

STILL FLYING: THE COMMUNICATIVE CONSTITUTION  
OF BROWNCOAT FANDOM AS CULTURE

by

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I always told myself that I wasn't going to include one of these because they seemed very cliché and overtly sentimental; both things I try to avoid as a matter of course. However, after nearing the end of this project, I realized that acknowledgement of those individuals who are directly responsible for the fruition of the work is warranted.

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## ABSTRACT

In contemporary western culture, fandom is common. Many academics and members of the general public alike conceive of fandom as outside the norms of spectatorship; to be a spectator is to enjoy an interest individually and passively. However, others contend that fandom is a more significant cultural achievement.

This study qualitatively investigated how Browncoats, or fans of the cancelled television series *Firefly*, communicatively construct their fandom culture. Methods included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, data analysis through Grounded Theory, and a comparative thematic analysis of the original *Firefly* source texts and Browncoat cultural data in order to discover meaningful themes evident in both.

It was found that three specific discursive patterns of practice; Conversation, Cultural Practices, and Co-authoring symbolically represent and recreate specific themes from the *Firefly* source texts while simultaneously enacting an overarching Underdog cultural ideology. This suggests that current conceptions of fandom may be inadequate to properly account for the symbolically lived practices of contemporary fans. As active constructors of culture through shared text engagement, the Browncoats are examples of a new construct in fan studies: *fanactivism* that closely resembles more accepted cultural forms like *religion*. Fandom may be the topic of interest, but at the heart of this study is a deeper understanding of the constitutive forces that are involved in the creation of all social reality

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In September of 2002, the Fox Network aired 11 episodes of a new series called *Firefly*. Despite its growing popularity, the show was cancelled after only three months and off the air by December of 2002. By all accounts it appeared as if *Firefly* would go the way of so many other creative endeavors that failed to live up to the Nielsen standard. However, fans of the show did not take this defeat lying down and these self-titled Browncoats organized unsuccessful grass-root campaigns to get the show back and successfully lobbied Fox to release the series on DVD. Browncoat driven sales of the DVD box set and continual moral support inspired the show's creator Joss Whedon to pitch the feature film *Serenity* to Universal, which was released in 2005. Nearly eight years later, the Browncoats are a strong vibrant culture with common language, practices, rituals, and identity that emulate and honor the crew of *Serenity*. While intriguing in its own right, the commonalities between fan Browncoats and the fictional heroes are ultimately indicative of a more significant symbolic engagement with the *Firefly* and *Serenity* source texts.

The goal of this research was to qualitatively investigate how members within the Browncoat culture communicatively construct their fandom experience using elements of the original *Firefly* and *Serenity* narratives. This study employed qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews conducted through computer-mediated communication, and data analysis through Grounded Theory. Additionally, this study

utilized a broad thematic analysis of the original *Firefly* and *Serenity* narratives in order to compare them with those themes evident in the Browncoat cultural data. This comparative thematic analysis proceeded with the ultimate goal of discovering meaningful themes both in the Browncoats cultural discourse and in the original *Firefly* and *Serenity* narratives.

This research focused primarily on the discursive practices of Browncoat members that utilized appropriated elements from the television series, one feature film, and comic book series in order to structure their culture, language, and identity. Three specific patterns of discourse were subsequently discovered: Conversation, Cultural Practices, and Co-Authoring. It was further found that these patterns of practice (re)created the themes of Altruism and Self-sacrifice, Belonging to a Crew, Family Loyalty, Continuance, and Still Flying symbolically appropriated from the guiding *Firefly* and *Serenity* source texts while simultaneously enacting an overarching cultural Ideology of the Underdog. The continued existence of the culture is communicatively constituted through discursive practices that incorporate symbolic ideals appropriated from their chosen source texts. These thematic ideals and moral lessons are expressed discursively, ensuring an afterlife for the short-lived sci-fi western that has had a meaningful impact on members of this culture.

Fandom is common because individuals in contemporary western culture are continually bombarded with a barrage of mediated messages and accordingly savvy media consumers have developed receptive responses to derive meaning from the experience. The importance of cultural and audience-centered research like this is made

pertinent by the prevalence of active, meaning-making processes people participate in every day as they consume mass media. A closer analysis of the fan's active and devoted relationship to a particular media text holds great potential for understanding and improving other modes of sociopolitical activism and communal devotion.

The following chapter will commence with a review of academic literature pertaining to the concepts, theories, research interests, and issues addressed in this study of communicatively constructed fandom culture. The major topic areas will include popular and scholarly conceptions of fans, constitutive conception of communication, communicatively constituted fandom, the communicative constitution of culture, and discourse. The first section below will briefly review the two prominent phases of fan studies in order to situate this study in the current academic conversation. The subsequent sections will illuminate the key topic areas as they support claims inherent in this study while explicating relevant sub-categories of research and socio-cultural concepts.

### **Literature Review**

The existing literature regarding fandom is as diverse as the fields that study it and accordingly fans have been characterized in many lights. These characterizations fall along a continuum anywhere from a passive audience to a dynamic active sub-culture. The literature indicates that many fan studies began as an attempt to counter the media stereotype of the passionately obsessive, sometimes hysterical, young people and has evolved into a sociological focus on media consumption. Recent research regards fandom as a form of social and cultural reproduction.

### Fans and Fan Studies

In order to properly situate this study into the current academic conversation, the following literature review will address two thematic waves of fan studies that emerged in relation to this proposed research. The first wave of scholarship discussed below conceptualized fandom as relatively negative phenomena while the second wave arose in opposition to these scholars and felt the need to “rigorously defend fan communities against their ridicule in the mass media and by non-fans” (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007, p. 2).

Despite its common place in contemporary vernacular, the concept and definition of “fan” has generally evaded an explicit, singular, or unified meaning. Etymologically, the word “fan” originates from the Latin word ‘fanaticus,’ by which we derive the word “fanatic” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 12). This historical association has helped perpetuate stereotypes of individuals whose behavior, at the very least, exceeds conventional norms of spectatorship and at times is described as pathological (Jenson, 1992). Some stereotypical images are found in documentaries like *Trekkies* (Nygard, 1997), “where fans are portrayed as overweight, socially-inept men and women who dress up as Vulcans and spend thousands of dollars at conventions on a towel that William Shatner once used to wipe his face” (Davisson & Booth, 2007, p. 3). These representations portrayed fans as a homogeneous, easily manipulated, mass audience most often characterized by the more high-profile fan cultures like *Trekkies*, or fans of the *Star Trek* franchise (Jenson, 1992).

Similarly minded scholars conceptualized fandom as a negative or irrational human activity based on intuition instead of reason (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998;

Ehrenreich, Hess, & Jacobs, 1997; Jenson, 1992; Koppett, 1981; Lipsyte, 1975; Whittenberger-Keith, 1992). Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) even placed the fan along a continuum between the cultist and the enthusiast. Some fans, like science fiction fans, were, and still are to some extent, marginalized for their fandom and branded as crazies by the mainstream media (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Whittenberger-Keith, 1992; Ehrenreich et al., 1997). To this end, Harris and Alexander (1998) lamented that very few studies have captured the “authentic voices of the fans” (p. 5). They contended that “discussion around fandom has essentially pathologized it without leading us much closer to understanding this important phenomenon” (p. 5). As a result, a new wave of fan scholarship emerged that better recognized the inherent social element of the fan experience and more appropriately “allowed fans to speak of and for themselves and was often written by those inside respective fan cultures” (Gray et al., 2007, p. 3).

This contemporary wave of scholarship followed in the steps of de Certeau (1984), who argued that the consumption of popular mass media was a unique activity that showcased a power struggle between the empowered and the disempowered in society. Fandom in particular constituted guerilla-like warfare. De Certeau (1984) considered the creative consumption habits of the masses as subversive tactics to regain a sense of control from the hegemonic media producers that dictate content. Fandom from this perspective could be viewed as one way in which fans are able to wage this grass-roots battle.

Many of these scholars regarded the study of fandom to be a worthy cause because such scholarship championed those disadvantaged within society. Fans were

“associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race” (Fiske, 1992, p. 30; see also Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). This tradition argued against simple definitions of fandom as the mere act of being a fan of something, instead conceptualizing it as a collective strategy of interpretive communities to evade the preferred and intended meanings of the power bloc (Fiske, 1989).

Contemporary fan scholars, including myself, are concentrating on re-conceptualizing fandom, giving a new voice to the fan experience while arguing for its cultural, economic, and theoretical significance. In this new scholarly age, which recognizes the active audience, the fan appears to have emerged from the cultural margins to become a valued media consumer. Addressing this current revelation, Jonathon Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (2007), three preeminent fan scholars, pronounced that academia has reached the “fandom is beautiful” phase of fan studies (p. 3). Similar arguments about fan influence have also been made by influential fan scholar Henry Jenkins (2006a, 2006b, 2007), indicating a dramatic shift from his 1992 views on fan power, in *Textual Poachers*. In 1992, Jenkins characterized the interpretative acts of fans, especially the unofficial borrowing and use of licensed stories, characters, and settings for personal production, as oppositional behavior, and likened fans to marginalized “poachers,” who actively appropriate media texts for individual and collective purposes. He claimed that “like the poachers of old, fans operate from a position of cultural marginality and weakness” and “have only the most limited of resources” with which to influence producers (p. 26). But as Jenkins (2006a, 2006b,

2007) has since noted, active fan-sites and producer attentiveness to these sites, may be subtly altering the relationship between fan and producer as communication between fans has proliferated on the Internet.

Despite polarizing perspectives, one common theme emerged in both positive and negative scholarship on the “fan”: the fan is an active, emotionally invested participant that communicates personal and social identification with their community and the particular object of fandom. Additionally, there is a drastic shift in much of the contemporary fan scholarship from the marginalized resistant *poacher* metaphor (de Certeau, 1984; Jenkins, 1992) to an acknowledgement of fan empowerment and collective solidarity.

This research adds to this academic conversation by looking at the active communicative construction of fandom. In particular, this study focuses upon how fans construct fan culture by using thematic elements of original fictional texts. Additionally, this study hopes to add to the current body of academic research on fan studies by extending the idea that the differentiated modes of fan consumption are also closely interwoven with the ways in which we engage, experience, and communicate with the mediated world we live in. Specifically, the goals of this study are to qualitatively research fandom in order to explore the claims that 1) fandom is communicatively constituted in active participation, emotional investment, and subject identification as interpreted through the literature, and 2) fandom as culture (organization) emerges through the communicative practices of members that continually construct, maintain, and change the culture.



### Fandom (Re)conceptualized

As demonstrated above, fandom research often focuses on the active, individual experience of being a fan. Jenkins (1992) characterized fandom as an organized achievement. He described fandom as a coordinated institution of theory and criticism and a semi-structured space where interpretations of common texts and relationships to mass media are negotiated and theorized. Jenkins recognized the innate cultural element of fandom that often gets overlooked. Stated another way, fandom will refer to the inherent sub-cultural experience of being a *fan*. Moreover, this research argues the communal fan experience is communicatively constructed specifically with narrative elements from source texts.

While many adequate definitions concerning both *fans* and *fandom* abound, this study will offer its own conceptualization of *fans*, arguing that communication is the constitutive force that creates, maintains, performs, and transforms *fandom*. Therefore, fandom is a cultural process and specifically a participatory discursive achievement. Fans will, therefore, be distinguished from casual audience members and other media consumers by their: 1) Active participation with other self-identified fans interested in a particular media object or text, 2) Emotional investment with a particular media object or text, and 3) Identification with their particular media text. The embodiment and communication of these three dimensions comprises the concept of fandom.

### Active Communication of Fandom

Recent studies regarding fandom share a similar contention that fans are more than passive recipients of literature or media and actively and consciously go against the

norm of audience behavior. Jenkins (1992) originally described the interpretative acts of fans as oppositional behavior when he likened fans to marginalized “poachers,” who actively utilize official media texts for positive individual and *collective* purposes. Even though the official text of a show constitutes a common origin of interest, fans nevertheless collectively interpret programs, characters, and actors through narrative in ways that expand on and move well beyond the official narratives. Jenkins (1992) considers the very act of creating meaning from a “fantasy” text, such as a fictional television show, as work. As illuminated in this study, fans are active co-participants in this process of re-reading and re-writing the original source text to fit the communal needs or interests of the individual fan.

#### Collective Participation

Fandom is not only an active achievement on the level of individual participation, but is a dynamic act of textual reading and co-production. Fandom is “a complex multidimensional phenomenon, inviting many forms of participation and levels of engagement” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 2). An individual may produce a piece of fan fiction but then publically posts that creation on a fan website for communal critique. The work either is accepted or rejected as a worthy addition to the canon through personal messages to the author and direct comments posted below the work. Some works of fan fiction are even co-authored by multiple fans, or edited with the help of “betas,” where all elements are negotiated and interpreted together. Henry Jenkins (1992), along these lines, offers that “to speak as a fan is to...speak from a position of collective identity, to forge an alliance with a community of others in defense of tastes which, as a result, cannot be read

as totally aberrant or idiosyncratic” (p. 23). Fandom therefore deviates from traditional spectatorship not only in the degree of engagement with media objects but also in level of participation with other self-identified fans in the collective interpretation and co-production of texts that expand the original text or texts.

This level of participation not only identifies this individual as a fan but also distinguishes him or her as a member of a fan community (Baym, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2002). In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins (2006a) further expanded on this concept of a “participatory culture” as a “culture in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content” (p. 290). This participatory quality of fandom distinguishes fans from passive viewers (p. 11). This is a significant point because fandom has traditionally been misunderstood by many non-fans and academics as a reclusive private experience. Generally, the scholars who described the fan experience as negative also conceptualized it as a relatively private one. However, contemporary scholars recognize the inherent participatory nature of fandom and the unique emotional connection between fans and their particular fan object. Connecting these two points, Bielby, Harrington, and Bielby (1999) contended that “to ‘view’ television is a relatively private behavior, to be a ‘fan,’ however, is to participate in a range of activities that extend beyond the private act of viewing and reflects an enhanced emotional involvement with a television narrative” (p. 35). Whittenberger-Keith (1992) also defined fans in terms of this communal attachment to media-artifacts. Her definition reflects the idea that fans identify with one another regarding the objects of their admiration.

### Emotionally Invested Identification

For most fans, the primary investment in the object of their fandom is emotional. Fans of media objects have very little material connection and “for better or worse, tend to engage with these texts not in a rationally detached but in an emotionally involved and invested way” (Gray, et al., 2007, p. 10). Sandvoss (2005) even defined “fandom as the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text” (p. 8). This affective investment exhibited by fans often appears to be more deeply-rooted than any proprietary attachment, further deviating from generalized expectations of spectator behavior. Hugenberg (2002) studied sports fans of the NFL’s Cleveland Brown’s franchise and described them as emotional stakeholders in the organization. She goes on to conceptualize fan communication and organizational affiliation as emotion-based. Hugenberg also contends that “because the fans’ constituency represents an emotional connection to the organization, its team, and its symbols, it [is] a group unlike those in other organizations that have solely economic, political, and/or environmental affiliation or concerns” (p. 11).

Grossberg (1992) noted the importance of conceptualizing and studying fans according to their “affective sensibilities” and “affective alliances” because these apparatuses “provide the space within which dominant relations of power can be challenged, resisted, evaded or ignored” (p. 59). By “making certain things or practices matter [emotionally], the fan ‘authorizes’ them to speak for him or her, not only as a spokesperson but also as surrogates... The fan gives authority to that which he or she invests in... Fans let them organize their emotional and narrative lives and identities” (p.

59). This emotional attachment of fans bleeds into a similar connection with the respective fan community organized around the particular media object. The enthusiasm and the level of commitment to a particular fan community may vary, but they still represent people who interact together around a common devotion and develop a strong sense of communal identity and identification with the culture and/or the subject of fandom.

Fandom is, at its core a sense, of personal identification with a choice media object and collective identity with other fans. This identity is not totally devoid of individual recognition but, as Tajfel and Turner (1986) posited, is derived primarily from group membership. Social identity emerges as the part of an individual's self-concept, which derives from one's knowledge of membership to a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership (Tajfel, 1978). Sandvoss (2005) contends that fans "build an intense identification with their object of fandom" (p. 101). For the fan, the text becomes more than a piece of media. It instead is a symbol that the fan identifies with personally and socially to a fan community. Grossberg (1992) similarly offers that fans "make an affective investment into the objects of their taste and they construct, from those tastes, a consistent but necessarily temporary affective identity" (p. 247). This identity is communicatively constructed through an amalgamation of communicative practices that are ultimately influenced by the particular text that fans choose to engage with.

### Fans and Texts

Whether a given object of a fan's interest is found in a novel, a television program, or a popular celebrity icon, fan objects should be viewed and analyzed as texts. They all constitute a set of signs and symbols that fans engage within their frames of representation and mediation, and they create meaning during the process of reading. Derrida (1976) argued that texts are not merely written or spoken word. He further contended that everything is a text and subject to deconstruction, including gestures, places, and people. Many previous fan studies placed emphasis on audience activity and neglected the specific object of fan consumption as an object of study. Fan studies that focus on objects share similar traditions with literary theory in the shared essence of analysis and interpretation of meaning in the study of texts and their readings. Accordingly, Sandvoss proposes a new model that reemphasizes "the act of reading as a form of communication and dialogue with a textual other" (Gray et al., 2007, p. 11). It is the intent of this research to support this ideal of the communicative relationship between the fan and the object of their fandom in which texts are much more dynamic entities than traditionally thought.

These particular conceptualizations of what constitutes a *text* correctly suggest that this thesis is concerned with language and interpretation. This thesis therefore assumes that language, in this case computer-mediated communication, is the site of meaning but that the nature of language is such that it invites endless variety and interpretation. Related to this, John Fiske (1987) contends that audiences actually have the capacity to create new meanings from a text, perhaps not originally intended, and in

turn experience pleasure. Many cultural studies theorists have argued that there are dialogic possibilities in the viewer-text relationship. These scholars recognize the essential distinction between “subject positions that a text constructs” and the actual viewers who “may or may not take up those positions” (Brunsdon, 1983, p. 76). There is a significant difference between what media texts offer and what individual viewers actually make of them (Geraghty, 1991). Though these texts may suggest preferred readings, their actual meaning is derived through “the imposition of the individual’s frame of reference upon the world of the text” (Allen, 1985, p. 89). Communicative practices like fan fiction allow fans to engage with source texts on deeper levels.

Another of Jenkins’ (1992) seminal insights was that “fandom celebrates not exceptional texts but rather exceptional readings” (p. 284). Jenkins views have become the theoretical quintessence of most fan scholarship and this notable distinction between texts and readings warrants further discussion. If *reading* is understood as the interaction between text and reader, this theoretical distinction between the two only becomes possible through the erosion of the text as an independent entity in some form of relational dialogue (Sandvoss, 2005). This theoretical work lends itself to prior research (Iser, 1971, 1978; Ingarden, 1973) that studied the processes through which readers generate meaning in the reading of literary texts. Meaning is created in a process that is not a “one-way incline from text to reader” but a “two-way relationship” (Iser, 1978, p. 173). The reader enters into a reflexive dialogue with the text (Husserl, 2000) whereby the reader fills in textual blanks with his or her prior experience. The concretization of meaning is based on this mutual dialogue between text and reader.

Contemporary media texts are often purposefully designed to allow for multiple readings to encourage the *fannish* proclivities in order to benefit the texts' producers. The text itself may be imbued with any number of acceptable readings. Livingstone (1990) contends that "a number of normative alternatives may be encoded in a text, so that different viewers may select different readings and yet remain within a dominant framework" (p. 83). This over-coding lends to the generation of satisfactory explanations that the original narrative lacks (Allen, 1985; Geraghty, 1991; Livingstone, 1989). The original text may provide determinate conditions for its interpretation but may also be imbued with any number of acceptable readings (Morley, 1989).

