The Fans Have Spoken: Understanding Survivor Fandom Through Semi-Structured Interviews

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THE FANS HAVE SPOKEN: UNDERSTANDING SURVIVOR FANDOM THROUGH SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Communication

by
Bennett Robert Katarzynski
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Accepted by:
Dr. James Gilmore, Committee Chair
Dr. Ashley McKenzie
Dr. Elizabeth Gilmore
ABSTRACT

Survivor is an American competition-based reality television show in which contestants compete with and against one another in physical and social challenges while being stranded in remote parts of the world. In the end, the last contestant standing is awarded a one-million-dollar grand prize. Since premiering in 2000, Survivor now has over 40 completed seasons in its catalogue which has allowed for the show to develop many fans over the past two and a half decades. However, not every Survivor fan thinks or behaves in the same way. For this thesis I paired Henry Jenkins and Janet Staiger’s fan action categories (1992a; 1992b; 2005) with other communication concepts such as James Carey’s ritual communication (1975) to conduct semi-structured interviews with Survivor fans to better understand what it looks like and means to be a fan of the show from a ground level. In conducting these interviews, three main themes emerged which can be described as 1). varying levels of fandom from casual fans to superfans 2). a comfort in regularity that comes with watching new episodes of Survivor each week and 3). a familial component in the sense that each participant in this study was introduced to Survivor either with or by a family member or loved one. These first two themes are reflective of the works from Jenkins and Staiger (1992a; 1992b; 2005) and Carey (1975) while the third theme has seemingly highlighted a gap in the literature in that little to no research has been done that comprehensively studies the roles that family can play in fandom introduction and maintenance. This implies that while the current scholarship in fan studies certainly has its merits, there is still more that can and should be studied going forward as seen with the finding of this theme of family present in this thesis.

Keywords: Survivor, fan(s), fandom, fan actions/behaviors, ritual communication, family
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mom, my dad, and Dr. James Gilmore. None of this would have been possible without your constant support. I am grateful more than you will ever know. Thank you all for never (ever) getting sick of hearing me talk about Survivor.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2020, I was an undergraduate student living in my very first apartment. The social restrictions set in place in response to Covid-19 were still fairly common and strict, so most of my classes were held completely online, and social events were essentially nonexistent. My weekdays were spent doing my schoolwork in my bedroom by myself, and my weekends were often spent with one friend who would come over to my apartment where we would play video games, watch movies, etc. This routine got old fast which is what gave me the idea to introduce something new into our routine. Earlier in the year, Netflix had added two seasons of my favorite television show, *Survivor*, to its catalogue. This addition had allowed for many people unfamiliar with the show to watch it for the first time in a long time or even the first time ever, and I had seen several tweets and posts online where people were thoroughly enjoying what they were seeing. Seeing my own chance to create a new *Survivor* fan, I picked a season for my friend to watch with me, and, within an episode or two, he was hooked. Now, three years later, he has watched almost all forty-four complete seasons and happily watching season forty-five along with me.

Today, streaming gives audiences access to countless titles from television to movies and beyond. Across platforms, audiences have an abundance of choice between different titles both new and old as well as a wide gamut of genres to choose from which can range anywhere from film noir to reality television. Choice is abundant and audiences are constantly exposed to content that is both familiar and new to them as each streaming service periodically updates their catalogue (Burroughs, 2019). In Fall 2020, Netflix, one of the biggest and most utilized
streaming services, added two seasons of the then twenty-year-old competition-based reality television show *Survivor* to its streaming catalogue (Dehnart, 2023). Not only did this give fans of the show an easy access point to rewatch some fan favorite seasons (specifically, season 20, *Survivor: Heroes vs. Villains*, and season 28, *Survivor: Cagayan*), but it also broadcasted the show to a whole new audience group who had either stopped watching the show in seasons past or had simply never seen it before. Established fans of the show had the opportunity to revisit some of their favorite seasons while new and returning audience members got to enter or reenter the fandom with two of the most highly praised seasons (Ross, 2023). This addition to streaming was especially important for audiences as it came at time where Covid-19 was still disrupting lives across the world as well as halting much entertainment production (Horeck, 2021). As the vast majority of people were stuck at home due to lockdown measures (Koh, 2020), more people had time to turn their attention to the media that was available on the streaming services to which they were already subscribed. These lockdown measures in combination with *Survivor* being readily available on Netflix allowed for a sort of renaissance for the show in terms of heightened exposure and engagement.

*Survivor* is not only one of the longest running reality television shows of all time, but it is also one of the longest running television shows in general (Torres, 2023). Premiering in the spring of 2000, *Survivor* has now been on the air for 24 years and is gearing up for production of its 47th and 48th seasons. Additionally, *Survivor* is often credited for helping make modern reality television what it is today thanks to the fact that its first season finale in August of 2000 was watched live by over 50 million Americans (Johnson & Critic, 2000). Audiences were hooked to the survival experience paired with the cutthroat social politics and strategy. Due to this draw, CBS, the network that has aired *Survivor* from the beginning, quickly greenlit production for a
second season later that year to capitalize on the show’s popularity and cultural relevance (Dehnart, 2021). However, as the years have gone on, Survivor’s ratings and mainstream popularity have dropped from the massive numbers they once held (Kimball, 2023), but that is not to say that the show is “dead” or without an audience. There are numerous fan sites and communities both online and in person that allow for fans both new and old to engage in the culture and lore that Survivor has created. Former Survivor contestant Rob Cesternino and freelance writer Martin Holmes run websites and podcasts that are largely focused on all things Survivor (Cesternino, 2022; Holmes, 2022). There are fan-made competitions based off Survivor (Surviving Maine, 2023). Furthermore, there are many fan identifying individuals on social media that just like to talk about Survivor. It can be as low stakes as posting every now and then to dedicating whole accounts to the show. All that is to say, while Survivor may not be at the forefront of the cultural zeitgeist like it once was, it is still putting out new seasons for a fandom made up of all sorts of viewers from day-one fans to brand-new audience members coming in from places like Netflix or even just the latest episodes from the newest season.

This thesis aims to better understand those who identify as a Survivor fan. Existing research has either looked at Survivor as a focal point or as supplementary material. Katrina E. Bell-Jordan wrote about how reality television shows, including Survivor, construct race to their audiences (2008). Jonathan Metzl wrote about the articulation between Survivor and voyeurism (2004). Kristin M. Barton performed a qualitative uses and gratifications study on reality television which referenced Survivor (2009). While this is not the only literature on Survivor (and more is discussed in the literature review below), it demonstrates that not only does Survivor tend to be just a segment of study or a mere exemplar for reality television, but also the research that does consider it has become dated. The show as well as its audience and fans have
changed so much over the years. The differences between the show and its fandom from the years before Covid-19 to now are substantial, let alone the differences from the late 2000s to now.

Using audience and fan studies frameworks in conjunction with Henry Jenkins’ and Janet Staiger’s respective fan action categories (Jenkins, 1992a & 1992b; Staiger, 2005) to inform an interview protocol, this thesis intends to understand Survivor fan behavior. Survivor fans are the ones who tune in from season to season to watch new and returning contestants battle against each other for the title of Sole Survivor. They are the ones who rewatch the show and enjoy (as well as participate in) its surrounding discourses. This thesis aims to better understand why fans remain fans through asking the following question: What does it mean to be a Survivor fan? I hope to answer this question and more to illuminate the mechanics and characteristics of this enduring fandom as well as extend fan studies and frameworks to what is often considered the parent of modern reality television.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Audience & Fan Studies

The field of audience studies originated as a way to better understand “the audience” in a general sense in various mass media contexts. James Webster (1998) writes that “it is hard to imagine any form of media studies that is not, on some level, about audiences” (p. 190), and this can be seen in all sorts of past research from work with cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) to uses and gratifications (Katz et al., 1973) and beyond. Cultivation theory aimed to understand how repeated exposure to not any one specific type of television program, but rather television broadcasts effected audiences’ worldviews (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Further, as I will touch on more in a moment, uses and gratifications was focused on understanding why audience members selected particular media texts to consume and the benefits they derived from these selections (Katz et al., 1973). Both of these social scientific theories are focused on the mass media and, in turn, focused on the audiences’ role in consuming it. While the purposes and motivations of audience studies may vary, they ultimately exist to create a picture that better illustrates what audiences look like, what they do, how they do it, etc. In today’s media landscape, audience studies are more important than ever as there are so many contexts and settings where people fall into the category of being an audience member thanks to the omnipresence of social media, video sharing platforms, streaming, etc. (Gray, 2017). Simply put, without audiences (and the fans within them) much of the mass media both past and present would have little reason to exist. Therefore, it is important allocate time and study to these groups as they are the drivers for the creation of numerous texts and cultures that spring up in response to them.
As previously mentioned, uses and gratifications has been one of the most forefront frameworks in audience studies due to the way that it frames what media audience members choose to pay attention to as well as what benefits, or gratifications, they receive from said media selection (Katz et al., 1973). In their development of the theory, Katz et al. discuss the fact that audience members are active and aware of their needs whether they be seeking information or entertainment or learning about themselves or others (1973). Katz et al. believe that audiences can accurately understand what they are looking to get out of each piece of media they select, and they can further select the best piece of media to “gratify” these “needs” that they have (1973). While this framework has certainly presented itself as useful in various research contexts thus far including social media use (Whiting & Williams, 2013), music choice (Lonsdale & North, 2011), and internet use (Ebersole, 2000), David Morley provides an interesting development of uses and gratifications within audience studies (2003). Citing both James Halloran (1970a; 1970b; 1975) and Stuart Hall (1973), Morley discusses the fact that while media creators may craft their film, television show, video game, etc. to mean or represent something in a specific way, it is not up to them but rather the audience that consumes said media to interpret and assign meaning to the text (2003). This speaks to Stuart Hall’s notion of encoding and decoding in television as show runners can do everything in their power to attempt to get a specific message across to audiences, but ultimately, if audience members select a different interpretation of that message (whether this choice is conscious or not), this audience generated meaning is the one that will remain in their minds (1973). Hall further notes that before a piece of media can be selected to meet a need like uses and gratifications suggests, meaning must be ascribed to the messages in the media both from a production standpoint as well as an audience standpoint (1973). Television producers craft show narratives, visuals,
themes, etc. to mean specific things for mass audiences which is the encoding part of Hall’s framework while the decoding is represented by the audiences’ reception of these messages through their exposure to them via the television (1973). However, in decoding these messages to understand them, audience members are able to find their own significant meanings either alongside or in place of those encoded into the particular text. While there is a level of hegemony at work in this structure as the texts of television come from those with the power of production, it would be impossible to assume that audience members would or could interpret or decode everything as it was encoded. This differs from Katz et al.’s understanding of uses and gratifications as they assume that the framework should/can only focus on what audience members take away from a piece of media (1973), whereas Hall puts more emphasis on the fact that the decoding, the process of understanding a message in media, has a lot more variance and nuance for audience members which is not as clear cut as the idea that audience members can identify their own needs and select media that precisely gratifies them.

