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Exploring a Sense of Community in Online Fandoms: Fourth Wing and Reddit

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“Remember, it is only the body that’s fragile. You are unbreakable.”

(Iron Flame)

1 Introduction

The rise of digital platforms has redefined what it means to belong to a community. What once required careful scheduling and physical presence, can now be achieved with a few clicks. Modern media and technology have not only removed geographical limitations but also revolutionized the ways people connect, enabling communities to form around shared interests, values, and passions. Among these communities are fandoms, which offer a fascinating example of active engagement that sets them apart from other audiences. Fans not only consume content; they channel their passion into creating, sharing, and collaborating. It is through this collective “doing” that fans create vibrant communities. The *Fourth Wing* subreddit, dedicated to Rebecca Yarros’s *Empyrean* book series, illustrates how these dynamics unfold within an online space and will be the focus of my study. By analyzing the subreddit as a case study, this thesis investigates how *r/fourthwing* functions not merely as a forum for fans to gather but as a virtual community, where members engage through discussion and participation. My analysis will be guided by two central research questions:

- What defines a virtual community, and based on these criteria, can the *Fourth Wing* forum on Reddit be considered a community?
- How do engagement, emotionalization, and discourse dynamics shape the sense of community among members of the *Fourth Wing* subreddit?

I argue that members of the forum experience a sense of community that transforms the platform from a simple online space into a dynamic social environment where connections are fostered despite the absence of in-person interaction. This sense of community is sustained by shared identity markers, collaborative norms, mutual emotional support, and collective memory, all of which contribute to the subreddit’s cohesive culture.

Before I approach a detailed analysis, I will set the stage by exploring the remarkable success of the series, and its rise as a literary phenomenon. The thesis begins with an overview of the novel’s plot and reception, highlighting how Rebecca Yarros’s use of Romantasy tropes, accessible storytelling, and emotionally charged romance has captivated a diverse audience. The chapter also examines the unique qualities that make *Fourth Wing* a compelling case for fandom studies, its viral success on social media platforms and ability to resonate with both traditional fantasy readers and those new to the genre. By critically reflecting on the book’s reception, including debates about its literary value, this chapter lays the groundwork for

understanding how the novel's widespread appeal has fostered an engaged and dynamic fan community.

After exploring the cultural impact, Chapter 3 examines the platform I chose to analyze: Reddit. It begins by providing an overview of Reddit's distinctive characteristics, emphasizing its text-driven, discussion-centric design and its ability to accommodate niche interest groups. Unlike broader social media platforms that prioritize visual content or casual interaction, Reddit's structure encourages in-depth conversations and collaborative exchanges. After briefly outlining Reddit's structure and user roles, I will explore *r/fourthwing*, focusing on how its growth, layout and moderation practices shape user interactions and contribute to a sense of belonging.

Chapter 4 establishes the theoretical foundation for my analysis. It draws on fandom theory and its participatory nature, incorporating key insights from Henry Jenkins. Building on foundational definitions of community and virtual spaces by scholars such as Jones, Bruckman, Anderson, and Delanty, the chapter also discusses how interpersonal relationships and performative emotion shape online discourse. Next, I examine McMillan and Chavis' Sense of Community (SoC) model, which provides a solid foundation for understanding membership, influence, emotional connection, and shared history. To account for the nuances of digital environments, the chapter integrates adaptations of the SoC model, including insights from Blanchard, Rotman and Wu, and Prinster et al., among others.

Chapter 5 builds upon this foundation by introducing an aggregated analytical framework, integrating McMillan and Chavis's SoC model with insights from more recent studies. The framework comprises four components: Membership and Identification, which examines how individuals connect through shared experiences, identities, and symbols. Norms and Influence, which considers the role of boundaries, group norms, and authority in shaping behavior. Needs and Emotional Connection, which explores how participation and exchanges fulfill individual and collective needs; and Collective Memory and Continuity, which highlights the importance of shared history, traditions, and continuity in sustaining a sense of community. Together, these elements provide a nuanced approach to understanding how the subreddit functions.

After introducing the framework, chapter 6 outlines my case study approach, data collection method, and post-selection criteria. It explains how specific content was chosen using criterion sampling and examined through thematic analysis. The chapter also details the featured threads

and provides a summary of their content, along with the methodological choices made to ensure a consistent analysis.

Chapter 7 applies the aggregated framework introduced in Chapter 5 to examine how the subreddit fosters a sense of community among its members. Through a detailed exploration, the analysis demonstrates how shared identity markers, collaborative norms, emotional exchanges, and collective memory come together in ways that contribute to community formation. The chapter highlights the various ways in which members engage with one another, offering insights into how fans navigate shared passions and build connections in an online environment. It concludes with a summary of the findings, outlining the key results of the analysis.

Finally, the conclusion reflects on the broader implications of the findings and proposes avenues for future research. By investigating the *Fourth Wing* subreddit, this thesis not only seeks to explore how online spaces foster a sense of community but also aims to contribute to the understanding of modern fandoms and digital culture.

2 The Fourth Wing Phenomenon

*Fourth Wing*¹, the first book in Rebecca Yarros's *The Empyrean* series, was published in 2023 and rapidly gained much attention because of its explosive success and devoted fans. It resonated not only with traditional Romantasy (Romance and Fantasy) fans but also attracted a new audience unfamiliar with the genre. Since its release, it has sold over two million copies worldwide and maintained a spot on *The New York Times* Hardcover Fiction Best Sellers list for more than 69 weeks ("Hardcover Fiction Books"). Book 1 was so successful that *Barnes & Noble* hosted midnight release events at over 200 locations for the sequels, including the Union Square store in New York, evoking memories of the fan excitement seen with *Twilight* and *Harry Potter* (Alter). The sequel *Iron Flame* was released in 2024, and *Onyx Storm* followed in January 2025, with two more books already confirmed.

Set in a fictional world where elite dragon riders are trained to defend their kingdom, *Fourth Wing* has sparked widespread engagement among readers, leading to the formation of an active online fandom. This thesis examines how community-building takes place within the subreddit, using it as a case study to explore the broader dynamics of virtual spaces. The story follows 20-

¹ Despite being the title of the first book, *Fourth Wing* has also become a broader term for the entire fandom. In adherence to this convention, I will use *Fourth Wing* throughout this paper to refer to the entire series.

year-old Violet Sorrengail, who was prepared to train for a quiet life in the Scribe Quadrant, surrounded by books and history. Instead, her mother, the commanding general, forces her into Basgiath War College, where she is supposed to train to become one of Navarre's elite dragon riders. This shift challenges Violet not only physically, as she has a condition that increases her of injury, but also socially, as her position as the general's daughter makes her a target. The stakes are further heightened by the declining number of dragons willing to bond and her fierce competition with fellow cadets. Her main adversary is Xaden Riorson, a powerful wingleader who harbors a deep hatred for Violet due to her mother's role in his father's execution after a failed rebellion.

Over time their relationship gradually shifts into a passionate romance, following the classic enemies-to-lovers trope. As Violet grows stronger and more skilled, she bonds with not one but two dragons, a rare feat that positions her as a key player in the fight to protect Navarre. However, the kingdom is surrounded by failing protective wards and mounting external threats, such as the Venin, corrupt beings who channel dark magic and absorb life force. Violet learns that the Venin and their wyvern armies are not only real but a significant danger to Navarre, contrary to the kingdom's official denial of their existence. By the end of *Fourth Wing*, the emotional and physical stakes reach their peak. Violet, now bonded to two dragons and increasingly connected to Xaden, finds herself caught in a web of political intrigue. The book leaves readers with a cliffhanger: Xaden reveals his involvement in a covert rebellion against the kingdom, forcing Violet to confront her growing feelings for him and the role she will play in the impending conflict.

In *Iron Flame*, the sequel to *Fourth Wing*, Violet's journey becomes increasingly complex as she navigates the aftermath of the first book's revelations. The plot introduces new conflicts, including her brother Brennan's secret survival, escalating tensions within Basgiath War College, and rising threats from the Venin and military leadership. The book ends with a major battle, significant discoveries about the kingdom's warding system, and Xaden's transformation into a Venin. Like the first book, *Iron Flame* ends on a cliffhanger, leaving readers eager for a resolution which in turn fuels activity on the subreddit. These unresolved plotlines and escalating stakes continue to encourage fan discussions and engagement, providing a rich foundation for exploring community dynamics within this fandom.

Fandom Appeal

While I will later analyze specific subreddit posts that illustrate how readers engage with the series, it is crucial to also examine critical perspectives on why *Fourth Wing* has been so successful. As reviewers have noted, Yarros has skillfully mastered the Romantasy genre by blending elements of high-stakes fantasy with emotionally driven romance. (“Yarros Cracks Fantasy Romance”). Many fans are drawn to the author’s use of familiar tropes like enemies-to-lovers and her focus on strong female protagonists, which provide emotional depth and escapism. Yarros simplifies complex world-building, allowing the story’s emotional and romantic aspects to take center stage. A common sentiment among book reviewers is that the series’ “triumph is not one of complexity” (“Yarros Cracks Fantasy Romance”).

The rise of Romantasy as a genre has played a vital role in the success of novels like *Fourth Wing*. Authors such as Sarah J. Maas and Rebecca Yarros have garnered immense popularity, largely thanks to their social media presence, particularly on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, where book-related content has exploded. Videos with related hashtags have garnered billions of views, and this visibility has been instrumental in bringing Romantasy to the forefront of contemporary fiction. In addition, it has also provided space for more diverse representation, with authors focusing on queer romance and characters of color. This expansion of diversity, coupled with the genre’s ability to create captivating narratives, has further solidified its appeal (Creamer).

At the same time, some critics question the literary value of *Fourth Wing*. Georgia Kerr from Berkeley Fiction acknowledges that the novel will not deliver for those seeking well-written, groundbreaking literature, suggesting that it prioritizes entertainment and emotional engagement over deeper literary elements. While *Fourth Wing* may lack the complexity and stylistic innovation often associated with high literary value, its straightforward narrative, and relatable characters provide readers with a highly addictive, emotionally engaging experience (Kerr). The novel’s success is also evident in its reception on popular platforms like Goodreads. *Fourth Wing* has an impressive overall rating of 4.57 stars, based on over 2.9 million user ratings and over 279,000 reviews (“Fourth Wing, Goodreads”). Furthermore, the first novel won the Goodreads Choice Award for Best Romantasy in 2023, solidifying its position as a fan favorite. These numbers reflect the book’s widespread appeal and top-rated reviews often highlight the novel’s addictive nature and the strong romantic tension as critical factors for its popularity.

3 Reddit: The Platform and Its Role in Fandom

Founded in 2005, Reddit has grown into one of the most popular platforms for online interaction and has been referred to as the “front page of the internet” by its creators (Panek 4). While widely used, its unique structure and community-driven design have sometimes made it elusive to the public, with many knowing of Reddit without fully understanding how it operates. Unlike platforms that emphasize visual content, Reddit prioritizes text-based interactions to foster engagement and discourse among users. This makes it an ideal platform for exploring the dynamics of online fandoms, where participants connect through shared interests, discussions, and collaborative content creation. The *Fourth Wing* subreddit exemplifies this environment, offering a vibrant space where fans exchange ideas, provide support, and share their passion.

The platform and its Idiosyncrasies

According to its creators, Reddit is “a growing family of millions of diverse people sharing the things they care about most” and is “home to thousands of communities, endless conversation, and authentic human connection” (*Reddit Inc.*). Reddit hosts over 100.000 communities with more than 306 million weekly active users and 82 million daily active users (*Reddit Inc.*).

Despite Reddit’s smaller user base compared to platforms such as Facebook, which hosts 3.1 billion monthly users, its focus on niche communities and discussion-driven content distinguishes it from more mainstream platforms. In contrast to Instagram or TikTok, which are more focused on broad social interaction and media consumption, Reddit offers a space for in-depth exchanges and specialized content that appeals to particular interest groups, such as fan communities (Geuens).

This makes it a unique platform focused on user-generated commentary, which is often extensive and seen as a central feature of the platform experience. This unlimited system for comments and its branch-like reply structure fosters conversational discourse while also reflecting early online exchanges among tech-savvy strangers. Those interactions lacked face-to-face social cues but were conversational and small enough in size to generate a feeling of community. Over the years and the consequent growth of the internet, Reddit faced the challenge of preventing disconnected statements among thousands of users. The creators designed two features addressing the issue: First, they implemented the same voting system used for posts on comments, enabling registered users to organize them. Second, Reddit permits users to reply to comments publicly, reply to these replies, and continue this indefinitely,

creating a branching structure of discussions. While these design elements have helped Reddit maintain some of the conversational nature of early, smaller-scale online discussions, the voting system significantly influences the quality of its discourse. Voting enables the most humorous, concise, or insightful comments to surface, while less engaging comments, which often clutter large online conversations, fall below the visibility threshold (Panek 5).

In addition to voting and commenting indefinitely, Reddit created a “post flair” feature. This refers to a label or tag users can attach to their posts within a specific subreddit. These flairs are typically used to categorize content, making it easier for others to anticipate the thread’s focus or help users filter posts by specific topics. For example, in the *Fourth Wing* subreddit, standard post flairs include categories such as *Spoiler*, *Fan Theory*, *Book Discussion*, or *Art*. If a user wants to post a theory about the next book in the series, they must tag it with the *Fan Theory* flair, allowing other users interested in predictions and speculations to find it more easily. Subreddit moderators usually define and set the available post flairs that users can choose from, which can be mandatory or optional, depending on the subreddit’s rules. For instance, in the *Fourth Wing* subreddit, the *Spoiler* flair is mandatory for posts discussing plot details from the latest book, ensuring that users who wish to avoid spoilers can easily filter out these posts.

User Roles and Dynamics on Reddit

Reddit users fulfill various roles. Panek distinguishes between administrators, moderators, contributors (who post and/or comment), constituents (registered users who vote on said posts and comments), and visitors (6). This mirrors early online communication systems like Internet Relay Chat (IRC), where moderation was managed by selected users while administrators focused on technical maintenance (Panek 6). Administrators, who are usually paid employees, design and maintain the homepage. In contrast, moderators are unpaid volunteers driven by their interest in the forum’s topic. They set rules and manage functionality and can ban users, remove posts, or use bots for moderation tasks. Subreddit creators are automatically designated as moderators, and additional moderators are added when needed to manage a subreddit’s growth (Panek 6).

Unlike other major social media platforms with uniform rules, Reddit’s modular structure allows moderators to establish their own guidelines, resulting in diverse approaches to shaping each forum’s character and content. Consequently, moderators wield significant power and autonomy in shaping a subreddit’s tone. Their ability to define and determine what is acceptable

not only influences engagement but can lead to modern forms of gatekeeping. In digital spaces, gatekeeping functions through networked processes rather than discrete gates, meaning that subreddit moderators do not just regulate content but actively influence how the community experiences and interprets discussions (Welbers and Opgenhaffen 4731). Bruns describes this concept as “gatewatching,” where social media users do not necessarily block or permit information, but instead amplify and curate existing content (121). Consequently, moderators introduce a power imbalance: regular users must comply with the rules or face consequences such as content removal or exclusion. In spaces where emotions run high, these choices can become deeply subjective, not only safeguarding an online space but also dictating its limits.

Even though moderators tend to “seed” their subreddits with posts, Reddit contributors provide the most content by posting statements, links, creative works, or comments. Compared to other roles, they have no rule-setting authority. Constituents are users who upvote or downvote contributions, influencing the visibility of posts and comments, consequently shaping the platform’s discourse (Panek 7-8).

Visitors on Reddit typically do not post, comment, or vote, but they can still access most content as passive consumers. Some visitors register and create usernames to access specific subreddits and personalize their experience, while unregistered users (often referred to as “lurkers”) browse content without participating. Their reasons for not contributing vary, including privacy concerns, lack of time, or simply a preference for consuming information rather than engaging in discussions. As with many other online platforms, Reddit has more visitors than active contributors (Panek 8).

r/fourthwing

One of those lively spaces, and the focus of my analysis, is the *Fourth Wing* subreddit, which will now be examined in greater detail. The subreddit was created on May 16, 2023, just 17 days after the novel’s release, and in its brief existence, it has achieved impressive statistics, ranking among the top two percent of forums. In April 2024, *r/fourthwing* had 66,000 members, but by January 2025, that number had surged to over 118,000. (“Fourth Wing moderator”). This rise coincided with major events such as the releases of *Iron Flame* and *Onyx Storm*, both of which drove increased participation and engagement. During such peak moments, the subreddit saw over 3,600 posts and nearly 58,000 comments in a month (“Fourth Wing Moderator”). As of January 2025, the subreddit has amassed over 31.8 million page views, with an average of

280,200 unique visitors each month (“Fourth Wing Moderator”). Notably, in the week leading up to the anticipated release of book 3, the subreddit recorded a staggering 1.7 million views in just seven days, highlighting the intense excitement surrounding the upcoming book launch (Official OS Release Rules Repost). These statistics reflect a highly engaged and continuously growing community.

In addition to the subreddit’s expanding user base, its layout and structure have also adapted to reflect the community’s needs and the series’ development. However, these changes are largely shaped by the moderation team, who hold significant influence over the platform’s design and organization. This adaptability is particularly evident in changes to its layout, which has undergone noticeable modifications between April 2024 and early 2025. At the top of the main page, the April 2024 layout prominently featured the title “ONYX STORM”, alongside the tagline “A STORM IS BREWING,” which was set against a dramatic backdrop of dark clouds and lightning (“Fourth Wing”, *Reddit*). This visual immediately established a tone of intensity and excitement, mirroring the series’ dynamic and emotionally turbulent elements. The lightning was also a direct reference to the signet power of the series protagonist, Violet. However, as of early 2025, the moderators have exchanged it with a more minimalistic dark-grey banner, replacing the previous high-intensity imagery with a subdued, neutral design.

Beneath the header, the subreddit remains titled *r/fourthwing*, but its accompanying badge no longer displays the title of book 2, but simply the subreddit’s name. This change may indicate a move toward solidifying its identity as the primary hub for the fandom rather than centering its branding around a specific installment in the series. The subreddit emoji has also been updated. While the previous icon, a blonde woman with wide eyes and an open mouth, hinted at the intense, emotional reactions frequently observed in the subreddit, the new icon features a dark-haired man sticking out his tongue, resembling the main male character, Xaden. These ongoing changes suggest that the subreddit does not simply serve as a static discussion board but an evolving digital platform that reflects both the storyline and the fandom’s shifting focus.

On the right side of the page, the series’ title and author are displayed, along with a brief description of the forum’s purpose, identifying it as a community for fans. One notable adaptation in the subreddit’s language over time is the terminology used for community statistics. Rather than the conventional labels of “Members” and “Online,” that were used in April, the subreddit now refers to its follower count as “Riders” and its online users as “Flying” (“Fourth Wing”, *Reddit*). This modification reflects a deliberate adoption of the series’

terminology, further integrating the fandom's shared lexicon into the subreddit's structure. Such linguistic changes enhance the sense of identification within the community, transforming standard Reddit features into a more tailored, book-inspired experience.

