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Creating Threads, Making Archives: A Study of Organizing and Indexing Practices Around Idols' Photos on Twitter

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Introduction

An obvious and irrefutable fact in any discourse concerning fandom is that fannish practices, whether proliferating in pre or post digital culture, in their spirit of participation, contribution and creation, take on numerous tasks that are the lifeblood of the fandom and often crucial for the survival or relevance of the actual text or object of fandom. These practices that revolve primarily around the consumption, promotion, organization and dissemination of information, that contribute to the sustenance of a community of practice (Malik & Haider, 2020; Wenger, 1998), experienced a shift with the advent of new media affordances that prompted the media studies scholar or the acafan to reassess their limitations, as Paul Booth (2015) has noted, in understating fandom as “either an identity (fans are people who have an emotional attachment to a media text) or as a practice (fans are people who produce their own meanings and texts)” (p. 3). Alongside the change in speed in the spread of valuable information, what also underwent an upheaval, is the way information was organized, an activity that brought about some changes in fans’ role as dedicated archivists, for fandom thrives on the practice of “sharing and storing of texts and interpretations, [. . .] built on the work of the archive” (Lothian, 2012, p. 545).

While compelling scholarly work has previously addressed archival practices on the internet, ranging from the discussions on the Wayback Machine to the discourse surrounding the creation of the Archive of Our Own (AO3) (Chun, 2008; Lothian, 2012), there is exciting ground to be covered in understanding how archives work as a site of play, performance and labour when it comes to creating information repositories in social networking sites, spaces that were not necessarily originally created for this purpose. In an attempt to analyse this phenomenon, the aim of this study is to look specifically at ARMY (short for the fandom name “Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth”), the fans of the Korean boy band Bangtan Sonyeondan, or more popularly BTS, and assess their archival practices around the creation and organization of information in Twitter threads.

Twitter and BTS ARMY

Stan Twitter, Fan Communities, Archivists

In April 2022, Statista Research Department published the findings that in 2019, Twitter had around 290.5 million monthly active users worldwide. This figure was projected to rise to a whopping 340 million in another five years’ time. The social networking site, apart from, and because of, developing into a popular marketing channel (Statista, 2022), steadily grew into an important site of activity for celebrities (Marwick, 2010, as cited in Recuero et al., 2012) and public figures to

promote their interests, works, and opinions. Their presence led to the proliferation of fandom activities on the site, and a host of fans moved to Twitter (and continue doing so) in order to follow and engage with their favorite celebrities (Hargittai & Litt, 2011; Recuero et al., 2012). In fact, the study of social networking sites in the first quarter of 2018 revealed that “72 percent of internet users aged 16 to 24 years were using social networks to keep up with and follow celebrities” (Statista, 2022). The unruly and endlessly creative nature of fan activities that rely on co-opting and adapting mediums to their benefit, slowly changed the dynamic of Twitter, and hashtags, Trending Topics, Retweets (RTs) and Quoted Retweets (QRTs) were soon being employed strategically to enhance the scope of fandoms, achieve fandom goals and improve the reach of the celebrity or the fandom’s object of interest.

This is especially true of “K-pop Twitter” where K-pop enthusiasts followed suit when their “faves” (short for “favourites”) began utilizing the potential of Twitter to promote their music and reach out to their fans, a phenomenon that YeonJeong Kim (2021) reflects on at length in her analysis of the relationship between the four generations of K-pop artists and their Twitter presence. Kim’s study has insightful patterns to reveal when it comes to charting the rising popularity of Twitter in the K-pop market. While artists of the first and second generation K-pop groups limited their interactive and promotional activities to fan cafes and other closed communities, Kim observes that, “from the third generation onward, artists shared content with their fans through global media platforms such as Twitter, and started to communicate with wider fan bases through live streaming and text messaging channels.” In fact, while the second generation and third generation stars posted their first tweets after 1,154 days and 132 days from their debut respectively, the fourth generation idols were noted to have tweeted 116 days before they debuted (Kim, 2021). A “notable exception” among the third generation idol groups was BTS, for they opened their account six months before their debut in 2012 to reach out to their fans globally, something that had not been done before (Kim, 2021). In being the oldest group to have built a presence on Twitter, it comes as no surprise that fans who follow them on the platform were able to engage with the groups’ content even before they became popular and create a community on the platform that was distinct from the fan communities in other social media sites.

