

**FANDOM AS AN ONLINE SUPPORT GROUP**  
**– A case study of CW's *Supernatural***

Bastian Tammentie  
Bachelor's Thesis  
Sociology  
Faculty of Social Sciences & Philosophy  
University of Jyväskylä  
Autumn 2016

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION .....	3
2. THEORETICAL RATIONALE.....	5
2.1. <i>Celebrities and charities</i> .....	5
2.2. <i>Online support networks and fans</i> .....	7
3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	9
4. DATA AND METHODS.....	9
4.1. <i>Charity campaigns</i> .....	11
4.2. <i>Charity campaigns as discussed subjects</i> .....	13
5. RESULTS .....	15
5.1. <i>Fan reception of celebrity involvement in charity campaigns</i> .....	15
5.1.1. <i>Battling stigma</i> .....	16
5.1.2. <i>Empowerment through charity campaigns</i> .....	18
5.1.3. <i>Representation matters</i> .....	20
5.2. <i>The symbolic meaning of family</i> .....	20
6. DISCUSSION .....	24
6.1. <i>Ethics and challenges</i> .....	24
6.2. <i>Further research</i> .....	26
7. BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	28
7.1. <i>Online resources</i> .....	30
7.2 <i>Charity campaigns</i> .....	31
Appendices.....	33
i. <i>Image 1</i> .....	33
ii. <i>Table 1</i> .....	33
iii. <i>Table 2</i> .....	34
iv. <i>Table 3</i> .....	34

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“Family don’t end in blood. We take care of our own.”  
– #SPNFamily Crisis Support Network, Random Acts.

Gone are the days when there seemed to be an impenetrable barrier between the fans and the producers of a TV-show. As social media has gained a stronger foothold in our everyday life it has also become a platform for people to reach out for one another in a global respect. This has also brought celebrities and fans closer as they are now able to share the same forums in the form of social media platforms, most notably Facebook and Twitter. While one-on-one conversation may not take place, both parties are able to see the other’s updates as well as those of the members of their respective groups. I believe it is in part of this reason that numerous celebrities during the past ten years have launched various charity campaigns, some of which are directly targeted at the fans.

My Bachelor’s thesis (from here of referred to as *dissertation*) studies the reception these campaigns have received as a social phenomenon from those fans who fit into the subject group of the campaigns. The reception is drawn from the comment section on the public Facebook updates of celebrities through a case study of the American CW channel’s fictive TV-show *Supernatural* and the public Facebook profiles of its lead actors Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles, and the series regular Misha Collins (heretofore *the actors, the celebrity* or *the cast*). The focus is on the discussion surrounding the cast-launched charities and their influence based on comments from the fans themselves. Due to the resource limitations it is more beneficial to conduct an in-depth study of a particular situation in a carefully defined group than sweep a statistical survey that I feel would leave the results too superficial for this topic. This has been argued further in Chapter 4. First, as the series at the

centre of my focus is not known by everyone, I will next provide the reader with some background of the show.

*Supernatural* is an American television series created by Eric Kripke that debuted on September 13<sup>th</sup> in 2005 on the WB before becoming a part of the CW line-up in 2006. The show follows two brothers Sam (Jared Padalecki) and Dean (Jensen Ackles) Winchester who travel across the United States hunting monsters and supernatural creatures known from urban legends and are joined by the angel Castiel (Misha Collins) in Season 4. With 12 seasons (in 2016) it is the longest-running American fantasy and horror television series, its other themes including mystery, adventure and drama. In addition, the series focuses on "a stronger-than-usual familial bond" (Felschow 2010, para. 5.1) not only between the Winchesters but also between their friends, discussing the questions of what makes a family (partially answered in a quote "family don't end in blood" by the character Bobby singer, played by Jim Beaver, which has been adopted as the SPNFamily Crisis Support Network operating under Random Acts), and how far a person is ready to go for their family.

According to Catherine Johnson (2005 in Felschow 2010, para. 3.1), show that utilise elements of science fiction, fantasy and horror genres are inclined to attract strong and dedicated followings, and such a phenomenon can be detected in *Supernatural* as well. The cult fans are, according to (Felschow 2010, para. 2.3), the part of the core fandom that challenges the producers of the show and "delegitimize[s] institutional authority" (Johnson 2007, 291 in Felschow 2010, para 2.3) through various fan activities, such as openly criticising a turning point or a character trope in the show on online forums, by writing fan fiction, or through other participatory means. This is what connects them to the participatory fandom discussed by Fleming (2007), which in turn represents the type of fans most likely to take part in organised group activities. In my dissertation, these activities consist of online charity campaigns.

It is worth noting my own involvement with the *Supernatural* fandom of which I have been part of since 2011. This study is not an autoethnography, but I recognise how my long involvement with the community may have affected my approach and has provided me with data that has enabled me to shift my focus from general to more precise phenomena within the fandom. In writing this dissertation I have attempted to achieve balance between my position as a fan and a scholar by remaining as a non-participant observer.

The dissertation is structured as follows: in Chapter 2 I review some of the earlier research concerning celebrity-launched charities, fandom and online communities, and what my dissertation has to add to these studies. In Chapter 3 I introduce the research question, and in Chapter 4 I give the methods for conducting this research the findings of which are detailed in Chapter 5, and analysed further in Chapter 6.

## 2. THEORETICAL RATIONALE

I draw from modern online culture studies as well as from celebrity culture and fan community research. I start Chapter 2 by providing some insight to celebrity culture and celebrity-launched charities, and continue with a brief review of fan activism. I finish the chapter by introducing how fans have organised and how these aspects are tied in fan activism.

### 2.1. Celebrities and charities

E. Cashmore suggests that celebrities themselves make up the least interesting part about celebrity culture, the more intriguing aspects being the interest people show towards individuals “whose lives never intersect with our own and whose fortunes make no material difference to us” as well as the industry based around promoting “ordinary people” into momentary celebrity status. In the modern era celebrities have become a part of merchandise in such a way

that after acquiring just a little bit of fame it is put into use in selling of various products, such as cosmetics, cars, movies or cds, in so doing exchanging the use of their name for cash. (Cashmore 2006, 1-3.) Celebrities appearing as the face of a charity or working with or for a non-profit organisation in other ways is also common, albeit complex a phenomenon: "the involvement of celebrity can seem incongruous, often arousing resentment, when mixed with the very serious business of [the charity]. Still, many charities insist that they generate more money, and receive more publicity, for an appeal or event when it is supported by a celebrity" (Brockington 2009 in Wilson 2015, 3). However, when the celebrity has a personal connection to or experience of the issue, the message is made more powerful and believable for the audience, as demonstrated by the following quote from the Chairman of the BBC Appeals Advisory Committee (Wilson 2015, 7): "celebrities coming out with particular problems is quite useful for charities as well, particularly things like mental health, where people don't speak about the issues."