#### Communication and Fandom

Thus far fandom has been presented from a multiplicity of perspectives that exhibit a varying degree of respective difference. However, all the literature reviewed illuminates a vision of fandom as a communicatively constructed phenomenon. To properly support such a claim, especially in regards to fan organization, several core communication concepts must be explicated.

Traditional conceptions of communication have been simplistic transmission models or vague descriptions of interactions between a sender and receiver. Carey notes that, "the transmission view of communication is the commonest in our culture – perhaps in all industrial culture – and dominates contemporary dictionary entries under the term" (1989, p. 12). With the traditional model still academically entrenched in the discipline, Craig argues that:

The traditional transmission model is philosophically flawed, fraught with



paradox, and ideologically backward, and that it should at least be supplemented, if not entirely supplanted, by a model that conceptualizes communication as a constitutive process that produces and reproduces shared meaning. (1999, p. 125)

While still taught at many scholastic levels, very few communication scholars would still claim to adhere to the limited transmission-type conceptions. This, however, is a fairly recent accomplishment propagated by communication theorists such as Carey (1989), Deetz (1994), Pearce (1989), and Shepherd (1993), among others. The theoretical underpinnings of this thesis draw on these assumptions that communication, specifically language, constitutes, maintains, and changes culture.

This thesis holds to this constitutive model of communication (Craig, 1999) and its central tenets that not only complicate our thinking about communication, but also challenge the ways in which we think about organization (Miller, 2009). This thesis further contends that reality is a social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) whereby knowledge, like all other facets of reality, is constituted through communicative practices. Identity, for example, as an aspect of both knowledge and reality, "is formed by social processes, [once] crystallized, it is maintained, modified, or even reshaped by social relations" (p. 173). Grounded in the socio-cultural tradition, these scholars typically theorize communication as a "symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed" (Carey, 1989, p. 23) through "shared socio-cultural patterns" (Craig, 1999, p. 144). Conceived of in this manner, communication explicates how larger, macro-level, social order is created, realized, sustained, and transformed in individual, micro-level interaction processes. Individuals exist within

socio-cultural environments that are constituted and maintained in large part by symbolic codes. The term “(re)production” is often forwarded as explanatory of this process and quite adequately infers the paradoxical reflexivity of this phenomena. Taken-for-granted interactions between individuals are heavily mitigated or influenced by preexisting, shared cultural patterns and social structures. From this point of view, seemingly insignificant discursive interactions largely “reproduce” the existing socio-cultural order.

Social interaction, though, can also be a creative process that permits and even requires a great deal of improvisation that, albeit collectively and ultimately, “produces” the very social order that makes interaction possible in the first place. A communicative practice – or discursive interaction is, then, an actual means of expression in a community, given that community’s specific scenes and historical (in the broadest sense) circumstances (Carbaugh, 1996, p. 14). Put simply, organizational structure cannot occur without communication and communication cannot exist, or may be severely limited, without organizational structure.

### Communication and Organization

As presented above, this study supports the socio-cultural tenet that communication is constitutive of the organization through the duality of structure and action (Giddens, 1979, 1984; Taylor, Groleau, Heaton, & Van Every, 2001; Nelson-Marsh, 2006). This study advances the argument that “communication processes are fundamental in constructing and reconstructing seemingly stable and recognizable organizational and technological forms across time and space” (Nelson-Marsh, 2006). Communication further enables organizational participants to interpret texts and social

components contextually (Jackson, 1996). Organizational members dynamically coordinate their actions with others based on these subsequent interpretations (Deetz, 2001). It is therefore communication that facilitates the interpretive and coordinative efforts of members, in turn constructing and reconstructing the recognizable social order (Taylor et al., 2001). In many cases, the primary communicative form through which this is achieved is discourse.

### Organization and Discourse

Research into organizational discourse occurs in a multitude of disciplines (Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001), including but not limited to rhetorical and literary studies, critical discourse analysis, and postmodern studies. Accordingly, discourse is conceptualized in an endless array of description and theory that leaves it in danger of “standing for everything, and thus nothing” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b, p. 1128; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). While this research on fandom culture does not intend to extensively discuss the differing viewpoints, it will offer a brief acknowledgement of the perspectives that are relative to the particular data that emerged during research and draw a clear demarcation from unrelated perspectives. This research does admit an ontological bias toward previous metatheoretical work on the communicative constitution of organizations (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; McPhee & Zaug, 2000), where the much broader construct of “communication” and the more specific and purposeful “discourse” are related but not synonymous. Following this, another important distinction must be noted between *discourse* and *Discourses*.

### Discourse and Discourses

Following Alvesson and Kärreman (2000a, 2000b), as well as Fairhurst and Putnam (2004), this supports the distinction between discourse scholarship, the study of talk and text in social practices, and the study of Discourses, or general and enduring systems of thought (Foucault, 1976, 1980; Gee, 1999; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). To clarify, discourse (lower case “d”) is conceptualized as a localized accomplishment and medium for social interaction where the particularity of linguistic usage and interaction are of central concern to scholars (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In contrast, the term Discourses (often with a capital “D”) references the more transcendent historically situated systems of collective thought formation and articulation (Foucault, 1976, 1980) that order and naturalize the world in particular ways (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b; Foucault, 1976, 1980; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). In this Foucauldian view, the relationship between power and knowledge is key and established in culturally standardized Discourse, that are reified in discursive acts like talk, text, ideas, rationales, and assumptions that constitute both object and subject. Stated more simply, a given *Discourse*, like feminist *Discourse* for instance, is embodied in any number of *discourses*, or tokens of text or talk that allow it to transcend both time and space (Foucault, 1976, 1980; Gee, 1999; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). This thesis acknowledges the potential for *Discourse* studies in that fan organizations offer a unique site to observe the powerful cultural and institutional forces that lie beyond language use in any given text (Deetz, 1992; Derrida, 1988). However

this research is primarily concerned with the localized *discourse* and perhaps the micro-level cultural *Discourse* that plays a constitutive role in the production of community.

### Organizations as Discursive Constructions

It has been highlighted above that organizations are socially constructed products, where “the product acts back upon the producer” and is experienced as something other than a human creation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 61). For many scholars, these organizations are conceived of specifically as discursive constructions because discourse forms the foundation of organizational life (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a; Boden, 1994; Deetz, 1992; Taylor & Cooren, 1997; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). Discursive acts shape organizational processes and constructs (Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001) by demonstrating how participants enact and construct a particular type of organizational structure through talk. Conversation as “talk-in-interaction” is comprised of the sending and receiving of messages (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). Talk is “the doing” of discourse, whereas text is “the done,” or the material representation of discourse in spoken or recorded forms (Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). It should be noted, as it was above, that although written documents are an easy way to conceive of texts (manuals, emails, reports, etc...), conversation patterns *routinized* in organizations, like performance appraisals or job interviews, also exist as texts (Derrida, 1988). Texts differ from conversational discourse in that they have staying power or the capacity to operate outside the original context in which they were developed. Organizations manifest in this nexus of conversation and text (Taylor & Van Every, 2000).

Conversation, as a facet of discourse, is therefore the “site” of an emerging organization because it is where members accept, challenge, or change the rules and protocols of social interaction (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). Discourse, then, is the process by which the organization is sustained, as conversation represents the dynamics of organizing and text becomes the built-in structures of language or “surface” from which an organization is read (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). Discourse and organization mutually constitute one another as texts inform the structuring patterns of discourse that shape the organizing processes that, in turn, form texts. This discursive activity often fosters the formation of strong discourse communities

### Discursive Communities

Research into *discourse communities* is well established by multiple rhetoric and composition researchers (Bakhtin, 1981; Russell, 1990; Harris, 1999; Bizzell, 1997, 2002; Maybin, 2006). Many who follow the Bakhtinian tradition focus on the power and authority in language, whether conversation or text, within a specific community. Discourse to these scholars is the site for a power struggle of centralizing and decentralizing forces in language and writing. Therefore, the term *discourse community* refers to a community that focuses on writing and that displays power hierarchies maintained by the Bakhtinian power struggle.

Instead, this thesis conceptualizes a discourse community in its simplest form as “a group of people who share language-using practices” whereby social interactions are highly conventionalized and “canonical knowledge regulates the world views of group members, how they interpret experience” (Bizzell, 1992, p. 222). Within such structures,

an individual is “a member of a team, and a participant in a community of discourse that creates its own collective meaning” (Porter, 1986, p. 35). Thus, a discourse community is a collective of like-minded individuals where some attitudes are acceptable and others considered contradictory to the community’s belief system.

The overarching ideology is both shaped and dictated by the discursive acts of community members. Discourse so conceived is able to endure over time and represents all of the thoughts that the community has adopted or is attributed to it. When the discourse is applied to a more expansive philosophical ideal, all of the exchange of ideas, systems of thought, analysis, and history will become part of the community. Bizzell (1992) further suggests that “entering a discourse community means signing on for the project” (226), and specifically an interpretive one. The goal in establishing this concept is not necessarily to argue whether or not the culture of study, constitutes a discourse community but rather to highlight the interpretive conventions framing the organizational work that occurs at this site.

As participants communicate they say something about how a person should be, act, relate to others, feel, and live in place (Carbaugh, Gibson, & Milburn, 1997; Carbaugh, 1988/1989, 1989a, 1989b, 1996, 1998a, 1998b, 2006). Accordingly, a cultural discourse is a particular system of these specific ways of being, acting, relating, feeling, and dwelling that produces, and is in turn produced by, particular communicative acts in situated social interactions. This discourse is the embodiment of cultural meaning that enables both the social and communicative whereby it is a medium *for* social interaction (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004).

Organizational members also enact culture through discourse (Keyton, 2005) as they construct a reality shared among the members (Berger & Luckman, 1966).

### Communication and Culture

Culture has traditionally been described in terms of race, co-location, interest, or association. According to Carbaugh (2006), much of this can be credited to the dominance of the psychological model utilized in the social sciences. From this prevalent view, culture is described as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category from another” (Hofstede, 1997, p. 260). Communication, while widely considered to be important in these conceptualizations, is regarded as something that a culture *does*. However, from a socio-cultural view, communication constitutively emerges as the something the cultural *is*. As Hecht, Collier, and Ribeau (1993) state, culture is a communicative production: “[W]hether national, ethnic, professional, organization, or gender based...culture is the common patterns of interaction and perceptions shared by a group of people” (p. 15). Members’ communicative actions constantly organize and reorganize what is recognized as stable culture and co-culture to meet the social needs inherent in its members (Mumby & Putnam, 1992). This study subscribes to this communicatively-centered view of culture, which is consistent with the before mentioned conceptualizations of communication and organization.

Culture, therefore, manifests in the recognizable communicative practices that reflect commonalities of group identity and symbolically enact values, beliefs, and shared histories. This may take the form of traditionally associative elements like narrative, rites,



rituals, and artifacts as well as the continual reenactment of cultural relationships, meaning-making practices, and discursive acts and performances. Whatever variant definition of culture prevails, communication is the constitutive force in the creation and maintenance of the culture.

### Communicatively Constructed Fandom Culture

Following in the footsteps of communication scholars, like Hugenberg (2002) who studied sports fandom from a communicative standpoint, this study too aims to conceptualize fandom culture as “a socially constructed and historically transmitted pattern of symbols, meanings, premises, and rules” (Philipsen, 1992). Fandom as a communal experience is created and maintained communicatively through various social practices. Communication, whether face-to-face or via a mediated channel, is influenced by historical context as it re-creates or reinforces the culture moment-by-moment. This in turn leads to discursively constructed cultural realities that are continually created and recreated in a dynamic cultural process.

Many communicative practices that socially construct cultural fan realities occur under the proverbial radar. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued, the “world of everyday life is not only taken for granted as reality by the ordinary member of society [but] it is a world that originates in the thoughts and actions, and is maintained as real by these” (p. 20). All active social process is communicative and therefore reality is created, maintained, and challenged through communication. McKerrow (1989) offers skeptical hope that the best we can strive for is constant vigilance of the “taken for granted’s that endanger our freedom [and considers this] our chance to consider new possibilities for

action” (p. 97). Fan communities like all others are constituted in response to the emotional and organization needs for affiliation or identification in accordance with established, albeit negotiable, discursively constructed rules and regulations (Lewis, 1992). These cultures are fluid and dynamic, often dismissed or unrecognized as significant collective organizational achievements.

### **Conclusion**

In accordance with a socio-cultural focus, it is believed that this process can more genuinely be understood from within the particular fan culture itself where members and the researcher share in the experience. From here, the researcher can observe “the flow of social life in order to discover there, and to represent, in writing, the portion of a culture that is devoted to communicative practices” (Philipsen, 1992, p. 8). These practices, often viewed as mundane activity, may even go unnoticed by the members themselves. Carbaugh (1993) similarly argued for this orientation because it lends qualitative study “a strong toe-hold in actual moments of symbolic practice, and anchors [them in] the here and there of interactive living” (p. 101). This study, therefore, sought to *qualitatively* investigate how members within the *Browncoat* culture communicatively construct their fandom experience using elements of the original *Firefly* and *Serenity* narratives. This research focused on the discursive practices of *Browncoat* members as they appropriate narrative elements from the television series, one feature film, and comic book series in order to structure their culture, language, and identity. Two research questions will guide the qualitative investigation of the *Browncoats*:

RQ1: How do Browncoats communicatively construct fandom as a culture?

RQ2: What symbolic themes emerge in both Browncoat culture and the original

*Firefly* and *Serenity* texts?

## CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

These questions implicate several theoretical paradigms, but based on the social constructionist assumptions of this research, qualitative methods stand uniquely poised to examine fandom and account for the nuanced, dynamic, and socially negotiated nature of a communicatively constructed culture. Interpretive studies yield rich, descriptive results that are more representative of the members' interpretations. This study's focus on socially negotiated cultural elements lends to a fundamental dependence on interpretation (Anderson, 1996, p. 25). Since this research concerns fan culture, where meanings are socially constructed, contextually situated, and locally specific, data in the form of field notes, participant observation, and collection of online documents was contextualized with data gleaned from qualitative interviews and analysis of official texts. Qualitative research frequently employs a variety of methods that are meant to explicate the "situated form, content, and experience of social action...[where] actual talk, gesture, and so on are the raw materials of analysis" that stabilize across time and space in distributed organizations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2004, p. 18). The following chapter will proceed with an introduction and exploration of the research site that will establish important background information on Browncoat culture. This will be followed by a detailed description of the methods utilized in this research including: data collection procedures, semi-structured interviews online, data analysis and Grounded Theory, and thematic analysis. There will also be a brief conclusion.

## Case Study

In September of 2002, Fox aired 11 out-of-order episodes of a new space-western called *Firefly* from creator Joss Whedon. On paper, *Firefly* appeared to be another standard science fiction show like *Star Trek*, but even the casual viewer could notice drastic differences. It was science fiction and a western, the heroes were criminals, the dialogue was clever, things didn't work all the time, things were dirty, people got hurt, the ship ran out of gas, the characters swore in Chinese, and there were space hookers. Despite all of its uniqueness and obvious sub-textual depth, the show was cancelled after a mere three months and off the air by December of 2002.

Fans of the show, who had already become an active online community, did not take this defeat lying down. They organized grass-root campaigns to get the show back on the air. When this attempt inevitably failed, they successfully lobbied Fox to release the series on DVD. Fan supported sales of the DVD and continual moral support led Joss Whedon to pitch a feature film to Universal, which eventually came to fruition in 2005 via *Serenity*. This victory was widely celebrated by all, now self-proclaimed *Browncoats* and rewarded their *fannish* activities with tangible results. The story could have ended there; instead *Browncoat* culture continued to grow and now exists virtually across the globe.

### Research Site

Initial observational research of several related websites and communication with the Webmaster for *Browncoats.com* indicates that Browncoat culture exists through a connected network of message boards, chat forums, Facebook and Myspace group

listings, Yahoo groups, and a multitude of *Firefly* and *Serenity* websites. A simple search of “Browncoats” in Yahoo groups revealed 172 individual *Browncoat* group pages that span the entire globe, serving as hubs of participation. A similar search in Facebook resulted in over 500 group listings. Membership is rarely official in terms of monetary dues or registration; some groups require a request process. In general, membership into this community is very open but there are definite cultural boundaries that communicate *Browncoat* membership.

The simplest way to bear witness to *Browncoat* fandom is to watch the show and film and to buy an ‘official’ product. For “*Firefly* and *Serenity* fans, that means DVDs, soundtracks, visual companion books, novelizations, trading cards, action figures, and t-shirts authorized by and mass produced for 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox and Universal Pictures” (Cochran, 2008, p. 240). Other ways include supporting *The Signal* or *Firefly Talk*, two respective bi-weekly podcasts that continue to broadcast ‘Verse (a term both used for the fictional universe of *Firefly* and the *Browncoat* culture) related material. These shows include chats about specific episodes or the film, gaming tips, news about fan *shindigs* (discussed in the findings) like the *Browncoat Backup Bash* (December 2006), *Browncoat Cruise* (December 2007), and the annual *Browncoats Ball*, most recently held in October 2008 in Austin, Texas. Content also includes reviews of other forms of *Browncoat* fan activity like fan fiction, fan filk (music) albums, fan art, and fan-made films. One such film, *Done the Impossible: The Fans’ Tale of Firefly and Serenity* (2006) documents the meta-narrative of how the *Browncoats* helped bring about *Serenity*. For those *Browncoats* with spiritual proclivities, there is even a ‘*Firefly Prayer*.’ *Browncoats*

also engage in scholarly activities like writing conference papers, journal articles, book chapters, books, and at least one thesis.

In addition to the more imaginative and artistic endeavors, *Browncoats* actively support non-profit organizations and raise money for relief efforts like Hurricane Katrina and Freedom from Hunger (Cochran, 2008). They also earnestly support Whedon's charity of choice, Equality Now, which works to end violence and discrimination against women and girls around the world (Cochran, 2008). In 2007, the second annual international fundraiser campaign, Can't Stop the Serenity, raised \$114, 528.48 dollars (Cochran, 2008). The philanthropic achievements of the Browncoats suggest that their cultural expectations may require more than some other forms of fandom.

Among *Browncoats*, "intensity of devotion and level of activity distinguishes admirers from true *Browncoats*" (Cochran, 2008, p. 243). A "*Browncoat*...is much more of a fan activist...Instead of just saying, 'What a great show – oh well, too bad it was cancelled,' the *Browncoat* says, 'F#ck that! What can I do to keep Firefly going!?!' (po1s - pseudonym, qtd. in Browncoats.com as quoted in Cochran, 2008, p. 243). Research for this study will be conducted in this virtual arena on sites like *Browncoats.com* and *Fireflyfans.net*.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Previously reviewed literature and theory suggest that the above elements of online fandom can be understood through qualitative research. This study broadly employed a grounded theoretical approach with certain methodological elements similar to an Ethnography of Communication (EOC), including participant observation, in-depth

interviewing and artifact collection (Hymes, 1962; Philipsen, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1992; Philipsen & Carbaugh, 1986; Carbaugh, 1995; Carbaugh & Hastings, 1992; Lindlof & Taylor, 2004). This research further utilized the Cultural Approach to Organizations (CAO) theory as a theoretical frame and a grounded theory methodological approach (Geertz, 1973; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982; Griffin, 2009). Additionally, this thesis utilized textual analytical methods to interpret data collected from general observation, participant-observation, semi-structured interviewing, and cultural description to formulate a localized understanding of communicative practices, cultural narrative, media appropriation, legitimacy, and symbolic thematic meaning as they are patterned and practiced in the *Browncoat* culture. This methodology is consistent with an interpretative approach that is “inherently participatory because local meaning can be created only through action” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999a, p. 49). Since *Browncoat* culture is constituted through the communication of its members, an interpretive approach involving similar methods was appropriate.

