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# ***Mad Men* fans speak via social media: What fan voices reveal about the social construction of reality via dramatic fiction**

## **ABSTRACT**

*Fans of complex television dramas often watch because of eudaimonic motivations – the desire to make meaning from media, to explore their own emotions and to learn about the human experience through the exploration of novel experiences that audio-visual fiction affords. This study analyses the psychology of how fans of Mad Men (2007) construct social realities via online discussions of some of the major relationships and storylines on the show. Our primary goal was to understand how fans create reality from fantasy and our focus was on social relationships and individual character analyses. Using a social science approach, we performed both a computer-automated and an expert-driven thematic analysis on 209 fan comments harvested from social media. The automated analysis revealed common emotional expressions, such as associating hate with the character Betty Draper. The expert analysis revealed that many of fans' social media conversations centred on evaluating Don and Betty Draper as parents, spouses and people, either condemning or defending them in each of these roles. Fans were evenly split between Betty*

## **KEYWORDS**

fandom  
social media  
*Mad Men*  
television shows  
blogs  
meaning making  
eudaimonic  
appreciation  
hedonic enjoyment

*supporters and detractors. Betty was most likely to be defended as a person and condemned as a mother. In contrast, three fourths of fans condemned Don. This condemnation was mostly directed towards him as a person and spouse, not as a father. We situate these findings in an interdisciplinary literature and explain the psychology behind why and how fans use fiction both to empathize with others and to explore their own realities. We explain from a positive psychology perspective that our analysis of fans' social media commentary exemplifies how television fandom for complex dramas can be healthy and psychologically beneficial.*

In modern times, ... psychology has become empirical science. As such, it seems to offer no serious role for fictional literature.

(Oatley 1999: 101)

Psychology is a discipline that seeks to understand human behaviour, thoughts and feelings. For more than half a century, the everyday patterns of human behaviour have shifted rather strikingly towards media consumption. The particular delivery system has morphed during that same period from a preference for radio, then television and now to today's convergence culture, where content takes precedence over delivery system (Jenkins 2008). Although not all media content is fictional narrative, viewing stories still makes up a large part of media consumption, with television viewing (if one disregards delivery system) still commanding one of the largest shares of our attention (see Dill-Shackelford, in press, for a review).

In light of the behavioural evidence of the importance of media content in human life, it seems strange that, during the same period, psychology had largely written off the study of human interaction with fiction as failing, 'to meet even minimal standards for empirical psychology' (Oatley 1999: 101). Although we argue that good progress has taken place in the psychological study of human interaction with narrative since Oatley's assertion, this progress is less visible when it comes to the topic of how fans of audio-visual media (such as television) make meaning from their processing of the story both internally and externally, the latter taking place, in part, via social media. This is an important topic because, as we will argue, the psychological process by which fans make meaning from complex television dramas and similar media is psychologically healthy and beneficial.

## **THE ROLE OF STORY IN UNDERSTANDING HUMAN EXPERIENCE**

'Nothing is less innocent than a story'.

(Van Laer et al. 2014: 798)

Throughout human history, we have used story to understand who we are and why we do what we do (Isbouts and Ohler 2013). Paradoxically, we sometimes argue that television is mere entertainment and therefore does not affect us. Decades of research tell us that the truth is quite the opposite (Brenick et al. 2007; Dill 2009). We are drawn to story arcs and we learn from the experiences of fictional characters (Isbouts and Ohler 2013). This learning has been construed in different ways: as narrative persuasion (Costabile and Terman 2013; de Graaf et al. 2012; Han and Fink 2012; Moyer-Gusé and Nabi 2010) which may take place via transportation and/or identification; as Entertainment-Education

(Gesser-Edelsburg and Endevelt 2011; Moyer-Gusé et al. 2011; Slater and Rouner 2002); and, most recently, as audience participation in a social simulation that can result in personal changes in the audience (Djikic and Oatley 2014). It is this last conceptualization that we focus on in this article.

Fans, by definition, deeply engage with a narrative and its characters. Fans make up 'a community of shared meaning', who '... are simultaneously loyal and critical' (Bielby et al. 1999: 37). Meaning making and criticism are both signs that fans are transported into the world of their favourite narratives. In fact, not only do fans become personally absorbed by their favourite narratives, but on a meta-analytic level, they feel – at least partially – that they own the narrative and want to contribute to it (Bielby et al. 1999; Booth 2008; Jenkins 2011). Booth (2008) argues that what he calls the 'media object' – in this case, the show – becomes a part of the fan's identity.

A good deal of fan studies scholarship focuses on analyses of the work of transformative fans: those fans that create fan fiction and fan art and engage in other fannish activities (Hellekson and Busse 2014). The fan commentaries we address here, however, mostly exemplify the contributions of affirmative fans: fans who enjoy analysing and discussing popular media. While the online conversations engaged in by these fans are certainly social in nature, we use them to examine personal fandom (Dill-Shackleford, in press), or the individual's *experience with* the fan object. It is this more internal facet of the psychology of fandom that concerns us here.

