

Fannish forms of engagement and exclusionary out-group naming on Marxist-Leninist Tumblr

Bianca N. Y. Kang¹[0009-0007-2745-0529] and Dr. Kathleen M. Carley¹[0000-0002-6356-0238]

Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh PA, USA
biancak@andrew.cmu.edu

Abstract. Political engagement is increasingly understood to be shaped by affect rather than pure rationality. Fandom provides an underutilized theoretical lens for exploring this computationally. Our study examines whether fannish forms of engagement with political figures correlate with exclusionary out-group naming at the user level. We analyze 2,920 Tumblr users who engaged with Marxist-Leninist (M-L) content in April 2025. We operationalized fannish engagement across six dimensions: storytelling, us-versus-them pronoun usage, patterns of affective appraisal, proximal styles of writing, self-identification, and original textual production. Using multivariate Bayesian multilevel models, we find that the tendency to engage in fannish forms of engagement in texts involving M-L figures (e.g., Lenin) are clearly and positively correlated with the use of exclusionary out-group naming (e.g., USAmericans). These correlations are considerably weaker or absent for contemporary politically adjacent figures (e.g., Trump), suggesting that we are not merely observing general interest in political discussion. Our findings support fan studies theorizing of the link between such engagement and exclusionary political discourse by demonstrating it at the user-level. We further contribute a computational operationalization of fannish discursive behavior and the first computational study linking fan studies theory to behaviors relevant to online political antagonism. We discuss implications for how misinformation and polarization interventions are designed.

Keywords: Fan studies · Political discussions · Online communities.

1 Introduction

Political beliefs are not fully guided by rationality. Contemporary understandings instead recognize affect as core, particularly with the muddying of boundaries between modern politics, celebrity culture, and the media [27]. Fandom, a trifecta of community, affect, and productivity, provides a theoretical lens for understanding political engagement when its logics are not fully structured around established parties and ideologies (e.g., Bernie Bros who support Elon Musk) [25] or reason [4]. It recognizes how such engagement fulfills functions other than authentic belief, e.g., community and entertainment [21], which nonetheless have the potential to drive ‘ugly’ behavior [23].

Fandom has long been understood as a source of *group* identity; the logics of de-legitimation and exclusion of others tied to the exaltation of one’s fan object [14] (also: anti-fandom [12]). This manner of political engagement has undergirded recent culturally significant phenomena, such as Gamergate, QAnon, and the modern alt-right [9], and should be studied seriously. The shared affect individuals have towards some common object (e.g., a specific politician) enables many seemingly disparate groups and ideas to cohere [25]. These communities position themselves against a named dangerous other, one that threatens the object(s) of attachment and, by extension, the group constructed around it; e.g., “the swamp” versus the alt-right [11]. Such spaces, which mix fannish practices and toxic content, can generate the conditions for radicalization to occur [21].

Rich qualitative work provides compelling evidence for fannish engagement in politics and how it may, on aggregate, relate to antagonistic behavior like online harassment [25]. However, it remains unclear whether this engagement is observable in specific discursive behaviors at the *user* level; for instance, whether individuals who fannishly engage with political figures are more likely to produce exclusionary discourse. We understand this through the lens of anti-fandom (perceiving disliked fan objects/groups as lacking intellectually, morally, aesthetically [12]) and boundary work (how group boundaries are discursively performed using symbolic concepts such as morality and taste [15]). In fannish contexts, symbolic boundaries become encapsulated in ‘bad’ objects [12] which are often given derogatory names as a means for differentiation [22] (e.g., “the swamp”). Drawing on the concept of orientation to difference [10], we posit that such names act as markers for low orientation to difference: competing perspectives are not represented and negative readings are non-negotiable.

We further note limited computational work drawing on fan studies to examine such questions. [3]’s study of Redditors on ‘tankie’ subreddits places little emphasis on the role of affective engagement with the ideology and its figures, instead focusing on summarizing the topics discussed, their ‘extremism’, and the ‘toxicity’ of their language. Other computational work has only examined media fans.

