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Lilyana Zucker March 27, 2025

The Tribe Has Tweeted: *Survivor* Fans' Expectations of Themselves, Their Community, and the Show Itself

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Abstract

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By Lilyana Zucker

This study investigates Twitter engagement by fans of the reality television show *Survivor* to understand audience reception. My qualitative analysis of 393 tweets responding to the 47th season of *Survivor* demonstrated that the fan community perceives the show and themselves each in four different ways. What was tweeted was determined by on screen events, with some posts dedicated to "wow moments," of an absurd and unexpected nature, and others to more consistent topics such as players going home, idols/advantages, gender, and appearances. These categories revealed that fans viewed *Survivor* as a cast of contestant stories to follow and become attached to, a game competition with rules and strategies that are exciting to engage with, a microcosm of society in which real world issues can be discussed, and a part of the reality television genre in which superficial judgements reign. When tweeting, fans frame their posts as self-referential, other fans directed, player directed, and collective community referential. In utilizing these positions, fans demonstrated the various perspectives they had of their own status as fans and the significance of their fan community: to be a fan they had to be emotionally invested in the program and share that on Twitter to project their selfhood; that fan status required interpersonal engagement within the community that could be carried out on Twitter; that being a fan involved acting as an authority figure over players with their forum of influence as Twitter' or that as a fan they deserved enjoyable television and would use Twitter to articulate that.

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Introduction

Television-watching has long been considered a social activity and due to advancements in social media, audiences can engage in a wide range of reception styles, now with complete strangers as company. Twitter[1] was founded in 2006 as a social media platform that allowed posters to micro-blog, meaning they could share their thoughts on everything from pressing political current events to their favorite television shows (Deller 2011). From the steady production of in-the-moment sharing, Twitter has become "a kind of virtual loungeroom… a metaphorical 'watercooler' in the cloud," where viewers of television are able to share their commentary in a many-to-many setting (Harrington, Highfield, and Bruns 2013).

Reality television audiences occupy a large discussion space on Twitter with the draw of sports like competition fervor and questions around the authenticity and motivations of contestants not found in scripted productions. The genre can be defined loosely as an unscripted and nonfiction form of entertainment populated by nonactors (Kavka 2012; Deery 2015). While there is often pre-planning and editing involved by show runners in constructing the scenarios that audiences receive, there is no writer's room dictating how the participants should be acting and what they should be saying. This means that there is forethought in formulating an environment fruitful for entertainment such as selecting a cast and situation, but the showrunners cannot force the interpersonal drama. This strategy often pulls audiences who are excited by the possibility of at least some level of authenticity that is often not found in scripted productions.

[1] At the time of writing this thesis Twitter had been purchased and renamed X for over a year, but for the sake of clarity and consistency with previous literature I will be referring to this platform as Twitter throughout this paper.

Reality television, as a genre, has expanded over the past two decades, making it challenging for scholars to clearly define its parameters. There is little doubt, though, that it has a huge presence in television programming, broadly, with nearly every channel and streaming service hosting one, while some are dedicated entirely to the genre (Murray and Ouellette 2009; Deery 2015). From this, some scholars have opted to categorize reality television based on its uniquely intimate dynamic between the production, participants, and audiences, or focus on the specific formats, or sub-genres, as safer groupings (Murray and Ouellette 2009; Hill 2015; Deery 2015). One of the most popular formats for reality television shows is the gamedoc, which is the type of reality television that will be studied in this thesis. Gamedocs are identified by their dramatic structure of predictable segments resulting in a definitive climax (Montemurro 2007; Deery 2015). This format is then reproduced in different geographical regions or for different interests, further proliferating our televisions with reality-based content (Hill 2015).

Reality television has its roots in documentary television, like true crime shows and hidden video camera entertainment, which was aimed at "the lowest common denominator," of audiences (Kavka 2012). It was thought of as being representative of all the faults of modern culture poorly made, a waste of time, and overall worthless (Hill 2015). With this opinion from critics, reality television has been dismissed as trivial, discounting the meaning behind its content and the character of those who watch it. The status of reality television watchers is impacted by this conception as illustrated by efforts to account for the amount of reality television people watch as, "[viewers] underreport because of social stigma – for nothing is easier to criticize in polite society than reality TV" (Deery 2015).

In the summer of 2000, CBS broadcasting premiered the first season of *Survivor*, setting the tone for the reality television programs we see today by introducing the concept of

"competition under conditions of comprehensive surveillance," meaning the contestants would be battling against one another while cameras pick up on every detail of their relationships for the viewers' enjoyment (Kavka 2012). *Survivor* gave reality television the opportunity to incorporate a structure to their seasons, separating from the sporadic gags of its hidden camera practical joke predecessors. While reality television is often still considered low brow, it dominates the television industry, making it difficult to dispute its entertainment value and movement from the outer edges of television programming to its nucleus (Grindstaff and Turrow 2006; Murray and Ouellette 2009).

The show itself consists of sending a group of strangers to a non-American location. In earlier seasons contestants could end up in remote villages in Africa, Asia, or South America. Once there they are divided into teams, or tribes in the vocabulary of the show, for the first half of the season before breaking into an individual game midway through at the merge. While on the show, contestants must depend on each other to "survive" in the wilderness by building a shelter, tending to a campfire, and hunting and gathering food. Beyond surviving in the primal sense, the contestants must survive the show's various obstacles. The first hurdle is competing in challenges imagined and built by the production team to test the participants' physical and mental capabilities. Those who succeed in these competitions win safety and can continue their journey, but those who are unsuccessful are forced to evict one tribe member from the show at Tribal Council through a majority vote. This person could be anyone who has not earned their security, so everyone must work in their own best interest to make it through. When approaching the possibility of ejection from the game, contestants strategize with one another often by making alliances of mutual protection or by manipulating their peers against a common enemy, all in hopes of swaying the group opinion onto someone other than themselves. There is no

prescribed set of criteria that determine calls for ejection, but typically players evaluate one another's personal attributes – strength, intelligence, sociability, etc. – to help them decide. They typically consider who is the weakest link during the team portion to reinforce their tribe and then who is the biggest threat to their own longevity in the game during the individual portion. Contestants must last the full season of 26 days without being sent home and be chosen as the best player from a jury of the very people they voted out to win the title of Sole Survivor and the million-dollar prize (Saliban 2012).

The host of *Survivor*, Jeff Probst, describes the show as "a microcosm for our real world," illustrating that one obvious way to study reality television through a sociological lens is to consider the non-actor contestants as observable examples of human behavior, group dynamics, society construction, etc. (Probst 2019). Another approach is to examine how these volunteer contestants are evaluated and spoken of by the viewing population. The genre's popularity tells us that as a cultural artifact, *Survivor* has meaning and resonance in contemporary society. Audiences may offer the key to what that meaning is. The conversations surrounding reality television programs can sometimes overshadow the content of the program itself thanks to online platforms such as Twitter and YouTube (Hill 2015). To understand more about reality television as a category of entertainment, it is wise to listen to the experts on the subject: the dedicated audiences who consume and discuss it more than anyone else (Hill 2015)

Having been on air for over two decades, *Survivor* has accumulated a large following of viewers. After wrapping up the most recent installment prior to this study, the 46th season, in May of 2024, *Survivor* was awarded the honor of "#1 entertainment show among viewers in Adults 18-34, A18-49 and A25-54." In examining the popularity of the live broadcasts, the season finale garnered 4.34 million viewers. Additionally, according to Paramount+, the

streaming platform that houses the show, *Survivor* averages 8.4 million viewers on the online forum (CBS 2024).

While data on viewership, audience size, and related social media use is not publicly available, audience members can be considered fans if they "[invest] time and energy into thinking about, or interacting with, a media text," which in this case would be the show of *Survivor*; then they can also be a part of a "Fandom as a collective community," of fans (Booth 2009). This community can be exhibited in person, through gatherings like watch parties, or in online forums, such as Reddit groups and Twitter threads. For the *Survivor* fandom specifically, there are formal network-run events, former contestant-hosted meet and greets, private fan watch parties, discussion boards on Reddit, and a Twitter hashtag for each season to keep all fan tweets in one spot. In this study I will be collecting data from that Twitter thread, #Survivor47, as it is populated by fans of the show throughout the course of *Survivor*'s newest installment to best understand the values of the *Survivor* fandom. In conducting this research throughout the entire season I aim to discover how fans go about discussing *Survivor*. I will examine what moments in the show generate the largest viewer responses and how those responses are posed, especially in terms of how they change throughout the season. These findings will provide insight into how fans comprehend *Survivor*, what they enjoy about the show, how they conceptualize their own status as fans, and why they choose to interact with one another in a public forum to build an online fan community.

Literature Review

Audience Reception

Audience reception studies are crucial to a sociological understanding of media. It would be incomplete to study how texts are produced without understanding how audiences interpret, apply, and react to them. Some of the key reasons a researcher may study audiences are to understand market and consumption averages, weigh in on the debate surrounding the moral impact of media, investigate the effects of new technological developments, and to explain curiosities about society's culture, politics, and identity (Kitzinger 2004). This last category is most important to this thesis as it looks at either how the media presents society's understandings of culture or conversely how audiences use the objects and texts provided by the media to create identities and negotiate interpersonal relations. This type of research prompts the largest number of studies on audience reception given its wide offering of empirical approaches to study personal enjoyment and selfhood, as well as one's response to and understanding of media.

Originating in interdisciplinary efforts to provide reader-oriented analysis in literary studies, audience reception is focused on taking account of the experience and interpretation of the consumer to gain an understanding of how meaning is created by individuals (Press 1994). This approach was noted as a departure from the Marxist model of production. This is because the Marxist model argued that the intended meaning of a cultural object is what audiences receive, while audience reception assumed that audiences could develop their own interpretations that may not align with the creator's intentions (Griswold, Lenaghan, and Naf 2011). Audience reception has a long history before ever expanding to newer media in television and film. Pierre Bourdieu is considered to be influential to the beginnings of audience reception in studying the

elite class's engagement with high culture to establish their social dominance (Press 1994). In discussing the various tastes of individuals, he explored their reception to cultural objects as audience members and argued how those interpretations could be used as social capital. Janice Radway wrote a 1984 piece on the meaning-making of romance novels by women. Her work prompted a shift from studies generally discussing audiences interpreting texts towards a concerted effort to determine the active role of the audience in ascertaining meaning (Radway 1984). Once published in English in 1985, Ien Ang shifted the focus of audience reception again, this time towards television viewers, specifically in attempting to uncover the pleasure some gained in watching the soap opera *Dallas* (Ang 1982). Though already relevant for their groundbreaking approaches to studying audiences, both Radway and Ang's work hold commonality with and importance in my study on reality television as all three focus on audiences of productions that are oftentimes considered lower status in their respective fields of literature and television.

A viewer is an individual consumer of media, while the audience is the collective that may share attributes, may be conceived as a group, may react to messages in similar ways, and may affect one another through interpersonal involvement (Griswold et al. 2011). With this definition, it should be recognized as a mode of social formation, created by the coming together around a form of entertainment, like a television program, and the mutual social interests that come along with that. In simpler terms, an audience is a "group of people who came together to 'audience'" a piece of media (Fiske 1992). Rather than being classified as a social category or group, which is more of a constraining conception of who people are, the social formation of audiences changes based on what the members do in a specific context.

When examined from the perspective of the economic system, the audience is a group to market towards and commodify; within a socio-cultural position, the audience is a location to absorb culture presented or to socialize with others; lastly, through the lens of understanding everyday behaviors, the audience becomes a process impacting a person's way of living (Fiske 1992). The possibilities of a context, and thus the audiences available to study, are vast considering the myriads of entertainments produced. Audiences can include followers of television to literature, gaming to film, and much else. Additionally, the conception of the audience can change depending on how it is viewed within a particular social order. Acting as both a noun and a verb, the audience has a complicated meaning to it and must be understood as such if one wishes to study it. In the case of this study, the audience is the group of individuals who dedicate an hour and a half of their time each week to watch and engage with the show *Survivor*.

A crucial aspect of audience reception studies is the examination of how audiences draw meaning from their cultural objects of choice, also known as meaning making. Meaning is usually made through interpretations that allow individuals to understand cultural objects (Rawlings and Childress 2019). This approach centers the actor as their interpretations of a stimulus are the key to their inferences. In other words, meaning is not given and often differs amongst people and within a person over time or events. "Interpretation" can be understood as the process of associating an object with another cognitive concept as done by categorization and semantic association. Categorization entails how a person organizes the given stimuli into their cognitively predefined classifications through labeling, while semantic association involves tapping into a network of associations to connect a new concept to other familiar ones to create a cognitive link. These two strategies work together to identify what a stimulus is and what it is

related to gain a full perception of it. Interpretation is important because it impacts stances and behaviors of individuals which are crucial to understand greater patterns within society (Goldeberg and Singell 2024). In other words, cultural objects' susceptibility to many different meanings from many different individuals makes these interpretations more generalizable than a strict analysis of a particular issue (Rawlings and Childress 2019).

Interpretation and meaning-making are done in two ways: implicitly or explicitly. The implicit form is typically done slowly with nondeclarative aspects of culture that become subconsciously and readily available for later use. Nondeclarative culture exists in emotional responses, skills, and other qualities that are deployed without much forethought that cannot be easily verbalized. Explicit meaning construction is associated with declarative culture that is utilized in a slow and calculated way, though it is quickly learned. Declarative culture encompasses knowledge and practices that one can consciously express, such as tasks involving thinking, valuing, and deciding (Lizardo 2017). Both forms of culturalization are necessary to understanding how individuals create meaning from cultural objects. They utilize both nondeclarative and declarative aspects of culture to draw conclusions implicitly and explicitly.

Previous literature has found that meaning-making is often a shared process, a notion that is especially relevant in the field of audience reception. Shared meaning as a concept can be understood as both a widely held consensus on a cultural object's significance and a common method of understanding how to come to an interpretation and its greater significance (Rawlings and Childress 2019). Shared meaning occurs when there is shared categorization and association in the interpretation stage. Shared categorization is when a stimulus is similarly categorized by different people, and shared association occurs if multiple people connect a stimulus to analogous concepts. People can share one of these attributes and not the other, but they typically

arise in situations where individuals exist together in a cultural environment. Since they experience the same events, they often are conditioned to think in the same way (Goldberg and Singell 2024). Meanings can often become demographically situated, revealing information about individuals' place within society. This is representative of a dispositional account of meaning making, in which people's backgrounds most influence their meaning construction (Rawlings and Childress 2019).

As described, in similarly situated communities, individuals will often come to the same conclusions about meanings. This can be attributed to audience members influencing each other's interpretations of media texts through collective discussion. Oftentimes people evoke a strategy called framing, sometimes without being cognizant of it, which describes the process of an individual presenting information, namely their categorizations and associations of an object, that guides another person's interpretation to create a shared meaning between them (Goldberg and Singell 2024). In Childress and Friedkin's (2012) study on book clubs, readers enter the discussion preparing to influence their peers and be influenced by them based on the eventual conversation. Childress and Friedkin confirmed the impact of interpersonal relationships on reception by noting the differences between readers' reflections of their given texts before and after group discourse. Prior to club discussion their subjects' evaluation of their novel was favorable, but afterwards 66.2% of participants shifted their perception of the book to a more negative one. With the only changing factor being interaction with others, Childress and Friedkin contribute this switch in opinion to be the product of conforming to outside influence. This illustrates why there is often much consensus amongst audience communities.

