AGREEMENTS AND DISAGREEMENTS IN ONLINE FAN DISCOURSE

Master's thesis

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract

Internetistä on tullut merkittävä apuväline ihmisten välisessä viestinnässä. Se on tarjonnut myös faneille helpon tavan kommunikoida ja osallistua erilaisiin faniuden aktiviteetteihin tehden samalla faniudesta entistä näkyvämpää. Tutkielman aiheena on samanmielisyyden ja erimielisyyden ilmaiseminen Internetin englanninkielisellä keskustelupalstalla, jonka aiheena on amerikkalainen tv-sarja *Supernatural*. Keskustelupalsta on osa The Internet Movie database -sivustoa (www.imdb.com), joka kerää tietoa elokuvista ja tv-sarjoista. Tutkielmassa yhdistyy faniuden ja tietokonevälitteisen viestinnän osa-alueet. Samanmielisyyden ja erimielisyyden ilmaisemista on tutkittu mm. puhutussa kielessä, mutta aiheesta on suhteellisen vähän tutkimusta tietokonevälitteisessä keskustelussa. Tutkielma siis osaltaan täyttää tätä aukkoa aiemmassa tutkimuksessa.

Tutkielman tarkoituksena oli selvittää, kuinka keskustelupalstan osanottajat ilmaisevat samanmielisyyttä ja erimielisyyttä. Aineisto koostuu viestiketjuista, jotka kerättiin keskustelupalstalta viikon aikajaksolla syyskuussa 2010. Aineiston analysointi perustuu tutkimukseen, jossa Baym (1996) luokitteli verkkokeskustelussa samanmielisyyttä ja erimielisyyttä ilmaisevien viestien sisältämät elementit. Tutkimuksessa hyödynnettiin myös määrällistä analyysiä, jotta saataisiin selville kuinka usein eri elementit toistuvat aineistossa. Analyysin avulla tarkasteltiin mistä elementeistä viestit koostuvat ja miten osanottajat hyödyntävät eri elementtejä ilmaistessaan samanmielisyyttä ja erimielisyyttä.

Tutkimus osoitti, että samanmielisyyttä ja erimielisyyttä ilmaisevat viestit rakentuivat useimmiten samoista tai vastaavista elementeistä keskustelupalstalla. Samanmielisyyttä ilmaistiin kuitenkin viesteissä usein selkeämmin kuin erimielisyyttä. Viestit sisälsivät samanlaisia elementtejä ja rakenteita kuin aiemmassa tutkimuksessa on havaittu, mutta samanmielisyyden ja erimielisyyden ilmaisemisessa oli enemmän vaihtelua keskustelupalstalla. Suurin osa viesteistä koostui useista elementeistä mutta varsinkin samanmielisyyttä ilmaisevat viestit saattoivat olla hyvinkin yksinkertaisia.

Asiasanat – Keywords Computer-mediated communication, agreements and disagreements, fan discourse, discussion forums
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1 INTRODUCTION

computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become a part of everyday life for a vast number of people in both their personal and professional lives. The Internet offers people a fast and easy way to communicate with other people on a global scale. It has also offered an important platform for fans to communicate with each other and participate in fan practices (Nikunen 2005: 97). This study looks at online fan discourse on a message board dedicated for discussing the television series *Supernatural* within the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) website. IMDb is a popular website that archives information about movies and television shows. At the time of collecting the data for this study, it also hosted an actively used message board system for people to discuss movie and tv related topics, which, however, has since been closed. Discussion forum is a well-established medium that provides people an online environment to discuss different topics with others and express their opinions. Although the development of technology has allowed more possibilities for audio-visual communication, text-based forms of CMC, such as discussion forums, are still widely used and remain popular. Thus, looking at how people communicate on discussion forums is relevant.

Linguistic research into CMC is still a relatively new area of study. Early research on language and CMC dates back to the 1980s with more serious interest in the subject emerging in the 1990s (Herring 2001: 613). Since then the focus of research in CMC has moved from the impact of technology on the use of language into considering the social diversity and variety of group practices (Androutsopoulos 2006: 421). This study looks at CMC in the context of a fan group and describes the way this particular group, i.e. the participants on the *Supernatural* message board, express their opinions and communicate with each other through the discussion forum. Discussing a tv series on an online forum is one example of a wide variety of fan activities that can be found on the Internet. What makes it interesting to examine how fans express themselves and negotiate opinions online is their enthusiasm for the topic of discussion.

Fan culture in general is a topical subject of study. Fans as a phenomenon seemed to have gained much more visibility in recent years, and have moved more into

mainstream culture. The Internet provided fans a public medium that increased the visibility of fan culture (Jenkins 2006: 135-136). Indeed, the use of the Internet and intermediality in general is a typical feature of fandom (Hirsjärvi and Kovala 2007: 248). Thus, looking at fan practices in the context of CMC is important. Furthermore, larger audiences are developing a more fan-like approach toward media products, which is referred to as fanification of audiences (Nikunen 2005: 345). Thus, the way fans utilize CMC and online environments could affect larger audiences.

As mentioned above, the message board examined in this study is dedicated to a tv series called *Supernatural*. It is an American drama series that utilizes horror and fantasy themes in its narrative, and it has gained a cult following over the years. The series has a very active fan base with a strong online presence. *Supernatural* first aired in 2005 and is still running at the time of writing this, making it quite a long-running tv series. The choice of subject for this study is based on my own interests in both the online fandom and the series being discussed. I have followed *Supernatural* since its first season aired. Although I am not actively involved in the *Supernatural* fandom, I have observed different fan practices of the fandom online.

The aim of this study is to examine specifically how agreements and disagreements are expressed by the participants on the *Supernatural* message board. Expressing opinions and agreeing and disagreeing with other people's assessments is a part of everyday human interaction. It is normal for people to express their knowledge by making assessments as they participate in social activities, and others can co-participate by agreeing or disagreeing (Pomerantz 1984: 57-63). Furthermore, the Internet has offered people an easy way to express their opinions to a larger group of people and to respond to other people's opinions. It also allows people to do so anonymously, which can affect the way people express themselves. Discussion forums in particular provide people with a platform to express their opinions and discuss and debate various topics. Thus, agreeing and disagreeing with other participants is a typical part of communication on discussion forums. As CMC has become a significant medium for interaction for many, looking at the way people express themselves and particularly how they express agreement and disagreement online is important.

Agreements and disagreements have been previously studied within the field of pragmatics and through conversation analysis. Thus, agreements and disagreements have been studied in the context of spoken language. However, fewer studies have been done on the subject in the context of CMC, and therefore more research in how agreements and disagreements are expressed online is needed. Baym (1996) studied a Usenet discussion group for soap opera fans and categorized different message components used to structure agreements and disagreements within the group. This study utilizes Baym's categorical scheme in analyzing posts collected form the *Supernatural* message board. The data for this study consists of a set of message threads discussing the first episode of the sixth season of *Supernatural*. The analysis of the data utilizes both a qualitative and a quantitative approach. First, the messages are analyzed to see what message components are used to construct the agreements and disagreements expressed by the participants on the message board. Second, this study looks at how frequently different message components appear in the data.

This study is organized into 9 chapters. Chapters 2 to 5 describe the theoretical background and chapters 6 to 9 describe the present study. Chapter 2 is focused on the study of computer-mediated communication from the point of view of linguistics, including the use of language on discussion forums. Chapter 3 describes the characteristics of a discussion forum as a medium. Chapter 4 is dedicated to fandom research and discusses fan practices, communities, online television fandom and also the characteristics of cult fandoms, including *Supernatural*. Chapter 5 looks at previous research on the subject of agreements and disagreements in both spoken language and online discussion. Chapter 6 describes the design of the present study, including the aims of the study, the collection of data and the method of analyzing it. Chapter 7 presents the findings of this study, which are then further discussed in chapter 8. Chapter 9 looks at some of the possibilities for further research on the subject matter.

2 COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION AND LINGUISTICS

This chapter looks at the study of computer-mediated communication from the point of view of linguistics and the use of language in online discussion forums. First, I will discuss how linguistic research into online communication begun, how the landscape of computer-mediated communication has changed over the years and how the focus of research has shifted from a technology centered point of view to a more social one. Second, I will look at linguistic features that have been seen as typical of language used in computer-mediated communication and specifically on discussion forums.

2.1 The study of computer-mediated communication

Computer-mediated communication, or CMC, refers to a vast variety of different forms of interaction through computer networks, such as email, Facebook and Twitter, to name only a few. Thus, finding a definition that would comprehensively describe CMC seems a difficult task. Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic (2004: 15) define the term computer-mediated communication loosely as "any human communication achieved through, or with the help of, computer technology". Barnes (2002: 4) offers a more detailed description of CMC, which, while placing the emphasis on the technology, also draws attention to the diversity of CMC:

> Today, the term computer-mediated communication (CMC) is used to refer to a wide range of technologies that facilitate both human communication and the interactive sharing of information through computer networks, including e-mail, discussion groups, newsgroups, chat, instant messages, and Web pages.

The aforementioned definition by Barnes does not, off course, cover all forms of CMC, and as technology continues to develop, new modes of computer-mediated communication continue to emerge.

Indeed, according Herring (2013: 6), "communication technologies are increasingly moving beyond computers". Mobile devices such as smart phones provide people with the possibility to not only access the Web but also to use different social media applications such as Facebook and Instagram, without having to open a web browser. Thus, Herring (2013: 6) questions the use of *computer-mediated* as term, although CMC it is still preferred by scholars. Herring and Androutsopoulos (2015: 127) use the word *computer* to encompass any digital communication device in their definition of computer-mediated discourse, which is a specialization under CMC. Computer-mediated communication can perhaps be best considered an umbrella term referring to different kinds of ways computer networks and digital communication devices are used for human interaction.

The fact that CMC covers such a variety of different forms of communication is also reflected in that CMC is multidisciplinary as a field of research (Thurlow et al. 2004: 20). CMC can be studied from a number of different perspectives and by using the tools offered by various fields of study, such as sociology, psychology, media studies and linguistics. Thus, according to Thurlow et al. (2004: 20-21), CMC should not be considered a clearly defined discipline but as a field of study falling under a wider field called Internet Studies. Researching CMC from the point of view of linguistics is particularly important because language is such a fundamental part of communication between people. Especially written language seems to persist in CMC despite the multimodal possibilities of the medium (Herring 2004b: 31).

The use of language online has also been referred to as computer-mediated discourse, or CMD. Discourse as a concept has various definitions, but in the context of CMC Thurlow et al. (2004: 119) uses the term discourse in the meaning of language-in-use. Herring and Androutsopoulos (2015: 127) define computer-mediated discourse as the product of human interaction via sending messages through networked or mobile computers, including all digital communication devices. They further describe the study of computer-mediated discourse as a specialization within the study of CMC that focuses on language and the use of language and is characterized by the use of discourse analysis as a method of study. Herring (2004a: 339-343) states that computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) is not as a single method, instead it is a set of methods

adapted from different disciplines with a basic orientation to content analysis that focuses on language. Herring (2004a: 339) also argues that any study of online behavior that is done through observing language could, in a broad sense, be considered computer-mediated discourse analysis.

CMC is still a relatively new area of research. Computer networks themselves only date back to the 1960s (Herring 1996: 2). The possibilities for interpersonal communication through computer networks were realized almost instantly at the emergence of the medium (Herring 2001: 613). However, the phenomenal growth of the use of computer technology for human-to-human interaction only started happening in the mid-1990s (Thurlow et al. 2004: 15). According to Herring (2001: 613), the study of CMC closely followed the development of the technology itself. She argues that, while the first academic research in the use of language through computers dates back to the mid-1980s, more serious interest in the use of language in online environments only started to arise in the early 1990s among the linguistic scholars. Thurlow et al. (2004: 15) describe the 1980s and the 1990s as a pivotal foundation period for the CMC research because many of the main issues and topics of research were first identified during that time. The research done in those years, which Androutsopoulos (2006: 420) labelled as the *first wave* of linguistic research on CMC, can be considered classic research in the field (Thurlow et al. 2004: 15).