Jenkis and Shestrova (2012) have found that " the personality of celebrities, as much as the themes of popular fictions, may shape what issues fan activists embrace" as demonstrated by their example of an American screenwriter Joss Whedon's usage of his blog to raise awareness of sexual violence against women. His cause is further supported by the appearance of strong female characters in his television series attracting the kind of fans drawn to the feminist issues as the one mentioned above, thus increasing the chance of success for his campaign (Jenkins & Shestrova 2012, para. 3.3-3.4). As another example, the *Mind* charity originating from the United Kingdom was established in 1971 by the National Association of Mental Health as its first fundraising campaign addressing the issues and stigma surrounding mental health. The charity has a vast celebrity involvement with celebrity supporters and celebrity ambassadors (as defined by the campaign itself on its website<sup>1</sup>) as well as with the English comedian, actor and writer Stephen Fry as its president. On Mind's website it is revealed to have contributed to the passing

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.mind.org.uk/about-us/celebrity-support>

of legal acts against discrimination of people with mental illnesses.<sup>2</sup> The celebrities involved with the charity are reported to have or have had issues with their own mental health. This feature is also present in the *Supernatural* charity campaigns, albeit in smaller scale. Celebrity involvement in charitable campaigns either as a “mere” face promoting the campaign or as an individual with a personal connection to the cause is therefore not a particularly new phenomenon.

## 2.2. Online support networks and fans

It is the various forms of contact between individuals that make internet as a whole a social network. The concept of a *micro-support network*, bearing close resemblance to the concept of personal community networks, was introduced by Finnish Antti Koivisto in 2007 (Suominen 2009, 146) in reference to the people an internet user is connected online, such as friends, neighbours and family members, that influences the opinions and decisions of the user, provides assistance, and maintains social contact between members. Therefore the user’s browser history and so-called online biographies describe the social networks taking shape online (Uotinen 2005 in Suominen 2009, 147). As online chats and forums became more popular recreational activities it contributed to communities being transferred to cyberspace. Heinonen (2008 in Turtiainen 2009, 213) separated these communities to educational, work and leisure networks, and defines seven sub-groups for the latter: gamer communities, virtual playhouses (communal virtual worlds), matchmaking communities, hobby communities, fan communities and online crisis support networks. This dissertation studies the space where the last two interlace.

Fans have constituted a unique user group from the very beginning of online networking. In cyberspace like-minded fans from all around the world have been able to reach out to one another in various fan sites that have been

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.mind.org.uk/about-us/our-achievements>

around since the creation of personal homepages became a possibility. The Internet forums or message boards that appear alongside them has also enabled fans to engage in “activities related to the object of their affection, as well as seeking interaction with each other in organized group activities” (Fleming 2007, 2-3). This can mean the creation and sharing of fan art and fan fiction, but also the more organised forms of fan activity. Fans are known to have saved a TV-show from cancellation (Jenkins 1992 in Fleming 2007), present a petition against censorship (Nikunen 2008) and take actively part in charities, for example march in gay rights parades and raise money and awareness for various causes, such as AIDS research and mental illnesses (Jenkins & Shestrova 2012).

Fan activism is a phenomenon that is simultaneously local and transnational (Jenkins & Shestrova 2012, para. 3.7). A fandom as a group offers like-minded individuals a chance to bond and build an intercontinental community through “share[d] interests, [by] develop[ing] networks and institutions, and creat[ing] a common culture”. The interaction with like-minded people provides an environment where the individual is less likely to be judged by his or her opinions, interests or disabilities and is accepted as a member of a group (Fleming 2007). The positive impact of social interaction and social acceptance is one form of peer support that has been found to have a positive impact on an individual’s recovery and managing of his or her mental illness while preventing social isolation (see White & Dorman 2001; Dennis 2003; and Lucksted et al. 2011).

In my research I aspire to combine the aforementioned elements of celebrity involvement, fan activism and peer support: the charity campaigns studied here raise funds for “outsider” organisations (that is to say, organisations with little to no involvement with the focal fan community of Supernatural) by relying on the active participation of the fans, while simultaneously offering social support for the fans with depression or other mental illness. This sets the



framework for the actual study of the receptions these campaigns have received from the fans.

### 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this dissertation I study the personal impact the charity campaigns launched by idols have had on the fans concerned as told by them in the Facebook comments on the public profile of the *Supernatural* cast member involved with the campaign. I'm interested in finding out if the leaders of the campaigns being celebrities affects the way the fans with depression or other mental disorders perceive the campaign, and if the campaign itself as a social phenomenon contributes to the well-being of said fans. In other words, my focus is *on how the fans with depression perceive celebrity involvement in charity campaigns that raise awareness of the same mental illness, and how this reception has been justified by the fans.*

### 4. DATA AND METHODS

In this dissertation I have conducted a case study of one fan community (the *Supernatural* fandom) and more specifically its one sub-group (the fans with mental illness). According to Yin (2003 in Baxter & Jack 2008, 545) a case study is a recommended method when "(a) the focus of the study is to answer "how" and "why" questions; (b) you cannot manipulate the behaviour of those involved in the study; (c) you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study; or (d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context."

Firstly, as in this dissertation I aspire to answer the questions *how* the fans with depression perceive celebrity involvement in charity campaigns that raise awareness of the same mental illness, and *why* or *what reasons* have been given for this reception, the group studied must fall into this specific category.

Secondly, I have decided to conduct the study as a non-participant research where I analyse the already existing comments the fans in question have posted on the public Facebook walls of the involved celebrities within a certain timeframe (January 2016–November 2016), and so the behaviour of the individuals studied cannot be manipulated in any way.

Thirdly, the fan reception is tied to the celebrity-launched charity campaigns that also involve the fans themselves and so it cannot be removed from the context. Therefore, a case study is reasonable and justified a method in this dissertation.