In addition, a "Community Guide" button has been introduced, which, when clicked, expands into a pop-up window ("Fourth Wing", *Reddit*). This new feature welcomes users with a personalized "Welcome to the quadrant, Rider" greeting, before directing fans to important resources, such as spoiler policies, critique guidelines, and subreddit rules ("Fourth Wing", *Reddit*). It is worth noting that all these resources are centered around norms and regulations, showing how highly policed the forum is and how user engagement is carefully monitored and controlled. Nonetheless, the change from a static information panel to an interactive guide suggests a move toward a more user-friendly and engaging interface which reflects deliberate efforts to facilitate navigation. By addressing members as "Riders" and integrating book-related language, the guide reinforces a sense of belonging, framing the subreddit as an extension of the *Fourth Wing* world.

This is followed by a list of rules that expand to reveal short descriptions, covering topics such as respecting artists, avoiding piracy, and prohibiting AI-generated art. This comprehensive list reflects the community's commitment to ethical behavior and respect, ensuring a positive and constructive environment for all members. These rules reinforce the idea that the forum is a "safe" space where fans can express their passion without fear of harmful interactions. Below these guidelines are buttons linking to pages like "FAQ," "Fan Fic Master Post," and "Critiques How To" ("Fourth Wing", *Reddit*).

The layout is simple and clean, which is a general characteristic of Reddit, and facilitates easy navigation for both new and experienced users. The post flair system acts as a core navigational element, allowing users to find content under labels such as "Theory," "Fan Fiction," "Rant/Rave," and "Discussion" ("Fourth Wing", *Reddit*). Over time, the flair system has expanded to include new resources and discussion topics, such as "Jesinia's Library: What Are You Reading?", "Empyrean Show on Amazon", and "Events - r/fourthwing & Rider's Quadrant" ("Fourth Wing", *Reddit*). This evolution reflects the subreddit's responsiveness to ongoing developments, ensuring that emerging topics, such as its TV adaptation or book-related events, are incorporated into the community structure.

While various aspects of the subreddit have evolved, the main content area remains reserved for community posts. At the top left, users can sort posts by categories such as “Hot,” “New,” “Top,” and “Rising,” which enables an individualized user experience. Below these sorting options are pinned community highlights. As of early 2025, these predominantly center on the upcoming release, featuring spoiler warnings, book preorder information, and megathreads for discussions, while those in April 2024 focused on more general content like the “Empyrean Wiki” or the “RQ Fic Exchange.” This shift reflects how the subreddit actively adjusts to key moments in the fandom’s lifecycle, ensuring that the most relevant topics remain easily accessible, reinforcing the subreddit’s role as an active hub for fans.

Unlike physical communities, where changes to a logo, banners, or merchandise require time and resources, digital spaces like this subreddit can quickly adapt their layout and pinned content in response to major events, reinforcing the fluid and responsive nature of virtual communities. The ability to instantly update branding, restructure discussion categories, or introduce new interactive features allows the moderator team to stay aligned with the fandom’s evolving interests and engagement patterns in a way that traditional, physically anchored communities cannot match. While the forum’s content is designed to appeal to the fandom, its presentation and structure are largely shaped by the moderators, who control the subreddit’s visual design, featured content, and discussion categories. Moderators act as decision-makers, curating how the space is navigated and experienced. To fully understand how such a space can foster a sense of community, it is first necessary to explore the theoretical frameworks that examine fandom dynamics, online group behavior, and the evolution of virtual communities.

4 Theoretical Framework

This chapter establishes the theoretical foundation for understanding how the *Fourth Wing* subreddit operates as an engaged virtual community. It explores the nature of fandom and its intersection with digital spaces, drawing on key insights from Henry Jenkins and theories of participatory culture. The chapter also examines models of community-building, with a particular focus on McMillan and Chavis’ Sense of Community model and its adaptations for digital environments. These approaches provide the foundation for the aggregated analytical framework developed in this thesis.

4.1 Fandom and Community

The term “fan” derived from the Latin word *fanaticus*, originally meaning “of or belonging to the temple, a temple servant, a devotee” (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 12). Over time, however, its connotations shifted, evolving from its religious origin to a broader sense of excessive and passionate fervor. By the late 19th century, the abbreviated term “fan” was used to describe devoted followers of professional sports, eventually expanding to include enthusiasts for any form of entertainment. Despite its playful and sympathetic usage in some contexts, the term never fully shed its associations with zealotry and excessive behavior (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 12). Henry Jenkins, a renowned scholar in fandom studies, builds on this by emphasizing the participatory nature of fandom, which involves active engagement and co-creation by its members. He notes that fan reading is a social process, shaped and reinforced through ongoing discussions with other fans, that expand the initial experience of a text. Fans do not simply consume media but also actively reinterpret and transform it by writing fan fiction, creating art, and producing videos. These participatory practices transform the act of media consumption into a form of cultural production, fostering a sense of belonging and shared purpose within the community (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 45-46).

Fan culture also constructs its own group identity, ideals, and informal institutions. Jenkins explains that fandom defines its relationship to the outside world by constructing its own values and norms, often independent of formal cultural and political institutions. Participation in fan culture is voluntary and spontaneous, prioritizing shared passions. This dynamic transforms fandom into a space for collective action and creative collaboration, where members actively contribute to expanding the meaning and significance of the media they love (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 273). Jenkins identifies five distinct levels of activity that illustrate the complexity and diversity of fandom as a subcultural community:

1. **Mode of Reception:** Fans engage with media texts with undivided attention, blending emotional proximity and critical distance. They often view texts multiple times, and their process of meaning-making involves not just personal reflection but also social interaction with other fans. (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 277-278).
2. **Critical and Interpretive Practices:** Becoming a fan involves learning the community’s preferred methods of analysis and interpretation. These practices shape how fans interact with and understand the text, fostering a shared framework through which meaning is constructed (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 278).

3. **Consumer Activism:** Fans assert their rights to voice opinions and make judgments about cultural productions. This activism is rooted in a response to their relative powerlessness as consumers, transforming fandom into a base from which fans may speak about their cultural preferences and assert their desires for alternative developments (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 278-279).
4. **Cultural Production:** Fan communities generate their own creative works, including fiction, art, and videos. These productions often reject profit-driven motives, focusing instead on reciprocity, interdependence, and community-driven aesthetics. Fan creations broaden access to creative works and develop alternative systems for production and distribution. Fandom views all fans as potential contributors whose creative abilities can be cultivated and shared, enriching the community (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 279-280).
5. **Alternative Social Community:** Fandom offers an “alternative reality” that rejects mundane societal norms, embracing creativity, inclusivity, and emotional connections. While fandom is not without its conflicts, it remains a space where democratic values are nurtured and renewed and noncommunal behavior is seen as a violation of the social code among fans. It offers refuge from the unsatisfying situations and responsibilities of modern life (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 280-282).

These dimensions demonstrate how fandoms cultivate a strong sense of belonging, making them ideal examples of how communities operate in the digital age.

4.2 Digital Platforms and Fandom

Online platforms have revolutionized fandom by providing spaces where fans can interact without geographic limitations. In 2014, Jenkins highlighted that these digital spaces fostered collaboration and community-building on an unprecedented scale, enabling fans to engage in shared traditions, exchange ideas, and build collective identities. While earlier studies focused on fandom’s subversive potential, Jenkins later critiqued how participatory practices, once grassroots phenomena, had become increasingly commodified by corporations. For instance, fan activities such as sharing and remixing content are often integrated into corporate strategies that benefit from user-generated content (Jenkins, “Rethinking ‘Rethinking’” 279). Despite this commercialization, Jenkins emphasized the importance of collective agency and networked publics, where fans collaborate to achieve shared goals. This collective approach highlights

fandom's enduring role as a site of community and creativity (Jenkins, "Rethinking 'Rethinking'" 284).

The rise of modern technologies has further transformed fandom into a vital aspect of everyday life. Unlike earlier eras when fan activities were confined to conventions or fanzines, today's fan communities thrive across online forums, social media networks, and mobile platforms that are often used daily. This shift enables fans to integrate their interests into their routines, reflecting how digital technologies have made fandom a connection between individual interactions and shared cultural trends (Sandvoss et al. 6).

In this context, fandom has also emerged as an important identity resource in a rapidly changing world shaped by globalization and "liquid modernity" as Bauman calls it (qtd. in Sandvoss et al. 11). Traditional markers of identity, such as class or nationality, have become increasingly fluid, and fandom provides individuals with both a sense of self and a way to belong to voluntary communities. These communities, like the *Fourth Wing* subreddit, offer spaces for members to engage in shared passions and forge connections, demonstrating how digital fandom navigates the complexities of identity and community (Sandvoss et al. 11).

4.3 Defining Community

But before one can analyze these dynamics, it feels essential to explore what even defines a community and, more specifically, a virtual community. While decades of scholars across different disciplines have struggled to define what a community is (and this thesis does not claim to have found the one true answer), people seem to reliably know when they belong to one and when they do not.

Amy Bruckman, for example, offers an intriguing approach to understanding community by drawing on cognitive science, particularly category theory, to argue that community is not a fixed concept but a prototype-based category. This view suggests that some communities are better examples of the category than others, much like a robin is a more prototypical bird than a penguin (Bruckman 616-617). This approach makes it possible to view online spaces like Reddit as occupying different places on the spectrum of community, rather than asking a binary question of whether they are communities or not. This perspective is particularly relevant for virtual communities, where the boundaries are often less clear than in traditional, geographically defined communities. Bruckman further argues that viewing community as a category with "fuzzy" boundaries encourages a more nuanced examination of how certain

online groups, like the *Fourth Wing* subreddit, may share characteristics with prototypical offline communities, such as shared values and social interaction, but differ in other ways, such as the absence of face-to-face contact (Bruckman 617-618).

Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" also provides a useful mode for understanding how fandoms function as communities. Anderson originally used this term in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* to describe the shared sense of identity and belonging within nations, despite members never meeting face-to-face (6). While Anderson did not study fandoms, his concept can be applied to digital communities, since their shared passions create bonds that are free from geographical boundaries.

Gerard Delanty builds on these ideas by emphasizing that communities continue to adapt to modern life. They provide ways for people to connect, share meaning, and feel a sense of belonging, even in fragmented and globalized societies. Delanty points out that these needs make community a flexible and enduring concept that can take many forms, including those we see in virtual spaces like Reddit. He also highlights the dual nature of community. It is both symbolic and social: symbolic, in that it relies on shared narratives, symbols, and values; and social, in that it involves interaction and shared experiences (Delanty 2-3).

What ties these perspectives together is their acknowledgment that community is a dynamic, multifaceted concept. It is not confined to a specific place, size, or form of interaction. Instead, community emerges wherever people come together to share experiences, support one another, and build connections.

Virtual Communities

While mediated communication, such as the telegraph, or telephone have long been used to form bonds across distances, modern digital platforms have made these interactions more immediate, large-scale, and continuously accessible. Unlike earlier forms, which were often limited in reach, contemporary online spaces enable engagement and connection in ways that previous channels could not.

Before discussing definitions of virtual communities, it is important to distinguish between online spaces and virtual communities. For instance, Erickson and Fernback note that while computer-mediated communication (CMC) enables individuals to connect and locate others

with similar interests, not all online spaces qualify as communities (qtd. in Ridings and Gefen, “Virtual Community Attraction”). Chat rooms, which cater to single-use interactions without ongoing participation, do not provide the consistency needed to support community development, whereas virtual communities, like the *Fourth Wing* subreddit, involve ongoing engagement. This means that while all virtual communities are online spaces, not all online spaces are virtual communities.

Already in 1997, Quentin Jones, then a PhD researcher at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and founder of the first ethnic internet-based community network in Australia, laid out criteria for distinguishing online spaces that evolve into communities. He divided digital communities into two subcategories: virtual community and virtual settlement, identifying four criteria necessary for an online space to transform into a virtual community: “A minimum level of interactivity, a variety of communicators, a minimum level of sustained membership, and a virtual common-public-space where a significant portion of interactive group-computer mediated communication occurs” (Jones 7). A distinction that has since been widely recognized in scholarly discussions on virtual communities, with many of the adaptations I detail later referencing his work.

He notes that interactive communication between a group of people needs to account for the fact that face-to-face communication is no longer a requirement, nor is it limited to a small group. This shift highlights interactivity and measures how much each message in a series of communications relates to and builds upon previous messages, forming a social reality. When looking at a variety of communicators, Jones agrees with other theorists who state that more than two communicators are needed to form a virtual community. Furthermore, sustained membership among large groups is another criterion necessary to label a settlement as a virtual community. Finally, there needs to be a shared virtual space where social activity can take place. This requirement distinguishes a virtual community from other online exchanges, such as private messaging between two individuals, which does not occur in a shared virtual space (Jones 9-10).

With the rise of modern communication tools like WhatsApp and other messaging apps, it is essential to note that while these services facilitate online interaction, they often operate within private or semi-private spaces. WhatsApp, for instance, primarily supports one-on-one or small group conversations, making it distinct from the public, community-oriented nature of spaces like Reddit. In the context of a subreddit such as *r/fourthwing*, interactions are visible to a much

larger group, creating a shared, open forum where users can build on one another's contributions. This public visibility allows the development of social bonds on a large scale, which is impossible in more private messaging spaces. When Jones' concept is applied to the *Fourth Wing* subreddit, it becomes apparent that this platform fulfills all his criteria. The statistics described in chapter 3 demonstrate a high level of interactivity and varied participation in the forum discussions. Additionally, the forum's steady growth also indicates sustained and active membership.

While Jones provides a structured framework, other scholars offer complementary perspectives that emphasize broader characteristics of virtual communities. For example, Rheingold describes virtual communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (5). This definition highlights the importance of emotional connection and personal relationships, aspects that Jones' criteria implicitly support but do not explicitly discuss.

Ridings et al. synthesize prior definitions into a comprehensive description, defining virtual communities as “groups of people with common interests and practices that communicate regularly and for some duration in an organized way over the Internet through a common location or mechanism” (“Trust in Virtual Communities” 273). This definition broadens the focus by incorporating attributes such as shared interests, regular communication, and organized interaction, which align closely with the dynamics observed in subreddits like *r/fourthwing*. Delanty argues that virtual communities should not be seen as entirely new phenomena but rather as an extension of the diverse forms of social belonging that have always existed. While digital spaces offer unique opportunities for interaction and participation, they simply continue the trend of communities adapting to new social and technological contexts (215). Moreover, Delanty emphasizes that what distinguishes virtual communities is their communicative nature, describing them as “communication communities” where belonging is facilitated through globalized social networks (221). This observation highlights how online platforms are able to foster connections that are both global and deeply personal.

These varied approaches showcase the evolving and diverse nature of virtual communities. While Jones' structured criteria provide a clear framework for evaluating online spaces, broader definitions like those from Rheingold and Ridings et al. emphasize the interpersonal and emotional dimensions that also play a critical role in community formation. Together, these

perspectives help understand how platforms like Reddit enable the development of virtual communities, offering a solid foundation for analyzing the *Fourth Wing* subreddit.

4.4 Interpersonal Relationships and Performative Emotion Online

Shifting away from the broader aspects of virtual communities, Nancy Baym's work on online soap opera fandoms offers valuable insights into how interpersonal relationships are actively nurtured and maintained in digital spaces. Her analysis of the rec.arts.tv.soaps (r.a.t.s.) Usenet group highlights how participants actively foster a culture of friendliness through specific communicative practices. Her findings emphasize that friendliness is not an inherent characteristic of a community but is actively cultivated by participants, stating "friendliness is something a group does rather than something a group is" (Baym 121). Baym highlights that virtual communities evolve from having shared interests into complex interpersonal networks, leading to participants beginning to see their fellow members as friends. This transformation is driven largely by avoiding behavior that would disrupt the community. In r.a.t.s., participants cultivate a welcoming atmosphere through humor, inclusive language, and social support, often addressing deeply personal issues. This friendliness is actively performed and not inherent to a group.

Baym also emphasizes the ways in which disagreement is managed within the group. While disagreement is inevitable in any community, participants tend to navigate it with strategies designed to preserve harmony, such as partial agreements, apologies, and reframings (Baym 129). These tactics avoid conflict and reflect the group's commitment to sustaining a supportive environment. For instance, Baym notes that partial agreements often serve to frame disagreements as differences in interpretation rather than outright contradictions, enhancing interpersonal harmony and mutual respect (126).

Another notable aspect of Baym's analysis is the role of gender in shaping the communicative style of the group, observing that harmonious and inclusive exchanges often emerge in spaces with a mostly female audience. This gendered dynamic not only fosters a sense of intimacy but also aligns with the soap opera genre's emphasis on personal relationships and emotional depth. These practices highlight how participant demographics, and the thematic focus of a community can influence its interactional norms (Baym 139).

Baym further explores how group traditions and norms provide the structural foundation for community-building in digital spaces. In the absence of physical objects or shared locations,

traditions like marking off-topic discussions as “TAN” (Tangent) serve to anchor the group’s collective identity and guide participants through the nuances of virtual interaction. As Baym notes, “norms provide much of the tradition that organizes online communities” (141).

Similar to the performance of friendliness, emotional expression is also shaped by social norms and expectations of the group. This suggests that digital interactions carry a performative dimension, raising the question of whether emotional expressions are spontaneous or enacted in response to community dynamics. As Blanchard noted, perceived emotional support plays a key role in fostering a sense of belonging, but this perception depends upon the responses received within the group (2112). One of the defining characteristics of virtual communities is their reliance on recorded and publicly visible interactions. This visibility contributes to a performative display of emotional engagement, where expressions of empathy and support are not simply a reflection of internal feelings but can also serve a strategic function. When users engage with one another, they construct and curate their online persona to align their performance with the community’s established norms (Macek 299-300).

In addition to textual displays of emotion, online spaces provide visual and symbolic markers, such as emojis or memes, to convey sentiments. These icons have become tools for emotional curation, shaping how users present their feelings. Emojis, which are commonly used on Reddit, function as a form of emotional translation, altering how emotions are expressed and perceived (Marshall & Umback 12). This blend of curated textual and visual emotional performance allows users to engage with the community while also performing their identity in a recognizable way. While it is beyond the scope of this study to determine the sincerity of every emotional display, these dynamics will be explored later in my analysis.

4.5 McMillan and Chavis’s Sense of Community Model

To further understand the emotional and social dimensions of these virtual spaces, it is necessary to explore theoretical models designed specifically to analyze the concept of community. Psychologist Samuel Sarason first introduced the “Sense of Community” concept in 1974. Sarason argued that communities are defined by more than shared locations or interests; instead describing them as “one of the major bases for self-definition” (157). This idea has since become central to the psychology of communities and laid the groundwork for subsequent SoC research, including McMillan and Chavis’s contribution from 1986.

Their Sense of Community model offers a nuanced framework for exploring personal connections within online spaces and will be the foundation of my approach. It has been widely applied to various communities and offers a holistic approach to understanding how shared identity, influence, and emotional connection contribute to community development. The model has gained broad acceptance for studying place- and interest-based communities due to its strong theoretical grounding and qualitative empirical evidence (Blanchard and Markus 67). It offers an ideal base for analyzing online environments like the *r/fourthwing* subreddit, where community-building occurs without physical proximity.