Some aspects of the first wave of CMC research have later been faced with criticism. According to Androutsopoulos (2006: 420), early linguistic research on CMC perpetuated notions circulated in the media that the language used on the Internet is a distinct and homogenous form of language, which is impossible for outsiders to understand. He argues that using terms such as *netspeak* or the *language of emails* demonstrates how earlier research homogenized and simplified the use of language in CMC. He also suggests that these simplistic views of the language use in CMC stem from a focus on the medium-specific features of CMC. Herring (2004b: 26) states that technological determinism has been an underlying assumption in much of linguistic research into CMC, which means it is assumed that the way people communicate is shaped by the technologies used for interaction. Androutsopoulos (2006: 421) notes that

later research rejects the idea of technological determinism without denying that technology has an impact on the use of language in CMC.

Furthermore, while the first wave of linguistic research into CMC produced many descriptions of the language of CMC, the research focused, as stated, on medium-specific features of language use in CMC without paying enough attention to the socially situated discourses surrounding the features (Androutsopoulos 2006: 420). Herring (2001: 625) argues that not all properties of the way language is used in CMC are a direct result from the properties of computer technology. Herring and Androutsopoulos (2015: 127) state that the discourse in CMC is affected by both technical factors and social and cultural contexts the use of CMC is embedded in. Indeed, the globally vast reach of the Internet unavoidably results in a culturally and socially varied user base, which also means there are differences between groups and individuals in the use of language online. Androutsopoulos (2006: 421) notes that there has been a change in the focus of linguistic research on CMC from medium-related towards user-related language use, which places emphasis on the variety of group practices and the social diversity in the use of language in CMC.

Although it is important to take into consideration the impact of social context on the language used in CMC, the technological factors should not be completely overlooked. Androutsopoulos (2006: 421) argues that the features that are considered characteristic for language used in CMC are better seen as resources different users or groups can draw on in building discourse styles in specific contexts. Furthermore, according to Herring (2004b: 26), the idea of technological determinism has later resurfaced in the study of CMC. Herring (2004b: 26-27) argues it is no longer under discussion whether technology is shaping communication between people. Research following the first wave of study on the language of CMC has in fact shown that technological, as well as situational, factors affect the use of language (Herring 2001: 613). What is now been questioned is how much and in what ways the medium affects human communication, and in what circumstances (Herring 2004b: 26-27).

Over the years, the central issues and concerns of CMC research have changed along with the development of technology and the appearance of innovations in the field of online communication, which have also affected how people communicate through these media. Herring (2004b) outlines the key changes in computer technology from the mid-1990s to early 2000s and describes how these changes consequently affected CMC. During the 1990s, CMC was mostly text-based and quite fragmented, because different modes of CMC often required different programs to access them (Herring 2004b: 27). For example, Usenet newsgroups required a newsreader for users to read and submit posts. What caused a change in both of these characteristics was the emergence of the World Wide Web (Herring 2004b: 27). The World Wide Web dates back to the early 1990s, growing rapidly between 1993 and 1995 (Mäkinen 2006: 31).

By the beginning of the 2000s, different types of CMC were being integrated within a web browser interface, which also had an impact on online communication practices (Herring 2004b: 29-30). People no longer needed different programs to access for example email or chat, as they were now both accessible through the Web, making it easier and more convenient for users to access different modes of CMC (Herring 2004b: 30). According to Herring (2004b: 33), many users require online communication to be simple, stable and usable across different platforms, which is probably one reason why text-based modes of CMC remain popular. Herring (2004b: 30), however, states that the ease of access provided by the Web affected the demographics of CMC users and consequently the quality of online discourse. She notes that a larger variety of users, including young and less-technologically skilled people, were attracted by the Web, making online discourse noisier, more fragmented and more contentious compared to modes of CMC that were harder to access.

Herring (2004b: 29) points out that another technological trend that has affected CMC in the 2000s is increase in bandwidth. She states that a faster Internet connection has made it easier for users to access different multimedia applications, and streaming video and audio for entertainment purposes has become increasingly popular. Indeed, text-based CMC is being supplemented by communication through graphical, audio and video channels at a growing rate (Herring and Androutsopoulos 2015: 127). Furthermore, there has been an increasing convergence of different modes in CMC, for

example text comments appearing alongside videos on YouTube (Herring 2013: 4-5). Herring (2013: 4) refers to the phenomenon as convergent media computer-mediated communication (CMCMC).

Different modes of communication co-occurring on a single platform is typical of web-based platforms referred to as Web 2.0 (Herring and Androutsopoulos 2015: 130) The term Web 2.0 was coined in 2004 and refers to websites that became popular in the first decade of the 21st century and are characterized by social interaction and content generated by the users, e.g. Twitter, YouTube and Facebook (Herring 2013: 1-2). The social interaction and user-generated content often appears along with or as a response to the structures or content offered by the site itself (Herring and Androutsopoulos 2015: 130). However, some applications associated with Web 2.0 are not web-based, such as Skype and Instagram, and some Web 2.0 sites predate the term, such as eBay and IMDb (Herring 2013: 3-4). Herring (2013: 1) divides Web 2.0 discourse phenomena into three categories: those familiar from older CMC modes (e.g. email and discussion forums) that have carried over without much change, those that have been reconfigured by Web 2.0 platforms, and new or emerging phenomena that either did not exist or reach popularity before the Web 2.0 era.

Herring (2013: 2) argues that while emerging and reconfigured phenomena offer new challenges, and, thus, are attractive for scholars, familiar phenomena should not be forgotten in pursuit of novelty, as all of the categories merit attention from researchers. Moreover, there has been an underlying assumption that new forms of CMC are really new, which has caused a tendency in CMC research to always look at the latest popular technology (Herring 2004b: 26-27). However, many of the new forms of CMC share more features with their predecessors than they differ from them, and despite the variety of possibilities for online communication, text-based forms still continue to be popular (Herring 2004b: 31). Furthermore, Herring (2004b: 29-33) argues that over the years CMC has lost some of its novelty and has become a practical necessity for many people instead of an object of fascination. Thus, instead of always looking at the latest form CMC takes, it might be more productive to focus on how and why people utilize CMC.

2.2 The linguistic features of CMC

As previously stated, there were many descriptions of CMC provided during the first wave of linguistic research on CMC. The language used in CMC has been much discussed specifically in relation to written and spoken language early on in the CMC research (see for example Ferrara, Brunner and Whittemore 1991, Wilkins 1991). Additionally, much of the early research also seemed to be focused on text-based CMC, as they were the most popular form of CMC at the time and multimodal forms of CMC only begun to rise in popularity later as the technology developed.

Although the idea that the language of, for example, discussion forums is homogenous has been criticized for being too simplistic, there are still features that reoccur in CMC. As mentioned in section 2.1, the features described as typical of CMC can be seen as resources for individual users or groups to utilize in their own particular ways depending on context. Thus, it is relevant to look at the different features of language that have been seen as characteristic for CMC, and discussion forums in particular. One of these features is the use of paralinguistic cues, such as emoticons and acronyms, which are expressed through the visual appearance of language utilizing for example spelling, punctuation, keyboard characters and spaces between words (Barnes 2002: 94).

Herring (2001: 614) states that text-based CMC has been considered a lean medium because it only transfers information through the visual channel, whereas a rich medium such as face-to-face communication also utilizes auditory and gestural channels. However, she further argues that CMC can be very expressive, as users often compensate for the lack of auditory and gestural cues by textual means. One of the ways to achieve this is the use of emoticons which can compensate for the lack of facial expressions (Herring 2001: 623). Emoticons, such as the smiley face :), are created by using the letters, numbers and symbols available on a computer keyboard. According to Barnes (2002: 96), emoticons can be used for aesthetic purposes or for adding expressiveness and emotion to a message, and they often appear in communication that

has a playful tone of voice. However, she also states that emoticons, such as ;) which indicates irony, can clarify or even change the meaning of a seemingly hostile message.

Acronyms are abbreviations that are created by combining either the initial letters of a group of words or parts of the words (Barnes 2002: 94). For example, *CEO* stand for *chief executive* officer and *radar* stands for *radio detection and ranging* (Oxford English Dictionary). However, Barnes (2002: 94) notes that acronyms in CMC differ somewhat from what is traditionally considered an acronym. She elaborates that acronyms used online are usually formed from phrases by using both letters and symbols, for example, *F2F* stands for *face-to-face*. Furthermore, Lee (2003: 319) argues that the use of online jargon, including acronyms, helps define online communities, and for new members, learning the jargon signifies belonging to the community in question.

Lewin and Donner (2002) made a quantitative analysis of 200 messages posted to five different message boards to determine the frequency with which features considered typical of CMC appear in the messages. Lewin and Donner (2002: 31) list twelve features that are seen as characteristic for the language of CMC or somehow deviate from standard language. The twelve features are categorized under syntax, punctuation, characteristics of oral register and social conventions. First, syntax includes omitting subjects or verbs in sentences, using specialized spelling such as *u* for *you*, using acronyms and emoticons, and adding emphasis by using capital letters or enclosing words with asterisks. Second, punctuation includes not using a full stop (i.e. run-on sentences), using more than one punctuation mark at the end of a sentence, and using all lower case or all upper case letters. Third, characteristics of oral register include pause fillers and transcribed sounds, e.g. *Hmmm*, and not using intersentential connectors, e.g. *however*. Fourth, social conventions include the use of greetings, sign-offs and names.

Lewin and Donner's (2002) findings indicate that the popular image and perceptions of the language used on discussion forums do not necessarily correspond to reality. Although their study gives an idea of the way different linguistic features typically associated with CMC appear on message boards, it does not provide a comprehensive picture of the use of language on discussion forums. It is important to remember that, as

with spoken or written language, the way one uses language in online environments varies greatly according to its context. As Herring and Androutsopoulos (2015: 129) point out, the use of language online is affected by different technical and situational factors, leading to variety both within and across modes. Medium-related factors include the available channels of communication, synchronicity, whether the transmission is one-way or two-way, message format, message persistence, and the size of message buffer, whereas situational factors include group size, the purpose and topic or theme of communication, norms of social appropriateness and what code or language variety is used (Herring 2007, as quoted by Herring and Androutsopoulos 2015: 130). As there is such variety possible within different modes of CMC, no broad generalizations can be made concerning how language is used on discussion forums.

3 DISCUSSION FORUMS

In this chapter, I will discuss some of the features typical of a discussion forum that distinguish it from other forms of communication, and how these characteristics affect the communication process. First, I will provide a description of discussion forums as a medium. Second, I will discuss the nature of discussion forums as a mixture of mass and interpersonal communication, and how online communication in general has bridged the gap between the two types of communication that were previously quite easily separated into two different strands of research. Third, I will discuss some of the norms and behavioral phenomena associated with discussion forums.

3.1 Discussion forum as a medium

Different forms of communication through computer technology can be seen as different CMC genres, all of which create their own social environments (Barnes 2002: 3-4). One way to categorize different modes of CMC is to divide them into either synchronous or asynchronous systems. Communication in synchronous modes of CMC happens in real time, whereas in asynchronous modes there can be a time delay between messages being sent and received (Barnes 2002: 35). Examples of synchronous forms of communication include Skype, chat or instant messaging, and examples of asynchronous communication include email and discussion forums. However, interaction in asynchronous modes of CMC such as discussion forums can be quite fast-paced, making them nearly synchronous. Furthermore, the division between the two forms of communication is disappearing in CMC systems that combine both synchronous and asynchronous communication such as Facebook, which features a real-time chat that preserves the messages (Herring and Androutsopoulos 2015: 130).