In order to answer my questions I first aspire to define how meaningful the campaigns are to the *Supernatural* community by analysing how many times the campaigns are approximately mentioned on the “walls” of the cast’s public Facebook profiles. This provides background to how significant a topic charitable work is within the community and for the cast. This is followed by the analysis of the comments written by fans on the updates promoting these campaigns in order to determine the feelings these campaigns raise in the fans with mental illness (e.g. thankfulness, support or opposition) and how this reception is explained, which are the primary focus of this research.

The campaigns introduced operate primarily in the United States, and the majority of the fandom itself is American, though other nationalities are common. The exact age of the fans could not be determined on Facebook where the user can choose to hide their date of birth from strangers (people with whom they are not Facebook friends) or altogether. According to the fan-hosted information resource site Supernatural Wiki<sup>3</sup> the CW’s target demographic for *Supernatural* is adults aged 18-34 with emphasis on the female audience, as also suggested by the episodes of the first season being aired back-to-back with *Gilmore Girls* where Padalecki also starred and which

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Ratings>

was primarily marketed for female audience. This demographic has not been confirmed as the focus of this dissertation is more on the discourse by a certain group of fans rather than on the general fandom statistics, but it offers insight to the nature of the studied group. As the main interest is on the discourse, the gender and exact nationality of the fans have also not been determined as I feel that they have little importance from this particular viewpoint. As mentioned above the fans are assumed to be female based on the information available for public on their personal profiles, but the possibility of some of the fans being of some other gender (transsexual, intersexual, transgender, agender, genderqueer or similar) should not be overlooked.

#### 4.1. Charity campaigns

The campaigns to be studied are *Always Keep Fighting* (AKF), launched by Jared Padalecki in 2015 and its sub-campaigns *Always Keep Fighting: Love Yourself First* in 2016, *Family Always Has Your Back*, launched by Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles in 2016, *You Are Not Alone* campaign launched by Jared Padalecki, Jensen Ackles and Misha Collins, and the media scavenger hunt game *GISHWHES* ("The Greatest International Scavenger Hunt the World Has Ever Seen") and the charity organisation *Random Acts*, both founded by Misha Collins.

The AKF campaign is still active with new "versions" being launched every couple of months, but this research focuses on the campaigns launched before November 2016. The textual content found on the websites of the charities, such as the choice of wording in the introduction of the campaign and the product through which it is funded, is also briefly analysed.

Each AKF campaign is a fundraising event where the profit raised from selling shirts with the campaign's name and slogan is donated to various organisations for helping individuals suffering from depression and/or suicidal tendencies, yet

they can also be interpreted to offer emotional support by spreading awareness of depression as a mental condition and by emphasising that the depressed individuals and their friends and family are “not alone” with the illness but are supported by the *Supernatural* community:

So people are aware — though it still can use all the awareness and research funds possible — and it occurred to me [then that] a charity dealing with depression and addiction and suicidal thoughts and mental illness was something that I would love to do this T-shirt for, whenever it happened. [...] Then they insisted that I have my face on it [because] it would help add a connection and help maybe start a conversation.

- Jared Padalecki (Prudom, 2015, para. 9)

GISHWHES was founded in 2010 as a publicity stunt to help *Supernatural* win the People’s Choice Award, and due to its popularity it was renewed as an annual charitable campaign holding two Guinness World Records for the biggest scavenger hunt and one for the largest number of pledges for a charitable campaign (Prudom 2013, para. 3-4).

I conduct a study on the *Supernatural* cast’s public Facebook pages (“walls”) where I focus on what kind of messages are sent to the fans and in what form (videos/text posts/pictures/other) and what subjects are being discussed within the frame of charity campaigns and their influence.

The study has been carried out as non-participant observation and analysis of Facebook updates that have appeared on the cast’s public wall over the course of eleven months and their subsequent comments.

No exact percentage of the type of or the subject in the comments has been calculated due to time and resource limits, as one update may have 500 to 1,200 comments or more. For this reason only comments the content of which is relevant to the research topic, the influence of celebrity-run charity campaign on the fans, have been studied further. The comments that fall into other categories such as brief expressions of adoration and affection for the actor or the show, repetitions or chants, single emojis and others not related

to charity campaigns or its influence have been acknowledged but not taken into account. The same principle has been applied to the updates and their subjects as well.

#### 4.2. Charity campaigns as discussed subjects

The dialogue taking place on the *Supernatural* cast's public Facebook profiles does not follow the more traditional dialogue where the original speaker's comment is responded by another one whose observation is thereafter responded by the original speaker and so on. As I have observed in this particular case the comments of the fans to the cast member's original post are rarely answered directly by the celebrity, but instead the overall nature of the commentaries that follow, be it a certain tone (hostile, friendly, confused, hopeful) or focused on certain subjects (e.g. the show, a charity campaign, the fandom, politics) is later on annotated by the celebrity in a new update. The interaction between fans and the celebrity is therefore rather one-sided in comparison to the interaction between fans.

In analysing the updates on the cast's Facebook profiles I have divided them into sub-groups based on their general topic. For example updates that focus on the TV-show *Supernatural* by either promoting upcoming episodes or season or are filmed on set have been categorised under "Supernatural". Updates that are mostly picture-based are categorised under "Picture" even if the picture is attached to a written status. In some cases the updates fit into more than one category, for example a livestream addressing current or future campaigns may take place upon a family event (e.g. the celebrity's family may draw the slogan in sand, or the campaign may be addressed during a family holiday). In these cases the updates have been categorised based on their main subject.

During January 1<sup>st</sup> 2016-November 10<sup>th</sup> 2016 there were approximately 152 updates posted by Jared Padalecki (error marginal +/- 2). 10 of those were videos or pictures created by the fans but posted by Padalecki. At least one update had been removed shortly after posting. (See Table 1.)

The style of the updates was largely visual: in total, 90 updates were picture-based (pictures with links included) and 36 video-based. Only 16 updates consisted only of text (at times with links) with no pictures or videos attached. 50 updates in total concerned the Always Keep Fighting campaign and its sub-campaigns making up 55.6% of total updates. Together with campaigns launched by others, 68.9% of all Padalecki's updates within the time period of 11 months focused on charities and philanthropy. The majority of fan comments regarding charity campaigns, their reception and personal impact on the individuals was also found on Padalecki's wall.