#### Data Collection and Procedures

Methods of data collection included general and participatory observation recorded through field notes and subsequent journaling, semi-structured interviews, official document collection, electronic communication, and visual media. These particular methods of data collection were utilized because they are the primary methods utilized in qualitative research. The interpretive nature of *Browncoat* culture required continual elicitation of member checking and participant clarification during data collection. Data collected was continually compared between preliminary observations



and interpretations, both physical and electronically mediated, clarification from the members involved in an event or creation of observed data, and thematic analysis. In addition to observation and field-noting of online interactions, collection of *Browncoat* documents offered salient information that espouses purposes, rules, functions, history, and processes of this particular organization (Lindlof & Taylor, 2004). At the time of this research, the officially licensed texts that comprise the franchise thus far were: the complete *Firefly* television series, the *Serenity* feature film, the two *Serenity* three-comic miniseries; *Serenity Volume I: Those Left Behind* (2005) and *Serenity Volume II: Better Days* (2008), and the single-shot comic *Serenity: The Other Half* (2008); *Firefly: The Official Companion Volume I* (2006), *Firefly: The Official Companion Volume II* (2007), and *Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* (2005). Previous scholarly literature regarding *Firefly* was also collected and consulted for both the literature review and to gain a better understanding of the research site. These texts included, *Finding Serenity: Anti-Heroes, Lost Shepherds and Space Hookers in Joss Whedon's Firefly* (2005), and *Serenity Found: More Unauthorized Essays on Joss Whedon's Firefly Universe* (2007). Other fan-made documents that were publically posted on *Browncoats.com* and *Fireflyfans.net* were also cataloged and analyzed. While these documents by themselves may generally explain aspects of *Browncoat* culture, they lack an explication of reasoning and therefore were used in conjunction with other data to synthesize a rationalization (Lindlof & Taylor, 2004).

The collection process began with data reduction and interpretation and consisted primarily of the in-depth study of the key websites (*Fireflyfans.net* and *Browncoats.com*),

and other public documents regarding the Browncoats' history, practices, goals, language, and other seminal texts. This consisted of hours of *lurking* on public Browncoat message boards, forums, and chat rooms. The next phase of research, which actually occurred simultaneously with the previous phase, consisted of gathering information through participating in Browncoat message boards, forums, chat rooms, etc... and specific electronic communications with key members. My primary site of interaction for participant observation was the FIREFLY CHAT 0.1 Alpha chat room on *Fireflyfans.net*.

#### Gaining Access

Access to the virtual *Browncoat* community was very open. Most elements of *Browncoat* spaces like *Fireflyfans.net* exhibited no restrictions to access. However, some spaces had content that required the creation of a username, password, and profile, but there was not a formal review process, and upon completion of this step one was free to participate in all *Browncoat* activity. Some *Browncoat* Yahoo groups required registration and group acceptance before access could be granted, but this process was relatively easy as well. While the community in general was open, I purposefully announced my presence to the various site administrators and formally requested membership into these communities. Once this permission was achieved, I commenced with my research.

#### Participant Observation

All social science relies on observational research to some extent, but qualitative research in particular utilizes observation to enrich our understanding of the

communicative practices that inform and shape culture with an emphasis on the reception of messages and the resulting interpretations in the continuous flow of communication of the culture (Lindlof & Taylor, 2004). This emphasis highlights the relationship between symbolic practices and social structure by detailing the ways in which communication allows the culture to function contextually in-the-moment (Lindloff & Taylor, 2004). Through participant observation, I became immersed in the culture as much as possible and intimately linked to the research in-question.

Preliminary observation began in October of 2008. Initially, I was uncertain where to begin so I utilized a Google search to find as many websites that related to the search terms *Firefly* and *Serenity* as I could. The first inquiry resulted in over 800,000 hits. A further search of “Firefly” + “Serenity” + “Fans” narrowed the pool down to 519,000 hits. I began with two sites at the top of the page, *Fireflyfans.net* and *Browncoats.com*. I first visited *Browncoats.com* because it was an intriguing title and obviously related to the characters from the show. There, I first learned that most fans of *Firefly* called themselves Browncoats.

Observational research traditionally is conducted face-to-face (F2F) but can also be accomplished in mediated environments like the Internet (Curasi, 2001). The primary sites for observation for this study, *Fireflyfans.net* and *Browncoats.com*, contained the most attainable information amid all of the relevant content-related sites. *Fireflyfans.net* was what I would describe as an active community site where Browncoat members participated daily in the chat rooms and posted on the message board forums. There was an extensive section for posting fan fiction, and links to purchasing official and unofficial

franchise merchandise. Observational interactions in these locales primarily consisted of text-based communication with the occasional picture or emoticon. Thick description and meaningful interpretation can still be achieved, despite the absence of physical presence. Observational material in this context included chat room interaction between and with *Browncoat* members, public documents on *Browncoat* websites (Fireflyfans.net and Browncoats.com), message board posts, *Browncoat* member profiles, *Browncoat* fan fiction, *Browncoat* Yahoo Group pages, *Firefly* television series, and *Serenity* feature film. Due to the enormous amount of content available, the review of fan fiction was conducted as a brief survey in order to gain a general sense of what the culture was writing about. It would likely take years to catalog and analyze all of it. I simply sought a general understanding of what Browncoats were writing about as it related to aspects of their culture. These observations and subsequent field-noting will be greatly enhanced, clarified, and properly contextualized through interviewing.

#### Qualitative Interviews: Semi-Structured

As one of many qualitative data collection methods, interviewing provides the most direct, research focused interaction between researcher and participant (Kvale, 1996; Stroh, 2000; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Kazmer & Xie, 2008). I had 23 direct research participants in total and conducted 20 qualitative interviews with 3 separate Browncoat fandom story responses additionally submitted. I also had email communication with several other Browncoats who helped inform the direction of my research but did not wish to participate in the interviewing process. No in-person or face-to-face (F2F) interviews were conducted. Twenty interviews may seem relatively small but the data

gleaned was adequately substantive to address my research questions. A smaller sample size also allowed me to conduct a more focused analysis and engage with the material at a deeper level.

Participants were self-identified Browncoats. Several participants are members from Browncoats.com, most are members on *Fireflyfans.net* (fff.net), and several others heard about the research through a variety of re-postings of my original fff.net post on several Facebook and Yahoo group pages. Participation in the study was completely voluntary. Participants contacted me and had the option of being identified by their online screen names or being assigned an anonymous screen name (discussed more below).

Interviews in this study proceeded as semi-structured conversations (Spradley, 1979) with questions that were intended to guide participant discussion toward specific areas (Lindlof, 1995, p. 171), while leaving adequate room for participants to discuss unanticipated elements of their *Browncoat* experience (see Appendix). Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share their experiences and allow researchers to explore the meaning(s) participants give to ideas and terms (Mishler, 1986; Murray & Sixsmith, 1998; Kazmer & Xie, 2008). Semi-structured interviews “combine the flexibility of the unstructured, open-ended interview with the directionality and agenda of the survey instrument to produce focused, qualitative, textual data at the factor level” (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999, p.149).

Interview questions were intentionally created that primarily addressed the participant’s experiences and perspectives as they functioned within the research site (Lindlof & Taylor, 2004). In this case, the primary research site was *Fireflyfans.net*,

where the majority of my participants were active members. Additionally, the questions were purposefully designed to elicit personal, open-ended answers that tell the story of the Browncoat fandom experience as they reflect the communication of significant human experiences for identifying and understanding organization cultural symbols (Boje, 1991, 1995, 2001; Brown & McMillan, 1991; Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994; Meyer, 1995). The subsequent answers were later analyzed (discussed below). Depth of understanding was achieved by asking the questions, listening to responses, then asking follow-up questions to probe issues and clarify responses (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The questions in these interviews were pre-formulated, but the answers were open-ended and continually expanded further (see Appendix). Probing questions or “probes” were also employed to encourage further explication. Probes are “neutral question[s] that [encourage] the interviewee to think more deeply, clearly, or broadly about an issue” (Schensul et al., 1999, p.126). While the underlying intention of these questions was to elicit open-ended narratives, this interview is not considered a traditional narrative interview because the questions are much more formalized (Lindloff & Taylor, 2004).

The interviews were all conducted through computer-mediated communication (CMC); 12 were conducted via instant messenger (IM) services through Yahoo Instant Messenger, MSN Instant Messenger, and Facebook Instant Messenger, 5 were conducted through email, 1 interview was conducted over the telephone, and 2 participants responded to the in interview questions in story format via email. Total time interviewing via instant messenger and over the phone was 27 hours and 7 minutes with each interview averaging 2 hours and 25 minutes. Interviews done through IM and email were

electronically transcribed. The one interview conducted over the phone was audio-recorded and transcribed manually. CMC interviewing exhibits some important differences from traditional F2F interviewing that should be noted.

### Computer-Mediated Interviewing

In mediated interviews, the interviewer and participant generally lack a physical context because they are not co-located (Murray & Sixsmith, 1998). Mediated interviewing can be more convenient for both parties and allows both parties to operate from a familiar and safe environment (Mann & Stewart, 2002). However, the interviewer has less control over and/or less awareness of the setting of the participant (Opdenakker, 2006). Internet interviews can be asynchronous or synchronous, public or semi-private (Mann & Stewart 2002). Internet interviews are appropriate for research of online activities and may be preferred by both the researcher and participant (Young, Persichitte, & Tharp, 1998). Some scholars even argue that Internet interviews may preserve more 'contextual naturalness' than F2F interviews (Mann & Stewart, 2002, p. 604). Contextual naturalness is language usage as it occurs in the everyday interactions of the participants (Shuy, 2002, p. 541). Preservation of naturalness is particularly vital in qualitative research and therefore interviews should occur in the same setting in which participants normally engage in that activity. For instance, most Browncoat participants in this study reported feeling more comfortable conducting the interviews through such means opposed to F2F or over the phone. Specific applications carry respective advantages and disadvantages.

### Email

Email has long been used for qualitative interviewing and brings specific features to the research process (Murray & Sixsmith, 1998; Young et al., 1998; Meho, 2006). Email interviewing is asynchronous, semi-private (Mann & Stewart, 2002), and involves multiple email exchanges between the interviewer and interviewee over an extended period of time. Email interviews are most successful when both parties are comfortable communicating via email (Young et al., 1998). The asynchronous nature of email insulates it from most scheduling issues because researchers can send interview questions and participants can return their answers when convenient. Additionally, while email lacks the non-verbal visual cues (facial expression, body language, etc...) of F2F interviews, it does provide some cues not available in F2F, such as spelling, using ALL CAPS, or emoticons (Curasi, 2001). Another more popular and synchronous form of CMC used for qualitative interviewing is instant messaging (IM).

### Instant Messaging

Instant messaging has some distinctive features that influence the interview process (Luders, 2004; Opdenakker, 2006; Steiger & Goritz, 2006). For example, IM is synchronous, semi-private, and allows for simultaneous textual transcription. The extemporaneous nature of IM interviews better resembles the conversational nature of F2F communication and accordingly, probes can be more easily employed (Luders, 2004). IM allows individuals to both carefully craft responses like in an asynchronous channel and respond in real-time, more closely reminiscent of F2F communication. Using



IM or email may mean that ‘disturbing background noises’ are not recorded as part of the data (Opdenakker, 2006); however, they can still affect the participant or interviewer.

An attractive feature of online interviewing is its self-transcribing nature (Foster, 1994; Herring, 1996; Curasi, 2001; Mann & Stewart, 2002; Meho, 2006). This automatic transcription feature of both email and IM interviewing also allows the interaction to be dually-documented on the researcher and interviewee’s computers. As such, conducting interviews via email or IM removes much of the burden associated with labor-intensive transcriptions. This benefit, however, can come at the expense of the participant as online interviewing often takes longer than a face-to-face interview (Markham, 1998; Opdenakker, 2006). Another popular method of mediated interviewing is conducted via the telephone.

### Telephone

The telephone can also be effectively utilized for semi-structured interviewing. The telephone is a synchronous medium that can mimic the natural back-and-forth of F2F conversation if both parties are comfortable. Telephone communication may also foster rapport building more quickly and help individuals feel more strongly connected. Tone and inflection cues can also be read. In research involving cultures that primarily communicate via email or IM, telephone interviews may not preserve contextual naturalness (Shuy, 2002; Mann & Stewart, 2002). Unlike email or IM interviews, which feature automatic textual recording, telephone interviews require manual transcription or specialized transcription equipment or software to convert the audio into text (Shuy,

2002). Face-to-face interviews are another tried and true method employed in qualitative research but did not occur in this research.

### The Interview Process

Participants were emailed instructions with the informed consent form attached. Participants were instructed to read through the document thoroughly before digitally initiating it. Individuals were also asked to specify whether or not they wished to be identified by their screen name, real name, or email address handle. Some individuals consented to the use of their screen name, real name, or email address handle; many wished to remain anonymous. In the interest of clarity, I later decided to assign a Browncoat code name to all participants that included the title BC and a sequential number (example: BC01) chosen at random. Participants replied back to the email with the initialed document attached and the words “I consent” in the email subject line. Once consent was obtained formally, I scheduled an interview date and time and followed through with it.

Interviews commenced with an attempt to casually build rapport with small talk, both related and unrelated to *Firefly* and *Serenity*, before leading into the first question: “When did you first become a fan of the show/movie?” The interview continued as a conversation where both probing questions and participant answers were used to direct topic discussions. Once I felt that the discussion had run its course and/or the interviewee had nothing more to inform, the interview ended. After the interview, I immediately saved the textual conversation in a Microsoft Word document and transcribed, in the case of the email or IM interviews, any field-notes that were taken about the experience. Data

obtained from the phone interview was manually transcribed. Much care was taken during transcription in preparation for analysis.

### **Data Analysis Methods: Grounded Theory**

According to Bernard and Ryan (1998), grounded theory or the constant-comparative method can be explicated as a methodological approach that “(1) brings the researcher close to informants’ experiences; (2) provides a rigorous and detailed method for identifying categories and concepts that emerge from text; and (3) helps the researcher link the concepts into substantive and formal theories” (pp. 607-608). Specific analytical techniques for this study included the collection of various *Browncoat* documents, co-production of texts through transcripts of interviews and field notes, and analysis of these texts in order to identify themes or categories, and the subsequent linking of said themes to develop an interpretive structure. This grounded theoretical method served as the analytical framework for this study of *Browncoat* fandom (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Lindlof & Taylor, 2004).

Data analysis in this study commenced with repeated critical readings of the data. After reading the transcripts and field notes and gaining a holistic sense of the data, I initiated manual coding of the transcripts and field notes. This continued until distinct patterns emerged inductively from particular data sets. After patterns were discovered, keywords and phrases were analyzed and explored within relevant clusters or structures. The placement of keywords and phrases within clusters enabled retention of patterns and, later, contextual themes. Once this was completed, themes were re-examined in terms of “frequency” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999b, p. 99) and emphasis. When certain

keywords within context were repeated frequently or used with great intensity, a representative one or two-word phrase (commonly referred to as a code) was employed. Repetition of keywords and phrases is a standard technique in qualitative data analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Ryan & Bernard, 2003), but intensity can also indicate meaningful significance. Data collected for this research was mostly textual which eased in the coding process. In line with grounded theory, I continually compared data occurrences, developed and refined concepts, developed categories, and identified themes throughout the procedure. I, therefore, grounded my interpretations, and the resulting theory, in the data (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). As a researcher, I made every attempt to maintain a high degree of rigor by grounding the analysis in the data, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the ground up. As such, the qualitative coding procedures should:

1. Build rather than test theory.
2. Provide researchers with analytic tools for handling masses of raw data.
3. Help analysts to consider alternative meanings of phenomena.
4. Be systematic and creative simultaneously.
5. Identify, develop, and relate the concepts that are the building blocks of theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998a, p. 13).

Qualitative analysis is generally conducted inductively; however, a grounded theoretic approach often involves moving between induction and deduction (Strauss & Corbin, 1998b). While grounded theory involves inductively deriving explanations and/or theory solely from data, this process is inherently interpretive and, therefore, researchers

are essentially “deducing what is going on based on data, our assumptions about the nature of life, the literature we carry in our heads, and the discussions that we have with colleagues” (pp. 136-137). Additionally, in this research, interpretative results were derived both inductively from analysis of texts obtained from *Browncoat* culture and deductively from analysis of and comparison to the original *Firefly* and *Serenity* texts that the *Browncoats* so revere.

A grounded theoretical method further enabled simultaneous implementation of a comparative thematic analysis (discussed below) because it allowed for identification of recurring patterns of symbolic meaning in *Browncoat* participants’ accounts and performances. The subsequent themes or categories were cross-referenced with established themes from *Firefly* and *Serenity*. I then utilized the “relationships among categories to build theoretical models, constantly checking the models against the data – particularly against negative cases” (Bernard & Ryan, 1998, p. 608). As highlighted previously, this qualitative study focused on *Browncoat* communication as it constitutes culture, by which a thematic analysis will assist in interpretation.

#### Comparative Thematic Analysis

Much of this research examined *Browncoat* fandom as it related to recurrent motifs from the narratives of *Firefly* and *Serenity*. This study utilized a broad thematic analysis of the original *Firefly* and *Serenity* narratives in order to compare them with those themes evident in the *Browncoat* cultural data. This more general methodology is much more interpretive and was better suited for analysis of this culture. This type of analysis was utilized to interpret data obtained in observational field notes, chat

transcripts, message board posts, member communication, and semi-structured interviews. The analysis proceeded with the ultimate goal of discovering meaningful themes both in the *Browncoats* cultural discourse and in the original *Firefly* and *Serenity* narratives.

Boyatzis (1998) describes thematic analysis as a systematic process of encoding qualitative information, involving the identification and interpretation of themes systematically. Identification of themes occurs through a “careful reading and re-reading of the data” (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258). Accordingly, a theme can be described as a main idea, a recurrent behavioral pattern and/or communication style embedded in “conversation topics, vocabulary, recurring activities, meanings, feelings, or folk sayings and proverbs” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 131). A theme can also be thought of as “a pattern in the information that at minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 161). This type of pattern recognition within the data lends to the emergence of themes that become the categories for analysis.

There are several approaches for conducting a qualitative thematic analysis. The two more prominent approaches are the data-driven inductive approach (Boyatzis, 1998) and the deductive application of an a priori template of codes (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). This analysis strived to adhere to an inductive approach that allowed for themes to emerge directly from the data using coding. According to the principles of inductive thematic analysis, as presented by Braun and Clarke (2006), coding of the data occurred “*without* trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame or the researcher’s analytic

preconceptions” (p. 83). Therefore, semantic “themes are identified within the explicit or surface meanings of the data, and the analyst is not looking for anything *beyond* what a participant has said or what has been written” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). Thus, identified codes and themes hopefully adhered closely to the original words used by the participants.

Analysis in this study followed the six phases of thematic analysis, as delineated by Braun and Clarke (2006) and outlined in Rhodes (2008). I also incorporated elements of Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, and Lund’s (2003) three stage procedure for inductive thematic analysis. It should be noted that this process was not necessarily linear but instead moved back and forth from one phase to the other. This procedure was a recursive or cyclical process, in which each stage informed the direction of the other (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Warren & Karner, 2005).

Phase 1, *familiarization with the data*, was achieved through my immersion in the data, including the recording of all thoughts and observations that come to mind after the first observation of each data set. This form of *description* (Tanner et al., 2003, p. 124) entailed the (a) typing up the hand-written interview notes, which acted as a review of the interview data; and (b) repeated readings of the interview data to gain a sense of each respondent’s experience as well as to begin the process of identifying themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). This stage of data analysis allowed me to reflect upon the study and my influence on the interpretative process. This further enabled me to make decisions regarding the future direction of research that linked the work to the remaining analysis.