However, it is important to note that academics were not the only ones interested in audience studies. As audiences are the consumers and main deciders of success of film and television, those in media production have long since studied or attempted to study audiences to better understand what “sells” to the people who they want to consume their content (Smythe, 1981). With traditional cable television audiences only had so many channels and programs to watch, so it was easier for production companies to create programs that broadly appealed to the masses. However, as Philip Napoli notes, as time went on and technologies advanced, the media, specifically television, and its audiences began to fragment (2011). More program and entertainment options became available to audiences which allowed for catering to more specialized interests (Chan-Olmsted & Jung, 2001). This media and television fragmentation
gave rise to more niche programs which amassed their own fanbases while also making it harder for companies to accurately study audiences as they split and diversified.

Then, in the 1980s and 1990s, fan studies began to emerge from audience studies as well as cultural studies to focus on more dedicated audiences and audience members, fans. Unlike work done in sport contexts studying those who tailgate and wear their favorite team’s jerseys (Sloan, 1989), these studies focused more on fandoms within media audiences. While the scope of fan studies has been broad in researching various topics such as fans of *Star Trek* (Jenkins III, 1988), Madonna (Brown & Schulze, 1990), *Doctor Who* (Booth & Kelly, 2013), etc. the main themes in the research of understanding fans and their behaviors, no matter the context, have persisted to present day (Lynch, 2022). One scholar who has demonstrated his dedication to the field of fan studies is Henry Jenkins through several works including *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (1992b) and *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006), just to name a few. In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins continued to develop his concept of participatory culture, which suggests fans are the ones who gave meaning and life to texts put forward by their creators such as film and television shows (2006). In *Convergence Culture* Jenkins frames the first chapter around *Survivor* saying, “*Survivor* is television for the internet age – designed to be discussed, dissected, debated, predicted, and critiqued” (2006, p. 25). Jenkins goes on to use *Survivor* to discuss the concept of “spoiling” which pertains to the idea of prematurely revealing narrative and plot elements and conclusions to others and how it plays with (and even ruins) fan discourse and behavior among audience members who actively tune in to watch each new episode of a season as it airs from week to week (2006).

One typology that Jenkins presented across his works was his division of fan behavior into five fan action categories (1992a; 1992b). These categories are described as “a distinctive
mode of reception,” “a particular interpretive community,” “a base for consumer activism,” “a particular artworld,” and “an alternative social community,” (1992a; 1992b). This typology helped to better express how fans acted within a fandom or participatory culture in general. Further, as *Textual Poachers* (1992b) went on to become seminal in the realm of fan studies, Janet Staiger drew from it as a reference point for her book *Media Reception Studies* (2005). Staiger outlines these categories as a framework that provides inroads to better understand fan communities based off how individuals as well as groups of fans enact their fandom. She also goes on to add her own category, “the extension of fan partialities into everyday living” to cover how fans may further integrate their favored texts into their day-to-day lifestyles (Staiger, 2005). As this collective framework from Jenkins and Staiger can be used to illuminate and illustrate how exactly fans exist and act in relation to a given text, I offer it here to outline the rest of this literature review to better understand fans of the television show *Survivor* as it and its fans have fallen out of academic research in recent years despite it being “the astonishingly popular CBS show that started the reality television trend” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 25).

**Jenkins & Staiger’s Six Fan Action Categories**

“*A Distinctive Mode of Reception*”

In this first category of Jenkins’s model (1992a & 1992b), he notes how, in comparison to general audience members who may be passive in their media consumption as well as accepting of “whatever is available” (Staiger, 2005, p. 98), fans consume more methodically and with purpose. Staiger notes that “If [a] text is a serial program, [fans] will view ‘faithfully,’” (2005, p. 98) and that is exactly what *Survivor* is. From the beginning, *Survivor* has been airing at 8:00 pm on Wednesday nights (seasons two through 20 aired in the same time slot but on Thursdays instead of Wednesdays). With *Survivor* remaining in its Wednesday timeslot since
season twenty-one airing back in the fall of 2010, fans came up with the term “White Rice Wednesday” because rice is the main food source the contestants eat, and it affirms that Wednesday is synonymous with the show (Berns, 2015). This anticipation and continual viewing of *Survivor* every Wednesday is representative of the fan dedication and devotion that Jenkins and Staiger discuss (1992a & 1992b; 2005).

Here, James Carey and his concept of ritual communication pair well with Jenkins and Staiger’s idea of a distinctive mode of reception. Carey notes that, while communication can be transmissive, it can also be ritualistic (1975). He elaborates with the fact that ritual communication focuses not on sending or receiving new information but rather building community and confirming one’s identity within a community (Carey, 1975). Pairing this with “faithful” viewing of *Survivor* each week allows for audience members to easily enter into fan identity. Like Jenkins’ concept of participatory culture, *Survivor* fandom has fairly low barriers to entry in this regard (Jenkins, 2009). By simply tuning in once week, fans engross themselves into not only the narratives and lore of the current season, but all seasons passed as well. In a study on television fans’ use of the internet, it was found that fandom and fan expression can range from simply “lurking” to full blown discourse participation and textual production (Costello & Moore, 2007). This goes to show that there is no one way for fans to properly express or participate in fandom. Further, fans may have additional traditions or ritual tendencies in conjunction with live viewings of each new *Survivor* episode. Eating a specific meal (like white rice), hosting or attending viewing parties (Fairplay, 2023), or following up the episode by consuming recap material like *On Fire: The Official Survivor Podcast* hosted by Jeff Probst, the host of *Survivor* (2023-present), or *Rob Has a Podcast* (Cesternino, 2010-present) are all different ways to maintain identity as a fan in a ritual fashion. These practices are not the only
ways to supplement one’s viewing of the show, but they are real examples of the various activities that fans will engage in to more faithfully and ritually watch *Survivor* in comparison to the average viewer who watches the show simply because that is what is on television at the time. Paul Booth notes that expression of and engagement in fandom enters ritual communication territory in digital spaces when fans move past surface level actions like Googling an actor or contestant to more engaging behaviors such as participating in a discussion of said actor or contestant and engagement with other fans in reference to their chosen source material (2010). Further, in sport contexts, it is traditionally seen that fans, if not in person at a sporting event, like to have watch parties in support of their favorite teams where they adorn themselves in sport regalia (Aden at al. 2009), much like a *Survivor* fan would host or attend a watch party and wear a buff from the show. Moreover, with something like podcasting having such low barriers to entry both for the creator and audience members (Berry, 2006), anyone can choose to create their own podcast as well as consume the various podcasts or singular episodes as their own pace (Salvati, 2015). Therefore, when someone like former *Survivor* contestant Rob Cesternino creates an extensive podcast that covers all things *Survivor*, it allows for fans to have a space to supplement their viewing experience by listening to an episode that recaps the latest *Survivor* episode or features an interview with another former contestant (Cesternino, 2010-present). This again speaks to Booth’s point (2010) where fans engage in more ritual means of communication in a format such as podcast listening because, while they likely will not glean any new information from listening to a recap of an episode they just watched, they are affirming their fan identity by listening to a sort of mentor in the community (Jenkins, 2009) speak on a communal topic while also having the ability to engage in discussion with other fans in the comments or generally online.
Lastly, in the era of streaming where more people are forgoing the traditional cable
television experience in favor of Netflix, Hulu, Disney Plus, etc. subscriptions, those who are
dedicated *Survivor* fans must actively seek out means to watch the show live which often
requires extra subscription fees whether it be through various streaming services or cable. While
most people would likely find this annoying, *Survivor* fans will seek out means to watch the
show as faithfully as Jenkins says they will (1992a & 1992b). Further, with the rise of streaming,
fans often revisit seasons past either through the select seasons Netflix promotes (Dehnart, 2023)
or Paramount Plus which is the service CBS stores all their content on which includes every
season of *Survivor* (Paramount Plus, 2023). In one pilot study I conducted, a content analysis
which looked at tweets posted during the airing of episodes three and four of *Survivor 43* and
how they represented fan expressions, I found that there are many similarities between *Survivor*
fans and sport fans through the lenses of sport fandom frameworks. This content analysis also
had implications that likened *Survivor* fans to sport fans in the sense that both use their
respective events (a new episode of *Survivor* and a new game with their favorite team) to further
identify and promote themselves as fans to others. This can manifest as wearing a *Survivor* buff,
live tweeting during a new episode, or even holding real life conversations with other fans (or
potential fans) to discuss what has happened or what will happen in given season.

“A Particular Interpretive Community”

For this category, Staiger notes that it is characteristic of fans and fandoms to “usually
have developed a network of colleagues, and these groups discuss, debate, and, for newcomers,
teach perceptions of variation among the formulas, explanations for aspects of the text or
performance, and predictions of future encounters with it” (2005, p. 99). This suggests that in
each fandom, fans structure themselves in such ways that they both become familiar with one
another thanks to a common interest in their select text and also produce dialogue and discourse centered around specific texts. Further, like Jenkins touches on in his definition of participatory culture (2009), this community structuring, though it may not be so rigid or formal, gives members the opportunity to teach or mentor newer fans on the happenings and ways of the fandom at large.

In the case of Survivor’s fandom, this interpretive community can be seen in the way that fandom has manifested online over the past several years. Various social media platforms such as Tumblr and Reddit have provided fans and fandoms spaces to digitally gather, post, and discuss their favored texts, and, while Survivor certainly has its own spaces carved out on these platforms, no platform seems to be as prolific for fandoms such as Survivor like X, formerly known as Twitter, has. Yes, X is a microblogging social media platform that caters to a large array of users and topics, but, thanks to its various affordances, it works as a supplement and backchannel (Deller, 2011) that allows for fans to discuss new Survivor episodes as they air weekly. In a pilot study that I conducted in the spring of 2023, I performed a discourse analysis in which I analyzed the most “popular” or frequently appearing tweets that came up under the main Survivor hashtags and trending topics in relation to the seventh episode of the then currently airing season 44. What this study found was that the majority of the most seen, interacted, and promoted tweets were not from general audience members or average fans, but rather they were from figureheads in the Survivor fandom whether they be current or former contestants, or others such as journalists, podcasters, etc. Sometimes these prominent users are colleagues in a sense, similar to the previously mentioned Rob Cesternino and former Survivor contestant Stephen Fishbach, who are known for frequently hosting recap episodes for Rob’s podcast (2010-present). Other users were colleagues in a more informal sense of the word such
as Mike Bloom, a reality television journalist, and Ryan Kaiser, a writer for the Survivor fan website The True Dork Times (Pitman, 2023). However, spaces such as X allow for these “colleagues” to come together and discuss Survivor at their own conveniences which is especially useful as well as fruitful while a new episode is airing (Highfield et al., 2013). Further, while these more prominent fans in the community speak on and about Survivor, whether it is airing or not, using public digital spaces such as X allows for more fans who do not necessarily have the same sized followings or recognizability to jump in and not only contribute to the conversation but also speak with those who are sorts of “Survivor celebrities” (Kehrberg, 2015).