## **FANDOM AS MEANINGFUL ENTERPRISE**

A great deal can be understood about human psychology by analysing how individuals think and feel in the context of a favourite pop culture narrative. Critics have derided fans on the grounds that they invest too much energy in television shows or movies – marked as trivial entities! Furthermore, these critics wonder why a healthy person would waste valuable time thinking about people and events that are 'not real' (see Dill-Shackleford, in press, for a discussion).

This article positions itself in direct contradiction to the assertion that being a fan is a shameful waste of time. We argue that it is the deep processing of a fictional narrative, such as a television show, that forms the basis of a fandom and that this can be psychologically healthy and beneficial. This argument is based on theoretical work (Bartsch and Beth Oliver 2011; Djikic and Oatley 2014; Djikic et al. 2009; Oatley 1999; Oliver and Bartsch 2011) that has not, to our knowledge, been brought to bear on the study of television fandom as we present it here.

One popular understanding of the fan's attachment to the object of interest is that the fan is overly engaged with a fantasy that is irrelevant to her real life. This is a misguided argument. First, let us address the 'reality' of fiction. As everyone has experienced, film and television can draw us in emotionally. We cry during the dramatic climax, we worry about predicaments the characters find themselves in and breathlessly await the resolution to those conflicts. Yet, it is often not well understood that this connection to fiction is a personal one. That is, the emotions we experience while engaged with fictional narratives are our own (Oatley 2008). They are derived both from empathy with the fictional characters and from our own personal experiences and memories (Djikic and Oatley 2014; Oatley 2008, 1999). Human interaction with fiction helps us gain insight into our own values, beliefs and feelings. Fiction is

particularly well suited to the task of helping us gain personal insight because fiction provides a platform that distills and clarifies human experiences. This allows us to process our own personal experiences in a context that is free of some of the barriers in our own lives that prevent us from understanding our emotions (Oatley 1999).

One of the (for our purposes, very productive) ‘unrealities’ of fiction is that it cuts away the chaos and reveals the essentials of human life. Fiction focuses on the interesting bits of life, amplifies them and adheres to a storyline in a tidy way that would be unfathomable in real life. Psychologically, fiction has a way of detaching the barriers and complexities of one’s own life and providing a means through which one can focus on a specific issue. In this way, fiction may provide a means of analysing one’s own feelings, goals and values that cannot be achieved without it. This leads to a bold conclusion: people need story to adequately understand and process their lives. Bolder still is the extension of this premise to media that are often trivialized: television consumption can be quite healthy and beneficial psychologically and practically speaking.

Another facet of understanding the benefits of being a television fan involves the recent differentiation in the social science literature between hedonic enjoyment and eudaimonic appreciation as motives for viewing audio-visual fiction (Bartsch and Oliver 2011; Bartsch Mangold et al. 2006; Bartsch et al. 2008; Bartsch 2012; Oliver and Bartsch 2011). Watching television for fun and laughs is motivated by the desire to experience hedonic enjoyment. On the other hand, eudaimonic appreciation occurs as a reaction to media that enables the viewer to find meaning, search for truths and understand their own lives through the experiences and situations played out on the screen. The TV and film we watch as a result of eudaimonic motivations is that which generates mixed feelings (e.g., sorrow and the joy of overcoming). In part, these feelings are vicarious and are aided by our mirror neuron system. In our brain’s mirror neurons, social behaviours that we see are mirrored and there is a stimulation of related systems. For example, watching someone hit another person will mirror the behaviour in your brain and also stimulate the motor cortex (responsible for controlling movement) where the action of hitting would be initiated. We believe that mirror neurons help humans imitate others and also empathize with them. In this way, watching others behave, even via audio-visual fiction, stimulates the brain in such a way that we are better able to understand (empathize) and imitate the behaviours we see (Green and Dill 2013; Hurley 2004; Konijn 2013).

What exactly are our brains processing when we connect to fictional people and situations? In his book *Social: Why Our Brains are Wired to Connect* (2013), Lieberman asserts that there is neurological evidence that whenever people are not engaged in a specific task, the brain defaults back to social processing. Lieberman argues that this is because our social relationships are deemed so important for human survival that becoming an expert in social matters is of paramount importance. Therefore, our brains continually turn our attention back to social matters.

And therein lies another reason that we may spend a great deal of our psychic energy thinking about audio-visual fiction: our brains do not differentiate between the ‘real’ of our daily lives and the psychological reality of fiction in the way many commonly assume (Dill-Shackelford, in press; Green and Dill 2013). In fact, as mentioned above, in some ways it is more profitable for us to think about fictional realities than everyday realities. No doubt, we thrive when we consider both. So, we need to be social experts to survive and thrive.

And fiction provides a venue for processing social thoughts and emotions that is, in some ways, more profitable than thinking about our own social lives, or at the very least, serves as a useful adjunct to such social processing.

In the description of our study that follows, the reader will see how fans devote intense energy to understanding the human relationships presented in a fictional television narrative. A good deal of the social media conversation focuses on issues of meaning making – on sorting out social judgments and values, comparing the narrative to one's real life experiences and to experiencing emotions in the context of the narrative.