In a similar vein, and developing around the same time, was the discourse around the fannish ability to appropriate and adapt that led to the creation of “stan twitter”, a label for fandom communities on Twitter formed around a common media text (I use the term media text in its broadest sense to denote varied and diverse media productions as well as personalities) noted for their “aptly fanatic culture and behavior” (Bercero & Abadiano, 2021). The term “stan”, has its origins in Eminem’s song of the same name (Goswami, 2020, as cited in Bercero &

Abadiano, 2021). The term has a negative connotation, and while it was initially used as a noun, it began to be eventually employed as a verb (Bercero & Abadiano, 2021), to imply being obsessed with something. While the accounts in stan Twitter are engaged in a variety of duties, with distinctions often blurring the roles they perform, as is typical for most fan practices, Malik & Haider (2020) in their study of online K-pop fandoms, note that the community in stan Twitter, can largely be divided into two groups: fanwork accounts and service accounts (p. 8). They further explain the roles of each of the groups—(1) fanwork accounts comprise Fansites, Fanartists, GIF makers, and AU writers, while (2) service accounts comprise Counselors, Event Guides, Updaters, Translators, Giveaway (GA)/GroupOrder (GO) holders and Archivers (Malik & Haider, 2020, p. 9). The authors note that such distinctions chart the key roles of fans engaged in stan Twitter, although it is nearly impossible to draw any clear demarcation between the varied roles, since everyone is engaged in multifarious activities that cross the boundaries of clearly defined roles (pp. 8-10).

Crossing boundaries and shifting between (even remixing) roles are qualities closely associated with archivists, even when understood in the context of traditional archives in institutional settings. Taking into account the fan archivist's tendency of crossing boundaries, jumping between roles is understood as an inherent part of their work that offers them greater scope at experimenting with how information is arranged or recorded. Thus, in offering their insights, making edits, creating “ships”, fans expand the very idea of who is an archivist and what is an archive, and help bring to light and confer new meanings on the multitude of conversations that are generated within the archive.

BTS and ARMY—Parasociality and Engagement of Idols and Fans

Archiving practices have spanned across fandoms, through ages, and are certainly not unique to Twitter or digital media in general. Yet, the decision to examine the archival practices of the ARMY stan Twitter rests on several factors. Firstly, the connection between BTS and ARMY is not determined by the kind of parasociality that characterizes other celeb-fan relationships, i.e. a relationship that “exists wherein the celebrity is oblivious to the individuals that make up their fandom” (Bercero & Abadiano, 2020, p. 9549). Since their debut in 2013, BTS have instrumentalized social media to reach out to their fans; this is, in fact, a primary factor behind their global success. Their deployment of social media has manifested in ways that are as diverse as their discography. A steady stream of “real-life contents” enabled BTS, as Michelle Cho (2018) has noted, “to engage on an intimate, quotidian basis, and [grant] [the fans] a sense of having witnessed the band’s personal and professional growth over time. Many fans attribute their intense attachment to BTS to the regularity, frequency, and candor of the group’s

transmedia contents.” Secondly, a consequence of the bands’ commitment toward sharing their creation process and constantly interacting with their fans is that, there is no dearth of content for the fans to organize, reflect on, and play with, for the sake of nostalgia and building a subcultural memory. This, in turn, leads to the final reason for studying BTS and ARMY—the expanse of the fandom and my position as a fan. ARMY enjoys the reputation of being the largest and the most powerful fandom at this point in history, offering a diverse set of discourses to examine. Further, since the positionality of the researcher is a crucial factor while studying any fan culture, as someone who personally identifies as ARMY, studying the ARMY fandom offers the advantage of the intimate knowledge of the ongoing discourses that may not always be evident to an outsider looking inside. While the focus of this paper is on analysing the practice of making threads, an activity that is quite common in other fandom and non-fandom contexts as well, the decision to focus solely on the ARMY’s community of practice is also reliant on personal affective experiences when it comes to participating in knowledge production and dissemination.

Purpose and Methodology

This paper looks at the many Twitter “threads” that are created around themes that pertain to the idols’ appearance/personalities, idol-idol interactions, and idol-fan interactions, and analyses how the archiving motive, that is made evident in the primary tweet, and the response it generates, reflects information preservation objectives and the socialization of ARMYs around their subject(s) of admiration. Adopting two key strategies—(1) conducting a microanalysis of interactions between fans within these threads using conversation analysis method and (2) a content analysis of the original post (OP)—this paper examines how the creation and organization of these threads not only contribute to the preservation of memories of specific events and “eras” of the band itself but also amplify the possibility of discovery and induction (for “baby ARMYs”) and information dissemination, much like traditional archives, while assigning greater agency as curators to the creators and followers of such threads.