Misha Collins' profile used more visual media than Padalecki's and also covered little wider subject area with politics that became the main theme in October 2016 during the United State Presidential Election (see Table 2). As Collins is the founder of one charity (Random Acts) and the philanthropist scavenger hunt game GISHWHES it is no surprise that a notable portion of his updates were charity-focused. This data was collected between January 6<sup>th</sup> 2016 and November 9<sup>th</sup> 2016.

In total there were 284 updates. 29.2% GISHWHES, Random Acts 5.6% and 7% Other charities, all but two promoting the AKF: You Are Not Alone campaign in cooperation with Jensen Ackles. In total, 41.9% of updates concerned charities and philanthropy.

On Collins' wall, the fan comments were divided between charitable acts, the series, and political discussion.

On Jensen Ackles' wall there was the least activity between January 7<sup>th</sup> and November 9<sup>th</sup> with 34 updates in total, 38% concerning charity campaigns (Always Keep Fighting: You Are Not Alone, GISHWHES) none of which were launched by Ackles but were supported and promoted by him, in number

second only to the updates of the TV-show that make up 44% of total content. The majority of updates were video and livestream based. (See Table 3). The fan comments on Ackles' wall predominantly concern the series and its upcoming episodes, conventions where fans either have met or hope to meet the actor(s), and the updates themselves regardless of the subject of the update.

This content study shows that charity campaigns are one of the main subjects on the *Supernatural* cast's Facebook walls, which in turn reflects the importance the campaigns are given in discussion.

## 5. RESULTS

Regardless of the public nature of the platform, the fans share their often very sensitive stories of their personal struggles with mental illness or other hardships of life without feeling the need to disguise their identity behind a nickname. It is likely that while their comments are available for anyone to read the participants "may feel they are part of a trusted community and use the space to communicate intimate details of their lives" (Eynon et al. 2008, 26). It is also possible that while these stories are shared on the celebrity's social media site they are not realistically expected to be answered or even read by said celebrity, as suggested by the comments following the rare instances in which the stories are acknowledged via a "like" or a comment or by being shared by the celebrity. In these cases the tone of the reaction is always positively surprised, and rarely do the fans wonder if the celebrity is going to acknowledge their comment or not. Instead the comments are responded by other fans with encouraging words and by sharing their own stories to show solidarity.

### 5.1. Fan reception of celebrity involvement in charity campaigns

The profit raised from selling of the campaign products is donated to charity organisations founded on the basis of providing aid for the people in need and/or spreading information of the subject (cancer, mental illness). However, the campaigns themselves provide not monetary but spiritual and social support as well, as becomes apparent in the comment section of the Facebook updates about the campaigns where fans share their stories of how the campaign has had an impact on their lives. In most cases it is not only the issue of mental illness, especially depression, being given prominence but also learning that the people the fans look up to may also suffer from the same disorder as the fans.

As the profiles in social media are public, in order to preserve the anonymity of the fans their names have been censored, and any distinctive writing style has been altered closer to standard language within the limits of not changing the core of the sentence. The fans have been given random numbers to distinguish between individuals. It is worth noting that the discussion on social media concerning charity campaigns is largely dominated by female fans, male fans participating more in discussion concerning the series. As the majority of celebrity updates on charity campaigns was found on Padalecki's wall with aforementioned 68.9% in total, most of the quotes originate from the comment section of Padalecki's updates as well.

### 5.1.1. Battling stigma

FAN-148: Hello, I just wanted to say that thank you for what you Jensen Ackles are doing. *There's always been a stigma about mental issues* [...] and there are times that we don't seek help because of what we think people would say or what it would do with our career. It's getting better and it's really amazing to see that you guys are there and shown us that it's okay to not be okay and to seek help.

October 2016

Fan-148 brings up the concept of *stigma* often associated with mental illness. Goffman (1963) defines stigma as a discrediting attribute of the self that



diminishes the social actor in the eyes of others if discovered. This forced the individual to manage his or her personal information and social relationships to avoid becoming discredited, greatly restricting the individual's life and possibly leading to isolation and "imped[ing] personal recovery" (Lucksted et al. 2011, 51). The stigma of mental illnesses such as depression is often a notable cause of concern for the individuals with depression (Griffiths, Christensen & Jorm 2008, para. 1).

FAN-24: I am a child of the 60's/70's and back then we didn't get help, it was a cause for shame to have anxiety/panic or depression. Thank God the attitude toward mental health is changing. [...] the amazing thing about the SPN family [is that] you truly are surrounded by people who care.

February 2016

Fan-24 attributes the idea of shame to the discrimination she feels she has faced. From her perspective, a mental illness is a shameful, discrediting feature. In both the cases of stigma and shame, the individual's projected self (for instance, the appearance of a mentally healthy individual) has become threatened leading not only to the discrediting of the individual but also to her shame, and possibly her primary social group's shame as well for they are the ones sustaining a discrediting value attributed to the mental illness. For this reason stigma is present in the case of Fan-24 as well. As mentioned in the former chapters, one of the charity campaigns' goal is to raise awareness of mental illnesses and to reduce and even eliminate the stigma associated with them. In Fan-24's comment it is suggested that this open discussion of mental disorders has led to the change in the public attitude towards mental health. It is also suggested that she has found support in the fandom through the charitable activities and general acceptance of people like her.

In battling stigma, the individual's sense of empowerment becomes a significant factor. As found by Rüsçh et al. (2006), perceived discrimination (as suggested by Fan-148 in "*we don't seek help because of what we think people would say or what it would do with our career*") can lead to low self-esteem and even self-stigma where the individual applies the negative discrediting

element or stereotype to themselves, whereas low perceived discrimination prevents self-stigmatisation. The charity campaigns launched by *Supernatural* cast battle this discrimination with their rhetoric that actively includes the people with mental illness as a part of the Supernatural “family” while also reminding them of their worth (“You are enough”, the “You Are Not Alone” and “Love Yourself First” campaign titles). This reminder as well as the availability for an individual to discuss the threats they may feel to threaten their worth and ability “is a strong interpersonal resource to counteract the effects of self-esteem threats” (Dennis 2003, 325) through attentive listening, encouragement, reassurance and expressions of caring and reflection (Dennis 2003).

FAN-221: Hey Jared [...] I wanted to tell you that [the Always Keep Fighting campaign is] one of the influences that encouraged me to go to counselling...today was my first session and it really helped me! I am feeling a lot more relaxed about talking to people about what I'm going through.