Shared meaning-making allows for connections to be made amongst those participating. In examining shared meaning-making in relation to the types of cultural objects being

interpreted, cultural taste plays a role in determining the strength of this commonality. Cultural tastes have proven to have an impact on the creation and quality of interpersonal networks, meaning different cultural objects have different outcomes. This thought stems from Bourdieu's line of reasoning that cultural knowledge is converted into social capital that helps to construct interpersonal relations. It is thought that arts related culture is especially useful for promoting friendly conversation that aids in building kinship, and today, due to the rise of the internet and social network sites, networks can expand wider passed geographic and personal boundaries. When evaluating the correlation between cultural tastes and virtual relationships, Lizardo (2006), taking after Bourdieu, divides artistic media into two categories: highbrow and popular culture. Highbrow cultural objects tend to be somewhat inaccessible to the majority of individuals, making it so those who can converse in it create strong connections, though being small in quantity. Popular culture, on the other hand, is more widely attained which allows for many more connections that end up being weaker. These cultural tastes operate in opposite ways with knowledge of highbrow culture serving as "fences" for elite communities, while popular culture awareness allows for "bridges" to connect individuals in pleasant conversation (Lizardo 2006). This is why oftentimes discussions surrounding popular television shows and movies appear to be so positive and even playful. However, if fans of these programs consider them to be elite in status, discussion can grow more competitive and exclusionary.

Audience reception is not simply about the act of passively watching television. While viewers often do engage in passive consumption, audience reception studies acknowledge that receivers of media content can engage in a wide range of meaning-making or interpretive strategies. This is often done by evaluating what has been seen or what might be seen and engaging with television content through other forms of media, (Grindstaff and Turow 2006).

This argument stems from Griswold, Lenaghan, and Naf's piece on "Readers as Audiences" in which they define readers as not someone who is simply able to understand the written word, i.e. literate, but someone who practices reading as an interactive activity (2011). Active watching would be considered "instrumental viewing" in which one participates actively with their media, as opposed to its counterpart of "ritualistic viewing" which is more-so done mindlessly out of habit. In instrumental watching one plans in advance to follow specific program content, is cognitively involved with it, and continues to engage with it afterwards in post-exposure activity (Godlewski and Perse 2010). With this interpretation of effort going into receiving entertainment, scholars have rejected the idea that audiences are an indistinguishable and dormant group that absorb a singular message and are easily influenced by the media they consume. Instead, they are believed to be "readers" who can respond to and interpret texts in a multitude of ways, creating a more positive relationship with the media as they often feel connected to it (Schlütz and Jage-D'Aprile 2021).

This engagement involves an expression of the text in the audience's everyday life at varying levels of intensity. Schlütz and Jage-D'Aprile (2021) demonstrate this in their examination of the *Game of Thrones* fandom. Fans of *Game of Thrones* engage in their program cognitively through striving to comprehend the details of each house of Westeros, effectively by harboring positive and negative emotions towards various characters, or behaviorally in allowing the show to influence their activities such as researching additional information from the books. The most engaged viewers customize their watching habits to the needs of the show, discuss the show, absorb various transmedia elements of the show, and produce one's own show related materials to create a world that is based off but larger than the original text. In carrying this out, the *Game of Thrones* fans express a high connection with the show and in turn boast a more

positive attitude towards it (Schlütz and Jage-D'Aprile 2021). Engagement can be carried out individually as previously described, but it can also be done in the collective form of meaning-making, illustrating that audiences can exist as a community. This can be seen in the previous example book clubs, which have become one of the largest forms of community participation in the entertainment arts. In book clubs, as would be indicative of other audience communities, readers work together to find meaning in the text, while relating it to their own lives (Griswold et al. 2011). In audience communities, members can compare their findings, share opinions, and pose questions.

Due to the unusual nature of reality television teetering on the boundary of authenticity and fiction, works dedicated to the audience reception of reality television have organized different schemas that viewers use to create meaning from this content. Carolyn Michelle (2009) was able to concisely compile these approaches into four categories that she defines as the transparent, mediated, referential, and discursive modes of reception, before running her own audience reception study to examine how each strategy is used by viewers of the show *Rock Star: Supernova*. The transparent style consists of audiences treating the reality program as if it was real life and should be internalized as such. Michelle states that this approach was the most common one she observed as viewers posted statements on the contestants which appeared to accept the footage they were shown as accurate reflections of the characters attitudes and actions with no reservations. A mediated manner of watching recognizes the constructed nature of the program, allowing the viewer to enjoy from a distance due to their awareness of possible manufactured moments. In her research, Michelle found that audiences using this lens recognized that the showrunners intentionally create drama for the sake of ratings, and with this knowledge attempted to defend the contestants that were presented as villains by the editing

process. The middle ground perspective is referential in which audiences perceive media as similar to life, as they can find factual connections to reality, but also grasp that certain aspects are interfered with if they fail to fit within the viewer's understanding of the world. Watchers in Michelle's study were seen to utilize both personal experience and knowledge of external events to influence their comprehension of character's behaviors. In the discursive mode, viewers focus entirely on the message of the media, responding positively or negatively to the theme that they believe the producers have promoted. In the case of *Rock Star: Supernova*, some discursive viewers conjectured that the producers had a winner in mind that they were rigging the show for, while others commented on a larger message about the encouragement of certain social orders through the show. Due to the lack of clarity surrounding the truth of reality television programming, an understanding of this variety of perspectives when viewing must be included in any study examining audiences of this genre.

Fandom

One specific type of an engaged audience community would be a fandom, which takes the concept of an active audience to an even higher level. Fans historically have a negative connotation of almost rabid behavior with its roots in the term fanatic (Jenkins 1992 as cited in Costello and Moore 2007). A more generous definition, however, would be that a fan is anyone who connects on a deep level with a particular piece of media, often resulting in their involvement in ventures outside of mere watching to enhance their experience. A fandom, then, is a broader community of dedicated viewers who share a collective identity and a culture that is amassed through practices and traditions (Jenkins 2018). Fan selfhood, and in turn association in a fandom, is not inherent but rather adopted. Thus, since fan identity is not innate in personhood,

it is not eternally lasting as it can be lost at any point. This could either be intentionally through abandonment of interest or unintentionally due to reduced involvement from a shifting hierarchy of priorities (Harrington and Bielby 2010). So, just as reception requires active engagement through instrumental viewing, being considered a fan demands consistent participation as well.

A key defining characteristic of fandom is its participatory culture. Participatory culture insinuates the creation and sharing of cultural output related to the media product of choice; these handiworks can range from fanfiction to artwork to video compilations to written statements and so on. The fandom is purposefully created as a space in which there are minimal obstacles for sharing one's creations, which is reinforced by a wide embrace from others on the receiving end. This creates a community in which fans can learn from one another while developing some level of social bond (Jenkins 2010). Some scholars argue that to be a part of the fandom one must contribute to the community, whether it be producing original labor or replying to a fellow fan's work (Booth 2009). Other fandom researchers recognize the status of the "lurkers" who are members of the fan community even though they only observe discussion without partaking in it themselves (Costello and Moore 2007). "Lurkers" can be difficult to study without hearing from them directly through surveys or interviews, but thankfully their presence can still be counted via views on certain sites such as Twitter. As illustrated in these scholarly debates within fandom studies, although fan communities on one hand are a space of acceptance for fans' efforts, not all of them are entirely welcoming and have an air of exclusivity in what is required to be called a fan.

Some of the earliest genre-specific fandom studies were based on the fans of soap operas, which can act as a guide for our understanding of fandoms origins, especially when specifically studying reality television as the two genres held a shared status of overlooked programming. In

their 2018 piece, *Soap Fans, Revisited*, C. Lee Harrington and Denise Bielby examined their literature on the soap opera fandom that they conducted over 20 years prior. This piece was considered a watershed moment in its efforts to bring a marginalized and stereotyped fan community to the mainstream. This was done through the expression of soap fans as accepted and validated by the production industry, as opposed to the prevailing opinion that fans were unwanted annoyances. Alongside the phoning of fan-club acquaintances and scanning the soap opera magazines, soap opera fans even felt empowered to write to the network about their wants and opinions of the show (Ford 2008). Turning to the fans' connection to the object of the soap opera programming itself, Harrington and Bielby revealed that the configuration of the programs, with emotionally rich ensemble casts and cliff-hanger episodes that begged for discussion, promoted and somewhat defined the fan forms of engagement. Soap fans originally privately discussed episodes with networks of known family, friends, or coworkers, then eventually expanded wider to a community of fan clubs and fan written magazines, before finally being one of the first groups to adopt the internet for recreational reasons. Once transitioning to online forums, individuals came together to share their thoughts and traditions to create emotional connections. The community was built by the practice of regular common behaviors and communication patterns that members would unite around. Indicative of later fan online communities, this space welcomed enjoyable debate but also influenced one's interpretation of a show when attempting to conform to the group's conclusion (Baym 1999).

Godlewski and Perse's (2010) work on reality television audience participation online, especially regarding shows in which viewers can influence the outcome via anonymous voting, is a precursor to this thesis. The method to research these topics is a questionnaire for viewers to fill out about their watching and online engagement. Victor Costello and Barbara Moore (2007)

took a very similar approach, in posting an online survey to uncover fans' habits regarding television watching and internet usage. Although this piece had a more distinct focus on fandom, it was extremely broad in the types of fans it examined as they sent their survey to 806 fan sites related to 86 different television programs of presumably many different genres. One piece that veered away from direct questioning of subjects and towards internet observation, was Megan M. Wood and Linda Baughman's (2012) fascinating observation of Glee fans' character roleplaying activities on Twitter. While roleplaying was far more singularly focused than the types of tweets I investigate in my study, the method of monitoring Twitter threads over a multiple month period resonated with my efforts.

Social Television

Fandom studies point to the rise of the internet as a crucial landmark in the restructuring of fan interactions and confirming the existence of audience communities as they appeared in public view. In this way, I opt to examine the audience of *Survivor* within their online fandom community on Twitter. This practice of engaging fellow fans for television conversation in an online area has been dubbed social television in recent literature. Social television is understood as the use of technologies to engage in the communal experience of watching television with other viewers who are physically elsewhere. One may engage in social television to feel more involved in their media consumption as an active viewer and to avoid passivity. Especially when discussing audience reception, social television is recognized as a fruitful strategy in engaging media as a fan. Once participating in this practice, a watcher creates connections, especially if they directly mention or respond to another user. Some of these connections are reminiscent of

communal viewing gatherings with known friends, new like-minded peers, or the stars of the chosen program (Doughty, Rowland, and Lawson 2012).

The technologies behind social television originated as communication devices built into television sets but have since expanded to chat sites as a way to interact completely asynchronously and with a seemingly unlimited amount of people (Harboe 2009). Today we look to any of the diverse social networking sites (SNSs) as a possible place to house social television efforts. SNSs are any web-based service that allow individuals to create a profile that is public or partially public, to compile a list of other users to connect with, and to navigate the list of their connections and those belonging to others (Boyd 2008). Posting original content and reacting to a peer's publishing would be considered social television on an SNS as it connects audience members through this virtual medium. In the context of television fandoms, one can assume that the users posting under a show's hashtag are fans as this would be one method of engaging with their media. SNSs make it so that one does not need to find an individual site dedicated to their interest but rather can join a wider site and then find their like-interest peers (Boyd 2008).

Since 2009 sociologists have begun to see the value that studying Twitter adds to this field as a total of 1,644 articles which analyze the platform have been published (Murthy 2024). Scholars utilize the online impressions left by Twitter users in statistical, ethnographic, or mixed method studies. In my study, I use a qualitative approach in which I treat Twitter as a digital ethnographic field site. In this approach, the site allows for observation and interaction with the users, though I do not employ any engagement. With the new ownership of the site and the restriction of API access, research on Twitter will need to rely on these qualitative methods because the large-scale quantitative efforts will become less accessible. Murthy (2024) recommended searching within specific hashtags to engage with communities on the platform

and to collect screenshots of posts as fieldnotes, both of which I do in my study, to understand more about the users, their perceptions, and their methods of engagement on Twitter.

Given that Twitter touches all spheres of society in its discussions of politics, economics, entertainment, and more, it can provide observable data for a variety of research topics (Murthy 2024). Furthermore, while most trending discussion topics are decided by the traditional media industry, Twitter allows users to decide what subjects are important news events by coming together and talking about them (Murthy 2012). This will allow for an education on what everyday users care about and want to discuss. Most importantly, it places a newfound spotlight on groups that are not normally heard from or topics that are sometimes overlooked, providing unprecedented insight. This is best represented by Twitter's impact on social movement formations. This impact can be attributed to Twitter's ability to connect those who would normally be too geographically separated to converse on these topics at a rapid speed. These networks can even turn into real communities, bounded by the hashtags that frame the exchanges. The same can be said for the viewing communities of this thesis as Twitter also allows them to connect for a discussion in real time across any location (Murthy 2024).

Twitter can also tell us much about both individual and group dynamics. As a micro-blogging site, Twitter is a venue in which users can meticulously control how they present themselves. Posts that may appear insignificant, like Murthy's (2012) example of someone sharing what they ate for breakfast, are a method of self-affirmation. It is a way for people, in this ever changing and chaotic world, "to say 'look at me' or 'I exist'" (Murthy 2012). In this way, users are opening the door to what Goffman (1959) referred to as the "backstage" or the private areas of life. Or, better yet, they are constructing the "backstage" in a way that presents themselves how they want to. Either way, even though Twitter is a place of individualism in each

post allowing users to share their inner thoughts, it creates an interconnectedness amongst familiars and strangers as each post lets people learn each other's habits, favorite things, and daily activities. Even more so, Twitter allows users to engage with one another using retweets or share information on specific discussions by tweeting in a hashtag thread. These activities are representative of solidarity within Twitter, and both mechanical and organic can be found when examining posts. Mechanical solidarity, which describes social cohesion based on people's similar roles and values, presents itself when posters discuss their shared experiences. For this Murthy (2024) uses the example of posts during COVID-19 lockdowns in which users developed a mechanical solidarity when they tweeted about undergoing the same situations. Organic solidarity emerges through the division of identities and tasks, so this form of unity appears when different groups come together and add their own unique specialization to a specific topic.

While using Twitter for social television could theoretically be done at any time, it often centers around the time of broadcast when there is the most foot traffic. Consequently, television-related tweets are highest during sporting events, reality television shows' live finales, and developing current news events. However, regular episodes of programs still have many tweets during the timeslot of the live broadcasting. This is because there is a shared understanding of the importance of live timing, as viewers know that their post will be interacted with by other users who are watching live. Fans choose to post in this way because watching television live and discussing it in the moment with fellow audience members makes viewers feel as if they are a part of a larger community, that we know to be the fandom (Deller 2011). This is especially evidenced by the continued watching of live television even in an era of digital video recording options and streaming services, which allow audiences to watch their shows after the original airing. Twitter and other social television platforms have been influential in the

resurgence of a live viewing experience by encouraging people to watch their shows in real time. Thus, social media is not as much of a threat to television as some may expect but rather is providing new forms of engagement and attention to traditional television by complementing it with an online social audience that one wants to keep up with (Highfield et al. 2013).

Social television provides researchers with an opportunity to examine unfiltered and immediate audience reactions. Analyzing tweets can provide quantitative and qualitative data on what audiences are thinking based on what they are posting. Buschow, Schneider, and Ueberheide (2014) ran a broad analysis of Twitter conversations on various types of television programs, including reality talent competition programs, dramatic fictional series, and political talk shows. This study can be framed as something of a launchpad for other works by illustrating the general concept of using Twitter as a medium to gather audience reception data for different types of entertainment options. Highfield, Harrington, and Bruns (2013) took a more focused approach in researching the global musical phenomenon Eurovision to investigate which events generated an increase in tweets based on a minute-by-minute examination of hashtag posting. As Eurovision was only a week, it is a much smaller time frame than the macro analysis I conduct over a full season, but its methods mirror the micro aspect of my study in discovering what sparks viewers' interests on *Survivor*. Deller's (2011) audience research was one of the closest influences for my thesis as it was of tweets before, during, and after each episode of the eight-part documentary series *Revelations* to understand how people talk about the show, especially in comparing the different episodes' conversations. Although our unit of analysis differs in format as Deller's is a religious documentary mini-series, her approach of watching the audiences' progression over the course of a season by examining multiple episodes is like mine. Lastly, Smit and Bosch's (2020) research examines tweets about the South African reality television

show *Our Perfect Wedding* to observe the community of Black South Africans as they use Twitter as a space of communication. While this study is conceptually like mine in a broad sense with its Twitter audience reception research on reality television, my research does not include the identities of the posters whatsoever. Regardless, this piece also helps me identify a gap in the literature in which there is a lack of audiences of American reality television shows being studied via Twitter.