The present study departs from past psychological research in a number of key ways. The psychological investigation of how people engage with fiction has focused largely on written literature rather than on audio-visual narrative. Furthermore, rather than using fans of a narrative, these studies most often use a general sample and give them a particular narrative to read (e.g., Djikic et al. 2009; Green and Brock 2000). While this is a fruitful pursuit, this study takes advantage of the availability of social media fan commentary to gather fan insight, which also allows us to take advantage of fan input that is naturally occurring and motivated by fan interest, not generated for a research study.

The popularity and increasing accessibility of social media brings unprecedented access to fans' comments and criticisms of their favourite television shows and characters. From our standpoint, this turn of events is a substantial boon because it allows for access to popular culture fans' reactions and insights more readily than ever before. A great deal of online fan commentary is available via blogs in the form of message board comments, tweets and other brief social media posts. As these data have become available, new analytical technologies have also emerged, enhancing analysis by helping researchers manage and derive meaning from data. While the authors are acafans and bring a theoretical understanding of fan psychology to this investigation, the social science approach we take has the advantage of using a system that is designed to minimize bias. We expand on this below when we report our research methods.

### **MAD MEN, POPULAR CULTURE AND POPULAR MEMORY**

We chose the show *Mad Men* (*MM*; 2007–2015) to examine the ways fans derive meaning from the experience of processing a fictional television show. *Mad Men* depicts the personal and professional highs and lows of 1960s ad executive, Don Draper, as well as the lives of his wife, Betty, his children, especially his eldest child, Sally and his colleagues. *Mad Men* was selected for this study for a variety of reasons: the programme is a critically acclaimed, award-winning drama that has influenced American popular culture.

*Mad Men* is particularly intriguing because it is a period piece. The story begins in the early 1960s, while the show first aired in 2007: over 45 years after the time in which it is set. Period pieces help viewers mentally construct the social reality of past historical periods and debate issues, such as sexism, from that time period. Viewing universal subjects like social relationships through the lens of history allows us the pleasure of revelling in our own progress (Spigel 1995). Spigel calls the construction of history through fictional television programmes 'popular memory', explaining that, 'Popular memory does not set out to find 'objective', 'accurate' pictures of the past. Instead, it aims to discover a past that makes the present more tolerable' (1995: 21). On the

other hand, period pieces can also be used as cautionary tales, suggesting how far we still have to go. This is what United States President Barack Obama did in his 2014 State of the Union address when he said that some current American policies ‘belong in a *Mad Men* episode’ (Rothman 2014) due to their effects on women. If the US President refers to a television show in an important national address, the show is firmly established in popular culture.

Spigel (1995) interviewed young women and asked them to describe a typical 1950s woman. She also asked where participants got their information. She found nearly all of the women admitted that their information came almost exclusively from television examples, such as Marion Cunningham from the show *Happy Days* (1974–1984; also a period piece). Paradoxically, although the women admitted that their historical knowledge was based on fiction, they still believed in its accuracy. It is possible that *Mad Men* fans, who are making sense of social relationships both through fictional characters’ storylines and the show’s fictional retrospective context, believe that – or at least wonder if – they are gaining knowledge of the 1960s by viewing the show.

*Happy Days* and *Mad Men* create popular mythologies about the 1950s and 1960s, respectively. Fans who were not born in those decades may come to think of Marion Cunningham, the mother from *Happy Days*, as a typical 1950s mom and Betty Draper as a representative example of a certain kind of 1960s mom. Social psychologists call these kinds of schematic ideals ‘exemplars’. When you search your memory for what a typical 1950s mom was like, Marion Cunningham may be the first to come to mind, thus making her cognitively available as an exemplar. Similarly, Ward and June Cleaver (from *Leave it to Beaver*, 1957–1963) are exemplars of parents from the 1950s. Al and Peg Bundy (from the offbeat comedy *Married with Children*, 1987–1997) may be considered the parental versions of anti-heroes.

## **THE CURRENT STUDY**

Content analysis is a method in the social sciences for studying content systematically and objectively looking for patterns or specific characteristics in the text of that content (Stone et al. 1966). The current research uses two methods of content analysis to investigate how fans derive meaning from fictional television depictions of social relationships. Fans’ analyses of the parenting of Don and Betty Draper, the main characters of the historical drama *Mad Men*, serve as our text. This text was derived from fan commentary posted publicly on online social media. We were especially interested in exploring the fans’ social construction of reality through fiction. Our methodology allowed us to summarize the fans’ perspectives using both an automated ‘big data’ approach and expert human coding.

## **METHOD**

### ***Text Selection***

*Blog selection process.* To identify appropriate textual content, we used the approach described by Webb et al. (2012) modified for our specific purposes. Webb et al. (2012) first sought out popular fansites that focused only on *Mad Men*. Those sites were then searched for content about depictions of brides and weddings on the programme. In our research we altered this approach by prioritizing blog post topic over the site that hosted it. This

reflects a trend for *Mad Men* fans to prefer posting to pop culture sites such as Vulture, The AV Club, and *The New York Times* online rather than to *Mad Men*-specific sites such as the *Mad Men* dedicated Facebook page or the AMC *Mad Men* website. *Mad Men*-centric sites had a smaller readership and less fan commentary (averaging around 200 comments per blog post) than pop-cultural sites (averaging upwards of 600). By finding the most popular blog entries on the web, we were able to identify the online spaces where the most fans were participating, as well as a more diverse representation of fandom levels.