After familiarization, Phase 2, *generating initial codes*, began with the

identification of “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in meaningful ways regarding the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998, as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.88). It could be argued that the identification of relevant and analyzable data actually began during the note-taking process, since I was already filtering the participant’s statements to record as direct quotes to be noted as summarized points, or to be excluded from the notes altogether. Coding involved the recognition of important moments and the subsequent encoding prior to a process of interpretation (Boyatzis, 1998). According to Boyatzis, a “good code” is one that captures the qualitative richness of the phenomenon (1998, p. 1). Inductive codes are directly constructed from the raw data and often carry labels that are close to the syntax and words of the original data. They may exhibit innovative categories that have not been discussed in literature before. This process also enabled the identification and development of themes in the next phases.

In Phase 3, *searching for themes*, the various codes were sorted and combined in ways that formed broader, overarching themes. This required me to make meaningful *connections* (Tanner et al., 2003, p. 124) between codes identified in Stage Two that were relevant to the research as a whole. In this study, for instance, the data was translated into a series of themes about *Browncoat* culture.

This process also consisted of a heavy dose of *organization* where all collected data was arranged in a meaningful manner (Tanner et al., 2003, p. 124). Codes were subsequently organized into a codebook in Microsoft Excel. Specifically, the interviews, individual salient passages, specific sentences, phrases, and sections of the field notes



were identified, coded, and entered into Excel spreadsheets. Microsoft Excel easily facilitated the rearrangement of codes into various groupings and provided a table representation of the themes and their respective codes and data.

In Phase 4, *reviewing themes*, I evaluated potential themes with an ultimate goal at final thematic selection and coherence. This occurred at two levels. Level One involved review at the level of the coded data extracts in order to assess whether data within the themes “cohere together meaningfully” and if there is “clear and identifiable distinctions between themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). Essentially, I verified if the themes work in relation to the coded samples. This process was aided with the generation of a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis where I visually conceptualized my themes. At Level Two, I considered the validity of the successful candidate themes from Level One in relation to the meaning of the entire data set. When the themes were coherent both at the individual level and with the entire data set, the research continued.

Phase 5, *defining and naming themes*, entailed the specific definition and refinement of each theme, the overall story of the analysis, and the development of clear and concise labels. Each name should identify the essence of what each theme means and its relation to all the other themes. I conducted and wrote out a detailed analysis for each individual theme. In addition, I identified the ‘story’ that each theme tells. It was also important to consider how an individual theme's 'story' fits into the broader overall ‘story’ that I was trying to tell about the data. As part of the refinement process, sub-themes were also identified. These themes-within-a-theme' were useful for providing structure to large and complex themes and for demonstrating the hierarchy of meaning within the

data. By the end of this phase, I was able to clearly define what my themes were and what they were not.

Phase 6, *producing the report*, involved the final analysis, synthesis, and write-up of the themes presented in this paper. The goal of this phase was to tell the complex story of the data in a convincing manner that demonstrates the merit and validity of the analysis. This final write-up provided “a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93). Great care was taken to ensure that this account included sufficient evidence for each theme in the form of enough data extracts to demonstrate the prevalence. The final product goes beyond mere description of the data, and forwards an argument.

In the next chapter, I explicate the findings of this research that support the arguments presented in the Discussion chapter. Specifically, I describe and explain the discursive practices that constitute Browncoat fandom as culture, particularly focusing on communication as the generative mechanism through which a cultural ideology is constructed.

### CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS

The goal of this section is to address my two research questions. Question one sought to discover *how Browncoats communicatively construct fandom as a culture* while the second question concerned *what symbolic themes emerge in both Browncoat culture and the original Firefly and Serenity narratives*. Data gathered for this study demonstrates how fandom, in this case Browncoat fandom, *is* a culture. Fandom is more than a hobby, more than the enjoyment. Fandom as culture is actively constituted in communicative practices that (re)construct symbolic themes from *Firefly* and *Serenity* as a guiding ideology. This chapter explicates the results by first focusing on the specific communicative means through which Browncoat culture is created. Second, I demonstrate which symbolic themes from *Firefly* and *Serenity* emerge as cultural ideology in the communication practices of the Browncoats. These major findings suggest that our current conceptions of fandom may be inadequate to properly account for the deeply symbolic lived practices of contemporary fans like the Browncoats. There seems to be a need for another name for the Browncoat experience: *fanactivism*. This claim will be teased out below and explicated more fully in the discussion section.

In addressing question one regarding culturally constructive communicative practices, communication is more than the transfer of information, but a constitutive force

which enables the culture to emerge symbolically. Several communicative forms emerged that constitutively demonstrate cultural membership but one practice stood out as more central: *discourse*.

### **Browncoat Discourse**

I chose the term Browncoat *discourse* because it is the active and generative communicative means through which this culture is created and sustained. *Discourse* has a variety of academic connotations, so I will describe what I mean by discourse here. Simply stated, Browncoat discourse includes *symbolic* communication between Browncoats via a multiplicity of mediums: synchronous communication in-person, over the telephone, via instant messenger services, in chat rooms and asynchronous communication via email, message board posts and responses on a multitude of websites. As stated in the literature review and exhibited in the findings, this study's focus on communicative discourse as symbolic in nature highlighted how people, brought together by an interest in a television show and a movie, actively worked to create and sustain their culture.

The content of Browncoat discourse is often dedicated to celebrating, discussing, and expanding the narratives of *Firefly*. However, many of these discursive practices are also relational-based, concerned with maintaining connections between individuals. Regardless of subject matter, discursive practices are the means through which a common ideology regarding what it means to be a Browncoat manifests. Discourse reinforces what are acceptable statements, ideas, and actions for a Browncoat. Browncoat *discourse* is the primary means by which this fandom culture is communicatively achieved. Below, I

explore three discursive practices that construct and reconstruct Browncoat culture:

*Conversation, Cultural Practices, and Co-Authoring.*

### Conversation

Discourse has become endemic of Browncoat fandom and is the constitutive force that creates, maintains, and changes the Browncoat culture. The most recognizable discursive practice is the primarily informal conversations that occur between Browncoat members. Broadly described, these conversations are communicative acts between two or more Browncoats and can be anything from short informal chats in a chat room or through an instant messenger service to scheduled debates over *Firefly* related content. These conversations take place in-person as well as through mediated technology. This form of discourse serves a multitude of purposes and contributes to the construction of a common culture through three symbolic attributes: *Commemoration and Continuation, Communal Connection, and Common Language.*

### Commemoration and Continuation

Browncoat fandom is anchored in a passionate celebratory appreciation for the official *Firefly* and *Serenity* narratives expressed communicatively between members. Fans often choose conversation as the medium for this expression and this communication starts to become Browncoat discourse when it is celebratory in nature. These practices are discursive because they actively and ritually symbolize an appreciation of *Firefly* beyond simple enjoyment. Browncoats are celebrating *Firefly* as an achievement and something to take note of and to continue. For Browncoats, this appreciation and the subsequent discursive expression of that admiration is the first step

toward something more meaningful. Individual reasons for their particular affinity varied but most members interviewed, like BC04, agreed that its eclectic blend of genre, style, and narrative made it appealing:

*Firefly* [sic] was something we hadn't seen in a while. It was also something very unique. A sci-fi (of which there are few) western (of which there are fewer) show with mysteries, quirky characters, comedy, action, romance, and a bit of everything, so that it never got boring. It had something for everyone.

These are not unexpected responses; in fact they are 'normal' for fans. It is this normalcy that is interesting in that fans sustain a show with a very short lifespan through their discursive celebrations. However, it is more than a commemoration of something that has completed.

Through discourse, Browncoats commemorate the brilliance of the show in their talk, but then cultivate new developments of the meanings conveyed in the show. As BC04 declared, "we still talk about something that finished around 4 years ago. Sure we get new comics or something every now and then, but essentially we talk about something that is over, and has been for a while." Despite the lack of new official content, many Browncoats like BC19 continue to discuss *Firefly* and *Serenity*. "When it was cancelled we were outraged, but instead of giving up and forgetting about the show, we continued to talk about it." Browncoat discourse can be observed when Browncoat conversations are dedicated to discussing and debating the merits of the *Firefly* canon, and continuing these merits in new story developments. Through this discourse, fans

become more than spectators, they construct a story line of the culture as much as they do the storylines of the show they so appreciate, but which now is off air.

This communication keeps the spirit of the show alive while providing an opportunity for group members to build cultural capital by demonstrating their knowledge of the canon. Discursive involvement distinguishes mere fans of *Firefly* from Browncoats and constitutes an important aspect of Browncoat fandom. As BC02 passionately exclaimed, “there are simply too many people [who] call themselves a fan. They may honestly like the show, but for me *a person is not truly a Browncoat unless he or she can talk about it* [sic] theoretically on many different levels.” Discourse through conversation permits Browncoats to collectively celebrate *Firefly* and was reported as one of the more common ways to signal cultural membership.

This form of identification is more than a tacit communicative process as it is also a generative mechanism through which participants *symbolically* and *practically* cultivate an idea. There is a qualitative difference between merely having an affinity for *Firefly* and ontologically being a Browncoat. While expression of appreciation by itself is not enough to constitute Browncoat fandom according to most members, it is an entry point for communal involvement that leads to a more meaningful connection with the Browncoat community. Below I demonstrate how this initial enthusiasm moves from commemoration to communion.

#### Conversation and Communal Connection

Commemorative discourse truly becomes culturally meaningful when it prompts some level of communal connection and activity. For many *Firefly* fans, conversing with

one another becomes a point of departure from solitary fandom toward more social Browncoat activity. BC01 asserted that “a fan appreciates [the] show but it's more solitary. [*Being a*] Browncoat means you're not just watching and enjoying [but] you're actively involved in promoting the show and connecting with others.” Conversation based on an initial desire to celebrate *Firefly* connects fans together in common interest and practice. In terms of Browncoat history, these discursive acts also formed the basis of the Browncoat community

The initial communication between fans regarding their shared interest was the beginning of the Browncoat culture. After fans like BC04 discovered the show, they “began to seek each other out, so that they could share their feelings, thoughts, stories and other *Firefly* [sic] related talk with others like them.” After cancellation, the discourse continued, bonding the group together. “I guess even after *Serenity* [sic], we feel that there is still so much left to think about, discuss, and enjoy all over again, so we continue to come together in various ways.” While *Firefly* was undoubtedly the starting point for Browncoat discourse, it was by no means the end.

Communal discourse often pertains to *Firefly* but also goes beyond discussion of the fictional narratives. BC07 recounted that “if you go into the *Firefly* [sic] chat room, most people aren't talking about firefly... people use it as a starting point,” This appears to be where the real sense of community is fostered and is sustained. BC10 reported that “I read many [message board] threads discussing *Firefly*, but didn't really participate. However, I am a frequent participator of 'community threads'.” As BC01 confirmed,



*Firefly* initially brought the fans together but something else keeps them together as a community:

The longest running threads on FFF are Imponderables (which discusses life issues both serious and silly), Browncoat Bar and Grill (which is more generic talk which you'd typically find in a neighborhood bar), [and] the photo thread (where people share pictures of events in their life).

These threads have been in use for more than 3 years and have little to do with *Firefly* directly. BC01 affirmed that within the community there is “more socialization not related to the ‘team’ [crew of *Serenity*]. We do talk about *Firefly*, but the majority of our conversations and interactions are more generic in nature and more just a group of friends talking.” This emphasis on the social aspect of Browncoat fandom was repeated in both interviews and in observed conversations between members. For many Browncoats, discourse appears to represent cultural membership more when it moves beyond *Firefly* toward relational connection. This explicit demonstration of interest into the personal lives of other members is representative of being a part of a larger community.

While *Firefly* was the common thread that formed this group, something else holds it together. While it eludes finite definition, it is undeniably communal in nature. BC19 describes this experience as an “overwhelming [...] feeling of belonging and understanding between people in the Browncoat groups.” The importance of this connection is evident in this response and the common practices that manifest the theme of *Belonging to a Crew* discussed below.

For many Browncoats, the community link has come to define their fandom. One fan, BC18, confirmed “that [the] social aspect has to be there or it's not really the same, you're not a ‘real’ [Browncoat].” This connectivity further distinguishes Browncoats from casual fans. BC10 indicated that ontologically being a Browncoat is “more than just liking the show, it's about being a part of the Browncoat community.” Post cancellation, the show survives not only in the *Firefly*-specific discourse but also in the communal connection that this continued discourse has enabled. The community is strengthened by one distinctive component of Browncoat discourse that provides members with a shared sense of identity and reinforces a common ideology.

#### Conversation and Common Language

Browncoats regularly use culturally specific vernacular that incorporates appropriated elements from *Firefly* and *Serenity*. Use of this language was observed in discourse between Browncoats and during qualitative interviewing. This common language is important as part of Browncoat discourse as it signals cultural membership, contributes to a shared sense of identity, and distinguishes Browncoats from other fans and non-fans. According to BC10 it is “all the 'language/customs/cultural' stuff that separates us from those mythical 'normal' people.” Like many other facets of *Firefly*, the language is an eclectic mix of diverse elements related to the official media texts.

According to Joss Whedon, the spoken language in *Firefly* and *Serenity* is a “patois a lot of Western in it...Shakespeare, some Pennsylvania Dutch from the turn of the century, some Irish, any colloquialism...a lot of Chinese...Elizabethan English...Victorian” (Bernstein, 2005, p.10). Browncoats often emulate elements of this

speech, primarily through Western slang, simple Chinese phrases and curses, and sarcasm. BC05 claimed that “I never used to use the word ‘folks’ to refer to people until I started watching Firefly...most Browncoats greet me with a ‘ni hao’ (Chinese for Hello).” Browncoats additionally draw from a *Firefly* lexicon that includes unique or outdated words with culturally specific meanings like “shiny” and “shindig.” BC09 clarified that these “firefly-isms” also offer variations of common English words “like using ‘Gorramn’ instead of Goddamn.” Many of these “firefly-isms” are commonly used in Browncoat discourse, evident during qualitative interviewing; see several examples in Figure 1.

Firefly-ism	Definition	Data Example	FF/Serenity Origin Example
‘Verse	Shortened form of “Universe.” Refers both to fictional universe that crew of Serenity inhabits, the entire Firefly/Serenity franchise, and non-fiction universe the Browncoats live in.	And while the fervor may have died down a bit, I think the Browncoat community will be an ever-expanding thing of its own...just like the ‘verse. <b>-Tenth Crewmember</b>	<b>RIVER</b> (smiling faintly) No power in the ‘verse can stop me.  <b>"War Stories" Episode</b>
“the black”	Phrase meaning the cold dark blackness of space. Browncoats also use it to refer to world in a general sense.	It’s good to stay engaged in the community. Otherwise you start to feel like you’re <b>all alone in the black</b> <b>-Tanya Morris2001</b>	<b>KAYLEE</b> I don’t know. People get awful lonely in the <b>black</b> .  <b>"SERENITY" Film</b>
“Shiny”	Word meaning good or great. Expression of something positive.	Stay <b>Shiny!</b>  <b>-Algir</b>	<b>JAYNE</b> (cocks his gun) <b>Shiny</b> . Let’s be bad guys.  <b>"SERENITY" film</b>

**Figure 1** Examples of Firefly-isms from *Firefly* Used in Browncoat Discourse

Language usage like this is one of the more obvious ways to identify Browncoat discourse. Perhaps less obvious is the discourse that takes the form of common, patterned cultural practices.

The above section directly addressed research question one and it was found that Browncoat fandom as culture is continually being constituted and reconstituted through specific discursive practices. In the next section, I tackle research question two by exploring what these discursive practices look like when patterned and how these patterns make manifest ideological themes. Discourse actively constitutes culture. However, it is when discourse becomes patterned that it aids researchers in recognizing ideological themes. In the case of Browncoats, these ideological themes paralleled themes from the *Firefly* and *Serenity* narratives. This parallel demonstrates the lived culture of *fanactivism* as members identify with meanings in a show and live these meanings as culture.

### **Discourse, Cultural Patterns, and Ideological Themes**

This study found that, as with any culture, Browncoats constitute their culture through a series of common, patterned practices. It was also discovered that cultural practices are also a form of discourse as they are meaningful communicative patterns. Such activity is generally very creative and incorporates narrative elements from *Firefly* and *Serenity*. These discursive practices enable the development and representation of distinctively meaningful, ideological attributes of their culture. Additionally, these repeated patterns of interaction allow the Browncoats to be a recognizable and seemingly stable cultural entity. While the above development of these practices relate to this project's first research question, further exploration of the *Firefly* related themes reflected

in these acts directly address research question two. Many patterned practices emerged that were deeply symbolic for Browncoats. However, this report will concentrate on only those most vivid and central patterns: *Philanthropy*, *Shindigs*, and *Co-Authoring*. These central patterns highlight central ideological themes evident in the narratives of *Firefly* and *Serenity*. These themes include: *Altruism and Self-Sacrifice*, *Belonging to a Crew*, *Family Loyalty*, *Still Flying*, and *Underdog Resistance*.

### Philanthropy

Philanthropy is a cultural practice through which the theme of *Altruistic Self-Sacrifice* theme (discussed below) and its sub-themes emerge. BC18 reported that Browncoats “use *Firefly* and *Serenity* [sic] for enjoyment but also for benefit, like the Can't Stop The Serenity screenings.” Can't Stop The Serenity (CSTS) is an annual charity film screening of *Serenity* that takes place in over 50 cities across the United States and worldwide. Proceeds from this event go to support Joss Whedon's favorite charity Equality Now and other Browncoat charities. Like “The Message” (discussed below), Browncoats seem more than ready to carry those who need help. BC23 vehemently offered that “we aren't here just to don dusters and blue gloves...we know we make a difference in things...whether it be getting a movie made, getting someone a house built, or donating to a charity.” Philanthropy as practice is a distinctive component that Browncoats feel distinguishes them from other fans. For members like BC07, the general altruistic spirit “makes [the Browncoats] seem like a group of people worth being a part of...A lot of fandoms are focused more internally.” Philanthropy is a mark of the Browncoats and a testament to the impact the *Firefly* text has had on their lives.

Events like Can't Stop the Serenity (CSTS) serve several purposes as they benefit charities, provide public exposure to the 'Verse, and support the creators of show. BC01 explains:

Joss and the actors are all directly involved with specific charities and, as I mentioned, we support them with whatever they do...Adam Baldwin has a charity connection to a support for families of law enforcement and the military Nathan Fillion is active with Kids Need to Read. Gina does breast cancer awareness, Joss is Equality Now and so on.

Philanthropy as a cultural practice symbolizes not only a sense of altruism and communal connection (as discussed above) but also *Firefly's* inspiration for these endeavors.

Philanthropy is more than just the act of giving, it is a symbolic act of *fanactivism*. The general philanthropic attitude of Browncoats is related to producer interest, but is more symbolic in that it represents a thematic ideal inspired from *Firefly*. The primary motivation for doing good works is the engrained cultural ideology that has emerged from *Firefly's* underlying messages.

Participants like BC10 consistently communicated a similar selfless regard for improving the welfare of others as an important element of Browncoat fandom. This shared attitude further indicates that Browncoat fandom is about something more than an affinity for *Firefly*. Browncoats "have often been pegged as generous, open-hearted people with good taste, and I have to say I agree with this label. The Browncoats that I've met have proved themselves to be kind individuals, always ready to help out."

Browncoats go out of their way to help others and are very willing to help one of their own.

BC23 was a recipient of the Browncoat charitable spirit when he recently fell on hard times. His story has become a cultural narrative that was recounted by other Browncoats as an example of the altruistic nature of the community.

I recently became unemployed again (state government legislated my job away), going through a divorce, and becoming the lone parent of my 2 kids [...] I burned through my savings, unable to find a job, and was on the verge of being evicted, losing my car, everything [...] So I swallowed my pride and begged my friends and family for help [...] I somehow copied Haken, the fff.net administrator, on my email plea [...] He asked me if it was okay to ask Browncoats to help, and I said 'Sure, at this point, I've got nothing, so any help is good help'.

The Browncoat community overwhelmingly responded with moral and financial support.

A lot of people were there morally, to remind me I wasn't a failure [...] But the Browncoats who sent money, some anonymous others not so much...all said the same thing...no need to payback, pay it forward when you are on your feet for the next Browncoat in need.