At its core, McMillan and Chavis define a sense of community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (9). The four components that characterize a community are: “Membership, Influence, Integration and Fulfillment of Needs, and Shared Emotional Connection” (McMillan and Chavis 9). In 1996, McMillan revisited the model, renaming the original components “Spirit,” “Trust,” “Trade,” and “Art” (315). These revisions enhanced the model without altering its foundation and applicability. While I will mainly focus on the original model and discuss its components now, these updates provide additional depth to the theory and will be incorporated into the four categories initially defined.

Membership

Membership refers to the emotional investment or commitment individuals experience when they perceive themselves as part of a community. It entails feeling included and connected. Membership often originates from a felt sense of belonging, not necessarily requiring formal inclusion but rather a personal identification with the group. However, it also includes the potentially troubling creation of boundaries, defining who belongs and who does not. This might create an “us vs. them” mentality, which can lead to exclusionary behavior, as shown later in the analysis. Conversely, boundaries also offer a form of perceived “emotional safety”, allowing for the expression of needs and the development of intimacy. McMillan and Chavis see emotional security as a component of overall safety, and the boundaries created offer the structure and protection necessary for group intimacy (9).

In 1996, McMillan further emphasized the spark of friendship that fosters community spirit (315). It is essential for everyone to have connections with others, providing a space where

community members can express their personalities and see them reflected. McMillan's 1996 revision reinforces the idea that membership not only involves a sense of belonging but also creates symbolic boundaries that differentiate between members and non-members. People tend to bond with communities where they feel wanted and believe they belong. This sense of belonging increases their attraction to the community. Acceptance by the community affirms this belief, reinforcing member's attachment. Both the individual and the community share responsibilities: members must believe in their right to belong, and the community must accept them (McMillan 317).

Beyond this sense of belonging, identification and personal investment also deepen an individual's connection to the group. For McMillan and Chavis, belonging and identification entail the sense, belief, and anticipation that one fits within the group, feels accepted, and is willing to sacrifice. In addition to these aspects of membership, McMillan and Chavis identify a shared symbol system as crucial in establishing and sustaining a sense of community. Such a system, which is also very present on *r/fourthwing*, helps to create social distance from non-members, further reinforcing the boundaries and shared identity within the group (McMillan and Chavis 9).

Influence

The second aspect is influence, which operates on two levels: Firstly, for an individual to be drawn to a group, they need to have some impact on the group's actions. Secondly, a group's cohesiveness relies on its capacity to affect its members. McMillan and Chavis draw on the consensual validation construct to further elaborate on this factor. The construct, which was initially suggested by Backman and Secord in 1959 and further discussed by Byrne and Wond in 1962, states that individuals have an innate need to confirm that their perceptions and understandings are shared by others. People often seek confirmation that their views are accurate, using validation to reinforce their perceptions. This ensures that members do not feel isolated or irrational. They further mention the transactional nature of consensual validation from individuals and the group. Exchanges that provide this kind of validation reassure members that their interpretations are shared, understood, and not deemed exaggerated. This experience helps solidify the connection to the group and strengthens the sense of belonging (McMillan and Chavis 11). In addition, uniform and conforming behavior reflect a group's efforts to validate its members while establishing group norms.

In 1996, when McMillan redefined this aspect as “Trust,” he emphasized order and how it develops through the community’s use of power. For a community to thrive, it must address power distribution and establish order through norms, rules, or laws. Knowing what to expect from one another fosters cohesion. Authority, based on principle rather than individuals, is essential for decision-making and maintaining order. When a community has order, authority, and reciprocal influence, trust forms, which evolves into a sense of justice (McMillan 319-320).

Integration and Fulfillment of Needs

Integration and fulfillment of needs is the third component central to a sense of community. This is based on behavioral research and means that to sustain a positive sense of unity, a group must ensure that the individual-group relationship benefits its members (McMillan and Chavis 11). While McMillan and Chavis acknowledge that it is impossible to identify all the factors that bond people in a close community, they mention some reinforcers, such as membership status, competence, and shared values (McMillan and Chavis 12-13). People are drawn to others whose abilities or skills benefit them. A strong community aligns people so they can meet each other’s needs while also fulfilling their own.

In 1996, McMillan reinterpreted the idea of integration and fulfillment of needs as “Trade” (320). A community develops a social economy where members exchange resources, support, and emotional investment. Members make bargains with each other, integrating their needs and resources into a continuous exchange process. Initially, bonding occurs through shared similarities. However, as the community grows, differences among members become crucial, enabling exchanges based on varied needs and resources. The most valuable exchanges involve sharing feelings and, once a perceived safety is established, progress to deeper, more challenging exchanges like criticism and suggestions. Fair trading practices build trust and may evolve into a system where members give freely out of a sense of joy and privilege, not because of what they will get in return (McMillan 320- 322).

Shared Emotional Connection

The final component of McMillan and Chavis’s SoC model is the concept of shared emotional connection, which forms the emotional bond that ties community members together. This connection arises from several key principles that influence how individuals form and strengthen their relationships within the group.

One important principle discussed by McMillan and Chavis is the “Contact Hypothesis”, which proposes that the more interaction community members have, the greater the likelihood that they will develop a sense of closeness. However, they do acknowledge that quality of interaction also plays a role. Positive experiences and relationships contribute to a stronger sense of belonging, whereas negative interactions can hinder the development of emotional bonds (McMillan and Chavis 13).

Another critical factor is the resolution of community tasks or events. McMillan and Chavis emphasize the importance of closure to events to foster cohesiveness within the group. If community interactions remain unresolved or unclear, the lack of closure may disrupt the group’s unity and diminish the formation of strong emotional connections (McMillan and Chavis 14).

Additionally, personal investment in the community plays a significant role in the strength of these emotional ties. When individuals invest time, energy, and resources into the community, they become more emotionally engaged and committed to the group (McMillan and Chavis 14). This investment can take many forms, from participating in discussions to contributing creative content.

Recognition and humiliation are also crucial to understanding emotional ties within a community. According to McMillan and Chavis, being honored or humiliated in front of the group can significantly impact how appealing (or unappealing) the community becomes to the individual. Public recognition and praise strengthen bonds, while humiliation can push members away (McMillan and Chavis 14). Lastly, McMillan and Chavis mention the concept of a “spiritual bond”, that unites members through shared values, experiences, or a common purpose (14). Although this idea is more abstract, it aims to capture the deep connection that can exist in communities.

In 1996, McMillan expanded on the concept of shared emotional connection by reframing it as “Art”, highlighting the significance of storytelling and the creation of a shared history (322). Through storytelling, members relive emotional experiences, reinforcing their bonds with one another and creating a collective memory that strengthens the community. He conceded that it is not the frequency of these shared events that matter, but rather their quality that contributes to a SoC. Members select defining moments that resonate with the community’s core values and embrace them. These shared narratives help to solidify experiences that honor the

community's spirit, ensuring a lasting connection that reaches beyond physical location or face-to-face interaction (McMillan 322).

In essence, thriving communities provide members with positive interactions, significant shared events that are positively resolved, ways to honor members, chances to invest in their community, and moments to foster spiritual connection among members (McMillan and Chavis 14)

4.6 Adaptations of the SoC Model to Online Spaces

Various subsequent studies have focused on the adaptability of McMillan and Chavis's model to virtual communities. By applying their framework to specific platforms, these studies illustrate how the core components of SoC persist, even when modified to suit digital environments. The following studies integrate platform-specific factors into their analyses, highlighting how scholars have expanded McMillan and Chavis's framework to better capture the complexities of virtual communities.

Blanchard & Markus

Blanchard and Markus build on traditional community models by emphasizing process-driven interactions over static factors. Their 2004 study on the Multiple Sports Newsgroup (MSN) applies McMillan and Chavis's model to an online context, reinforcing that a sense of community can emerge in online spaces but with certain modifications. Their findings suggest that while the four key components of the model are present in virtual communities, they manifest differently. For instance, membership is recognized through identifying and acknowledging other members but influence in virtual settings like MSN is less prominent or harder to detect (Blanchard and Markus 72-73). Nonetheless, the authors remark that their difficulty in identifying influence does not mean it is non-existent nor that, at some point, it may have been a dominant factor. Blanchard and Markus diverge from McMillan and Chavis by proposing a process-driven theory of Sense of Virtual Community formation (SoVC). While McMillan and Chavis imply that community feelings and behaviors emerge simultaneously, Blanchard and Markus argue that community-like behaviors, such as providing support, maintaining norms, and social control, precede and eventually generate feelings of community (69). Members initially engage in these behaviors for practical purposes, such as sharing information, and over time, the repeated enactment of these actions evolves into a sense of community (Blanchard and Markus 74). This process theory emphasizes that SoVC can become

self-sustaining but may also decline if members stop engaging in community-like behaviors. This may happen if leaders leave, or unresolved crises disrupt the group's cohesion.

Additionally, integration and fulfillment of needs in online spaces typically involves exchanging informational and emotional support, which fosters trust and attachment within the group (74). Blanchard and Markus found that informational support was the most valued form on MSN, highlighting how the types of support members prioritize can vary depending on the platform. They also noted the impact of observing support exchanges, where even lurkers reported feeling connected to the community simply by witnessing others give and receive support. Their study further exemplifies the importance of identity creation and trust production as critical processes for establishing virtual community bonds. These two factors are not as emphasized in McMillan and Chavis's original model. This suggests that virtual communities, like the *Fourth Wing* subreddit, may require participants to craft individual identities actively while the platform fosters trust through sustained interaction (Blanchard and Markus 74-75). The key difference in Blanchard and Markus's approach is their emphasis on process rather than static variables, providing a dynamic understanding of how communities emerge and persist in virtual spaces.

In her consecutive 2008 study, Blanchard expands her analysis, focusing on how group norms play a crucial role in fostering SoVC. These norms function as guidelines, enhancing members' sense of belonging by creating shared expectations, which is particularly relevant in online environments where typical social cues, like body language or tone, are absent. Blanchard's study suggests that these norms hold greater influence over members' sense of belonging than direct influence, which is more prominent in physical spaces. She notes that members often rely on profiles and contributions as identity markers to develop a collective identity and shared values, further reinforcing group cohesion. In contrast to McMillan and Chavis's original model, influence is less dominant in online settings, with group norms and identity formation taking on more significant roles (Blanchard 2109-2110).

Blanchard also discusses how support exchange impacts SoVC. Publicly observing and participating in these exchanges, such as offering advice or sharing personal experiences, reinforces group norms and strengthens emotional bonds among members (2115). Notably, Blanchard's study once again highlights that even lurkers who do not actively participate can feel connected to the community by observing others exchange support. This is particularly relevant for understanding online spaces like Reddit, where active and passive members coexist,

with passive members often outnumbering active contributors. This shows that members can still develop a sense of belonging and attachment through indirect participation, adding another dimension to SoVC formation.

Blanchard further explores social exchange theory to show how reciprocity drives support exchanges within virtual communities. Individuals give and receive help directly in dyadic relationships or indirectly within larger groups. If support is shared between two individuals, the emotional attachment remains dyadic. However, when support is exchanged publicly, these attachments extend to the larger community, cultivating a collective identity that ties members to the community rather than to individual members (Blanchard 2111). She further draws on Wellman and Guilia's observation that the public exchange of support can create the impression of a highly supportive group, even if only a small number of members are actively involved in these exchanges. Since the messages are visible to everyone, the entire community benefits from these interactions, even if they did not participate directly. This strengthens the overall SoVC by creating group-wide attachment rather than individual bonds (Blanchard 2112).

Together, these studies provide a nuanced understanding of SoVC that extends McMillan and Chavis's model by incorporating social exchange theory and emphasizing the roles of norms and reciprocity. Their findings are particularly relevant to virtual communities, where active contributors and lurkers alike engage with and benefit from community interactions. When physical proximity is absent, norms, identity, and support exchange form the foundation for SoVC, enabling members to cultivate a strong sense of belonging that mirrors the SoC dynamics of traditional communities.

Rotman & Wu

In 2010, Rotman and Wu proposed an adaptation of the SoC framework specifically for virtual communities, which differs from physical ones in structure and social norms. In digital environments, critical elements like face-to-face interaction, visual communication cues, or previous social ties are absent, excluding what McMillan and Chavis call "community residency". Instead, virtual communities enable connections around shared interests, becoming social spaces for self-disclosure and need fulfillment (Rotman and Wu 40).

Rotman and Wu emphasize the diversity among virtual communities, which can range from social networks like Facebook to specialized forums like subreddits, or professional spaces such as LinkedIn (41). These communities may be small, intimate groups or large networks with

hundreds of thousands of members. Users within these communities fulfill different roles and engage in interactions depending on the platform. These exchanges often evolve into what Kollock termed in 1991 “generalized reciprocation,” where back-and-forth correspondences build and reinforce social ties (qtd. in Rotman and Wu 42). Interaction itself becomes a form of social currency, helping members find their place within the group. Rotman and Wu remark that virtual community members often take on specific roles, such as “answer-people,” who provide guidance to others, or “question-people,” who seek information (42). Similar to McMillan and Chavis’s ideas of membership and influence, this role differentiation within digital communities fosters a sense of place and belonging for participants. However, unlike McMillan and Chavis, Rotman and Wu emphasize the dynamic, shifting nature of these roles, where members’ contributions continuously shape the evolving community structure (42).

They also highlight how interaction not only has practical benefits but provides an emotional connection in these spaces. Emotional support is crucial, as it fosters trust and empathy, aligning with McMillan and Chavis’s concept of shared emotional connection. SoC often reaches its strongest point in communities capable of resolving internal conflicts and rallying around shared goals, offering members both individual validation and collective support. Nevertheless, unlike their physical counterparts, virtual communities often have shorter lifespans and experience frequent changes. Such shifts might involve platform updates, the introduction of new technologies, or changes to content. Yet, despite their brief existence, virtual communities create their own forms of shared history. While this collective memory may be relatively short compared to that of physical communities, it remains equally significant (Rotman and Wu 43). For users, even a brief shared experience can contribute to a strong SoC.

In addition to shared history, Rotman and Wu emphasize the role of common culture, where members co-create language, symbols, and community norms to strengthen group identity. This shared culture plays an essential role in fostering unity and differentiating members from outsiders. For established communities, shared cultural norms reinforce cohesion and identity, providing continuity even within digital spaces. This aligns with McMillan and Chavis’s SoC components of membership and influence, but Rotman and Wu highlight how such culture adapts continuously in online spaces (Rotman and Wu 43).

Furthermore, like Blanchard and Markus, they remark on the importance of a virtually constructed identity. While the anonymity of online spaces may initially encourage individuals to share thoughts they might hesitate to express in face-to-face interactions, developing a unique

virtual identity becomes central to fostering a sense of community. Without some form of identifiable persona, trust and shared history cannot fully form. This is similar to McMillan and Chavis's understanding of membership and influence within a community but adapts these concepts to an online environment where identity is flexible and evolves through participation (Rotman and Wu 43-44).

Rotman and Wu's updated SoC framework outlines five elements that collectively reflect virtual community dynamics: domain, interaction, affection, history, and identity (44-45). Each aspect highlights how SoC adapts uniquely in digital contexts.

- **Domain:** A broad, flexible domain of interest is often enough to attract members and supports the development of a sense of community (Rotman and Wu 44).
- **Interaction:** SoC arises from interactions that go beyond simple information-sharing. Participants join for varied reasons, to create content, observe, or connect, and interact in ways that fulfill these needs (Rotman and Wu 44).
- **Affection:** Affection-driven exchanges develop after trust is built through repeated interactions and personal disclosures (Rotman and Wu 44-45).
- **History:** History is preserved through digital archives, allowing users to revisit past discussions and contribute to a shared narrative. (Rotman and Wu 45).
- **Identity:** Virtual identities are continuously shaped by ongoing interactions and evolve with participation, capturing the fluidity of identity in online spaces (45).

While Rotman and Wu's framework builds on McMillan and Chavis's model, its focus on adaptability and identity provides critical updates relevant to digital spaces.

Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev

In 2011, Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev examined the sense of community on Twitter (now X), a platform not originally designed for community-building. By applying McMillan and Chavis's framework directly, without modification, the study demonstrates the model's relevance in analyzing online environments. Unlike other researchers who adapted the model to fit the nuances of virtual spaces, Gruzd et al. found that its original structure was sufficient to capture the dynamics of a digital platform like Twitter. Their analysis explored how SoC can develop even within a one-sided network, such as Wellman's Twitter network, drawing on Anderson's concept of an imagined community (Gruzd et al. 1298).

Users, who usually never meet most of their fellow members, form a shared identity through frequent interactions, retweets, and the creation of a common language known as “Twitterspeak” (Gruzd et al. 1302). Their study shows that Twitter meets the conditions for a virtual community as proposed by Jones, including sustained interaction and the presence of a common-public-place. Furthermore, the authors highlight how membership is established through mutual connections and clusters of users around shared interests. Influence is reflected in the act of retweeting and replying, which allows users to shape discussions and maintain visibility within the network. Twitter users also exchange support, often in the form of sharing information and resources, which fulfills the need for integration and the fulfillment of needs. Finally, shared emotional connections are fostered through humor, shared events, and conferences, which help maintain a sense of belonging (Gruzd et al. 1307-1312). These findings reinforce the validity of the SoC model, suggesting that users can form strong bonds and community ties through sustained interaction and mutual support.

Prinster et al.

In 2024, Prinster et al. examined 21 subreddits and developed the Community Archetypes framework to study the diverse ways users experience SoVC. They divided Reddit communities into five distinct archetypes: “Topical Q&A, Learning & Perspective Broadening, Social Support, Content Generation, and Affiliation with an Entity” (Prinster et al. 16-18).

In their approach to studying virtual communities, Prinster et al. emphasize the importance of identifying antecedents that contribute to the formation of a SoVC, rather than solely focusing on the experience or outcomes of SoVC (4). The authors propose four primary factors: “interactivity, membership boundaries, homogeneity, and norm enforcement” (Prinster et al. 8). These antecedents offer a theoretical foundation that reflects the diverse structures and dynamics found in various Reddit communities, which they later classify into the five distinct archetypes.

The first antecedent, interactivity, considers the level and quality of interaction within a community. Prinster et al. note that while the volume of interaction (such as the number of posts or comments) is essential and more commonly identified in the literature as an important factor, it is often the depth of conversation and reciprocity within exchanges that truly contributes to SoVC (Prinster et al. 12).

The second antecedent, membership boundaries, includes factors such as engagement tiers, prolonged participation and linguistic boundaries. Membership tiers may be assessed by tracking the volume of posts, comments, or the amount of time a user spends on the subreddit. Members who return consistently over extended periods contribute to the development of community culture and help to establish a sense of identity and continuity within the community that also attracts new members. The ability to use language specific to the community, which includes using insider jokes, specific terms or abbreviations, is another sign of familiarity and belonging (Prinster et al. 12-13).

Homogeneity, the third antecedent, reflects the degree of similarity among community members. Prinster et al. observe that shared life experiences and goals hold greater value than demographic background. Moreover, homogeneity can also be measured by linguistic markers which indicate individual membership status, as users adopt specific language that aligns with group norms. (Prinster et al. 13).