### ***Search terms and the filtering process***

In order to find these blogs and comments for our data set, we searched the top three US search engines, Google, Yahoo and Bing, respectively. Because of our interest in social relationships, we used social words as our search terms, searching for varied combinations of the following words (including variations such as plurals): mother, father, parent, women and gender role. The show's title and the word mother were included in every search due to our interest in parenting as a key social relationship. For each search conducted, the researchers examined the first three pages of results. Further, although we were interested in the social relationship of parenting initially, we found that our blog entries broadened the discussion to the wider field of important social relationships (marriage, family, sexual relationships and other social relationships) in addition to parenting.

### ***Cleaning the data***

To prepare for the analysis, the collected data needed to be reviewed for superfluous data (bloggers' handles, time/date stamp and page numbers) before being entered into the content analysis software programmes. The content analysis (identifying themes and concepts that emerge from all the collected comments) method was used to understand and develop the argument based on the *Mad Men* fan comments. Both methods of content analysis have safeguards to aid in the reduction of bias. For example, when experts analyse text based on a shared definition of a theme and then agree on places in the text that express similar meanings, we can feel confident that the two experts were identifying the same construct, as defined in the coding scheme.

The initial data set yielded 354 pages containing thousands of comments from 41 different blog posts. The data set was cleaned to remove comments that did not discuss aspects of parenting. The cleaned data set contained 209 comments from 26 blog entries.

For the automated lexical analysis, the software itself generates a dictionary of terms. In the content analysis that employed expert coders, the following methods were used: three trained raters familiar with the show *Mad Men* read the text data and generated lists of potential codes using a grounded theory approach (Gibson and Webb 2012), which enables themes to emerge from the data. The research team then examined the researchers' individual drafts of the coding scheme, discussed them and merged them into one scheme.

From there, the process was iterative. Two coders used the coding scheme on a small amount of data, then discussed discrepancies and resolved them. Once the two coders agreed that the coding scheme worked well, coding proper proceeded. Appendix A contains the coding scheme generated for this study, including the definitions of all of our codes.

Dedoose, the software used to perform the expert coding, permits hierarchical structuring of the coding scheme. Dedoose uses the term 'parent code' for the broadest themes. Nested under a parent code are child codes. We report the results below in terms of parent and child codes.

Two coders coded 20 per cent of the textual data, then discussed the differences in their application of the coding scheme to resolve any discrepancies. They then coded the same data a second time. Their reliability was 0.71. Once reliability of the coding scheme was established in this way, the coders split the remaining data in half and each individually coded 40 per cent of the data set.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Automated lexical analysis*

After finalizing the data set, we ran an analysis with the text analytic software Leximancer ([www.Leximancer.com](http://www.Leximancer.com)). Leximancer mines text to determine the frequency of concepts, thus the results from this analysis are a lexical representation, or a verbal summary, of the entire text. In addition, the software indicates the strength of the connections between concepts in order to show the relationships that exist between words in the text. The main value of conducting an automated lexical content analysis is that, because the computer does the work, the summary of the text is relatively unbiased. Furthermore, the software can process a large body of text quickly.

Based on this lexical analysis, the most frequent concepts occurring in the data were *Don* and *Betty*. These were closely followed by the concepts *Sally*, *kids*, *mother* and *women*. Despite the frequency of the concept *Don*, which was counted 168 times, the concept *father* was counted only 15 per cent as often, at 25 times. The concept *mother*, in contrast, was counted 95 times, 64 per cent as often as the 149 times the concept *Betty* was counted. One might argue that the high representation of mother in the results is the natural reflection of 'mother' being one of the primary search terms used during data collection. But what is particularly interesting and relevant here is the inversion of parent-ing name to character name. *Don* held predominant over *father* whereas fans used the name of *Betty* considerably less frequently than the term *mother*.

Further, these results indicate that while participants frequently commented on the character of Don, these comments were less likely to be in regards to his role as a father. For example, this comment discusses Don's first and second wives: 'He actually has more respect for Betty than he does for Megan'.

As seen in the above excerpt, the term most connected to the concept of *Don* was *wife*, followed by the concepts *Megan* (Don's second wife), *husband*, *father* and *marriage*. These associations suggest that when fans discuss Don, they are frequently remarking on his relationships to the characters of Betty, Megan and his children, especially his daughter Sally. Such comments are often less than complimentary of Don. For example, one observed, 'What Sally cannot see and the audience is being misdirected from, is the pain and suffering Don has inflicted on his wife'. Another viewer wrote, 'Of course Don is an awful husband and father but men ruled in that day'.

In contrast, the concept most connected to *Betty* was *hate*. While these concepts sometimes co-occur due to fans' unfavourable opinion of Betty (e.g., 'I think we hate Betty not just because she is cruel but because she cannot ever see herself as the bad guy'), these concepts also appear together in other

contexts. For example, one said, 'I hate the way Betty is perceived'. Another fan laments the vitriol towards Betty,

Whenever someone in the *MM* fandom says that they hate Betty because she's a cold, unloving terrible person, I can't help to think that they must have some type of internalized misogyny because it's ridiculous to think that they would have a more negative reaction to her than for Don, Roger, or Pete.