Discussion forum is an asynchronous, multi-participant, one-way mode of CMC. One-way transmission is used in many multi-participant CMC, meaning the messages are transmitted in their entirety and in a linear order (Herring 1999). Typically, a user on a discussion forum can start a conversation by sending an opening post which defines the topic of conversation, and to which other users can post replies. The replies are usually

stored and organized by the system into a message thread, in which the messages are presented in a chronological order with a date and time of posting. One message thread roughly equals one conversation. As mentioned in section 2.1, text-based forms of CMC, such as discussion forums, have remained popular over the years. Indeed, despite the vast number of newly emerging formats, e.g. different social media applications, discussion forums have demonstrated longevity as a medium. (Kytölä 2013: 19).

As discussion forum is an asynchronous form of communication, users do not need to be on the website at the same time in order to participate in a discussion. Indeed, there is a both physical and temporal separation between participants in asynchronous CMC, which can affect the communication. The lack of physical and temporal context can place more pressure on participants to make all referents and implied meanings clear in online discussion, especially if not all messages are available to all participants (Baym 1996: 317). However, because the opening post of a thread sets the topic on a discussion forum and the whole message thread is visible to all participants, there is less of a need to make all referents explicit in subsequent messages on a message thread. In addition, participants share a similar physical context in the form of a computer screen and a temporal context in the sense that messages are not necessarily stored indefinitely, and, thus, do not need to be timeless, unlike in, for example, print media (Baym 1996: 317).

Furthermore, the interaction in a discussion group is contextualized in many ways. Because discussion groups are ongoing, they have a history, they share referents, they have certain normative conventions, and they can create and sustain communities through language (Baym 1996: 318). For example, in discussion groups that focus on movies or television series it is usually an established convention for the writer of a message to warn the readers about possible spoilers in the message content (Baym 1998b: 60). If a message on a discussion forum reveals information about the plot of a recently released film or a tv episode that has just aired, it is good manners that the writer warns the readers about it beforehand, so they can avoid reading too much about the plot before they have watched the movie or episode in question.

Discussion forums can be either moderated or not (Barnes 2002: 6). A moderator is a person who reads all the messages before they are made available to readers or group members and, as a result, all unrelated or inappropriate messages can be screened out (Barnes 2001: 35). Whether a discussion forum is moderated can have an impact on the discussion. Moderating a discussion forum can help keep the discussion civilized as all inappropriate messages can be removed before they become public. However, screening the messages can also slow the discussion down. Most discussion lists are unmoderated because reading all messages before distributing them is time-consuming and usually unnecessary (Barnes 2002: 6-7). In addition, according to Barnes (2001: 35), "Unmoderated lists tend to be more responsive, interactive, and reflective of the group's feelings." However, there are ways to keep a discussion civilized without slowing it down. Some discussion forums, like the IMDb message boards, are moderated, but the messages are not read by the moderator before posting. The participants can report inappropriate messages, which are then removed by the moderator, if they are against the guidelines of the board. Thus, the discussion remains fast and interactive, while any hostile or inappropriate behavior is discouraged.

3.2 Discussion forums as mass and interpersonal communication

Baym (1996: 315) notes that the communicative activities of the Usenet discussion group she studied were affected by the medium being a combination of mass and interpersonal communication. Barnes (2001: 2) states that communication research has traditionally been divided into either mass or interpersonal communication, both branches having their own perspectives and theoretical backgrounds, however, the Internet challenged that division as computer networks can be utilized for both interpersonal communication and mass communication. She notes that interaction in a face-to-face setting, e.g. between two people, in a small group or public speaking, was usually considered interpersonal communication, whereas communication mediated e.g. through television, radio or newspapers, was considered mass communication, however, there are exceptions to the rule.

Barnes (2001: 8-11) specifies three characteristics of the Internet that make it comparable to interpersonal communication. First, communication through computer networks can be bidirectional, meaning that the information flows back and forth causing the participants to exchange roles from senders to receivers and back, which is similar to face-to-face interaction (Barnes 2001: 8-9). Discussion forums are one example of the way Internet is being utilized for bidirectional communication. One participant begins a conversation by sending an opening post and as others respond to the message, he or she becomes a receiver of information. When, or if, the original poster responds by writing another post to the message thread, he or she once again becomes a sender. In contrast, the roles between participants do not interchange in mass communication; instead, the flow of information is one-way from a sender to a receiver (Barnes 2001: 8-9).

Second, people communicate with each other online as if they were interacting face-to-face, but instead of a physical location they interact in a space which is socially constructed by the participants themselves through written exchanges (Barnes 2001: 6-10). As previously stated, interpersonal communication traditionally happens face-to-face, but as the Internet enables communication across great distances, it has changed the conditions of attendance (Barnes 2001: 9). Thus, interpersonal communication is no longer tied to a single geographical location. However, Cathcart and Gumpert (1986: 325) argue that the participants need to have an unsaid agreement between them to conduct their conversation as if they were face-to-face in order for a mediated form of communication to work as interpersonal communication. Third, the Internet enables written language to be used to communicate in a way that is transactional and instantaneous, which results in written messages following models that resemble interpersonal communication and oral face-to-face communication (Barnes 2001: 10). Currently, the increased possibilities for multimodal communication can only bring CMC even closer to a face-to-face interaction, for example, through applications that enable video chat such as Skype.

In contrast, Baym (1996: 319) states that Usenet resembles mass communication in the sense that the messages are always broadcast to a large audience, even when the participants may come to know each other or when messages are addressed to specific

individuals, which means the conversation is never just between two participants. The same can be said of discussion forums. Barnes (2002: 34) also notes that how public the medium is can affect the nature of the conversation. Baym (1996: 319) argues that while participants in a face-to-face, oral conversation are only accountable to the other participants in the conversation, the participants in a Usenet discussion group are accountable for the entire group. Thus, she notes messages addressed and personalized to a single reader that offer nothing to others in the discussion group are frowned upon due to the possibility of contacting others in the group directly through email.

In addition, Baym (1996: 319) discusses the interpersonal dimension of the communication on Usenet and describes how it can have an impact on a larger scale within a discussion group. She argues that messages can have consequences on the relationships between individual participants but at the same time, there can be consequences for the group as a whole. She elaborates that, for example, hostile messages exchanged between two participants can create not only resentment between the participants in question and a possible loss of public face for either or both but also an overall hostile environment in the group. As previously stated, the participants in online discussion groups create a socially constructed space through their exchanges. Baym (1996: 319) offers a similar argument by stating that because language is the only way to create a social context in CMC, the messages are vital in defining the social world of a discussion group.

3.3 Netiquette and online behavior

Online discourse has previously been portrayed as having a tendency towards antagonism and competitiveness (Baym 1996: 323). Early research on the subject described CMC as impersonal and occasionally hostile, which was theorized to result from the lack of face-to-face communication (Barnes 2001: 33-34). However, like spoken and written communication, CMC can be extremely hostile, exceedingly polite and friendly, or anything in between. How people communicate online can be affected by various factors, including the atmosphere of the group or the online environment the

discussion takes place in. As stated in section 2.1, the social context and the variety of group practices has gained more consideration in later CMC research.

Although there does not seem to be one, universally accepted or utilized code of conduct, or netiquette, for Internet users, there are some, more or less, widely accepted norms. Furthermore, different sites, including discussion forums, usually set their own guidelines and rules that are specified on their websites. Regardless of existing rules, hostile behavior still appears on discussion forums. However, in the 2000s, Internet users have become less willing to tolerate abuse and different types of aggravating behavior online, and as a result are more accepting of measures that restrict such behavior (Herring 2004b: 32).

Lurking is one frequently occurring phenomenon on the Internet and it refers to a lack of response (Barnes 2001: 33-43). An online group can have a vast number of unseen members, or lurkers, who follow the discussion without actually participating in the conversation other than as audience members (Barnes 2001: 42). Although studying lurking is difficult due to the silence of lurkers online, there is a number of possible reasons for lurking that vary from people treating the Internet like traditional mass media, i.e. being consumers instead of producers of media, to just being polite listeners or having difficulties using the technology (Barnes 2001: 43-45). However, participants do not always view reading messages without taking part in a negative light. It is in fact recommended for new participants in an online discussion group to lurk before contributing to the discussion in order for them to become familiar with the group's dynamics and avoid embarrassing themselves due to misunderstandings (Barnes 2002: 149).

Flaming refers to a discourse style that involves sending hostile messages, i.e. flames, in CMC (Barnes 2001: 33-45). Barnes (2001: 45) states that there is no consensus among researchers on what causes flaming, but one suggested theory is that flaming is the result of low social presence of computers and subsequent lack of social cues in CMC. She further argues that the lack of social presence and contextual cues, which result from the information in online interaction being transferred through a limited number of

sensory channels, can lead to increasingly uninhibited communication. Regardless of the reason, sending aggressive and name-calling messages to another is not only unsettling for the receiver but can also affect the discussion group as a whole (Barnes 2001: 46-47). As mentioned in section 3.2, hostility between two participants can lead to an overall hostile environment in a discussion group. Thus, just a few participants can change the entire social environment of a discussion group (Baym 1996: 319). Indeed, flaming can change the tone of a discussion group to one that inhibits participation and if the flaming continues, the number of participants in the group will usually decline as people begin to drop off (Barnes 2001: 47).

Trolling is another phenomenon that appears in discussion forums. According to Herring et al. (2002: 372), trolling refers to posting messages, i.e. trolls, designed to lure especially inexperienced or otherwise vulnerable participants to pointless arguments. They further argue that, although trolling and flaming are different phenomena, they have the tendency to merge in real life, as both are used to disrupt the discussion and can lead to long, aggravated arguments. Herring et al. (2002: 377-378) observe in their study two strategies debated by users on a discussion group for dealing with trolling: ignoring it, or having the person doing the trolling, i.e. troller, banned from the group. Since trollers enjoy attention, simply ignoring his or her messages would arguably be an effective way to deal with a troller (Herring et al. 2002: 381). However, not reacting to provocation requires a considerable amount of self-control, and the entire group would have to follow through on ignoring the troller for it to be an effective strategy (Herring et al. 2002: 378). One of the measures Herring et al. (2002: 381) suggest to prevent trolling in discussion groups is having clear rules and penalties for breaking those rules.

4 FANDOM RESEARCH

This chapter focuses on fandom research. As this study looks at the interaction of an online fan group discussing what can be described as a cult tv series, it is relevant to look at some of the characteristics of fan culture and previous research done on the subject. First, I will look at fandom research as a field of study and discuss some of its main issues. Second, I will discuss the topic of fan practices and how fandom is characterized by activity and productivity. Third, I will discuss television fandom and the role of the Internet as a platform for fan practices. Fourth, I will discuss fan communities and the different communicative practices of online fan groups. Fifth, I will look at cult fandoms, including the tv series *Supernatural*, and the textual characteristics typical of a cult series.

4.1 Fandom research as a field of study

Defining what a fan is academically, or how to distinguish a fan from a regular viewer or consumer, seems to be a complicated issue. Views on the phenomenon vary greatly within fandom research (Harris 1998b: 4). The term fan dates back to the late 19th century when it was used in reference to people who followed professional sport teams and women theatergoers (Jenkins 1992: 12). However, the definition of a fan has changed over the years. Nowadays, being a fan means having a relationship to media products that is both intense and social (Hirsjärvi and Kovala 2007: 247). In contrast, Hills (2002: xi) finds different terms and definitions of fans proposed by researchers contested, and argues that strict definitions are not always necessary. In addition, it is important to note that the term fandom is used to refer to a community of fans surrounding a specific object of fandom, e.g. Star Trek fandom (Hirsjärvi and Kovala 2007: 247).