“A Base for Consumer Activism”

In the category of consumer activism, Staiger outlines how this behavior category encompasses the idea that fans of a text make predictions on narrative plotlines and characters’ roles within said text (2005). Further, this category encompasses fan activism in the sense fans will often advocate against things like the cancellation of their favorite television shows (Guerrero-Pico, 2017), as well as more serious social issues that may or may not have some ties to their favorite show such as gender equality and proper representation for women (Scott, 2019). Survivor fans are concerned with week-to-week discussions of “who’s going home next” or “who’s going to win this season,” as well as some very specific stints of social activism in relation to the show.

The main instance of activism from Survivor fans came in the form of the Survivor Diversity Campaign where contestants and fans alike called for more equal representation and inclusion of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) both as contestants as well as members of production (Merrett, 2020). J’Tia Hart (Taylor), a Survivor: Cagayan contestant, created a petition in the midst of the 2020 Black Lives Matter Protest calling for, among other
things, *Survivor* producers to begin creating new casts that were at least 30% BIPOC (2020). This petition led to the creation of an X account (*Survivor* Diversity Campaign, n.d.) as well as the utilization of other platforms and opportunities to further project BIPOC voices in relation to the call for *Survivor* to be more inclusive of those with minority identities such as the Black Voices of *Survivor* Roundtable that Rob Cesternino allowed for *Survivor: Marquesas* contestant, Sean Rector, to create using his podcast platform (2020). Ultimately, with lots of public fan backing for this campaign, amidst many temporary production hiatuses due to the Covid-19 pandemic, CBS, the network that airs *Survivor*, announced that all of their future reality television shows, including *Survivor*, would have casts that were comprised of not just 30% BIPOC contestants but rather 50% BIPOC contestants (Hibberd & Ross, 2020). This is a clear example of how a text can mobilize fans into activism and advocacy (Bennett, 2012) which in turn alters their favored texts (Numerato, 2018). As time goes on, fans may have to advocate against the cancellation of *Survivor* à la Guerrero-Pico (2017), but, for now, it is the social activism that is the most salient for *Survivor* fans as the show allows for a reflection of the cultural issues that face society at large (Earl & Kimport, 2009).

"A Particular Artworld"

When it comes to a particular artworld, Staiger notes how this category is exemplified by fan creations in many senses of the word (2005). Two examples Staiger offers up are Erika Doss’ evaluation of homemade shrines and memorials for Elvis which had been carefully crafted by some of his dedicated fans (1999), and Camille Bacon-Smith’s work with women who create illustrations inspired by their favorite science fiction texts (1992). Similar examples, though not very common, in the *Survivor* fandom do exist. @SurvivorQuotesX, as the name implies, is a X account run by a fan of the show who frequently posts quotes and visual media from the past
twenty plus years of *Survivor*. Occasionally, they post and make reference to their “*Survivor* Museum” that they have in their home which is a room filled with both official and unofficial *Survivor* memorabilia (ex.: torches, banners, buffs, contestant autographs, etc.) (2023). Additionally, Sami Cappa is an illustrator who draws, amongst other things, portraits of every *Survivor* contestant (2023).

One large area of study in relation to fandom and “art” is that of fan fiction. There have been numerous research endeavors that have covered fan fiction in several contexts such as One Direction (Hedrick, 2021), *Star Trek* (Jenkins, 1992b), and *Harry Potter* (Tosenberger, 2008). While these are nowhere near the only fan fiction topics researched, this goes to show that fan fiction is a popular focus of study in connection to fandom. Further, while there is *Survivor* fan fiction (Homegirl, 2013), it does not seem to be a major piece of the overall fandom. Rather, fans tend to speculate about and analyze current and past seasons of *Survivor* whether it be through social media, podcasts, websites, or even just in person.

As previously mentioned, some fans will take their love for the show to another level when they go as far creating their own season of *Survivor* (Surviving Maine, 2023). In a similar vein to fan fiction, these fan-made seasons of *Survivor* do extend the source material to new fan-made contexts, but it is not done in the way that traditional fan fiction uses pre-existing characters, plotlines, etc. (Kaplan, 2006). These fan-made seasons, often presented through video sharing platforms like YouTube, use the general *Survivor* game format and apply it down to real groups of fans who compete for the sheer fun of “participating” in their favorite game that they watch weekly on television (Ashley, 2023). Further, as the organizing and production of a fan-made *Survivor* season can be tedious and difficult, many fans will turn to the utilization of simulators or other *Survivor* related games in order to immerse themselves into more *Survivor*
media or try their hand at the game in an accessible way. BrantSteele is a popular simulation website where users can pick between different game formats such as *Big Brother, RuPaul’s Drag Race, The Hunger Games*, and even *Survivor* (BrantSteele, 2023). From there, users have the ability to pick between different seasons of the various shows listed, use preexisting casts or create their own, and finetune statistics to create endless possibilities of fan-made “reality television.” Rob Cesternino has even had several episodes of his podcast dedicated to watching these simulations play out (2023). And when these simulators are not interactive enough, fans have interactive online means in which to “play” *Survivor* such as through Roblox (Jambe, 2015) or Stranded (Stranded, 2007) which are both online multiplayer games where participants compete against other real participants in modified *Survivor* formats. While these entities are in no way the same art format as something like fan fiction (Thomas, 2011) or other traditional art forms, they are expressive fan-made creations of various formats that are largely products of this internet as Christine Dandrow speaks to (2016).

“*Extension of Fan Partialities into Everyday Living*”

This is the one category that Jenkins does not originally propose (1992a; 1992b), but rather is Staiger’s addition to the typology (2005). She defines this category as fans’ inclusion of their favored text into the rest of their lives whether that be through collections or a modified sense of self. Staiger details examples of fans who are extreme collectors of merchandise and memorabilia (Bacon-Smith, 1992) to fans who claim to have spiritual connections with their idols (Hinerman, 2002). No matter the case, this category exists to describe the various ways fans take passive consumption or expression of fandom and turn it into a more central part of their lives (Klinger, 2006).
Other examples that Staiger uses to represent this category include various women’s collection of *Gone with the Wind* memorabilia and the naming of their children after characters from the film (Taylor, 1989), the lengths fans will go to contact or interact with celebrities (Cavicchi, 1996), and “tape exchanges” that fans of television shows would engage in to collect their favorite episodes or seasons of said shows (Fiske, 1986). While some of these practices are certainly dated, many of them do still exist today in some fashion. As previously mentioned, the owner of the SurvivorQuotesX account has what they refer to as a “museum” in their home which is a room full of *Survivor* merchandise like Buffs, the official *Survivor* clothing item contestants must wear at all times during the filming of the show (Paramount, 2023), and other memorabilia both official and not (SurvivorQuotesX, 2023). Jeff Probst even mentioned during the opening scene of season twenty, *survivor: Heroes vs. Villains*, about how one contestant, Colby Donaldson, was so popular in his original season that people were, in fact, naming their children after him (Burnett et al., 2010). In terms of interactions with contestants as Cavicchi discusses, thanks to social media, fans have easy access to speaking with any contestant, past or present, online, but contestants will also often host *Survivor* watch parties specifically for fans to come and interact with them to further build and live within the *Survivor* fandom (Fairplay, 2023).

Lastly, while digital file sharing, social media, and streaming have largely killed any sort of tape exchange economy as Fiske spoke of it (1986), *Survivor* fans online often incorporate pieces of the show into their day-to-day communications. However, it is also important to note that Michael Newman describes how the digital piracy of media like television can contribute to the integration of digital texts in daily communications as such piracy makes the source text more accessible to everyone for anything from watching a show for the first time to or having a
place to screenshot or screen record for reproduction and/or redistribution (2012). Sometimes fans may make a contestant their profile picture, they may use a Survivor GIF as a reaction to a post or a way to more finely tune the tone of a post (Brown, 2012), or even incorporate language from the show into their own vocabularies ex. “the tribe has spoken,” “voted off the island,” etc.

Chuck Tryon expands this point further in discussing how live tweeting an episode of television and even articulating a text with images, taglines, posts, likes, comments, etc. to one’s digital self made up of online profiles is another way fans bring their favored text into their everyday lives which are increasingly more online as the years go by (2013). While this category may look different than what Staiger was describing in 2005, the core tenets are still applicable to fan behavior in 2023, and this includes Survivor fans.

“An Alternative Social Community”

This last category, as Staiger notes, is ultimately the collection of individual fans into what can be considered the fandom as a whole (2005). She also points out that Jenkins “uses the term alternative community rather than subculture or counterculture” (2005, p. 107) to avoid referring to these communities as “nonnormative.” While these social communities comprised of fans have likely existed since people could identify themselves as fans of a given text, the internet has made the formation, visibility, and maintenance of these communities so much easier. No longer are they bound to physical spaces, but they can exist online now where any fan anywhere can join and participate as they please. As previously noted, there are several online spaces where Survivor fandom and community exist, but it is especially present on X as it is such a versatile (Highfield et al., 2013) website as well as through Rob Cesternino’s podcasts and website.
It is important to point out that Dick Hebdige identifies subculture as a culture that arises against or in opposition to a mainstream or dominant culture (2012). This is not the case for Survivor fans. Fans genuinely enjoy the show, so they find or create spaces that allow for the construction of a community that places it at the center. This is the case for many fandoms built around a central text (Hellekson & Busse, 2006). Further with the affordances that the internet and the various social media platforms that it houses have, these communities are quite visible and “social” by nature (Wood & Baughman, 2012). These are places where fans can go to participate in or simply observe discourse, analyses, fan “art,” etc. that all relates back to their favored text which is likely not a common institution in other communities they find themselves to be a part of.

Again, X has long played a role in supporting fan communities (Arvidsson et al. 2016; Bore & Hickman, 2013; Highfield et al. 2013). As previously mentioned, I have conducted two pilot studies assessing what Survivor fandom looks like on X with different methodologies: a content analysis and a discourse analysis. These studies captured weeks-long conversations and sentiments regarding consecutive episodes of a then currently airing season of Survivor as well as the discourse that unfolded during just a single episode of another then currently airing season. These studies demonstrated that platforms like X are not just backchannels to fan communities (Harrington et al., 2013), but rather they are places that house them. These studies have also captured the ever so common act of “live tweeting” where fans will post about and discuss live television as they watch (Deller, 2011). In “live tweeting” it is as if fans are watching something with a greater community no matter who they are or are not physically with. My pilot studies captured this Survivor “live tweeting” and demonstrated a heightened example of this social community category as it brings together fans, contestants, press members, etc. to all discuss new
additions to a show that they care so much about. This is a community that would otherwise not exist without *Survivor*.

This brings me to my research questions which are as follows:

**RQ1**: How do *Survivor* fans express what it means to be a *Survivor* fan?

**RQ2**: How do *Survivor* fans identify themselves and their positions within the fandom?

**RQ3**: How do *Survivor* fan behaviors fit Staiger’s revision of the fan action categories?
CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

Data Collection

For this thesis I used Sarah Tracy’s description of interviews as a methodology (2013) as a way to answer my research questions. As my research questions aim at better understanding how Survivor fans behave and find meaning within the fandom, conducting interviews was the best way to gain insight into the nuances and meanings of being a Survivor fan from individual fan perspectives.