Our study addresses these gaps. Specifically, we ask: **to what degree are fannish forms of engagement with relevant figures correlated with the usage of exclusionary out-group naming?** We selected Tumblr, given its convergence of fandom and politics [18]. We analyzed users who have engaged with Marxist-Leninist postings. Although research has focused on reactionaries, others also involve this form of affective engagement [16] and exclusionary discourse (e.g., the Manichean division between a ‘bad’ imperialist West and ‘good’ others [5]). We hence expect to see a positive correlation, particularly with more fannish forms of engagement. We also expect the correlations for relevant figures (ideologically relevant ones like Lenin) to be stronger than the correlations for less relevant figures (contemporary politicians like Obama). The latter, if found, would provide further evidence for the role of fandom beyond a general interest in politics.

2 Methods

Operationalizing fannish engagement. We identified some major dimensions from the literature:

1. Stories. We used [2]’s StorySeeker classifier and expected stories to produce stronger correlations.

2. Us versus them. First-person singular and plural, and third-person plural pronouns were extracted with SpaCy. We expected the plural pronouns to produce stronger correlations.

3. Patterns of appraisal. The framework of Martin and White [17] provides a structured framework to describe affective appraisal. We focused on the Attitude component, which covers Affect (emotions), Judgment (evaluation of human behavior), and Appreciation (evaluation of aesthetics); the latter two are institutionalized reworkings of Affect [17]. Across many texts of a certain discourse type, patterns of these evaluations reveal registers, which reflect identities constructed by their authors [17]. We borrow this idea, extending it computationally using semantic axes grounded in the framework and concept class analysis [26] to identify manners of appraisal. 10 patterns surfaced. Texts that were in the seven largest patterns (99.8% of 166,935 de-duplicated posts) were kept. We expected manners of appraisal emphasizing Affect to produce stronger correlations.

4. Style of writing. Constructions of proximity, such as describing insider anecdotes or personality, as if the figure is known personally [8]. We located clusters of writing styles from texts that emphasized Affect and mentioned figures from pop culture fandoms (e.g., *Glinda*), using StyleDistance embeddings [19]. We assigned other texts to their closest clusters ($\geq .9$ cosine similarity; if below, placed into an ‘unassigned’ cluster). We conducted statistical tests, identifying patterns of function word and tense usage, combined with discourse analysis, to analyze between-cluster differences. We expected writing styles that make use of discursive features which construct more proximal representations (e.g., present tense) to produce stronger correlations.

5. Explicit self-identification & producing original texts on the object. A binary indicator for if the user marked themselves as Marxist-Leninist in their bio (12.5% do), and another for if the user wrote original text (i.e., not just reblogging) on figures of interest. We expected self-identification and production to show credibly positive correlations.

Data collection. We identified 57 blogs that contain Marxist-Leninist (M-L) content by searching relevant hashtags (e.g., *marxist-leninist*). Using the Tumblr API, we collected 1 year of content from each blog, before using a bidirectional snowball approach. We collected the top 20% of blogs reblogged by the seed blogs on M-L content and the top 5% of blogs that interacted with the seed blogs on these same contents. 3561 blogs were retrieved, spanning May 2024 to April 2025. For this study, we focused on April 2025, which alone contains 3,044 users and 2,336,035 posts. Through reblogging, many Tumblr entries contain

multiple posts authored by different users. However, it is not mandatory for a reblogging user to add content or reblog from the latest point. Reblog chains are thus not singular; content presented varies following the choices of the reblogging user. We hence split each entry down to its constituent posts, treating each post as a document on its own. We focused only on text and removed posts: (1) associated solely with fundraising, (2) image descriptions, (3) shorter than 20 words or longer than 5000 words, and/or (4) classified as non-English. This retained 1,081,793 posts (166,935 de-duplicated) and 2,920 users.

Identifying relevant figures. We used a semi-automated process to identify sets of entities important to Tumblr M-L discourse. Full details are provided in a forthcoming paper. It consists of: (1) identifying Person entities associated with self-identified M-L users via weighted log-odds ratios, (2) filtering to entities correlated with higher absolute Affect via multiple membership models, (3) thematically grouping entities via Leiden, and (4) extending the lists with associated entities from relevant topics. The contemporary politically adjacent (CPA) figures totaled 140 (e.g., *Trump*); the M-L figures totaled 66 (e.g., *Lenin*). For exclusionary out-group naming, we searched for posts that contained at least one of the following: *usamerican*, *usamericans*, *usamerica*, *yankee*, *imperialist*, *imperialists*, *imperialism*, *imperialistic*, *the west*, *westerners*.