Creating Threads, Making Archives

In keeping with the changes in/of the archives post in an increasingly mediated world, the idea of the “actual archive” and the “conceptual archive” (De Kosnik, 2016, p. 273) in media studies as well as the emphasis on studying the shift in “archive-as-source to archive-as-subject” (Stoler, 2002, p. 93) guide the project’s inquiry into how “contemporary digital network technologies” impact the forms and functions of archives, leading to the proliferation of various kinds of digital

archives, especially in fandom. In this context, Twitter threads, in the hands of fans, become archives in enabling continuity of the original message/post in a medium that limits each post to 280 characters. According to Twitter, “A thread on Twitter is a series of connected Tweets from one person. With a thread you can provide additional context, an update, or an extended point by connecting multiple Tweets together.” What makes Twitter threads unique, when compared to other mediums that offer the option to develop connected posts, is the ease with which Twitter threads can be created, modified and shared, that makes them popular among fans who intend to improve fan engagement as well as generate traffic to their posts to meet the end goal of promoting the fandoms’ discourses.

In analysing Twitter threads created by ARMY, I perceive these threads or the posts as a unique type of micro-archive, in nearly the same sense that a scrapbook might be an archive, while differing in the sense that, although often deeply personal, threads are organized keeping in mind the rules of the medium, they are public, and are developed around a theme that is made clear in the first tweet of the thread by the OP. Secondly, these posts, even when not understood as archives, can be perceived as exemplifying archival practices. These two factors will help underscore the changing form and functions of the archive, illustrating Stoler’s assertion how the archival “turn” transformed the meaning of the archive so that it is “neither a material site nor a set of documents” but “a strong metaphor for any corpus of selective forgettings and collections” (2002, p. 94).

Threads Developed Around Idols’ Appearance and Personality:

The content of ARMY’s threads were analysed and thematically, the threads created by them were categorised into three key groups. Firstly, we look at the practice of “threading” a specific members’ photos based on their appearance or a personality trait that the fans might find endearing, charming, impactful or simply noteworthy. For instance, the first post (Fig. 1) is representative of a number of similar threads that are created by including photos of a particular idol from various sources, events, and eras, that are thematically similar—they show a side of the idol that is of significance to the OP who intends to highlight or share this knowledge with other fans; simultaneously, organizing such pictures also visually represents how a member retains an aspect of their personality over a particular timeline, sometimes spanning years. This enables the OP and his followers who engage with the thread to socialize with other members over shared knowledge or gain new knowledge, although the comments tend to be as diverse as simple appreciation of the idol to that of expression of desire.



Figure 1. Screenshot of the First Post of Twitter Thread Focusing on the Visual Representation of the Idol's Personality.

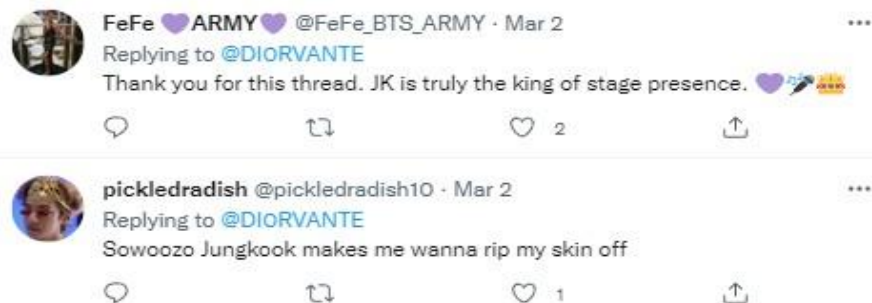


Figure 2. Screenshot of the Fans' Responses to the Thread.