This story poignantly exemplifies the strong sense of altruism among fan Browncoats and demonstrates that in the truest sense of altruism most Browncoats seek little acknowledgement. BC05 contended that "most all of the Browncoats I know are happy to work behind the scenes doing good and getting little recognition for it." As BC23 confirmed, "I believe that's the underlying motivation in everything we as Browncoats

do. Giving and supporting without the expectation of the same, on any and every level.” The Browncoats support for one another is less surprising than their willingness to help those outside their culture. This is evident in the numerous philanthropic endeavors undertaken by members of this community, such as CSTS. This ideological belief has become a distinctively lived practice for the Browncoats.

#### Philanthropy as Symbolic of Altruism and Self-Sacrifice

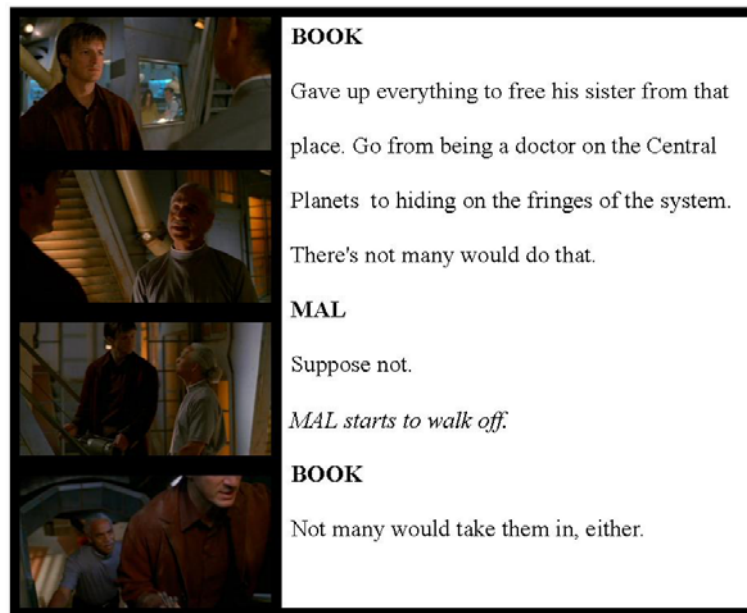
Most fan cultures borrow elements of media texts to develop their fandom. Examples include borrowing characters and settings from an original narrative like *Firefly* to create an online identity and profile, fan fiction, or costume that emulates a favorite character. While these practices certainly have a place in Browncoat culture, the more prominent features of the Browncoat experience appear to be appropriations of a different kind. Most Browncoats like BC03 “identify with the [symbolic] themes” that emerge in the original *Firefly* and *Serenity* narratives. These themes are incorporated into Browncoat culture and constitute a significant component of its ideology. *Altruism* and *self-sacrifice* were central ideological assumptions manifested in the practice of philanthropy.

For a television series with criminals as the main protagonists, there is a surprising abundance of altruistic sub-themes and metaphors. Codes representing altruistic self-sacrifice were present in 11 of the 14 *Firefly* episodes and in one feature film *Serenity*. The crew of *Serenity* is undoubtedly out to make a profit on their clandestine capers, but regularly demonstrates a selfless nature toward one another and outsiders that conflicts with this goal. Many such instances emerged during a thematic



analysis of the *Firefly* and *Serenity* narratives, however only three specific scenes will be referenced here.

Self-sacrifice is evident in the relational dynamic between characters of Dr. Simon Tam and his sister River. The Tam's come from a wealthy prominent family on one of the central planets. In the pilot, we learn that Simon rescued his sister from an Alliance ran "school," where she was being experimented on, at the cost of his fortune, career, parental ties, and at risk to his own life. This is established several times in the dialogue of multiple episodes and in the film by various characters, including the following scene (Figure 2).

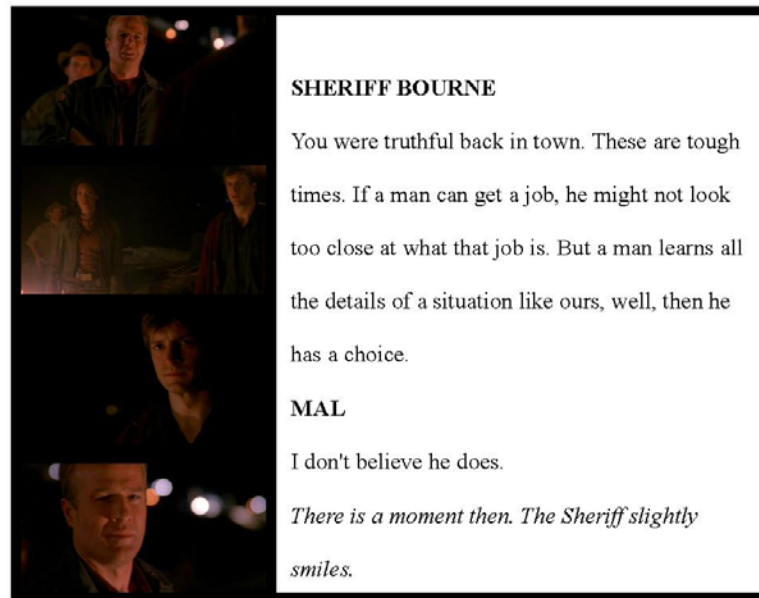


**Figure 2** Scene from "Trainjob" Episode Exemplifying Self-Sacrifice

Throughout the series, feature film, and comics, *Serenity*'s crew ends up similarly sacrificing for their newly adopted crew members. The next example of altruism in

*Firefly* occurs in the episode “Trainjob” and demonstrates an inherent component of altruism; doing what’s right

The crew of *Serenity* is hired to rob a train by a ruthless gangster capitalist named Niska. The crew succeeds in their mission despite some complications and nearly getting caught thanks to some “thrilling heroics.” Through the course of their near entrapment, they learn from the local sheriff that the “goods” they stole were some well-needed medicine for members of the local community who suffer from degenerative affliction. After escaping and getting back to the ship, Captain Reynolds unexpectedly orders the crew to unload the cargo so they can return it. Several of the crew question Mal’s decision, reminding him of Niska’s nasty reputation, to which he replies, “There's others need this more” (“Train Job”). Predictably, at the same moment, some of Niska’s henchmen come to inquire about missing the agreed upon rendezvous. Captain Reynolds attempts to explain and give their payment back but an inevitable conflict ensues. The crew eventually wins the melee and the captain and Zoe sets off to return the goods.



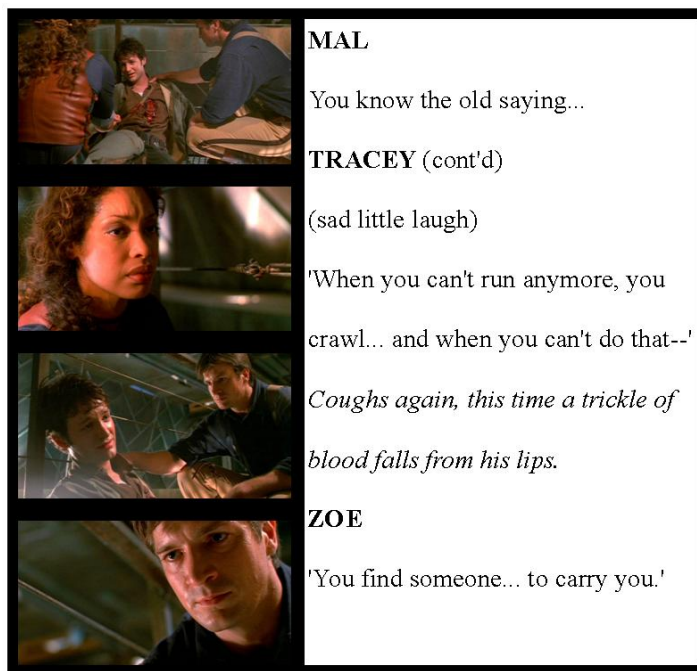
**Figure 3** Scene from “Trainjob” Exemplifying “doing what’s right”

In this instance, the crew risks profit and their lives to do what’s right by some disadvantaged folks. Several Browncoats referenced this scene as inspiring and affirming for their own altruistic ventures. The final example of the emergent symbolic theme of altruism in *Firefly* is one that surfaced multiple times during qualitative interviewing and perhaps is the most explicit as it has become a Browncoat philosophy emerged from the episode known as *The Message*.

In the episode, “The Message,” which is appropriately titled as it appears to have sent a meaningful message to Browncoats, Captain Reynolds and Zoe received an unexpected package from an unknown sender. It turns out to be a coffin of sorts containing the body of their old friend Tracey who served under them in the Unification War. The package also contains a recorded message asking for help. Apparently, Tracey had fallen in with some bad people and feared that he might lose his life. As it turns out,

Tracey was in-fact just in a medically induced death-like state as part of a plan to smuggle synthetic organs. After double-crossing his original employers for better ones, he faked his own death, hoping to elude his pursuers.

The dirty Alliance marshal, who is hunting Tracey, catches up with Serenity, forcing a confrontation, splitting loyalties, and further revealing Tracey's true selfish nature. Tracey ends up mortally wounded and is forced to genuinely ask for help (Figure 4).



**Figure 4** Scene from “The Message” Including Dialogue of Cultural Credo

They end up granting his dying request and finishing the original mission to take his body back home. The final scene is a poetic funeral on a snow covered world.

After watching this episode, Browncoats appropriated a certain piece of “The Message” and philosophically turned into a cultural credo. BC01 explained:

Well one of the big quotes that gets passed around is, ‘when you can't walk you crawl and when you can't do that you find someone to carry you.’ I think in any group of good people you'll find the instinct to help others. Browncoats are just the same :)

This particular quotation has become a meaningful part of Browncoat fandom. BC05 similarly offered that, “you've probably heard the quote from the *Firefly* [sic] [episode] ‘The Message’ [...] I think that rings true with a lot of Browncoats.” The sense of altruism that this particular *message* and many others gleaned from the *Firefly* and *Serenity* have fostered, distinguishes this particular fan culture from others.

The data above illustrates how patterns of practice, such as philanthropy, make manifest ideological meanings about the right way to be a Browncoat. In particular, to be a Browncoat, one engages in philanthropy because it represents altruism and self-sacrifice. By buying into these meanings, they not only appreciate or celebrate the show, they live as cultural members and demonstrate this membership by regularly practicing philanthropy. Membership for Browncoats is also demonstrated by other patterns of practice, what participants refer to as *being a part of the crew*; hosting or attending *Shindigs*.

### Shindigs

*Shindig* is a term used to describe a social gathering of co-located *Firefly* fans or Browncoats. The actual term *Shindig* is a name of one of the *Firefly* episodes where part of the fictional crew attends a high culture party. Browncoats appropriated this word and utilize it to describe their social get-togethers. Many *shindigs* appear to be very informal,

small, parties of local Browncoat sub-groups. These *shindigs* frequently take the form of familial-like dinners. They also commonly appear as *Firefly* and *Serenity* viewing parties, game nights, Super Bowl celebrations, and other kinds of soiree. BC01 recounted that “I was actually a member of the Utah Browncoats on *Yahoo* and we had regular get-togethers. We did watch *Firefly* [...] some, but mostly we just met up and went to the movies and dinner, or out to the zoo, or just general large group activities.” While informal in terms of ambiance and agenda, these gatherings do take on a regularity that approaches ritual.

BC20 participates “primarily with the NC Browncoats (North Carolina). They meet on the first and third Mondays for dinner.” Another interviewee, BC05, similarly noted “we get together every month for a *shindig* [sic].” Additionally there are more “formal” Browncoat *shindigs* that are intended for any and all Browncoats. The most ritualized of these appears to be the annual *Browncoat Ball*, which attempts to emulate many elements of the episode “Shindig” and rotates host city and host Browncoat crew. There has also been the *Browncoat Cruise* and *Browncoat Disneyland Day*. Whether informal familial gatherings or highly ritualized annual events, *shindigs* are an important social component of this fandom culture. These get-togethers help foster a sense of community and reinforce the symbolic theme of *Belonging to a Crew*.

#### Shindigs as Symbolic of Belonging to a Crew

*Belonging to a crew* is both a prominent theme in the *Firefly* narratives and a cultural metaphor used by Browncoats to express shared feelings of solidarity, family, and loyalty. As BC04 explained, “I suppose the notion of a 'crew sticking together' is

similar between *Firefly/Serenity* [sic] and the Browncoat community.” To both the fictional Browncoats and the fan Browncoats, “crew” is predominately a metaphor for family and as Beatlesfan noted, *shindigs* are “about making family” and that belonging to a particular crew like the Atlanta Browncoats is “like having twenty brothers and sisters who all like the same things I do.” Browncoats consistently reported feeling part of a larger family of *Firefly* fans. BC05 stated that “I’ve heard a saying that a Browncoat is just family you haven’t met yet. So far I’ve found that to be very true.” *Shindigs* foster familial socialization and are both instrumental in maintaining a sense of belonging and building on it.

Recruitment or “conversion” of new Browncoats is one of the most prominent patterns of practice related to *belonging to a crew* that emerged during this research. As BC01 contends, “we all consider it just part of being a Browncoat.” Most members interviewed were recruited or “converted” to join the ranks of the Independents and expressed their efforts to do the same. This cultural practice appears to have been influenced by the *familial* themes from *Firefly* as many members like BC23 think of recruitment more as “family-building.” Inviting potential members to *Shindigs* was reported as a common recruitment strategy that values the social aspect of their fandom and the underlying theme of *Belonging to a Crew*. BC03 volunteered that “I’ve hosted ‘*Firefly* parties’ [sic] to introduce friends to the show.” *Shindigs* then are a means to adopt new family members. BC21 also reported that “BCs (at least those I know) want everyone to join in” and “we welcome all fellow travelers.” The welcome spirit of Browncoats is consistent with the strong sense of *Family* and *Belonging to a Crew*.

Whether conceptualized as adoption or recruitment, *shindigs* serve both instrumental and symbolic purposes within the culture.

*Shindigs*, as patterns of practice foster a sense of connection and family, indentifies cultural membership, and construct and reconstruct different ideological themes important for Browncoat culture. In particular, *shindigs* exemplify and reconstruct an ideological assumption that you are a loyal part of a family. As discussed above, members are altruistic and self-sacrificing for those outside the culture. Inside the culture, they are also loyal to one another.

#### Shindigs as Symbolic of Family Loyalty

Browncoats have created and sustained a bond not unlike that of family that is reflective of a motif in the *Firefly* narratives.

Family. It's what truly drives the stories of *Firefly* [sic] and connects the disparate crew of *Serenity*. While Captain Mal and his crew may not be blood, they have evolved into their own kind of kin that squabbles, loves and protects just like any other. (Bernstein, 2006, p. 132).

There is a plethora of familial imagery in the narratives of *Firefly* and *Serenity*. Codes representing family were present in all 14 episodes of *Firefly* and in the *Serenity* movie. Common images include communal dinners around a big table, all crew meetings, frequent disagreements, laughter, tears, games, and love. To some Browncoats like BC07, “the strong sense of family in that show is an amazing source of hope.” The crew itself is a complete image of a family with an actual brother and sister in Simon and River, a married couple in Zoe and Wash, a grandfather-like figure in Sheppard Book, a

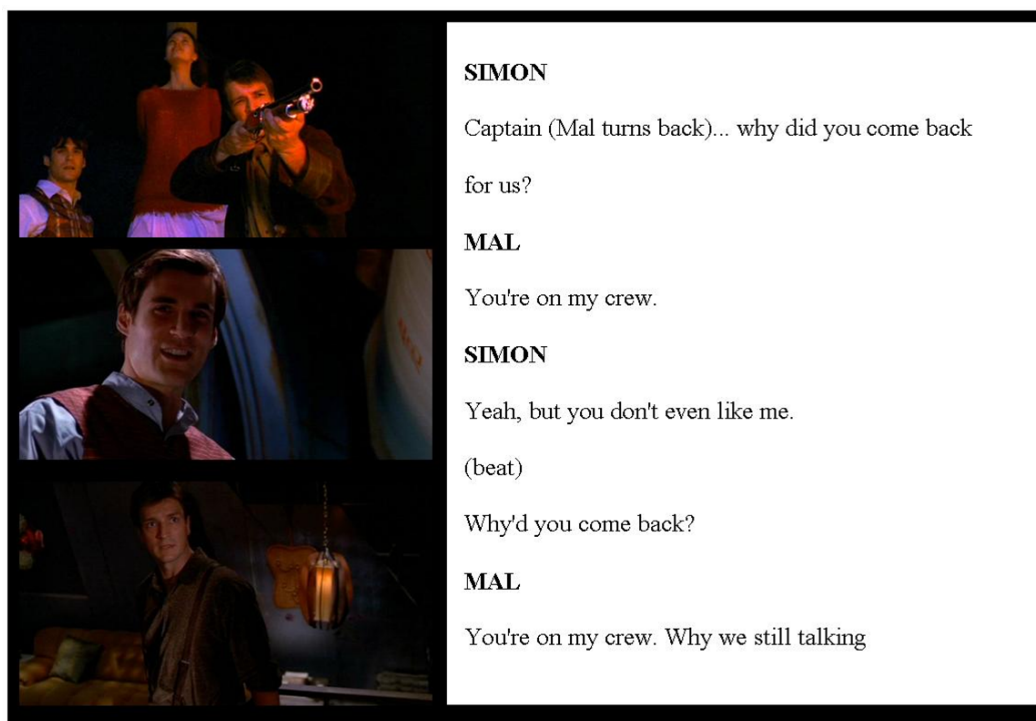


testosterone driven older brother in Jayne, a beloved little sister in Kaylee, a wise and tender mother in Inara, a flawed yet stoic father figure in Mal, and home in Serenity.

Whedon uses this “crew” to represent the concept of the chosen family and this has taken on symbolic meaning within the Browncoat culture.

*Firefly* was the common cause that united individual fans, first into friends, and then into a viable community. Over time, the bonds forged became stronger and those friendships became something more. As BC01 asserts, “I think we initially started out connected through our mutual interest in the show, but over time we have built a real connection as a family.” Like the fictional crew, the fan Browncoats are an adoptive family. Whedon’s work consistently features themes of the chosen family and how its bonds can be stronger than those forged by blood relation. BC05 recounted “I know there are some folks in our group who find the Browncoat family to be more accepting and welcoming than their own biological family.” This familial connection proved strong enough to keep the culture going years after *Firefly*’s unceremonious end. The familial aspect of *Belonging to a Crew* is one of the symbolic thematic elements from *Firefly* that constitutes Browncoat fandom and is manifested in several cultural practices that reinforce this ideological belief, in particular during *Shindigs*.

The strength of any crew depends on the loyalty its members have to their leader and vice versa. Serenity’s leader, for better or worse, is Captain Malcolm Reynolds (Mal), a “world-weary man with an unshakeable love and loyalty for his adopted family” (DiLullo, 2009, p. 26). Mal is extremely protective of his crew and his loyalty even extends to those he dislikes (Figure 5).



**Figure 5** Scene from “Safe” Episode Exemplifying *Belonging to a Crew*

His crew is in turn fiercely loyal to him and each other with a few exceptions. In “War Stories,” Niska takes his revenge for taking a job and not completing it (“Trainjob”) by capturing and torturing Mal and Wash who have been in conflict over Mal and Zoe’s war buddy bond. The crew is able to successfully pay off Niska for the return of Wash and one of Mal’s ears. Zoe and Wash cannot stand the idea of leaving the captain behind and despite being outmanned and outgunned, they and the rest of crew takes up arms to rescue him (Figure 6).



**Figure 6 Scene from “War Stories” Episode Exemplifying “No-Man-Left-Behind”**

The underlying message of loyalty to one’s crew embedded in this quote resonated with members of the Browncoat community like BC23. “Being a Browncoat is [...] about being more than ‘just a fan’. It’s the ‘no-man-left-behind’ mentality, where you are there for others, with the knowledge they feel the same way.” *Firefly* itself has become the cause that Browncoats are devoted too in spite of its premature cancellation.