Finally, norm enforcement addresses how communities regulate behavior, either through top-down moderation by appointed mediators or horizontal enforcement by regular members. Both forms of norm enforcement ensure that users adhere to community standards, which contributes to a stable environment where members feel comfortable engaging. This regulation can be observed through practices such as upvoting, downvoting, or even direct intervention by other users to maintain group integrity (Prinster et al. 14).

Together, these antecedents shape the dynamics within virtual communities, laying the groundwork for the five community archetypes. Each archetype represents a unique composition of these antecedents, providing insight into the structures and interactions that characterize Reddit communities. While many communities align closely with a single archetype showcasing specific features and user behaviors, some forums display characteristics of multiple types, reflecting the complex and diverse nature of online spaces (Prinster et al. 15).

Similarly to Bruckman's work on community, Prinster et al. also propose to view communities on a spectrum. The following overview briefly outlines each archetype, illustrating how these categories capture the varied experiences of SOVC on Reddit.

- **Topical Q&A:** Topical Q&A communities are spaces that focus on knowledge-sharing through structured question-and-answer interactions. SoVC is cultivated through mutual problem-solving and shared interest, with interactivity and

membership boundaries established around the exchange of expertise and support (Prinster et al. 16).

- **Learning & Perspective Broadening:** Learning and Perspective Broadening forums bring users together who aim to deepen their knowledge or broaden their views on certain topics. While some users experience SoVC due to shared values, others may not because their primary interest lies in consuming content and information rather than forming interpersonal connections (Prinster et al. 16-17).
- **Social Support:** Social Support communities are centered around providing empathy, validation, and support among members, often forming around shared personal experiences. Members feel understood and supported, and user roles are often fluid (Prinster et al. 17).
- **Content Generation:** Content Generation communities focus on creating and sharing user-generated material. SoVC emerges through valuing creative contributions and encouraging active engagement with other people's work. Similar to Learning & Perspective Broadening, users who engage with the subreddit mainly as a resource rather than as a social space may not experience SoVC (Prinster et al. 17-18).
- **Affiliation with an Entity:** Affiliation with an Entity communities often form around shared interests in popular media or connections to organizations or institutions. Members gather to discuss personal experiences, share information, and provide updates, building SoVC through loyalty and identification with the affiliated entity. Fandom communities such as the *Fourth Wing* subreddit fall under this archetype where members bond over their shared passion for the books. (Prinster et al. 18).

Nonetheless, I would argue that while the *Fourth Wing* subreddit's main archetype is affiliation with an entity, it also combines elements of knowledge exchange, social support, and creative content generation, consequently embodying a blend of archetypes.

Much like McMillan and Chavis, Prinster et al. emphasize that foundational factors such as interactivity, membership boundaries, and norm enforcement are crucial for establishing a strong sense of community. For instance, interactivity aligns closely with McMillan and Chavis's idea of shared emotional connection, as both models recognize the importance of reciprocal exchanges that cultivate belonging. Similarly, membership boundaries reflect McMillan and Chavis's concept of membership and emotional security, where clear boundaries between members and non-members help establish group identity and a sense of perceived emotional safety.

However, Prinster et al. introduce antecedents and archetypes specific to the digital context that are not as explicitly defined in McMillan and Chavis's original model. For example, homogeneity and norm enforcement take on distinct characteristics in online spaces, where demographic or linguistic similarity as well as the balance of horizontal and vertical enforcement by community members and moderators play a critical role. These antecedents align with McMillan and Chavis's components of influence and integration and fulfillment of needs, but provide more insights tailored to the structure of online communities. Additionally, the five archetypes further expand on McMillan and Chavis's model by categorizing the unique ways users experience and engage with sense of community online.

5 The Aggregated Analytical Framework

Many foundational models were developed in the late 1990s or early 2000s, a time before the rise of algorithm-driven social media and the seamless integration of online interactions into daily life. Today, digital spaces are not merely supplementary to social interaction but are deeply embedded in how people communicate and form relationships with others. McMillan and Chavis' model remains foundational, which is evidenced by the frequency with which subsequent studies reference its structure and influence. Other scholars have built upon their framework to address different aspects of virtual community formation, but no single model fully captures the complexity of how a sense of community manifests online. For example, Prinster et al.'s study from 2024 introduces an archetypal approach that is useful for categorizing existing communities but does not provide a direct framework for analyzing an experienced sense of community within a fandom. Therefore, rather than relying on a single model, I have developed an aggregated framework that synthesizes several perspectives. My approach integrates McMillan and Chavis's foundational model, Blanchard and Markus's process-oriented perspective, Rotman and Wu's focus on identity and historical continuity, and Prinster et al.'s antecedents. This ensures that all relevant dimensions of a sense of community can be comprehensively studied.

The following chapter will outline each component of my framework and connect these elements to prior research, clarifying their theoretical origins. Nevertheless, it is important to note that while each aspect is discussed individually, the elements are also interconnected. The sense of community within a virtual space emerges from the dynamic interplay between membership, norms, emotional connection, and collective memory, which work together to shape a cohesive and supportive community experience.

5.1 Membership and Identification

In digital fandom spaces identification often emerges through enthusiasm for the community's topic, allowing members to see their interests and personalities reflected by the group. This is reinforced through identifiable elements, such as usernames and flairs. These symbols not only serve as tools for individual self-expression but also foster trust and recognition, reinforcing connections between members. Unlike traditional communities, where demographic similarities might foster connections, online communities also prioritize representation and shared goals. Within the subreddit, these similarities support a collective sense of belonging and create a sense of exclusivity and shared understanding. Identification is further strengthened by a shared symbol system, which entails insider language, specific terms, and symbols unique to the fandom. The ability to use said system marks an individual as an "insider" within the community, deepening their sense of community.

Membership and Identification in my framework is primarily drawn from McMillan and Chavis's concept of membership, which emphasizes belonging, perceived emotional safety, and a shared symbol system (9). However, I integrate insights from Blanchard and Markus as well as Rotman and Wu, who highlight the importance of virtually constructed identities and common culture within digital spaces (74-75; 42). Additionally, Prinster et al.'s antecedents contribute to this category by emphasizing similarities as tools for identity construction within online spaces (12-13).

5.2 Norms and Influence

Norms and Influence play a crucial role in setting expectations for appropriate behavior and creating a respectful space. Boundaries, such as guidelines and criticism etiquette, allow members to share openly without "fear" of negative repercussions. Commitment to the group is also reinforced through clear rules and a shared understanding of community standards, such as correctly labelling spoilers, which fosters respect and trust. These group norms are maintained through peer-driven and moderator-led enforcement, which creates a reliable environment that fosters a sense of order and unity within the community. Influence is present in two ways: the group impacts individuals by providing validation, as perceptions are regularly mirrored and confirmed by others, while individuals influence the group through actions like upvotes or comments, shaping discussion topics and their visibility.

This component incorporates McMillan and Chavis's concept of influence, particularly in how group norms impact behavior and establish order (11). Blanchard's research further refines this by emphasizing implicit norms and identity markers in online spaces and Rotman and Wu's work contributes to understanding how users take on different roles (2109-2110; 42). Additionally, Prinster et al.'s antecedent of norm enforcement highlights the interaction between top-down moderation and horizontal enforcement by users, offering a practical lens through which subreddit dynamics can be analyzed (14).

5.3 Needs and Emotional Connection

In virtual spaces, needs and emotional connection often manifest through exchanges of support, resources, and information which have a lasting impact on community members. Personal disclosures and thoughtful discussions foster trust, while reciprocal support ensures that members feel valued and connected. Members often receive affirmation, or direct engagement with their posts, reinforcing their sense of belonging and shared values. This mutual validation strengthens the group and fosters a culture of inclusivity and respect which leads to emotional investment, another defining characteristic of this component. Members dedicate time, energy, and creativity, deepening individual connections and reinforcing the collective bonds that make the community supportive. By sharing their reactions and reflecting together, fans create a supportive space where everyone can feel understood.

This category is grounded in McMillan and Chavis's notion of integration and fulfillment of needs, which describes how communities sustain themselves by meeting individual and collective needs (11). However, it also incorporates Blanchard's work on social exchange theory, emphasizing the importance of reciprocity in online spaces (2111-2112). Rotman and Wu's insights on how digital interactions evolve from information-sharing to emotional support, and Prinster et al.'s emphasis on interactivity and quality of interaction further contribute to this aspect (44-45; 12).

5.4 Collective Memory and Continuity

This component emphasizes the significance of shared history, traditions, and communal experiences in fostering a sense of community. In the absence of physical proximity, these elements help to foster long-term connections. Through archived discussions, significant events, and recurring topics, the community builds a collective memory. These records allow members to revisit key moments and reconnect with the community, even after periods of

absence. Activities like weekly book chats or celebratory posts for community milestones create a sense of shared excitement and purpose. These traditions help to keep the community engaged and give members something familiar to return to, reinforcing a sense of stability over time.

The Collective Memory and Continuity component integrates McMillan and Chavis's idea of shared emotional connection but expands on it using Rotman and Wu's insights on shared history and common culture (45). Additionally, Blanchard's emphasis on the importance of witnessing or participating in support exchanges further strengthens this category (2112). Finally, Prinster et al.'s work on Affiliation with an Entity highlights how fandom communities maintain continuity through recurring interactions and shared passion (18).

Visualizing the Framework and its Origin

To provide a clearer understanding of the aggregated analytical framework, the following visual representation highlights its four main components and their respective elements.

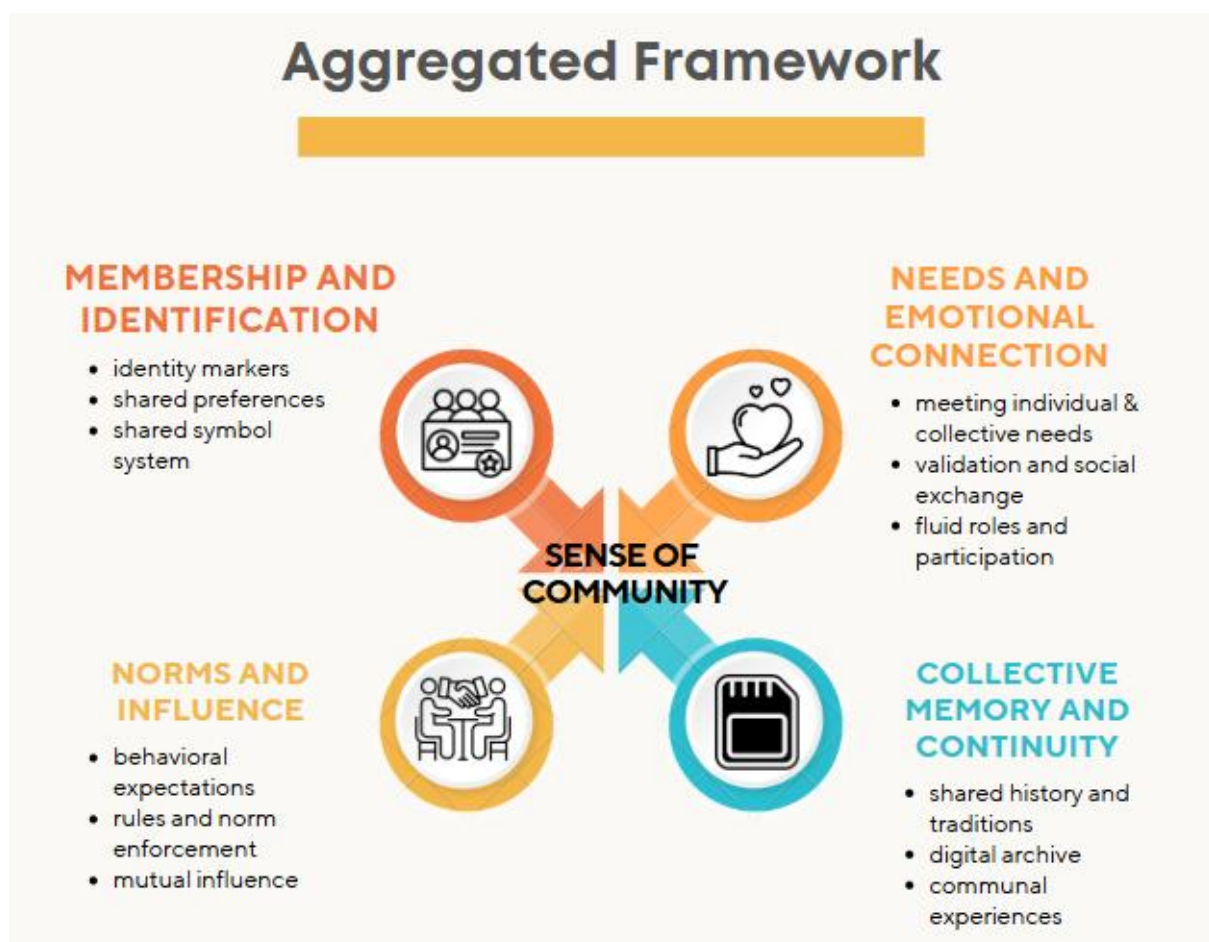


Figure 1: Aggregated Framework

Additionally, the accompanying table maps each component to its theoretical origin, demonstrating how the framework synthesizes existing research.

Framework Component	McMillan & Chavis	Blanchard & Markus	Rotman & Wu	Prinster et al.
Membership and Identification	belonging perceived emotional safety shared language system	identity markers Boundaries	virtual identity common culture	boundaries, engagement tiers Similarities Shared language system
Norms and Influence	group norms Authority Order	implicit norms	dynamic role enforcement	top-down Moderation and peer-driven influence
Needs and Emotional Connection	mutual validation shared values personal investment quality of interaction	social exchange reciprocity observed support	emotional support fluid participation and roles	interactivity reciprocity quality of interaction flexible roles
Collective Memory and Continuity	shared history	support exchange	shared digital history recurring traditions	recurring interaction affiliation with an entity

Figure 2: Theoretical Foundation

6 Methodology

The framework presented in Chapter 5 builds on McMillan and Chavis’s Sense of Community model, integrating modern adaptations and reinterpretations to better reflect the characteristics of virtual communities. I chose a case study approach to explore how a sense of community manifests within the subreddit, allowing for an in-depth examination of this specific fan community. The following chapter details the data collection method, criteria for post selection, and an overview of the selected posts.

6.1 Data Collection

I used criterion sampling to select posts from *r/fourthwing* that reflect key aspects of community engagement and illustrate a diverse range of interactions. I focused on the following criteria:

- **Engagement:** Posts with high levels of interaction among members were included because they indicate active participation within the community. High-comment threads often reveal how members connect and exchange emotional support. For instance, the post “Why am I so obsessed with this?” received 148 comments, while “I crocheted Sgaeyl” garnered 182 comments.
- **Rules and Guidelines:** Official posts discussing subreddit rules and guidelines were selected because they shape community expectations and enforce boundaries. These posts provide insight into how moderation influences interaction, reinforces community values, and establishes behavioral norms. Examples include “How To: Criticism on *r/fourthwing*” and “Official *r/fourthwing* Onyx Storm Release Rules”.
- **Traditions and Events:** Posts reflecting emerging traditions and recurring activities were chosen to examine how the subreddit develops shared rituals and strengthens group identity over time. This includes events such as annual fan fiction exchanges and midnight release parties, which demonstrate how members collectively build a shared history.

After selecting the posts, I applied a thematic analysis to examine how these interactions shape the subreddit’s sense of community, focusing on identity, interpersonal connections, group norms, and continuity over time. While Reddit is primarily a text-based platform, users often incorporate visual and symbolic icons such as emojis and GIFs to complement their written exchanges. Although this study does not quantify the balance of textual versus visual elements, I explore how different modes work together to foster a sense of community.

6.2 Overview of Analyzed Subreddit Posts

The following posts span from July 2023 to January 2025 and cover varying moments in the forum’s development and reflect the ways in which members engage with one another. Each entry is listed with its full original title and the date it was posted.

Selected Posts:

1. **Announcement Re: Spoilers for Other Series (June 21, 2024):** A post outlining guidelines for discussing spoilers from other series.
2. **1st Anniversary Fan Fic Exchange (May 2, 2024):** A post marking the subreddit's first anniversary, outlining a fan fiction exchange event organized by the moderators.
3. **Fourth Wing & Iron Flame reread on r/fourthwing & The Rider's Quadrant (November 4, 2024):** An announcement post organizing a communal reread of *Fourth Wing* and *Iron Flame* with scheduled discussions and analysis.
4. **How To: Criticism on r/fourthwing (April 12, 2024):** A post offering advice on how to engage with criticism about the books constructively.
5. **How To: Spoilers on r/fourthwing (April 16, 2024):** A post establishing rules and etiquette for sharing spoilers.
6. **Fan Art Friday | @LunatrixArt 🦋 (July 12, 2023):** A weekly series where artwork from a fandom artist is showcased, in this example @LunatrixArt.
7. **FW/IF Is my obsession normal? (May 4, 2024):** *Certain_Pomelo_5885* describes their intense emotional reaction to the series and seeks reassurance about whether their strong feelings are normal and how to recover from them.
8. **I crocheted Sgaeyl 💙 (February 13, 2024):** *ChibiNekoChan* shares their crocheted dragon inspired by the series.
9. **I wanna hear why YOU love the series! Get deep or be silly - let's throw a whole bunch of love around on this Monday! (May 13, 2024):** *Allycatbakes* calls upon fellow fans to share their love for the series after reading some negative comments on another subreddit.
10. **Jesinia's Library Chat (February 29, 2024):** A weekly post where members share what they are currently reading, offer recommendations, and engage in general book chat.
11. **Midnight Release Parties (November 3, 2023):** A post where members share their excitement and preparations for attending *Iron Flame* release events.
12. **Official r/fourthwing Onyx Storm Release Rules 🗨️ (January 15, 2025):** This post was published two weeks before the release of *Onyx Storm* and provides a structured breakdown of the adapted spoiler policies, content restrictions, and temporary rule enforcement mechanisms.

- 13. PSA: Get off TikTok if you don't want to be spoiled & stop commenting here that you're x% through Onyx Storm (January 17, 2025):** A post uploaded 4 days before the release of *Onyx Storm*, in which moderators address community frustration over early leaks and reiterate rule enforcement in response to member concerns.
- 14. r/FourthWing has hit 50,000 members 🧡💫 art by Emilia Mildner (February 12, 2024):** A post celebrating the subreddit's growth to 50,000 members, accompanied by original fan art from Emilia Mildner.
- 15. r/fourthwing has hit 100,000 members 🧡🔥💧 art by: aokiart_ (December 9, 2024):** A post celebrating the subreddit's growth to 100,000 members, featuring fan art by aokiart_.
- 16. r/fourthwing & reposting of bonus content (September 16, 2024):** A post addressing guidelines for sharing and reposting bonus materials related to the series.
- 17. Rules (no date):** The 15 subreddit rules can be found on the main page and outline expected member behavior and content guidelines.
- 18. Why am I so obsessed with this? (January 14, 2024):** Bluebutton7 shares their overwhelming emotional connection to the series and asks the community for advice on how to manage their intense feelings.