Similarly, the concept *mother* is most connected to the concept of *bad*. Yet again, these concepts often co-occur in the context of condemning Betty's parenting. For instance, one fan explains their understanding of Betty: 'Betty Draper isn't just a bad mother because she's a woman of the '60s. She's a bad mother because she is a bad mother'. However, they also appear in the context of defending her. Another fan says, 'I don't see her as a bad mother. I think the people who do must have had perfect moms who were never spanked or yelled at'.

### **Expert content analysis**

*Broad Themes.* Table 1 presents the relative frequency of the most used parent codes and the most used child codes according to the expert analysis. Looking at just the parent codes or broad themes, we see that the ten most common broad ways that fans discussed social relationships as represented on *Mad Men* were, in rank order from greatest to least: (1) evaluating characters, (2) discussing specific parent-child interactions in the show's storyline, (3) comparing story characters to one another, (4) Comparing *Mad Men* to real life, (5) discussing gender roles, (6) discussing the accuracy of *Mad Men*, (7) talking about generational cycles in parenting, (8) discussing the idea of the 'trapped mother' of the 1960s, (9) comparing life now and in the 1960s and (10) fans picturing themselves in the situations portrayed in the show.

*Specific Themes.* The specific social relationship-related themes or 'child codes' that *Mad Men* fans discussed the most were: (1) condemning Don as a person, (2) condemning Betty as a person, (3) condemning Don as a parent, (4) defending Betty in general, (5) condemning Betty as a parent, (6) defending Betty as a parent, (7) defending Don as a parent, (8) expressing sympathy for

<b>Parent codes (broad themes)</b>	<b>Chapter 1 Number of Excerpts</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Evaluating characters	215	1
Parent/child interaction	58	2
Comparing characters	55	3
Comparing to real life	50	4
Gender roles	46	5
<i>Mad Men's</i> accuracy	43	6
Generational cycles	39	7
The trapped mother	38	8
Comparing now and then	29	9
Picturing oneself in the situation	7	10

Child codes (specific themes)	Chapter 2 Number of Excerpts	Rank
Condemning Don	72	1
Condemning Betty	66	2
Defending Betty	63	3
Condemning Betty as a mother	49	4
Defending Betty as a mother	39	5
Condemning Don as a father	38	6
Sympathizing with a character	33	7
Condemning Don as a husband	32	8
Negative parent/child interaction	31	9
Comparing life in 1960s to now	27	10

Table 1: Top ten most frequent parent code (broad themes) applications and the top ten most frequent child codes (specific themes) in rank order.

a specific character, (9) condemning Don as a husband and (10) discussing specific negative parent–child interactions on the show. This list suggests that much of the conversation among fans about relationships as depicted in the *Mad Men* universe revolves around condemning and defending Don and Betty Draper as parents, as people and as spouses. Because this is such a big part of the discussion, we created two visuals to compare and contrast the heart of this conversation. Figure 1 shows a graphic depicting the balance between fans condemning and defending Don and Betty. Figure 2 gives more detail, relating how fans variously condemn and defend Don and Betty as parents versus in their non-parenting roles.

Results indicated the following: fans talk about Betty (236 excerpts) a bit more than about Don (185 excerpts). However, when they talk about Betty,

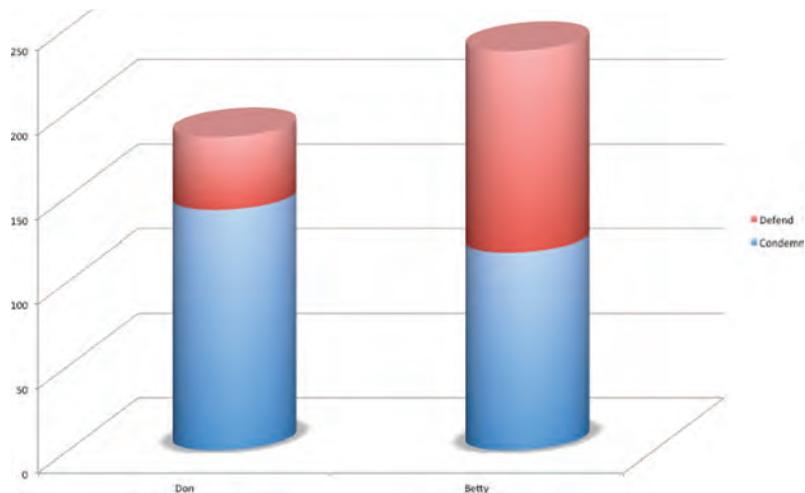


Figure 1: Comparison of how fans condemn and defend Don and Betty Draper in online comments.