October 2016

One of the recurring themes in the comments is the relief that comes from mental illness being publically acknowledged which the fans interpret as a proof of the acceptability of their condition. Fan-221 writes about “feeling a lot more relaxed” due to the positive impact, or inspiration as she words it, has encouraged her to be more open about her struggles with depression. Here parallels to the issues with stigma brought up by Fan-148 can be detected. Several scholars (see Barney et al. 2006; Vogel et al. 2007; and Griffiths et al. 2008) have agreed people with depression to be reluctant to pursue professional help due to stigma.

### *5.1.2. Empowerment through charity campaigns*

The main factor discussed in this section is peer support, while the concepts of stigma and self-stigma in particular discussed in the former chapter are present as well. Self-stigma can be determined as internalised stigma where

the individual has accepted the common discrimination and applies it to themselves in the form of self-stigmatisation (Rüsch et al. 2006).

FAN-12: Thank you [...] for telling us it's okay to speak up and say "hey, I deal with anxiety and depression" or "I have had thoughts of suicide" or whatever the case may be [...] showing that it is okay for us to talk about it and support one another and say #YouAreNotAlone and to #AlwaysKeepFighting.

February 2016

Fan-12 brings up the importance of being able to talk about her condition. This I feel is a way of reducing self-stigmatisation by establishing ill mental health as a non-taboo subject that can be addressed without the individuals involved being stigmatised for not successfully performing the role of a mentally healthy individual. Similar themes are found in the following quote:

FAN-37: I am an addict and I also have been diagnosed with anxiety & depression. It really does help knowing that no matter how lonely I may feel when I'm having an episode, that I'm not actually alone in this battle!

February 2016

Fan-37 carries not only the stigma of a mental illness but also the one of an addict. However, she, like Fan-12, has found support in the fan community that she described as helpful. Rüsch et al. (2006, 399) find that the reaction people have towards the discrimination they face depends on "the level of identification with the group of people with mental illness. If they do not identify with this group, they are likely to remain indifferent, because they do not believe that public stigma refers to them. If, however, they show a strong sense of group identification, they are likely to react with empowerment and righteous anger." In the case of Fan-12 and Fan-37, both clearly feel strong identification with their peers with mental illness causing them to worry about the reaction the outsiders may show should their stigma be discovered, but they also identify with the supporting and de-stigmatising group of peers that gives them strength to withstand discrimination and the symptoms of their illness. I will address this further in the following section.

### 5.1.3. Representation matters

This section is connected to the former sub-chapter 5.1.2. as representation and empowerment are often linked. The chapters have been divided based on the tone in fan comments: *empowerment* is here interpreted as pertaining to the positive impact from the collective peer support of the fan community. With *representation* I refer to the celebrity portrayal of mental health and the struggles it entails. This distinguishment has been done due to the difference the fans with depression themselves make between peer support and idol support:

FAN-126: I [have] both [severe] anxiety and depression, which runs in my family [...] It has caused me problems with school, social settings, and everyday life. [...] *Supernatural* was EXACTLY the thing I needed during the time not to feel lonely, sad and anxious [...] it made me feel amazing that there was someone in Hollywood representing people with mental illnesses.

October 2016

Peer support in the online social group of a fandom among its other features also enabled the individual to feel themselves belonging to a group that supports them, accepts them and shares similar interests with them. This empathetic relationship can be argued to be one reason behind the fandom perceiving their group a family. Upon conducting this research the concept of *family* was found to be a recurring theme that should be analysed further. This is discussed in the chapter below.

## 5.2. The symbolic meaning of family

In both the TV-show *Supernatural* and its fandom, family is one of the strongest motifs, as also recognised by Padalecki in a Variety Magazine interview:

"[...] every season, Sam and Dean are dealing with something greater than themselves and they have to either rely on the help of another, or a greater influence to help them get through it."

-Jared Padalecki (Prudon, Variety Magazine 12<sup>th</sup> March 2015)

"Family" is numerously referenced throughout the show, in both the characters' lines as well as in the episode titles, such as: *Family Remains* (s4 ep11), *Family Matters* (s6 ep07), *Mommy Dearest* (s6 ep19), *Brother's Keeper* (s10 ep23), *O Brother Where Art Thou?* (s11 ep09) and *All in the Family* (s11 ep21). Family also appears in the titles of the charity campaigns: In the *Jared & Jensen: Family Has Your Back* campaign in September 2016, the campaign is introduced with the quote "It's been 12 years together which makes us all family" (see Image 1). The campaign promotions on Facebook are also often accompanied by a hashtag #SPNFamily that is also used by the fans in reference to the community, and it is also repeated in the fan comments:

FAN 86: [People], it's ok to not be able to afford the merch. These shirts, hats, and hoodies don't define this family. They're just a symbol. This family is made of love, kindness, and support. You are all loved whether you can buy gear or not. Stay safe and always keep fighting.

In Introduction I have mentioned how the question of how a family is defined is a strong and recurring element in the show, and something embraced by the fandom as well. In the *Supernatural* series the characters have been shown being willing to sacrifice everything for family. Similarly, in the fandom *family* represents the readiness to support members of the community (and outside the community) regardless of their weaknesses or disabilities. While the fans, unlike the characters in the series, are not expected to give up their lives for their peers, some monetary sacrifices are willingly made, as demonstrated in the following conversation that took place on Misha Collins' Facebook wall when the You Are Not Alone campaign was launched:

FAN A: Excuse me Jensen or Misha. If either one of you could loan me the money for the shirt, I could pay you back in two weeks; I don't want to miss this.

FAN B: I'll get you one, [FAN A]. Just pay it forward next time there's a YANA campaign.

FAN A: Oh my gosh [FAN B]. This means so much to me. I would tell you why but that would take a really really long time. Thank you!

FAN C: This is why our fandom is a family.

As seen in the quote, Fan A is willing to participate in the charity campaign but cannot yet afford any of the products and is asking for the celebrities leading the campaign to give her a chance to participate by lending her the money she needs (other fans have shown similar behaviour by asking the cast to extend the campaign by a couple of days). Fan B steps in and "sacrifices" the money Fan A needs by offering to buy her the shirt. However, Fan B is not asking for their money to be returned but instead requests Fan A to show another fan the same kindness in the future. Fan C, an onlooker so far, considers this act of philanthropy towards a peer to be the proof of the familiness in the community.