For the sampling for this study, I used a combination of convenience and snowball sampling to create the participant pool. Being a Survivor fan myself for the past thirteen years, I have come to personally know many family members, friends, colleagues, etc. who have identified themselves as Survivor fans. These are the people I contacted first to interview, and from there, I asked if they know of any other Survivor fans who may be interested in participating in this study. Of these close personal relationships, only one of them made it into the final dataset along with a few other participants that I knew personally, but shared little to no past experiences that were Survivor related. Further, in the recruitment process, I drafted a graphic that advertised participation in this study that I shared across social media to reach Survivor fans both inside and outside of my social circles. Additionally, there are members of the Survivor fandom on X and other social media platforms that I have previously interacted with that I also reached out to to build out the participant pool. To minimize bias in interviewing the participants whom I knew personally, I avoided interjecting any of my own opinions or bringing up any past shared experiences (if any existed) between myself and the applicable participants. Further, each participant was asked the same set of questions from the protocol with similar
follow up questions as needed. I did not operate off any prior or assumed knowledge that I had which allowed for each of the participants, no matter the closeness in our relationship (if at all), to speak organically from their own experiences and points of view rather than from ones shared with myself.

The inclusion criteria for people to be considered for participation in this study is as follows. All participants must have been 1.) 18 years of age or older 2.) someone who has watched at least one season of American Survivor live 3.) someone who has seen a minimum of five seasons of American Survivor. This inclusion criteria ensured that all participants were adults who had a decent familiarity with the show while allowing room for varying levels of fans to participate. A superfan who has seen every episode of the show multiple times and is active in online Survivor focused spaces would likely have different perceptions of what it means to be a Survivor fan in comparison to a more casual fan of the show who may watch each season week to week but does not have time to dedicate to more intensive discussions of the show, fan behaviors, etc. Further, by setting the minimum number of seasons seen at five allows for the inclusion of newer fans who are still immersing themselves into Survivor’s extensive catalogue while also having a decent understanding of the show and its surrounding communities and discourse.

Once each participant was contacted, read over the informed consent form, and consented to participation we scheduled a time (and place when necessary) to conduct an interview. One interview took place in person and the rest took place over Zoom in order to best accommodate the needs and schedule of each participant. All interviews, both in person and over Zoom, were fully recorded using Zoom in order to make use of the application’s built-in transcription
services. All materials were only made available to myself and kept on a local hard drive protected by a linguistic and biometric password.

For the actual conducting of the interviews, I used a semi-structured format with a predetermined protocol that was the same across all interviews. Using a semi-structured format for each interview allowed for participants to provide answers for each of the baseline questions while also allowing for a more fluid discussion with room for follow-up questions to expand upon different answers and topics as they emerged. Each interview lasted between 20 and 45 minutes. After data collection was completed, the dataset was comprised of nine participants in total (n=9). Three participants were men, and six participants were women. All nine participants were White, and their ages ranged from early twenties all the way up to mid-fifties. No further demographic data was collected.

**Data Analysis**

Once all interviews were conducted, I began the transcription phase of the study where I also began to analyze the data to see what main themes were emerging across the participants’ answers. As Tracy (2013) as well as Johnny Saldaña (2013) note with qualitative data coding, as I transcribed each interview recording and gathered the transcripts into one document, I took the time to immerse myself in the data and familiarize myself with each answer to each question. Once all of the data was gathered and formatted into one document, I began primary cycle coding by grouping answers to the same questions together and adding descriptive codes to the different ideas and themes that begin to emerge. Alongside the document that contained these transcriptions, I also developed a codebook that organized each of the emerging themes from the primary cycle. Once the primary cycle was completed, three main themes were made evident which left little need
for a full round of second cycle coding and a collapsing the codebook. The following section will introduce these three themes that emerged from this data analysis.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Through conducting the interviews in this study, three major themes became evident.

Two of these themes are strongly informed by past literature: First, that there are different levels of *Survivor* fandom ranging from a casual fan to a superfan; and second, that fans find comfort in the regularity that *Survivor* provides from week to week and from season to season in a fashion very similar to Carey’s ritual communication (1975). The third main theme, which is not reflected in most existing fan studies literature, focused on the role of family. Family is almost always responsible for the introduction to *Survivor* fandom, but it is not always present in continued fandom and fandom maintenance in relation to *Survivor*.

*Theme One: Levels of Fandom*

It became very evident through conducting these interviews that there was no one way to classify each participant as the same type of *Survivor* fan. Some fans were on the more casual side of the spectrum in the sense that they maybe have not seen every season of the show either because they are newer members to the fandom and have yet to explore the backlog of seasons that existed prior to their introduction or because they simply stepped away from the show for various reasons and came back so many seasons later. Participant 4, a White woman in her mid-thirties, was introduced to *Survivor* with season 42 which aired during the spring of 2022. Since her introduction to the show, she’s now watched almost every subsequent live season and, in her free time, gone back to watch an additional nine seasons between season 20 and season 41. She noted that she wanted to go back and watch more seasons of the show, but she simply doesn’t have the time to sit down and power through so many episodes and seasons of television to be fully caught up. Further, she went on to note, “I was watching because they’re nice to just have
on to and like doing dishes or whatever.” Moreover, when asked other questions aimed at gauging her level of fandom in relation to *Survivor*, participant 4 further exemplified her more casual status by answering question 6 of the interview protocol, which asked about how she typically watched *Survivor* each week, by saying:

> But I do have to say, and maybe this was it was 45 too. They were the 90-minute episodes and so many commercials that I was – it kind of changed a little bit for me with Season 45 in that I was watching it like the next day, because 90 minutes with like 30 minutes of commercials was just too much for me.

This demonstrated that she was not as committed to watching a new episode live or as quickly as she could like some more superfans found in the participant pool. Through the lens of the fan behavior of a distinctive mode of reception, participant 4, while still a fan and meeting the inclusion criteria of this study, demonstrated less of a commitment to the routine of watching *Survivor* week in and week out. When asked question 10 of the interview protocol, which asked about what other *Survivor* related media and discourses she had participated in, she responded with:

> Not really, with the exception of, you know, watching and like following on Twitter and seeing what people are saying. That’s definitely something I’d – Like every commercial break I’m like looking to see what do people think about that, or seeing if any memes or clips, or whatever might be – especially with like Carolyn, that was so fun to follow on social media. So, Twitter would be probably the only kind of other form of media than I consume.

While this is representative of some of the fan behavior categories such as a particular interpretive community and an alternative social community in that participant 4 actively seeks
out these supplemental discussions on social media, she does not participate in them. Further, she does not listen to podcasts such as *Rob Has a Podcast* (which other participants have noted they listen to in some capacity). These behaviors are more entry level and casual which speaks to participant 4’s level of fandom. Finally, when asked question 12 of the interview protocol, which asked about what *Survivor* merchandise she had collected, if any, she responded with a simple “I have not … Just because I’m not really a collector in general.” This speaks to a lack of connection between participant 4 and the fan behavior of an extension of fan partialities into everyday living. Rather than bringing *Survivor* more into her life with various merchandise, participant 4 relegates her fandom for the show to simply watching it, viewing relevant online discourse, and participating in the occasional interpersonal discussion of the show such as participating in this study.

On a similar note, participant 5, a White woman in her early twenties, spoke about how she always watched *Survivor* when she was living at home with her parents saying, “So, I actually started watching Survivor when I was pretty young. I don’t know an exact age, but my parents watched it growing up so I would just see it in the background, and it really drew my attention.” However, when she came to college, she “rediscovered [her] love for *Survivor*” and began to really pay attention to the show as it aired live as well as going back to watch seasons she may have missed or not remembered. At the time of our interview, she said that she had seen “roughly 20” seasons in total. Further, when asked question 10 from the interview protocol, participant 5 said the following:

Occasionally, I know Jeff Probst has a podcast, and I’ll see clips from it on occasions. I don’t necessarily seek them out, but I do – I try to keep up. I also scroll on Twitter, as I’m watching live but other than that I’m not actively seeking
out. I do sometimes see, like drama that’s going on bits and pieces, but it’s not something I’m actively seeking.

Like participant 4, participant 5 also takes a casual approach to consuming the show as she also lightly follows along with social media discourse, but it is not something that she deems essential or necessary to her Survivor viewership or fandom. She too has a limited though existent relationship to the categories of a particular interpretive community and an alternative social community. She engages with the behaviors though only at a base level. The final example to offer here to help exemplify participant 5’s casual fan status comes in her answer to question 12 of the interview protocol. She said, “I have not. When I was younger, I definitely wanted a buff. Now I’m at the point I don’t think I would personally want something like that, but I could see why other people would.” Again, like participant 4, this shows participant 5’s lack of deeper engagement into the category of an extension of fan partialities into everyday living. She does not partake in the extra activities and behaviors that would take her to a more engaged fan or even superfan, but she is a fan none the less. Participants like this can be framed more as casual fans, not to be confused with casual audience members, due to their less engaged fan behaviors (ex. Just watching Survivor each week, not following along with or participating in online discussion, not collecting Survivor merchandise, etc.) in relation to Survivor and its related media if at all.

On the other end of the spectrum, some participants could be identified as superfans in the sense that they consume and engage with Survivor at a much higher degree than the more casual fans. Participant 8, a white woman in her late twenties, was introduced to Survivor during the airing of season 37 and has since gone back and watched every season (some multiple times) as well as several seasons from international Survivor franchises. Further, this participant went
on to create a *Survivor* focused TikTok account a few years back where she discusses all things *Survivor* related with those that follow her as well as other notable figures in the fandom whether it be online or in person where she often attends live *Survivor* events. When asked question 10 of the interview protocol, the question that asked about what other *Survivor* related media she consumed, she had this to say:

I used to listen to *[Rob Has a Podcast]* regularly, which is obviously a recap show. I don’t listen to it as much anymore just because I’ve got so much stuff going on in my head, having someone talking on top of it – and just this is just podcast in general for me – is not good for mental health, so I will listen – [my boyfriend] listens to it all the time, and so I’ll still like, listen to if he’s like playing it out loud, I’ll still listen to it there. But I’m not as frequent. But I will always have the – after the episode like, go on Twitter, and just kind of like scroll what people are saying like, what people are posting about all of that stuff. So that’s one way.

Then, speaking on her TikTok account she said:

And then I myself will like recap the shows in different ways on my TikTok and now on my Instagram, but it’s the same video. And I, you know, when the season is airing, live, I will cover one episode pretty much for the entirety of the week. I, you know, talk about my thoughts after the episode, just like off the top of my head. I’ll make it like different kind of memes about it, so like not memes, but like sounds on the TikTok that have to do with that that specific episode. I go through the tweets, and I share the tweets with people. And then I just try to, you
know, talk with people as much as possible about each episode for that week which is really fun.