Hirsjärvi and Kovala (2007: 248) argue that as a phenomenon fans cannot be defined by a single characteristic; however, there are several features that are associated with being a fan and with fandom. They list the features as follows:

- acceptance or adoration, being critical (particularly with objects of cult fandoms) and being ironic about one's own fan identity
- repetition and loyalty
- intenseness
- intermediality and the prevalence of the Internet
- being active and productive
- being social, new forms of communality
- the meaning of fan practices in building identities, empowerment
- the variety of practices; collecting, clubs, fan fiction, creative activities

Furthermore, they state that what defines fans and fandom as a phenomenon is the way it combines these features. Indeed, Hirsjärvi and Kovala (2007: 249) argue that defining fandom requires the presence of multiple of these features and fandom cannot be reduced to one or two characteristics.

There have been several negative stereotypes about fans circulated in the media and widely accepted by the public (Jenkins 1992: 10-12). The word *fan* itself comes from the word *fanatic* (Jenkins 1992: 12). The different stereotypes about fans vary from a lust-filled female groupie to a psychopathic, obsessive loner (Jenkins 1992: 12-15). These different representations all describe fans as people who have interests that are outside of normal cultural experience and are dangerously out of touch with reality (Jenkins 1992: 15). Currently, fandom is a subject of study in the fields of cultural and media studies, however, earlier research on fans was done, for example, from the point of view of psychology and social sciences (Hirsjärvi and Kovala 2007: 245-246). Thus, fandom research has had a tendency to defend fandom and focus on the positive aspects of fan culture (Hirsjärvi and Kovala 2007: 260). Furthermore, even within fan culture itself, e.g. fan conventions, there is still a sense of cultural defensiveness, and fans feel a need to justify their attachment to their object of fandom (Hills 2002: xii).

Earlier research persistently characterized fans as *them*, meaning they are different from *us*, the respectable social types such as professors and social critics (Jenson 1992: 9). Fans are a phenomenon specific to popular culture (Grossberg 1995: 34). Although the audiences of high culture and popular culture can have similar practices, being a fan is not a concept associated with high culture (Nikunen 2005: 53). Being interested in high culture reflects the characteristics that are more highly regarded in our society, such as objectivity, neutrality, rational behavior and respectful attitude (Hirsjärvi and Kovala

2007: 247). In contrast, there is a notion that the audiences of popular culture are uncritical, easy to manipulate and easy to exploit for profit (Grossberg 1995: 35). Moreover, fans respond to the object of their fandom and express themselves with emotion (Hirsjärvi and Kovala 2007: 247-248). Unlike fans, people interested in high culture do not need to justify their choice of an object of interest (Nikunen 2005: 53).

Jenkins (1992: 16) brings up the concept of taste as an explanation behind the negative stereotypes about fans. He argues that what is considered to be in good taste, appropriate or to have merit also determines the desirable and undesirable forms of culture, ways of relating to cultural objects and how they are consumed and interpreted. Hills (2002: xii) argues that ”To claim the identity of a ‘fan’ remains, in some sense, to claim an ‘improper’ identity, a cultural identity based on one’s commitment to something as seemingly unimportant and ‘trivial’ as a film or TV series.” As fans’ preferences do not comply with what is considered to be in good taste, they go against dominant cultural hierarchies (Jenkins 1992: 17). Indeed, there is a shared sense of challenging cultural norms within fandom (Hills 2002: xii).

Although being a fan can be seen as opposing dominant cultural norms, fan culture seems to have been moving from a subculture to more mainstream. Nikunen (2005: 95-96) notes that due to the growing popularity of fantasy and sci-fi genres in the late 1990s and early 2000s, fan culture was gaining more visibility in the Finnish media at the time, and, instead of the negative stereotypes, fans were portrayed in the media as consumers who were particular about their choices of consumerism. Furthermore, Bailey's (2002) research suggests that the interpretive practices of fan groups are indicating a larger shift in audience practices influenced by the development of computer technology. Nikunen (2007: 111) talks about the fanification of audiences. This refers to audiences in general developing a relationship toward media products that is more like the relationship fans have to the object of their fandom (Nikunen 2005: 345). Thus, the practices of fan culture are possibly shaping audience practices in general (Nikunen 2007: 111). As a result, fan practices are no longer reserved for a marginal group but are possibly becoming a part of the viewing experience for general audiences as well.

Thus, fan culture is a very topical subject of study. Hirsjärvi and Kovala (2007: 245) argue that fandom has become an important subject of study partly because being a fan is a typical phenomenon for today's western culture. They further note that fandom research has generated a significant amount of attention and developed fast despite being a relatively young field of research. Looking at tv fandom is of particular interest, because television as a medium has such a prominent place in western society. Television circulates meanings and the images, portrayals and interpretations it constructs have the potential to affect our perceptions and beliefs on a cultural level (Harris 1998a: 43). Thus, looking at the relationship between television and its viewers has connections to larger cultural and social issues.

4.2 Fan practices

As mentioned in section 4.1, being active is one of the defining characteristics of fans. Although fan activity goes beyond viewing a tv series, the viewing itself can be perceived as an activity (Nikunen 2005: 50). Tv audiences were earlier seen as uncritical mass, however, this view changed in the late 20th century towards a view of tv audience as individual and critical viewers (Hirsjärvi and Kovala 2007: 252). For example, Hobson (1989: 162) calls the notion of tv audience as being passive a fallacious myth. Fiske (1987: 62) describes tv viewers as social subjects, whose history, race, gender, nationality etc. influences their construction of meaning. According to Grossberg (1995: 37), the meaning of a text is not fixed; instead people are continuously trying to interpret the meaning of a text, and to find meanings that relate to their own lives and experiences. Thus, different people can find different meanings in the same text and they can use the text for different purposes. The notions that meaning making is a process and, moreover, that interpreting a text means applying it are further supported by the phenomenon that is fandom (Hirsjärvi and Kovala 2007: 250). Thus, interpreting what one is watching can be seen as an activity in itself.

The concept of an active audience, however, makes distinguishing fans from the rest of the viewers more problematic (Grossberg 1995: 38). Jenkins (2006: 135) described fans

as ”the most active segment of the media audience”. Doing activities involving the object of fandom is what separates fans from the general audience (Nikunen 2005: 50). Fan activities include, for example, attending fan conventions, buying fan merchandise, participating in online fan communities and producing e.g. fan fiction and fan art. Indeed, productivity is also one of the features that define fans, as mentioned in section 4.1. The kind of practices fans engage in is influenced by the object of their fandom, as fandoms of different genres have different traditions (Nikunen 2005: 53). Fan activities in for example science fiction fandom are quite organized, including, e.g. fan clubs and large fan conventions (Nikunen 2005: 51). However, fan practices can also spread from one fandom to another (Nikunen 2005: 100). For example, fan fiction has spread from science fiction fandom to a vast variety of other fandoms (Nikunen 2005: 351).

Fan practices are a clearly recognizable aspect of fandom and, thus, much studied within fandom research (Nikunen 2005: 50). However, not all forms of fan activities are as visible (Nikunen 2005: 51). Fandom was described in the early fandom research as a unified phenomenon (Hirsjärvi and Kovala 2007: 261). However, fandom should be seen as existing on a continuum (Harris 1998a: 48). Fans are not a homogenous group, instead they differ, for example, according to the object of their fandom and their levels of participation, which causes differentiation within individual fan groups (Harris 1998a: 49). In addition to active fans, there are fans who do not want to participate in fan activities or publicly express their identity as fans, although, fans seem to have a need to express their fan identity in some way (Nikunen 2005: 127). Furthermore, people assign different meanings for being a fan at various stages in their lives and the ways they experience and participate in fandom can change (Hirsjärvi and Kovala 2007: 261).

One notable aspect of fan practices is how fans utilize different media for their own purposes. As mentioned in section 4.1, one of the features that characterizes fandom is intermediality, and especially the use of the Internet. Intermediality, which has become common in contemporary culture, refers to how texts are recycled in different forms through various media (Lehtonen 2001: 71). Fan practices also mix the use of different media, such as movies, television, the Internet and print media (Nikunen 2005: 345). Fans can for example read magazine articles featuring a tv series they watch on

television and look for information about the series or discuss the series online. Furthermore, fans are quick to utilize new media technologies for the purposes of fandom (Jenkins 2006: 135). The Internet has become an important medium especially for the tv fandom (Nikunen 2005: 98).

4.3 Television fandom and the Internet

The emergence of the Internet seems to have marked a change in fan culture. It offered fans a new space where they could interact with each other, create their own websites and distribute, for example, fan art and fan fiction (Nikunen 2005: 97). It also refreshed pre-existing fan practices and provided them with new forms (Bailey 2002: 247). Today, one can find an abundance of content online generated by fans. Fans utilize different social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) and blogging sites (e.g. Tumblr) as well as discussion forums, chat rooms, wikis etc. to share information, to create communities, to discuss the object of their fandom, and to present the products of their creativity. There are online archives, such Archive of Our Own, containing vast amounts of e.g. fan art and fan fiction. Indeed, the Internet has aided in the growth of fan culture as it provided fans with a new medium to utilize (Murray 1997: 41). In addition, the Internet has made fan culture more visible because it offered fans a public way to distribute their own cultural production (Jenkins 2006: 135-136). Thus, fan interaction is now also more accessible to researchers (Baym 1998a: 113).

There are several characteristics that make the Internet an attractive medium for fans. Firstly, the Internet makes it easy for fans to create communities on a global scale and participate in fan culture from their own homes (Bailey 2002: 248). Secondly, unlike traditional venues for fan interaction, such as concerts or fan conventions, the Internet makes it possible for fans to remain anonymous and therefore avoid any negative stigma (Nikunen 2005: 97-98). Thus, there is less social risk for people to participate in fan practices (Bailey 2002: 248). The Internet is an apt match especially for television because it reflects the private nature of tv as it negates the need for fans to express their fan identity publicly (Nikunen 2005: 97). In fact, the Internet as a space is somewhere

between public and private (Nikunen 2005: 98). Lastly, the Internet enables fans to distribute their cultural production to a wide audience (Nikunen 2005: 97).

As mentioned earlier, the emergence of the Web refreshed pre-existing fan practices. However, fan practices also seem to have changed under the influence of the Internet. They have become more global due to the Internet, or at least much of it is now in English (Nikunen 2005: 99). As a result, fan practices spread easier from one fandom to another (Nikunen 2005: 351). Furthermore, the Internet has a role in constructing fan practices, as fans learn the kind of practices there are through fan sites (Nikunen 2005: 100). Thus, it is not surprising that fan practices of different fandoms are becoming more similar, although different fandoms still maintain their own traditions (Nikunen 2005: 109). In addition, there has also been an increase in the variety of fan practices (Nikunen 2005: 96).

Besides changing fan practices, the Internet has also changed the relationship between the audiences and the people in charge of the production of tv programs. Computers have the capability to store massive amounts of information in digital form, which is further expanded by linking them through the Internet (Murray 1997: 83-84). The Internet has made it possible for tv fans to document and keep track of plot developments and long story arcs, which consequently affects the production of tv series by ensuring they remain consistent over time (Murray 1997: 85). Furthermore, fans can interact not only with each other, but also with the producers, writers and stars of tv series through the Internet (Murray 1997: 41). Tv producers can follow fan discussion online and therefore get direct feedback from the fans (Nikunen 2005: 107). Today, it is also typical for studios and production companies as well as actors, directors, writers etc. to have social media accounts, which they can use to market their products, observe fan reactions and, if they choose to, interact with the fans directly. Thus, fans can affect the object of their fandom through their online fan activities.