Based on these observations it appears that the strong cohesiveness within the community as well as the shared lengthy history are the main factors that give the community the symbolic meaning of a family. One way for the fans to express belonging to this group is wearing the merchandise through which the charity campaigns are funded.

The merchandise surrounding the charity campaigns function as icons for the campaigns and the *Supernatural* community itself, as each item carries the campaign name and slogan as well as the pictures of the lead stars or other identifiable symbols for the TV-show (such as the anti-possession symbol that appears in the show, or the 1967 Chevrolet Impala). In larger scale they symbolise the communal aspect of the fandom: by purchasing a shirt or other article of clothing linked to the TV-show, the community built around it, and a charity campaign the individual promotes themselves as a member of a specific community as well as a philanthropist. Solomon discusses the role of products as social stimuli, and argues as follows:

1. "The symbolism embedded in many products is the primary reason for their purchase and use.
2. Individuals are evaluated and placed in a social nexus to a significant degree by the products which surround them.
3. The reflexive evaluation construct implies that the product symbolism which is instrumental in assigning meaning to others is also used by individuals to assign social identity to themselves.
4. The outcome of this self-definition process guides behaviour via the social script that is evoked.
5. Symbolic consumption can exert an a priori effect on role definition and interaction, especially in situations where internalized behavioural responses are lacking." (Solomon 1983, 327.)

In the *Supernatural* fandom similarities can be perceived. The fans (either with or without depression) for the most part do not buy the products for the sake of consuming but because of the symbolism of philanthropy and being a part of a group they carry (1). Owning a product with a campaign logo can be argued to express to others that the owner has indeed donated money to a charitable cause and is therefore an active member of the community in this respect, setting him or her apart from the fans who have not participated in the activities for one reason or another (2 & 3). This research is not, however, concerned with why fan/charity merchandise is bought, and so drawing conclusions from Solomon's list can only be done on a rather superficial level. Nonetheless what matters for this research is the meaning of family being attributed to the merchandise, campaigns and the fan community alike. In this way owning a part of the merchandise can be argued to be its own variety of peer support by enhancing the sense of belonging to an empowering and accepting community.

## 6. DISCUSSION

To sum up, it has been found that active celebrity participation in campaigns that raise awareness of mental illnesses has a positive, supportive effect on those fans who themselves suffer from a mental illness. While the full fandom itself is too vast to qualify as a support network, the whole of the fandom involving also the fans who simply watch the series and are not active participants in the fandom activities, through the charity campaigns it creates micro support networks within the larger main network. In addition, the family rhetoric contributes to strengthening the social bonds between the individuals.

The fan reception found in this study has been mostly positive. It is still worth pointing out that not all fans find celebrity participation necessary. However, these comments are more likely to come from fans who themselves have little personal connection to the subject of the charity campaign. The fans who report suffering of having suffered from a mental illness are on the other hand more likely to consider celebrity participation empowering.

### 6.1. Ethics and challenges

In social research the key ethical principles are informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and privacy, and avoidance of harm. Issues rise with questions about how informed the consent can be and is it always meaningful or even possible. In addition, guaranteeing anonymity requires ensuring the individuals cannot be identified from the data. However, in cyberspace and especially on social media sites the users often appear under their own name and picture, and so tracing comments back to the individual who posted them is more probable than identifying the respondent from offline data. Moreover, as individuals state their opinions in public under their presumably correct personal information, it raises the question about meaningful consent as the data is already accessible by other internet users worldwide. In this case it can



be argued that by recognising the public nature of the social media domain the permission for data usage has been given and the individual is aware of the possibility of their opinions and statements being linked back to them.

However, as internet is divided into communities in which the participant may feel they are part of a trusted, enclosed group, the researcher may be seen as an invader of such space.

Another issue to consider is the privacy of celebrities, or lack thereof.

As the personal life of a celebrity is so readily considered public information they can be argued being denied access to what Goffman (1956) defines as *back region* or *backstage*, a place where the desired front, or a collection of symbolic resources used to sustain a certain performance in front of "the audience" (other people), need not be maintained like they are in the front region: thus a back region is a "place where the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude" (Goffman 1956, 70). In other words, on backstage an individual can step out of character and enjoy privacy. Some members of society are, however, denied this possibility in various ways. Notable examples of such persons are the homeless whose access to the backstage is limited due to their public living environment, as well as celebrities whose backstage is repeatedly breached by the public. Drake (2007, 219) raises the subject of *celebrity ownership*: the property is not as much the individual himself but rather than the image and its relation to the support of the masses that ultimately enable stardom. "Celebrity power depends upon the audiences and the media's investment in the status and exceptional nature of celebrity. At the same time, celebrities need to regulate and control the ownership of their images to maintain a monopoly over themselves as individualised brands." (Drake 2007, 219.) The right of privacy as an individual right defends against personal intrusion through anonymity, solitude and secrecy (Gavison 1980 in Drake 2007). In the life of celebrity the violation of this right is defined as "unwarranted intrusion", most notably in the case of media and freelance paparazzi.

This kind of forced publicity raises ethical questions for the researcher: by not granting a celebrity the same right to privacy as is guaranteed for non-celebrities, is the researcher taking advantage of that person? If so, should all future researchers concerning well-known individuals be conducted anonymously, and if not, why is this specific group excluded from this ethical principle?

As mentioned above in my dissertation the study is conducted on a public platform where the user chooses to reveal their name and picture to other users. This presents a challenge for the principle of anonymity with “laypersons” alone, whereas in the case of celebrities the publicity is amplified.

## 6.2. Further research

My dissertation is a micro-level research conducted as a single case study. Further study is required to determine the larger scale effect charity campaigns have on the fans and the differences between fandoms not only in how useful the campaigns are found but also in the attitude shown towards such campaigns. Further study is also required regarding the change in online fan communities as discovered in Chapter 5 with the symbolic meaning of family being given to the community to highlight the strength of the social cohesiveness within the group.