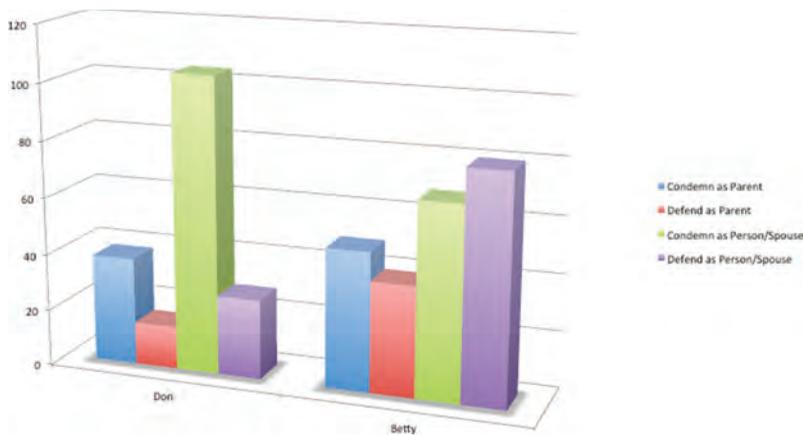


Figure 2: Differing reasons Mad Men fans give for condemning and defending Don and Betty Draper.

they are equally likely to condemn as to defend her, but they are much more likely to condemn Don than defend him (75 per cent of the commentary about Don condemned him).

In Figure 2, we look at these numbers by separating how they apply to condemning and defending Don and Betty as parents versus in their non-parenting roles. As can be seen, Don and Betty's profiles are quite different. Perhaps what stands out the most is that the single highest number of comments express condemnation for Don as a person and as a spouse (104), whereas the single lowest number of comments defend him as a parent (fifteen). For Betty, all of her scores actually fall between Don's extreme lows and highs. Her highest number of comments (80) comes from defending her in her non-parenting roles (as a person and spouse) and fans defended her more as a person/spouse than as a parent. However, for Betty, there are almost equal numbers of comments defending and condemning her in both domains.

Fans commented frequently on Don's flaws as a human in many conversations, as in this excerpt from the comments, 'Don gets chance after chance at a fresh start (reconciliation with Betty, the divorce, the new agency, Dr. Faye, Megan, etc. etc.) and he throws each and every one of them away'. In both of these excerpts, fans condemn Don's behaviour, but in terms of romantic relationships and work relationships.

Comparatively, the character of Betty came up in comments almost equally to Don but was far *more* likely to be discussed in the context of her role as a mother. The fan discussions of Betty centre primarily on motherhood, even though in the show she also has relationships with both other family members and friends. For example one fan said, 'She [Betty] is a terrible mother because she only cares about herself'. Another fan discussion elaborates on how Betty came to be a certain kind of mother:

If all women are destined to become their mothers (and I really hope they're not), Betty makes a lot of sense. She has made comments numerous times about how she resented her mother for nitpicking her eating habits. She also clearly had a terrible time after her mother's death in the first season and you get the impression that she was always

seeking her mother's pride and approval. Betty does the same thing to Sally regarding her eating habits and seems to carry the same cold attitude that says 'you will never be good enough'.

Finally, one fan comment points to frustration over Betty's limited role as a mother and indicates that this limited picture of Betty has set the character up for the role of a villain unfairly, a sentiment supported by many other fans:

... the writers have treated Betty terribly this season. They gave all her story lines to Sally and all her screen time to Don's boring love life. She's had no arc. We haven't seen her outside the house so it makes it easier to villainize her solely because she's a wife and a mother. That scene where all the women from the office stood around judging her was so irritating and heavy handed ... Despite how badly the writers have treated her this season I'm still on her side. The more they try to villainize her just to get people to feel sorry for Don and now Sally, the more I defend her.

We can conclude from this analysis that these fans believe that Don Draper is a bad person and a bad husband, but do not feel as strongly that he is a bad father. For example, one commenter stated, 'I think Don Draper is actually a good father. Emotionally he connects with his kids better than Betty does. He's just a lousy husband'. On the other hand, fans are about equally likely to condemn as to defend Betty in any domain and many did so within the same comment. This next fan excerpt is just one of many that found Betty as both flawed yet not entirely at fault, 'Sure she is cold and dismissive, but how is that any worse than the all too common 'spoil and coddle' parenting style today? ... I wonder why there is so much criticism of Betty when most of her problems are caused by Don'.

### **Connecting fiction and reality**

These data provide evidence that fans evaluate social relationships on *Mad Men* similarly to the way they evaluate real-life social interactions. As discussed above, this process allows us to experience life as though we were the characters in the situations we are watching. This leads to a deeper understanding of other people and situations outside of our own worlds. Furthermore, the vicissitudes of complex drama allow us to process our own mixed feelings about life in the manner that we detailed in the introduction to this article.

That fans are invested is evidenced by the mere fact of their going online, reading blogs on the subject and posting their own comments. Furthermore, some of the most frequent ways they discuss social relationships on *MM* involve comparing the show to real life and imagining themselves in the show's setting.

If we return to Table 1, which summarizes the main themes present in fans' social media discussions of *Mad Men*, we can consider what these themes represent more broadly. There are several themes that exemplify the premise that fans grapple with their own values when they consider television narrative. For example, the category that, by far, represented most of the social media discussion was the category 'evaluating characters'. If we move to the child codes, we see that this evaluation took the form of condemning and defending the main characters in various social roles: parent, spouse

and value as a person. Fans explained why they thought Don was largely a failure as a husband, though not so much of a failure as a father. They gave specific examples of storylines to defend their positions. If we unpack this a little further, we see that a fan makes an argument about her values, thus grappling with her own beliefs – for example, what makes a man a good parent or spouse and what makes him a good person. The next most frequent fan analyses focused on evaluating parent/child interactions, which represents another opportunity for fans to grapple with what makes a good parent.