Furthermore, television viewership has changed over the years partly due to the Internet. Firstly, the viewing of a tv program is no longer tied to a specific time and place (Bailey 2002: 246). For example, online streaming services, such as Netflix, offer people the

possibility to watch tv programs at the viewers' convenience, which means that the audience is not restricted to the broadcast schedules or the tv set as the medium through which to watch a tv series. Furthermore, they make it possible for people to watch tv programs that are not necessarily being broadcast on tv in their countries.

Secondly, the developing technology is believed to enable a more active audience (Nikunen 2005: 101). As mentioned in section 4.1, the general audiences are developing a relationship toward media products that is similar to the relationship fans have with object of their fandom. In addition, tv producers are encouraging viewers to be more active (Nikunen 2005: 102). Viewers are being treated more and more as fans in the process of television production, which seems to result in tv series being increasingly complex, as producers rely on viewers to know the characters and their history (Nikunen 2005: 107). Tv productions are also purposefully encouraging viewers to become fans by, for example, using elements that are typical of cult series (Nikunen 2005: 348). The textual characteristics of cult series will be discussed in section 4.5.1.

4.4 Fan communities

As mentioned in section 4.1, being social is one of the features that characterize fans. Finding a community and sharing the fan experience can be essential for an individual's fan identity (Nikunen 2005: 51). Even though a fan always has a personal relationship to the object fandom, there typically exists a sense of community in fandom (Saresma and Kovala 2003: 10). Indeed, fans have a desire to interact with a larger social community and the input of other fans always influences fan reception (Jenkins 1992: 76). For example, the production of meaning is a social and public process for a large number of fans (Jenkins 1992: 75). Thus, fan communities can play an important part in a fan's meaning-making process. Being able to discuss certain topics can even be a reason for being a fan of a certain object of fandom, which is exemplified by soap opera fans using the tv show they watch as an excuse to discuss topics relevant to their own lives (Baym 1998a: 127). However, as stated in section 4.2, not all fans participate actively in fandom or want to express their fan identity publicly. It is more important is

that an individual self-identifies as a fan, regardless of his or her level of participation in fandom (Nikunen 2005: 52).

However, there are benefits for being part of a fan community. It can support fans when they encounter negative stereotypes about fandom (Nikunen 2005: 127). It offers an environment where being a fan and expressing enthusiasm about the object of fandom is acceptable (Nikunen 2005: 128). In addition, fan groups can provide fans more power to influence the object of their fandom. As mentioned in section 4.1, empowerment is one of the features associated with fans. Being active in fan practices can empower fans and give them a greater sense of control over the object of fandom or even the industry producing it, which is one of the pleasures of fandom (Harris 1998a: 48-51). Furthermore, due to the Internet, it is possible for fan groups to achieve unprecedented size, which makes it more likely for them to be able to influence the object of their fandom, and not just the social lives of the participants themselves (Baym 1998a: 127-128). Fandom is perhaps the only way of empowering viewers in the face of an industry that is very difficult to influence (Harris 1998a: 51).

4.4.1 Communicative practices of online fan groups

Baym (1998a) describes four communicative practices that shape the interaction on the online discussion group for soap opera fans she examines in her study. They are informing, speculating, criticizing and reworking. Firstly, sharing information, i.e. informing, helps fans build richer interpretations of convoluted storylines and makes resolutions feel more gratifying as fans have more information for example about prior events in the tv show in question (Baym 1998a: 115-116). As noted in section 4.3, tv series in general have been increasing in complexity. Indeed, tv series have become more elaborate ever since the 1980s, utilizing larger casts and longer story arcs (Murray 1997: 85). However, as also noted in section 4.3, the Internet has made it easier for fans to keep track of long narratives. Fans can accumulate more information together than they can individually and, thus, provide the group with a larger knowledge base, which can help especially information-poor fans enjoy the show more and aid their participation in the fan community (Baym 1998a: 118). In addition to providing

information, fans can entertain each other and build public identities by sharing personalized retellings of prior events in the show (Baym 1998a: 116-118).

Secondly, speculating is a game-like practice that involves fans drawing on different resources to speculate on characters' personalities, predict possible future events in the show and the impact of those events throughout the fan community (Baym 1998a: 119-120). Speculating in a group provides fans enjoyment and, like having more information, it can enhance the meanings they find in the show (Baym 1998a: 122). In addition, speculation is enjoyable for fans because it offers them a way to demonstrate their genre competence by making correct predictions, which, as a result, helps them gain recognition within the group (Baym 1998a: 121-122). Furthermore, as the storylines in soap operas involve intimate relationship, speculating in a discussion group also allows the participants to draw on their own experiences when making predictions and, therefore, discuss their own lives and, in a broader sense, debate and negotiate socioemotional issues with a wide range of people (Baym 1998a: 119-127). Fans can use a tv show as a pretext to discuss subjects beyond the show, and, being able to discuss certain topics can even be a reason for being a fan of a particular tv show or medium (Baym 1998a: 127).

Thirdly, criticizing involves fans using their knowledge base to assess a show on several different levels, which include for example the quality of acting and writing, internal consistency and ideological content (Baym 1998a: 122). Baym (1998a: 124) argues that fans can be highly critical of a tv show without becoming less involved in it, and criticism can actually be enjoyable for fans in different ways. She states that the public and communal venting of frustrations can create unity and solidarity or, like speculation, it can lead to socioemotional discussion, both of which enhance the value of the community. She also notes that criticism offers a possibility for fans to show their genre competence, and criticizing the show's flaws can be a way to entertain other fans making the community more amusing to hold the fans' interest when the show is producing weak episodes.

Lastly, reworking events in the show can be motivated by criticism of the show or simply by a desire to present one's own version of how the events could have unfolded (Baym 1998a: 126). Flaws and rough spots in a narrative provide an opening for fans to reshape it according to their own wishes (Jenkins 1992: 74). Thus, the weak spots provide fans space for creativity and a way to channel any frustrations they have with the show into creative activities (Baym 1998a: 124-126). Fans can demonstrate both their performative skills and genre competence through reworking the events of the show, and, thus, provide entertainment, which mitigates boredom or irritation within the group at times when the participants are not enjoying the show itself (Baym 1998a: 126-127). In addition to enhancing the show or compensating for its weak episodes, entertaining others through performative skills can help the participants establish identities and gain recognition within the group (Baym 1998a: 127).

To summarize, online discussion groups can enhance fans' enjoyment in watching a tv series by helping them find new meanings, allowing fans to show their creativity and expertise on the genre, providing entertainment and allowing fans to discuss their own lives and topics beyond the show. Furthermore, as mentioned above, showing performative skills can help fans build identities in a discussion group, while demonstrating expertise in the genre can help them gain recognition within the group, which also enhances their enjoyment. Informing, reworking and criticizing all allow participants in a discussion group to show their performative skills, whereas speculating, criticizing and reworking provide them with the opportunity to demonstrate their genre competence (Baym 1998a: 116-126). However, other fan communities may have different resources and practices that help them enhance the meaning they find in the object of their fandom (Baym 1998a: 127). Thus, the communicative practices discussed above may not be as prominent in other discussion groups.

4.5 *Supernatural* as a cult fandom

Supernatural seems to have a very passionate fan base considering how active the fans are, particularly online. Fan activity surrounding the series varies from *Supernatural* conventions organized in different countries, in which the actors, writers and producers

of the series interact with the fans, to different forms of creative activities such as fan art and fan fiction. *Supernatural* fans actively communicate with each other online through various fan communities and discussion groups. In addition to a devoted fan base, *Supernatural* exhibits several features that are seen as typical of a cult series. Hills (2002: x) states that, although fandom and cult fandom are overlapping terms, cult fans differ in some parts from fans in general. According to Hills (2002: 131), the cult status of a media product depends on both textual characteristics of the object and the distinctions made by the audience.

One important criteria Hills (2002: x) gives to cult fandoms is that fans themselves identify the object of fandom specifically as cult. Hills (2002: 136) argues that a text can have the textual characteristics of a cult text, but the audience engagement ultimately determines its cult status, i.e. cult texts are both found in the text as well as created by the audience. He uses as an example the series *Nowhere Man*, which was positioned by the creators as a cult series, but which failed to gain a cult following because the audience felt it was too pre-programmed. Thus, cult texts cannot be purely manufactured. *Supernatural* has been referred to as a cult series not only by the fans but also by the media and the people behind making the series, for example, in interviews. Furthermore, Barker (2010) identifies *Supernatural* as a cult series and uses it as an example in describing some of the changes in cult television. He argues that *Supernatural* fits the definition of a cult series in terms of both textual features and the reception of the fans. However, it might be too early to define *Supernatural* as a cult series.

According to Hills (2002: x-xi), cult fandoms are defined by longevity in the absence of new material, i.e. a tv series only becomes a cult series if the fandom still remains active after the show has been cancelled. A very notable example of a cult series is *Star Trek*, which maintained a devoted following decades after the original series ended, and which has developed into a franchise consisting of several subsequent tv series and movies. As *Supernatural* is still an ongoing series (at the time of writing this), it cannot be truly labelled a cult series yet. However, the fact that the series has produced several seasons and is still airing reflects the continued devotion of its fans. Furthermore, Barker (2010) states that the lack of high viewing ratings, which seems to be usual for

cult programs, has actually helped *Supernatural* gain the status of a cult show as it has incited more support online and created a closer relationship between the fans and the creator of the show. In addition, he argues that the *Supernatural* fandom has tried to push the show into the mainstream, thus, going beyond typical fan activities.

4.5.1 The textual characteristics of a cult series

As the cult status is dependent on both textual characteristics as well as audience distinctions, Hills (2002: 131) argues that cult texts cannot be simply textually programmed, but they are not completely textually arbitrary either. He also states that, although sharing similar textual characteristics, cult texts are not a singular genre; instead, they can better be described by utilizing Wittgenstein's term of family resemblances. In this context, family resemblances refer to a network of similarities, which are either overall similarities or similarities of detail that crisscross and overlap each other (Wittgenstein 1988: 32, as quoted by Hills 2002: 131). According to Hills (2002: 131), the textual characteristics that most cult texts have in common include auteurism, hyperdiegesis and endlessly deferred narrative.

Firstly, the public visibility of the creator or the writers seems to be one point where cult series differ from other tv series. According to Hills (2002: 133), cult texts usually have an author or a creator, provided in the official publicity narrative, whereas for example soap operas seem to be unauthored in this sense. The creator of *Supernatural*, Eric Kripke, as well as some of the writers and producers, seem to be well known to the fans. Barker (2010) argues that the fans of *Supernatural* have a trust in the vision of its creator, Eric Kripke, because he has acknowledged fan criticism from the beginning. He further argues that this trust makes fans less likely to criticize when the series, for example, takes risks in its narrative, as fans trust that the risk will pay off at some point.

Secondly, hyperdiegesis refers to how cult texts create a narrative space that is large, detailed, and only partly visible to viewers at a time but which also has an internal logic (Hills 2002: 137). Examples of hyperdiegesis include among others *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, both of which have rich universes where the events of the movies and tv episodes

take place. The writers of *Supernatural* have created a universe for the series that includes creatures and characters from urban legends, folklore, different religions, myths and legends. They have over the series gradually added layers to the immersive and sprawling mythology of the series (Barker 2010). Mythologies from different cultures offer the writers of *Supernatural* vast possibilities to create new story lines, and, moreover, the universe of the series offers fans an existing fictional world to use as a basis for creating their own stories in the form of, for example, fan fiction. Indeed, hyperdiegesis encourages fans to explore and develop the universe created by a cult series (Nikunen 2005: 145).