In this same answer participant 8 went on to talk about how she is actually now part of a small *Survivor* podcast. All of these things exemplify how she is heavily engaged in the particular interpretive community and alternative social communities associated with *Survivor* fandom. Further, she takes this engagement further by creating pieces of media that can be classified as being part of the particular artworld category. She finished her response to this question by saying:

I no longer consume as much. I mean, I still consume a lot. But I don’t consume as much like podcasts and stuff because that’s like a big way for – that people get those recaps. But I definitely try to engage with conversation along the – with this like community online, as much as I possibly can for the week. And I’ll do things like I’ll post the reaction … of how we felt about the vote out. I will … go through a rundown of all of the like twitter like things that I see that are interesting, and I’ll share that because a lot of people will have like thoughts that I won’t have … I don’t know if you know who Mike Bloom is., but Mike Bloom is incredible, and he's not on TikTok … I like share his thoughts as much as I possibly can … I talked to him once, and I was like, ‘I’m really like, I hope you’re okay that I’m doing this.’ He’s like, ‘I don’t use TikTok. Get it out there.’ So, I just wanna make sure that everyone can kind of get that kind of … sense of community as much as they possibly can. And it’s just like, you know, it’s basically all about stuff where I just kind of want to engage with people as much as I possibly can for that essentially week of content after the episode.
In this sense participant 8 has become a sort of informal mentor as Jenkins described in his concept of participatory culture (2009) by committing to creating and engaging with the online Survivor fandom. These practices engage with multiple of the fan behaviors that Jenkins and Staiger (1992a; 1992b; 2005) highlight at a much higher level than more casual fan behaviors exhibited by other participants like the previously mentioned 4 and 5. In answering question 12 of the interview protocol, participant 8 had this to say:

Yes, we have a bunch of buffs. A ton of buffs. So, I started buying the Merge buffs since season 41 … [my boyfriend] has … all 3 from Heroes vs. Villains. He bought them in real time. They’re very cool. People keep trying to buy them from us, and we are like ‘they are not for sale.’ Like we saw one on sale on eBay for like $800, and I was just like there’s no way that someone’s paying $800 for that, but I guess there they might … And then there wasn’t really much else that we collected. So, we had the merge buffs for a bit, and then I was gifted the – all of the buffs from last season from CBS. And then I think that kind of started something inside of us, and we were like, ‘Oh my God, this is so fun like we love buffs.’ So, for Valentine’s Day we both bought each other a buff like randomly. We didn’t realize that the other person got it, and then, like, I’ll show – Hold on, I’ll show you … This is so funny this is happening now because I didn’t have – all I had was buffs and maybe something else. But I was gifted – Somebody sent me this, and these are – He makes these online, and so, these are replica idols from, I think, One World, Redemption Island, and Heroes vs. Villains. And then this is a hidden immunity idol like the rules. And then this is the J.T., like a replica. J.T. note to Russell.
Alongside these items, participant 8 also noted that she and her boyfriend had also collected other items including mugs, a hat, and various merchandise created by contestants who were on *Survivor*. This interest and level of collection demonstrates a willingness to buy into the categories of a particular artworld and an extension of fan partialities into everyday living. Participant 8 buys into *Survivor* fandom so much that she brings elements of the show, both official and not into her life as she collects this merchandise which a higher level of fandom in comparison to someone who opts to only engage with the original texts and related online discourse.

Another participant from this sample who could be classified as a superfan would be participant 7, a White man in his mid-thirties, as not only has he seen every season of *Survivor* (most of them multiple times through), but he has also amassed a large collection of *Survivor* merchandise (including actual props from the show) and even runs a popular *Survivor* fan account on X which has gained several thousand followers. When asked question 10 of the interview protocol, he said the following:

I was really big on the message boards back around seasons 12 to 24. *Survivor Sucks* was a big one, a lot of the ORG (online reality game) games we played on like pro boards, message boards, and AIM messaging, and some people in my life that I still follow on Facebook and talk to every once in a while, were people I’ve met playing these games. So that’s a big way that I stay in contact. I know we mentioned the Twitter account. I enjoy going on the Reddit accounts, and really the inside jokes that we all have. If I were to say some quote to someone who’s not a big *Survivor* fan, but they watch a few seasons of – they’re like, “I have no
idea what you’re talking about,’ but I could make a one- or two-word statement on Twitter or Reddit and the Survivor community knows what I’m talking about.

Here, participant 7 discussed various Survivor related activities he’s participated in over the years which have helped him further express and engage with his fandom for the show. As his fandom goes further back than other participants in this study, he has become more well versed in some more niche Survivor related items which speaks to his participation in the interpretive community and alternative social community categories associated with Survivor. These are more involved means of participation than has been seen with the casual fan exemplars. Also, in this answer participant 7 makes note of the Survivor fan account that he runs on X. In a follow-up question to this answer where I asked about how he got to creating the account and why he chooses to maintain it he said:

So, when I created the Twitter account … if I reflect back, and I say that Survivor is like an old friend. It’s that constant that’s in my life, and it’s the one thing that no matter how bad of a week I had, I knew Wednesday night I had an hour of happiness coming. So, it was – some of my friends would say, ‘Oh, I can’t wait to go. Have a drink on Friday night. I can’t wait to do whatever,’ and for me it was like, ‘I can’t wait to just have an hour to myself to enjoy my favorite show.’ So, I remember it was fall of 2014. I was working as a substitute teacher. I had no full-time job. My girlfriend had left me. I was totally just heartbroken, and I said, ‘What brings joy to my life?’ And I said, ‘Survivor does.’ And I said, ‘How can I interact with people and kind of keep this feeling of joy going?’

After using this narrative to set the scene, participant 7 went on to explain why X was the platform he chose to use to create his fan account. He said:
So, I went on Twitter, and I was like, ‘I wonder if there’s some kind of way that I can incorporate Survivor?’ And so, I clicked the hashtag because I had never used Twitter before, and I saw a bunch of things, and someone had posted – It was an account based on Will & Grace and it was someone who posted Karen Walker quotes, and I thought it was hilarious. And I remember thinking, ‘What if someone did this with Survivor?’ So, I started looking for Survivor quotes, and there was a few but nothing major. And I said, ‘Alright, then I’m gonna do it.’ And when I woke up every morning and I was depressed or sad I went on my phone and I wrote down quotes I remembered, and I saved them in my drafts tweets. And then throughout the day I would get the real quote along with a picture sometimes, or a GIF. And the reaction I got in the beginning was like, ‘Oh, I remember that. I remember this.” And it was just able – that conversation was able to be started, and whether or not it was someone who just liked it, retweeted it, or a previous player commented or said something, I got joy out of it.

Participant 7 continued reflecting on the growth of his account and its surrounding community over the years by saying:

And it just kind of snowballed, and it kept growing. And then one day I woke up, and I was like, ‘I have 1,000 followers. I wonder how much like further this can go.’ And so, I started live tweeting. I started pulling out more tweets of more popular moments or even quotes that I thought were funny that really weren’t well known. And the reaction was just really positive. And it was a good outlet for real life stress. And now it’s just it. It’s my longest relationship.
Like participant 8, participant 7 has also taken to creating a space for I and others to discuss *Survivor* online. Again, this is representative of being a fandom mentor à la participatory culture (Jenkins, 1992a & 1992b), but also it again maps onto the fan behavior categories of a particular interpretive community and an alternative social community as this X account provides a place for *Survivor* fans to come together, speak on, and enjoy their common interest. However, this is more of a superfan behavior as most casual fans likely are not taking the time to create and run social media accounts for *Survivor*. This act takes a level of dedication and love for the show. Another thing that that can help identify participant 7 as super fan is what he refers to as his “*Survivor* Museum.” As seen with participants 4 and 5, they have elected not to buy into or collect any *Survivor* merchandise. Participant 8 has collected a few things up to the point of our interview, but participant 7 by far has the most extensive *Survivor* collection. When asked question 12 of the interview protocol, again, the question that asked about the collection of *Survivor* merchandise, he said:

So, I remember my first item I ever bought was the generic *Survivor* hat which is over there [gestures towards hat]. It’s just a generic symbol. So, I wore that because I have these cowlicks on my hair. So, I always wore a baseball cap because I was always bullied by it. And I was like, ‘I’m going to wear something that I love.’ And then family members would buy me T-shirts from *Survivor* – from the CBS store, and then DVDs. And so, I had a little *Survivor* collection, and then they always advertise the eBay at the end of every season, and I was in middle school/high school. I didn’t have any money, so finally, after *Cook Islands* aired, I had my mom’s credit card, and I bought the boat paddle that’s above me over there. Yeah. So, it’s up there. So that was a couple hundred dollars, and I
charged it to my mom’s credit card and all hell broke loose. And she was like ‘I’m taking the money out of your savings account!’ And of course, I was not happy about that. But then I was like, ‘Wait, I’m gonna have something that was actually on the show.’ So that was the start of the Survivor Museum. And I’ve been collecting now probably since Cook Islands. I’ve been trying to get – whether or not it’s a real prop, or from the CBS store – just a little bit of something, and I keep it all in this – this is my childhood bedroom in the house that I bought. So, I have all my stuff on display, and for a while I was collecting autographs. But there’s so many people that I was like … ‘I’m gonna go broke doing this.’ I never got big into buff collecting, because that’s also a really expensive hobby, but the last, probably 6 or 7 years, I’ve been focused on finding props from the show. So that’s been fun, and just to hold it and be like, ‘Oh, my God. I saw this on TV, and it's actually here.’ It’s been a joy, and I have a flag from Guatemala that I bought at a garage sale for like $10, because the woman didn’t know it was real, and she’s like it came with this envelope. And so, I opened it, and it was the certificate of authenticity. She was like, ‘Oh, my son bought this! But he moved out and doesn’t want it,’ and I was like, ‘Oh, my God! Like this was Danni Boatwright’s!’ So, it’s fun. Now, when I rewatch old seasons, I’m like, ‘That’s mine. I have that. That’s on display in my room.’

This commitment to collection alone is characteristic superfan fan behavior. It is a quintessential extension of fan partialities into everyday life as not only has participant 7 collected large quantities of Survivor merchandise, but he’s gone as far as participating in online auctions to purchase real props from the show. Then, to organize all of these items into a “museum” named
after the show has brought *Survivor* into his physical life more than any of the other participants in this study. When I asked what his favorite thing he had in his museum, he responded with:

I was actually wondering that the other day because some of these things I have insured secondary through my homeowners and policy, because say, God forbid something happens – like I’ve spent, probably like $15,000 on props. So, I have two that are my favorite. I have – or three. I have the paperweight that held down the votes for *Heroes vs. Healers vs. Hustlers* yeah. So, I have that from tribal council. I have Amber’s fire token chest from *Winners at War*, so that one was really fun for me, because *The Australian Outback* was the first like big season … It was like the first season I really fell in love with, because *Borneo* – No one really understood the game until the end. But *The Australian Outback* was such a big cultural moment that I loved. And then *Winners at War* came, and I was so excited. I think every *Survivor* fan was like ‘We’re going to see a season of all winners.’ So, to have something from that season is just – It’s one of my favorite things, and I got it as a gift for getting my master’s degree. So, it was a personal accomplishment, also a childhood dream kind of put together. So, I love that, and then to branch off on that same kind of theme of loving *The Australian Outback*. I have Jerri’s – It’s down there – The challenge disc from one of the individual challenges. So those are my 3 favorite, and I just sometimes I’ll come in here after having a bad day, and I’m like, ‘Oh, my God like – I love it … like it’s unreal.’