As found by Webb et al. (2008, 109) the majority of research concerning the internet usage of young people emanates from the United States of America, raising a need for similar research conducted in other countries. Fan activism as described in this dissertation has not yet taken hold in Finland, and therefore it would be advisable to focus such studies in larger countries with a stronger fan culture. Alternatively it is possible to study in what ways Finnish fans may be involved with foreign campaigns and fan activism via internet, the dimensions of celebrity participation in charity, as well as how online

communities contribute to the mental well-being of Finnish internet users. This type of research can be utilised in planning the rehabilitation of people with mental illness. As one possible outcome online support groups can be recommended alongside face-to-face psychotherapy or other treatment, as has also been suggested by Webb et al. (2008, 112). Lastly, more research could be conducted on the purchase of and the meaning given to merchandise the fans can buy and how owning specific fan products may influence the interpersonal relationships within the fandom.

## 7. BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barney, L.J; Griffiths K.M; Jorm, A.F. and Christensen, H. (2006) Stigma about depression and its impact on help-seeking intentions. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 40(1), 51-54.
- Cashmore, E. (2006) *Celebrity culture*. USA: Routledge.
- Cheryl, H. and Alison, A. (1998) *Theorizing fandom: fans, subculture, and identity*. Hampton Press.
- Costello, V. and Moore, B. (2007) Cultural Outlaws An Examination of Audience Activity and Online Television Fandom. *Television & New Media*, 8(2), pp. 124-143.
- Dennis, C-L. (2003) Peer support within a health care context: a concept analysis. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 40(2003), 321–332.
- Drake, P. (2007) Who owns celebrity? Privacy, publicity and the legal regulation of celebrity images. In: Redmond, S. and Holmes, S. ed. 2007 *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*. Sage.
- Fernback, J. (2007) Beyond the diluted community concept: a symbolic interactionist perspective on online social relations. *New Media & Society*, 9(1). 49-69.
- Fleming, L. (2007) *Participatory fandom in American culture: A qualitative case study of DragonCon attendees*. Graduate thesis, University of South Florida.
- Goffman, E. (1956) *The presentation of self in everyday life*. University of Edinburgh Social Sciences Research Centre.
- Goffman, E. (1963) *Stigma*. London: Penguin.
- Herzog, A. (2014) "We, the Fans": Power in the Democratic Archive of Fanfiction. Doctoral thesis, University of Regensburg.
- Lewis, L.A. (2001) *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*. London: Routledge.
- Lucksted, A; Drapalski, A; Calmes, C; Forbes, C; DeForge, B. and Boyd, J. (2011) Ending Self-Stigma: Pilot Evaluation of a New Intervention to Reduce Internalized Stigma Among People with Mental Illnesses. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 35(1), 51–54.

- Mahoney, T. (2013) Exploring the influence of social media on future intentions of charity sport participants. Doctoral thesis, University of Louisville.
- Marwick, A. and Boyd, D. (2011) To See and Be Seen: Celebrity Practice on Twitter. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*. 17(2). 139–158.
- Marx, G.T. and Wood, J.L. (1975) Strands of Theory and Research in Collective Behavior. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 1(August 1975). 363-428.
- McNeil, B.J. (2009) Building Subcultural Community Online and Off: An Ethnographic Analysis of the CBLocals Music Scene. Communication Dissertations, Department of Communication, Georgia State University.
- Nikunen, K. (2008) Uusia katseita faniudesta faniuksiin. In: Nikunen, K. ed. 2008. *Fanikirja. Tutkimuksia nykyculttuurin fani-ilmiöistä*. Vajaakoski: Gummerus. 7-12.
- McPhail, C. (2006) The Crowd and Collective Behavior: Bringing Symbolic Interaction Back In. *Symbolic Interaction*, 29(4). 433–463.
- Rüsch, N; Lieb, K; Bohus, M. and Corrigan, P.W. (2006) Self-Stigma, Empowerment, and Perceived Legitimacy of Discrimination Among Women With Mental Illness. *Psychiatric Services*, 57(3), 399–402.
- Solomon, M.R. (1983) The Role of Products as Social Stimuli: A Symbolic Interactionism Perspective. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 10(3) December, 1983. 319-329.
- Suominen, J. (2009) Kaiken maailman tieto? Internet tietämisen kohteena, lähteenä ja välineenä. In: Saarikoski, P; Suominen, J; Turtiainen, R. and Östman, S. ed. 2009. *Funetista Facebookiin. Internetin kulttuurihistoriaa*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus. 116-156.
- Turtiainen, R. (2009) Tunne netissä. In: Saarikoski, P; Suominen, J; Turtiainen, R. and Östman, S. ed. 2009. *Funetista Facebookiin. Internetin kulttuurihistoriaa*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus. 193-233.
- Webb, M; Burns, J. and Collin, P. (2008) Early Intervention in the Real World. Providing online support for young people with mental health difficulties: challenges and opportunities explored. *Early Intervention in Psychiatry*, 2008(2), 108–113.

- White, M. and Dorman, S.M. (2001) Receiving social support online: implications for health education. *Health Education Research*, 16(6), 693-707.
- Wilson, M. (2015) The Celebrity Effect: An Exploratory Study of the Relationship between Celebrity and Charitable Giving using BBC Charity Appeals data. Centre for Philanthropy Working Paper, University of Kent.
- Vogel, D.L; Wade, N.G. and Hackler, A.H. (2007) Perceived Public Stigma and the Willingness to Seek Counseling: The Mediating Roles of Self-Stigma and Attitudes Toward Counseling. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 54(1), 40-50.
- Zubernis, L.S. and Larsen, K. (2014) *Fan Phenomena: Supernatural*. United Kingdom: Intellect Books.