To maintain consistency in analysis, I applied a cut-off date of January 21, 2025 (the official release date of *Onyx Storm*). Working exclusively with screenshots taken on that date ensured that later activity did not influence the analysis.

7 Analyzing r/fourthwing

With the model established and the posts introduced, this chapter will now examine how the components of the framework manifest within the subreddit. The analysis focuses on both individual posts and broader observations to illustrate how this subreddit has evolved into a virtual community. Posts are analyzed within the categories where their content is most applicable, rather than across all components. However, they may appear in multiple categories if they address more than one aspect of the framework.

7.1 Membership and Identification

Membership and identification within the subreddit are evident through members' shared enthusiasm for the series and their use of symbolic markers to establish and express group

identity. This sense of belonging begins with the act of subscribing to the subreddit and is reinforced through visible indicators such as usernames, flairs, and post engagement. These elements allow members to showcase their alignment with the community and signal their commitment to its values.

Markers of Membership

A distinctive marker of identification within the subreddit is the use of user flairs representing dragon breeds from the series. Among the eight available breeds are dragons like “Green Scorpiontail” or “Black Morningstartail” (“Fourth Wing”, *Reddit*). Outsiders unfamiliar with the series may not immediately recognize these dragons or their significance, making the flairs an implicit test of insider knowledge. Choosing the appropriate dragon flair requires familiarity with the series’ lore, as each breed is tied to specific characters and traits. By selecting a dragon flair, members not only express their personal affinity for a particular aspect of the series but also demonstrate their understanding of its narrative.

Interestingly, while other users are limited to selecting from a predefined list of dragon breeds, moderators can create customized flairs. This distinction reinforces the hierarchical nature of membership, where moderators, as community leaders, can craft flairs that may reflect their roles, personality, or inside jokes relevant to the moderation team. For example, moderator *yanny77* uses a flair stating, “Should I get the ban hammer?” paired with a bright red background (“Fourth Wing”, *Reddit*). A color that has long been associated with authority and power. As Elliot and Maier explain, red’s significance as the color of blood, life, and danger gives it an emotional and attention-grabbing quality (108). Within the subreddit, this use of red could symbolically convey the moderator’s readiness to enforce rules and maintain order.

Another moderator, *portujules*, uses a green flair, stating, “Nature likes all things in balance,” which may evoke associations with calmness, and harmony; as green is often linked to success and positive emotional states (“Fourth Wing,” *Reddit*; Elliot and Maier 108). These color choices not only differentiate the moderators from regular users but also communicate nuanced aspects of their roles and personalities, giving it a performative aspect. By incorporating such connotations, moderator flairs serve as tools for identity construction, reinforce the moderators’ authority, and subtly convey cues that shape how members perceive the moderators.

Although less prominent than user flairs, avatars also contribute to identity expression within the subreddit. Reddit allows users to upload custom profile pictures, enabling them to showcase

their personalities or interests. While not all users choose to upload a specific avatar, those who do often create an additional layer of individuality within the community. This is exemplified in the post “Why am I so obsessed with this?” where user *bluebutton7* comments about another’s avatar, “profile pic checks the fuck out 🥰🌀” (Why am I so obsessed). Here, the use of emojis reinforces enthusiasm and amusement, emphasizing how visual elements contribute to a shared recognition and validation within the subreddit.

Identification Through Representation

Beyond visible markers, membership is also shaped by personal identification with the series’ characters and themes. Fans see aspects of their own experiences reflected in the story, which deepens their connection to both the book and the community.

This dynamic is particularly evident in *allycatbakes*’s post, “I wanna hear why YOU love the series!” which invites fans to share what makes *Fourth Wing* special to them. The responses reveal that for many, the appeal goes beyond general enjoyment, readers see themselves in Violet’s struggles and achievements. Some emphasize how the novel’s portrayal of disability mirrors their own experiences. User *Maleficent-Nail-9680*, who, like Violet, also has Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS), describes how they “related on such a deep level to her physical struggles” and truly appreciated that despite Violet’s growth, she “couldn’t train away her weak joints any more than I can” (Why you love the series). This recognition of chronic illness as an ongoing reality rather than something to be overcome is a key factor in why some readers feel represented in the story. Similarly, *curious_cat_127* describes this personal identification by emphasizing Violet’s physical limitations and perseverance, stating, “Other FCs would have magically got rid of their disabilities after bonding a super powerful dragon but Violet is still her ‘fragile’ self after everything. She gets stronger without suddenly becoming ‘normal’” (Why you love the series). These responses exemplify how identification with the characters and themes plays a crucial role in why fans are devoted to the series.

Others highlight how the book validates different forms of strength. User *No_Cattle8415* expresses appreciation for how the novel reinforces that “not all strength is physical,” noting that characters accommodate Violet’s needs not because she is fragile, but because she “won’t be able to fully lean on her strength if she’s limited by something she can’t control” (Why you love the series). This illustrates that it is not just about visibility but about how characters’ struggles are acknowledged and validated within the story. By discussing these connections,

members reaffirm their identification with the story while simultaneously reinforcing community bonds.

This sense of personal connection also extends to the novel's broader representation of diversity. Several members highlight how the inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters feels natural rather than obligatory. User *AscendingStevie* remarks that they appreciate how queer characters “are just there, existing seamlessly, as we do in real life,” contrasting this with other fantasy series where representation can feel forced or performative. Personal identification shapes how fans engage with the series and each other. Discussions about representation are not just about praising diversity; they are a way for members to articulate their own identities and find common ground with others who share similar experiences.

Identification Through Shared Demographics

This sense of identification is also reinforced by demographic similarities among members. As they disclose personal details such as age, marital status, and parental roles, a shared identity may emerge. For example, in the “Why am I so obsessed” post OP *bluebutton7* opens with, “I am a 37-year-old mom (2 yr old son), in a 14-year relationship, [who] work[s] a full-time + high-pressure job” (Why am I so obsessed). This disclosure creates immediate points of connection, fostering solidarity among members in similar life stages leading to replies such as, “Wait, are you me ????? Hahaha My heart almost stopped for a moment since I am 37 with a 2 year old too” (Why am I so obsessed).

The act of sharing personal information often initiates a chain reaction. *Honeycrsip_skipbo*'s reply, “Can we please start a club for moms confused with why they're so obsessed” prompts a whole sub-branch of comments with other members joining in stating, “I would 10/10 be part of what I would consider a “support group” for moms” or “I would like to also join this support group, as a 34yo mom of 2” (Why am I so obsessed). This exchange ends in members actively discussing how to set up a group chat, with the OP taking the initiative to “legit gonna try to make a group chat” (Why am I so obsessed). These conversations showcase how shared similarities not only deepen individual connections but also reinforce bonds between members.

Another fitting example in the same post is user *mamasuebs* labeling herself and others as “Mums of Navarre” (Why am I so obsessed). This reference goes beyond a simple descriptor because it aligns the users with the fictional kingdom of Navarre, where the main character lives. By choosing Navarre as a shared reference point, *mamasuebs* not only signals her

familiarity with the series but also expresses a desire to belong to its world. She positions herself and other mothers as part of the story rather than merely as readers observing from the outside. Notably, members do not refer to the (problematic) mother figure of the main character but rather label themselves as mothers of the whole kingdom. This shows that not all use of insider language functions in the same way. While some terms retain their original meaning, others are adapted to integrate aspects of a user's real-life identity into the fictional universe.

Insider Language and Shared References

The subreddit also strengthens its group identity with terminology drawn directly from the books. An example which illustrates this well is a sentence in one of the guidelines that can be found on the main page. Members are advised to, "please send a modmail and a wingleader will help" ("Fourth Wing", *Reddit*). For those unfamiliar with the books, the term "wingleader" holds no meaning, nor does it evoke the sense of authority that those familiar with the series would associate with it. Similarly, the use of the nickname "Violence" for the main character, Violet, demonstrates how members adopt and use language from the books. The nickname, given to Violet by Xaden, is commonly used in posts and tags. While fans immediately recognize the affectionate and contextually significant term, an outsider would likely be confused, illustrating how members reshape book references to construct their own vocabulary.

The use of book quotes is another example. Moderator *portujules*, for example, uses the flair "you're making us look bad" next to their name ("Fourth Wing", *Reddit*). While an outsider may think this is a random or slightly accusatory sentence, it holds deeper significance for fans who recognize it as a direct quote from book 1. This shared terminology creates a sense of exclusivity and signals belonging to a group that understands and engages with the characters and narrative of the series. Interestingly, this is not an isolated instance, four out of seven moderators use book quotes as their flairs, further reinforcing the cultural importance of the series' content within the subreddit.

The use of book quotes is not limited to flairs though, they frequently appear in discussions as well, serving as both a connection to the source material and a way to foster inclusivity. For instance, in the post "Is my obsession normal?" user *babyapricod* writes, "Welcome to the quadrant," a direct quote from the series that doubles as a welcoming statement into the community. By adopting these quotes, both moderators and members display their familiarity

with the story and foster a sense of connection among those who recognize and potentially identify with these references.

The post regarding the first fan fiction exchange provides another vivid example of how insider language fosters community identity. Participants are referred to as “Cadets” and organizers as “Executive Officers” (1st Fan Fic Exchange). Both terms are rooted in the military academy setting of the series and are regularly used in the books. This deliberate adoption of book-inspired terminology not only enables members to immerse themselves in the fictional world but simultaneously strengthens their shared identity. Additionally, fans use language specific to fandom culture in said post, such as “smut” and “ship-based,” to describe the creative works exchanged during the event.

Fan-made creations like the crocheted dragon which *ChibiNekoChan* presents in her post also showcase insider knowledge and shared references. The choice of Sgaeyl, one of the central dragons from the series, immediately sparks excitement from other members and leads to comments such as, “I love how you captured her sass” and “Thats SO good exactly how I picture her” (I crocheted Sgaeyl). The general agreement between the artist’s interpretation and the community’s collective understanding of the character fosters a sense of belonging and identification with the group. The creative process and references to additional projects, that are discussed in the comment section, such as user *LanettaTPF84* stating, “I’m working on Tairn now! Andarna is finished and on display” further illustrate the insider nature of these contributions, as only those familiar with the series would recognize the names (I crocheted Sgaeyl).

Insider language and shared references reinforce belonging and distinguish insiders from outsiders. However, they serve different functions: some terms, such as direct quotes, establish a shared vocabulary, while others, like Violet’s nickname involve the adaptation of existing terms to take on new meaning. In cases like “Mums of Navarre,” this personal identification goes one step further as users embed their real-life identity into the fictional universe. Fans see themselves in the characters and story, and by discussing these connections, they affirm their love for the books and strengthen their sense of belonging within the subreddit. Together, these elements transform the subreddit into a fan space where members co-create and maintain a collective identity rooted in their shared passion for the series.

7.2 Norms and Influence

This sense of community is further shaped by the norms and expectations that guide member interactions and ensure a balance between open dialogue and accountability. Through clearly established rules and active moderation, users are expected to align their contributions with the community's values, creating an environment that promotes inclusivity and respect for each other. At the same time, these expectations may affect how members choose to express themselves, reinforcing particular engagement styles.

The subreddit's 15 guidelines form the foundation of its norms, outlining expectations for respectful and constructive interactions. Rules such as "Be Kind & Respectful" and "No Author/Artist Bashing" emphasize the importance of maintaining a positive atmosphere ("Fourth Wing," *Reddit*). These principles are particularly relevant in a fandom space where members may form deep emotional connections with the source material.

However, these norms can shape how members present their opinions, promoting particular ways of engaging while discouraging others. It may also result in self-censorship, as users must consider how their contributions will be received. For example, users are reminded to avoid judging others' preferences or engaging in bashing, with an emphasis on framing critiques constructively as part of a dialogue. This focus on tone and intent reinforces the subreddit's protective and supportive culture, but members may feel subtle pressure to conform to diplomatic phrasing, even if their personal sentiment is stronger.

Beyond tone and interaction, the rules also establish expectations, regarding content moderation, spoiler policies, and appropriate post formats. Guidelines such as "Mark All Posts with Spoilers & Proper Post Flair" and "No AI Content" demonstrate an effort to maintain both an organized discussion environment and a community-driven ethical approach ("Fourth Wing," *Reddit*). This leads to norms that are not only descriptive but prescriptive, defining what can be posted and how it should be phrased. Discussions must adhere to a particular level of politeness to remain acceptable.

Additionally, policies against "Low-Effort Posts" and "No Targeted Harassment" reflect a broader commitment to fostering productive discussions while preventing hostile interactions ("Fourth Wing," *Reddit*). Nonetheless, what is considered inappropriate in one online space may be seen as ordinary debate in another, raising the question of how much this subreddit's norms filter out certain forms of engagement. These conventions illustrate the subreddit's dual

function as both an open platform and a carefully curated space, where self-regulation and moderator enforcement work together to maintain community standards.

Criticism

While the moderators acknowledge the validity of criticism, they emphasize the need for respectful phrasing. For example, the “How To: Criticism on r/fourthwing” post contrasts dismissive statements like, “RY can’t write, her writing sucks” with a more polite alternative, “I really liked the premise of the books and was intrigued by the dragons, but unfortunately I didn’t enjoy RY’s writing style personally” (Criticism on r/fourthwing). This rephrased example subtly shifts the critique from being a general judgment of the author’s work to a subjective reflection of the reader’s preferences. By including the word “personally,” the statement frames the dislike as an individual response rather than a universal fact, minimizing potential defensiveness or conflict within the community.

The post further suggests that overly harsh critiques may be better suited to other platforms, stating, “a big thing to keep in mind is *whether or not this is the correct place to share your criticism*. [...] Maybe your post would be better suited on a different sub or in review platforms like *Goodreads* or *Storygraph*” (Criticism on r/fourthwing). This statement reinforces an “us vs. them” mentality by highlighting that this online space is dedicated to celebrating the books and those with excessively harsh criticism may find other forums more appropriate. While the intended goal may be to encourage constructive dialogue, this statement also signals that certain forms of critique are less welcome than others, turning the subreddit into a highly “gatewatched” space.

The post concludes with a note of appreciation for members who follow these principles, encouraging compliance through positive reinforcement. Notably, comments under the post reflect this dynamic, with one user, who is also a moderator, expressing gratitude and complimenting the thoughtful approach with “thank you for all the work you do making this sub such a positive space!” (Criticism on r/fourthwing). This acknowledgment from a fellow moderator reinforces their shared goal of maintaining a respectful environment and highlights how their influence shapes the subreddit.

Spoiler Management

Spoiler etiquette represents a particularly vital aspect of the subreddit's norms, aiming to protect new readers from having their experience spoiled while balancing the needs of seasoned fans. In "How To: Spoilers on r/fourthwing", moderators address post-publication spoilers and detail mandatory spoiler tags as well as specific protocols for different types of content to ensure that fans at different stages of the series can participate without encountering key moments too soon. The post divides its guidance into three detailed sections: "Flairs," "Spoilery Titles," and "Banned Title Words," each accompanied by examples to ensure clarity (Spoilers on r/fourthwing).

The most extensive section, "Banned Title Words," includes 40 specific examples, ranging from major plot points like "Liam's death" to subjective phrases such as "Dain sucks" (Spoilers on r/fourthwing). It also explains the usage of blackout tags and universal spoiler flags which show a significant effort to ensure that discussions remain accessible and considerate for all members. User (and moderator) *mamasuebs*, for example, provides a step-by-step guide on spoiler tagging in the comment section, transforming a potentially overwhelming set of rules into an opportunity for mutual support. They further describe their ability to correctly black out spoilers as a vital fan experience, stating, "it changed my life 😂" (Spoilers on r/fourthwing). The exaggerated description of spoiler tagging as life-changing aims to give the rules a positive connotation, while the use of the "😂" emoji tries to make the message feel less daunting and strict.

However, this thoroughness does not remain without criticism. In one comment, user *lizzy-stix* questions whether the subreddit's extensive spoiler rules, such as banning general phrases like "Ghost," or "First Signet," may unintentionally stifle discussion and creativity, remarking that, "Some of these are wayyy overdoing it" (Spoilers on r/fourthwing). Their comment, "at some point, is this sub for fans of the series to chat about it or does it exist for readers who haven't finished the books yet," captures the challenges faced by fan communities in balancing the needs of diverse member groups (Spoilers on r/fourthwing).

For new readers, the subreddit's spoiler policies create a "safe" space, yet for seasoned fans, the same policies may feel restrictive, limiting the depth of discussions that are essential to sustaining a fandom. The commenter also suggests that users joining a fan community should

accept a degree of personal responsibility for managing their exposure to spoilers, a sentiment that contrasts with the subreddit's heavily regulated approach.

The moderators' justification is expressed in the post's final paragraph, where they state that many users join the subreddit before finishing the series because they "have questions, want to share their journey, or just need to scream into the void" (Spoilers on r/fourthwing). This framing implicitly positions new readers as the most valid group, creating a dynamic that may feel unfair to more experienced fans. Notably, while the comment is not deleted, it has received no replies and six downvotes. This negative form of engagement further illustrates the potential disconnect between those questioning the norms and the broader community, suggesting an implicit discouragement of disagreement. Downvotes act as passive disapproval and discourage members from questioning forum regulations. While this approach to spoilers emphasizes the moderators' commitment to maintaining order, it may discourage users from fully engaging for fear of accidental violations.

Beyond standard spoiler guidelines, the subreddit adapts their rules during major events such as book releases, as demonstrated in the post "Official r/fourthwing Onyx Storm Release Rules." The post provides a breakdown of the subreddit's adjusted spoiler policies, temporary restrictions, and enforcement mechanisms leading up to the highly anticipated book launch. Unlike the general rules, these temporary, stricter measures expand upon the subreddit's existing policies.

The language and formatting of the post reinforce the moderators' firm stance, with bold and capitalized words such as **must** and **NOT**, emphasizing the severity of the rules and the consequences of non-compliance. In anticipation of leaks and early access copies, moderators implemented a manual approval mode for all submissions, ensuring that no unmarked spoilers slip through. It shows how proactive the moderators are in their aim to protect the community rather than merely reacting to leaks after they occur. Additionally, the moderators expanded the automod filter for comments, adding new flagged words and phrases to ensure immediate enforcement of spoiler restrictions.

Users who fail to follow the rules "will automatically be given a temporary 7-day ban. If there is a second offense, the user will be permanently banned from the subreddit" (Official OS Release Rules). This shows how high the expectations for individual responsibility are, aligning with the broader norm of self-regulation within the community. They also appeal to the

collective responsibility of the fandom, urging members to be mindful of differing reading circumstances. This includes statements such as, “People have things going on in real life & not everyone can sit and read the book in one sitting” (Official OS Release Rules). This frames the rules as a way to be considerate toward fellow fans and come together as a community.

Moderators further position themselves as protectors, aligning their efforts with the shared goal of a “safe” space. The post reminds fans that “We are getting our books along with y’all and will be doing our best to prevent all of our members from being spoiled” (Official OS Release Rules). By framing their actions as a collective effort, the moderators reinforce a sense of trust and solidarity. The comment section shows that members fully support these measures. Many users thank the moderators for their hard work, acknowledging the effort it takes to manually approve posts and enforce the rules. This interrelates with the fulfillment of a collective need and will be explored further in 7.3 *Needs and Emotional Connection*. The unanimous response contrasts with occasional past criticisms of overly restrictive policies, suggesting that the community largely perceives temporary spoiler adaptations as justified during high-stakes moments.