BC03 “cannot believe how loyal its followers are and how the fandom continues to grow and thrive.” Loyalty to the franchise was reported numerous times as one of the elements that constituted Browncoat fandom. This loyalty is observable in events like CSTS that draw attention to *Firefly* in the hopes of recruiting new fans. Their loyalty is also reason why those narratives have found an afterlife at all. According to BC09, being a Browncoat:

Means standing by its (*Firefly*) side, no matter what...in the case of *Firefly*, it was the fans that kept it alive...the fans gave it a chance for a movie...it's hard to

explain what a fan really is but the most important part is to support it through thick and thin.

The Browncoat community's dedication to *Firefly* is reminiscent of the loyalty Malcolm Reynolds shows for his crew. BC18 claimed that "no matter what his crew does, he'll back them up because they're his crew. That's pretty much my philosophy on family." This example indicates that being part of a "crew" also serves as a metaphor for belonging to a family.

As demonstrated above, patterned practices, like *shindigs*, serve instrumental social purposes while enabling and reinforcing more symbolic Browncoat meanings. Specifically, to be a Browncoat one attends *shindigs* that are ultimately representative of belonging to a crew. Engagement in social practices demonstrates cultural membership, solidarity, and a loyalty to this adopted family. These practices also effectively grant *Firefly* an unlikely afterlife in the hearts and minds of Browncoat members. Illustrated below are more patterned practices which I have named *Co-Authoring*, which explicate the emergent ideological themes of *continuation of the story* and *still flying*. Additionally, together with the discursive practices discussed above, the Browncoats represent and reinforce the *Ideology of the Underdog*.

### Co-Authoring

Co-authoring in the Browncoat culture takes place on two different planes. The first is the literal collective continuance of the original *Firefly* and *Serenity* narratives through standard, *fannish*, textual engagement practices. Browncoats collectively keep the original texts of *Firefly* alive through their re-watching, re-reading, re-telling, and

engagement in *fan fiction*. A feature of most fandom communities, fan fiction is the fan-authored fictional stories based on characters, plots, or settings from narratives of the original creator. For example, BC10 reported “Browncoats tell all kinds of stories, but most involve either the cast of the crew of *Serenity*, or different characters in the Browncoat universe.” Fan fiction is generally considered “unauthorized” by the original work's owner, creator, or publisher, is self-published, and usually intended for the eyes of other fans. The majority of fictional ‘Verse expansion takes traditional story form but as BC22 “can be anything from a psychological profile of a character at a particular point to good old action adventure.” This process is often personal but also collective.

Fan-authored texts are generally posted publically, in respective cultural spaces, and are read and either accepted or rejected as worthy additions to the “Sereniverse.” A frequent participator in this practice, BC07 expounded that “you post it publicly and you get reviews, so you know someone is reading” Fan readers analyze these texts and offer criticism described here by BC18:

I did see where someone was sort of outlining an idea they had. Other Browncoats were very helpful and kind with their input. They pointed out things that might be problems, but they also tried to see how it could be changed just a little bit to keep it in without contradicting the established canon.

Fan authors take criticism and edit their works accordingly to conform to cultural ideology. Inherent in these discourses are ideological beliefs that reinforce or challenge what Browncoat fandom entails. This form of communal discourse additionally serves as a mechanism for expansion of the fictional ‘Verse through *continuation of the story*,

addressing unanswered questions and filling in gaps based on hints producers left during the television series, film, or comics.

### Co-Authoring as Symbolic of Continuance

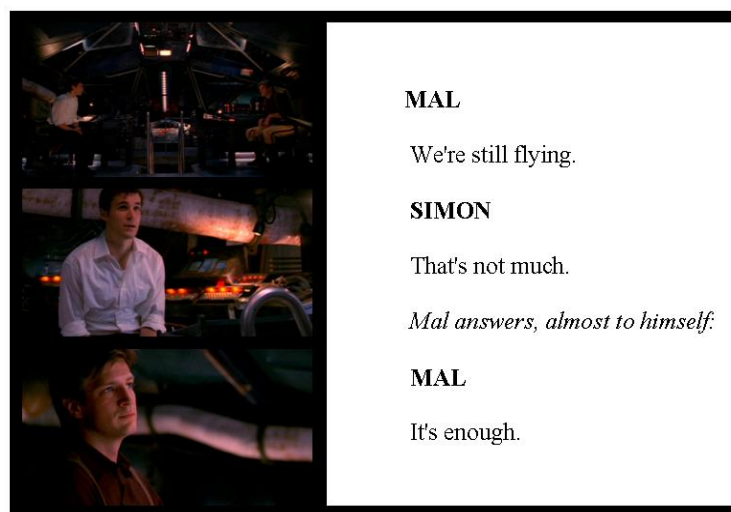
Most Browncoats were disappointed to say the least after *Firefly*'s cancellation and wanted the story to continue. Almost immediately, fans took matters into their own hands. According to study participants like BC07, "a lot of people continue their Firefly journey through fanfic, either reading or writing." BC09 added that "the first and foremost thing fan writers write about is what happens after the episode 'Objects in Space' [...] they tend to make their own sequel of the series or the movie even." BC04 testified that "continuation of *Firefly* is a common theme, often with new characters, although I imagine sequels/prequels about certain characters are very popular too." This creative discourse has allowed the story to persist long after its official cancellation and helped *Firefly* and *Serenity* achieve a life after death of sorts. BC06 explained that "being that they (storylines) were only in their beginning [opened] hundreds of various avenues for fan fictions." *Firefly*'s short lifespan left the door open for this fan activity as Browncoats felt the 'Verse was unfinished.

*Firefly*'s limited canon left many unanswered questions and inspired creative continuance through fiction. BC21 stated that "with only 14 episodes, Joss didn't have time to tell us all that he had in mind...so we fill in the blanks." According to BC09, there were "so many questions unanswered...so many black holes and loopholes left...too much was left behind so the fans took matters into their own hands, to revive it themselves...in that way, fan fiction is an enormous help." With no official word on

whether or not there will be any new significant content, Browncoats create their own. The majority of Browncoats demonstrate their fandom through the patterned practice of co-authoring fan fiction. All participants, however, interpret co-authoring as symbolic of *keeping Firefly alive* through *continuance* of both the adventures of the crew and the spirit of the show. As such, co-authoring manifests on a second more figurative plane.

#### Co-Authoring as Symbolic of Keeping *Firefly* Alive

Co-authoring occurs in the continued existence of the Browncoats as a culture through the various discursive practices like language usage explained previously. As discussed in the first section of this chapter, cultural language is often borrowed from *Firefly*. For instance, the phrase “still flying” and several of its derivatives, which is appropriated dialogue from the pilot episode, “Serenity” (Figure 7), is commonly used in Browncoat culture and can represent multiple symbolic meanings:



**Figure 7 Scene From “Serenity” Episode Exemplifying *Still Flying***

“Keep flying,” an appropriated derivative of this concept, dually serves to represent the discursive practice of co-authored fan fiction, discussed previously, as a mechanism

through which both the culture itself and the *Firefly* narratives stays alive. As BC22 forwards, “we have nothing else to do but *keep the crew flying* [sic] by taking hints that Joss has given us and expanding on them.” Additionally, Browncoats like BC23 utilize this phrase in common conversational discourse like “have a good night and keep flying!” While BC23’s usage of the phrase here can be read as a light hearted relational gesture, it can also be understood more broadly to connote the Browncoats overall goal of keeping both *Firefly* and the culture alive. As Browncoats discursively co-author in this manner, they expand and continue the very meta-narrative of their own culture as much as they do the storylines of *Firefly*.

This asynchronous discursive practice plays a meaningful and constitutive role in Browncoat culture. This usage demonstrates the symbolic construction of ideology through discourse. The need to continue the fictional narrative through this discursive practice is rooted in the deeper desire of fans to reinforce and express an underlying symbolic *Ideology of the Underdog* gleaned from *Firefly*.

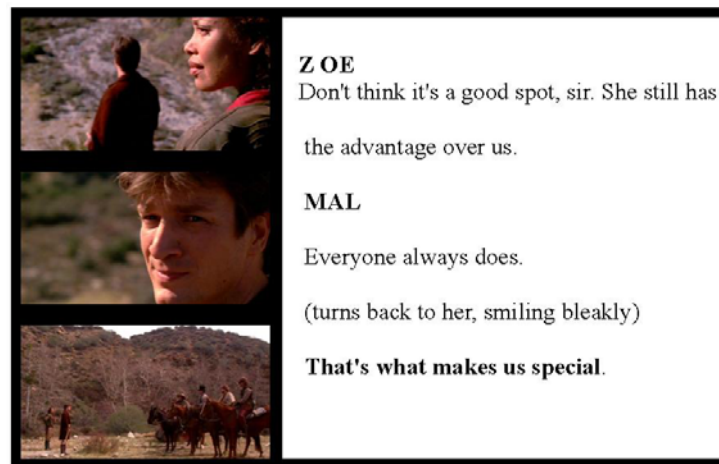
#### Discursively Practiced Fandom as Symbolic of Underdog Resistance

As presented throughout this chapter, discourse plays a constitutive role in the Browncoat community that goes far beyond debating the merits of a fictional narrative. More significantly this discourse is a generative mechanism in that it fostered the construction of a common ideology that has significantly impacted the lives of cultural members. *Co-Authoring* (re)creates the ideology theme of underdog resistance.

Broadly described, an *underdog* is an individual that is expected to lose a contest or that is at a disadvantage. The *Underdog* ideology is affirmed in many thematic



messages in *Firefly*. As BC05 affirms, “I think that there is a theme within the *Sereniverse* [sic] (the world of *Firefly*/*Serenity*) that appeals to people who really love the series. It's about being the *underdog* [sic] and still surviving.” This message can also be heard in the show’s theme song that is “a song of life in defeat, and that's kind of what the show is about. It's about people who have been either economically or politically or emotionally beaten down in one way or another” (Bernstein, 2007, p. 33). The fictional crew members of the *Sereniverse* are certainly underdogs in that they are disenfranchised members of society (ex-Independent soldiers, career criminals, fugitives, poor, etc...) forced into life on the frontier of the galaxy. They generally find themselves in a disadvantaged position, frequently outmanned, and outgunned (Figure 8).



**Figure 8 Scene from “Serenity” Episode Exemplifying the *Underdog* Ideology.**

The crew generally operates within the gray area between criminal and hero, which allows them to succeed despite their natural disadvantages. BC10 explained that *Firefly* “tells the story from the underdog's side - not necessarily the good guys, and definitely not on the right side of the law, which is a refreshing change.” The Browncoats feel that

they have something in common with their fictional counterparts in regard to being underdogs, which has in turn impacted their beliefs and actions. This shared sense of struggle as underdogs has bonded the fan Browncoats together giving them a common cause.

Like the crew of *Serenity*, many fan Browncoats have struggled personally. BC20 reported that “Browncoats are usually on [the] low end of economic scale. They are struggling to make ends meet, pay rent, buy gas, work, etc... just the like crew of *Serenity*.” It was previously argued that Browncoat fandom is anchored in a pronounced sense of *altruism* evident in their many *philanthropic* practices. This compassion for the disadvantaged comes from a sense of empathy. BC05 explained that “we have a soft spot for folks who are struggling. I think most of us feel like we're struggling too. And that we have a camaraderie.” The camaraderie that Browncoats like BC18 share has evolved into a *familial* bond that serves to strengthen their resolve to practice the ideals gleaned from *Firefly*:

I think anyone that knows the ‘whole story’ of the *Firefly*-world, Browncoats (fictional) sees that they were fighting for a good cause. They were fighting for the common man, and I think that's what a lot of Browncoats (fans) are doing with their efforts.

Fighting for the common man has become a lived practice for Browncoats demonstrated in both their internal and external *philanthropic* practices. This sense of solidarity also can be seen in the numerous social practices like *shindigs*. Furthermore, like the crew of

*Serenity*, many fan Browncoats also feel marginalized in the sense that their fandom revolves around a failed and unsupported television series.

Another dimension of the underdog spirit emerges in the refusal to accept defeat. Like their fictional counterparts, many fans see themselves as a band of disenfranchised rebels after the series was officially cancelled by the Fox Network in December of 2002. As the Editors of Browncoats.com stated, “we Browncoats resemble more than a little the disenfranchised crew of the show.” Likewise, BC04 confirmed that “since Fox cancelled the show, which is about a crew that care about each other and are running from a large government trying to shut them down, we definitely have similarities.” A faction of real-life *Browncoats* even feel as if they are in a battle against their own ‘Alliance,’ evident in several explicit characterizations, like that of BC20, of Fox as an “oppressive evil Alliance.” The weapon of choice in this fight appears to be the very meta-narrative of their struggle observed in their discourse, fan fiction, and during interviewing. While not all Browncoats feel so strongly, many do feel like their continued existence in some way stands in opposition to Fox’s wishes for the *Firefly*’s demise. Some even believe that their efforts may be rewarded someday with a new version of *Firefly* or another *Serenity*-like sequel. Many hope that recruitment, or family building, of new members may cause a studio like Universal to revive the series. Members acknowledge that this hope is a long-shot, but one worth taking. Despite the relative hopelessness of their situation, the Browncoats continue fighting to keep the spirit of their favorite show alive.

This rebellious refusal to accept *Firefly*’s demise is indicative of a deep-seeded philosophy that permeates the culture. *Browncoat* members proudly see themselves as

patriotic and repeatedly describe their fandom with words like ‘passionate, rebellious, and independent’ with an ‘us against them’ motif that particularly colors their self-depictions (Cochran, 2008). The refusal to accept their defeated position very much defines the character of their culture and has bonded them together in a common cause. Rather than succumbing to the hopelessness of their marginalization, Browncoats proudly and constructively accept it; another lesson learned from their fictional heroes. According to the show’s creator Joss Whedon himself, *Firefly* is about:

...discovering strength through weakness, simply because the idea that these people could get through the day at all, make a living, avoid the Alliance and not get eaten is kind of a triumph. But it's a triumph because they have no power, which is of course different than strength. (Bernstein, 2006, p. 6).

By all accounts, the fan Browncoats could have easily disbanded after their attempts to officially save *Firefly* failed. However, their collective position of weakness gave them a common cause and their rejuvenated support contributed to a resurrection of sorts in *Serenity*. Whedon echoed this ideal in his words at the early film screenings of *Serenity* that served as a rallying cry to all Browncoats: “They tried to kill us. They did kill us. And here we are. We’ve done the impossible, and that makes us mighty.” This statement is a well known appropriated line of dialogue from *Firefly*’s pilot episode “Serenity,” which has become another credo representative of the *underdog* ideology.

Whedon wrote this sentiment into *Firefly*’s characters, including Mal who seems to enjoy being the underdog (Figure 8). Browncoats too seem to take pride in their subordinated position. As BC01 stated, “with being canceled and all, [there is] a sense of

fighting the good fight and standing for an uncommon or unpopular cause.” Many real-life Browncoats, like BC05, may feel marginalized because they support a dead franchise, however, this has also created a bond of solidarity that they defiantly draw strength from:

There are folks who think Browncoats are ridiculous for continuing to hope & carrying on. I almost like the idea of ‘swimming against the current’...There's a local comic shop owner who really looks down his nose at us. And of course our attitude about it is ‘F\*\*k him!’

The Browncoats ability to find strength from this position of weakness is dependent upon continued reinforcement and practice of the ideological beliefs derived from their beloved texts. The *Ideology of the Underdog* holds this culture together nearly 8 years after the unheralded half-a-season of a television series that created it ended.

#### An Afterlife Through Practiced Ideology

Browncoats keep *Firefly* alive through a variety of discursive practices that incorporate thematic ideals from the fictional narratives. Perhaps more meaningfully is that Browncoat fandom also effectively keeps the beliefs set forth in the series alive through lived practices representative of a common ideology. These beliefs are formative to the Browncoat experience as communicated by research participants. BC18 poignantly explicates that:

A true Browncoat starts with the series and applies its lessons to other things in life. They take what they've learned from the show and try to apply it to other things. Or they'll take lessons related to *Firefly*, like its premature cancelation, and

try to find ways to use them in ‘real life.’ It's sort of about linking *Firefly* to real life and vice versa.

The lessons that Browncoats learn from *Firefly* come from symbolic themes and play constitutive role in both the individual's life and in the culture. According to the members themselves, like BC23, “being a Browncoat is about translating that world, interjecting it, into your own. Living up to an ideal or ideals set forth in something you feel strongly about.” Like other appropriated elements, these symbolic ideals are utilized by members to meaningfully connect their lives to the texts. The parallels between the fictional Browncoats and the fan Browncoats have been noted previously, however, it appears that these similarities are something more substantive than traditional fan emulation.

#### Summary of Findings

The goal of this findings chapter was to tell the Browncoats' story. It was intended for this chapter to read like the development of a story. This story could have been told in several ways but with any story the author first develops the key elements, in this case the discursive practices that generate cultural meaning. Subsequently, the specific patterns of practice that create and recreate the themes from the guiding *Firefly* and *Serenity* texts were explored. This manner of development enabled me to address my two research questions directly while simultaneously highlighting an overarching ideological discourse: *Ideology of the Underdog*.

The *Browncoats*, while lacking a central physical presence, are a *culture* with common language, practices, rituals, and identity. These shared characteristics certainly lend to the emergence of an observably distinctive cultural reality. While intriguing in its

own right, the commonalities between Browncoats are ultimately indicative of a more significant symbolic engagement with the *Firefly* and *Serenity* source texts. The more academically fascinating aspect of Browncoat fandom is that Browncoats reconstruct an *ideology* based on their interpretation and extension of the *Firefly* narratives with which they identify. The culture's continued existence is communicatively constituted through discursive practices that incorporate symbolic ideals appropriated from their chosen source texts. These thematic ideals and moral lessons are gleaned from *Firefly* and *Serenity* and expressed discursively, ensuring an afterlife for the short-lived sci-fi western that has had a meaningful impact on members of this culture. These symbolic themes from *Firefly* and *Serenity* have become a meaningful constitutive force in Browncoat culture.

## CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

There are many aspects of Browncoat fandom culture that are intriguing and could be discussed at length. However, one area emerged as most interesting: Browncoats symbolic engagement with the *Firefly* and *Serenity* source text and its profound effect on the real-life experience of those involved. The following chapter will commence with an exploration of this more intriguing attribute through three primary theoretical and practical contributions that this thesis offers.

The findings support theoretical challenges to prior assumptions regarding the nature of both *culture* and *fandom*. The first contribution is an explication of how the cultural literature is helpful in demonstrating how Browncoat fandom culture is more than fandom; it's fandom as cultural production. In particular, this research also demonstrates that what binds this culture together is communication and symbolic meaning. Closely related to this, the second contribution shows that Browncoat discourse is a continuance of text and through this discursive activity and the re-writing or narrating of the text the cultural reality continues. Communication is the constitutive force that creates, maintains, and changes the culture while simultaneously acting as the primary means by which the *Firefly* and *Serenity* canon has achieved a unique afterlife. The third contribution of this thesis challenges prior conceptions about what fandom means. Specifically, how Browncoat fandom exemplifies the need for a new more applicable



theoretical mechanism for studying fan cultures that actively incorporate their particular affinity into their lived experience. All of these claims not only contribute theoretically to fan studies, but practically demonstrate the need to challenge prior assumptions regarding the nature of both *culture* and *fandom*. First, Browncoat fandom as culture is communicatively constituted through discursive practices, challenging traditional conceptions of what a culture is and what holds one together. A second contribution challenges what fandom means. In particular, this study contests prior assumptions concerning the nature and legitimacy of fandom.