### 7.1. Online resources

- Baxter, P. and Jack, S. (2008) Qualitative Case Study Methodology: Study Design and Implementation for Novice Researchers. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(4), 544-559. [Online] [Accessed 30.12.2016] <<http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol13/iss4/2>>
- Eynon, R; Fry, J. & Schroeder, R. (2008) The Ethics of Internet Research. In: Fielding, R; Lee, R.M. & Blank, G. ed. 2014. *The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods*. [Accessed 4.12.2016] <<http://sk.sagepub.com/reference/the-sage-handbook-of-online-research-methods>>
- Felschow, L. (2010) "Hey, check it out, there's actually fans": (Dis)empowerment and (mis)representation of cult fandom in *Supernatural*. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 4(2010), editorial. [E-journal] [Accessed December 30<sup>th</sup> 2016] <<http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/134/142Praxis>>
- Griffiths, K.M; Christensen, H. and Jorm, A.F. (2008) Predictors of depression

stigma. *BMC Psychiatry* 8(25). [Online] [Accessed December 22<sup>nd</sup> 2016]  
<<http://bmcp psychiatry.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-244X-8-25>>

Jenkins, H. and Shresthova, S. (2012) Up, up, and away! The power and potential of fan activism. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 10(2012), editorial. [E-journal]  
<<http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/435/305>>

Mind. (1971) [Online] <<http://www.mind.org.uk>>

People's Choice Awards. (1975) [Online] <<http://www.peopleschoice.com/pca>>

Prudom, L. (July 26<sup>th</sup> 2013) 'Supernatural' Season 9: Misha Collins Talks Castiel's Human Side, Sex Scenes, Random Acts And GISHWHES. *The Huffington Post*. [Online] [Accessed December 12<sup>th</sup> 2016]  
<[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/26/supernatural-season-9-misha-collins\\_n\\_3656950.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/26/supernatural-season-9-misha-collins_n_3656950.html)>

Prudom, L. (March 12<sup>th</sup> 2015) 'Supernatural' Star Jared Padalecki Talks Depression and Why You Should 'Always Keep Fighting'. *Variety*. [Online] [Accessed September 8<sup>th</sup> 2016] <<http://variety.com/2015/tv/people-news/jared-padalecki-always-keep-fighting-depression-suicide-twloha-1201451708>>

## 7.2 Charity campaigns

Always Keep Fighting Campaign. AKF campaign 2015.

<<https://represent.com/jared>>

Always keep Fighting: Love Yourself First. AKF sub-campaign 2016.

<<https://represent.com/jared/love-yourself-first-hoodie>>

Jared & Jensen: Family Has Your Back. AKF sub-campaign 2016.

<<https://represent.com/jaredjensenfamily/12-year-anniversary-limited-edition-campaign>>

You Are Not Alone Campaign. AKF sub-campaign 2016.

<<https://international.creationstands.com/products/jensen-misha-you-are-not-alone-campaign>>

Random Acts. 2009. <<http://www.randomacts.org>>



## Appendices

### i. Image 1.

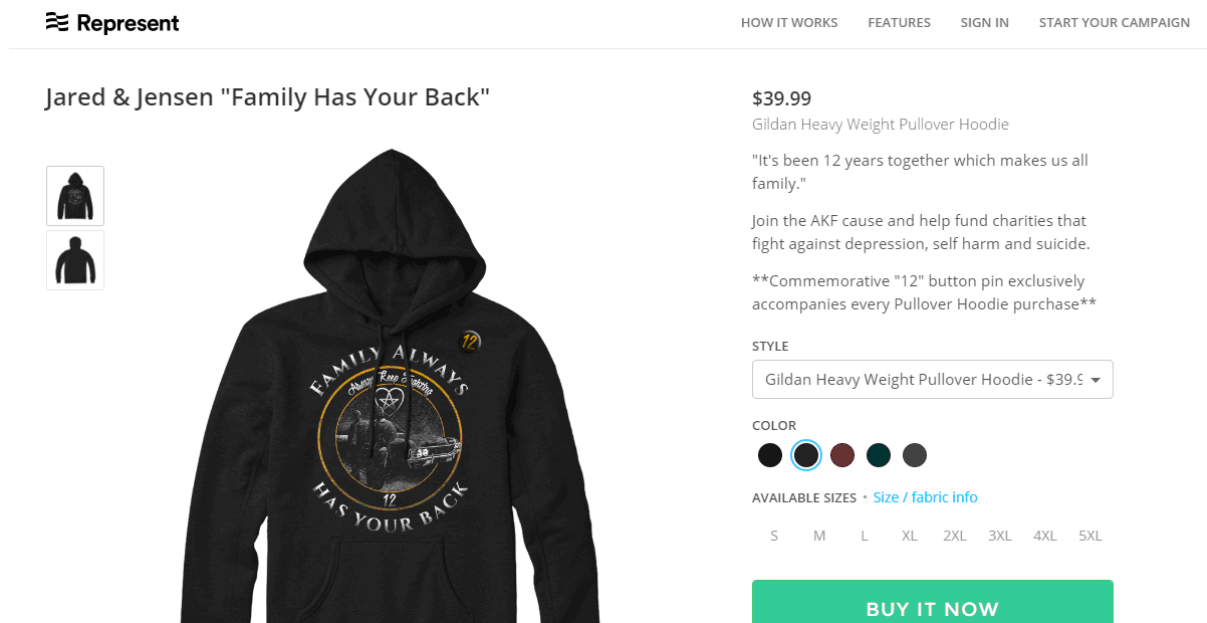


IMAGE 1. Screenshot of the Family Always Has Your Back campaign website 29.9.2016, Represent.com.

### ii. Table 1.

TABLE 1. Categorisation of updates on Jared Padalecki's public Facebook profile. January 1<sup>st</sup> 2016-November 10<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<i>Padalecki, J.</i>	Personal life	Charity		Work		Other themes
		Own campaigns	Campaigns by others	Supernatural	Other	
Picture	19	36	1	17	3	14
Video	2	13	7*	12	1	1
Text	1	1	3	5	0	6

\*Two video updates overlap with the second and third category, and one with the third and the fourth category. In this table all are included in *Campaigns by others* as this category was shared by all three.

iii. Table 2.

TABLE 2. Categorisation of updates on Misha Collins’ public Facebook profile. January 6<sup>th</sup> 2016 to November 9<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<i>Collins, M.</i>	Personal life	Charity			Super-natural	Politics	Other themes
		GISHWHES	Random Acts	Other charities			
Picture	9	32	3	6	19	9	22
Video	11	35*	4**	10	23	27	17
Text	0	16	9	4	7	9	12

\* Two videos in this category overlapped with Personal life.

\*\* One video in this category overlaps with the Other charity section

iv. Table 3.

TABLE 3. Categorisation of updates on Jensen Ackles’ public Facebook profile. January 7<sup>th</sup> 2016 and November 9<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<i>Ackles, J.</i>	Personal life	Charity		Work	Other themes
		AKF	GISHWHES	Supernatural	
Picture	6*	4	0	6	4
Video	3**	8	1	9	2
Text	1	0	0	0	0

\* One update overlaps with Supernatural

\*\* Two updates overlap with Supernatural