Moreover, members encourage one another to follow the rules and even suggest self-imposed measures, such as avoiding social media altogether, to prevent accidental exposure to spoilers, proving that spoiler management in the subreddit is not only dictated by moderators but is actively maintained through collective participation. The post highlights how norms shift in response to major events and illustrates how the fandom handles challenging times, including fans influencing each other’s behavior. These adjustments strengthen belief in the community, ensure that fans can experience the book at their own pace and reinforce the idea that protecting one another’s reading experience is a collective responsibility.

From Spoiler Enforcement to Crisis Control

While the official release rules post established proactive spoiler management, the later post “PSA: Get off TikTok if you don’t want to be spoiled” represents a fascinating, reactionary response to pre-publication leaks and early book sales. This shift from planned enforcement to crisis control highlights how norms are not static but evolve in response to external disruptions.

Unlike the structured tone of the release rules post, this PSA adopts a more urgent and frustrated tone, signaling the moderators’ growing impatience with continued violations. The statement, “We’ve reiterated this so many times that there is no excuse,” conveys a sense of exasperation,

emphasizing the challenge of maintaining spoiler-free discussions in a rapidly changing digital environment (PSA: Get off TikTok). The PSA reinforces the subreddit's spoiler restrictions, introducing seven-day temporary bans for “**ANY discussions**” surrounding unofficial or leaked content (PSA: Get off TikTok).

Beyond the enforcement aspect, the post also functions as a warning and advisory message to members, urging them to take responsibility for their own spoiler protection by avoiding platforms like TikTok. The emphasis on “Get off TikTok” reflects an acknowledgment that while subreddit moderators can control internal discussions, external platforms remain a significant unregulated threat to the community's spoiler-free environment (PSA: Get off TikTok).

Community reactions overwhelmingly support the subreddit's rigid spoiler enforcement, reinforcing the idea that these norms are not just moderator-imposed but collectively approved. The post itself has received over 1,000 likes, which signals widespread agreement with these measures and emphasizes the community's active role. User *medusamagic* describes their proactive approach, “I added basically everything related to the entire series to my filtered keywords so I wouldn't see anything about any of the books on my feed,” demonstrating how, similarly to comments on the release rules thread, individual members take personal responsibility for upholding community norms in their own online spaces (PSA: Get off TikTok). Others take even more drastic measures, choosing to mute the subreddit entirely until they finish the book.

However, the discussion extends beyond individual responsibility and highlights the collective disapproval of early access behaviors. Users express anger toward those who obtained books before the release date, particularly individuals who exploited retail errors or engaged in deceptive practices. *HoneyWhereIsMyYarn* reveals that “someone on here was outright bragging about tricking a new cashier into not scanning it,” sparking outrage over both spoiler leaks and the perceived unfairness of early access. Another user notes that “Target is allegedly investigating this whole thing now,” indicating that the leaks have escalated beyond the subreddit into corporate consequences.

This widespread condemnation functions not only as an expression of frustration but also as a form of social influence. By criticizing those who obtain early access or spread spoilers, the community reinforces behavioral expectations, subtly pressuring members to avoid engaging

with leaked content or posting about it. This moves the discussion beyond fandom etiquette and into consumer ethics, debating whether gaining early access amounts to bypassing the system or violating an unspoken fairness standard within the fan community. This moral framing shapes how users perceive their own behavior, with many positioning spoiler avoidance as both a personal responsibility and a collective duty.

At the same time, users emphasize the role of moderation as a primary defense against spoilers, commending the subreddit's strict enforcement efforts. For example, *tapper1591* states, "Shout out to the mods for keeping this community safe! Heavily/amazingly modded subs are the best, and only Mods can make it happen!!" (PSA: Get off TikTok). This praise highlights the dual nature of spoiler protection as both a collective effort and an expectation placed on moderators to act as gatekeepers, ensuring the subreddit remains a "safe" space. Nevertheless, these expressions of appreciation also reinforce a power dynamic in which the moderators' actions are continuously validated by the community, further legitimizing their authority and reducing space for dissent.

Several fans also frame spoiler protection as a form of loyalty to the author. One comment urges others to "Be respectful of the author enough to just wait for the release," reminding that spoiling is disrespectful towards the fandom and the author (PSA: Get off TikTok). User *Renierra* expresses sympathy for Rebecca Yarros, stating, "I honestly feel bad for RY because this is a big deal for her and asshole "fans" are ruining it" (PSA: Get off TikTok). By putting the word fans in quotation marks, the user separates these individuals from the "true" fandom, implying that "real" fans would respect Yarros and the official release date. This rhetorical choice reinforces an "us vs. them" dynamic within the fandom, where those who abide by community norms and spoiler etiquette are positioned as respectful fans, while those who disregard these rules are not.

The thread shows that adhering to established norms is not only about preserving reader experience but also about respecting the creative process and defending Yarros from what some perceive as exploitative fan behavior, framing spoiler avoidance as a fan obligation. The heightened frustration in both the post and its comment section emphasizes the subreddit's deep investment by framing leaks as a collective threat that must be actively resisted. By positioning spoiler avoidance as a shared responsibility, members influence one another's behaviors, encouraging stricter self-regulation and reinforcing the idea that upholding community norms is an essential part of being a "real" fan.

Moderation and Morality

The subreddit's commitment to rule enforcement is not only evident in times of crisis but also in the language used to communicate and reinforce these norms. Beyond the general, formal guidelines outlined in moderator announcements, community members are actively expected to participate in upholding these standards, shaping the subreddit's culture around rule enforcement.

Posts like "Announcement Re: Spoilers for Other Series" explicitly encourage users to report rule violations, stating, "Please use the report button whenever you see spoilers for other series that are unmarked (or any other rule breaks)". While this participatory enforcement empowers members to take ownership of the subreddit's standards, the language used in such posts occasionally adopts an intense tone. In the same post, members submitting reports are praised as "heroes," while unmarked spoilers are described as grounds for temporary bans. The word "hero" adds a moral dimension to reporting and frames it as an act of honor.

The moderators also emphasize that user reports are essential to "keep the subreddit clean and spoiler free" (Spoilers for Other Series). The choice of the word "clean" is particularly notable, as it carries connotations of purity and goodness, implicitly framing an environment with spoilers as unclean, or undesirable. This rhetoric reinforces the community's approach toward maintaining a spoiler-free space but also raises adherence to spoiler etiquette to a moral ideal. Members may feel social pressure to align with these values, shaping their own posting habits. By framing the environment as "clean," moderators subtly label compliance with these norms as virtuous, while interactions deemed "unclean" may carry negative connotations, further distinguishing between compliant and non-compliant members.

In a post about reposting of bonus content, moderators describe users who repeatedly request prohibited content as "repeat offenders," a term borrowed from criminology, further emphasizing the severity with which rule-breaking is viewed (Reposting of bonus content). This language establishes a clear boundary between acceptable and unacceptable behavior, reinforcing the authority of the moderators. Such wording also influences how community members perceive violations and those who commit them. By associating rule-breaking with criminal terminology, the moderators encourage self-policing among users, reinforcing a culture where adherence to rules is not just expected but strongly socially reinforced.

The post also adopts a formal tone by using phrases such as “in accordance with our subreddit rules and Reddit’s ToS,” emphasizing the legitimacy of the rules by referencing platform standards (Reposting of bonus content). Additionally, the statement “please be respectful of this decision” discourages pushback in a polite but proactive manner, framing compliance once more as an expected courtesy (Reposting of bonus content).

In one comment, moderator *mamasuebs*, who also replied to other posts discussing guidelines, contributes a GIF featuring a salute, which can be interpreted as both humorous and symbolic. By using a GIF from a comedy show, they keep a casual tone while the salute reaffirms their readiness to uphold the rules. Such interactions illustrate the nuanced ways in which norms and hierarchies are reinforced and accepted within the subreddit.

Shaping Discourse

While norms and rule enforcement establish a foundation for community expectations, influence within the subreddit extends beyond moderation and self-policing. Members actively shape discussions and set the tone of the community through their contributions, reinforcing shared values in more organic and participatory ways. By upvoting posts and commenting on content they find valuable, members play an active role in determining what gains visibility and sparks further engagement. This collective influence helps guide conversations, and fosters a sense of shared enthusiasm, demonstrating that influence in the subreddit is not solely about maintaining rules but also about encouraging positive interaction.

One example is the crochet post introduced in 7.1. It is one of the most upvoted threads on the entire subreddit and received 2,400 upvotes and 182 comments, generating a lively comment section filled with praise and admiration. The interplay between upvotes and replies demonstrates how user engagement influences not only individual posts but also the broader conversational flow. *Gabbemel*’s comment, “OH MY GOSH! She is perfect!!” which received 99 upvotes, was pushed to the top of the thread and likely encouraged other users to engage with it (I crocheted Sgaeyl). Another member’s reply, “I second, third and one millionth this comment!! Amazing job!” expands on the enthusiasm of the first (I crocheted Sgaeyl).

By collectively determining which posts and comments rise to the top, members shape the community’s engagement patterns. This makes the subreddit’s content a product of what members choose to amplify and respond to, steering the direction of discussions and influencing the broader tone of the fan space.

This collective influence extends beyond general discussions to individual behavior, as seen in the “1st Anniversary Fan Fic Exchange” post. In the comment section, user *portujules* initially expresses hesitation about writing fan fiction for the first time, stating, “I’ve never written anything but the community is so supportive and wholesome that I’m debating giving it a go” (1st Fan Fic Exchange). Encouraged by another member who offers, “Please! I can be your coach!” *portujules* ultimately decides to participate, replying, “omg, okay I’m sold” (1st Fan Fic Exchange). The thrilled tone of the comment section, featuring a GIF of a highly excited rapper and enthusiastic all-caps comments like “YAYAYYAYAYAY,” foster an atmosphere where members feel safe stepping outside their comfort zones (1st Fan Fic Exchange). These interactions show how collective support and encouragement can inspire individual confidence and action. By creating a welcoming and supportive environment, the group not only shapes members’ engagement but also empowers individuals to contribute creatively in ways they might not have otherwise attempted.

The balance between moderators enforcing norms and member-driven engagement highlights how the subreddit functions as both a structured and collaborative space. Moderators provide the framework to ensure order and inclusiveness, while members bring life and creativity to the feed, making the subreddit a dynamic and interactive community. At the same time, the interplay of norms, and social reinforcement creates an environment where engagement may be shaped by collective expectations rather than purely individual intent.

7.3 Needs and Emotional Connection

While membership and norms shape the subreddit, they also create an environment where users can forge emotional connections and meet individual and collective needs. The subreddit functions as a lively social economy with members exchanging emotional support, resources, and information.

Meeting Individual and Collective Needs

In the “Why am I so obsessed with this?” post, OP *bluebutton7* opens with a detailed confession: “I am a 37-year-old mom (2 yr old son) [...] and I cannot stop obsessing over this series?! It’s infiltrated 75% of my thoughts every day for the last week?!” (Why am I so obsessed). *Bluebutton7* expresses disbelief at their own obsession, despite typically not being a fantasy or romance reader, asking “y’all, what the actual f is this?!?” (Why am I so obsessed). By sharing deeply personal details such as their age, marital status, and the responsibilities they juggle,

they immediately establish a sense of intimacy. These confessions resonate with many community members, who respond with empathy and validation. Replies like “I’m in the exact same boat” and “you’re not alone” provide reassurance and affirm that these feelings are a shared experience within the fandom (Why am I so obsessed).

Many commenters also join in by sharing their own age, relationship status, and whether they have children, creating a broader sense of connection. Exchanges like these link back to the concept of membership and identification, as discussed earlier, where shared personal details and common life experiences help members establish a deeper bond to the community.

In the same thread, the OP describes the all-consuming nature of their obsession in the comment section, saying, “This is unnatural,” and later goes even farther by replying to one comment in all-caps, describing her feelings as “UNHINGED. INSANE. UNNATURAL EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT” (Why am I so obsessed). The OP further acknowledges the therapeutic value of these exchanges, commenting, “this entire thread has been THERAPY for me” (Why am I so obsessed). In both cases, the capitalization highlights how vital this shared validation is to the OP.

Members often amplify their expressions of emotion through multimodal elements. The use of capitalization, and punctuation in comments like “THIS. POST. IS. EVERYTHING.” helps convey the intensity of their feelings, making emotional responses more recognizable within the community (Why am I so obsessed). While these displays may be exaggerated for emphasis, they highlight how shared perceptions shape the way emotions are expressed and validated. For example, OP *bluebutton7* does not use emojis or capitalization in their original post, but as they receive more and more affirmation, they start using them regularly in replies to comments they receive. This shift suggests that emotional engagement is not only personal, but also interactive and shaped by the reactions of others within the community.

In the “FW/IF Is my obsession normal?” post, OP *Certain_Pomelo_5885* describes their feelings in equally personal terms, stating that it feels like “an ache in my chest and a longing to be back in that world! [...] It’s almost like THIS world just isn’t good enough 🧐” (Is my obsession normal). Beyond their choice of words, the OP relies heavily on emojis to convey the depth of their emotions, using 🥺, 😭, and 🧐 among others, throughout the post and comment section. These visual markers enhance the emotion of the message, making their distress and excitement more tangible to the community.

However, while emojis add emphasis, they may also be a simple alignment with digital communication norms that are meant to draw in responses. The OP explicitly seeks validation by asking, “Is my obsession normal? Will it ever go away?” and later discusses it in the comments as well, sharing, “I created this post in deeeeeep need of support 🧡 It’s totally helped” (Is my obsession normal). The replies from other members not only validate these feelings but also frame this intensity as a typical reaction within the fandom.

Notably, many commenters mirror the OP’s use of multimodal expression, reinforcing the emotional support being offered. Some respond with similar emojis, while others choose reassuring ones such as 😊 or 😌, emphasizing the comforting tone of their messages. For example, user *babyapricod* replies, “you should know you are not alone 🕊️,” combining verbal reassurance with a peace sign emoji that adds a sense of calm and solidarity.

Comments such as “We’re not pathetic” prompt the OP to enthusiastically respond, “Definitely not pathetic at all!!!! We’re not alone in this,” creating a supportive space where the shared acknowledgment of feelings helps both the OP and commenters process their experiences (Is my obsession normal). This interaction illustrates how *Certain_Pomelo_5885* gradually shifts from expressing their emotions in individual terms by using “I” in their post, to adopting the collective language of the group by using “we” in the comment section (Is my obsession normal). While they originally seek validation as a new member, the OP gradually transitions from an outsider to an insider, aligning themselves more closely with the fandom.

By framing these reactions as “normal,” the community not only reduces individual doubts but also reinforces a collective understanding of what it means to engage fully with the series. The normalization of using such emotionally charged language, and OP’s change in self-perception can be seen as both a reflection of personal investment and a product of community dynamics that encourage such expressive engagement.

Need fulfillment can also be seen in *allycatbakes*’s post, “I wanna hear why YOU love the series!”. Discussing favorite moments is not only about the books but about seeking validation from others who feel the same way. User *Maleficent-Nail-9680* describes this intensity by stating that “when an author touches my heart through a truly emotional book, it immediately becomes a 5-star read for me,” and something they rarely experience (Why you love the series). Similarly, *p00psicle151590*, who initially dismissed the idea that *Fourth Wing* could be life-changing, later realized its impact, sharing, “I thought that was fucking ridiculous that a book

about dragons and sex could do that. Then I read it. I got it” (Why you love the series). They go on to describe how the book introduced them to fantasy, inspired them to start a book club, and even motivated them to begin writing their own novel, leading them to conclude, “so in a way, it totally did change my life” (Why you love the series).

The comment section reveals that such reactions are collectively understood and shared within the community. Members regularly echo each other’s sentiments, emphasizing, for example, that the book “brought back a feeling I didn’t know I could still have” (Why you love the series). This demonstrates a pattern where emotional connection becomes a shared experience, which strengthens the sense of connection to both the series and the community itself.

Moderators also play a vital role in meeting the community’s needs by welcoming new members to the subreddit. Dedicated posts, such as the links listed on the main page, guide users through the subreddit and provide orientation resources like FAQs and spoiler policies. These efforts make the community accessible and inclusive, ensuring that newcomers feel comfortable navigating the subreddit. By proactively addressing potential barriers to participation and showcasing the richness of the subreddit’s content, moderators help create an environment of trust and belonging. This welcoming approach complements their role as enforcers of norms, highlighting the balance between maintaining order and fostering closeness.

Another example of how the subreddit meets the community’s collective needs can be seen in the “PSA: Get off TikTok” post, which shows how moderators actively aim to protect the emotional well-being of the fandom. By issuing urgent warnings and reinforcing spoiler restrictions, moderators fulfill the need for security and trust.

However, moderators are not the only ones taking action, users also play a crucial role in maintaining the subreddit’s safe space, proposing strategies to reduce risks and reinforcing expectations of respect toward both fellow fans and the author. Many comments express relief that the moderators are stepping in, with one user stating, “Thank you for this. I’ve been getting irritated seeing people snatching copies from Target before the release date” (PSA: Get off TikTok). With over 300 upvotes, the widespread approval of such statements demonstrates that spoiler protection meets a deeper communal need for fairness, trust, and the ability to fully enjoy the reading experience as intended.

User *Love_is_the_answer* comments on this perceived sense of safety, “This is my only safe space for FW spoiler free content. Super appreciate you all 🌸” (PSA: Get off TikTok). The

use of the flower emoji visually reinforces gratitude and warmth, complementing the written message with a symbolic gesture of appreciation. By taking swift action, moderators provide a sense of stability in an unpredictable digital environment, fulfilling the need for a space where members' emotional responses to leaks, and collective frustration are acknowledged and supported.

Beyond expressing gratitude, several commenters apologize to the moderators, acknowledging that their enforcement duties will likely expose them to spoilers. *Lilacabkins* writes, "I'm sorry that your own experiences have been marred by being exposed to all the spoilers/early bird readers," while another echoes, "I'm sorry that you've probably gotten a bunch of things spoiled for you 😞 thank you for your hard work!" (PSA: Get off TikTok). The sad face emoji enhances the emotional tone, emphasizing regret and sympathy toward the moderators. This multimodal expression strengthens the message and shows that community support extends beyond words alone.

This exchange, where moderators protect users from spoilers, and users, in turn, express regret and gratitude for the moderators' exposure, further strengthens a collective sense of care and responsibility within the subreddit. The moderators are not distant rule-enforcers but fully embedded members of the fandom, whose efforts are recognized and appreciated.

Many comments also frame spoiler leaks as an ethical violation, reinforcing a moral hierarchy within the fandom. Some users express personal guilt at the mere thought of obtaining an early copy. *Inevitable-Reason-33* admits, "tbh if i did see them out in target id be too worried to even try to grab one, and id just feel guilty in a way," demonstrating how the norm of waiting for the official release is deeply internalized (PSA: Get off TikTok). Others take an even stronger stance, with user *Witty_Bat_3429* condemning those who bypass the rules, "its scummy and vile and just straight up crime" (PSA: Get off TikTok). These reactions emphasize the moral superiority of those who respect the spoiler-free period, drawing a sharp line between those who wait and those who do not.