Methods

For this study, I examined viewer tweets of *Survivor*. Each tweet constitutes a unit of analysis. The tweets were collected throughout the course of the 47th season of *Survivor* and were found within the #Survivor47 thread. Episodes aired every Wednesday evening at eight o'clock Eastern Standard Time starting on September 18th, 2024, and concluding on December 18th, 2024. Data collection occurred on eight Friday mornings, which sometimes lead into the afternoon, throughout this period. The dates of collection were as follows: September 27th (after the second episode), October 4th (after the third episode), October 25th (after the sixth episode), November 1st (after the seventh episode), November 22nd (after the tenth episode), November 29th (after the eleventh episode), December 13th (after the thirteenth episode), and December 20th (after the fourteenth and final episode).[2] Friday mornings were chosen as my allotted time to begin collecting the tweets to ensure the inclusion of posts after the hour and a half run time of an episode[3], an expansion of Deller's (2011) half an hour after broadcast time in her study. This decision allowed for the presence of both in-the-moment tweets as well as delayed tweets.

The eight dates used were chosen to coincide with my comprehension of the four phases of a typical *Survivor* season: (1) pre-merge in which the cast is split into three tribes to live and compete with, (2) the merge in which the tribe lines dissolve and contestants adapt to playing the game as an individual, (3) post-merge in which the game has become every player for themselves, and (4) the end-game which shows the number of contestants dwindle until there are three remaining in the finale where the winner is declared. For pre-merge, I opted to skip the

[2] The original schedule for data collection only included 3 periods, but midway through the season CBS Broadcasting announced that an additional episode would be added. Due to this, I was forced to push back the end-game dates. Upon seeing the large gap that was created between my second and third collections, I decided to add the late November dates as the post-merge phase.

[3] The thirteenth and fourteenth episodes were the only episodes in the season that were not an hour and a half in length but instead were two hours as they were considered the finale episodes.

premiere to avoid initial cast reactions and examine posts once the season was more formally established in the second and third episodes. For the merge, it typically spreads over the two chosen episodes with the first being when the original three tribes are eradicated and the second being when everyone is merged as one new tribe of individuals. For post-merge, I chose later dates to be able to study a more established situation that was a good distance from the merge itself. For the end-game I had little choice outside of the penultimate and final episode of the season, which was declared a two-part finale by the network. While I could have done just one episode for each of the four parts of the season, resulting in four collection dates, I chose pairs for a better sense of each stage of the game, a larger amount of data, and to test if there was any runoff in tweets from the week prior.

The collection of tweets was done manually, by hand. For each episode, I loaded the #Survivor47 thread and scrolled through it myself to document the data. I was shown to use a show related hashtag to compile my dataset from multiple previous studies which used the same strategy (Smit and Bosch 2020; Deller 2011; Highfield et al. 2013). I screenshotted each tweet, copied its online link, described it in text, contextualized it within the episode, logged the date and time it was posted, logged the date and time I analyzed it, transcribed its interaction statistics such as the number of views, retweets, likes, comments, and bookmarks it received, and then answered various categorizing questions about it. I would do this for roughly fifty tweets each time, stopping when the interaction levels appeared to be fluctuating with a handful of tweets falling below ten thousand views, or in the case of the second day of each set if there were too many tweets from the week before appearing in the feed. The usernames of the posters were not included anywhere in my spreadsheet, thus anonymizing every tweet that was collected and the study itself.

The categories I used for my coding methods were informed by previous research as well as my own motivations. Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, and Greenwell's (2010) article provided me with categories such as "information sharing" that I would mark whenever a poster shared quotes, statistics, or other facts from the show, "promotional activities" which almost exclusively identified contestants who posted about their own presence on the season[4], and "diversions" which would be tagged when posters would bring up information that was not directly discussing the episode even if it related to it. Buschow, Schneider, and Ueberheide's (2014) piece inspired me to include categories about "emotional sentiments" where I logged any heartfelt reaction ranging the entire spectrum from excitement to annoyance to deep sadness. I also adapted their category of "evaluation" to a broader one about any activities someone could be partaking in while watching, like wanting, thinking, hoping, etc.

From my own experience on *Survivor* Twitter, I was able to come up with categories myself that I knew were necessary to best capture the fandom's discourse. First, considering the show is so heavily centered around the contestants and their stories, I knew I needed categories about whether the tweets were discussions on characters, and if so which one or ones. Additionally, as the show has a lot of moving parts, I assumed there would be discussions on the show's production aspect, such as editing practices or challenge concepts, that would need to be accounted for. Next, in a more general sense, as tweets are often a combination of texts and visuals, I wanted to be able to note if there were images or videos, and if they were from the episode, the season, one of the show's other 46 seasons, or from another form of media entirely. Lastly, given this is a fandom study, I also wanted to be sure to log any mentions of previous

[4] Although all posts were anonymized, this was one category that required some awareness of the poster. Luckily, this would often be very intuitive as the contestant/poster would speak in first person and include images of themselves from the show, leading me to conclude who they were without having to reference their account name.

seasons that were being used to signal membership in the fandom, as well as mentions of other television shows that would label someone as a broader television or reality television fan.

When the season ended, I had compiled a dataset of 393 tweets in total. I uploaded the tweets into MAXQDA24 to acquire a visual of emerging themes. I found a high quantity of tweets related to players going home, idols/advantages, gender, and appearances, so I made those 4 of my categories that were emblematic of what posters enjoyed talking about regarding the show. I also noticed that each tweet had a different subject target in referencing the self, engaging with the other fans online, engaging with the players on the show, and referencing a collective fan community. These groupings illustrated how *Survivor* fans interacted with the object and one another on Twitter. Through combining the findings of the what and the how related to fan postings, I was able to gain an understanding of the *Survivor* fan community that exists online.

Findings

What Are Fans Tweeting About?

This first section of findings examines the content of the tweets in the dataset to uncover the various ways fans comprehend the program of *Survivor* and how they get pleasure in their viewing experience. To get to the root of what fans talk about I looked for the type of moment that prompted posts and then for specific topics that popped up repeatedly throughout the season. During season 47 of *Survivor,* fans talked the most about the players being voted out at the end of each episode, the advantages placed in the game as plot disruptors, how players enacted their genders, and the physical appearance of the players. These topics illustrate what fans prioritize about the program based on their conceptualization of its purpose via the number of tweets they dedicate to their discussion online. In understanding their prioritizations, their modes of enjoyment become clear.

Tweet Triggers

The first and most simple conclusion is that what fans post about on Twitter directly mirrors events occurring in the show. In other words, topics are rarely spoken of on Twitter unless they are presented first on the show, and they are spoken of even more when there is a standout "wow moment" surrounding them. "Wow moments" are typically shocking in the absurdity or unexpectedness of their nature. Taking the first week that I coded, episode 2, there were two very clear "wow moments" that constituted about half of the tweets accounted for in that episode. One was when Andy had an emotional breakdown after the challenge. In this scene he cried about how he felt alienated from his tribe because no one cheered when he chopped open his coconut. This was such a consequential event that it remained a prevalent topic into the

following week. This was a “wow moment” because of the absurdity of the situation in which a player had such a massive mental collapse so early in the season. While fans expect players to fall apart over the course of the season due to the grueling elements, it was unexpected to knowing audiences so early in the season, in the very first episode, leading many posters to make jokes about the surrealness of it all. The other scene that blew up in the same period, but for a different reason, was when Rachel attempted to steal rice from the challenge which had bags of rice that were sliced open. This effort was never seen before in *Survivor*’s 46 previous seasons and was lauded by fans as a stroke of genius. The unexpected nature of it excited fans, thus triggering them to go to Twitter to talk about it.

Player Going Home Tweets

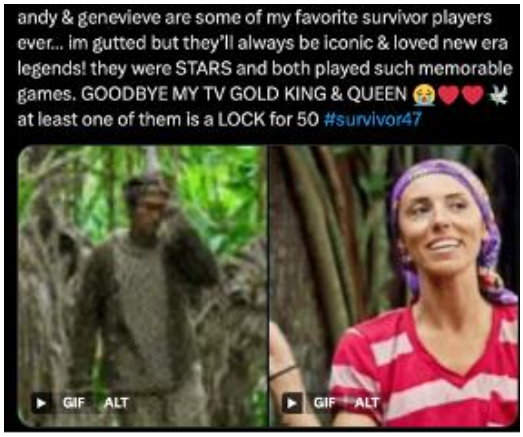
The most popular and consistent topic that appeared on Twitter over the course of the entire season were discussions about the player who was sent home each week. These posts typically appeared during or after the end of the episode which is when this event takes place. It was the topic tweeted about most often, and this cannot simply be chalked up to it happening every episode because other events such as challenges happened every episode and were not spoken of as frequently. The entire show is about surviving, as in not getting eliminated, so it should not be shocking that this is the topic that audiences are most responsive to. While some of these were “wow moments” that got people talking, such as when both players and fans were blindsided by who was voted out, I found that fans posted every single time. This practice was upheld to simply allow fans to share their reactions to this occurrence, which were often emotional.

For the first half of the season, the posts related to a player going home were quick with concentrated emotions. They typically were rather short and used expletives, all capital letters, and outside reactionary visuals such as GIFs, clips, and pictures to express themselves. Although posts related to feelings of happiness, enjoyment, and excitement were the highest emotions expressed overall throughout the season, tweets that were coded as sad, upset, angry, or annoyed reached their own peaks in Period 1 and then Period 2, emphasizing that the strong feelings towards vote outs in the first half of the season that were typically negatively skewed. A good example of this type of tweet is Figure 1 which contains all aspects of the early season posts I am referring to: the use of expletives, capital letters, and a non-Survivor related visual. The GIF of a person ripping their television from their wall and throwing it in anger is used to illustrate this poster's supposed extreme vexation at Aysha being voted out. These emotions of outrage appear to be so visceral, but never once is Aysha mentioned by name, representing that this is a superficial reaction. The emotions being articulated were not from a deep connection with the player, likely because it was too early to form such bonds but rather were used as a type of performance. Even if there has been an affinity that has grown for the contestant within a few episodes, the quick and sharp format of the posts illustrate how this kinship is surface level as the poster does not have much to say outside of harsh words. It appears that they cared most about presenting themselves as distraught, regardless of if they truly were.

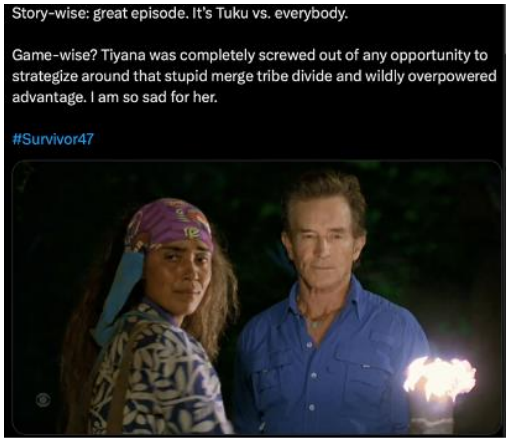
(Figure 1): Tweet posted after Aysha was voted out. The visual depicts someone ripping their television off the wall and throwing it to express the poster's supposed anger over Aysha's exit. The dialogue involves the poster cursing out Aysha's tribe for choosing to eliminate her, and it is included for the same reason.

As the season progressed, the tweets reacting to vote outs changed to longer posts dedicated to expressing heartfelt opinions on players or thoughtful considerations of the events leading up to a contestant's demise that were typically paired with visuals from the show itself to portray the ejection scene or highlight the player themselves. The number of tweets expressing happiness, enjoyment, and excitement were highest in the last two periods, while anger and annoyance were almost non-existent, and sadness ticked back up a bit in Period 4 to the same amount it was in Period 2. This illustrates the reduction in volatile feelings that were so prevalent prior, and an increase of reactions grounded in an appreciation of the players. The focus on reflective opinion sharing is represented by the second half of the season having higher markers of opinion sharing as an activity within the post, specifically with Period 4 having double the amount of all other times. Evidence of this deeper emotional connection to a player, and thus a passionate reaction to their exit, can be found in Figure 2. A long tweet, this post deeply conveys the poster's sadness in Genevieve and Andy exiting the game, and although it uses capitalization and emojis to help emphasize this emotion, they are not used as a crutch as the feelings are

clearly conveyed in the text elsewhere. It also compliments the players' gameplay in its expectation that one of these contestants will be back in the future. This post uses GIFs from previous episodes within the season to encapsulate these players and show appreciation for them rather than shocking GIFs to attempt to express themselves. In the later periods, fans act more maturely as they judge situations objectively, leading them to both evaluate the game moves or offer condolences for the players rather than only doing so for themselves. Figure 3 represents this in the poster's expression of sadness for Tiyana when she left as well as their opinions on the events that led up to her exit. The viewer reflects on the situation with level headedness and without inserting themselves too overtly, juxtaposing the methods of the beginning of the season. Utilizing the actual image of the player being sent home from the show, rather than relying on an outside GIF to help them express their emotions, further pushes focus on the impact on the player. This illustrates that as the season progresses, even though the fans are still drawing attention to their feelings, these sentiments do not overshadow the players.



(Figure 2): Tweet posted after Andy and Genevieve were voted out back-to-back in a double elimination episode. The visuals depict Andy and Genevieve at different points throughout the season. In the text the poster explains their sadness in stating Andy and Genevieve's strategic prowess and entertainment value.



(Figure 3): Tweet posted after Tiyana was voted out. The visual depicts Tiyana looking back at her tribe in disappointment after they chose to send her home. The text represents fan recognition at the distinction between the game and the show, and how when considering the situation from a game perspective Tiyana was unfairly eliminated.

Almost all the fans posting about this topic express an adverse reaction to the player being ejected from the game. This is because *Survivor* fosters a connection between fans and the group of 18 contestants on the show. Without players with compelling personalities that are conveyed to the fans, there would be no enjoyable stories to follow. The overwhelming reactions to players getting sent home illustrates a focus on the players as the objects of entertainment, their personalities and histories providing the content. Even more than that, however, when fans learn about and attach emotions to these players, it makes the show more enjoyable but the exits of their favorites that much tougher. On top of a mournfulness from the loss of entertainment value and the loss of a character who held their affection, sometimes these emotions are triggered by what they see as an unrighteous exit. A tweet like Figure 14 expresses sorrow over players they held dearly and viewed as “TV GOLD,” but the poster behind Figure 15 instead shares their sadness due to the unfair nature of the player’s eviction. In chasing justice for this player, the post is still demonstrating that fans in this community create bonds with the contestants on

screen because they feel a need to defend them. These fans comprehend *Survivor* as a show rooted in its characters that they can build one-sided relationships with while they are playing.

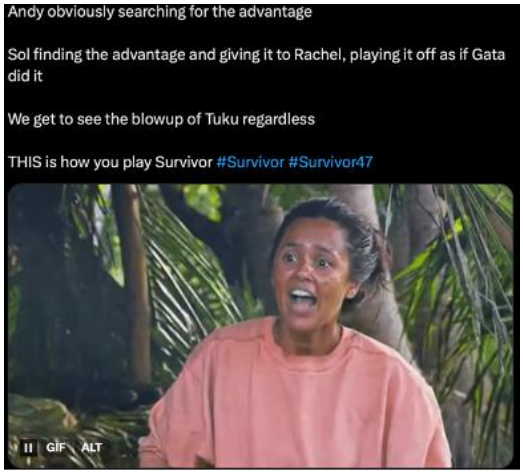
Idol and Advantage Tweets

The second most popular discussion theme within this season was the conversations surrounding idols and advantages in which users would post in response to these devices appearing in the show. An idol is typically hidden somewhere in each tribe's camp, the area in which they live, and could save someone from elimination if they can find it and play it when they suspect votes against them. Other advantages include an extra vote to cast at Tribal Council, a nullification of another player's vote at Tribal Council, the ability to leave Tribal Council for safety but without casting any votes, and many others, that can be earned in smaller individual challenges throughout the season. While these items are present throughout the whole season, they often remain unseen for some episodes when the holder does not need to use them, meaning that posters wouldn't be seeing them on their televisions and thus not be inclined to post too much about them. At other times they become focal points within the episode, leading them to be major talking points online. Period 2 had the highest number of posts related to this topic, which aligns with the events happening on screen. In this period was episode 6 with Sue's nerve-wracking idol find and episode 7 with Sol's surprise advantage that saved Rachel from ejection. Both moments were inventive and exciting, categorizing them as "wow moments." While fans talked about idols and advantages briefly even when they were not portrayed so shockingly, these "wow moments" trigger a mass discussion that is clearly seen within the data.