Similar posts may highlight another aspect of the same idol's personality based on the sub-cultural desire or knowledge; often, comparisons are drawn with other characters, and the interpretation of these posts depend on intertextual knowledge. For fans who are not necessarily familiar with the subject of comparison, these threads become a site for acquisition of new knowledge. In looking at similar threads of a particular idol, based on, for example, how sassy, intelligent, caring, etc. they are, these threads collectively become an archive of the different facets of a star's personality that the fans might find interesting or important enough to document, share, and develop a discourse around. In rearranging and remixing images originally generated around discourses born far from each other, fan archivists engage in the process of encoding and decoding that



Figure 3. Screenshot of the First Post of Twitter Thread Comparing an Idol to an Animation Character.

confers on them the power of negotiating existing (textual) meanings and aids them in the production of newer forms of knowledge (Hall, 1980).

Further, threads that make use of both images and recorded data, such as the one focusing on Namjoon's cultural impact in Fig. 4, mimic record-keeping work of archivists by collating verified data in a compact manner and at the same time introduce an element of fan-idol intimacy through creative juxtapositioning of each piece of information with a photo of the band's leader. Moreover, the conversations under such threads reconfigure such archives as both place and practice in digital spaces. ARMYs draw from their own repository of knowledge, thereby contributing to the information organized in this thread, while mainstreaming more information about the idol in the spirit of making his and, in turn, the bands' achievements known. At the same time, in reiterating OP's claim, they offer legitimacy to the importance of the information archived.