Some users also view it as a direct attack on the community and the author herself. In response to a user suggesting there is no harm in asking for leaked content if one already purchased the book, moderator *fourthwing-ModTeam* strongly pushes back, stating, "Piracy and leaks of early copies are a massive harm to the community because not only is it illegal, it's caused the author an incredible amount of stress and mental anguish" (PSA: Get off TikTok). This language

frames unauthorized early access as more than just a rule violation, the moderator equals these leaks with tangible consequences for the fandom and the author. This rhetoric emphasizes the community's deep investment in safeguarding both the reading experience and the author's work while presenting spoiler avoidance as a shared obligation.

Social Economy

Apart from meeting individual and collective needs, the subreddit also fosters a social economy built upon reciprocal exchanges of knowledge, creativity, and engagement, creating a system where contributions are valued and reinforced through community interaction. Members regularly exchange emotional and informational resources to support one another. In “Why am I so obsessed with this?”, suggestions such as “I found listening to fantasy fangirls podcast helped me get through the constant thoughts about the books” and “the cure is to read more fantasy romance novels!” provide practical strategies for managing intense feelings (Why am I so obsessed). The podcast “Fantasy Fangirls” is mentioned six times in the thread and one of the most common recommendations for coping with a post-reading slump.

Similarly, in “FW/IF Is my obsession normal?”, members share their own methods for coping with a book hangover, including rereading the series or exploring fan-created content. One commenter recommends, “Rereading actually helped me feel less panicky about finishing the books,” while another highlights the value of fan fiction and podcasts as tools for maintaining a connection to the world of *Fourth Wing* (Is my obsession normal). Just like in *bluebutton7*'s thread, the “Fantasy Fangirls” podcast is a recurring topic and discussed repeatedly. These exchanges demonstrate how the community functions as a resource hub, with members offering support and solutions grounded in their own experiences.

Creative contributions also play a vital role in shaping the subreddit's social economy, as members actively create, share, and celebrate fandom-related content. The crocheted dragon post by *ChibiNekoChan* exemplifies this dynamic. While interactions in this thread largely center on mutual validation, they also illustrate how enthusiasm and support can be amplified through digital conventions.

A commenter shares, “I’ve been crocheting as a light hobby for 50 years [...] and I’m so envious of your talent,” prompting the OP to respond, “Thank you, that really means a lot to hear from someone so experienced ❤️” (I crocheted Sgaeyl). The use of multimodal elements such as emojis reinforces the perceived warmth and sincerity of the interaction, allowing members to

convey enthusiasm, appreciation, and encouragement in ways that text alone might not fully capture.

The OP, for instance, frequently integrates heart emojis into their comments and even includes a blue heart (💙) in the post title, a nod to the dragon they recreated, who is described as blue in the series. This small detail reflects how visual elements can also serve as subtle references to the books, reinforcing the fandom's shared knowledge. In some cases, interactions unfold entirely through emojis, as seen in an exchange where user *kermione_afk* comments three heart emojis (💖💖💖), and the OP responds with a heart and a hugging emoji (💖🤗). On the one hand, this demonstrates how visual elements not only contribute to emotional expression but can also serve as a complete stand-in for words. On the other hand, it remains unclear whether emojis genuinely reflect emotions or simply function as a communicative convention for convenience.

Another member, *iamkoalafied*, engages in a discussion about crafting techniques, stating, "I'm working on baby Andarna with a pattern from the same creator" (I crocheted Sgaeyl). They further describe modifications and share insights into their creative process, leading to *ChibiNekoChan* expressing gratitude and curiosity, stating, "Thanks for the tip, I'll definitely look into her add-ons!" (I crocheted Sgaeyl). The exchange continues as participants brainstorm solutions for specific design challenges, such as replicating features like a mace tail or a feathertail.

This type of collaborative resource-sharing highlights how individual creativity can inspire broader participation, as shown in a comment stating, "I am suddenly inspired to start crocheting again" (I crocheted Sgaeyl). Not only do posts like this one encourage participation and skill-sharing, but it also turns personal projects into shared community experiences, reinforcing the social economy within the subreddit by fostering a sense of collective investment.

Moreover, official recommendations on the main page, such as the Discord server "Rider's Quadrant," "The Emyrean Wiki," and featured posts like the "Fan Fic Master Post," offer members a variety of ways to deepen their engagement with the community ("Fourth Wing," *Reddit*). These resources cater to different interests and needs, from seeking real-time discussions on Discord to exploring the series' lore in depth in the Emyrean Wiki. The "FW Gifting Guide" offers a personalized touch, helping members express their fandom enthusiasm

through merchandise or assisting friends and partners in selecting gifts. For those seeking similar works to *Fourth Wing*, the “Book Rec Master Post” link provides readers with a list of recommendations that encourages exploration of related genres (“Fourth Wing,” *Reddit*). This integration of external platforms and selected resources reflects the subreddit’s broader aim of addressing a wide range of member needs and reinforces its role as a vital source for the fandom.

Additionally, the “1st Anniversary Fan Fic Exchange” is another example of how members contribute their creative talents to the social economy of the subreddit. By writing custom fan fiction based on prompts from assigned partners, participants actively share their storytelling skills as a communal resource. This event functions as more than just an outlet for creativity, it provides members with new content to enjoy, expanding the narrative of the books.

The exchange highlights how fan contributions enrich the fandom, strengthening the community’s engagement with the series. This form of collaborative content creation reinforces the subreddit’s participatory culture, transforming it into an interactive space where members not only consume content but also produce and share it, sustaining the fandom in the process. It also highlights the community’s commitment to establishing annual activities which will be further explored in 7.4 *Collective Memory and Continuity*.

Reframing Criticism Together

While much of the subreddit’s activity revolves around celebrating *Fourth Wing*, it is also a space where fans respond to criticism, both from within and outside the fandom. Discussions often explore what makes the series compelling, but they also help readers process and reframe critiques.

This dynamic is evident in *allycatbakes*’s post, “I wanna hear why YOU love the series!” in which the OP reacts to criticism encountered on another subreddit, where some users dismissed *Fourth Wing* as “juvenile writing.” Seeking reassurance, they turn to the community, inviting fellow readers to share what drew them to the series. A common response in the thread is to reframe critiques as aspects that contribute to the book’s accessibility and appeal.

For instance, *vangoblin* acknowledges that “the world-building isn’t crazy complex” but argues that this simplicity allows them to focus more on interpersonal relationships rather than on learning “how a plant affects a magic system or the entire 20,000-year history of a country” (Why you love the series). Instead of seeing limited world-building as a flaw, this perspective

shifts the emphasis to the emotional connections between characters, positioning *Fourth Wing* as an engaging and immersive story precisely because of its direct and engaging style. *Vangoblin* further challenges the idea that accessible writing is a weakness, stating, “Don’t be a jerk about the story being readable for a large portion of the population” (Why you love the series). This strong wording not only defends the books but frames dismissive critiques as exclusionary, reinforcing the thread’s tendency to push back against criticism.

Beyond individual responses, it also reflects a broader resistance to what some perceive as elitist attitudes in literary discussions. Several commenters critique external reviewers for their condescending tone, arguing that the way a book is judged often depends on the expectations readers bring to it. *Connect-War6167* refers to such critiques as “snobbery,” suggesting that some of the disdain for *Fourth Wing* may stem from personal preferences rather than objective flaws (Why you love the series). Similarly, *jfoxk* pushes back against the characterization of the book’s style as “juvenile,” noting that “Just like language when I was a teen or in my early 20s [it] is very different than language used now” (Why you love the series). This comment highlights how stylistic preferences may change over time, reinforcing the idea that what some perceive as weaknesses may instead reflect evolving trends in storytelling or a lack of understanding of modern writing styles.

At the same time, many fans readily acknowledge that the book has flaws but argue that those flaws do not diminish their enjoyment. Some responses even suggest that part of the series’ appeal lies in its imperfections. *Curious_cat_127* expresses this contradiction by writing, “Wish I knew. Been asking that question for a few months already,” before proceeding to list all the reasons they enjoy it (Why you love the series). Other users take this idea further, directly comparing the series to books with more refined or complex narratives while still maintaining that *Fourth Wing* is uniquely compelling. *No_Cattle8415* writes, “I definitely have read other books with better writing, pacing, worldbuilding, character development, etc., but the Emphyrean series IS GOOD. IT. IS. GOOD. Period.” (Why you love the series). The deliberate capitalization and punctuated phrasing reinforce the conviction of the statement, mirroring spoken emphasis in a purely textual format. By breaking the sentence into distinct units, the user ensures their enthusiasm is conveyed, making their response more impactful. This ability to acknowledge flaws while maintaining enthusiasm reflects a common theme on the subreddit, where enjoyment is framed as deeply personal rather than strictly dependent on literary excellence.

A particularly outspoken comment describes the series as “trash, with juvenile writing and the corniest premise ever”, yet, despite this initial criticism, they confess to becoming invested in the story, writing, “I can only say I’m glad OS will come out next year [...] so I can get another fix of this guilty pleasure” (Why you love the series). Instead of engaging in prolonged debates over quality, many members focus on their emotional connection to the story, pushing back against overly critical perspectives.

By reframing perceived flaws and contextualizing critiques within broader cultural shifts, members defend *Fourth Wing* while also reinforcing their shared enthusiasm. This collective engagement strengthens the sense of community within the subreddit.

Participation and Shifting Roles

Just as the subreddit provides a space for collectively processing criticism, it also fosters dynamic interactions where roles among members shift fluidly. A single discussion may begin with one user seeking support or validation but end with them offering guidance to others.

One example of this adaptability is evident in the thread “FW/IF Is my obsession normal?”, where *Certain_Pomelo_5885* initially seeks reassurance about their intense emotional investment in the series. The OP, who frequently uses emojis throughout the thread, writes, “Feels so good to be seen 🥺” with the emoji conveying a sense of emotional overwhelm and relief, which emphasizes how deeply validating the exchange feels. However, as the discussion unfolds, the dynamic changes, with the OP transitioning from a support seeker to a source of encouragement for others. In response to *babyapricod* who shares their own mental health challenges and coping strategies, *Certain_Pomelo_5885* replies, “If you ever need anyone to process it with, feel free to message me privately 🥺” (Is my obsession normal).

This shift demonstrates how community roles are not static. Readers might enter a conversation in need of support but later take on a comforting role. The fluidity of these interactions reinforces the subreddit as a space for mutual support. *Babyapricod*’s response, “Don’t mention it! I am at a better stage than the first finish [...] you can msg me whenever you want, I’d be happy to chat 🥰,” further illustrates how participation within the community evolves as members engage in ongoing exchanges of reassurance and encouragement (Is my obsession normal). Once again, this interaction highlights not only the reciprocal nature of support within

the community, but shows that members quickly integrate multimodal elements to enhance their message, which may be shaped by convention rather than genuine sentiment.

A similar change can be found in *bluebutton7*'s "Why am I so obsessed with this?" post, where the OP undergoes a notable transformation in their role within the community. Throughout most of the discussion, which happens over the course of two days, the OP seeks validation and support, and they receive numerous recommendations and empathetic replies from other members.

However, in the final exchange posted two weeks later, their role within the thread has changed. Instead of seeking support, *bluebutton7* now offers it, responding to another member who expresses similar emotions by writing, "I'm so glad you feel seen by this sub! [...] Rereading, fan fiction, looking at this sub every day, and the fantasy fangirls podcast have really been keeping me sane" (Why am I so obsessed). This reply not only reflects the OP's emotional progress but also demonstrates their active engagement in sustaining the community's support system.

The delayed timing of this reply illustrates how roles are not fixed but evolve over time. What begins as a personal request for guidance gradually transforms into a contribution to the broader fandom experience. By sharing coping strategies that worked for them, the OP strengthens the community's shared knowledge base, turning their own journey into a resource for others who may stumble upon the post. In doing so, *bluebutton7* moves from being a recipient of support to an active participant in the subreddit's social economy, demonstrating how engagement within the community is often reciprocal rather than one-directional.

Quality of Interaction and Emotional Investment

The subreddit also demonstrates how the quality of interactions often outweighs the quantity in fostering emotional connection and community engagement. While many members only have one or two exchanges within a thread, the quality of these interactions holds greater value than the sheer number of exchanges.

This dynamic is also exemplified in the aforementioned "Why am I so obsessed with this?" thread, where OP *bluebutton7* shares, "I'm deeply appreciating all the other moms/wives/career women responding to this and helping me sort through the obsession" (Why am I so obsessed). The OP's gratitude for the emotional support highlights how even brief exchanges can provide

a sense of validation. In the same thread, they state, “I seriously am feeling so much better with the solidarity in this thread!!!,” which perfectly shows how brief exchanges within a single thread can help members feel part of a larger, supportive community (Why am I so obsessed).

The quality of interactions is often tied to the emotional investment of its members. An illustrative example of this dynamic is the active engagement of moderator *mamasuebs*, who commented on six of the analyzed posts, which indicates high emotional investment in the community. Their status as a “Top 1% Commenter” and “Super Contributor” further emphasizes their extensive engagement and commitment. In the “Why am I so obsessed with this?” thread, *mamasuebs* joins several exchanges in the comment section, sharing how the obsession with the series has reignited their passion for fan fiction. They go on to describe how this engagement has impacted their daily life, even joking about ignoring their husband to theorize on the subreddit and write fan fiction. These comments showcase their willingness to share personal experiences and emotions, positioning herself as a fellow fan rather than just an authority figure.

When another user praises their fan fiction as “so well thought out and well written” that it feels like canon, *mamasuebs* responds enthusiastically, “👏 thank you for the vote of confidence!” (Why am I so obsessed). The enthusiastic response, complete with emojis, reinforces the supportive tone of the subreddit. However, this enthusiasm can also be viewed as a form of self-validation. Having invested so much time and energy into the community, their engagement may not only reflect “genuine” enjoyment but also serve as a way to reaffirm their role within the subreddit.

In the thread celebrating 50,000 members, they express joy and pride to be part of the community, stating, “This is my favourite sub on Reddit. So happy to be here with this awesome community” (r/FourthWing has hit 50,000). Moreover, *mamasuebs* also shows appreciation for fellow moderators and the community’s positive environment. In the “How To: Criticism on r/fourthwing” post, they thank another moderator for their efforts, modeling gratitude and positivity that are typical for the tone of the subreddit.

These interactions exemplify high emotional investment and further illustrate how roles within the subreddit are fluid. Her ability to shift between being a contributor, supporter, and moderator reflects the dynamic nature of online communities, which may encourage other

members to engage more openly, knowing that even moderators are fellow fans who share their enthusiasm.

7.4 Collective Memory and Continuity

Online forums inherently preserve threads, such as discussions, debates, and celebrations, in a digital archive, creating a lasting record of a community's evolution. Unless actively deleted, these records provide an enduring history of the subreddit, which is crucial in an online space where a community's sense of history and shared traditions exist only digitally. The subreddit's archive serves as a resource for new members to immerse themselves in the fandom and learn about the group's idiosyncrasies and norms, while for returning fans it offers a way to reconnect with the community. Even those who do not actively participate can engage with the fandom on their own terms, allowing them to feel a sense of belonging and connection without the need for direct interaction.

Building Collective Memory Through Shared Practices

The post "Is my obsession normal?" illustrates how shared experiences and recurring practices contribute to the subreddit's collective memory. OP *Certain_Pomelo_5885* describes joining Reddit specifically to seek emotional support to cope with their obsessive feelings, a sentiment echoed by other members who share similar needs. For instance, *No_Island_7899* comments, "I joined Reddit only for Fourth Wing talk," while another user remarks, "I already have a Reddit account but never been active but had to be active because of FW. I needed a support group" (Is my obsession normal).

While this process of seeking connection reflects the subreddit's role in fulfilling emotional needs, it has also become a common entry point into the community, reinforcing a shared tradition of discovering, joining, and engaging with the space. In this way, the subreddit functions as a support network, where each new wave of members follows a familiar pattern of participation.

Additionally, recurring recommendations, such as in-depth rereading or listening to the graphic audio versions, reflect a collective understanding of how to manage intense responses to the series, once again tying this tradition to *Needs and Emotional Connection*. The frequent mention of these practices reinforces a sense of continuity, as members draw on a shared pool of strategies. This mutual experience is further exemplified by comments like, "It's nice and

funny how this community and the entire fandom truly truly understand us” (Is my obsession normal).

Moreover, the recurring use of multimodal elements to convey or highlight emotions contributes to the community’s communicative traditions, reinforcing a sense of belonging. One example is the frequent appearance of the "one of us" GIF which is often used to enthusiastically welcome new members. This particular GIF, along with other widely recognized reactions, forms part of the subreddit’s collective repertoire. Although members interact with the subreddit individually, their participation is not an isolated experience but rather part of a broader collective engagement. By framing these shared moments as mutual, the community not only fosters an emotional connection among its members but also preserves a record of its activity, offering guidance for future users.

Similarly, the post “Why am I so obsessed?” also discusses communal practices. OP *bluebutton7* shares their journey of devouring both books and joining the fandom by, “spending like 10 actual total hours over the course of Thursday and yesterday on this subreddit feeding my need for... idfk what” before beginning a reread (Why am I so obsessed). This process of rereading and diving into the fan space is reflected by other users, such as *darthsaber1987* who remarks, “Finding this sub makes me feel like I’ve found my people. Now, I’m looking forward to this journey and talking about it with people who get it” (Why am I so obsessed).

Like *Certain_Pomelo_5885*’s thread, recommendations to read other series like ACOTAR showcase a communal tradition of how to stay immersed in the world of romantasy and extend the experience beyond *Fourth Wing*. Additionally, members’ comparisons to their experiences with book series like *Harry Potter* suggest a continuity of fandom traditions, as they remember earlier moments of fan obsession. The OP’s comment, “I’m glad we have this space to all be outrageously obsessed together,” captures how the subreddit functions as a collective space where members can build a sense of community through repeated engagement with the series and other fans (Why am I so obsessed).

The practice of communal rereads is also exemplified with the “Fourth Wing & Iron Flame Reread on r/FourthWing & The Rider’s Quadrant” post. This thread marks the official announcement of a structured group reread, with scheduled discussions spanning several weeks and many members expressing excitement about reliving the story together. *UmbrisMoonbeam* responded, “This is so helpful! I love the manageable breakdown of chapters. Excited to relive

the magic with you all!!” while another added, “Oh I LOVE this!! Gonna write it on my calendar” (Fourth Wing & Iron Flame Reread). The guided format of the reread enables a shared experience, ensuring that both new and returning fans can engage in ongoing discussions.

Additionally, moderator involvement in organizing the event reinforces the intentional shaping of community traditions, as seen in the response, “we organized a reread because so many people were asking about one. The smaller weekly sections are supposed to make it more manageable!” (Fourth Wing & Iron Flame Reread). This response reflects the subreddit’s inclusiveness, ensuring that readers who prefer a slower pace can still participate in discussions alongside those usually reading at a faster speed. Communal events like these strengthen the collective memory of the subreddit and provide an accessible entry point for newer members to engage with others and share interpretations.