The fact that participant 7 has collected these items from the show and they can elicit emotional responses is something that just is not found with casual fans of *Survivor*. Comparing these superfans in participants 8 and 7 to the more casual fans in participants 4 and 5 shows that while
all the participants can be labeled as *Survivor* fans there is a clear distinction between the levels in which one can be identified as a *Survivor* fan.

*Theme Two: Ritual Communication*

Several of the participants noted at one point or another that they actively look forward to new episodes each week and having *Survivor* as a part of their weekly routine. Every participant said that they have been watching either live or the day after if and when necessary for anywhere between 4 and 45 seasons depending on the participant with the exceptions of participant 4 who stopped watching season 45 (the most recent complete season at the time of writing) about halfway through for reasons of not having time and participant 9, a White woman in her early fifties, who prefers to let a handful of episodes or even seasons build up before she can sit down and binge watch several episodes in one sitting. This active anticipation of new episodes each week is evocative of James Carey’s ritual communication (1975) in the sense that each participant is not watching *Survivor* each week for some practical reason or to learn something new (aside from how the season’s narrative will progress) but rather they focus on watching the show for the sense of happiness, comfort, etc. that it provides them each week. Watching *Survivor* week in and week out helps fans affirm and maintain their identities as *Survivor* fans just like attending church or some other religious service each week does the same thing for religious people. When asked about their weekly watching habits with question 6 of the interview protocol, some participants, like participant 5, spoke of how ritual communication does not manifest in their practices:

I don’t – I don’t have any rituals. I usually do watch alone. Sometimes my roommates will come in like this past season I kind of got them involved in it. My roommate actually knew one of the cast members. So yeah. So, she knew Jake
from the recent season. So that kind of pulled her attention a little bit. But usually, it’s alone.

Aside from that, her watching experiences were typically by herself with no other specifics or rules. Participant 3, a White woman in her mid-thirties, also noted how when she was in college, she would leave from spending time with her friends or leave work early to make sure she was home in time to watch the newest episode of *Survivor* live. However, now, as a mother, she said that she usually does not have time to watch new episodes until the day after by herself during her children’s naptime. She elaborated by saying:

Earlier, when I was younger and still living with my parents, ‘cause I’m 35 now, it was always *Survivor* night. We had – we, you know, made a dinner that we could eat in the living room, and we always like – even once I started working, I would leave work about 5, 10 minutes early so I could run home – so I can get home in time for *Survivor*. My bosses never knew that, but there it is. And then, as I got older, my college roommates would make fun of me ‘cause I didn’t care where I was. It was like, ‘No. Sorry it’s *Survivor*. I gotta go.’ And then, now I have to watch it on Paramount Plus because getting my kids to bed on time is *Survivor* itself. So, I’ll watch it on Paramount Plus usually during nap time or something like that, and it’s just me. My husband is not into it, and he tried to make fun of me because I get into it – like the challenges. I’ll sit there and I’ll cheer and stuff like that. And he tried to make fun of me once. I was like, ‘Hmm, no. I hear you during football like yeah, I don’t wanna hear that. You have football, I have *Survivor*. You go to your little sports things, and I’ll go to mine.’
But yeah, now it’s just I try to – I make sure I watch it every week, but I just try to fit it into whatever hectic schedule is going on that week.

Other participants have much stricter regiments when watching such as participant 7 who said that when he watches a new episode all lights must be off, no candles can be lit, no distractions are allowed, and he does not eat and anyone else watching with him, typically his wife, cannot eat loudly. He went on to say that:

My wife, or girlfriend at the time, moved in, and she started watching. And she had never really watched the show, and she quickly learned no talking. No questions is my biggest thing. If someone’s like, ‘Wait! What’d they say?’ Or ‘Oh, he’s going to do this!’ ‘No!’ No talking ‘til the commercial. I don’t want armchair commentary…

No matter the watching setup participants choose for themselves or find themselves in, they are ultimately there to keep up with each new season as it airs.

Further, when asked question 8 from the interview protocol, the question that asked why *Survivor* has been something that participants can continue to enjoy after so many years and seasons, many participants responded with something to the effect of they enjoy knowing generally what to expect because *Survivor* does more or less follow the same format every season but also having something new to see with a new set of contestants and circumstances. Participant 8 noted how no season of *Survivor* could ever be the same even if it took place with the same contestants, in the same place, with the same twists, etc. *Survivor* will always be different from episode to episode and from season to season despite operating out of the same concept and structure for the past twenty plus years. To explicate these answers further, participant 1, a White man in his mid-fifties, noted that he enjoys seeing the different
personalities and challenges and almost living vicariously through the contestants. Participant 2, a White man in his mid-twenties, said:

Yeah, it – my answer is kind of different than what it maybe even could have been a couple of years ago. ‘Cause I’d always, you know, people referred to Survivor and like Jeff, referred to it as like it wasn’t just a game. It was like the greatest social experiment. And so that was the reason I loved it at first. And so then, even though that’s kind of like, I would argue, it’s not a social experiment at all anymore. It is really just like a game I think where they cast people who aren’t just from different walks of life, but they’re just like almost all nerds that watch the show at this point. So, I’m not really a hundred percent sure why I stick with it. I don’t think there’s a point where I would ever give up on the show even though some of the past few seasons haven’t been great because I always think that, you know, I have such nostalgic feelings for the show and the whole 20 something seasons that I’ve been watching it that it can always be great. And it’s always – even if it’s not – what’s the – it’s like the – the bad slice of pizza is still good. Like even bad seasons of Survivor – it’s still in some ways the show that I fell in love with 20 years ago. Not 20 years ago, 20 seasons ago.

Participant 3 still enjoys viewing Survivor as a social experiment and watching people who are often overlooked in real life triumph on the show. She said:

Because, like – like I said before, it’s taking a very small sample size of society and forcing them to kind of interact in a way that they haven’t before, and especially now with as divisive as our country is, I like that they’re bringing in more and more diversity. And I like that, as a whole, Survivor takes the hierarchy
of needs that I mentioned before where, you know, you have the bottom, which is your basic food, shelter, blah blah all the way up to the need for acceptance, the need for approval. You know all these other like – and it touches on every single form of the hierarchy of needs. But it not only touches on it, it shows how a person in general will fight for the different levels. So, some people fight for power. Some people fight for acceptance. Some people fight for approval. So, I like that Survivor as a whole shows different focal points of society and what people end up needing more. … Survivor as a whole takes a person’s background and kind of just sees if people use it to their strength or their weakness like is to gonna be something that pushes them forward or brings them down kind of. And to me I just love the psychology behind Survivor and every season seeing the different forms of it manifests itself. So that’s – I think it’s awesome.

Participant 4 said she enjoyed watching the different characters and how their stories played out as well as “the ritual of having something to watch or do every week” which is again reminiscent of Carey (1975). Participant 5 has also enjoyed watching characters as well as strategy develop from week to week and season to season. Participant 6, a White woman in her early twenties, said she enjoys Survivor so much because it just feels so much more authentic than any other reality show such as Big Brother. But it was participant 7 who captured this sense of familiarity best when they said:

This is gonna make me sound weird but it it’s like an old friend that I’ve had for 24 years, and I know what to expect. But I don’t … So, there’s a frame. There’s a scaffold there of ‘Okay. So, I know some general ideas. There’s gonna be challenges. There’s gonna be backstabbing. There’s gonna be friendships. There’s
going to be tribal council … But what else?’ So how does that fill in? So, it feels like a constant with – it feels like a constant variation of the same thing but in such a way that it’s still different. So, I love that ability to watch something with a general outline and not go into it blind, but I don’t know everything, right?

Lastly, though participant 9 has stopped watching new seasons live several years back, she did say:

No. Like usually I’m not watching … since you can stream it. I’m not watching it live. I usually save it. My favorite is if I save a couple of episodes, and then I can do it like on Friday or Saturday. But so that’s like now I’m not even looking when it’s gonna start, because I want several seasons to pile up so I can watch several episodes to pile up … It’s more like I would save it for Friday night for that, ‘Oh, I’m done with work like I want to enjoy it,’ or that kind of thing.

All of these participants have something about Survivor that they find either enjoyable or comforting that allows for them to keep watching even though they know that a group of strangers are going to be living out in the wilderness and working together and against one another in a fight for one million dollars.

Theme Three: Family

The final theme from the transcripts was the role that family has played with integrating these participants into the Survivor fandom. Every participant had an anecdote of some sort about how they began watching Survivor with their family or a loved one. Sometimes their family stopped watching with them or watching all together, and sometimes family was a structure that helped facilitate a maintenance of Survivor fandom (or even the other way around). Participant 1 spoke of how his wife or daughters would occasionally watch with him, but he
would regularly watch with his son when he was living at home. Further, *Survivor* has allowed for him to reconnect with a cousin who he otherwise does not have a lot in common with. Participant 2 got started watching *Survivor* because his parents had been watching for some time, and that is what enticed him and his sister to also pick up the show as a weekly family viewing event. He said:

Yeah, I think – I don’t remember what year that was, so I don’t remember what age I would have been then, but I watch *Survivor* with my family. And, so, I think my parents were watching it. My mom had been watching seasons before that, and so I’m not sure what made me like pick it up. And just that was what we started watching as a family, but I eventually did. And we sat down, and *Survivor* was like one of the shows we would watch together. We were big into like, you know, *Survivor, American Idol*, watching all of those kind of at like, the peak of weekly reality TV.

Participant 3 said a neighbor had told her family in the spring of 2000 about this brand-new show where this group of people were left on an island to survive so her entire nuclear family had to sit down every week and watch how the events unfolded while also making a dinner that was suitable for sitting in front of the television and not at the dining room table. She elaborated by saying:

We were on a family vacation in Myrtle Beach. I think I was – Okay so it was 23 years ago – crap. So, okay I was 10 or 11 or something like that, and we just had a neighbor tell us about it and say, ‘Hey this show’s kinda funny,’ because season one was kind of like no holds barred. Reality TV wasn’t a thing yet. So, they’re like hey, ‘They just dropped these people off on an island and they’re trying to
survive.’ And season one had a guy named Richard Hatch who just went rouge, and just walked around naked. And then there was another guy whose name I forget, it was like Rudy or something like that. He was an old Navy Seal and just hated Richard and no – They were telling us about like all of that, and my dad I just remember going – he’s former military – And he was just like, ‘Hell yeah, let’s watch that.’ So, so we did. We sat down and watched one episode and it was just the coolest thing of like – it was new. It was a reality show – “reality” – and yeah. They had us from the first go around where someone was naked on an island.

Participant 4 said:

So, my family just happened to be in town. [My daughter] was in a musical, and they were about to start there. They always do like a bet where they pick winners – $2 in, or something like that. And each week you get points, if your people are still in – whatever, and they were like, ‘Do you want to join?’ And I was like, “Sure I’ve never watched Survivor, sounds fun.’ And so, it was family, I guess, that got me into it.