3 Results

We constructed a series of multivariate Bayesian multilevel models to identify the correlations between (1) the total number of posts on a blog using exclusionary out-group naming and (2) the total number of posts on a blog that employ a discursive feature of interest alongside mentioning figure(s) of interest. Blog-level random effects were estimated jointly, inducing partial pooling across blogs.

1. Stories and general tendency to post about M-L figures. Against our expectations, the tendency to post stories that mention M-L figures was more weakly correlated to the tendency to produce posts with exclusionary out-group naming ($\rho = .75$, 95% CI [.61, .87]), than the tendency to post non-stories with M-L figures ($\rho = .92$, 95% CI [.85, .97]). Importantly, however, both correlations are credibly stronger than those estimated for CPA figures ($\rho = .35$ for stories, $\rho = .51$ for non-stories). Posting about M-L figures and CPA figures appear to be distinct behaviors; the correlations between these behaviors are weak (-0.08 to .30). In contrast, there is a very strong correlation between the tendencies to post non-stories and stories with M-L figures ($\rho = .87$, 95% CI [.78, .95]); same between posting non-stories and stories with CPA figures ($\rho = .91$, 95% CI [.87, .94]).

2. Us versus them. As expected, the correlations involving M-L figures and third-person plural pronouns were positive and credibly stronger than those of CPA figures (*we*: $\rho = .38$, 95% CI [.20, .56], *they*: $\rho = .31$, 95% CI [.13, .50]) (Figure 3). Correlations for CPA figures were not credibly different from zero (*we*: $\rho = -.04$, 95% CI [-.18, .10], *they*: $\rho = .09$, 95% CI [-.05, .22]).

3. Patterns of appraisal. There were two prominent observations for appraisal patterns. First, a tendency to produce M-L figure posts where affective expressions were more central was positively correlated to a tendency to produce posts with exclusionary out-group naming, with the strongest correlation at $\rho = .86$, 95% CI [.79, .92]. Notably, the relative strengths of these correlations (Fig. 1) mapped almost directly to the descending order of mean affective appraisal (Fig. 2).

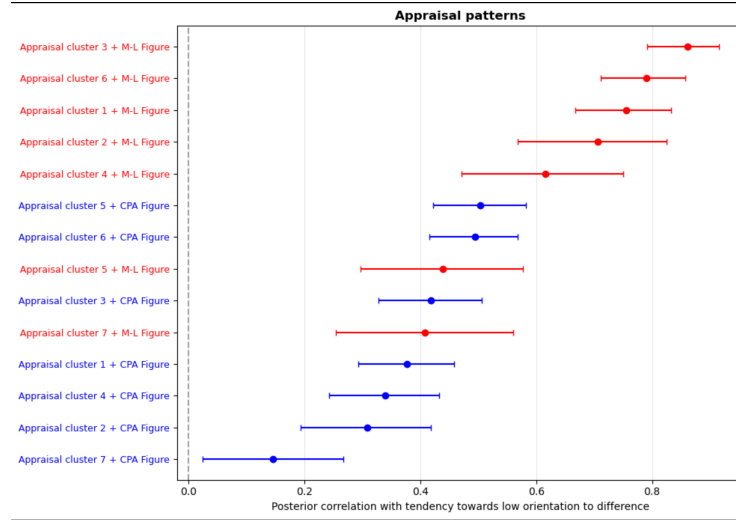


Fig. 1. Posterior correlations for appraisal patterns and figure mentions.

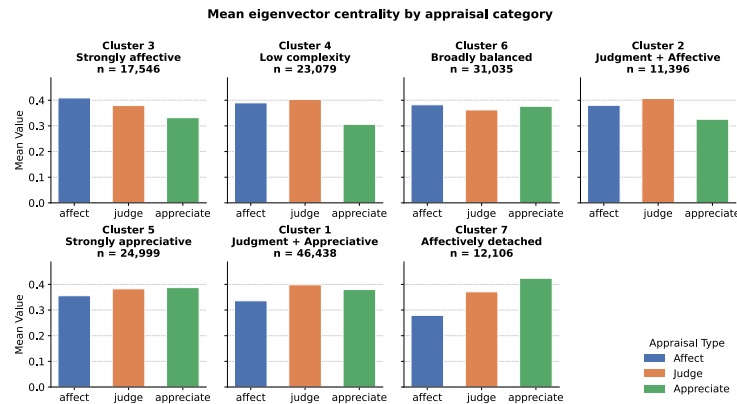


Fig. 2. Mean eigenvector centrality of appraisal categories, sorted by Affect means.