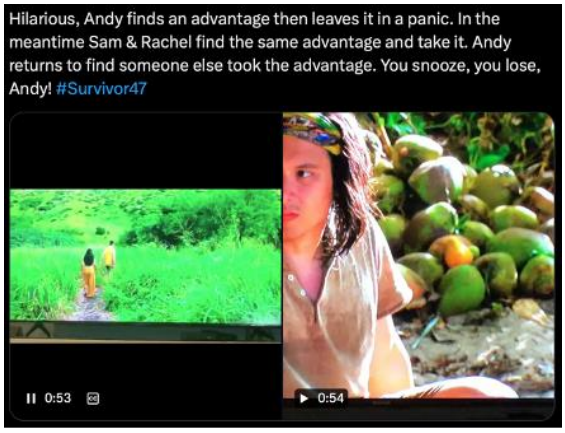
Tweets surrounding idols and advantages, for the most part, skewed positive, primarily illustrating that audiences enjoy them as plot devices. These tools are pivotal in *Survivor*, with

the ability to alter future events. When they are first received, they intrigue the viewer with their foreshadowing of impact, and when they are finally used after much anticipation they can be exhilarating if they disrupt the course of the game in a satisfying way. With both the hunt and usage of idols and advantages being thrilling to watch, posters often express their joy explicitly in clear appraisal of players' actions or implicitly through humor. Figure 4 represents that the involvement of idols or advantages can bring joy due to the satisfaction in them being played well. The poster is relaying the event and specifically attesting to the quality of Sol's gameplay. The wording of "THIS is how you play *Survivor*" prioritizes the focus on Sol's accomplishment and the GIF from an earlier season of an excited player illustrates the poster's pleasured feelings. Figure 5 illustrates a very straightforward example of enjoyment as it connects to comedy. The poster articulates that they found the roundabout search for the idol "hilarious" and then proceeds to explain why. They also include videos of the sequence so that their fellow Twitter users can partake in the delight. Figure 6 takes the idea of hilarity a step further by depicting how fans can create their own jokes out of the situation. This poster used an image to illustrate their finding of Sue's forced performance of innocence funny, creating their own meme[5], which is a popular tweet format. Even if one does not know the source of the graphic, it appears comedic in its nature as a meme. However, when identified, it can be traced back to a sketch by comedian Tim Robinson, further emphasizing the humor of the situation. With this connection made through the visuals of the tweet, enjoyment can be presented in a less straightforward, though still understandable, way.

[5] A meme is "an amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through social media" (Merriam-Webster). For this study, I focus on the type of meme which articulates meaning through the humorous combination of visual and text.



(Figure 4): Tweet posted when Sol found an advantage hidden at a group reward, which Andy was searching for first unsuccessfully, and used it to save Rachel at a Tribal Council when she was slated to go home. The visual depicts player Jamie from season 44 screaming in excitement to represent the poster's own enthusiasm. The text documents the scene and praises Sol for his actions.



(Figure 5): Tweet posted when Andy finds a "Beware Advantage" but abandons it out of fear of the punishment aspect that goes into securing it. This leaves it for his tribemates Sam and Rachel to find, so then when returns braver to claim it he sees it has disappeared. The visuals depict these scenes from the show. The text documents the scene as well, while adding a note that the poster found the ordeal humorous.

(Figure 6): Tweet posted when Sue found an idol covered in red paint. It created a trail of red paint which made the other contestants suspicious, forcing Sue to act confused and investigative as well. The visual depicts a man in a hot dog suit saying "We're all trying to find the guy who did this" to point out the humor of the situation.

The tweets in this category frame Survivor first and foremost as a game by focusing on the objects that contribute to the competition. In conceptualizing it as a game like any other, fans find joy in their viewing of the program in its singularity and strive to protect that image. They do not bring in outside issues or look deeply into the character traits of individual players. Rather, they transfix the rules and strategies of the game, and the benefits for following them and the consequences for not. In aiming to affirm the events on screen, the fans create a positive atmosphere of anticipation and excitement, as seen here when discussing fun aspects of the game such as idols and advantages on the show. Through this, they imply that the culture of the online *Survivor* fandom is positive overall. Although the show is built on competition and these fans conceptualize the show as such, the norms do not propel fans to take sides against one another. Instead, many of the tweets simply relay or celebrate the events that occur on the show, allowing fans to coalesce around a common pleasure like sports fans enjoying a match.

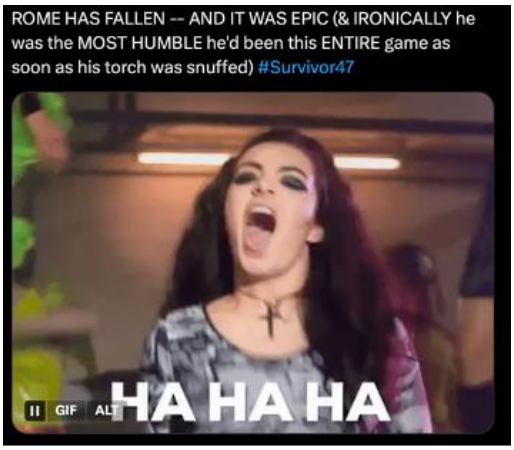
Gender Tweets

Another example of an ongoing trend throughout this season was gender related posts. These posts are discussions about players' behaviors and attitudes as it implicitly reflects upon their gender. Most of these posts arose during the beginning of this season when many fans pointed to a few male characters that they were not fond of. When there were scenes in which these men did specific actions that did not sit well with the audience, they would be spoken of widely on Twitter. Given these players were gone rather early in the game, all posts related to their negative attitudes in connection to their masculinity were made during Period 1, the overwhelming peak of this category. First, was T.K. who blamed everyone on his tribe except himself for their loss. Fans hated that attitude and rejoiced when he was sent home after that outburst. Next was Rome, who had a few triggering moments in which fans pointed to his arrogance about his own skills and rudeness to other players. Fans shared how they found him annoying and, again, celebrated his ejection from the show. Last was Gabe, who in a confessional during the third episode stated that he thought of his female alliance members like "wounded birds" that he could control. Although receiving the least attention out of the three, this underestimation of female players aggravated fans. Once these players were sent home the number of tweets that could be associated with gender plummeted because there was not as much to talk about without these targets.

Tweets referring to these men and their shortcomings typically expressed strong emotions, from irritation towards these players' presence to happiness at their departure. Figure 7 illustrates the anger and annoyance that prevailed as an initial reaction to negatively perceived male attitudes. This poster does not explicitly say that they are feeling these sentiments but instead shares them using imagery. The GIF of a visibly disgruntled woman saying, "Shut up!" is

a clear marker of disapproval for Gabe's word choice for his female allies. Although we know that this tweet refers to Gabe through our own remembrance of the episode, it does not name him directly, as some others do. This makes the tweet's readability rely on viewers who also noted this moment as problematic during their own watching, and given the tweet had 26,600 views, 39 retweets, and 1,000 likes, it seems like there were many audience members who related to this reaction. The other way that researchers could know that fans harbored hostile feelings towards certain male contestants was in their reactions to their ejection from the game. Figure 8 represents this well in its celebration of Rome's eviction, exhibited both in text and in the choice of GIF. The capitalization, as well as the actual language, of "ROME HAS FALLEN -- AND IT WAS EPIC" depict excitement in the given situation. The GIF used, a woman laughing "HA HA HA," illustrates happiness, but specifically at Rome's demise as it appears to represent the poster laughing at him rather than with him. Lastly, since the user recognizes that Rome was "HUMBLE" in this moment, it clarifies that the reason they are overjoyed at his loss is due to all the times he did not act this way.

(Figure 7): Tweet responding to Gabe's claim that his female alliance members are comparable to "wounded little birds" that he can control. The visual depicts a woman saying, "Shut up!" representing what the poster wishes to Gabe themselves. The text does not include Gabe's name, but instead his quote, allowing fans to make the connection themselves.



(Figure 8): Tweet posted after contestant Rome, who was known for being arrogant, was voted out and left gracefully. The visual depicts a woman laughing out loud, demonstrating the poster's happiness towards Rome's outcome. The text describes excitement about Rome leaving the show, but some confusion about his change in attitude.

Although greatly decreased over time, gender-based posts were not gone completely once these men were sent home because there were tweets that focused on female empowerment. Even though the defense against problematic men prompted more posts, the celebration of female accomplishments also arose as a catalyst to post on Twitter and appeared to contain more explicit references to gender than the implicit reference at the men's expense. Still, however, the downfall of male contestants would be interpreted as a gain for female ones. Figure 9 represents this message in relating the loss of male players with this season being "for the GIRLS." On top of the capitalization of "GIRLS," the visuals drive home that this is an exciting and positive thing as it depicts women jumping and cheering in celebration. It seems likely, given the dialogue of the post, that the fan behind it is a female who views this type of gendered accomplishment as important to herself and other female viewers. They feel inclined to praise any female success, even when the success comes from the failure of the opposite sex. As female players do not only thrive when their male counterparts on the show falter, many posts are dedicated to their own tangible achievements. In Figure 10 one can see this practice in the

applauding of each woman's strategic mind. Along the same lines of the previous example, this post makes it clear that it aims to hail female triumphs in articulating that "we love to see this win for women." In speaking in the first-person plural, the poster is assuming that other fans have a vested interest in female successes. This might be because prior to this season a woman has won *Survivor* 20 times against 26 male wins. It appears that viewers respond to this disparity by focusing on gender specifically when cheering loudly for strong female competitors and the winner of the season, Rachel. In Period 4 a few posts seemed to be more concerned with Rachel's impact on the trend of female winners than Rachel's win itself. Figure 11 is an example of this as it praises the accomplishment of three female winners in a row, rather than Rachel herself. In using the fact of the 12-year drought of female winners and exclamation points to end the sentence, this poster illustrates that they had been waiting a long time for this achievement and are excited to relish in it. They also included promotional photos of all three women to further shed focus on them as opposed to an outside image or video which would draw attention away.

(Figure 9): Tweet posted after T.K. was sent home in the second episode following Jon in the first. The visual depicts female audience members cheering, crying, and jumping for joy at the loss of two male contestants. The text interprets this loss of male competitors as a win for women.

(Figure 10): Tweet posted after the merge, recognizing strategic female players from each of the three original tribes who made it to this point. The visuals depict these three women, Rachel, Genevieve, and Caroline, before the seasons in promotional images. The text interprets these women's brilliance as a victory for women.

(Figure 11): Tweet posted after Rachel was announced to be the winner. The visuals depict Rachel and the two previous female winners, Kenzie and Dee, all before their respective seasons in promotional images.

Diverging greatly from the game mentality of the fans of the previous section, viewers within this category do not leave behind their real-world identities and values when watching *Survivor*. These fans are unable to conceptualize *Survivor* as a competition that can exist without the culture of our outside world. They often view *Survivor* as a microcosm of society, so they cannot watch without recognizing the same institutional gender dynamics within the show. Upon seeing this, audiences take to Twitter to publicly sanction aggressive masculine behavior and celebrate female empowerment. *Survivor* provides a space for these attitudes to be caught on

screen and Twitter acts as a platform for fans' discussion of real-world issues. These fans feel a sense of responsibility to these external topics, in this case gender justice, and thus are emboldened to speak on it. It is important to note that this fandom does not interrogate gender norms, but instead simply offers short exclamations against hostile men and in favor of victorious women. These statements satisfy this genre of fans as they articulate their joy that comes from hard earned female accomplishments and the defeat of crass men.

Appearance Tweets

The last recurring theme of posts was the fan focus on players' physical appearances throughout the season. Posts that are considered appearance tweets are any that discuss how a player looks physically. This practice was lowest in Period 1 as fans were still acquainting themselves with the players, sharing a few nice comments about appearances briefly but nothing more. Most of them were related to the oldest female contestant this season, Sue, to illustrate how strong and beautiful she was despite her age. Figure 12 is an example of such a tweet that appeared in my first and second collecting sessions. This tweet complimented Sue's body and face, while making assumptions about her financial and social positions. It also included a clip of her fixing her hair and posing, further emphasizing her looks. This supportive attitude shifted halfway through the season as shown in Period 3 when posts about appearances skyrocketed and the ones discussing Sue shifted from supportive to judgmental. Fans heavily commented on her uncleanliness and her inability to pass as the younger age that she claimed to be. Figure 13 is an example of the apprehension to her hygiene as a poster compared her to Annabelle, while other fans chose to reference Pigpen from *The Peanuts*, the viral baby covered in peanut butter from several years ago, and any other character that fit the profile of dirtiness. Figure 14 is exemplary

of the ridicule Sue received for attempting to pass as younger than she was. The poster shared how funny they thought this situation was and included a GIF of puppets laughing to drive home the message. This implied that Sue looked much older than she said and that it was laughable that she even tried to lie. These posts could illustrate that fans take issue with unclean and lying players, but that had never seemed to be an issue on any other season I have watched given fans usually can anticipate dirtiness and welcome players of diverse ages. That is why I believe that this shift occurred due to her villainization within this period when she spoke negatively about a very beloved player, which fans reacted to in their posts. In episode 10, the first posts about two new topics arose: dislike around Sue's appearance and her rudeness to Kyle. By presenting herself as unkind to a seemingly harmless and well-liked contestant, Sue opened herself up for criticism, and the fans did not hold back, choosing her appearances as their target. However, this criticism continued even after Kyle was sent home, raising questions about the other reasons Sue received such backlash. This could possibly be an instance of a gendered response given she was attacked for her unclean and old appearance, neither of which are praised in women unfortunately.

(Figure 12): Tweet posted early in the season to compliment Sue's body and face, while making assumptions about her financial and social positions. The visual depicts Sue fixing her hair and posing.

(Figure 13): Tweet posted to compare Sue to horror film character Annabelle as a commentary on her dirty face. The visual depicts the character, while the text connects the two directly.

(Figure 14): Tweet posted to respond to Sue's efforts to pass as 45 years old, when she was 59 years old. The visual depicts 2 puppets laughing, implying she did not look the part, and it was funny that she tried.

Period 3 had a "wow moment" which also added to the large increase in posts related to the topic of appearances. In episode 10, Sol appeared on the jury for Tribal Council in a chic and racy outfit. Having been sent home the week prior, Sol was able to get cleaned up and dressed nicely for his position as a juror, and in doing so he sent the fandom into a frenzy. Prior to this moment, fans had discussed their favoritism of Sol as a player and attraction to other contestants on the show, but this one "wow moment" changed the trajectory of online discussion. In this period alone there were 16 posts about Sol in this outfit. Some blatantly shared their attraction to Sol, others compared his outfit to Diana's revenge dress to show his anger at being voted out,

and a few people even said they were glad he was evicted because otherwise they wouldn't have gotten to see this moment. Figure 15 illustrates the reneging of some fans on whatever negative feelings they had towards Sol being voted out because they are happy to see him dress up for the jury, illustrating a prioritization of watching attractive players. The buzz around Sol's outfit, and the many other tweets related to the appearances of players, illustrate that many viewers get enjoyment in evaluating the physicality of the people on their screens.