### **Challenging Culture**

Browncoat fandom as culture is communicatively constituted through discursive practices, challenging traditional conceptions of what a culture is and what holds one together. Browncoats constitution of culture emphasizes what many organizational culture scholars claim: culture is fundamentally communicative (Deetz, 2001; Hecht et al., 1993; Martin, 2002; Miller, 2009; Mumby & Putnam, 1992; Nelson-Marsh, 2006; Taylor et al., 2001; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Some of these scholars argue that there is a glaring need for research that looks at the communicative constitution of culture that occurs with these types of distributed organizations (Martin, 2002; Nelson-Marsh, 2006). Accordingly, the Browncoats teach us something new about culture. Most cultural studies affiliate culture with a nationality, a race, or a formal organization such as a religion or a corporation (Carbaugh, 2006; Hofstede, 1997). In the case of the Browncoats, not only are members unaffiliated in any traditional way, they also lack a shared meeting location. This thesis, therefore, adds to this conversation with both theory

and empirical data. Communication is the tie that binds Browncoats. Specifically, it is Browncoats' symbolic engagement with the *Firefly* and *Serenity* source texts and their appropriation and reproduction of the symbolic meaning of these texts in their discourse that constitutes their culture. Thus, the data from this study challenges the assumptions scholars make about what culture is, specifically challenging the idea that culture must be affiliated in some way.

As explored in the literature review, *culture* has traditionally been conceptualized as affiliated and co-located in a physical space. Communication, while acknowledged as important, is thought of as something that a culture *does*. From this study, it becomes clear that communication constitutively emerges as the something the culture *is*. *Browncoat* discursive practices simultaneously constitute both cultural process and product, continually producing and reproducing “shared socio-cultural patterns” (Craig, 1999, p. 144). As Browncoats enact these cultural realities, they demonstrate “what communication scholars have long understood: organizations are fundamentally communicative” (Nelson-Marsh, 2006, p. 1). Through this study, we can observe *how* culture is fundamentally communicative, particularly when it does not share a physical location or a shared goal or outcome. This in and of itself is not a new finding. However, in regards to fandom, this study contributes a new understanding of fans as members rather than spectators. Browncoats are connected through a common set of dynamically symbolic processes that allow their culture to emerge as a seemingly coherent form across time and space (Alvesson, 2002; Bantz, 1993; Martin, 2002; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Yet there is more to the story.

Despite common misperceptions of fans, *Browncoats* are a *culture* with common customs, practices, and identity, constituted communicatively through discourse. They are more than a group of *fanatics*; they are a group of philanthropic adopted family members who see themselves as guided by a shared moral or ideological code.

The cultural discourse that enables the continued existence of the Browncoats is much more rich and dynamic than outsiders presume. As explicated in the Results, this discourse that is central to Browncoat fandom often pertains to their shared interest *Firefly*. BC02 exclaimed that “there are simply too many people [who] call themselves a fan. They may honestly like the show, but for me *a person is not truly a Browncoat unless he or she can talk about it* [emphasis added] theoretically on many different levels.” Discourse extends beyond the fictional narratives and is generative in the sense that it *does* something. Endemic of Browncoat culture, discourse enables *social connection that keeps Firefly alive* and fosters the *social negotiation of meaning*.

Discourse enables connection in the sense that it is the primary means by which members communicate in order to create, sustain, and change social bonds. Communal discourse often pertains to *Firefly*-related topics but also goes beyond discussion of the fictional narratives to more relational communication. This discourse fosters a sense of community that bonds Browncoat members together and constitutes a central component of Browncoat fandom. Ontologically being a Browncoat is “more than just liking the show, it's about being a part of the Browncoat community.” For many members, the social experience of being a Browncoat has become the most meaningful part of their fandom. BC18, confirmed “that social aspect has to be there or it's not really the same,

you're not a 'real' [Browncoat].” The majority of Browncoats interviewed confirmed that “for many fans the pleasures of fandom have as much to do with what goes on outside the television text as with what goes on within it” (Jones, 2000, p. 13). Despite the absence of co-location or face-to-face communication, Browncoats reported feeling deeply connected to one another and the community as a whole. These accounts ultimately provide some insight into the relationship between fandom, cultural development, and media texts. It further demonstrates that it is in communities and human relationships that texts are provided their meaning. Thus, without Browncoat discourse, *Firefly* and *Serenity* would lack meaning. Data indicated that the majority of Browncoat members are geographically dispersed and therefore discourse is the means by which they construct their cultural reality. Reality then, is the fan fiction or the continuance of the text and its symbolic meaning through cultural practices. Furthermore, this research indicated that the constructed reality requires the continual *social negotiation of meaning* that (re)constructs Browncoat culture, reemphasizing the prominent social nature of Browncoat fandom.

Perhaps surprisingly, the social negotiation of meaning actually begins with individual interpretive readings of the source texts by Browncoat members. Subsequently, these individuals engage in discourse regarding these interpretations, debating and theorizing meaning, ultimately achieving a shared or dominant interpretation. Browncoats discursively interpret and negotiate meaning with both material (*Firefly* DVD box set, *Serenity* feature film, memorabilia, etc...) and social elements (*Shindigs*, CSTS, FIREFLY CHAT 0.1 Alpha chat room, message boards, etc...). Meanings behind these cultural practices are continually being (re)constituted

through social interaction. For example, the common phrase “keep flying,” which is appropriated dialogue from the pilot episode “Serenity,” has multiple connotations within the fictional series and between Browncoat members. Its usage in dialogue between the BDMs may generally indicate a positive denotation, however, its contextual usage in cultural discourse ultimately determines meaning. It can be used conversationally like this example from BC23, “Have a good night and keep flying!” “Keep flying” also has a broader ideological connotation referring to the Browncoats overall goal of keeping the show alive through fan activity, as illustrated by Martha Dwyer. “We have nothing else to do but *keep the crew flying* [emphasis added] by taking hints that Joss has given us and expanding on them.” For Browncoats, these practices are especially meaningful because they manifest and reinforce thematic ideology from the “Sereniverse.”

Specific cultural ideologies derived from *Firefly*, like the *Ideology of the Underdog* explicated in the results, appear to be centrally meaningful to Browncoat fandom and are manifested in discursive practices via chat room conversations, message board posts, and narrative expansion of their source texts through fan fiction. The implicitly socially negotiated meanings of those appropriated themes are therefore “seldom fixed” and subject to “continuous refashioning” within the Browncoat community (Gergen, 2000, p. 146). The meaning behind the practices that manifest these themes are also then under constant social negotiation and therefore what it *means* to be a Browncoat is continually being (re)negotiated communicatively between members. In this way, not only is the text kept alive through interaction, but Browncoat culture, as a lived experience, is also demonstrated to be dynamic and organic. As these examples

demonstrate, Browncoats regularly negotiate the meaning of cultural elements discursively. These findings indicate that the dynamic discourse connects members together, grants *Firefly* immortality, enables meaningful negotiation, and adds to classic theory regarding *fandom as culture*.

### **From Poaching to Production: Adding to Classic Fan Theory**

These findings are consistent with aspects of de Certeau (1984) and Jenkins (1992) classic textual poaching metaphor that offers “an alternate conception of fans as readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests” (p. 23). Conversely, these findings also diverge from this classic view in fan theory. Both de Certeau and Jenkins conceptions of fandom hinge on the idea that “like the poachers of old, fans operate from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness...fans lack direct access to the means of commercial cultural production” (p. 26). There is certainly support for this view of marginalization both in the terms of socioeconomic status and in regard to fandom. As BC20 reported, “Browncoats are usually on low end of economic scale. They are struggling to make ends meet, pay rent, buy gas, work, etc... just the like crew of *Serenity*.” The relatively limited nature of the *Firefly* canon also puts them in a marginal status in terms of their fandom.

While there is an observable underdog sentiment among Browncoats, I doubt that too many of them feel like powerless “peasants” (1992, p. 27). Accordingly Browncoats' engagement with the source texts of *Firefly* and *Serenity* appears to be less subversive to producer interests as previously thought by fan scholars like Jenkins (1992). As presented in the results, Browncoats have even found strength from their relative subordinated

position among other fandoms and the non-fans alike. In some cases, like the fan-made DVD *Done the Impossible* and the fan-made film sequel *Browncoats: Redemption*, they have even proven to defiantly engage in their own commercial production. It should be noted that even Jenkins (2006a, 2006b, 2007) has recently acknowledged the influential potential of contemporary fandom, indicating a shift in his 1992 “poaching” views.

In the case of *Browncoats* “poaching” is not an accurate metaphor for the appropriation of the *Firefly* and *Serenity* source texts, as the tactical reading conjectured by de Certeau and postulated by Jenkins (1992). Going beyond mere strategic “fodder” for fan fiction or online identity profiles (Booth, 2008, p. 521), *Browncoats* combine interpretive reading, appropriation, incorporation, and creative production to develop and negotiate significant cultural meanings from symbolic themes in *Firefly* and *Serenity*. Instead of merely “poaching” the source text, contemporary fans, like *Browncoats*, interpret and negotiate meaning collectively. Symbolic meaning is not necessarily “taken” from source texts, but “formed” in concert by the fan community (Booth, 2008, p. 517). This process is inherently social as *Browncoats* “create meaning through the cultural, communal relationships of members of a fan community” (p. 517). A *Firefly* fan may individually read and interpret the text but this interpretation only finds its proper *Browncoat* meaning within the culture.

As Gergen (2000) states, these “texts only come into meaning through their function within relationships” (p. 42). The findings from this study demonstrate *how* texts come into meaning. For *Browncoats*, this can be seen in their various philanthropic projects like CSTS. One fan (One True Bix) drew inspiration for this altruistic endeavor

from interpreting recurrent motifs in *Firefly* that have now found profound cultural meaning through this particular annual event. Contemporary media consumers like Browncoats appear to be treating source texts less as objects and more as “practices” (Williams, 2005). In the Browncoat culture, these discursive practices are especially meaningful because they manifest and reinforce a deep-seeded ideology derived from themes from the “Sereniverse.”

Browncoat discourse is more than just superficial conversation, but meaningful interactive patterns in which the Underdog cultural ideology is (re)constructed and changed. These practices are also mechanisms that foster the construction of a common ideology that has positively affected the lives of cultural members. Discourse as lived practice has also allowed *Firefly* to persist. Browncoats live symbolic ideals appropriated from the *Firefly* and *Serenity* narratives through common cultural practices like *philanthropy*, *shindigs*, and *co-authoring* that inherently manifest the themes of *Altruism and Self-Sacrifice*, *Belonging to a Crew*, *Family Loyalty*, *Keeping Firefly Alive*, *Continuation of the Story*, and *Underdog Resistance*, as well as an overarching *Ideology of the Underdog*. It is this level of textual engagement that distinguishes this culture from many of its peers and is paramount to its continued legitimacy as a cultural form, in so doing challenging how we think of *fandom*.

### **Challenging Fandom**

In the case of this research, the majority of past and present conceptions of both fans and fandom appear insufficient to fully represent the lived-experience of being a Browncoat. Many fan scholars do recognize key aspects of the contemporary fan



experience, like the inherently social nature of fandom, however many still utilize theoretical constructs that emphasize a simple affinity or irrational emotional attachment to a particular object while connoting a lack of legitimacy.

In both academia and popular culture, conceptual terminology concerning fandom shares a similar tendency to employ the extreme interpretations of their etymological roots. As discussed previously, etymologically, the word “fan” primarily originates from the Latin word ‘*fanaticus*,’ meaning “insanely but divinely inspired,” from which we derive the popularly stigmatized word “fanatic” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 12). According to Merriam-Webster, it was likely this shortened version of *fanatic* came into popular usage when it was adopted to describe the behavior of baseball enthusiasts in the late 1800s. Furthermore, Merriam-Webster describes “fanatic” as being “marked by excessive enthusiasm and often intense uncritical devotion” and a “fan” in turn as “an enthusiastic devotee (as of a sport or a performing art) usually as a spectator.” Unfortunately, it is this idea that has tended to direct contemporary perceptions of individuals like the Browncoats. However, modern usage of these terms is also credited to the more light-heartedly passive term “fancy,” referring generally to an intense liking of something or collectively for followers of a certain hobby or sport.

There is, in actuality a vast spectrum of meanings from which we derive our understanding of this human phenomena, however, we tend to conceptualize fandom in terms of these two extremes, especially in regard to the former. These etymological associations have no doubt enabled stereotypes to persist and despite its conceptual progression or particular usage of the term “fan” it has “never fully escaped its earlier

connotations of religious and political zealotry, false beliefs, orgiastic excess, possession, and madness, connotations that seem to be at the heart of many of the representations of fans in contemporary discourse” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 12). The issue here is not with the word “fan” itself necessarily but with the unrepresentative or myopic connotations of the root word and its many incarnations. However, because the term fandom, as conceptualized thus far in popular literature and scholarship, appears inadequate for fully representing a community like the Browncoats, I humbly offer a more applicable theoretical mechanism for understanding contemporary fandom culture: *Fanactivism*.

Fanactivism is a portmanteau that retains the root word *fan*, accurately indicating an intensity of interest while additionally capturing the more *active*, lived experience and cultural element of this kind of participation. It is likely that the inclusion of the root *fan* will still conjure up the more stigmatized meanings for some, however, I encourage potential adopters to conceptualize a new interpretation that falls somewhere in between the craziness of *fanatic* and the passive spectatorship of *fancy*. The second part of this compound word is *activism*, which generally refers to an “attitude of taking an active part in events, especially in a social context.” Activism’s Latin roots are *actus* meaning “a doing” and similarly *actum* meaning “a thing done.” This etymology, therefore, suggests that fanactivism’s core meaning is active participation, which more accurately conforms to contemporary fan behavior. This more nuanced construct additionally speaks specifically both to the Browncoats’ oppositional stance to Fox’s official cancellation and in the general sense that they are actively supporting a cause. It is my hope that future scholarship may heuristically utilize this construct when studying similar cultural

phenomena. This construct better accounts for the ways in which contemporary media consumers incorporate their affinity for a television show, movies, comic, book, etc...into their lived experience rather than merely enjoying it.

As demonstrated, Browncoats are not fans in the traditional sense of spectatorship or imitation. Fandom as seen in Browncoat culture is a much more active process. Browncoats identify with and appropriate narrative elements from these texts in order to demonstrate their personal fandom and to develop the more meaningful parts of their fan community. In order to be a *fan of Firefly*, one must at least have seen the series, feature film, and comics. However, a *Browncoat* goes one step further, generally reading these texts regularly to glean specific narrative elements for the purpose of meaningful appropriation. For *Browncoats*, the *Firefly* and *Serenity* texts are “not simply something that can be reread; it is something that can and must be rewritten in order to make it more responsive to their needs, in order to make it a better producer of personal meanings and pleasures” (Jenkins, 1988, p. 87). A common example is the borrowing of settings, plots, and characters from a particular media text to create fan fiction. In this instance, the process of rereading and rewriting occurs quite literally. Fan-authored fictional expansion is an important part of Browncoat culture, but the relationship with their source texts goes even further beyond these standard fandom practices.

Textual appropriation itself is not unique to Browncoat fandom as most media fans borrow elements from their respective source texts to create key components of their fan experience. Like these other fans, Browncoats creatively utilize elements taken from their source texts to suit their needs in a variety of ways. Unlike other fans, however,

Browncoats additionally utilize appropriation for more symbolic purposes, incorporating thematic ideals from their source narratives into meaningful lived practices. Browncoats, like BC03, strongly “identify with the themes” from *Firefly* and incorporate them into their daily lives. This thematic adoption serves different interests but the most significant is the symbolic appropriation and incorporation of themes, beliefs, and moral lessons that are drawn out of *Firefly* and *Serenity*. BC18 poignantly explicates that “a true Browncoat starts with the series and applies its lessons to other things in life.” This thematic appropriation and real-life integration has become endemic of Browncoat fandom as BC17 confirms, “when *Firefly* is an active part of your life, it is safe to say that you are truly a Browncoat.” The symbolic elements from these prominent readings are incorporated into the very fabric of their personal and cultural identity. As BC23 reported, “being a Browncoat is about translating that world, interjecting it, into your own. Living up to an ideal or ideals set forth in something you feel strongly about.” These findings have transcendent possibilities beyond fan studies because this type of fanactivism is a constitutive process that closely resembles that of other more accepted cultural forms like *religion*.

### **Faith in Fiction: Legitimizing Fanactivism**

Most cultures have seminal texts that form the core of their community and guide member behavior to some degree. One particular cultural form exhibits the same kind of textual engagement as Browncoats. *Religion* or *religious* culture is a highly visible and legitimate cultural form that has transcended space and time since the very dawn of human civilization. Respective differences understandably vary, as there have been

innumerable religious cultures throughout man's history, however the majority of successful and more broadly socially acceptable mainstream faiths practice shared ideological beliefs derived from sacred source texts.

This particular comparison is not unprecedented in cultural studies, as both the notions that fandom is a form of religion and that religion is a form of fandom have been considered previously. Many comparisons address observable characteristics like the intensity with which members identify with their chosen texts (Grossberg, 1992), the shared construction of an interpretive communities (Jenkins, 1992), and the construction of cultural identities through fannish attachments to media texts (Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995). Cultural studies may always exhibit these comparisons because, as Hills (2000) noted, fans can never 'cleanse' their "discourses of religious connotations" (p. 129). Hills importantly added that "neither can fans' use of religious terminology be read simply as an indication" that fandom culture is religion (p. 129).

Cross analysis of these two phenomena has been approached at a variety of angles but several are more relevant to this research project than others as these conceptions of fandom move beyond superficial traits. Most notably, Hills (2000, 2002) argued that the transcendent experience of the religious follower is similar to the feelings fans have for their media texts. Hills conceptualized this experience as a kind of *religiosity* that does not necessarily indicate that fans *are* or *are not* spiritual, but rather implies a similar semiotic devotion to a text more akin to a religious following than media consumption. Hills' *neoreligiosity* manifests somewhere in-between religion and community and is not only a devotion to a text, but also a devotion to the communal experience of that text.

Jenkins (1992) similarly addressed this comparison in regard to the communal experience but was quick to point out that there are as many differences between fandom and religion as there are similarities. What is important to take away, though, is that the similarity between fanactivism and religion indicates a similar notion of community for both groups that revolves around a shared engagement with a chosen source text. From the results of this research, the most significant commonality between fanactivism and religion appears to be that Browncoats, like religious followers, interpret meaningful messages from a shared source text that they then utilize to develop and practice ideological beliefs.

Like the Bible, the Qur'an, the Torah, or the Book of Mormon, *Firefly* acts as a sacred text that galvanizes the Browncoat community. This shared text serves as a common symbolic resource from which the Browncoats can derive meaning and construct cultural elements. Expectations for membership in both the Browncoat culture and religions include the reading and rereading of these texts. The goal of this (re)reading is to gain a better knowledge and understanding of the profound nature of these texts and to glean symbolic messages that can positively impact the life of the reader. This knowledge is then discursively demonstrated to other members in a variety of practices. Collective interpretation and negotiation regarding the meaning of the *Firefly* narratives, like the Bible, is a vital component of these cultures.

*Firefly*, like the Bible, is rife with stories, parables, and allusions containing implicit and explicit moral lessons. For example, aspects of *Firefly*'s moral imperative are manifested through discourse about potentially socially legitimizing actions such as

diversity, open membership, and the regular performance of charitable works.

Accordingly, Browncoats engage with their source text in order to interpret meaning from these narratives. Members from both types, fan and religious cultures, symbolically appropriate and incorporate thematic elements from their source texts to develop distinctive and meaningful attributes of their culture. Sacred texts provide moral guidelines that direct member action and meaning is disciplined and structured by the community. Themes evident in these texts are appropriated and incorporated as ideological beliefs that specific cultural practices make manifest. These themes are especially meaningful to readers when they become lived practices. While individual interpretations are present, it is the shared or dominant interpretations of these texts that matter to the community. Fans and religious adherents similarly incorporate prevailing interpretations into their personal and cultural realities.