The exceptions to this pattern were Clusters 4 (low complexity) and 1 (judgment + appreciative). On closer inspection, for Cluster 4, all subcategories were invoked evenly with similar eigenvector centralities (except complexity). For Cluster 1, two affect subcategories were more central (happiness and inclination) than the other two. Its lower Affect average thus was not related to an overall lack of affect centrality, which was the case for Cluster 7.

Second, the correlation ordering for CPA figures was credibly different from M-L figures. There was no noticeable trend for CPA figures with mean affect category scores, further evidencing that the relationship between producing affectively-centric texts and texts with exclusionary out-group naming may be unique to M-L figures.

4. Style of writing. There was a set of stronger correlations for M-L figures which were credibly different from those for CPA figures. We proceeded with analyzing the discursive work performed in these style clusters by comparing these two groups (one with the credibly stronger correlations, the other with the weaker). We counted function words, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and time focus [6, 20], normalized by text length. We performed Kruskal-Wallis tests between all clusters with Benjamin-Hochberg correction ($\alpha=.05$). All results were significant. For the group with credibly stronger M-L figure correlations, clusters drew more on: (1) first-person pronouns, (2) verbs, and (3) focused on the present with (4) lower reading difficulty. For the group with weaker correlations, clusters drew more on: (1) numbers, (2) impersonal pronouns, (3) conjunctions, and (4) focus on the past and (5) future. Still, there were two clusters misaligned with their group: Clusters 3 and 5. To investigate this, we close-read some texts (examples in Table 1). We used transitivity analysis [13] and examined tense involved in representations of the figure(s) [7] and speech reporting [10].

Table 1. Example text from some clusters.

Clusters with stronger correlations	Clusters with weaker correlations
5: Adorno: But perhaps it is therefore... [direct quotation] Gehlen: Okay, wait a minute. We do not want to dramatize things. [direct quotation]	3: Ngl I never knew <i>Mao</i> [Carrier] <i>had</i> [Pr: relational, attribute; past simple] <i>such a heavy Hunanese (?) accent</i> [Attribute]. <i>I</i> [Senser] <i>saw</i> [Pr: mental; past simple] <i>some clips of him</i> [Phenomenon] on twitter...
8: guys... those bolsheviks you are claiming are [Pr: relational, attribute; present simple] sexy [Attribute] are just some guy. not stalin [Carrier], obviously...	7: ...will lead to a resistance to critique of their life and works, similarly to how <i>mao</i> [Sayer] <i>discussed</i> [Pr: relational, say; past simple], an unwillingness to act...

In clusters with stronger correlations, the figures are closer. In 8, Stalin is presently available for evaluation with proximal others. Though Cluster 5 does not statistically draw on the same discursive structures, direct speech between

characters also has an effect of placing them spatially/temporally closer to the speaker. In contrast, clusters with weaker correlations are distant; figures represented as someone before the speaker’s time, acting on others distal to the speaker (7). Though Cluster 3 was statistically similar to clusters with stronger correlations, the figure is still represented as temporally distant – they once *had* an accent, the speaker perceives them through clips.

5. Explicit self-identification & producing original texts on the object. We fit a hurdle negative binomial Bayesian regression, adjusting for the number of posts and included blog-level random intercepts. There was a positive relationship between M-L self-identification and producing texts with exclusionary out-group naming ($\beta=.54$, 95% CI [.43, .65]). There was a similar positive relationship for producing original texts about M-L figures ($\beta=.33$, 95% CI [.18, .49]). The evidence that M-L self-identification has a stronger association than original text production was weak (difference = .21, 95% CI [.0016, .417]), supporting assertions that committed consumption is a key marker, beyond explicit self-identification [24].