(Figure 15): Tweet posted when Sol arrived as a jury member with a new look. The visual depicts Sol himself in this outfit. The text reveals that this fan is no longer sad about Sol not being in the game anymore because they got to see this moment.

Being a reality television show, many fans of *Survivor* may engage in other programs within this genre and adopt their viewing practices. Shows such as *America's Next Top Model* pit appearances against each other as a competition, while programs like *Keeping up with the Kardashians* have their characters always dressed to perfection. An appearance-based evaluation process is represented in the case of the first series and a prioritization of one's looks exists on the latter. When fans project this outlook of the value of appearances on *Survivor* contestants, they are consistent with the values of reality television. Thus, these tweets approving of various players' appearances represent an effort to adhere to the rules of the genre. *Survivor* takes place in the jungle with no access to makeup, clean clothes, or even running water, but nevertheless

players are still held to the standard of beauty that reality television is known for. This is even more apparent when contestants are removed from the game and have access to some of these luxuries before returning to watch Tribal Council. The fans commenting on these moments are found to be conceptualizing *Survivor* as a member of the reality television genre primarily, and are illustrating their loyalty to this specific ideal of the genre. It is this association with the wider genre of reality television which fulfills this subgroup of fans, just as treating the show as a game or as a platform for external issues does for the previous groups.

How Are Fans Tweeting?

This next examination is focused on how the wording of the tweets collected articulate how fans view themselves and the purpose of their community. When answering how exactly thoughts are formulated within a Twitter post, I look not at the subject matter, which would answer the previous question of "what," but instead the positioning of the tweet. The options for this are tweets that refer to themselves as the poster, that reach out to other fans, that direct themselves at the players on the show, and that speak on behalf of the fan community as a collective. By investigating this layer of the tweet, the different norms and practices that make up the implicit culture of the fandom are discovered. Specific truths about what posters expect from the show, themselves, and the fandom are revealed.

Self-Referential Tweets

A post can be identified as self-referential when it uses first person singular pronouns to state personal feelings and opinions as the main message of the post. In this way, the self was fore fronted in roughly ¼ of the tweets collected from season 47, 106 out of 393, which was

higher than the amounts aimed at talking to other fans or players and when talking about the collective community. This illustrates that even though posts cannot impact the course of the *Survivor* season, unlike other reality television programs in which plots are based on fan response, expressing what one thinks and feels is still a crucial part of the viewing experience. This is presented by the sharing of both emotions, in 36% of these tweets, or of opinions, in 24% of these tweets.

Most posters express themselves in positive or negative reactions to events or players, with positive reactions dominating at 74% of the "sharing" posts compared to negative at 26%. Regardless of this discrepancy, examples of both are provided. Figure 16 shows the sharing of positive emotions and Figure 17 represents the articulation of negative reactions. In Figure 16 the poster expresses their happiness at Rachel surviving her near eviction from the show through their claim that they have been screaming. The GIF also emphasizes this emotion and given it is of Rachel herself it is made even more clear who the poster is rooting for. Although about the fan's love for Rachel as a player, the wording of "I will not shut up about it" puts their emotions and opinions as the focus, rather than Rachel's skillful gameplay, due to the use of first-person pronouns. Figure 17 continues this trend, evoking anger rather than joy through the GIF screaming "I'M PISSED." The poster does not mention any player specifically in their tweet, turning all attention towards the viewer's distraught attitude, and ignoring any strong connection to the episode itself. Though they state this emotion is due to the events of that episode's Tribal Council, by not naming why exactly they are upset, and more specifically who they are mourning, there is minimal consideration for anything outside of this person's expression. For both tweets the focus is the situation's impact on the fan poster, rather than a discussion of the situation itself.

(Figure 16): Tweet posted after Rachel survived the tribal council that all her peers voted for her due to her idol play. The visual depicts Rachel laughing and screaming in excitement during the season. The text discusses the fan screaming and refusing to stop talking about how amazing Rachel is, centering themselves in this situation rather than Rachel's accomplishment.

(Figure 17): Tweet posted after Aysha was voted out to this viewer's disappointment. The visual depicts the player Liz from season 46 screaming "I'M PISSED" as a way for the poster to express their emotions without speaking too much about the situation itself.

While this method of placing one's emotions central to the discussion of an episode is the most common way that viewers reference themselves in a post, some divert completely from talking about the show. These posters use aspects of the program, oftentimes visuals from the episode, to instead explain something personal about themselves. This method would illustrate the most a user could insert themselves as they centralize themselves completely and ignore the contents of the scene itself. Figure 18 is representative of this practice as it portrays a viewer comparing a moment in the show to one in their own life. They recognize themselves in Tiyana, who was sitting alone while everyone else on her tribe is in small groups on either side of her

speaking with one another and connect Tiyana's gesture to their own feelings about socializing at a party. This is indicative of an especially active and personal form of viewing as the audience member identified with this scene, specifically what the player was doing, so much that they were able to see themselves within it. The show helped the poster understand something about themselves, as they saw familiarity on the screen. The poster continued to rely on the program to share this sentiment with the world by utilizing an image from the scene to present their sentiments. This example illustrates the impact that the show can have on an individual and how they are inclined to share that.

(Figure 18): Tweet posted when Tiyana sat down even though everyone else was standing, talking, and strategizing minutes before the vote at Tribal Council. The visual depicts this moment from the show. The text recontextualizes this image in accordance with the poster's personal experiences that they wished to share.

The number of self-referential posts throughout the season was not indicative of any long-term trends as they peak in Period 1 and 3 and fall in Period 2 and 4, though not at largely disparate amounts. This signifies that this is a consistent practice, and given it was the highest method of posting at a total of 106 tweets, it is a popular practice too. This form of posting is so widespread on the entire platform, not just in this subsection of Twitter, because posting is a method of self-affirmation of. As Murthy (2012) put it, "I tweet, therefore I am." With its origins as a micro-blogging site, each mundane post about a user's everyday habits reminds the world

that they exist. In this way, the act of tweeting at its core is a method for someone to present themselves, but when participating in the first person like these viewers they are doubling down on this desire to be seen and are also able to curate exactly how they are represented. These viewers are presenting themselves as committed fans by portraying their heartfelt personal reactions that signify their attachment to the program.

In this study, most viewers want exterior actors to know that they had strong feelings about certain players or situations and what those feelings were, like that they were distraught when someone left or that they were thrilled when someone succeeded. With this perspective, these fans crave events that impact them as saddening or exhilarating or hilarious that they can then share with the online community. To these viewers being a fan means having emotional reactions and expressing those reactions. They find that experiencing highs and lows while watching the program illustrates a true investment in it. The purpose of the fandom for them, then, is an outlet to express these reactions to illustrate their selfhood as a fan. This is because it allows them to prove that they are a fan to other viewers by sharing their sentiments. If no one knows that they are connecting deeply with the show, then there will be less validity in their claim of being a fan.

Other Fan Directed Tweets

The second most prevalent way that posters directed their tweets within the *Survivor* fandom was in addressing other fans. These tweets focused on community building. When engaging with a community, rather than voicing one's opinions into the abyss, posts are designed to draw in other fans by asking questions, making references or comparisons, and sharing information. Twitter's ability to connect geographically separated people is what allows this to

occur. Users from different parts of the world can build connections and create communities by communicating on Twitter. The foundation of this community is oftentimes a common interest, just as *Survivor* is in this study (Murthy 2024). These fans are motivated by connection; they view their role as a fan as someone who engages with the fandom. To them being a fan is not complete without partaking in the audience community and finding those who commit back to you.

In asking a question, a poster is opening engagement for other fans to interact with them. They gain answers to their questions and foster interpersonal connections within the fandom. Figure 19 provides an example of this as a poster expresses their own confusion on a situation and aims to receive an answer on it from other fans. This question does not have a clear-cut answer and is more so framed as a debate, implying the poster may have wanted to prompt an open discussion around their topic of choice rather than gaining clarity on a single unclear subject. This framework is emphasized by the choice of visuals as the plain promotional photos provide zero bias to either argument, but help fans understand who is being discussed without having to match a name to a face on the television. In a different vein, it is also possible that this question was posed in response to the influx of tweets related to these men being perceived as "annoying," meaning the poster is also attempting to respond to other fans' tweets via this question. If this is true, then the poster demonstrates an awareness of the online fan community and their prominent discussion topics. This awareness allows them to conjure conversation starters that they hope will get traction amongst fellow fans. With these considerations, it is evident that the poster wanted to spark a dialogue to bolster their network.

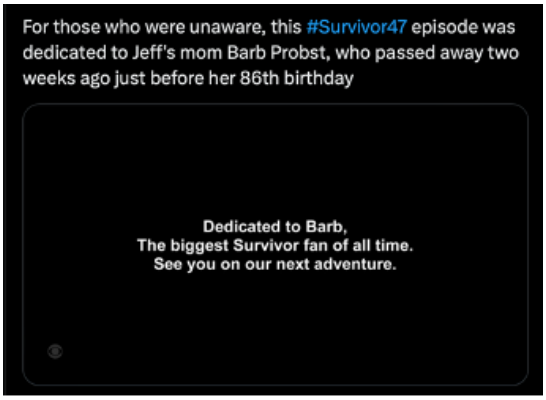
(Figure 19): Tweet posted two contestants who were spoken of negatively on their tribes and online: Rome was seen as cocky and loud, and Andy was seen as unpredictable and needy. The visuals depict both players before the season in promotional images. The text poses an open-ended discussion question of whether they are annoying or are being unfairly bullied in an effort to engage with other fans.

Although unlikely to create as much of a back-and-forth, references and comparisons to earlier seasons are another way that fans reach other fans with their posting. When alluding to a specific piece of *Survivor* history or trivia, the poster is essentially putting a guardrail up around their thoughts and only letting those with the proper knowledge understand what they are saying. It creates a smaller exclusive fan community, in which individuals gain entry by picking up on the reference, within the larger community, that is open to anyone who is present online. A good illustration of this can be found in Figure 20 in which the poster is making a very specific reference to a former player's Final Tribal Council speech to compare it to Sam's from this season. The message behind the post is that Sam's speech was very strong because it was compared to Maryanne's, which was also thought to be a great speech amongst the fandom, but this would only be understood by fans who also saw Maryanne's season. Those who are first time watchers or happened to miss this specific season would have no idea what this post means as it almost seems like a different language. By using this referential wording as opposed to saying something more straightforward about the quality of Sam's speech the poster is creating an exclusive subgroup within the community who understands this post. Still keeping with the

mindset that being a fan involves engaging with other fans, this poster creates strong connections with those who are like themselves, but they may not be as plentiful.

(Figure 20): Tweet posted during Sam's Final Tribal Council speech in which he discussed his game over the course of the season and why he deserved to win. The visual depicts player Maryanne of season 42 looking shocked. The text compares Sam's speech to Maryanne's speech.

Although asking questions and making references account for most of the posts directed at other fans, information sharing is a method of connecting with other fans. While they are still a way to flex the poster's knowledge of *Survivor* related facts like the comparisons, their goal is to inform other watchers of certain data, so they too are in the loop. This means that contrary to the previous category, these posts are done in a way that is inclusionary rather than exclusionary. A clear instance in which a viewer shared information to integrate other fans is Figure 21. Other tweets that can be categorized as information sharing often post obscure facts with no goal other than disseminating them, but this one makes it clear that its goal is to educate fellow fans through its opening phrase of "For those who were unaware." It calls out to other viewers scrolling on Twitter as their audience and states its aim as briefing them on something important. This illustrates a continued conceptualization of a subtype of fan that prioritizes engagement, with this kind producing a vast network.



(Figure 21): Tweet posted after a dedication to Barb, the host Jeff Probst's mother, appeared on screen at the end of an episode. The visual depicts this dedication from the episode and the text explains its significance.

This conflicting way of engaging with other fans illustrates the different understandings of this community. Although they all view being involved in the community as necessary to being a *Survivor* fan, they see it differently. Some see it as an exclusive place with inside jokes and lore where only those who already know these things belong. Meanwhile, others see it as a place where all those interested should be able to find acceptance and access to more knowledge about the program. In building off Lizardo's (2006) concept of highbrow cultures building fences around their communities while popular cultures building bridges to allow more people into their communities, I find that fans within one type of culture do the same. Although all technically within a community for an object belonging to popular culture, fans still view themselves and act as elite or popular. The elite fans, those who are educated on and prioritize engaging with the history of the show, feel that they should only be communicating with fans of a similar caliber and outlook. This means that they post tweets that are specific, usually referencing past seasons and players, and targeted at only a few of their close group members. On the other side of the divide are the popular fans who are excited to see the widespread appeal of the show and want to bring as many new viewers into the fold as possible. These posts either stay out of the past so as

not to leave novice audience members out or, when they do refer to earlier events, they do so in a way that can be easily understood by anyone reading it. Either way, they appeal to many fellow online fans, even if the connection made is not as strong.

It is important to note that any interaction between fans creates a protected space for social interaction. Much like the bowling groups in Robert D. Putnam's (2000) *Bowling Alone*, this online space connects people to build social capital. According to Putnam, Americans have become frighteningly disconnected from family, friends, and neighbors. We used to join organizations to allow for socialization outside of work and the home, and bowling leagues were one of these institutions. These associations were necessary to build a cohesive society. Now, instead of bowling in groups, people are bowling alone, which is symbolic of this decline in social engagement and dangerous for our country. Online social groups, such as a Twitter page populated by fellow fans of your favorite show, can be the answer to our increasing individualization. Although Putnam blames television, amongst other factors, as a reason for reduced civic participation, I claim the opposite. Cultural objects have been long thought of as valuable tools for social interaction and capital building, so why would television be any different? Putnam sees it as bounding us to our homes at specific times which in turn reduces face-to-face interactions, but the prominence of social television now curbs that by allowing for virtual engagement, making Twitter the savior of interpersonal exchanges.

It is important for this modern context of community to note that these subsections of Twitter, the website that is known to act as a hotbed for controversial discussion within our deeply divided nation, exist as an area for apolitical playfulness and enjoyment. When addressing other fans, posters stay on the topic of *Survivor* as opposed to the mundane or contentious conversations that are so prevalent today. When people are so quick to resort to discussing their professional lives or current events, an online community full of people only

speaking about a fun external topic can have a positive impact on society. Putnam attributes bowling groups as an escape from these conversation topics, but with their decline online fandom sites have stepped in to take their place. Twitter pages, Reddit threads, and TikTok hashtags now exist as an escape that viewers can enthrall themselves in once a week for a few hours to see humorous or thought-provoking comments from their peers, and as a place where the fans can talk about a favorite topic of theirs with those who feel the same way. Connections can be rebuilt, and this time can span beyond one's neighborhood, exposing individuals to varying perspectives.

In their viewing experience these fans channel their energies towards the rest of the fandom. Their expectations are not directed at the program itself, but rather the community that is built from the program. Furthermore, unlike the self-referential tweets, these posters do not see the online fandom as a place to get approval for their fan selfhood, but as an active community to engage with and find joy in. They primarily care about working towards an implicit culture built on playful connections. It is a positive environment in which discussion is welcomed and inside jokes are shared, creating a sense of closeness amongst fans. As the second most prevalent type of tweet of this section, with 59 tweets, the *Survivor* fandom is prioritizing community engagement as a key attribute to being a fan. Voicing one's own opinions is not enough to these fans as although they are being presented to the group, they are not an effort to connect with those other fans in a real and cordial way that creates a community with a cohesive and lighthearted culture.

Player Directed Tweets

Another way that players shared their opinions and emotions was when they were directing their tweets at the current players of the season, although this was less popular with 30 tweets during the season. These posts are identified by their format of speaking to a specific player, or players, by using their name(s) or second person pronouns. Rather than aiming to share feelings or opinions with the audience community, these viewers choose to go to the contestants. Figure 22 is representative of expressing emotion towards players as it appears the viewer was upset about Tiyana going home and chose to direct their fury at Caroline. Their anger is made transparent through capital letters, expletives, and the GIF that illustrates a man throwing a chair at other people. Like the man in the GIF, the poster has a specific target to direct their outrage at and that target is Caroline. The poster uses her name and "you" to make this abundantly clear.