*Emotional investment.* Becoming a fan is an inherently emotional experience (Zubernis and Larsen 2012).

Being a fan – of anything – entails a great deal of emotional investment. According to social identity theory, ‘involvement’ is the degree to which we’re intellectually and emotionally engrossed in something. When our sports team or television show or favorite movie or band is successful, involvement means that our self-esteem is bolstered right along with theirs.

(Larsen and Zubernis 2013: 12)

One indicator of the importance of *Mad Men*’s characters and stories to its fans can be found in the tone and emotional quality of fans’ comments, some of which we have quoted here. For example, recall the finding that the most common term associated with Betty was *hate*, whether it was because the fan hated Betty, or because they hated the haters. Hate is a strong word and comments using this word indicate emotional involvement with *Mad Men*’s stories and characters. One fan seems angry: ‘As much as I like Don it irks me that he gets away with almost everything, so it’s good to see Betty chew him out every once in a while or not let him shirk his responsibilities like, oh I don’t know, seeing his children when he’s supposed to’. Another fan feels sorrow when thinking about Betty, ‘I’ve been perceiving her with a lot of sadness – a woman we know has a lot of abuse and repression in her past, who thought she’d hit the jackpot marrying Don and who “played house” perfectly for years’. At times, fans analyse their own emotional reactions to the unfolding narrative and characters:

I think the reason we feel most frustrated is because we see so many opportunities for change and have felt at times that Betty was on the brink of seeing the light. Every moment when she reveals some humanity, understanding, or disregard for other people’s (and her own) judgments makes our hearts jump in anticipation of a big change. Unfortunately, this is not realistic.

The very fact that fans hope for change in a fictional story means that they are invested – what happens in the *MM* universe matters to them. Another fan expresses hope for change:

Don’s children are his one shot at redemption. If it happens (which I don’t think is a certainty, though I’m certainly rooting for it), it is through them that he will understand he is capable of feeling unconditional love and being loved unconditionally in return.

These fan comments exemplify the theoretical underpinnings we explored early in this article. In these data, we see examples of Oatley and colleagues’

proposition that fiction simultaneously serves to allow us to empathize with others, in this case with television characters. Furthermore, we see how the self recedes (following Kaufman and Libby 2012) and the viewer/character bond takes precedence. In the end, the viewer also wants Don to succeed so that he may vicariously experience that triumph and resolution. Indeed it may be that the lack of significant resolution itself tends to hook fans (Isbouts and Ohler 2013). 'An open-ended narrative with storylines that never achieve closure builds viewer loyalty that can last for decades' (Bielby et al. 1999: 36). Another way to examine this phenomenon is by putting it in the context of the Zeigarnik effect (1927), which is the idea that tasks that are incomplete garner much more psychological energy than those that are complete. In other words, unfinished business takes up more psychic space than finished business. Thus fans hoping for positive resolution may be applying the Zeigarnik Effect to the psychological processing of fictional narrative. If so, then when television writers and producers give us many loose ends to plots, that act should actually increase fan investment in the show.

*Cognitive investment.* Next, we asked ourselves what clues we had that fans use their experiences of watching and discussing the show as a way to explore ideas and beliefs and to search for meaning. Most often, rather than speaking of Don, Betty and Sally as the writers' creations or as fictional ideas, fans discussed them in a way that was no different from discussing social experiences in everyday life. This is consistent with the idea that fans use these stories to process social meanings – meanings that apply to their own lives. For example, one fan writes, 'Betty and Don are deeply flawed human beings attempting to be parents – just like every other human being on this planet who has children'. This comment epitomizes how being a fan of a fictional story provides a forum in which one can grapple with important human concerns. Here, for example, the fan is declaring that in her experience parents are deeply flawed human beings. Indeed all human beings are deeply flawed. She sees Don and Betty as one plausible example of this principle in action.

One fan writes that, 'If Don has a compassionate and empathetic son it's because Henry is raising him for the most part'. On one level, the fan knows that *Mad Men* is a television show and that Henry, Betty's second husband, is not really raising Don's son. But consider that this process mimics the way we experience our family members and friends. We leave them and they go to their homes and their stories continue. Therefore, it makes practical sense to project the story out in a way that is consistent with real life.

We know that fans place a high value on emotional authenticity in a show (Bielby et al. 1999). Without that authenticity, fans would not experience the story as something that depicts experiences and ideas that could happen in real life. As evidence that *Mad Men* provides emotional authenticity, a fan writes about her deep feelings for Betty and an appreciation for Betty's childhood experiences: 'I don't know how anyone can hear about Betty's mother and not feel sorry for Betty. I also don't know how anybody can take Don's side after he abused Betty for three seasons. I will always be on her side. She's just so sad and tragic and beautiful and strange'.