Thirdly, endlessly deferred narrative is a form of narrative that continues without end while focusing on certain themes or character identity issues, for example the identity of the main character in the series *Doctor Who* (Hills 2002: 134). The collapse of the endlessly deferred narrative, e.g. by resolving the mystery of the Doctor's identity in *Doctor Who*, can be crisis point for a cult series, which can even lead to its cancellation (Hills 2002: 135). In the case of *Supernatural*, identifying an endlessly deferred narrative is perhaps not as simple as in the case of *Doctor Who*. As indicated by the name of the series, one of the main themes of the series is the brothers', and through them the entire humankind's, battle against *Supernatural* forces that are a threat to human existence. There is often one main threat or villain over a season of *Supernatural* and once it is defeated a new threat arises, and, thus, the work of saving people's lives is never-ending. Both endlessly deferred narrative and hyperdiegesis seem to be most suitable for certain genres, as cult texts are predominantly from the genres of science fiction, horror, fantasy, comedy or camp (Hills 2002: 138). *Supernatural* utilized both horror and fantasy themes in its narrative.

In addition, Barker (2010) identifies intertextuality as one of the narrative techniques *Supernatural* utilizes to appeal to a cult audience. Furthermore, being self-reflexive and utilizing different forms of referentiality, such as irony and pastiche, also encourage fans for discursive productivity (Bailey 2002: 245). *Supernatural* has included self-referential elements several times in its episodes. The series has, for example, made fun of the horror genre, tv productions, fans and fan fiction, all of which are related to the series itself or the *Supernatural* fandom. As a tv series, *Supernatural* also utilizes

cumulative narrative (Barker 2010). It is a form of narrative that balances between stand-alone stories and episodes that advance a longer story arc, thus, allowing new viewers to enjoy the show while also rewarding long-time viewers (Sconce 2004: 98). Fans who have watched the series for a long time are able to enjoy the longer story arcs, while they can also recognize and enjoy the in-jokes included in the episodes. These kinds of intertextual references and in-jokes are included in texts specifically for fans (Nikunen 2005: 146).

5 AGREEMENTS AND DISAGREEMENTS

This chapter focuses on previous research on how agreements and disagreements are constructed in spoken language and in an online environment. Conversational structures, including how agreements and disagreements are expressed, have previously been researched in the field of pragmatics using the methods of conversation analysis (see e.g. Levinson 1983). Baym (1996) studied the construction of agreements and disagreements in the context of CMC and categorized message components used to express agreement and disagreement in an online discussion group. First, I will discuss how agreements and disagreements are expressed in a spoken conversation. Second, I will take a closer look at Baym's (1996) study and the different message components she categorized in her study.

5.1 Agreements and disagreements in spoken language

In this section, I will discuss concepts of sequential organization used in researching spoken language, such as turn-taking, adjacency pairs and preference organization, and how these relate to expressing agreement and disagreement in an online discussion. As Androutsopoulos (2014: 75) notes, the traditional linguistic units of analysis, such as a turn or a clause, are challenged by the ecological conditions of CMC, and categories, such as message or post must instead be taken into consideration. Thus, I will also discuss how using computer networks as a medium for discussion can affect the structure of a conversation, and how expressing agreement and disagreement in CMC differs from a spoken conversation.

5.1.1 Turn-taking and sequential organization in a conversation

One of the defining characteristics of a conversation is turn-taking because the nature of a conversation is that when one participant stops speaking another one starts and, thus, the turn shifts back and forth between participants during a conversation (Levinson 1983: 296). Furthermore, transitions from one speaker to another are typically very

orderly, and conversations usually contain surprisingly little overlap and very few extended gaps between turns (Levinson 1983: 296-297). Thus, in order for conversations to run smoothly, it is reasonable to assume there are some underlying rules or norms that govern turn-taking in a conversation. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974: 725-726) propose a model for a turn-taking system and describe it as a system which is managed locally and interactionally, meaning that turn-allocation is determined on a turn-by-turn basis and depends on the contributions of the participants. One technique in the turn-taking system that is used for selecting the next speaker is adjacency pairs, which refer to utterances that usually occur together, such as greeting and greeting, question and answer or offer and acceptance (Levinson 1983: 303).

Adjacency pairs can be seen as a principle unit in conversational organization (Levinson 1983: 304). Schegloff (2007: 13-14) provides a description of the features typical of an adjacency pair. He states that in its most basic form, an adjacency pair consists of two parts that appear adjacently, i.e. one after the other, and are uttered by different participants. Furthermore, he argues that adjacency pairs can be differentiated into first and second parts, which are pair type-related, meaning a first part should be followed by a second part of the same pair type, e.g. greeting-greeting, offer-accept/decline. It is important to note that a first part of an adjacency pair can have more than one possible second part, some of which are preferred and some dispreferred in a conversation (Levinson 1983: 306-307). The concept of preference organization will be discussed further in section 5.1.2. In addition, adjacency pairs are often embedded in other adjacency pairs, forming longer stretches of conversation, and therefore a local organization system, such as the occurrence of adjacency pairs, can structure larger conversational sequences (Levinson 1983: 304-306).

Agreements and disagreements appear in a conversation as possible responses to assessments (Levinson 1983: 336). It is normal for people make assessments when taking part in social activities, and initial assessments are used to perform one or more actions in a conversation, such as complaining, complimenting, praising or insulting (Pomerantz 1984: 57-63). Agreements and disagreements are usually performed by offering a second assessment (Pomerantz 1984: 63). The first and second assessments share the same referents, and the first assessment provides relevance to a second

assessment, which becomes especially apparent when the first assessment is formed in a way that either invites or constrains a certain response, e.g. by using interrogative tags (Pomerantz 1984: 59-61). For example, a phrase such as *It's a lovely day, isn't it?* would invite the other participant to agree with that assessment. Levinson (1983: 337-338), however, suggests that an initial assessment-second assessment pair cannot strictly be considered an adjacency pair because the first part does not necessary require a specific second part but does make one fitting, thus, making the turns less tightly paired than adjacency pairs. Regardless of what term to use for the pairing, assessments in a conversation do have sequential constraints (Pomerantz 1984: 62).

Computer networks as an environment for interaction set some limits for conversations that can affect e.g. turn-taking and, consequently, adjacency pairs. As stated earlier in this section, turn-taking in spoken language is usually quite orderly, with few gaps or overlaps. In contrast, Herring (1999) argues that turn-taking in CMC does not always alternate in a very orderly fashion or follow the rule of a minimal gap and no overlap between turns. She notes that an initiating message in multi-participant CMC might gain several or no responses, and a single message can respond to several initiating messages. Furthermore, according to Herring (2001: 620), it is problematic to equate messages with turns because messages can contain several conversational moves that are adjacent physically, but not functionally. In addition, Herring (1999) points out that there can be long temporal gaps between messages, especially in asynchronous CMC. She also states that while temporal overlap is not possible in the display of turns in one-way CMC because the messaging systems arrange posts into a linear order, overlap in exchanges happens often, as turns from different exchanges get placed between each other.

Furthermore, Herring (2001: 618) notes disrupted turn-adjacency is one of the major challenges for interaction management in an online environment. For example, on discussion forums where posts are displayed in chronological order, there can be several messages between an initiation and a response. This can make the communication more difficult for people to keep track of. However, users of computer messaging systems are able to adapt to the constraints of the systems, which partly explains the continuing popularity of CMC, despite its possible incoherence (Herring 1999). One way people

have adapted to disrupted turn-adjacency in a multiparticipant synchronous CMC is by naming the intended recipient of a message (Herring 2001: 619). According to Baym's (1996: 325-330) findings, naming was used in Usenet messages for different purposes than creating a connection to a prior post, however, the messages were linked to prior ones typically by quoting the initiating message. Quoting the prior post juxtaposes the initiation and response turns within one message, thus, creating the appearance of adjacency (Herring 2001: 620).

5.1.2 Preference organization

As mentioned earlier in section 5.1.1, adjacency pairs can have several possible second parts. Schegloff (2007: 58) argues that, except a few conversational sequences, such as greeting and greeting, where there is only one type of second part possible, in a majority of adjacency pairs, there are several different types of second parts a recipient can provide to a first part. In this case, types do not refer to e.g. different forms of greetings, such as *hello* and *good morning*. Responses can naturally take different linguistic forms, but e.g. accepting and declining are essentially different types of responses (Schegloff 2007: 59). The different types of seconds, such as accepting or declining, represent different alignments a recipient can take to a first part (Schegloff 2007: 58-59). Furthermore, not all second parts are of equal value (Schegloff 2007: 59). Indeed, there is a ranking where there is at least one preferred and one dispreferred type of second, when there are several alternatives to choose from (Levinson 1983: 307). The concept of preference organization also extends beyond adjacency pairs into the less tightly paired utterances, such as the assessment-second assessment pairing (Levinson 1983: 337-338).

The notion of preference in this context is not a psychological one but a structural one and it is related to the linguistic concept of markedness (Levinson 1983: 307). There is a relation between preference status and how the turn is constructed (Pomerantz 1984: 64). Levinson (1983: 307) describes the typical structure of preferred and dispreferred seconds. He argues that preferred second parts to adjacency pairs are usually structurally simpler, i.e. unmarked, compared to dispreferred seconds, which are

structurally more complex, i.e. marked. He further states that dispreferred seconds are usually delivered after a delay and typically include some preface and an account as to why it is not possible to perform the preferred second. In contrast, preferred seconds tend to be delivered without delay, in addition to being structurally simple (Levinson 1983: 308). Furthermore, the dispreferred seconds of different types of adjacency pairs share similar features, whereas preferred seconds of different types of first parts have little in common, a part from being unmarked (Levinson 1983: 333). The preferred second part to an initial assessment is usually an agreement, although, there are some exceptions (Pomerantz 1984: 63-64).

Pomerantz (1984: 64) argues that agreement turns are usually structured in a way that the occurrences of stated agreements are maximized, whereas in disagreement turns, the occurrences of stated disagreements are minimized. Pomerantz (1984: 65) further describes the general features of second assessments when agreement is the preferred second. Firstly, she states that in agreements, the entire turn is often occupied by agreement components, whereas disagreements often include prefaces. Secondly, she argues that agreements are often composed with stated agreement components, whereas disagreements can take different forms from unstated to stated disagreements, but when they are stated, they are usually weak forms of disagreement, such as partial agreements or partial disagreements. Thirdly, she notes that agreements are usually delivered with a minimal gap between turns, and, in contrast, disagreement components are often delivered with a delay, within either the turn or a series of turns. Finally, she points out that if a forthcoming agreement or disagreement is absent because of gaps, requests for clarification etc., it can be interpreted as an un-stated or an as-yet-stated disagreement.

Although agreement is usually the preferred second to an assessment, one instance where agreement is a dispreferred second is when the first participant delivers a self-deprecating assessment (Pomerantz 1984: 63-64). When responding to a self-deprecating assessment, the conversational expectations of avoiding criticism generally overrule the preference of agreeing with the first assessment (Levinson 1983: 338). Indeed, agreeing with a self-deprecating assessment would mean criticizing the first participant (Pomerantz 1984: 77-78). Furthermore, criticisms of one's co-participants are often shaped like dispreferred turns, involving delays and withholding criticism, as

well as weak-type criticism components with prefaces (Pomerantz 1984: 78-80). Disagreeing with a co-conversant's self-deprecating assessment exhibits support for the first participant (Pomerantz 1984: 81). Thus, disagreements following self-deprecating assessments are explicitly stated (Pomerantz 1984: 86). Moreover, any hesitation, stalling or evasiveness following a self-deprecating assessment can be interpreted as an agreement (Pomerantz 1984: 89-90). However, if a self-deprecating assessment is followed by an agreement with stated agreement components, it is usually a weak type of agreement (Pomerantz 1984: 90).