(Figure 22): Tweet posted after Tiyana was voted out and Caroline seemed to have been the deciding vote. The visual depicts a man throwing a chair at a group of people to mimic the poster's action of attacking Caroline. The text expresses disappointment and anger towards Caroline for voting out Tiyana when she could have chosen to vote for Gabe instead.

When speaking to players in posts, sometimes tweets leave out names and opt to address the cast as whole. Additionally, instead of acting as a vehicle to express their emotions, posts are used to voice what the viewers think the players should be doing. This is exhibited in Figure 23 which addresses the entire cast with an opinion on how they should be playing the game within

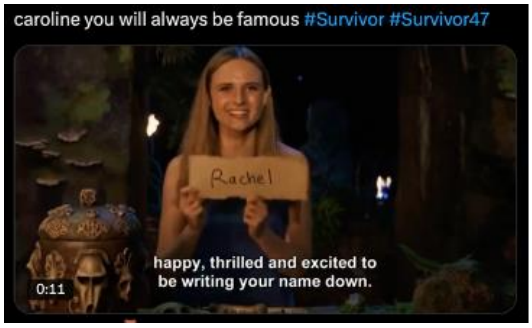
the show. Again, the use of "you" identifies this post as one that is directed at the contestants, but with no other names written in the caption it is apparent that the poster is speaking to a larger group. The tweet proceeds to claim that Andy's tribemates are engaging in bad gameplay by not cheering for him when he opens his coconut. The clip attached to this tweet, in which Austin and Drew of season 45 cheer on fellow tribemate Emily just as the poster advises, serves as evidence to back up this poster's statement. This viewer sees their role as a fan as knowing all the right moves and articulating them. As self-proclaimed authority figures, fans are on the outside looking in and grasp the concept of how to succeed. They task themselves with correcting the choices of the players, representing this feeling of credibility. It appears that part of the pleasure of watching the show is the feeling that one could direct the events of the game better than the current contestants, an experience much like a sports fan criticizing the decisions the coach of their favorite team makes.

(Figure 23): Tweet posted in response to Andy's expression of sadness over his tribe not cheering for him while he opened a coconut. The visual depicts a scene from season 45 in which Drew discusses the importance of swaying Emily to his alliance while he and his ally Austin cheer for her as she opens a coconut. The text implies that Andy's tribe is at fault for not utilizing a strategy that has proven successful in previous seasons.

Even though the poster is addressing a specific player or players, it is doubtful they expect or even hope for a reply. For the most part it seems, like the self-referential posts, that these fans wish to express themselves, but this time more so in relation to a player. This type of

post was found the most often in Period 1 and then in Period 4, meaning that posters were more likely to address players at the beginning and the end of the season. The high level of posts addressing players is indicative of comfort levels of communicating towards these contestants. At the beginning every contestant on the show is a stranger. This anonymity makes it relatively easy for a fan to critique or disagree with a contestant (Figure 22 and Figure 23). This makes most of the emotions around these posts antagonistic to the players as represented by 82% of the tweets from this category being marked as critical in the first two periods. The contestants also have not gotten the chance to prove themselves as competent game players yet, so even more than feeling comfortable with being assertive against strangers, audiences may see themselves as more credible. These types of fans seem to have an air of superiority about them in that they think they know better than the players on the show until proven otherwise.

Once the players become more personified and begin to prove their worth, it is harder to attack them in the same way as viewers did when they were unknown to them. Their personalities grow on audiences and their actions accredit them, leading to a reduction in these posts in the middle of the season. When the players became most familiar to the audience the directed posts returned in Period 4. Although there was still a fair share of disrespectful tweets, this time there were more positive posts. Figure 24 best represents this change as it is another post directed at Caroline that has a completely different tone. Expressing their joy for Caroline casting her vote for Rachel, this poster leaves out the capitalized letters, expletives, and aggressive visuals that indicate anger, and instead opts for a compliment and the clip of Caroline herself. Now that the audience has gotten to know Caroline better, they can respect her decision and speak to her in a way that illustrates that. For the posts that still criticized players directly, it can be assumed that audiences did not come to admire those contestants in the same way, likely because they never proved themselves in the eyes of the fans.

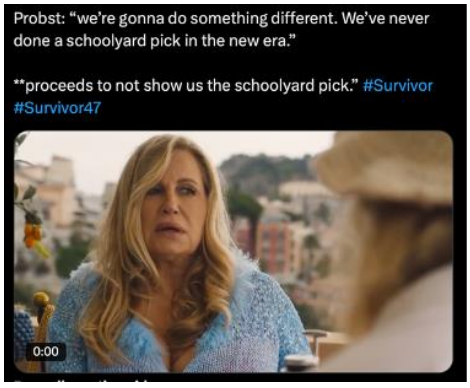


(Figure 24): Tweet posted after Caroline voted for Rachel to win in the finale. The visual depicts this moment from the episode. The text represents the poster's approval of both Caroline and the decision she made in this episode.

When speaking to the players through their posts, fans are expressing their role as decision makers in the treatment of contestants. In critiquing or approving of players' actions, the audience claims ultimate authority over how the contestants should be understood and evaluated. From the collection of posts adhering to this format of tweeting it appears that players earn the respect of fans by way of how they played the game, with certain expectations needing to be met from the contestant. Regardless of the challenges of an extensive process to get cast on the program, they are not accepted for that feat alone and must demonstrate that they are adept enough at playing *Survivor* to be embraced by the fans and treated with respect. Although players succeeded in the one sense of making it onto the show, they must prove themselves to the authority figure of the fandom, which in the forum of public opinion holds more power than the production team who admitted them on the show in the first place. There is an expectation of skillful players on the show from this group, and fans are comfortable speaking out when those needs are not met.

Collective Community Tweets

The last way of posting was collective, in which users would talk on behalf of the fan community. These tweets refer to the fandom by using first person plural pronouns such as we, us, and our. At its root these tweets recognize that the fandom is all watching the same things on their screens for the same purpose, creating a communal viewing mentality regardless of distance. Figure 25 is an instance of this in which the poster illustrates a baseline awareness that all viewers are watching together in a sense. By using the first-person plural pronoun in "proceeds to not show us the schoolyard pick," it is understood that this viewer envisions a community of watchers outside of themselves. They are not only disappointed for themselves that they missed seeing this moment, but for their entire fandom that they assume are just as upset. They want to voice this feeling for everyone to represent the importance of it. This perception of the audience watching at the same time, though in different places, is the necessary foundation for other portrayals of collective community driven tweets. As is the assumption that other fans are reacting in similar ways so that the poster can speak for the group rather than for their individual self.



(Figure 25): Tweet posted when host Jeff Probst declared that there would be a schoolyard pick for teams in a reward challenge, but the actual picking was not shown and instead the program jumped to the challenge itself. The visual depicts two women looking at each other with confused faces, conveying the conception of all fans disappointed by this.

This concept of community gets more interesting when you consider why the posters assume that everyone's reaction to a specific moment is the same as theirs. This type of tweet appeared 27 times during my study when the poster shared their responses, hopes, and opinions but presumed that everyone else's in the fandom were the same by using plural first person pronouns instead of singular. Figure 26 is an example of this as the poster articulates that an alliance between two players was just what "we needed," with "we" representing the fandom, as opposed to an individual wording. It is possible that this poster feels so involved in their fan community, in knowing the groups' desires, that they are confident in making this statement. This sense of harmoniousness could be a product of the impact that interpersonal relations have on reception, in which discussing shows allows fans to influence each other's takeaways (Childress & Friedkin 2012). The posters may have an awareness that their conversations will affect other fans' thoughts on the show, so it seems acceptable to share them as a collective consensus anyways. Or they could be the ones influenced by seeing other posts online and are repeating these sentiments. In already knowing that similar opinions are out there, the posters would be comfortable in assuming like-mindedness for the community. Either way the online platform allowing the exchange of ideas supports collectivity by constantly influencing users to unite in agreement.

Additionally, it could illustrate that fans feel it is acceptable to speak on behalf of the community even when it may not be agreed upon by everyone because it could still be agreed upon by some. This would illustrate the acceptance of factions within the fandom rather than a need to have every single fan in unanimity. Continuing with the case of Figure 26, one party within the audience would be people who are excited by Andy and Genevieve working together. This tweet would speak for those people, but it does not have to speak for those who are not in

favor of this alliance. Those who disagree have every availability to post their own tweet expressing their conflicting ideas or just ignore this post and know it does not refer to their group within the fandom. As it is a normal part of human nature to disagree, it would be understandable that the posters comprehend that the "we" in their posts cannot truly encompass the entire fandom. The practice of speaking for others was consistent throughout the season before dropping a bit at the end in Period 4. This could be because posters did not want to conjecture who the fandom wanted as the winner as that opinion is the most controversial of the season and thus the one opinion that fans would not want to presume that everyone felt the way that they did. Expressing widespread happiness for a budding duo would be permissible, while throwing support behind a winner on behalf of others would be discouraged.

(Figure 26): Tweet posted when Genevieve and Andy created an alliance with one another. The visuals depict Andy before the season in a promotional image and Genevieve during the season at a Tribal Council. The text conveys excitement on behalf of the fandom about this duo.

Once understanding how this collective entity exists, examining what they are asking for is next. The collective tweets appear to be about the expectations that the fans, as a group, have for the show as an object of entertainment. In one sense this can be understood as hopes from the production team, as represented by the appeal to be shown a specific scene (Figure 25). On the other hand, it could be a desire for a dynamic cast with interesting plot lines (Figure 26). This expectation is illustrated in reactionary posts to events on the show in which fans simply

articulate an appreciation for what they are receiving. Knowing their numbers determine the success of the program, the fanbase awaits the viewing pleasure they believe they deserve. They view themselves as the receiving class, those who should be kept in mind when the show is created. With this idea, talking in plural to imply a group consensus holds more impact when forming requests, representing why it is done even if they do not have proof their claim is widely held.

Discussion

Findings Summary

What fans were posting about demonstrated how they conceptualized the show *Survivor*, which in turn represented what they enjoyed most about the program. The most common type of tweets were the ones related to the eviction of a player from the show. Fans posting these tweets valued the players on the show above all else. What they appreciated most from the program were the contestants, so when they were forced to lose someone each episode, they shared their heartbreak. Their conceptualization was that *Survivor* was meant to be understood as a cast of characters to follow on their journey. The second most popular type of tweet were those in response to idols and advantages, which were crucial to a player's ability to win the game competition part of the show. In fixating on these competition objects, these fans revealed that they conceive *Survivor* as a game. They enjoy when big moves are made and players are successful in their strategies, and they concentrate mostly on these positives to create a joyous communal environment. The third set of tweets responded to *Survivor* as a microcosm of our world that holds the same cultural challenges. These fans did not solely view *Survivor* as a playful site of contest represented by the topic of gender online. Fans discussing gender recognized real life issues within the show. They get fulfillment in using both *Survivor* and Twitter as a mode to express their point of view. The final topic that represents the fourth perspective of *Survivor* and fan priorities are the posts about contestants' physical appearances. These fans adopt the implicit culture of other reality television shows that value beauty, recognizing *Survivor* as chiefly a part of the reality television show genre. These fans relish in both critiquing and praising appearances. Each of these categories hold a different understanding of what the show *Survivor* is, how it should be viewed, and how fans should appreciate it.

Understanding how fans expressed themselves on Twitter was crucial in shifting focus towards how they viewed themselves and their community. Again, four different options provided four different results on their expectations of these two concepts when actively watching the show. Posts that referred to the poster themselves in the text were the most common given Twitter's micro-blogging reputation. Fans engaging in this practice assumed that an immersed fan must be emotionally impacted by the show, since most posts were related to sharing their own feelings. Then, in the act of projecting these sentiments online, they perceived the community needed to hear of their passions for them to feel as though they were a true and accepted fan. The community is simply an outlet for these users to declare their status as fans. This finding is almost completely contradictory to the fans posting in the next most utilized format: tweets directed at other fans. These viewers felt their fan status rested on the practice of engagement with the larger viewing audience. In this way, they found methods to reach other fans in their tweets and expected those online to interact with them in response. Some fans took a welcoming approach to all discourse, while others closed themselves off to elite circles defined by their increased show knowledge. This mindset of superiority extended into the group of fans that aimed their posts at the players as these viewers saw themselves as an authority over the contestants. In examining this genre of tweets, it appears that fans do not accept contestants with open arms right away but rather require them to prove themselves as good game players. The fans position themselves as the judges and the fan community as more important than the casting team due to the power of public opinion. The last category represents some fans who attempt to speak on these group sentiments by referring to the collective community in their tweets. These fans view their community as a powerful entity that could have influence, for example over the producers, if they band together and share their beliefs. These fans view themselves squarely as

an audience that should be receiving as much viewing pleasure as possible, feeling that the show is meant to be tailored to them. These four styles of posting each assign a different definition and role to the concept of a fan, while also giving the community various responsibilities.

Community-Building as Resistance to Commodity-Building

Television production, as a business, prioritizes the creation of a commercially successful product. "Programmers care primarily that their product appeals to large numbers of viewers with demographic profiles that advertisers value, and care little about the meanings, significance, or ritual that television fulfills as a cultural product to a core audience of dedicated fans (Cantor and Cantor 1986). However, oftentimes media attracts fans who partake in enhanced engagement or emotional involvement in the product. In this study, solidarity arises as a community of fans prioritizes mutual validation and the recognition of one another's experiences. By interacting with other dedicated audience members online, *Survivor* fans can counter the narrative of the show existing merely as a piece of merchandise for the network and ensure that the program adheres to their standard of viewing.

In examining *Survivor* discourse between fans on Twitter, it appears that fans view themselves as the keepers of the true spirit behind the show. Given they know the history of the show and connect with the characters in a profound way, they task themselves with upholding the principles of the program via Twitter. The fans keep *Survivor* real and authentic, prioritizing continuity in the show against flashy and advertisable moments. Fans speak out when these expectations are unmet, and many take to Twitter to gather their community and plead against a particular production choice that may not align. As we know from Bielby, "Fans know when the production community is failing to deliver a story with the emotional authenticity they seek. When that happens, they feel entitled to complain and to assert claims as to how resources could

be better deployed to enhance the quality of the show" (Harrington and Bielby 1995; Hobson 1982). Thus, the collective experience of social television via Twitter allows fans to create a sense of solidarity around this resistance of commodity-building and promotion of authenticity.

When Low-Brow becomes High-Brow

Reality television is often considered "low-brow" because it lacks the intricate writing and powerful acting performances often attributed to the "high-brow" category of prestige television. Without these exclusive characteristics, reality television is thought to appeal to the masses, while elite culture does not and is consumed by a smaller segment of the population. Regardless of this conception, there are droves of loyal fans of reality television, and *Survivor* in particular, as can be seen in the Twitter pages dedicated to fans of the show. These fans are attracted to reality television due to its authenticity, which can exist in different forms. Fans conceptualize authenticity on *Survivor* as justice in competition and often defend an adherence to fairness and rule-following in the game context. Other fans focus on the entertainment aspect of a good story which can also be understood through the lens of authenticity. When examining discussions of provoking stories, there is intrigue in real contestant backstories and naturally occurring conversations between players, rather than contrived characters and plotlines. Within these stories exists organic drama, emotional breakdowns and intense interactions, made more gripping in their authenticity as compared to their fictitious counterparts. While still regarded as low-brow for these reasons, fans perceive an authenticity that even the best fiction writers and actors cannot achieve.