Figure 4. Screenshot of the First Post of Twitter Thread Collating

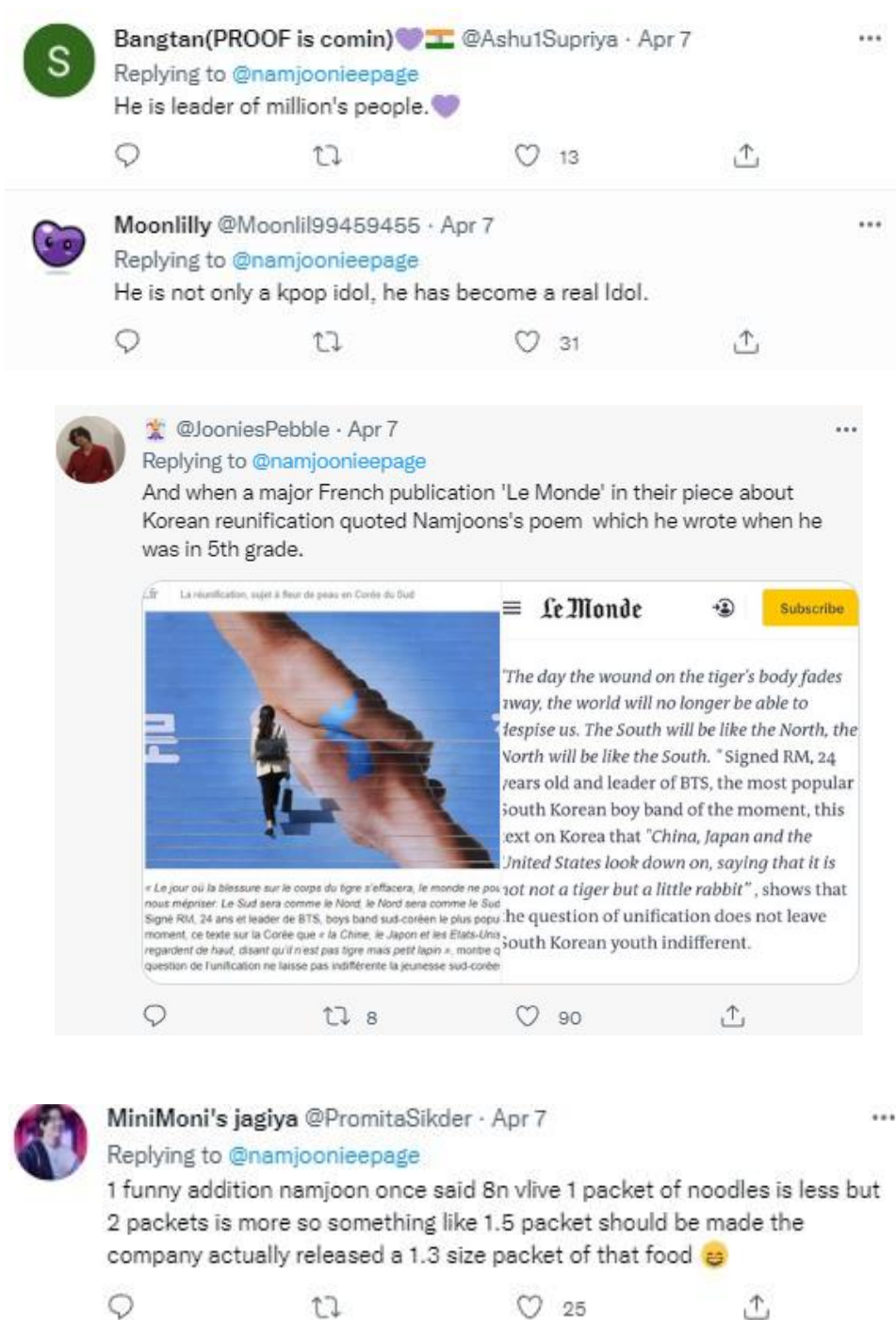


Figure 5. Screenshots of the Fans' Replies That Contribute to the Information Organized in the Thread and Affirm OP's Message.



Figure 6. Screenshot of the First Post of Twitter Thread Comparing Taehyung and Shah Rukh Khan.

Often, in adopting the spirit of “anything goes” in a true rogue archivist fashion (De Kosnik, 2016) threading the photos of a particular idol, based on how they perform or appear on stage, also takes a transcultural turn, wherein the OP may draw parallels with other celebrities belonging to different cultures, as is depicted in Fig. 6.

In creating such threads, the OP makes the shared characteristics between the two idols (i.e. Taehyung or V from BTS and Shah Rukh Khan from Bollywood) clear, thereby also creating and publicising knowledge about personalities who are culturally apart, while appealing to fans of both cultures, and making it possible for this knowledge to travel farther from the fandoms’ immediate boundaries. This makes knowledge sharing a playful yet productive activity that relies as much on creativity as it does on the archivist’s knowledge of both the cultural icons that helps them draw such parallels and contribute to the fandom’s collective knowledge.

Apart from their visual appeal and similarities in body language and personal traits that prompt the creation of this thread, drawing parallels between the two celebrities also reveals the “transcultural appeal of soft masculinity” that drives much “global female fandoms of such ‘soft’ male stars as Bollywood’s Shahrukh Khan or Hollywood icon Leonardo DiCaprio, in addition to South Korea’s Bae Yong Joon or Hong Kong’s Leslie Cheung” (Jung, 2010 as cited in Chin & Morimoto, 2013). A similar sentiment is reiterated by fans in the comments who bond over their shared belief that Taehyung, in fact, looks like he could be Khan’s son.



Figure 7. Screenshots of Fans' Replies: The First Two Comments Thank the OP for the Post; the Final Comments State that Taehyung Could Pass for SRK's Son.

Threads Developed Around Idol-Idol Interactions:

The second type of threads take stock of ARMY's attempts at depicting idol-idol interactions. These threads, while revealing the dynamic among the different members of the group, also chart how the relationship between the idols has transformed over the years.

More often than not, such threads become sites for "shippers" to engage with the content, showing their approval with the list, while other times, the OP intentionally includes photos that may show a snippet of two idols' interactions, often friendly and intimate, which are interpreted as sexual or romantic encounters, and documentation and organization of such photos become tools for expressing fans' desire, perception or curiosity of the idols' sexualities that bring to the fore the imaginative ways in which fans engage with the content they play with, document and organize.



Figure 8. Screenshot of the First Post of Twitter Thread Focusing on “JinKook” Relationship.



Figure 9. Screenshot of the First Post of Twitter Thread Focusing on the Dynamic between Namjoon and Taehyung.



Figure 10. Screenshots of Fan Interactions in the Comments.

Threads Developed Around Idol-Fan Relationship/Interactions:

Finally, the third type of threading activity concerns documenting the interactions between idols and fans or between idols and their fan communities. These threads tend to focus on listing the various instances wherein the boys spoke up for their fans, siding with them, and championing them, thereby removing the barrier that is characteristic of most parasocial relationships whereby the idols are emotionally detached from their fans (Goswami, 2020, as cited in Bercero & Abadiano, 2021).

Other times, they capture and compile the different instances of playful exchanges between the members and the fans during their interaction either on V-Live or Weverse. Certain threads focus on documenting photographic evidence of idol-fan interactions that show the respectful, playful, as well as endearing exchanges between fans and idols. Highlighting these interactions also means that the intimate knowledge of sharing a joke or a moment with the idol is

made public for newer ARMYs to discover as well as for older fans to discern how the fan-idol interaction has evolved over the years.



