Wenger (1998: 154) uses the term ‘trajectory’ as a way of trying to explain and link the temporal and ongoing process of identity development within any CoP.

The Green brothers have made videos contextualising and explaining various elements of their fan base to new fans who may have not been there from the beginning and, as seen in Chapter Four, the NERDFIGHTERIA page has an extensive guide in the description of the page to provide information and context for new members. This guide links to various other pages, in particular a two links that the administrators have label “Nerdfighteria- The phenomenon- a beginner's guide to everything Nerdfighteria” and “Nerdfighteria- The group- a summary of our little home away from home”; as well as a link to other Nerdfighter sub-

groups. In the description of the Nerdfighters South Africa page there are two links provided for new members to find out more about the fandom; however, both these links are very basic because they merely lead to *Vlogbrothers*' main channel itself and the official Nerdfighter website.

5.3.4. Develop both public and private community spaces

Dynamic communities are rich with connections that happen both in the public places of the community and the private spaces. Most communities have public events where community members gather to share knowledge and interact. That being said, the heart of a community of the web of relationships among community members and the day-to-day interactions. The public and private dimensions of a community are interrelated, because when individual relationships among community members are strong and then public events are richer.

As discussed earlier, public events and gatherings, such as the YouTube convention Vid-Con, being a large part of the Nerdfighter community globally. Despite this aspect of the Nerdfighter community, South African Nerdfighters, who are a part of the group, rarely or have never met before. Within a two-year span, members have posted about events they are attending such as a cosplay event happening in Bloemfontein or a group trip to Port Elizabeth to watch the film adaptation of John's book *The Fault in Our Stars*. Other members have referred to RAGE, which is a local South African cosplay convention, however there is no indication that members met up with one another at these events. According to Wenger et al (2002) CoPs are strengthened when public events, such as face-to-face meeting, can be used to enrich individual relationships. Strong individual relationships can then enrich further public events and meetings. Interviewees, like Fleur, stated that even though they know a few other members from the group offline they have never been to a gathering or met any from the group offline. However, for this community is it important to note that some participants mentioned that "nerds" can be socially awkward and thus do not enjoy going to gatherings and, according to Fleur:

"I'm sure that a lot of people are socially awkward and shy and so they might not want to meet people in real life. I think [gatherings] are just another element of the experience, but specially with this community, you can be a part of it without going to the gatherings.

Therefore, even though gathering and meetings are a large part of the overall Nerdfighter fan community, South African members have accepted that these kinds of public events are

not a necessary part of being a fan of *Vlogbrothers*. However, regular meetings, with a clear purpose could greatly enhance the group and the kinds of interactions that take place on the group, if we consider the value of this fourth principle.

5.3.5. Focus on value

Communities thrive because they add value to the community and individual community members. Communities need to create events, activities and relationships that help their potential value emerge and enable them to discover new ways to harvest it. Many of the most valuable community activities are the small, everyday interactions, such as informal discussions to solve a problem, or one-on-one exchanges of information. The value that the members found within the Nerdfighters South Africa group was not immediately evident, because for these members being a part of the Nerdfighteria fandom as a whole was more valuable to them.

Even though participants mentioned numerous different media products and fandoms that they associated with the feeling was that Nerdfighteria was different to those fandoms. Participants felt that Nerdfighteria transgressed the original project that *Vlogbrothers* started and is now a more encompassing fandom. Myrtle explained that:

[Nerdfighteria] is significantly more holistic than just watching the videos, because the things spoken about in the videos are a part of the world that we are in. It more than just entertainment and absorbing information, because the kind of environment that *Vlogbrothers* are proponents of is more about being information out into the world so that it can be used in the world.