While the genre may be considered low-brow, there exists an implicit status hierarchy among *Survivor* audiences. Fans distinguish themselves from general audience members with

their expert knowledge of the show; they separate themselves from the common watcher. Their community can be represented by symbols of their interdependency. The unique language of the show is only known to those within the fandom, bonding them together in discussion. Twitter exists as a location in which they can display that high-brow identity and engage in a shared experience of watching. Here they choose to engage with one another in agreeable and fun ways as they are in the presence of like-status individuals. Furthermore, in viewing themselves as the elite members of the *Survivor* audience, they think themselves important to the continuation of the program and thus able to critique the decisions of the show runners. As addressed by Bielby, "Fans feel more qualified to pass judgment on all aspects of the narrative, from how well it invokes the genre's conventions to its emotional authenticity, creating an inherent conflict between their aesthetically based interests and the commercial concerns of the serials' producers" (Harrington and Bielby 1995).

Within the fan community itself there are further distinctions creating a tiered system. This counters the structure of *Survivor*, which removes the capitalist class distinctions that exist in our society. The show unites people of all walks of life and strips away all markers of cultural capital from the outside world. However, ranks continue to exist within the fandom on Twitter. Twitter posts are identity displays that mark status hierarchies of different cultural, social, and economic levels. Knowledge of previous seasons or non-American versions of the show are used to display cultural capital. In using this cultural capital when posting, these fans represent their higher status of experts within the fan community. Other fans who engage in self-reflexivity represent the modes of expression that are associated with social class. In utilizing their language to tie the show back to themselves as the focus, they promote themselves as socially distinct. Lastly, the mere ability to watch a show live represents the economic status of someone who has

access to leisure time and means of reception. Those able to tweet live alongside the premiere of an episode have the economic luxury of not needing to work or care for others when the show is on, portraying their status as economic elites within the fandom.

Protecting and Celebrating Meritocratic Ideals

Through solidarity and symbols of interdependency, the fandom can be a part of something bigger than themselves. Fans promote key values of their fan community, which are embedded within beliefs of the larger world in which the show exists. Growing out of the idea of the American Dream, *Survivor* places a diverse group of contestants in a situation of equal opportunity, with status and modern comforts eliminated, to achieve a financial reward. In providing a cast of characters with different backgrounds, bodies, professions, interests, and lifestyles, *Survivor* promotes the conviction that anyone can succeed. A particular interest is placed on female players in their effort for success as they are historically disadvantaged in both the American meritocratic system and *Survivor*'s meritocratic system.

If a player wants to win, they must use their personal characteristics, such as physical strength, mental fortitude, and social awareness, and their surrounding contexts, in the people they are forced to engage with, the challenges they are meant to endure, and the unfamiliar "primitive" environment. This mirrors the meritocratic idea that an individual must leverage their own skills and manipulate their context to progress in life. Additionally, in both *Survivor* and American society, individuals must balance leaning on peers to get further in the game and individual prioritization when fighting to achieve success. Overall, if an individual works hard enough and overcomes these various obstacles, they win and gain financial wealth as the Sole Survivor. When thinking about what it takes to win a gamedoc like *Survivor*, the emphasis is

placed on effort and earning. Achievements are not given, and players must battle their way to victory that they deserve. This construction of the show is representative of the societal mindset of merit-based attainment, and in watching the program viewers are promoting these ideals of capitalist meritocracy.

This celebration of meritocratic ideals is demonstrated further in the interactions of fans on Twitter. “Wow moments” are challenges to the meritocracy of *Survivor,* thus explaining their nature of being shocking and unexpected. Players are expected to be mentally tough and strategic to win the game and such moments represent counters to these expectations. Fans speak out against the disrespect of meritocratic principles. Advantages and idols, oftentimes associated with “wow moments,” also represent the meritocratic viewpoint of fans as they praise an individual's efforts to earn such capital. The reason that fans enjoy the presence of these tools is that they are earned and then used by deserving players. Though, idols and advantages can be met with some scorn if they lead to the unfair departure of a contestant. Fans are sure to protest the unrighteous exit of a player. With the premise of the show being to eliminate threats to oneself, oftentimes those who are smart, strong, and sociable are evicted by their peers, leading to such outrage when a deserving player is eliminated. However, even when a player has not proven themselves worthy, there are mournful emotions after their loss. This is because the fans recognize that the meritocratic dream is tragically being cut short for a player and in turn the microcosm of *Survivor* does not support the success of all individuals.

Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to understand how fans of the reality television show *Survivor* go about discussing it on the platform of Twitter. Its findings engage with the work of fandom studies in its singular focus on the *Survivor* fandom and that group's varying definitions of what it means to be a fan. Its unique cultural object, *Survivor* fan tweets, and its approach of studying a full season in real time to evaluate the progression over time distinguish this study from the previous ones described in the literature review.

Tweets were triggered by what I deemed to be "wow moments." These moments were defined by such a degree of absurdity, hilarity, and unexpectedness that fans took to Twitter en masse to respond to them. In this longitudinal study, I discovered the four most popular discussion topics that remained consistent throughout the entire season. Two of these topics, tweets related to players being sent home and tweets related to players finding or using idols or advantages, were intertwined with the structure of the show so I was not completely surprised when these posts arose in large numbers. The other two however, tweets related to the gender of players and tweets related to the appearance of players, look beyond the show into the external world and the genre that the show sits in.

These categories explain how fans see the show and what draws them to it. Fans who were focused on players getting voted out homed in on the ensemble aspect of the program, appreciating closely following and bonding to the characters. When discussing idols and advantages, audiences demonstrated the alternative perspective of *Survivor* as a game, finding enjoyment in rules, strategy, and twists. The group who brought gender into their discussions view the show as representative of our world and its problems and find it gratifying to point this out to the online community. Last, users who posted about players' appearances recognized

Survivor as another reality television show, so bringing in the values of beauty from the genre and passing judgement is their method of viewing.

In switching to "how" fans articulated themselves in their posts, I examined what types of ways fans were posting. These ways consisted of who the fan was fore fronting in their posts: themselves, the collective community of online fans, the players from the show, or other fans to engage with. Tweets that prioritized the self were the largest group, populated by people who wished to share their personal feelings and opinions. Another popular category were tweets directed at other fans, which consisted of posters asking questions to initiate conversation in their community, making references or comparisons to previous seasons that would be picked up by knowledgeable peers, and sharing bits of information to educate those who were newer to the fanbase. An alternative way fans projected convictions and passions about *Survivor* was by directing them at the players themselves as opposed to speaking into the abyss. The final style of espousing one's emotions was by talking on behalf of the collective fan community to illustrate that the sentiments belonged to more than just the poster.

Each type of post represented a different attitude that was held by the fandom about what fans were and what the role of the community was. Self-referential posters felt that fans were required to be so involved in the program that they would hold strong emotions and opinions about various topics, and Twitter was a place to share these sentiments to project to the world one's fan status. Those directing their tweets at other fans thought that interpersonal engagement was the best way to be a fan, so the community was expected to be interconnected and communicative. In posting tweets aimed at contestants on the show, certain fans believed their role was to evaluate whether the players were deserving of their respect, considering the fandom as the superior authoritative source on most matters. Finally, when speaking for the collective

community, fans were often articulating what they wanted from the program, demonstrating that they perceived themselves as influential and deserving of favorable television.

Given the widespread use of Twitter, and other online forums, is new compared to the genre of audience reception studies in sociology, a broader implication is the quality of research that can come out of a study like mine. With both text and images, tweets can offer so much in a qualitative study. How people choose to present themselves online is entirely different than they would in a survey or interview, so a digital ethnography could reveal a different side of humanity. This bounty of new information could cover a variety of topics, since almost all aspects of society are discussed on Twitter. However, in being biased to television studies, I think that those studying media would get the most out of this method.

The methodology used in this study did not come without its limitations. I was not privy to Twitter's API or additional support for collecting, so I had a smaller sample than another study could have. A future study could easily correct this by sampling episodes more frequently and coding more in each episode. I also want to recognize that this was only a snapshot of a single season. It is indicative of the fans during the months between September 2024 and December 2024. Their focuses and practices could change by the next season, so it could be interesting to try to carry out this study again and see if there are shifts in results.

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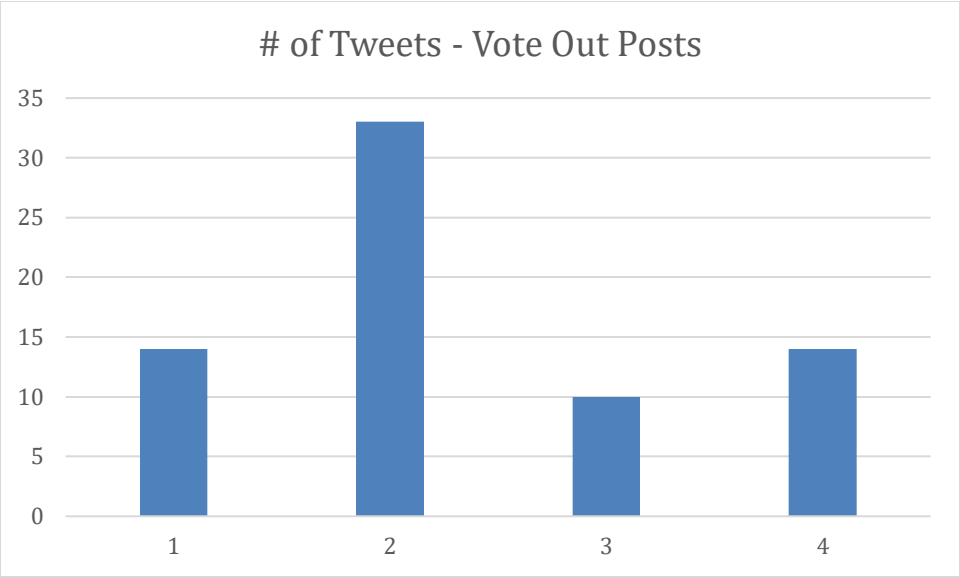
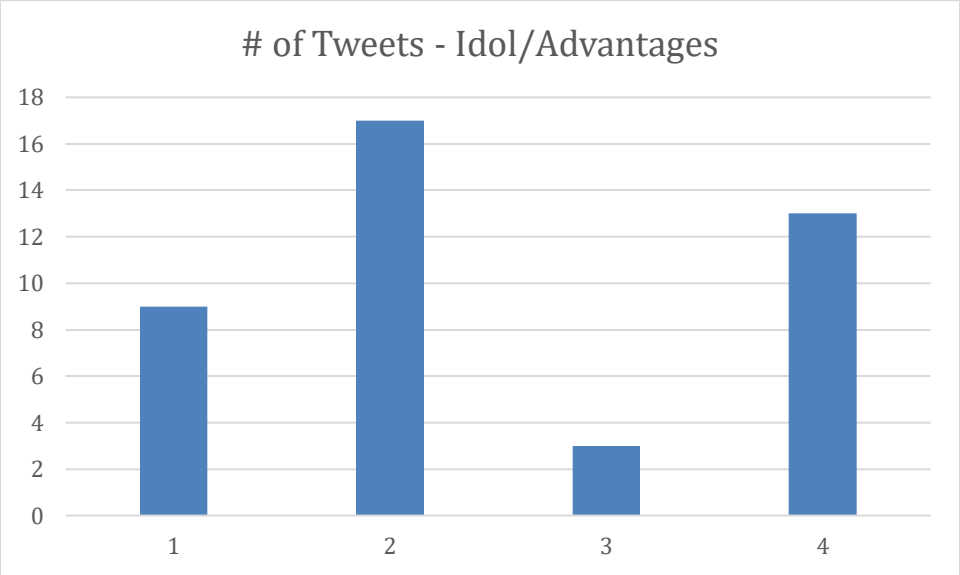
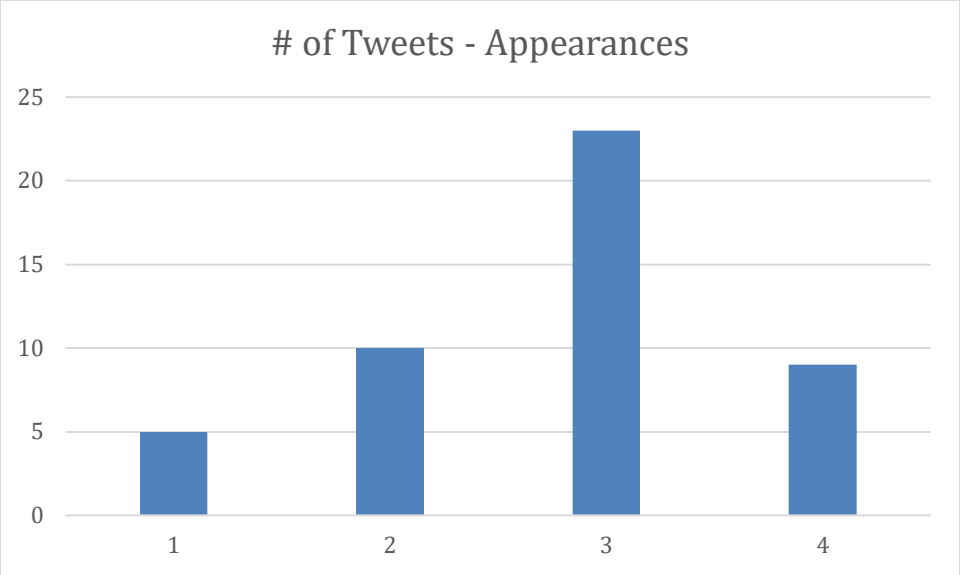
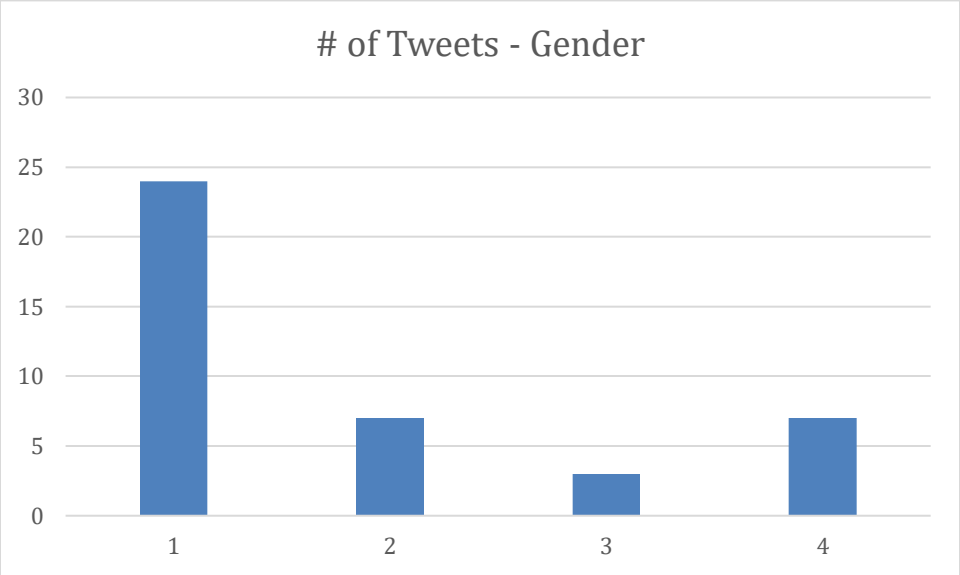
Appendices