4 Discussion

We find that fannish forms of engagement with relevant figures are substantially correlated with the usage of exclusionary out-group naming, across several dimensions of discursive behavior. These correlations are not replicated with CPA figures, showing that this affective relationship is unique to M-L figures, and not merely mirroring general interest in politics. Our main contributions hence are: (1) evidencing the correlation between fannish forms of engagement and exclusionary positioning at the user-level, (2) a computational operationalization of fannish discursive forms, and (3) a first computational study on online political engagement that draws from fan studies theorizing about affect and identity. The correlations observed indicate that the tendency to use exclusionary out-group naming is positively related to characteristically fannish tendencies:

1. The tendency to focus on relevant figures, reflecting the basic definition of fandom as *regular* consumption of some text [24].

2. The tendency to represent figures as proximal to one’s identity; M-L figures are taken personally (‘we’) and for the imagined community (‘us’) [24]. Users who engage in this tendency also show greater entitativity (use of ‘them’ and exclusionary naming). The importance of these figures to their sense-making and identity is further evidenced through the way these figures are constructed as spatially and temporally close to them, as people who exist in the present who can engage in mutual interaction.

3. The tendency to draw on affective appraisals; users with a tendency to present themselves fannishly through employing explicitly emotional appraisals in text with M-L figures (instead of institutionalized displays of affect via judgment and appreciation).

M-L self-identification, and to a lesser degree, production of original texts of M-L figures, was moderately correlated with exclusionary out-group naming.

However, self-identification rates were low (12.5%) and reblogs were far more common than original writings. Our findings show that the *manner* of engaging with texts is also informative in the absence of such signals, just as fan studies theorizing has emphasized, providing a broader vocabulary for mapping audiences in HYPE spaces. The relatively large variations in confidence intervals of posterior correlations evidence many different forms of engagement. Still, fannish forms of reading and engagement stand out with the strongest correlations to the usage of exclusionary out-group naming. Users who display such tendencies may require closer observation in HYPE spaces.

Implications. Our work is in line with the arguments that memes and entertainment are what is prevalent on social media, not news (or ‘fake news’) [1], and play and community are important motivators for people joining apparently extremist communities [23]. This has implications for how we might consider misinformation. It is common to metaphorize misinformation as a disease and attempt to ‘inoculate’ against it [28]. However, if the route is not through rationality, but affect and identity, providing the ‘right’ information is likely to be ineffective in reducing polarization [4], particularly when texts indicate low orientation to difference.

Limitations and future work. Only static relationships were examined. We considered only Tumblr; these relationships may be less clear on other platforms. We also used only one operationalization of antagonism (naming). Future work will consider links to nostalgia, particularly given trends in today’s politics, and if these relationships hold in other movements (e.g., reactionary, politicized pop culture).

Acknowledgments. This study was funded by the Office of Naval Research (N000142412568).

Disclosure of Interests. The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

References

1. Altay, S., Berriche, M., Acerbi, A.: Misinformation on Misinformation: Conceptual and Methodological Challenges. *Social Media + Society* **9**(1), 20563051221150412 (Jan 2023). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221150412>, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/20563051221150412>
2. Antoniuk, M., Mire, J., Sap, M., Ash, E., Piper, A.: Where Do People Tell Stories Online? Story Detection Across Online Communities (Feb 2024), <http://arxiv.org/abs/2311.09675>, arXiv:2311.09675 [cs]
3. Balci, U., Sirivianos, M., Blackburn, J.: Roll in the Tanks! Measuring Left-wing Extremism on Reddit at Scale (2023). <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2307.06981>, <http://arxiv.org/abs/2307.06981>, arXiv:2307.06981 [cs.SI]
4. Barnes, R.: Fandom and Polarisation in Online Political Discussion: From Pop Culture to Politics. Springer International Publishing, Cham (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14039-6>, <https://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-3-031-14039-6>