This observation highlights that being a member of this community involves more than just being a fan of *Vlogbrothers*. Many participants felt strongly connected to the personal aspect of *Vlogbrothers*' videos, which made them not only feel closer to the Green brothers themselves, but also to other members of Nerdfighteria. One example of this is the excitement that both Myrtle and Tonks expressed about the birth of Hank's first child (which had happened just before both their interviews). Another example was that when asked about their favourite of content some participants indicated that they enjoyed their brother's videos blogs and their other channels on which they played video games and discussed their lives with one another. Participants also expressed that they appreciated how open and honest *Vlogbrothers* were about personal issues, such as their chronic illnesses and mental health, because many of them also struggled with those kinds of mental health problems and could relate to the Green brothers on a more personal level. Neville, for example, referred to one of John's videos in which he talked about the movie *Harvey*, which is about the story is about a

man whose best friend is Harvey - a six-foot, three-and-a-half-inch tall invisible rabbit. The movie touches on the values of imagination and John discusses how his perspective on life changed after he watched it. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ooCeoh6608>). Neville notes:

John basically gave the rationale why he liked the movie and what space he was in when he watched it. At the same time, I was sort of going through the same patch so I watched the movie and it was very inspirational.

Similarly, Myrtle felt connected to personal elements of *Vlogbrothers'* videos, because of the close way in which fans follow their lives: "You are excited and so I am also excited about something with you. In in the same way when sad things happen and they talk it about I feel sad for them."

Myrtle particularly felt strong connected to their personal content, because it opens up dialogues about issues that have not been very openly discussed within mainstream media. It also made her feel connected to others with similar problems:

I mean I have mental health problems. I have suffered from depression, since I was about 13. Long time ago they [*Vlogbrothers*] did something about eating disorders and I was like: Thank you for acknowledging something that was a huge part of my life and in many ways still is. It made me feel like I'm not alone! Mentally you know you are not alone, but when you have someone you can associate with it's really cool.

This perspective helps to capture the culture and ethos of the community. Wenger (1998:47) notes that the concept of practice connotes doing, but not just doing in and of itself. It is doing within a historical and social context and it is these contexts which give structure and meaning to what we do. He thereby explains that these communities thus have a culture that can be both implicit and explicit. He refers to "explicit and the tacit" (1998:47); that which is represented and that which is assumed. It includes the language, tools, documents, images, symbols, defined roles, regulations and contracts that various practices make explicit for a variety of purposes as well as the implicit relations, cues, embodied understandings, underlying assumptions and shared perspectives. This study has already discussed the explicit aspect of the community which can be seen in their explicit shared repertoire. In the course of regular joint activity, a CoP develops ways of doing things, views, values, power relations, ways of talking, etc. Participants engage with these practices in virtue of their place in the CoP and of the place of the CoP in the larger social order.

Through engagement in the CoP members learn the less explicit elements and shared repertoire of their fandom, such as acquiring the values, beliefs, and viewpoints of their practice. Within a community, its members are taught how to behave properly in moral issues, support desirable behaviour both offline and online, and by doing so becoming perfect roles models (Baym, 2007). The implicit aspect and ethos of the Nerdfighteria encourages certain values and perspectives. For example, Luna, a Nerdfighter from Grahamstown and new member of the Nerdfighters South Africa group, notes that she considers herself a Nerdfighter not merely because of her following of *Vlogbrothers*, but rather “because of the Nerdfighter community and the support that they offer ... it seems like a way to view the world rather than just following these two brothers. It is more about the community and the way we interact with each other and the way we see the world.”

Social needs, including developing a sense of identity, are met through participation in online communities. Being a part of a community provides a level of familiarity and a “place to belong” (Henderson, 2015: 51). A ‘sense of belonging’ refers to as belonging to a community with common interest in a favoured cultural object (Jenkins, 2012). A fan derives self-esteem, status and confidence from this sense of belonging. Further, sharing a common interest and exchanging ideas mean that a fan can recognise themselves in their new peers. Sharing interests is central in comradeship and exchanging ideas should be seen as an inspiration (Palme, 2000). Participation in the Nerdfighteria community provided opportunities for participants to engage with others who share a love for *Vlogbrothers*, other so-called ‘nerdy’ interests and who share similar values:

“We may not know each other and we might not talk very often, but I think that if someone were to need something or if someone were to suggest something I think you would find a lot of people coming together. That’s what I think of when I think of community: People coming together for the same cause.

This expressed view speaks to the way that members of a community, according to Grudz et al, “share sociability, support and a sense of identity” (2011: 1295). Gray (2004:230) found that motivations to participate in online CoPs included opportunities to acquire new knowledge and skills and providing a mechanism that reduced the isolation inherent of geographically distant groups. Participants in this study often spoken about how being a fan within Nerdfighteria linked them to other fans from across the global and how these links added value to their fan experience. For Tonks:

“We can communicate and connect to people that like the same things that we do where location obvious prohibits that from happening.