Furthermore, while disagreements are usually dispreferred in a conversation, in online group discussions disagreements have an important role in keeping the discussion going. Barnes (2001: 42) states that discussions where the participants have fundamentally differing opinions are the most long-lasting. She argues debating topics helps the discussion continue, and, thus, it is necessary for participants to offer different points of view in a discussion group. In addition, not all participants in a discussion group necessarily express their real opinions online. As the participants know that public online discussion is indeed public, their messages do not always convey their personal opinion, but instead can be intended to gain favorable attention from those reading the messages (Shirky 1995: 44, as quoted by Barnes 2001: 42-43). Indeed, there is a performance aspect to expressing one's opinion in online discussion (Barnes 2001: 42).

5.2 Agreements and disagreements in an online discussion group

In this section, I will discuss Baym's (1996) study on the construction of agreements and disagreements in an online discussion group. Baym's (1996: 325) analysis on agreements and disagreements is a part of a larger study she conducted on the discussion group. Thus, she elaborates on her findings in a later publication (see Baym 2000). First, I will discuss her findings concerning the construction of agreements and disagreements in the discussion group in general. Second, I will examine the different message components categorized in her study.

Baym (1996) analyzed messages posted by a Usenet newsgroup group discussing soap operas and compared her findings to prior research on agreements and disagreements in both oral and written communication, specifically letters. Generally, the same set of message features were used to construct both agreements and disagreements in the discussion group, however, the disagreements contained more mitigating components than the agreements (Baym 1996: 338). The agreements and disagreements on the discussion group were similar to those in spoken and written language in that agreements were easier to perform than disagreements (Baym 1996: 339). However, there was a stronger resemblance between agreements in the discussion group and those in letters because they were more complex than agreements in spoken conversations (Baym 1996: 328). Nevertheless, the disagreements in the Usenet discussion group were even more complex than the agreements, thus, following a similar pattern to both oral and written communication (Baym 1996: 332).

Baym (1996: 328-332) states that although there were similarities between the agreements and disagreements in the discussion group and those performed in conversations and in letters, both agreements and disagreements in the Usenet messages contained features that are uncommon in oral and written communication. In addition, Baym (1996: 339) specifies that the repeated use of quotations, elaborations, and in the case of agreements, reasoning and qualifiers, combined with the relatively low amount of secondary assessments, make agreements and disagreements in the online discussion group different from oral or written ones. Furthermore, she argues that many of the differences result from the characteristics of Usenet as a medium; e.g. quoting benefits from the medium electronically storing messages.

However, while the medium had an influence on the performance of agreements and disagreements, the context of the discussion also played an important part in the way language activities were structured in the discussion group (Baym 1996: 342-343). Agreements and disagreements in the discussion group not only reflected the context they were embedded in but also the context the group was trying to create, namely a friendly environment open to diverse viewpoints (Baym 1996: 343). The emotionally loaded issues soap operas deal with often called for the participants to imbue their interpretations with personal experiences, which resulted in an effort to sustain a

respectful environment and making disagreements in the group civil and focused on differences in opinion instead of personal attacks (Baym 1996: 341).

Furthermore, Baym (1996: 341) argues that disagreements were important because they provided new resources for the participants to build richer interpretations, thus, enhancing the pleasure of viewing the show. She notes that the language practices of the group were focused on maximizing the introduction of new interpretative resources. Thus, providing simple agreements was insufficient and coordinating with a prior poster was not the main purpose of agreements in the discussion group (Baym 1996: 332). As mentioned earlier, agreements in the group often contained elements that function as social aligners, offense mitigators and elaborations. Baym (1996: 340) also argues that the presence of reasoning and qualifiers in agreements can be seen as adding new material or a new angle to the discussion. Furthermore, she argues that the widespread use of elaboration in both agreements and disagreements indicates that agreeing or disagreeing with a prior poster was a way to make one's own contributions relevant to the conversation.

5.2.1 Baym's categorical scheme of message components

Baym (1996) divided the recurring message features she found in her data to 17 categories. She further grouped the different categories under the headings of linking to previous discourse, creating agreement or creating disagreement, social aligners, offense mitigators, elaborations, and other. Here is a list of the different categories she identified in her study:

- Linking to previous discourse:
  - quotation with reference
  - references to previous talk
  - expression of the *need* to reply
  - other ways of linking to a prior message
- Creating agreement/disagreement:
  - explicit indication of agreement/disagreement
  - affirming/contradictory assessment
- Social aligners:
  - expression of gratitude to a previous poster

  - acknowledgment of the other's perspective
  - partial agreements
  - use of the other's name
  - smiley faces

- Offense mitigators:
  - qualifiers
  - reasoning
  - apologies
  - framing as non-offensive

- Elaborations

- Other

Both the agreements and disagreements Baym (1996: 328-332) analyzed in her study contained elements that link the posts to prior ones. Nearly all of the posts included a quotation with a reference (Baym 1996: 325). They were used to mark a topic and create an orientation to specific prior turns, thus, mitigating the spatiotemporal separation caused by the medium (Baym 1996: 339). As stated in section 5.1.1, quoting a prior post juxtaposes the initiation and response within one message, which compensates for the disrupted turn-adjacency caused by the medium. Other ways to create a connection to a previous post included references to previous talk, expressing the *need* to reply and other ways of linking to a prior message, however, they were used significantly less frequently than quotations in both the agreements and disagreements (Baym 1996: 327-332).

Baym (1996: 328-329) identified two main features that were used to create the agreement in the discussion group: explicit indication of agreement and affirming assessment. She states that the explicit indications of agreement either utilized the phrase *I agree* or strong agreement tokens such as *indeed*, whereas affirming assessments reiterated the point of a prior message. However, marking an agreement explicitly or making an affirming assessment was not always necessary to express a similar position in the discussion group, instead the participants could express their agreement by providing elaboration or reasoning to another poster's assessment (Baym 1996: 329).

In comparison, Baym (1996: 333) states that the disagreements were expressed with explicit indications of disagreement or contradicting assessments to the initiating message. She specifies that the explicit disagreements either utilized the word *disagree*, or synonyms of it, or disagreement tokens such as *but*. In addition, an opposing stance in the discussion group was expressed implicitly by providing reasoning against a prior assessment, by elaborations in the form or counterexamples, and by posing questions challenging a prior assessment (Baym 1996: 333-334). Thus, a disagreement could be expressed without using message features that are more clearly oppositional, such as explicit disagreements or contradicting assessments (Baym 1996: 333).

Although agreeing already creates an alignment between the participants in a discussion group, there were message components present in the agreements that enhanced the alignment, which include use of the other's name, acknowledgment of the other's perspective, smiley faces and expressions of gratitude (Baym 1996: 329-332). Naming was quite a commonly used socially aligning feature in both the agreements and disagreements, whereas acknowledging another poster's perspective, smiley faces and expressions of gratitude appeared less frequently (Baym 1996: 330-335). As stated in section 5.1.1, addressing another participant by name can be a way of adapting to the disrupted turn-adjacency that can appear in CMC. However, Baym (1996: 330) suggests that instead of being used as a technique to link one's post to a prior one, naming was used in the discussion group to provide public recognition for another poster. She argues that naming helps build a participant’s identity in a mostly anonymous medium, and personalize the group as a whole by identifying individual group members. Naming was used less frequently in the disagreement than in the agreements, possibly to avoid negative recognition (Baym 1996: 335).

In addition to the social aligners mentioned above, there was another socially aligning feature that appeared in the disagreements called partial agreement (Baym 1996: 334). Partial agreements were used to preface disagreements and were usually followed by disagreement tokens such as *but* or *though* in the discussion group (Baym 1996: 334). Furthermore, they often expressed a temporal shift in a participant's thought process in which the poster at first agreed with a prior poster's position but eventually came to a

different conclusion (Baym 1996: 335). Partial agreements were the most frequently used socially aligning feature in the disagreements (Baym's 1996: 334).

Four message features were categorized as offense mitigators: qualifiers, reasoning, apologies and framing as non-offensive (Baym 1996: 330-337). Despite being features more associated with disagreeing, the agreements in the discussion group also contained offense mitigators, mainly qualifiers and reasoning (Baym 1996: 330-331). As stated in section 5.2, maximizing the introduction of novel interpretations was the main focus of the language practices of the group and the use of qualifiers and reasoning in agreements can be seen as adding new material or angles to the discussion. In contrast, all four mitigating strategies were present in the disagreements (Baym 1996: 336-337).

Qualifying decreases the extent to which a poster can be held accountable for the content of his or her message, and, thus, modifies the poster's position (Goffman 1981, as quoted by Baym 1996: 330). Using qualifiers, such as *I think* and *I wish*, creates a distance between a speaker and their claim (Goffman 1981: 148). The qualifiers used in the Usenet messages framed the content of the messages as subjective (Baym 1996: 331). In addition, reasoning and elaboration can be difficult to distinguish from one another (Baym 1996: 327). Baym (1996: 331) clarified the difference between the message components with the following example: an element can be considered reasoning if it can continue the sentence *I agree because...*, whereas anything that can continue the sentence *I agree and...* can be considered an elaboration. The final mitigating element is framing as non-offensive, which explicitly marks the post as not being confrontational (Baym 1996: 337).

Elaboration was the most commonly used message component, apart from quotation, in both the agreements and disagreements in the discussion group (Baym 1996: 338). Elaborating expands the discussion to a new angle or topic of conversation that is related to the one being discussed (Baym 2000: 227). As stated above, anything that can continue the sentence *I agree and...* can be categorized as elaboration. The most frequently used elaborative shift in agreements was a poster moving from agreeing with a prior assessment to discussing his or her own (Baym 1996: 331). Indeed, agreements

were used by the participants as a way to make their own interpretation relevant to the discussion (Baym 1996: 340). As stated in section 5.2, providing new interpretative resources was important in the group, as building richer interpretations enhances the pleasure of watching the show. However, when used with disagreements, elaborations could also be considered a mitigating strategy because they move the discussion forward and away from the disagreement (Baym 1996: 338).

6 THE PRESENT STUDY

This section focuses on describing the design of the present study. First, I will explain the aims of the study and the research questions the study will try to address. Second, I will discuss the collection of data for the study, and the ethical issues related to researching CMC and collecting data from online sources. Third, I will describe the method used in analyzing the data in this study. However, before describing the present study in more detail, it is relevant to look at where the study is situated in comparison to previous research. This study is focused on the performance of agreements and disagreements on an online discussion forum. As stated in chapter 5, agreements and disagreements have been studied previously in the context of spoken language. However, less research on the subject has been done in the context of CMC. I will be using Baym's (1996) study on agreements and disagreements in an online discussion group as a basis for my analysis in this study.

Baym's (1996) study was carried out during the first wave of linguistic research into CMC and since that time, there has been many changes in how people communicate through computer networks and in CMC research. As mentioned in section 2.1, CMC has changed over the years to become more accessible to users through web browsers, more multimodal due to increased bandwidth, different modes have converged and co-exist in single platforms, and communication technology has evolved to include devices such as smartphones. Furthermore, as also mentioned in section 2.1, it has become a part of everyday life for many people. Thus, it is relevant to take another look at the performance of agreements and disagreements in an online discussion group, as the landscape of CMC has changed since the first wave of CMC research. Baym (1996) takes into consideration, for example, smiley faces in her study but makes no note of other linguistic features that are now seen as commonplace in CMC, such as acronyms. This suggests that either they were not yet commonly used at the time or not used by the specific discussion group she studied. As stated in section 2.2, these reoccurring features can be used by different groups in their own individual ways.

Furthermore, Baym (1996) studied agreements and disagreements in a particular context, which is a soap opera discussion group in Usenet discussing a certain storyline of a specific tv series. Thus, the study only describes the language practices of a certain group within a certain fandom, and her findings do not necessarily describe how agreements and disagreements are expressed in another discussion group, or online discussion groups in general. As stated in section 2.1, linguistic research into CMC has moved from emphasizing technology to a point of view that takes into consideration different group practices in CMC. The present study examines agreements and disagreements in the context of another group discussing a different object of fandom, i.e. the tv series *Supernatural*, using an online discussion forum, which is a similar but a different medium to Usenet. Thus, how agreements and disagreements are expressed in this group most likely differ from the group studied by Baym (1996). Indeed, the findings of this study possibly reflect both the change in context and also how the language practices of CMC have changed over time.