5. Bolton, M., Pitts, F.H.: Corbyism: a critical approach. SocietyNow, Emerald Publishing Limited, Bingley, U.K (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1108/9781787543690>
6. Carley, L., Reminga, J., Carley, K.: ORA & NetMapper. In: International conference on social computing, behavioral-cultural modeling and prediction and behavior representation in modeling and simulation. vol. 1 (2018)
7. Chilton, P.: Vectors, viewpoint and viewpoint shift. *Annual Review of Cognitive Linguistics* **3**, 78–116 (Nov 2005). <https://doi.org/10.1075/arcl.3.06chi>, <http://www.jbe-platform.com/content/journals/10.1075/arcl.3.06chi>
8. Derbaix, M., Korchia, M.: Individual celebration of pop music icons: A study of music fans relationships with their object of fandom and associated practices. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* **18**(2), 109–119 (Mar 2019). <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.1751>, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/cb.1751>
9. Driessen, S., Jones, B., Litherland, B.: From fan citizenship to ‘fan-spiracies’: Politics and participatory cultures in times of crisis? *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* **30**(1), 304–312 (Feb 2024). <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565241236005>, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/13548565241236005>
10. Fairclough, N.: *Analysing discourse: textual analysis for social research*. Routledge, London (2003), oCLC: 252896599
11. Finlayson, A.: Neoliberalism, the Alt-Right and the Intellectual Dark Web. *Theory, Culture & Society* **38**(6), 167–190 (Nov 2021). <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764211036731>, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/02632764211036731>
12. Gray, J.: New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-Fans and Non-Fans. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* **6**(1), 64–81 (Mar 2003). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877903006001004>, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1367877903006001004>
13. Hart, C.: *Discourse, Grammar and Ideology* (2014)
14. Hills, M.: An extended Foreword: From fan doxa to toxic fan practices? *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* **15**(1), 105–126 (2018)
15. Lamont, M.: *Money, morals, and manners: the culture of the French and American upper-middle class*. Morality and society, University of Chicago Press, Chicago (1992)
16. Lewis, R.: “This Is What the News Won’t Show You”: YouTube Creators and the Reactionary Politics of Micro-celebrity. *Television & New Media* **21**(2), 201–217 (Feb 2020). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419879919>, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1527476419879919>
17. Martin, J.R., White, P.R.R.: *The language of evaluation: appraisal in English*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hampshire, paperback ed., 1. publ edn. (2007)
18. Mccracken, A.: Tumblr Youth Subcultures and Media Engagement. *Cinema Journal* **57**(1), 151–161 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2017.0061>, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/672999>
19. Patel, A., Zhu, J., Qiu, J., Horvitz, Z., Apidianaki, M., McKeown, K., Callison-Burch, C.: STYLEDISTANCE: Stronger Content-Independent Style Embeddings with Synthetic Parallel Examples. In: *Proceedings of the 2025 Conference of the Nations of the Americas Chapter of the Association for Computational Linguistics: Human Language Technologies (Volume 1: Long Papers)*. pp. 8662–8685. Association for Computational Linguistics (2025). <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2025.naacl-long.436>

20. Pennebaker, J., Boyd, R., Jordan, K., Blackburn, K.: The development and psychometric properties of LIWC2015 (2015)
21. Petersen, L.N., Johansen, M.: Spaces of Hybridized Prefatory Extremism (HYPE) on Social Media. *Social Media + Society* **April-June 2025**, 1–11 (2025)
22. Peyron, D.: Fandom names and collective identities in contemporary popular culture. *Transformative Works and Cultures* **28** (Sep 2018). <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2018.1468>, <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/1468>
23. Reinhard, C.D., Stanley, D., Howell, L.: Fans of Q: The Stakes of QAnon’s Functioning as Political Fandom. *American Behavioral Scientist* **66**(8), 1152–1172 (Jul 2022). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642211042294>, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00027642211042294>
24. Sandvoss, C.: *Fans: the mirror of consumption*. Polity Press, Cambridge, 1. publ edn. (2005)
25. Stanfill, M.: *Fandom is ugly: networked harassment in participatory culture*. Critical cultural communication, New York University Press, New York (2024)
26. Taylor, M., Stoltz, D.: Concept Class Analysis: A Method for Identifying Cultural Schemas in Texts. *Sociological Science* **7**, 544–569 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.15195/v7.a23>, <https://sociologicalscience.com/articles-v7-23-544/>
27. Wodak, R.: *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*. SAGE Publications Ltd, 1 Oliver’s Yard, 55 City Road London EC1Y 1SP (2015). <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446270073>, <https://sk.sagepub.com/books/the-politics-of-fear>
28. Yee, A.K.: The limits of epidemiological models of misinformation. *Synthese* **206**(3), 158 (Sep 2025). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-025-05246-6>, <https://link.springer.com/10.1007/s11229-025-05246-6>