Similarly, Myrtle felt very strongly about Nerdfighteria’s ability to allow individuals to experience and engage with the world and get out of their social “bubbles”:

Something like Nerdfighteria reminds us that there is more than our own bubble and I think that is why fandom is so important to people. Even if that fandom is Dr. Who or Star Wars or Star Trek. It’s another world that we engage in and it’s a way for everybody to have something in common. I mean I have something in common with someone in Japan, or Canada or Australia. We associate with this community and it means that we are more open to a more global community.

From these responses, it is clear that these participants seen the value of the Nerdfighteria fandom as a whole, however, the value of the Nerdfighters South Africa is not evident based on the above discussed observations and conversations.

5.3.6. Combine familiarity and excitement

Successful communities offer familiar comforts, but they also have enough interesting and varied events to keep new ideas and new people cycling into the community. While, familiarity within communities creates comfort level that invites for candid discussions, vibrant communities also supply divergent thinking and activity. Lively communities combine both familiar and exciting events so that community members can develop the relationships they need to be well connected as well as generate the excitement that need to be full engaged.

Wenger (1998:85) notes that CoPs are “not intrinsically beneficial or harmful.” As a locus on engagement in action, interpersonal relations, shared knowledge and negotiation of enterprise, such communities hold “the key to real transformation; the kind that has real effects on people’s lives” (Wenger, 1998: 82). McMillian and Chavis (1986) assert that individuals in a community should feel a certain membership, or the feeling that they can influence the community; the community provides an integration and fulfilment of needs, and a shared emotional connection. Within regard to online communities, Palme (2000) outlines that status, self-esteem, confidence, comradeship, inspiration and generosity are some of the reasons individuals makes use of ICTs for this purpose.

CoPs emerge in response to a common interest or position, and play an important role in forming their members' participation in, and orientation to, the world around them. Through their engagement with Nerdfighteria these participants experienced identity in practice. Identity in practice refers to a way of being in the world. According to Wenger (1998:151), who we are "lives in the way we live day to day". The social context of the lived experience within this community creates that important pivot point between the self as an individual and the self who is adapting and growing within the group context. Nerdfighteria provides a space for individuals to define and makes sense of their engagement in the fan community. When asked about when she started identifying as a Nerdfighter Tonks explained that it was when she "found out what it meant":

Probably early on when I was watching the videos. I really like the values that they stand for and the sense of inclusiveness. And just being smart and intelligent and embracing that. It's an inclusive community and I like that they built that kind of place on the internet.

Here elements of the values and ethos of Nerdfighteria is reflected. Within the study all participants were drawn to and stayed a member of this fan community due to their affiliation with these values. The appeal of these values and impact that they have on group membership will be discussed earlier in the chapter.

5.3.7. Create a rhythm for the community

Vibrant CoPs have a rhythm and include "activities that create a sense of ebb and flow" (Wenger et al, 2002: 206). At the heart of a community is a web of enduring relationships among members, but the tempo of their interactions is greatly influenced by the rhythm of community events. The rhythm of the community is the strongest indicator of its aliveness.

The rhythm of each community may differ; however, a vibrant community needs a "regular, strong beat" (Goodnough, 2008: 29). A balance within the community needs to be established; if the beat is too fast, members may become overwhelmed and frustrated. If the beat is too slow, the community may become less productive, and enthusiasm dissipates (Goodnough, 2008: 29). From my interviews with original members of the group or members who joined in their early stages of the group felt that the group used to be more active but started to lose this sense of activity as the years progressed. As Goodnough (2008) notes, if the enthusiasm of the group did dissipate then the more and more members feel discouraged to participate and new members are not introduced. CoPs thrive on social energy, which both

derives from and creates identification, thus the negotiation of the domain is a critical successful factor.