Appendix A: Temporal Bar Charts for Tweet Topics

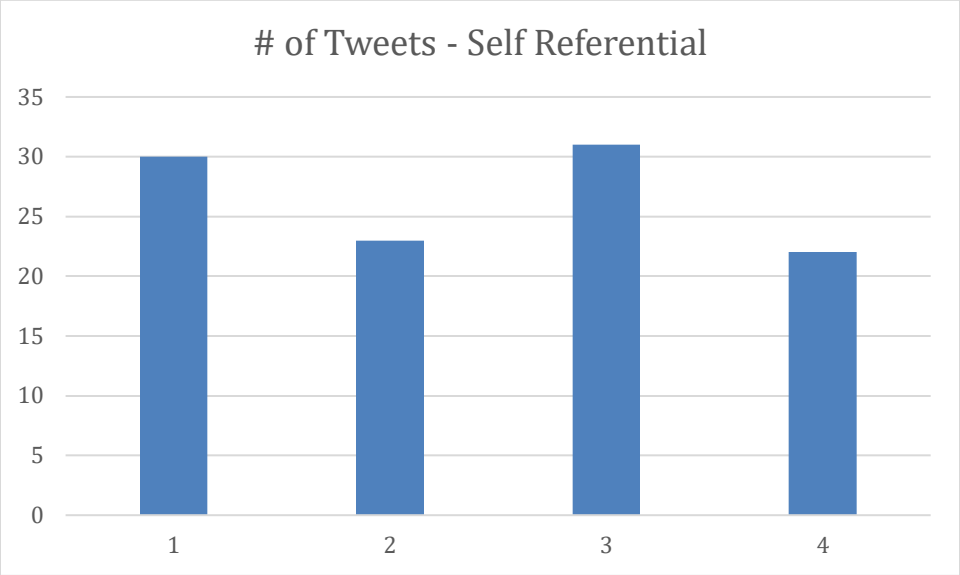


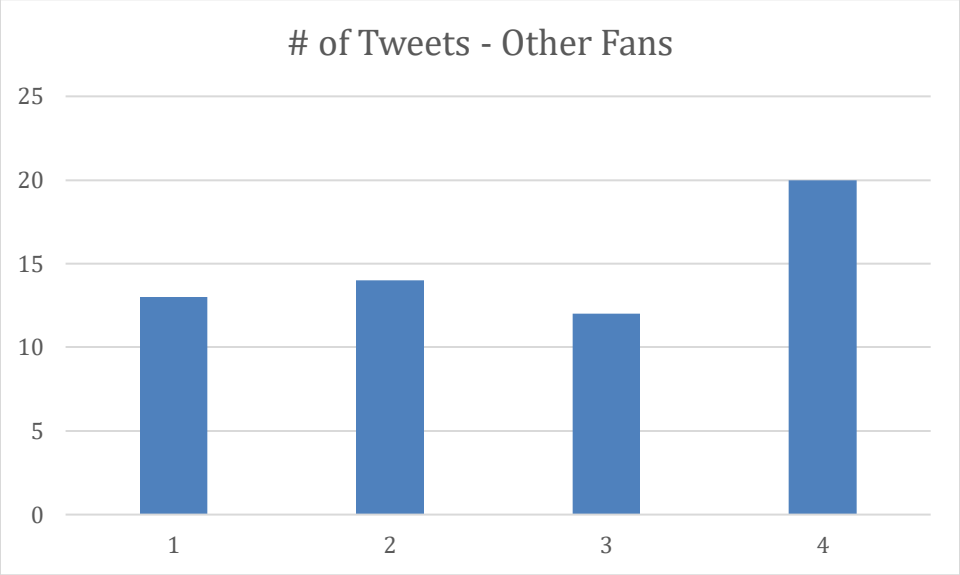


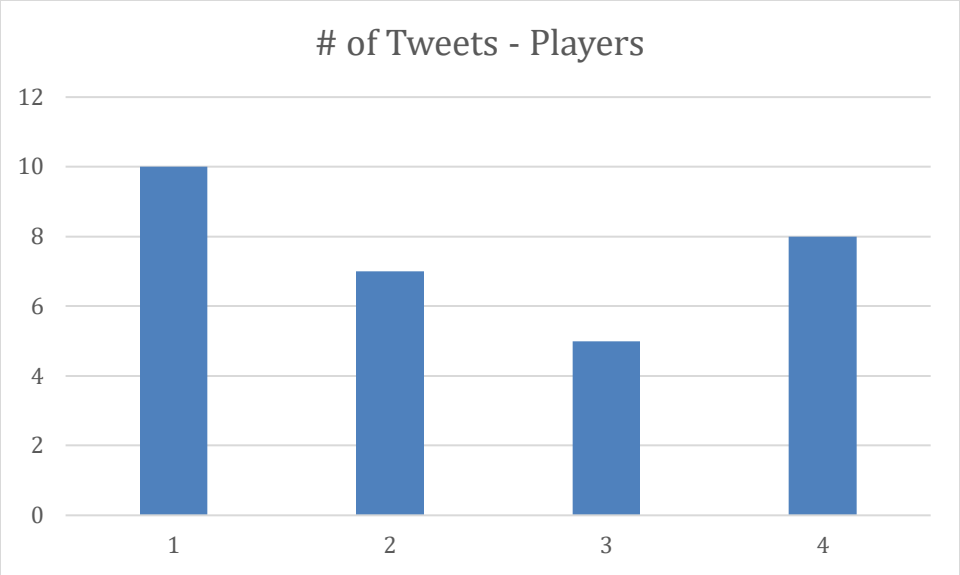

# of Tweets - Appearances
25
20
15
10
5
0
1
2
3
4

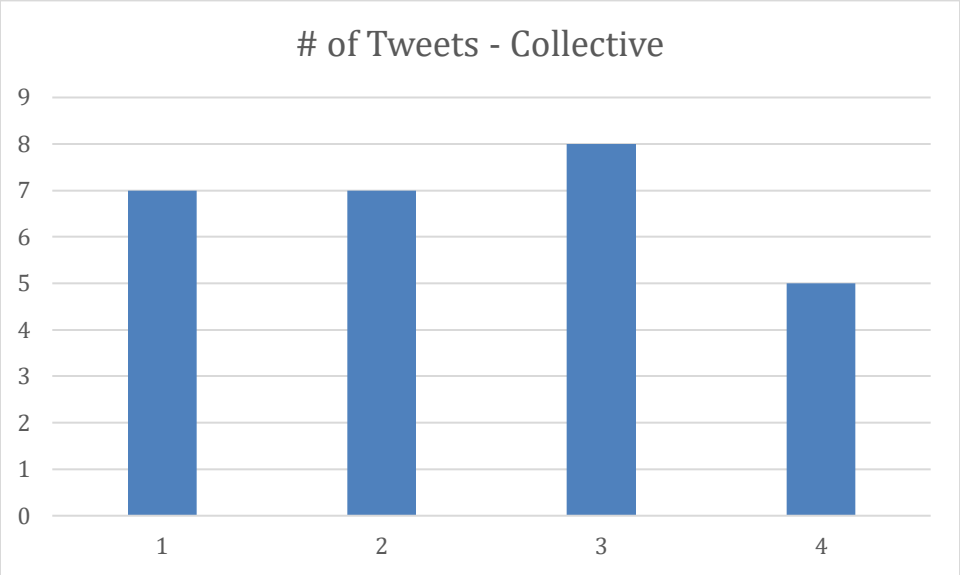

# of Tweets - Gender
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
1
2
3
4

Appendix B: Temporal Bar Charts for Tweet Positioning

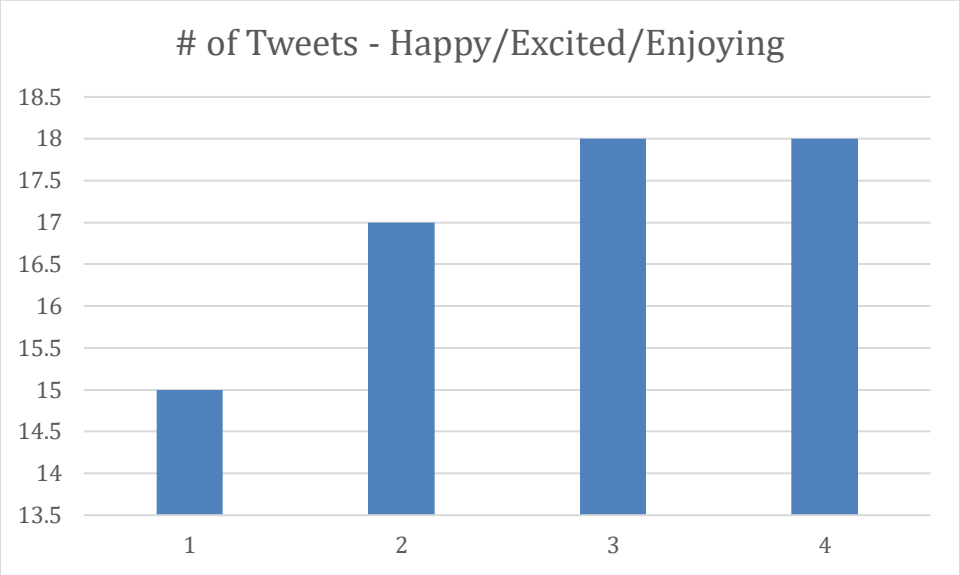


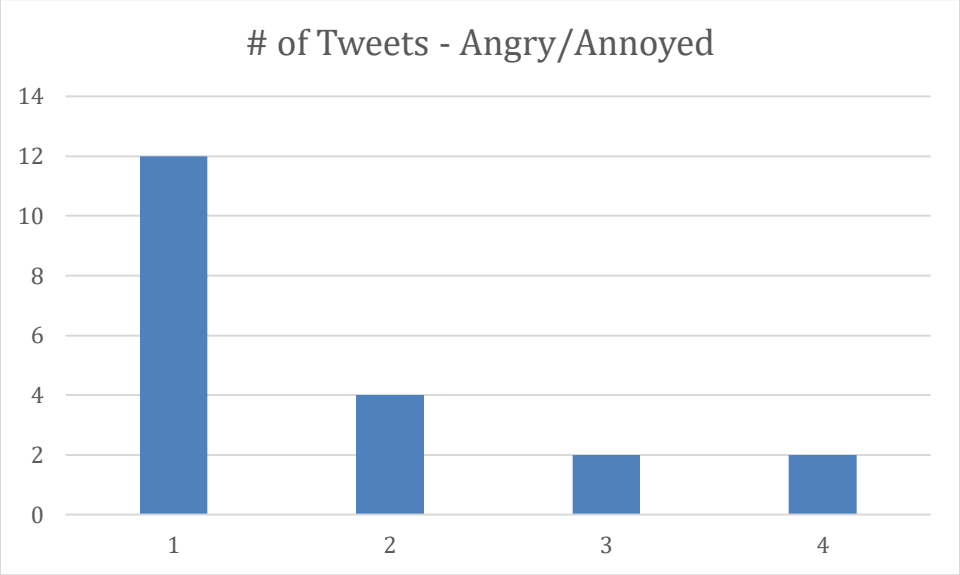


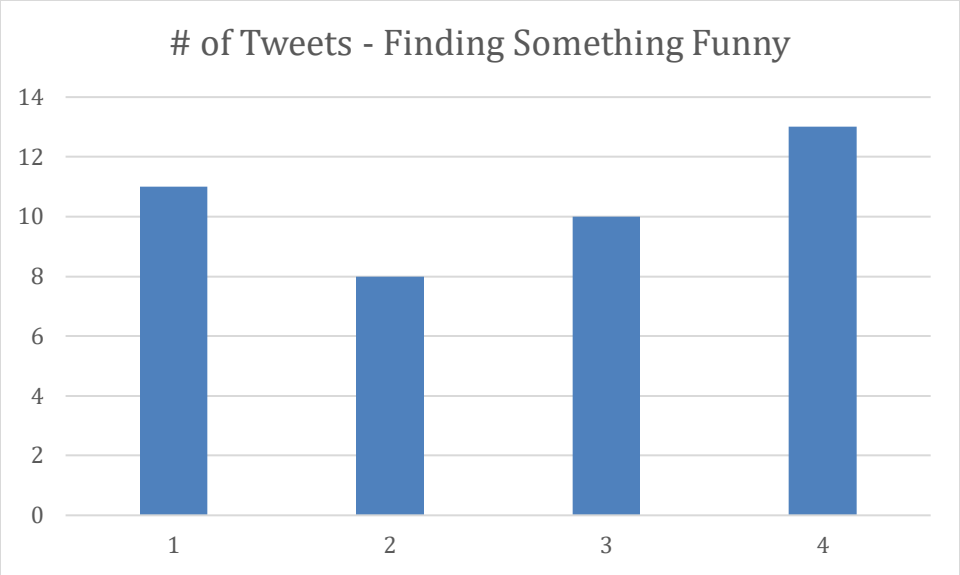

# of Tweets - Players
12
10
8
6
4
2
0
1
2
3
4

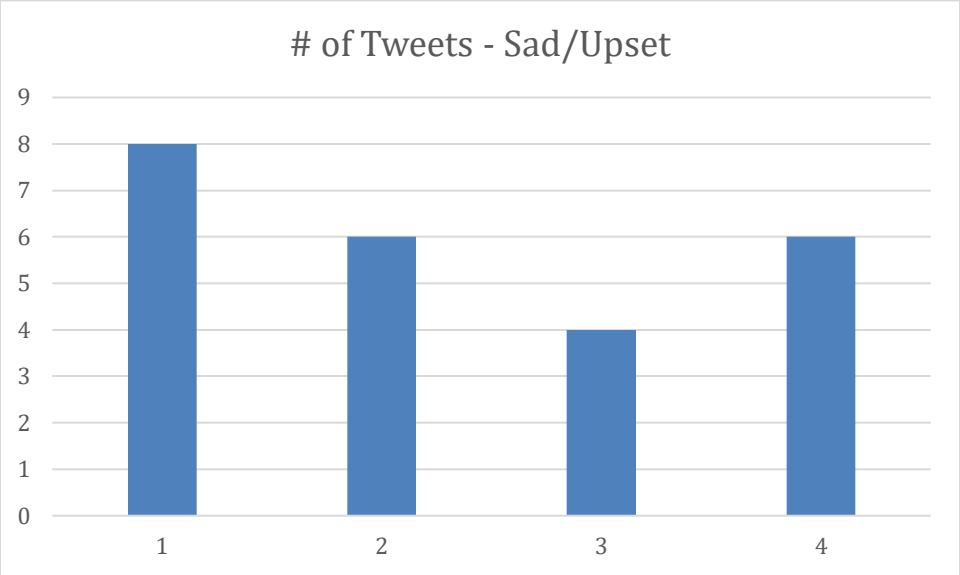

# of Tweets - Collective
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
0
1
2
3
4

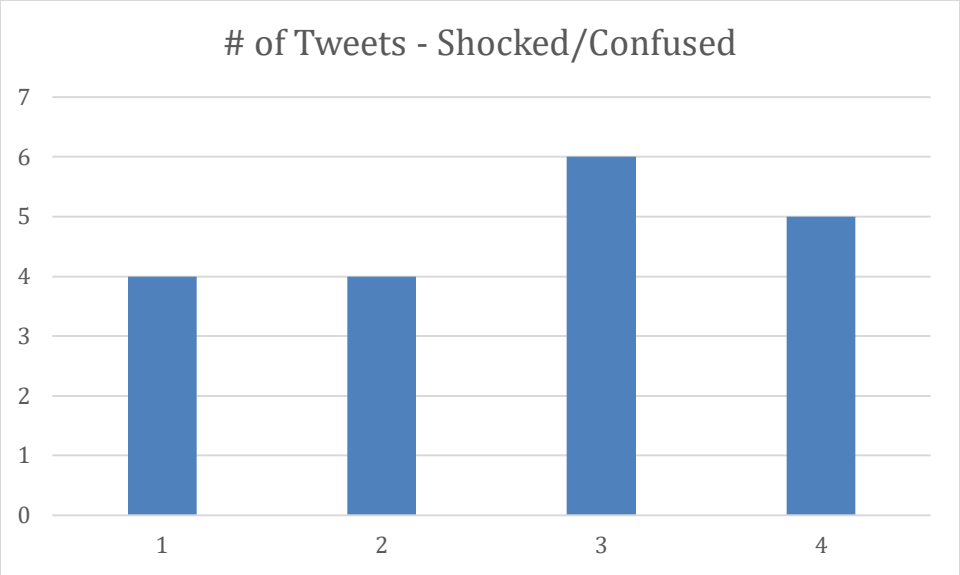
Appendix C: Temporal Bar Graphs for Tweet Emotions






# of Tweets - Finding Something Funny
14
12
10
8
6
4
2
0
1
2
3
4


# of Tweets - Sad/Upset
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
0
1
2
3
4


# of Tweets - Shocked/Confused
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
0
1
2
3
4