Participant 5 explained that her parents always watched Survivor when she was growing up and it was always something she was sort of interested in and that reinforcement of seeing it on the television every week is what ultimately prompted her to follow through in watching the show with them and eventually when she was living on her own. Participant 6 said that she was a fan of The Amazing Race before she was a fan of Survivor. However, as both shows are CBS properties, she saw advertisements for Survivor as well as the fact that she saw her family, specifically her parents, watching Survivor and she became more invested in the show as she
became more able to comprehend that game mechanics present in a given season. Further, to this day, she still texts with her brother about each new episode as it airs. Participant 7 notes that he was about 10 years old when the first season premiered and his family had been following the advertisements for the show, so they were the ones who prompted his whole family to sit down and see what this new show was about. Participant 8 told a story about how she was always a person who would make fun of *Survivor* and said things like “Oh, that show is still on?” It was not until she met her boyfriend who was a *Survivor* fan that she actually sat down to watch the newest season at the time, season 37, that she understood why people were still watching and why the show was still running. Finally, participant 9 said that she began watching *Survivor* during its first season with her sister, but now she primarily watches alone.

While this was not a foreseen theme coming into this study, it is a remarkable finding that each of these participants was introduced to *Survivor* either by or with their family. There is so many ways one can be introduced to a new show from a commercial to an algorithm recommendation, but each and every one of the participants in this study all had some sort of familial influence to facilitate their introduction. Whether it was a family member who was already a fan that wanted to share *Survivor* or a united family all sitting down to watch *Survivor* together for the first time, family played a role in every instance here. Seemingly those old enough to watch and comprehend the show at its time of premiere were there for season 1 along with their family (with the exception of participant 4; she was a *Big Brother* fan long before *Survivor* was on her radar), and those who were not old enough (or even born) at the time were exposed to it as they grew up by their parents consumption in the “background.” Another important thing to note here is that common subtheme tends to be that the participants’ families have almost always stopped watching the *Survivor* alongside them. Family tends to be an
introductory mechanism for *Survivor* fandom, but rarely is that mechanism maintained.

Participant 1’s wife may have started watching *Survivor* with him and may occasionally watch new episodes now, but there was a large gap where she stopped watching and his son was not yet old enough to watch with him. Participant 2’s parents have largely stopped watching all together, and he usually can only text his sister about it as they are not physically together watching.

Participant 3’s family all stopped watching early on in *Survivor*’s life span, her husband does not watch, and she only argues with her in-laws about the show and its coverage of social issues when they do talk about it. Participant 4’s family does still watch the show, but they only text about it from time to time and her daughter and boyfriend were both uninterested in watching with her. Participant 5 does not watch with her family anymore. Participant 6 has the same situation as participant 2. Participant 7 said:

So, I started watching [season 1] with my parents, and I think they fell off by episode 4. And then, they rejoined 2 weeks later, but I never missed an episode because it was summer break … But I was like, ‘No, I want to watch this because I was such a fan of Rudy. And he was just this old cranky guy who was out there. And I was like, if this guy is 72 years old, like, I’m gonna watch this guy die on TV, like, this is wild.’ So yeah, it started off as a family show, and I would say that it continued – I continued watching it with my family for the first 5 or 6 years, and then I continued watching it on my own, because I was in interested by the challenges, the survival aspect.

Now his wife watches with him, but only if she abides by his rules for watching a new episode. Participant 8 does still watch *Survivor* with her boyfriend, but it was because he was a longtime dedicated fan when he introduced her to the show. Finally, even though participant 9’s sister has
since stopped watching, she said “My sister like kind of fell off and like never got back. But if she’s visiting and I’m watching, then I was going to be like, ‘Yeah, we are going to watch it now, like. And you’re watching.’”

On the whole, however, even if family members still watch Survivor, it becomes almost a solitary act of fandom for these participants in the sense that they are often physically watching alone after their family loses interest or discontinues their consumption of the show. Even if they do have family to share in the fandom this tends to only take place through mediums such as text which is a different from of engagement as opposed to sitting in front of the same television an watching a new episode play out together. Either way, each of these participants did not stumble across Survivor and become a fan organically. They had some form of family make a decision to engage with the show together, and that is a common thread across this study.
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION

Levels of Fandom

What this theme ultimately revealed was how Jenkins and Staiger’s six fan action categories (1992a; 1992b; 2005) manifested in a Survivor fandom context. While each of these six categories were certainly represented amongst the participants, they were not equally represented across the board. The level of engagement from participant to participant across each of these categories clearly varies, but each participant can ultimately be identified as a Survivor fan both by the inclusion criteria that allowed for them to participate in this study by also by themselves and the answers they provided across their interviews.

For the first category, a distinctive mode of reception, each of the participants clearly had a way in which they chose to watch Survivor up to this point. Staiger noted that fans view their favored shows “faithfully,” (2005, p. 98), and that is seen here with Survivor fans. While some participants like 4 and 9 may have previously ceded their weekly live viewings of the show, they have proven to be the exception. Most participants elected to be committed to watching live weekly or just a day later if they have to. Further, while some of them simply watch Survivor while it is on, others have hard rules in what can and cannot be done during a viewing of a new episode. In terms of supplemental material consumption, many participants expressed that they would go on social media either during or after a new episode would air either to discuss the new events or simply lurk (Costello & Moore, 2007). With participants 7 and 8 they have even gone as far to creating and sharing Survivor related content with their online audiences to add to a viewing experience that is more than just watching a new episode of television (Berry, 2006; Salvati, 2015). This helps replicate Jenkins’ participatory culture (2009) within the participants’
(usually) weekly watching habits. Lastly, with *Survivor* being a program that is able to be streamed, many of the participants have been able to watch seasons they had not seen prior to their introduction to the show or even rewatch seasons that have seen before.

Next, with a particular interpretive community, Staiger describes how fandoms have a tendency to develop networks of individuals in which they can discuss and contextualize their respective source texts (2005), and that can be seen in this study with *Survivor* fans. Jenkins also builds on this with the concept of participatory culture (2009) in that these networks are often informal and easy to enter. In this study it has been seen that people like participants 7 and 8 have centered themselves as opinion leaders of sorts by creating spaces online to discuss *Survivor* and these are the same spaces where people like participants 4 and 5 may find themselves perusing as they scroll during and/or after a new episode. Since platforms such as X work as a supplement to the *Survivor* viewing experience (Deller, 2011), fans can easily engage with others as to whatever degree they are most comfortable with. Some fans may choose to not engage with online discourse like participants 1 and 9, some fans might lurk like participants 4 and 5, and some fans may take to participating in discussion and creating content like participants 7 and 8.

The category of consumer activism was far less represented in and relevant to the participants’ answers. Staiger outlines this category as being representative of fans’ advocacy for causes in relation to the show (2005). No participant raised any concern with *Survivor* ending any time soon or expressed a desire to fight for *Survivor* to stay on the air when the time might come for it to end (Guerrero-Pico, 2017). Further, when asked about how they perceived the various social issues (Scott, 2019) discussed on *Survivor* with question 12 of the interview protocol, many participants agreed that it was a good thing to see them discussed on the show but
that these we not issues that they either were not aware of or issues that they previously negatively regarded. The most significant answer in terms of activism came from participant 7 who provided two powerful anecdotes about how Survivor has provided a sense of activism for his own like. In the first anecdote he talked about how Survivor shed some new light on the Muslim faith for him. He said:

My father was in the [New York City Fire Department] as a firefighter for 22 years, and he was injured on 9/11. He was there when everything happened, and thankfully he survived. But he was injured. So that happened when I was in fifth grade, and I went along with the majority of America and blaming certain groups and buying into the Islamophobia. And I can admit that now, but I'm so ashamed of that. And then I remember watching Palau, where Ibrahim is there, and he was the first Muslim or open Muslim contestant on TV. There may have been a few that I’m misremembering right now, but he was the first one to pray on … reality TV. But when he was off on his own, because he didn't even feel comfortable praying in front of his tribe I realized, ‘Wait. I judged a whole group of people, and I didn't know anyone. I only knew the negative things the media had shown me,’ but I didn't know anyone that was Muslim or practiced Islam. And as corny as it sounds to say like, ‘Oh, I saw a guy on Survivor that practiced Islam’ like now I was able to see someone who did, and it was interesting for me and kind of being able to reflect on my biases. And then it was also interesting to see, like Omar in 42 was praying, but he wasn't afraid to pray in front of everybody. So is that a shift in our culture or is that just Omar's perspective that he's able to feel safe. So, it's an interesting question, because you want people to feel safe in their
religion that they can pray in front of others. So, I just think, from Palau in 2005 to 42 in twenty twenties – 15 years, but I think 15 years of reality TV has allowed people to see more groups of people that they wouldn't have seen in person.

Immediately following this anecdote, participant 7 went on to provide another one about how Survivor allowed for his brother to come to terms with his sexuality. He continued by saying:

Yeah … like, my brother realized that he was gay when he watched Brandon in Africa, and I wouldn't say realized, but realized that he could be out and that he was not – He was not in danger. And so, when he came out to me it was right around the merge in Africa, and I said I had no idea. And he was like, ‘I wasn't ever going to tell anyone because I was ashamed, but then I saw Survivor,’ … and we talked about this years later. This wasn't like in the moment, but he said to me he was like ‘When I first saw Brandon being somewhat flamboyant in Africa to 2001 standards, and people didn't want him dead,’ he was like ‘That gave me the strength,’ and I think at the time I was in like third or fourth grade, and I was like, that doesn't make sense. But then, as I grew up, I was like, ‘Wait, I get it.’ …

Yeah. I don't wanna speak for my brother, but that's – I'm just basing off what he had told me.

Though this quote is long, it exemplifies the power that a television show like Survivor can have on fans. Though this answer can be considered an outlier in the data, it shows that this category of fan behavior is not misrepresentative of Survivor fans but rather it is just not the most prominent category, a least among the participants here.

The next category for fan behavior is the particular artworld in relation to fandom.

Staiger categorizes this as fan creation of materials based off a source text (2005) whether that be
shrine creation (Doss, 1999), fan art (Bacon-Smith, 1992), fan fiction (Hedrick 2021), etc. In the instance of Survivor fandom, this study found that these behaviors are on the more extreme side of fan behaviors when it comes to Survivor fans. More casual fans like participants 4, 5, and 9 have elected to not engage in these behaviors while, again, the superfans like participants 7 and 9 have clearly taken to contributing to the Survivor artworld by developing their online presences and even creating the “Survivor Museum.” Even the fans who fall more in between casual and superfans do not really engage in these behaviors like participants 2 and 3. On the whole, the fans in this study largely choose to favor consumption and discussion of Survivor as opposed to making contributions to any sort of “artworld.”

Similarly, when it comes to an extension of fan partialities into everyday living, Staiger creates this category to exemplify how fans bring elements of things like their favorite show into, as she says, their everyday lives (2005). Clearly this can be seen with participants like 7 and 8 who have made Survivor central parts of their lives. Participant 7 even said at one point:

This is something that I've discussed with a therapist, but I think the fact that I started watching Survivor at so young and it's been a constant in my life that I have like secondhand fear of closeness with some people because I always feel like there's some kind of issue with trust, and I think that stems from watching Survivor and watching people backstab their best friends for years. So, I don't act on it, but I just know like when someone's talking to me, I'm like, ‘Wait, what's your motive here,’ so it's ‘Can I trust you?’ And at the end of the day, I'm able to separate the two.