For Wenger-Trayner (2015) passion for the domain is key. All the South African Nerdfighters interviewed felt strongly associated and affiliated with Nerdfighteria and identified as Nerdfighters. That is after all why they joined the Nerdfighters South Africa Facebook group, but from the discussions this element of “social energy” that Wenger-Trayner (2015) mentions is missing. This lack of “social energy”, discussion and interaction of the group contrasts with the element of Nerdfighteria that values intellectual engagement and the sharing of knowledge. For Fleur “there very rarely is discussion.” Even though most of the participants interviewed felt that the Nerdfighters South Africa did not, in its current state, function as a community some felt that it did serve a purpose. When asked about the group Fleur felt that it was a community, because “we have similar values and interests. We are not just a bunch of people together and there are actually things being done.” Many participants felt that even though the group was not as active as they would have liked they have not left the group, because it still serves a purpose. For example, Ginny stated:

On a personal level I don't feel like this is something that is missing in my life. I think that things usually are the way that they are, because it works in some kind of way. If people really weren't happy with the way it was working, one would assume that someone would bring it up.

Similarly, Hermione felt that even though the group was stagnant that fact did not take away from the idea and inspiration of the group: I think that the idea of what we've done and what we've got there is greater than the current activity on it.”

Part of this sense of identification relates not only to an identification to the CoP, but also identifying other members as learning partners. Due to the lack in engagement and limited interaction amongst the members of the group the relationships usually seen within online CoPs is not present. Members are linked by their love for Nerdfighteria, but very few of them have knowledge or interactions with other members.

5.4. Conclusion

Even though the Nerdfighters South Africa Facebook group has the potential to be serve as a CoP, due to the shared learning already taking place in the Nerdfighter community as a whole. However, it is clear, based on the above, that that the group does not to serve as a CoP, because there is very little shared learning taking place within the group and thus the

group add very little value to its members other than a place to gather with other South African Nerdfighters. Even though there is evidence of *some* shared learning taking place amongst some of the members of Nerdfighters South Africa, it greatly fails to provide the kind of interactions, shared learning, knowledge and clear purpose that the global NERDFIGHTERIA group has. The Nerdfighters South Africa also lacks the coherent internal structure, elements of control and leadership in order to ensure that it serves as purposeful CoP.

CHAPTER SIX: Conclusion

6.1.Introduction

This thesis aimed to understand the reason individuals joined, stayed and participated in fan communities through the lens of social learning theory, and particularly notions of Community of Practice (CoP) as developed by Lave and Wenger (1991). This thesis used the fan community of YouTube personalities *Vlogbrothers* (John and Hank Green), *Nerdfighteria*, as a case study in order to examine the idea that learning is a key element of the attraction of fandoms, and one that has been relatively underemphasised in other studies.

The research employed a three-stage qualitative design (participant observation, qualitative interviews and qualitative content analysis) which allows inferences to be drawn from one data collection tool to be supplemented by another. Qualitative research produces descriptive data by observing behaviour (Taylor & Bodgan, 1984: 5) and allows the researcher to understand the perspectives of social actors, to retrieve experiences from the past, and to gain expert insight or information (Babbie & Mouton, 1989).

This study was informed in particular by third wave Fan studies and the Communities of Practice (CoP) social learning model developed by Lave and Wenger (1992) and later adapted for online communities by Wenger (1998). The third wave of Fan studies included Jenkin's (1992) understanding of "interpretative communities." Jenkins (1992) describes fans as actively utilising official media text for positive individual and collective purposes. Thus, these fans make use of their shared resources, which refers to the object of their interest, as well as the various tools of their community, for example, online platforms.

This research reveals that online fan communities do indeed have a core learning and knowledge component. Most of the learning and knowledge sharing revolves mostly around the group's 'domain of knowledge'. Within the global NERDFIGHTERIA Facebook group, as discussed above, there is evidence of shared learning when it comes to specific domains of knowledge within the fandom. A CoP engages individuals in mutual sense-making; about the enterprise that they are engaged in, their respective forms of participation in the enterprise, their orientation to other CoPs and to the world around them more generally. Members may come from different perspectives, but it is their engagement as individual learners that is the most salient aspect of their participation. The trust members develop is based on their ability to learn together: to care about the domain, to respect each other as practitioners, to expose their questions and challenges, and to provide responses that reflect practical experience.

Nerdfighteria is structured around one's knowledge of the community and individual fans' knowledge of *Vlogbrothers* and other aspects of the community.