Figure 11. Screenshots of the First Posts of Twitter Threads Focusing on Idol-Fan Relationship/Interactions.

 **ria7** 🦋 • **PROOF** @serotans · May 12
"BTS with kids is pure serotonin"
👉 — an endearing thread;



방탄소년단

💬 117 ↻ 12.5K ❤️ 72.7K ↗

 **kirby7** @JKOOT7 · May 12
Replying to @serotans and @BTS_twt
joon looking at those kids like he's wondering if his kids across the pacific have already eaten their breakfast

💬 ↻ ❤️ 2 ↗

 **Beth** 🌻 #BlackLivesMatter ❤️ @btsisli30806418 · May 12
Replying to @serotans and @BTS_twt
Where is the video from of them comforting the little girl who is crying?

💬 1 ↻ ❤️ ↗

 **AMY7** @beomjeomsqueak · May 13
It's from idol era when they went for the show Good Morning America in NYC

💬 ↻ ❤️ 1 ↗

Figure 12. Screenshots of the First Post of Twitter Thread and Comments That Highlight Information Exchanged Within These Threads.

Twitter threads can be understood as micro-archives, following De Kosnik's idea of rogue archives and how they play with the archive's affiliation with cultural memory (2016), owing to factors unique to record keeping activities in social media. Firstly, Twitter threads have the potential to proliferate indefinitely, as long as someone takes active interest in taking forward the dialogue or contributing to it. Unlike "traditional memory institutions" that were "not designed to safeguard cultural texts that proliferate indefinitely" (De Kosnik, 2016, pp. 4-6) Twitter threads function surprisingly as "untraditional digital archives" that make such proliferation possible. In fact, these threads usually end with a final post/posts comprising a number of tagged accounts that are a part of OP's taglist. Plugging a taglist ensures that the thread reaches as many fans as possible, and increases the chances of retweeting/sharing, and improves engagement. Sometimes, a new follower may also request being added to the taglist. Thus, as a result of (rogue) archival practices, these threads expect a greater chance of proliferation.

Secondly, archives depend on repertoire—on acts of repetition. Fan labor in maintaining archives goes into keeping the projects operational almost "endlessly" which involves "responding to users' questions, migrating the data when necessary, and representing the archives to interested members or the public or the press" (De Kosnik, 2016, pp. 7-9). The threads included in the above discussions show that OPs try to respond to as many replies as possible, to keep the engagement strong; users often tag the Threadreader app to "unroll" and migrate the tweets to a more accessible form, and in maintaining impressive and lengthy taglists, interested members of the fandom are always kept in loop.

Thirdly, such fan-made threads function on the premise of "individualized and personalized styles," and draw from a shared subculture and contribute to its memory/property, thereby (re)producing newer strands of knowledge that break away from copyright and anti-duplication barriers that characterize what De Kosnik (2016) notes as the "archival genres of printed text and image, sound, and video



Figure 13. Screenshot of Interaction in the Comments Where the Fan Asks OP to Add Them to the Taglist.

recordings” (p. 10). This does away with the rigidity of canonicity, and centralizes affect as the core value based on which systems of knowledge are created and shared.

Therefore, while the analysis of ARMY threads is a small speck in the long and rich scholarship around the history of forming archives and usage of archival methods in online fan communities, this study hopes to underscore the changing contours of archives and implementation of archival practices that exemplify the role of fans as producers and well as preservers of content and community knowledge.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is imperative to note that the precarity associated with the lives of internet archives apply to Twitter threads as well, in fact, in a more acute fashion. Yet, for fans, this threat of transience is no new concern. All is done in what De Kosnik (2016) refers to as the spirit of “maybe”—these threads bind information by overcoming the constraints imposed by the medium and create the conditions of “possibility for persistence and recollection” by capturing a particular time in the fandom and, simultaneously, keeping a record of discourses around it, borrowing from as well as giving back to an ecosystem that functions on shared subcultural memory. Finally, thread-making as constituting archival practice shows a new means via which fans enjoy greater agency and are able to creatively organize information, and in doing so, leave through digital social media, what Holger Potzsch identifies in his study of digital archives, “potentially exciting traces of human life, of what it means to be human” (Cook, 2013, as cited in Potzsch, 2017) and more specifically, what it means to be a fan.

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