This process of reality construction is more significant than many outsiders assume. In Browncoat fandom, source text engagement goes beyond mere affinity for a fictional narrative. Media fandom is often criticized as an irrational behavior and non-fans, including many religious individuals, frequently question why seemingly rational individuals invest time, money, and emotion into a known fiction. Interestingly, similar challenges exist toward religious followers, however, in general, this type of behavior is still more socially accepted despite its striking similarities to fandom. Browncoats and Christians alike uphold collective ideologies obtained from seminal texts. For Browncoats, their sacred texts, *Firefly* and *Serenity*, are *fictional* in the sense that they are invented imagined creations from the mind of Joss Whedon. Conversely, Christians

believe their sacred text, the Bible, to be *non-fictional* in the sense that it is purportedly the inspired word of God. This point is ultimately contestable outside the community and to a brave minority within. However, many sacred narratives within the Bible from which Christians appropriate meaning, most notably those told by Jesus Christ, are indeed parabolic and therefore *fictional*. Thus, both Browncoats and Christians interpret these narratives, appropriate thematic ideals, and incorporate these beliefs into distinctive ideologies that become lived practices. In so doing, these individuals are essentially putting their *faith in fiction*.

This faith is more than just lip-service or superficial conjecture. This faith is *real* in that it is evident in the continued discursive practices of cultural members. Perhaps as *Firefly* is more than just a television show, Browncoats are more than fans, or at least more than what we conceptualize fans to be. Media fanactivism is often conceived of as a superficial, albeit intense fascination with a mediated text, however, this research suggests a deeper, more symbolic connection that has undeniably influenced how these media consumers live their lives. To Browncoats, *Firefly* and *Serenity* are more than just objects of interest; they are both seminal texts and allegories of their own fan experience. In concert with other contemporary fan studies like Jindra's 1999 research on *Star Trek* fandom, this study indicates that texts like *Firefly* can transcend the fictional plane and become "a way of life for many of its fans" and "for many" have "taken a place alongside the traditional metanarratives and mythologies of Western cultures" (pp. 217-229). As Browncoats continue to congregate in-person and virtually to discursively interpret and



develop meaning from these texts, they appear to be cutting out their sub-cultural niche somewhere in between neo-religion and community.

In general, it would seem that the constitutive forces at work in religion are similar to those that operate in fan culture. Vital to both is a shared sense of *belonging* to a community that upholds specific ideological beliefs from sacred texts. Both fans and religious followers demonstrate membership through the symbolic consumption and appropriation of texts. Comparison of these cultural forms may seem sacrilegious to some individuals, however, this only appears ludicrous because of the widely held assumption that religion is *natural* and therefore more rational than fanactivism. If, however, both religion and fandom are described in terms of their communal connection, devotion to shared sacred texts, and the subsequent ideological practices, then perhaps this comparison warrants continued consideration. By analyzing this symbolic engagement, we can better understand both the particular social contexts and the specific experiences of contemporary media consumers who take neither *religion* nor *fanactivism* for granted but instead challenge the prior assumptions and the practices associated with both. The point of this comparison is to demonstrate that neither fanactivism nor religion is an irrational human behavior but a contemporary meaning-making response to an ever increasingly mediated environment.

### **Significance**

The significance of studying fanactivism is closely linked to the prevalence of contemporary media and its importance as a “cultural agent, particularly as a provoker and circulator of meanings” (Fiske, 1987, p. 1). Today’s Western world is saturated with

mass media and we have accordingly adapted our engagement practices to compensate. Perhaps, as Grossberg (1992) suggested, “one cannot exist in a world where nothing matters” (p. 63) and therefore many humans have evolved their consumptive behavior to derive meaning from their increasingly mediated environment. What many assume to be irrational behavior, what we call *fandom*, may just be a natural development in the way humans interact with the world around them. Textual engagement practices like appropriation, previously regarded as exclusive to the abnormal fan, appear to be more generically transcendent to the meaning making practices demonstrated by members of other cultures: i.e., *religion*. The appropriation process allows contemporary media consumers like Browncoats to actively and continually interact with source texts and construct meaning in what they are viewing (Fiske, 1987; Gergen, 2000). In an ever increasingly mediated world where the average individual experiences life through the screen of a computer or television, humans are still driven to find meaning in their existence.

Media has enabled to us to stay connected but perhaps not in the way most individuals think. The proliferation of communication technology was one of the chief hallmarks of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and altered the way humans engage with one another. Specific modes like television now play a primary role in cultural socialization. Contemporary society is socially diverse and geographically dispersed. When communities were more physically localized, say 100-200 years ago, they shared many common social experiences that granted the group a certain amount of solidarity. In the United States for instance, the individuals lived in more tight-knit homogeneous

communities. The majority of individuals regularly attended religious services. A history of military service was common for many families with a significant portion of men having served. While these experiences were not entirely uniform, they did provide the majority of individuals with similar social practices that allowed them to relate to one another. As the nation geographically expanded, became technologically fast paced, and evermore culturally heterogeneous, many of these practiced commonalities changed or disappeared.

In this world of increasing diversity, media is one of the more common symbolic experiences in Western society. Gross (1984) suggested that “the mass media, and television foremost among them, have become the primary sources of common information and images that create and maintain a world view and a value system” (p. 347). Television programs like *Firefly* provide a common symbolic experience and inspire discourse in our fragmented and global society. It is the use of these communalized textual symbols that binds people together communally. The Browncoats very cultural existence is based on celebrating, sharing, and expanding the narratives of *Firefly* discursively. Fiske’s 1987 work of fan culture suggested that this type of discourse surrounding media texts is a means of creating and sustaining contemporary versions of traditional folk communities. Accordingly, *Firefly* and *Serenity* can be conceptualized as forms of modern folklore that generates and sustains a culture. As explored previously, Browncoat discourse reflects a symbolic engagement between text and reader where Browncoats utilize their chosen texts through a process of appropriation.

The symbolic appropriation practices of Browncoats suggest that “the reception of symbolic forms—including media products—always involves a contextualized and creative process of interpretation in which individuals draw on the resources available to them in order to make sense of the messages they receive” (Fiske, 1987, p. 8).

Browncoats actively appropriate their source texts as symbolic resources in order to develop personal and cultural identities. Browncoats are therefore demonstrative of Jenkins (1992) assertion that “fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images” in a process where they “become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings” (pp. 23-24).

Thompson (1995) describes appropriation as “part of an extended process of self-formation through which individuals develop a sense of themselves and others, of their history, their place in the world and the social groups to which they belong” (p. 8). I would agree but add that this self is also formed in context of cultural resources and influences. The Browncoat “self is a symbolic project that the individual actively constructs” in concert with other members of Browncoat community and with the “symbolic materials [*Firefly* and *Serenity*] which are available to him or her, materials which the individual weaves into a coherent account of who he or she is, a narrative of self-identity” (Thompson, 1995, p. 210). On the surface, Browncoats are a culture made up of diverse individuals, who seemingly have little in common except for a passionate interest for *Firefly*. Individuality among this community is both evident and respected and while each fan’s experience unquestionably differs all are inexorably linked by a common symbolic engagement with the *Firefly* and *Serenity* texts. The meaningful

connection between members of the Browncoat fan culture, and any culture for that matter, is a direct result of a common symbolic resource that enables their cultural constitution.

It should be clear by now that Browncoat fanactivism is much more dynamic than many non-fans and scholars grant to this form of media engagement. The fanactivist experience appears to be as strong as any religious devotion or political affiliation and further knowledge of why and how this experience is developed and sustained may offer more insight into these aspects of human culture. For example, the Browncoats connection to *Firefly* is meaningful enough to inspire the political formation of media campaigns like those of the original *Firefly* fans first organized to try to save the series from being canceled by Fox. Their common devotion to their sacred text and to each other thrives nearly 9 years after their efforts failed. On the surface this research may only appear relevant to fan studies; however, as hopefully demonstrated above, these findings have transcendent possibilities to other areas of cultural studies. A better understanding of the meaningful practices that constitute Browncoat culture will lead us toward a greater understanding of what holds all cultures together.

## **Conclusions**

### Importance of Study

Of primary concern to this study was letting the Browncoats tell the story of their own collectively constructed fandom experience. This research intended to provide a deeper understanding of the *Browncoat* culture. This study explored the cultural realities that are communicatively created, maintained, and changed by fans as part of the *Firefly*

universe and structure, and rituals and myths that are brought to life socially through discourse. Fandom is common and fan cultures' support for arts, entertainment, literature/authors, political movements, politicians, as well as sports teams and athletes, suggests the successful and lucrative continuation of these active institutions and the subsequent substantive academic research that it warrants. The importance of cultural and audience-centered research like this is made pertinent by the prevalence of active, meaning-making processes people participate in every day as they consume mass media. Additionally, fandom studies have much to say about the position of marginalized sub-cultures within a society. A closer analysis of the fan's active and devoted relationship to a particular media text and related community also holds great potential for understanding and improving other modes of soci-political activism and communal devotion.

When media is regarded as dynamic text to be actively read, as Browncoats do, closer analysis of such texts becomes paramount as fans emerge as active participants in a contemporary dialogue with textual others. Individuals in contemporary western culture are continually bombarded with a barrage of mediated messages and accordingly savvy media consumers have developed receptive responses to derive meaning from the experience. These "changing communication technologies and media texts contribute to and reflect the increasing entrenchment of fan consumption in the structure of our everyday life" (Gray et al., 2007, p. 8). Contemporary forms of fanactivism, like the Browncoats are illustrative examples of the unique relational responses that have evolved due to the highly mediated nature of society. Fandom may be the specific topic of

interest, but at the heart of this study is a deeper understanding of the constitutive forces that are involved in the creation of all social reality. The significance of which cannot be definitively measured, quantitatively or qualitatively.

#### Acknowledgement of Influence

It should be noted that in accordance with a grounded theoretical approach and an inductive thematic analysis, it was intended that the data itself inductively point the researcher toward meaning, rather than the researcher attempting to deductively impose meaning upon the data. However, in actuality this process tends to be neither completely inductive nor deductive but rather *abductive*, in the sense that the researcher will continually utilize both the data and prior personal and theoretical assumptions to derive meaningful themes (Peirce, 1955: 150-6). This acknowledgement is necessary because I realize that what I previously learned about the *Browncoats* from prior experience and my preliminary literary research will ultimately affect my interview protocol and therefore shape the nature of what they talk to me about. This prior experience comes from previous academic research in this area as well as personal fan activity.

I wish to identify myself as a “scholar fan” or “acafan (academic + fan)” (Doty, 2000; Hills, 2002), which admittedly led me to choose this particular culture and undoubtedly influenced the research to some degree. Scholar fans are typically college educated and likely to be professionals that utilize academic practices of evidence (referencing) in their explorations of a narrative universe, although generally without citing academic sources. While my status as a fan of *Firefly* and *Serenity* may have given me multiple investments in this work, it most assuredly also gave me better insight into

the culture being studied. My fan background and prior knowledge of the *Firefly* and *Serenity* source texts greatly aided in gaining access to the *Browncoat* community, building rapport with members, and conducting a thematic analysis of the narratives. This prior experience may have caused some inherent bias, but as many social scientists contend, excluding prior knowledge altogether is unlikely. Certain research methods may be more or less insulated from bias, but others that involve direct in-the-moment engagement with participants proved more challenging.

As Rosenblatt (2002) explains, the process of analysis during the interview seems to blur the boundary between two texts – the “text” that is the performance of the interview and the “text” that is the transcription of the interview (p. 900). Traditionally, researchers go to great lengths to eliminate personal influence and bias, however, in qualitative research, the subjective experience can in fact be a source of valuable knowledge about the phenomenon being studied (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992). In this study, inductive analysis was strengthened with other more deductive methods (e.g., themes, metaphors, and analogies relating to *Firefly/Serenity*) to assist in interpretation of *Browncoat* fandom. Strauss and Corbin suggest that analysis of qualitative data is “the interplay between researchers and data” that is both “science and art” (1998a, p. 13).

Additionally, I recognize that qualitative research is a co-constructed process in which both I, as the researcher, and the participants influence meanings that are made (Rosenblatt, 2002, p.894). In regards to interviewing for instance, this means having to recognize how my assumptions shaped the interview protocol and the perspectives of



those I interviewed. As Warren (2002) notes, “the interviewer, like the respondent, participates in the interview from historically grounded biographical as well as disciplinary perspectives” (p. 85). As such, “the interview, like the ethnography, is about self as well as other” (p. 85). I utilized my prior knowledge of *Firefly*, *Serenity*, and the *Browncoats*, as well as fieldnotes from my observations, and the transcripts and notes from my interviews with these participants. Since I did not have the opportunity to directly member check with all participants in my study, I employed practices that made my own subjectivity explicit while still allowing the participants to direct meaning. Such practices included Allen and Walker’s (2000) three steps of: (a) being open to and taking note of initial impressions by using the senses to guide what one notices, (b) observing and recording key events and incidents including one’s own reactions to events and feeling, and (c) moving beyond initial reactions to an “open sensitivity to what those in the setting experience and react to as significant” (p. 30). These strategies were intended to acknowledge the researcher’s influential presence in the research while still privileging the member’s point of view.

### Limitations

This study is vulnerable to four classic academic critiques or limitations, one of which was small sample size. In social science, it is generally thought that research is strongest when the number of participants in any particular study is sufficiently large enough to draw representative conclusions. While 20 interviews may not be an ideal number to definitively glean quantitatively generalized or qualitatively transcendent results from a population as large and widespread as the *Browncoats*, it was a good

starting place for a novice researcher. Additionally, coupled with data obtained from Browncoat websites like *fireflyfans.net*, *Browncoats.com*, and *Still-flying.net*, observations and participation in chat sessions in Browncoat chat rooms, and analysis of the source texts of *Firefly* and *Serenity*, these interviews were sufficient enough to qualitatively investigate the research questions. Ideally, any future research would be conducted on a larger scale with a larger number of participants. Future research could also be enhanced by incorporating more variety in regard to data collection procedures.

Specifically, this research could have benefited from incorporating in-person interviewees and observations of Browncoat fandom practices. A majority of Browncoat fandom is demonstrated through mediated communication but there are many co-located events that could be observed that would certainly add a richness and possibly new dynamics to this research. In-person research would also allow for more control measures and synchronous communication that could add to the quality of the research results. Face-to-face (F2F) communication exhibits certain nuances that cannot be completely replicated through mediated channels. These facets of F2F are generally related to emotional states, tone, or inflection and can add a dynamic to the interview process that may lead it in important directions. With purely textual communication, the interviewee has to rely on explicit cues like emoticons, all caps, or italics to indicate these nuances. This is admittedly acknowledged as a limitation of this research because F2F interviewing may be the best way to elicit open-ended responses. Ideally I would have liked to triangulate the data between my preliminary observations and interpretations both physical and mediated, clarification from the members involved in an event or

creation of observed data, and textual analysis. Another more conceptual limitation of this research must also be acknowledged as the focus of this thesis evolved from beginning to end.

As discussed previously, it was the intent of this study to qualitatively research Browncoat fandom using inductive methodology and grounded theory. Accordingly, I intended to let the data guide me in the direction of the significant findings. I had to start somewhere and my initial interests revolved around the role narrative played in the Browncoat culture. While conceptually designing this research, I decided that the narrative of construction of culture would be central and tentatively expected that the data would support some of my prior assumptions. This expectation was based on my own prior fandom experience, preliminary observational research, and a review of previous literature and theory regarding areas of study like fandom, narrative, and culture. However, once interviewing and analysis commenced, the data pointed in other directions.

The more pronounced findings in the data still related to narrative construction, but the communicative practices that constitute Browncoat fandom culture emerged as more interesting for discussion and interpretation. These cultural practices prominently emerged during qualitative interviews as symbolically meaningful to Browncoat members. Specifically, I had hoped to find more support for a conceptual argument regarding the narrative construction of fandom culture as somewhat expressed in the literature review. After conducting the interviews and analyzing the responses, it became apparent that the data regarding the cultural practices provided a greater opportunity for

discussion in terms of richness and detail. The lack of emergent data directly related to the constitutive nature of narrative is likely a result of inadequate research design. In retrospect, having never developed a qualitative study before, my interview questions, while carefully considered, designed, and reviewed, may not have been properly crafted to guide the interviews in the direction of narrative. While somewhat disappointing at this particular juncture, it is an experience I can learn from. This is an acknowledged limitation that will be mitigated in future research. Having committed to inductive methodology, I followed the direction of the data and broadened the scope toward a more general understanding of the communicative constitution of Browncoat fandom culture. While already highlighted, some within these limitations, I would like to specifically suggest some directions for future research.

#### Directions for Future Research

Research on fandom like the Browncoats holds great potential for exploring a variety of areas in social science; however, I will only mention one specific area for communication studies. Fan communities like the Browncoats serve as appropriate examples and poignant metaphors for conceptually abstract ideas like virtual organizations. For example, Browncoats for the most part share no centralized location and are therefore very much *virtual* in that their organization is continually being communicatively constituted. Again, while this was not a central focus of this research, I feel that it should be acknowledged that the Browncoats unequivocally fit DeSanctis and Monge (1999) definition of a virtual organization as a “collection of geographically distributed, functionally and/or culturally diverse entities that are linked by electronic

forms of communication and rely on lateral, dynamic relationships for coordination” (p. 693). Besides a definitive exemplar, Browncoat culture additionally “provides a metaphor for considering an organization design that is held together, literally, by communication” (p. 694). As the Browncoats exemplify, culture is no longer solely premised by co-location and can be distributed across time and space, constituted in the communicative networks of the individual members (King & Frost, 2002; O’Leary, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2002; Nelson-Marsh, 2006). Collectively, these scholars seek to understand what holds distributed organizations together across vast spans of space and time to the point that they are recognizable as seemingly stable forms (Giddens, 1979; Giddens, 1984; Bowker & Star, 1999; King & Frost, 2002; Martin, 2002; Star & Bowker, 2002; Nelson-Marsh, 2006). I contend that studies of fan cultures like the Browncoats provide opportunities to approach this understanding.

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APPENDIX

**Interview Protocol for Semi-structured Interviews of Browncoat Participants**

### Interview Protocol

#### Instructions:

*As stated previously, I'm interested in the individual and the collective Fandom experience of being a Browncoat or Firefly/Serenity fan. I'm also intrigued by the particular activities that differentiate Browncoats from individuals who merely enjoy the show/movie. You may choose to answer some of these questions together as the answers may be similar. Please be as detailed as possible.*

#### Questions To Be Answered:

When and how did you become a fan of Firefly/Serenity?

Probe: What were the circumstances involved? (Were you introduced through another fan or did you just stumble upon it? Did you catch it when it originally aired on Fox or after on DVD, SCI FI Channel, etc...)

How did the Browncoats as a community come about?

Is there a common Browncoat story?

Why do you think this particular show that only lasted one season has gained such a following?

Probe: Why do you stay involved even after the show has been cancelled?

Probe: What about the show/film caught your interest and what inspired you to become involved in fan activity?

What makes a Browncoat a Browncoat?

Probe: In general, what does it mean to be a fan of something?

Probe: Is there a difference between being a Browncoat and a fan of say, a football team? How or why?

Probe: How do you think others perceive being a fan of a science fiction show differs from being a fan of a sports team?

What does it look like to be a true Browncoat?

Probe: What online and offline activities are typical of Browncoat?

Probe: What does it mean to be a true Browncoat?

*It seems like fan fiction is a popular Browncoat activity.* What is your take on Browncoat fan fiction and do you participate in it?

What do Browncoats generally write about?

7. Tell me about the importance of being a Browncoat? What does it mean to you?

How do people become Browncoats?

Probe: What do they need to learn to become a true Browncoat?

9. Are there any similarities or parallels between the Browncoat fan community and elements of Firefly/Serenity?

10. Is there anything about Browncoats that you think I should know that I haven't asked about already?