Within the NERDFIGHTERIA Facebook group several themes emerged which related to the fan community's domain of knowledge. An analysis of these themes revealed that fans within the group used the group to, firstly share resources regarding the fandom and to, secondly, collectively negotiate and interpret various aspects of their fandom's domain of knowledge. However, the topic of mental health observed within the group is exemplarity of the fact that, even though fans used to group to share or find mental health resources, they all used to group as a support system in which to offer or request comfort or encouragement. Engagement within the group as instilled a sense of identity with the fandom, because exposure to the fandom's domain of knowledge meant that individuals fans started associating more closely to fandom's collective identity, language and values.

This research has also revealed that even though as a fan community Nerdfighteria, and some of its various sub-groups (too many to mention), do function as CoPs the Nerdfighters South Africa Facebook group does not meet the requirements to be a CoP, despite its original intentions and place within the community. Members of the group are invested in the fandom as a whole and are excited about being a part of a group with other South African Nerdfighters. However, the group is not very active and the limited activity on the group revolves around the sharing of jokes or pictures relating to various fandoms. The group is lacking in a sense of "aliveness" and leadership and therefore shared learning is greatly restricted within the group. To be a fully functioning a CoP must be purposeful and, even though there may be minimal evidence of "witness learning" within the group, overall the group fails to be engaging and does not allow members to collectively negotiate or interpret their fandom's domain of knowledge or their own fan experiences.

Members of the Nerdfighters South Africa recognise that learning and engagement are important aspect of the Nerdfighter community and of being a fan of *Vlogbrothers*. However, there seems to be missing elements from the South African group which limits or restricts this kind of knowledge acquisition; thereby indicating that members join and stay within the group for other reasons. Some of the reasons revealed through the research have to do with these members' overall loyalty to Nerdfighteria, as well as their personal connection with the *Vlogbrothers*' content. Members also stayed in the group because belonging to a group of other South African fans seemed to reduce some of the isolation felt by individuals who felt distanced from the rest of the, mostly American, fandom.

There is a reciprocal nature to fan communities, Henderson (2015:4) notes, because participants form the community and form and identity for themselves within the context of the community. In doing so the community exerts a reciprocal force influencing the members' current and developing fan identities. Nerdfighters feel emotional and personally attached to the community and therefore identity as Nerdfighters. Their continual engagement in the community sustains the community's projects and therefore Nerdfighteria continues to function and allows new members to join and engage. That movement, rhythm and active knowledge sharing is not evident within the Nerdfighters South Africa page. Thus, despite its potential to do so, as evident by activity and learning taking place in the global NERDFIGHTERIA group, the Nerdfighters South Africa does not appear to function as a CoP.

6.2. Limitations and further study

One limitation of this thesis was the scope of the research. If time allowed a survey been have been the preferred research method because doing a survey within one of the global Nerdfighter groups would have probed deeper into the way in which the fan community shared knowledge and to better categorise what the various domains of knowledge are within the group. There are several areas within this research that provide inspiration and guidance for future researchers. It is evident that learning, explicitly or more tacit, does take place in fan communities and it is clear if social learning theory and Wenger (1998)'s CoP model is applied and used to analyse other online fan groups there may be a richer understanding of this element of learning and meaning-making within online fan communities. Further research will need a wider scope and a more detailed look at more of the domains of knowledge discussed and analysed within Nerdfighteria and other fandoms. Other researchers could, for example, use the same data but look at a different aspect of fan communities using Wenger's 'knowing in practice' (1998: 134-142), which analyses the way in which fans identify with their chosen practices.

The analysis of the NERDFIGHTERIA group, due to its larger size, aimed to serves a way to analyse learning within the fandom. However, because the research focus was to look at motivating factors for why individual fans join, stay and participate it was more fruitful to do qualitative interviews with members of the Nerdfighters South Africa group, in conjunction with a participation observation of the group. Eight members of the Nerdfighters South Africa Facebook group were interviewed to get an insider perspective of their experience of the fan community and whether they experienced the element of learning.

Analysing a media phenomenon via the lens of a theory usually used within the field of education and social learning was a helpful in in which to make sense of the way in which modern audiences interact with one another and with their chosen media of choice online. With the social nature of these communities it is important to consider how individuals perceive these kinds of engagements. Based on this research I believe that further research can be done on fan motivations and values to understand to the intense the intense emotional investment of these fans and the way in which this emotional investment affects the way in which these fans see themselves and the way in which they interact with the world around them.

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