Fan Traditions and Community Memory

Beyond shared practices, the subreddit’s sense of continuity is further reinforced by regular engagement opportunities. One example is the weekly thread “Jesinia’s Library Chat,” which encourages members to share their current reads, ask for book recommendations, and discuss their literary interests outside of *Fourth Wing*. This structured space creates a reliable routine and encourages interaction among fans. Comments in the thread demonstrate how members actively participate and build connections.

For instance, user *lydibug522* shares their enthusiasm for discovering new books, stating, “I love finding books when the series is new and getting to enjoy theories” (Jesinia’s Library Chat). Theories are a common topic within fandom, and an ongoing series like *Fourth Wing* lends itself well to communal guessing. Over time, these discussions contribute to a growing collection of recommendations, further expanding the subreddit’s collective memory. The evolving pool of suggested reads ensures that members can continuously access and build upon past discussions, preserving a sense of continuity within the community. This ongoing tradition highlights how shared literary interests and regular participation strengthen the subreddit’s sense of community, creating a space where members can connect over their mutual passion for books.

Another tradition revolves around midnight release parties. For example, in the “Midnight Release Parties” thread the OP, *AllieMitch98*, invites other members to share their plans for *Iron Flame* launch parties, discussing everything from costumes to themed accessories.

JelloCrunch excitedly lists their preparations, including “making and giving out friendship bracelets (eek 🥰!!),” while others express their anticipation, handing out *Fourth Wing* stickers, and even dressing up with dragon-themed items (Midnight Release Parties). The use of emojis and detailed planning reflects the enthusiasm surrounding these real-world events, reinforcing how fan engagement can extend beyond the digital space.

Additionally, these discussions foster informational exchange, further emphasizing the fandom’s social economy. For instance, one user recommends, “If you don’t have anything to wear yet, check out NikiwangByNikiwang on Etsy. You won’t be disappointed,” providing resources for fans looking for themed outfits (Midnight Release Parties). The post also demonstrates fandom continuity, as members draw connections to past book releases. *Embarrassed-Two-399* shares her experience at a midnight *Harry Potter* release party, illustrating how in-person book traditions remain central in fandom culture. Similar threads emerged surrounding the release of *Onyx Storm*, showing that these events are not limited to a single book launch but are instead becoming a recurring highlight for many fans. The presence of these posts across multiple book releases illustrates how community-driven traditions persist and evolve over time, making it part of the subreddit’s collective memory.

Recurring posts such as *Fan Art Friday* also contribute to the subreddit’s collective memory by preserving a visual record of fan creativity. Each week, members share artistic interpretations of characters, dragons, or pivotal scenes, adding to an ever-expanding archive of fan-generated content. Comments like *preally1994*’s, “this is amazing!! can’t wait to see this weekly,” reflect the excitement these posts generate, and the community’s praise may inspire others to contribute their own art (Fan Art Friday). By showcasing fan art in a recurring format, these posts deepen emotional investment and foster continuity, offering regular opportunities for creative expression.

Celebrating major membership milestones has become another established tradition on the subreddit. The post “*r/FourthWing* has hit 50,000 members” marked a significant moment in the subreddit’s growth, featuring fan art by Emilia Mildner as a centerpiece of the announcement. The comments under this post reflect members’ enthusiasm, with users expressing excitement over the fandom’s rapid expansion and their pride in being part of an “unhinged and obsessed” community (*r/FourthWing* has hit 50,000). This format continued with the later milestone post celebrating 100,000 members, which similarly featured fan art, this time by artist *Aoki*. The comment section also highlights community engagement, with

celebratory GIFs reinforcing the shared excitement and multimodal nature of fan interactions. Notably, one of the GIFs was posted by a moderator, demonstrating emotional investment in the community's growth. This moment illustrates moderator participation beyond administrative duties and reflects the subreddit's emphasis on collective joy, further connecting milestone celebrations to the sense of community experienced within the fandom. These posts serve as historical markers, documenting the subreddit's increasing reach while also providing moments of communal celebration.

While the subreddit already builds a collective memory and fosters a sense of continuity through recurring events and traditions, it is important to acknowledge that the fandom itself is still relatively young. Having emerged in May 2023, the community has had less than two years to develop long-standing traditions compared to more established fandoms. This relative newness means that while certain practices, such as rereads, themed discussion threads, and events, are becoming embedded in the subreddit's culture, they remain in a developmental stage. As the series progresses and the fandom matures, these early traditions may evolve further, building on the subreddit's shared history.

7.5 Summary of Findings

This study set out to answer two central questions: What defines a virtual community, and based on these criteria, can the *Fourth Wing* forum on Reddit be considered a community? Additionally, how do engagement, emotionalization, and discourse dynamics shape the sense of community among its members? Through a detailed case study, this thesis demonstrates that the subreddit is more than a discussion platform for Rebecca Yarros's series; it has evolved into a virtual community.

The analysis reveals that the subreddit fosters engagement and emotional connections through shared identity markers, collaborative norms, emotional support, and collective memory. These elements not only shape how the subreddit functions but also contribute to its members' sense of belonging and shared purpose. To examine these dynamics, this study applied an aggregated framework consisting of four key components: Membership and Identification, Norms and Influence, Needs and Emotional Connection, and Collective Memory and Continuity. Each component provided distinct insights into the community's structure and interaction patterns, and together, they illustrate how the subreddit cultivates a sense of community.

Membership and Identification focused on how individuals establish a sense of belonging through shared preferences, identity markers, and symbols. Within the *Fourth Wing* subreddit, this becomes evident through flairs representing dragon breeds, insider language such as “wingleader,” and similarities among members. These elements foster trust and recognition while reinforcing the group’s exclusivity and shared understanding. For example, the inclusion of book phrases such as “We do not eat our allies” or “Welcome to the Quadrant” demonstrates how members align themselves with the story while signaling their status as knowledgeable insiders (“Fourth Wing”, *Reddit*; Is my obsession normal).

Identification is also reinforced through representation. Fans frequently discuss personal connections to the series, such as relating to Violet’s experiences with disability or appreciating the inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters. These discussions not only affirm individual identities but also strengthen community bonds. Demographic similarities further foster group identification. This is evident in posts where readers bond over similar life circumstances, demonstrating how personal disclosures transform individual enthusiasm into a collective identity.

Norms and influence also played a critical role in maintaining order and shaping user interactions. This includes the establishment and enforcement of rules, as well as the mutual impact of behavior. In the *Fourth Wing* subreddit, norms such as spoiler etiquette and criticism guidelines ensure a respectful and inclusive environment. Rather than serving as rigid barriers, these guidelines and expectations subtly “gatewatch” which conversations gain prominence or fade into the background. For example, the “How To: Criticism on r/fourthwing” post illustrates how users can achieve constructive dialogue without “overstepping”. The PSA post, along with the strong reactions in the comment section regarding leaked content, exemplifies the importance of shared norms, with members expressing gratitude for efforts to keep the space spoiler-free.

Even though the strictness of some rules occasionally sparks tension, the overall guidelines promote a sense of reliability. Beyond moderation, user interactions also play a role in shaping behavior surrounding literary consumption. This social reinforcement ensures that even without moderators intervening, the subreddit upholds its standards through peer influence. The dynamic between moderators and users, where rules are not only enforced but also shaped as a group, highlights how digital communities adapt traditional notions of authority and influence to virtual spaces. Influence operates in two directions: the fandom validates individual

contributions through upvotes and comments, while individuals shape the group by focusing on certain topics which in turn dominate the feed. The balance between formal rules and peer reinforcement cultivates a structured yet collaborative space, maintaining the subreddit's welcoming environment.

The forum's ability to meet individual and collective needs emerged as the most essential component of community formation. Members regularly exchange advice, and creative content, which creates a social economy that strengthens the overall sense of community. Supportive interactions and resources are central to foster trust and inclusivity. Personal disclosures in posts such as "Why am I so obsessed with this?" and "FW/IF Is my obsession normal?" provide opportunities for consensual validation and reframing intense emotional reactions as part of a collective experience.

While these expressions generally appear authentic, their performative dimension is uncertain, as platform norms and social expectations may shape how emotions are communicated. Nonetheless, the frequent use of emojis, exaggerated capitalization and other stylistic conventions, such as the inclusion of GIFs, indicates an unspoken, collectively understood culture of emotional expression. This shared language strengthens a sense of belonging by providing members with a familiar and accepted way to convey excitement or empathy. Members also shift between roles, transitioning from support seekers to supporters or contributors, depending on their needs and expertise. This fluid participation ensures that all members, whether active contributors or passive lurkers, have opportunities to engage with the group.

Finally, collective memory and continuity highlighted the importance of shared history, traditions, and communal experiences in sustaining the subreddit's identity. Digital archives preserve discussions, debates, and traditions, which allows members to revisit key moments and reconnect with the community over time. Scheduled activities such as "Fan Art Friday" and "Jesinia's Library Chat," offer regular opportunities for engagement, fostering a sense of stability, excitement, and anticipation. For example, the weekly library chat encourages members to share book recommendations, connecting their fandom experiences with other areas of engagement. Recurring events, such as midnight release parties for *Iron Flame* and *Onyx Storm*, demonstrate how traditions form and persist even in a young fandom. These rituals enrich the community's shared culture and help maintain its continuity; even as individual

members may come and go. By maintaining these practices, the subreddit reinforces its identity as a dynamic and enduring fan space.

While shared traditions and repeated activities contribute to the long-term cohesion of the subreddit, they do not appear to be decisive in determining whether someone feels as part of the community. Events like fan fiction exchanges and collective rereads can reinforce bonds and contribute to a shared history, but they are not necessary for experiencing belonging.

8 Conclusion

Building on these findings, my study aims to contribute to the broader understanding of online fandoms and virtual communities. While traditional community theories remain highly relevant, their adaptation to virtual environments is vital. The findings emphasize that virtual communities are not static but dynamic networks shaped by many factors such as reciprocal participation and emotional investment. While scholars such as McMillan and Chavis, Blanchard and Markus, and Rotman and Wu highlight varying aspects that foster online community formation, the application of my aggregated framework illustrates that virtual communities cannot be understood through a single theoretical lens. Instead, drawing on multiple perspectives is essential to capturing their complexity and the evolving nature of digital social interactions.

As online spaces continue to shape how people form connections, further research remains essential to understanding virtual engagement. One relevant area of study could be the influence of gender dynamics on community interactions. As Baym highlighted, gendered communication styles often influence the norms and exchanges in online communities (139). This dynamic could have shaped the subreddit, particularly in terms of emotional support, conflict resolution, and group cohesion. Although gender was not a primary focus of this study, the interactions in a predominantly female fandom may differ from those in more gender-diverse or male-dominated communities. Examining these differences across multiple fandom spaces could provide further insight into how gendered behavior influences virtual community-building.

Another opportunity for research concerns the concept of “emotional safety”. While this study identified perceived safety and trust as fundamental to the subreddit’s ability to function as a community, the deeper psychological mechanisms behind these dynamics are beyond the scope

of this analysis. Exploring these aspects could provide valuable insights into how emotional well-being and community attachment are experienced at an individual level.

Similarly, the presence of forced positivity within highly moderated spaces raises important questions about the balance between fostering harmony and allowing critical engagement. Given the subreddit's emphasis on rule enforcement, respectful engagement, and polite discourse, there may be an implicit expectation for members to maintain a uniformly positive tone. While this fosters inclusiveness, it may also discourage dissenting opinions or critical discussion about the books. This becomes particularly evident when considering what types of content receive overwhelming support. As shown in the analysis, the most upvoted posts usually center around creative contributions, praise for the series, or universally appreciated story elements, such as the crocheted dragon, all of which offer easy and uncontroversial ways for members to engage. Exaggerated enthusiasm and emotional expression drive this type of participation but it remains to be seen how an equally passionate yet critical discussion would fare.

The subreddit may embrace intense engagement, but as the guideline and norms suggest, high emotions stemming from a critical or negative viewpoint will not be amplified or tolerated in the same way. The subreddit's structure and hierarchical moderation do not reflect organic community sentiment, rather, there is active curation that "gatewatches" which topics gain visibility and are allowed to flourish. Further research could explore how the enforcement of civility influences the boundaries of acceptable discourse in fandom spaces. Additionally, investigating to what degree members self-censor in response to social pressure could provide insight into how moderation policies shape long-term community cohesion.

Similar to exaggerated positivity, it would be valuable to investigate how much of the displayed enthusiasm is due to social conventions. Exploring whether heightened emotion is simply an expected form of engagement rather than an organic reaction could offer insights into how performative friendliness affects social bonds. Additionally, users who invest significant time and effort into the community may not only participate because of simple enjoyment but also as a form of self-validation. Future studies could explore how conventions shape expected emotional responses, especially in fan communities where heightened emotions are central to engagement.

Another consideration is the linguistic and cultural dimension of the subreddit. The forum operates in English, which inherently shapes its cultural norms, practices, and discussions within the community. The consistent use of English may exclude or marginalize fans from non-English-speaking backgrounds, limiting the extent to which transcultural dynamics are represented (Hitchcock et al. 174-175). Exploring multilingual fandom spaces could reveal how language influences identity construction, participation levels, and the negotiation of cultural differences. A comparative study between English-speaking and non-English-speaking fandoms could provide valuable insights into how language both unites and divides fan communities.

Additionally, longitudinal studies could track the evolution of virtual communities over time, offering insights into how they adapt to changes in membership, platform, or external events. These shifts may include reactions to problematic plot developments, diminishing identification with the source material, or controversies surrounding the author.

Exploring the interplay between online and offline fan engagement also presents a rich area for future research. The subreddit serves as a hub for discussions, emotional processing, and creative expression, but it may be worth investigating how digital interactions influence offline experiences, such as fan conventions, book clubs, or even social relationships. Conversely, research could investigate whether offline relationships and existing social structures shape the way individuals engage within digital fan spaces. This could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how virtual and real-world fandoms intersect.

Finally, this thesis focuses on a single platform. While this allowed for a detailed case study, it automatically limited the scope of the analysis. Online fandoms extend across multiple platforms, each with unique affordances that shape interaction. Reddit's text-based structure differs from the fast-paced, algorithm-driven engagement of TikTok or the real-time interactions of Discord. Future research could examine these aspects and explore how different digital environments influence community formation and sense of belonging. Moreover, examining how fans navigate multiple platforms within the same fandom could shed light on content consumption, identity expression, and interaction preferences across different online spaces.

While my study examines the ways in which *r/fourthwing* members construct a sense of community, it is important to acknowledge that observed interactions can suggest a sense of

belonging but do not provide definitive proof of its existence on an individual level. As online engagement is inherently selective and private, Reddit posts can only offer insights rather than capture the full range of user experiences.

Additionally, participation is shaped not only by those who actively engage but also by those who choose to disengage. Users who no longer feel connected or “emotionally safe” may simply stop interacting. Since disengagement leaves no direct trace in discussions, it cannot be examined and generally remains unrepresented in public posts. However, the *Fourth Wing* subreddit demonstrates that fans can build virtual communities based on shared interests, ongoing engagement and collective participation.

Even though the novel provides the initial point of connection, the subreddit’s transformation into a virtual community is shaped by how users interact, establish norms, and reinforce a shared identity. The upvote system, post flairs, and moderation policies of Reddit create a structured environment, but the community’s sense of belonging develops through the dedication of its participants. Members actively shape the space by engaging in discussions, supporting one another, and maintaining traditions that contribute to a sense of continuity over time. In this way, the subreddit does not simply function as a forum for discussing the series, it becomes a social space where fans develop connections beyond the book itself. It proves that the solitary experience of reading a book can become participatory, as fans come together to discuss, analyze, and emotionally process the material.

In conclusion, this case study highlights the significance of virtual communities in shaping modern social interactions. The ways people connect, communicate, and build relationships online are constantly shifting, making the study of virtual communities increasingly relevant. While digital communities may lack physical proximity, they cultivate connections through shared rituals, interactive norms, and emotional support. Ultimately, the *Fourth Wing* subreddit exemplifies how these elements work together to create an appealing online space where members feel a sense of community, despite never meeting in person.

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Abstract

This case study examines the sense of community within the *Fourth Wing* subreddit, a virtual forum dedicated to Rebecca Yarros's *Empyrean* series. It explores how *r/fourthwing* is not just an online gathering place for fans, but a dynamic virtual community grounded in shared interests, emotional connections, and collective traditions. Employing an aggregated theoretical framework, the study synthesizes McMillan and Chavis's Sense of Community model with insights from scholars such as Blanchard, Rotman and Wu, and Prinster et al., adapting traditional concepts of community to online environments. Through a detailed analysis of posts and interactions, the case study investigates how membership and identification, norms and influence, needs and emotional connection, and collective memory foster a cohesive and engaged community. By focusing on practices such as moderator engagement, emotional exchanges, social economy and recurring traditions, the study highlights how online fandoms cultivate a sense of community. The findings demonstrate that physical proximity or in-person interactions are not essential for building connections, emphasizing the adaptability of traditional community theories to digital platforms like Reddit. Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates the immense potential of online fandom spaces to foster connections and contribute to participatory culture, reshaping traditional notions of community.

Key words: virtual community, online fandom, sense of community, Reddit, participatory culture

Zusammenfassung

Diese Fallstudie untersucht das Gemeinschaftsgefühl innerhalb des *Fourth Wing* Subreddits, einem virtuellen Raum, der der *Empyrean* Buchreihe von Rebecca Yarros gewidmet ist. Sie beleuchtet, wie *r/fourthwing* nicht nur ein online Treffpunkt für Fans ist, sondern eine dynamische virtuelle Gemeinschaft, die auf gemeinsamen Interessen, emotionalen Verbindungen und kollektiven Traditionen beruht. Mithilfe eines aggregierten theoretischen Modells kombiniert die Studie McMillan und Chavis' Sense of Community Modell mit Erkenntnissen von Blanchard, Rotman und Wu sowie Prinster et al., um traditionelle Gemeinschaftskonzepte an ein Online-Setting anzupassen. Durch eine detaillierte Analyse von Beiträgen und Interaktionen untersucht die Fallstudie, wie zentrale Elemente wie Mitgliedschaft und Identifikation, Normen und Einfluss, Bedürfnisse und emotionale

Verbindung sowie kollektives Gedächtnis eine kohärente und engagierte Gemeinschaft fördern. Indem Praktiken wie ModeratorInnenengagement, emotionale Interaktionen, soziale Ökonomie und wiederkehrende Traditionen in den Fokus genommen werden, zeigt die Studie auf, wie Online-Fandoms ein Gemeinschaftsgefühl kultivieren. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass physische Nähe oder persönliche Treffen nicht erforderlich sind, um bedeutungsvolle Verbindungen aufzubauen, und unterstreichen die Anpassungsfähigkeit traditioneller Gemeinschaftstheorien an digitale Plattformen wie Reddit. Abschließend verdeutlicht diese Arbeit das enorme Potenzial von Online-Fandom Räumen, Verbindungen zu fördern und zur partizipativen Kultur beizutragen, wodurch traditionelle Vorstellungen von Gemeinschaft neu definiert werden.