While these are more extreme examples, other participants have mentioned that they have collected a piece of merchandise or two. Many participants have mentioned, though not so
frequently, they have used *Survivor* as a talking point to mediate conversations they may have with new acquaintances like participant 4, coworkers like participants 6 and 9, and the occasional family member who might still watch or keep up with *Survivor*. They may not necessarily be having or attending *Survivor* watch parties like participant 8, but things like social media and streaming allow for these fans to keep up with a sort of *Survivor* community no matter how new of a fan they are or how big of a fan they are. *Survivor* is always accessible in some way, shape, or form so fans, no matter their level of engagement, can stay connected to fandom at large.

This brings me to the final category of fan behavior, an alternative social community, which Staiger states is the overarching community that encapsulates a fandom (2005). As alluded to in the previous section, each fan, thus each participant, fits into the overall *Survivor* community in different ways. Participants like 1 and 9 may not utilize social media to supplement their viewing experiences, but they still have people in their lives to talk to when the occasion arises whether that be with a son, cousin, sister, or coworker. Others may simply browse social media to see others’ opinions and how they stack up to their own like participants 5 and 6. More dedicated fans actively participate in and foster *Survivor* related discourse in order to help encourage and maintain community. Participant 8 said “I think it's such a niche interest that the community might not be the biggest community in the world, but it's a very dedicated group of people.” Though this dedication may vary from fan to fan, every participant felt that they had their own place in the overall *Survivor* community.

*Ritual Communication*

This theme largely emerged in a form similar to James Carey’s idea of ritual communication (1975) and also alongside the fan behavior category of a distinctive mode of reception (Jenkins, 1992a & 1992b; Staiger, 2005). A large driving force for these participants to
watch *Survivor* week in and week out is the sense of enjoyment and familiarity that comes with each new episode which many of the participants could identify themselves in a uses and gratifications sort of way (Katz et al., 1973). Looking at Hall’s encoding and decoding model (1973), the *Survivor* showrunners have been consistently creating a show out of more or less the same format for over twenty years now. Sure, mechanics of the show have changed over the years, but the premise is still the same. In many ways season 46 of *Survivor* is still the same show that season 1 was. Fans are not getting series long narratives for the same characters as they would with a show like *Grey's Anatomy* (which was another one of participant 7’s favorite shows), yet they keep coming back. They decode something new from the show each week that is meaningful to them as individuals, but the use of tools such as social media allows for fans like these participants to decode meaning as a community and create a shared understanding of the program as a whole.

Participant 4 outright said that watching *Survivor* was like a ritual for her. Participant 8 likened *Survivor* to “an old friend.” Both of these fans, casual and super, watch and rewatch *Survivor* because they are fans of the show and appreciate the consistency that it can provide for them. Booth notes that fandom becomes ritualistic fans move past being casual viewers of the show (2010) which is what these participants have expressed. Participants like 1 and 3 have said they will not miss an episode if they can help it. Even someone like participant 9 who likes to let episodes build up so she can binge watch them noted that she has a ritual of watching a handful when she’s done with work for the week. These behaviors are exemplary of ritual fan behaviors in that they are not watching *Survivor* when it happens to be on, and they happen to be sitting in front of the television at 8:00 on a Wednesday night. These participants are making a point to watch new episodes in a fashion that suits them and their identity as a *Survivor* fan.
Family

The final theme that emerged from this data was that of familiar integration in that every participant had some anecdote of how they were introduced to Survivor either with or by a family member or loved one. This was unforeseen by the literature as it more so focused on either audiences or fandoms as a whole or the individualistic/community-based behaviors that fans may engage in. Nowhere was family seen as a significant factor in fandom introduction or maintenance. There were mentions of how community can be found after fandom introduction, but, again, there was no real focus on how fans come to enter a fandom and who or what facilitates that. One scholar, Catherine Duncan, does note how the “home” in an often “overlooked” setting for where fandom can be produced and reproduced (2022) and that seems to be pointing to a gap in the literature that this thesis is helping address. It is entirely plausible and likely that there are Survivor fans who were introduced to the show without a familial component, but there is something to be said about the fact that every participant in this study all had family members present for their introduction. Morley does make mention of how the family unit does play a role in the decisions of what television is consumed in the home (2003), but this is not necessarily the same thing as a parent sharing an interest with a child or other loved one.

This common thread highlights something that past fan literature has seemingly missed. Though it may be occasionally noted by scholars like Duncan (2022) and Morley (2003), the theme is largely non-present in past fan research, especially that related to reality television. What the emergence of this theme suggests is that family is an overlooked piece of the metaphorical fandom puzzle that should be more looked at going forward. If family is responsible for getting all nine participants in this study introduced to Survivor, there is clear power that it holds in better understanding fan practices and fandoms at large. Without family,
participants like 5 and 8 might have never become *Survivor* fans had their parents not had it on the television as they were growing up or had their boyfriend introduce them to it respectively.

Participant 8 outright said that she was someone who “used to make fun of *Survivor* and the people that watched it” until her boyfriend made her sit down and watch it with him. This shows how powerful family can be as a mechanic of fandom. It can quite literally bridge a gap that would have not been bridged otherwise. In turn, once introduced, fans then have all the tools they need to find their own identity as a fan whether that be casual, super, or something new all together. That is why the finding of this theme is so significant.
CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSION

This thesis served as a project to better understand fan behaviors and identities in relation to the competition-based reality television show *Survivor*. Using Jenkins and Staiger’s fan action categories framework (1992a; 1992b; 2005) in conjunction with other concepts such as Carey’s ritual communication (1975), I used a semi-structured interview format to sit down with *Survivor* fans to learn about how fandom for the show can manifest between different individuals and what it ultimately means for each participant as an individual. In conducting these interviews three main themes emerged from the data. First, as guided by the literature review, not every participant exemplified fandom for *Survivor* in the same ways or even to the same degree. Different answers from different participants illustrated a sort of spectrum where casual fans who enacted less of the fan behaviors outlined by Jenkins and Staiger (1992a; 1992b; 2005) could be placed on one side of the spectrum while superfans who were much more exemplary of Jenkins and Staiger’s fan action categories could be placed on the other. Every participant in the study met the inclusion criteria and self-identified as a *Survivor* fan, but they did so to different extents. Second, all fans exemplified a sense of ritual communication in the way that they consumed the show. Many of them were methodical in how they needed to watch each new episode live as it was airing while others held off to watch new episodes a day later or several weeks later in a binge-watching session. Either way, all participants showed some agency in how they preferred to watch the show as opposed to someone who could be simply identified as a casual audience member who only watches *Survivor* when it happens to be on but does not seek it out otherwise. Third, and the most surprising, was the theme of family. Though past literature did not point to this, each and every participant was introduced to *Survivor* by a family member. While the
results of this study are not generalizable by nature of it being qualitative research, it is interesting to see this theme of family be present across all of the participants while there is very little research that touches on this mechanism. Therefore, while this thesis does affirm past literature when it comes to fan behaviors and ritual communication, it also sheds some new light on the roles that family can play when it comes to audience and fan studies.

When it comes to limitations for this study, the main one is the small participant pool at nine final participants. A critique of this small of a sample size would be that not enough data could be collected to properly reach saturation. While the inclusion of more participants would have created a more robust dataset, a level of saturation was reached in the sense that many of the participants were providing similar answers to the interview protocol, ex. Everyone mentioned having some specific way they chose to watch *Survivor* each week as well as having a family component present for their introduction to the show. Another limitation to this study was the way in which the sampling was conducted. Due to the time frame for the research to be conducted, convenience and snowball sampling was the most effective method to collect participants in a short amount of time. However, a random sample from a larger participant pool may have generated more diverse and representative sample of members of the *Survivor* fandom.

Finally, when it comes to future directions for research, obviously this study points to the fact that family as a mechanism of fandom is a concept worth researching. Past literature from audience and fan studies did not indicate that family was something to pay attention to when it came to researching *Survivor* fans, yet it was still a unifying theme across all of the participants’ answers. This study highlights a gap in the literature and shows that there is more work to be done to better understand fandom as a whole. Conducting more interviews with *Survivor* fans, reality television fans, and television fans in general may help reveal just how common of a
theme family really is when it comes to fandom. It also may show if this theme of family is unique to specific fandoms or if it is a theme that it more inherent to fandom itself. One final item of note here is the fact while all of the participants in this study did mention their families in some capacity, many of them also noted how their family’s’ interest in the show eventually dropped off while they have continued to maintain their fandom for Survivor to this day. This may also be a point of interest for future research this study may suggest family is more of an introductory mechanic rather than a maintenance one.

In the end, and I told many of the participants this after we completed our interviews, this thesis is my love letter to Survivor and the academic work I have done over the past five years. Every semester since I have been a freshman in undergrad, I have written at least one class paper on Survivor in some way, shape, or form. My first semester of graduate school I wrote a content analysis of what was being said on X about the current airing season of Survivor. That paper provided a basis for a discourse analysis done in a similar fashion for a class the following semester. Both of those papers called for a more intimate look at Survivor fans and what they had to say, and this thesis was the logical next step. Survivor means different things to different people, and it fulfills their various needs. Some fans are the casual ones who look forward to watching their favorite show each week. Some fans are more extreme and have devoted large pieces of their life to watching and talking about Survivor. As a long time Survivor fan myself, I wanted to create a space for understanding fandom in a Survivor context which has largely been overlooked by academia and the masses for the past several years. In offering the findings of this thesis I hope that not only have I displayed my love for the show but also shown that there is still value in the continuation of research concerning Survivor despite it being a show that has been on their air for over twenty years to this point. Survivor has endured for this long thanks to its
dedicated fans like the ones who participated in this study, and it will continue to air as long as they continue to watch as passionately as they have up to now. Participant 7 said it best when he compared *Survivor*’s familiarity to “an old friend” which is seemingly true for fans of the show like me and the participants in this study. It is something we have come to love, and we keep coming back for more.
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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. When did you first start watching *Survivor*?

2. How did you get started watching *Survivor*?

3. How many / which seasons have you seen?

4. Who are some of your favorite contestants?

5. How do you typically watch *Survivor*?
   a. E.X. What is the set up like?
   b. Do you watch live?
   c. Do you watch alone or with anyone?
   d. What do you do you do while you watch?

6. What is your favorite part of a typical episode / season?

7. What makes *Survivor* as a whole so enjoyable?

8. Why are forty plus seasons of *Survivor* with more or less the same format so entertaining?

9. Aside from watching *Survivor* itself, what are some other things you watch or do that are *Survivor* related?
   a. E.X., Do you watch recap shows?
   b. Do you listen to podcasts?
   c. Do you engage in person or online discussions?

10. Have you tried (successfully or not) to get friends, family, etc. to watch *Survivor*?
    a. How and how did it go?

11. Have you collected any *Survivor* merchandise?
a. If so, what?

12. How would you describe your identity as a *Survivor* fan?

13. Is there anything else *Survivor* related you would like to talk about?