In the following quote, we see how watching a television narrative can bring up a fan's own experiences and afford the fan an opportunity to reconsider and evaluate those experiences. For example, this fan wonders if the depictions she sees on *Mad Men* are reflective of her own lived experiences:

I was the oldest of seven children a teenager in the '60s whose mom had her last child when I was sixteen in 1965 – after Betty Draper is home from hospital with the last baby and she wakes up to its crying and ... just stands there – no matter how great a mom I had – I wondered when I saw this scene – if my mom ever just stood there too.

In other words, this fan thinks that if Betty Draper is a typical 1960s mother, then the fan's own mother may have done the same things Betty did when this fan was growing up in that time period. Thus the fan may come away from the experience of watching television and processing the experience with a new way of thinking about her childhood.

Our analysis demonstrates that we use fiction as a way of making sense of real life. This process is not pathological, as expressed in the common notion that fans have no idea that their story worlds do not exist in reality. Rather our data demonstrate how psychologically healthy fans can be – that they intuitively understand that a story can help us develop and learn things that will help us in our everyday social interactions. If as Lieberman argues, evolution marks as adaptive anything that helps us thrive as social beings, including investing time in social information processing, then it follows that we can hone our social skills through the processing of fictional narrative. For those of us who were raised with the mantra that 'TV rots your brain', and who were sceptical of accepting this philosophy whole cloth, we present an alternative viewpoint. TV, it seems, can help us build better, more adaptive brains.

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## APPENDIX A

Short codes with ten or more mentions and their operational definitions in alphabetical order.

Short code	Operational definition
1960s mothers	This code addresses comments about motherhood in the 1960s
1960s women	Independent of mothering roles, this code indicates a comment was focused on roles of women in the 1960s
Compare characters	This code notes a comparison of one <i>Mad Men</i> character to another
Compare C/P	This code indicates a comment in which a child and parent, either as characters or as roles, are being compared to one another
Compare life in 1960s	This code indicates that a commenter is comparing a real person's experience, from either a first-hand or second-hand perspective, of something during the 1960s to events depicted on <i>Mad Men</i>

(cont.)

Compare life in modern times	This code indicates that a commenter is comparing a real person's experience, from either a firsthand or second-hand perspective, of something during modern times to events depicted on <i>Mad Men</i>
Compare M/F	This code indicates a comment in which a mother and father, either as characters or as roles, are being compared to one another
Compare real-life	This code indicates that a commenter is comparing a real person's experience, from either a first-hand or second-hand perspective, to events depicted on <i>Mad Men</i> , without specific reference to a time period
Condemn Betty	For this code the character of Betty is evaluated negatively without specific reference to her roles as a wife or mother
Condemn DaddyD	This code is concerned with aspects of comments in which Don's parenting is evaluated as bad. In this case 'bad' can refer to being a poor role model, malice or mistreatment, lack of emotional bond, uncaring or anything else a commenter defines as 'bad'
Condemn Don	For this code the character of Don is evaluated negatively without specific reference to his roles as a husband or father
Condemn HusbandD	This code is concerned with comments in which Don is assessed negatively in his role as a husband
Condemn MamaB	This code is concerned with aspects of comments in which Betty's parenting is evaluated as bad. In this case 'bad' can refer to being a poor role model, malice or mistreatment, lack of emotional bond, uncaring or anything else a commenter defines as 'bad'
Defend Betty	For this code the character of Betty is evaluated positively without specific reference to her roles as a wife or mother
Defend Don	For this code the character of Don is evaluated positively without specific reference to his roles as a husband or father
Defend DaddyD	This code indicates a commenter has defended Don's parenting
Defend MamaB	This code indicates a commenter has defended Betty's parenting
Defend WifeB	This code indicates a commenter has defended Betty in her role as a wife
Don victim	Independent of a focus on parenting, this code applies to comments in which Don's adult behaviour is explained by an aspect of his childhood
Evaluate characters	This code indicates that the commenter is expressing their evaluation or judgment of a specific <i>Mad Men</i> character either positively or negatively
Frustrated mother	This code indicates that the commenter characterized motherhood on <i>Mad Men</i> as a source of frustration or a mother character on <i>Mad Men</i> as frustrated
Generational cycles	This code indicates a comment that addressed the way family experiences depicted on <i>Mad Men</i> will influence future family generations
Gender roles	Independent of modern comparisons, this code looks at any discussions where gender roles in the 1960s are addressed
MM accuracy	This code indicates comments that classify <i>Mad Men's</i> depictions of the 1960s as accurate or inaccurate. These comments can be based on personal experience or a commenter's perceptions of the time
Negative P/C interaction	This code indicates that the parent/child interaction noted by the commenter was characterized as negative by that commenter
Now and Then	This code indicates a comment was comparing modern society to the real-life and/or <i>Mad Men</i> depicted 1960s. The commenter must mention a specific aspect of modern society and a specific aspect of 1960s society

P/C interaction	This code notes that an interaction between a parent and a child character has been observed by the commenter
Sympathize	This code indicates that a commenter expressed sympathy for a specific <i>Mad Men</i> character
Trapped mother	This code indicates that the commenter characterized motherhood on <i>Mad Men</i> as a source of oppression

Note: Codes marked in blue are parent codes; remaining are child codes.

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