6.1 Aims and research questions

The purpose of this study is to examine how agreements and disagreements are expressed in online fan discourse. The study will analyze messages posted on a message board dedicated to discussing the tv series *Supernatural*. The research questions this study aims to find answers to are the following:

1. What message components do the participants use to construct agreements and disagreements on the message board?
2. How frequently and in what ways do the participants use various message components in the agreements and disagreements?

This study mainly utilizes a qualitative approach to analyzing the data. I will examine what kind of message components the participants use when expressing agreement and disagreement on the message board. In addition, there is a quantitative element to this study, as I will look at how frequently different message components appear in the data

to see if any trends or patterns appear in the construction of agreements and disagreements.

6.2 Data

There are certain challenges in collecting and analyzing data in CMC research in terms of the amount of data and how and what kind of data to gather. CMC as a subject of study offers researchers access to massive amounts of data, which is a problem that can be addressed by e.g. researchers' own decisions (Androutsopoulos 2014: 75). Thus, narrowing down the amount of data to a manageable portion is one step in CMC research. The data for this research was collected from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) website (http://www.imdb.com/) and more specifically from a message board within the site focused on a tv series called *Supernatural*. The reasons for choosing the website and the *Supernatural* message board stem from my own interests, since I am a user of the IMDb website and a regular viewer of the tv series.

Supernatural is an American tv series produced by Warner Bros. Television and Wonderland Sound and Vision. The tv series first aired in 2005 and is, at the time of writing this, still ongoing. As stated in section 4.4, *Supernatural* can be characterized as a cult series, as evidenced by its continued fan support and longevity as a series. The series is based on the horror genre and it often utilizes urban legends, folk tales, mythology and religion in building its narratives and the world of the series. The series is based on the premise of the two main characters, Sam and Dean, traveling around the United States hunting *Supernatural* creatures that are a threat to humanity. However, the personal relationship between the two lead characters, who are brothers, is the focal points of the series. Indeed, the most prominent theme of the series is family. In addition, *Supernatural* has an exceedingly active fan base, particularly online.

The Internet Movie Database (IMDb) is an online database where users can search for movie and tv related information. It contains information, for example, on actors, soundtracks and movie release dates, as well as multimedia content, such as movie trailers and interview videos. They also offer users a possibility to write their own

reviews on movies and tv series. Furthermore, at the time of collecting the data, IMDb had an active message board section on their site, which, however, has since been closed. The message board was divided into a series of categories and subcategories, which ranged from general film or tv discussion to specific genres or movie series. Moreover, every movie and tv series had their own message board, including *Supernatural*. The IMDb website has a relatively long history and is extremely popular. For example, in 2015, they had 200 million visitors a month and the site included 180 million items of data (About IMDb (n.d.)). The website originally started as lists of movie credits collected by a Usenet newsgroup called rec.arts.movies, which was made searchable in 1990 (IMDb history (n.d.)).

The approach on data collecting in CMC can be placed on a continuum which spans from purely textual to a more ethnographic approach (Androutsopoulos 2014: 75). The data collected online can be either screen data, which is produced and collected online, or user-based data, which is collected in contact with Internet users through, for example, interviews (Androutsopoulos 2014: 76). The data collected for this study consists of screen data. The choice of the kind of data to collect is largely affected by what question the research is focused on. Androutsopoulos (2014: 76-77) argued that although a research question can justify the use of only one kind of data, screen data and user-based data should be seen as complementary forms of data collecting. As this study is focused on examining the different linguistic elements agreements and disagreements consist of, focusing on textual samples seems sufficient. Conducting a larger research into linguistic practices of an online fan group may have benefitted from collecting user-based data, in addition to screen data.

Furthermore, due to the vast amount of data available online, it is usually necessary to select a sample from all the available data when studying discourse in the context of CMC (Herring 2004a: 350). There are different techniques in sampling data for the purposes of computer-mediated discourse analysis, which include random sampling, sampling based on theme, time, phenomenon, individual or group and convenience, all of which have their own advantages and disadvantages (Herring 2004a: 351). However, it is usual to combine two or more of these techniques (Androutsopoulos 2014: 79). Both temporal and thematic samplings are favored in research focusing on computer-

mediated discourse analysis because they offer the advantages of providing a rich context and topical coherence (Herring 2004a: 351).

The sampling of data for this study was done based on both theme and time. Indeed, thematic samples are often organized by time, which allows for some longitudinal observations (Herring 2004a: 351). The data for this study was collected in September 2010 following the United States broadcast date of the first episode of the sixth season of *Supernatural*. First, I set out to gather the data based on time and collected all the message threads that were started within one week's time following the airing of the episode and all the messages posted within those threads during that week. However, due to the overwhelming number of messages posted within that time, I had to further limit the amount of data to achieve an appropriate sample size for this study. Thus, I limited the data again based on time to include only message threads that were begun on the day of the broadcast following the airing of the episode and all the messages posted to them within a week. Consequently, the threads included both initial reactions to the episode but also more carefully considered opinions.

Second, to create a coherent set of posts to analyze, I narrowed down the data thematically. Basing a data sample on theme is useful when gathering data from discussion forums and other types of online discourse that are organized thematically (Androutsopoulos 2014: 79). The topics discussed on the *Supernatural* message board were varied, including discussion on the actors, the characters, the music, different plot points etc. The messages also involved different communicative practices, such as sharing information, speculating, criticizing and reworking the series, which were described in section 4.4.1. Because agreements and disagreements are responses to assessments, as mentioned in section 5.1.1, I found it meaningful to narrow the data to threads where the original poster offered a review of the episode as a whole. Thus, the data was limited to threads where the topic of discussion was the episode itself and the participants opinions on it. As a result, the data was narrowed down to consist of 14 message threads containing 208 posts in total.

Furthermore, as some of the messages within the message threads did not express either an agreement or a disagreement, the data was narrowed down to include only messages that expressed either an agreement or a disagreement or both. In the context of an online discussion group, Baym (1996: 325) defined an agreement as any post that was "explicitly responsive to a prior message" and took the same stance, whereas a disagreement was defined similarly as responsive to a prior message but taking a differing position. Determining which messages included an agreement or a disagreement was complicated by the fact that in some cases it was ambiguous as to which prior message the poster was responding. In addition, some messages responded to more than one prior message including both an agreement and a disagreement and were therefore counted into both categories causing some overlap. The threads that only contained an opening post were also excluded from the data, as they were not responding to any specific prior post and, thus, did not include any agreements or disagreements. Of the 208 messages included in the data, 111 (53 %) expressed an agreement and 46 (22 %) expressed a disagreement. Issues in categorizing and coding the data will be discussed further in section 6.3.

Sampling the data temporally and thematically resulted in a set of data, which was an appropriate size for this study and had a coherent theme. Choosing a number of threads and following them for a week allowed most of them to gain enough responses to include either agreements or disagreements or both. However, limiting the data based on topic of discussion excluded much of the interaction on the message board. Including a variety of topics that the participants debated as well as collecting data from a longer period of time would have given a fuller understanding of how agreements and disagreements are expressed on the message board. However, due to the large number of messages being posted on the board, it would have required doing a more extensive study than was practical for this thesis. Thus, the data collected for this study represents the way agreements and disagreements were expressed by the participants on the message board at a specific point in time.

6.2.1 Ethical issues of collecting data from online sources

Collecting data from online sources can be problematic from the point of view of research ethics. Internet as a subject of study seems to be somewhat of a grey area, as, according to Herring (1996: 5), there are no universally accepted and agreed-upon rules for research practices in CMC. As stated in section 2.1, Internet research is multidisciplinary, and, thus, various methods from different disciplines are being used to study Internet phenomena. Furthermore, Internet researchers from different disciplines and backgrounds have their own perspectives on research ethics, which can of course vary (Sveningsson Elm 2009: 73). Most of the basic ethical principles and guidelines used in academic research pre-date the Internet, and although some of them can be transferred to the new medium, others need revising (Sveningsson Elm 2009: 71-72). There are, however, efforts made to create more uniform guidelines for Internet research. The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) promotes critical Internet research that is cross-disciplinary, and they provide guidelines for ethical online research on their website (http://www.aoir.org/). However, new questions and problems will probably continue to arise due to the rapid development of the Internet (Sveningsson Elm 2009: 72).

One of the issues that face CMC research involve the subject of privacy and publicness (Androutsopoulos 2014: 87). Online environments cannot always be neatly categorized as either public or private (Sveningsson Elm 2009: 76). The distinction between public and private is even less clear in many of the social media sites (Kytölä 2013: 69). Thus, what online data is considered private and what is considered public can sometimes be difficult to determine. Approaches can vary from one researcher to another, as some scholars regard all online communication comparable to published texts, while on the other hand collecting online data while lurking, i.e. reading without contributing to the discussion, could also be considered comparable to eavesdropping on a private conversation (Herring 1996: 5). Furthermore, researchers' definitions of what is public, and thus considered public domain, are not always shared by the participants themselves (Androutsopoulos 2014: 88). Private and public can be seen as opposites on a continuum, and different online environments could be categorized under public, semi-public, semi-private and private (Sveningsson Elm 2009: 75).

The degree of privacy of the data has an effect on which ethical principles a researcher should follow. Privacy and informed consent are central issues in research ethics, and both of them pose challenges for Internet researchers (Sveningsson Elm 2009: 69-70). Hiding the identity of the research subjects is one of the central rules of research ethics (Sveningsson Elm 2009: 71). However, because ethical guidelines for researchers can vary greatly according to institution and country, there is no consensus on how to protect the privacy of the informants in CMC research (Androutsopoulos 2014: 87). Androutsopoulos (2014: 88) notes that it is easier to maintain the anonymity for private online data than it is for public or semi-public data. Even though most participants on the IMDb message board already used pseudonyms to hide their true identity and personal information, none of the pseudonyms will be revealed in this study.

Informed consent is also seen as a basic requirement of research ethics, however, when the environment that is being studied is public, informed consent is not always necessary (Sveningsson Elm 2009: 70). Furthermore, when the subject of study is an online environment, informed consent might be difficult or impossible to obtain (Sveningsson Elm 2009: 72). As online environments are not necessarily clearly private or clearly public, but instead something in between, researchers need to question whether they are public enough to study without informed consent (Sveningsson Elm 2009: 76). The IMDb message boards could be labeled as semi-public. The message boards are available for anyone to read, but in order to participate in the discussions one needs to become a registered member, and to authenticate one's account. Because anyone can read the discussions on the IMDb message boards and the website receives millions of visitors a month, I consider it to be more towards the public end of the continuum, and thus public enough to study without asking permission from the participants to use the data.

6.3 Method of analysis

This study utilizes Baym's (1996) framework (for details see section 5.2.1) as the basis for analyzing the data collected from the *Supernatural* message board. First, I identified

the messages within the data that included either an agreement or a disagreement and focused on those messages. Furthermore, because some messages included other conversational moves in addition to agreeing or disagreeing with a prior post, I only analyzed the parts of the messages that contained an agreement or a disagreement. The agreements and disagreements were further analyzed by using a coding scheme that Baym (1996) presented in her study. The different message components she identified in her study were explained in section 5.2.1.

As mentioned in section 6.2, Baym (1996: 325) defined an agreement as any post that was "explicitly responsive to a prior message" and took the same stance, whereas a disagreement was defined similarly as responsive to a prior message but taking a differing position. Furthermore, whether a second assessment can be defined as an agreement or a disagreement depends on the position it takes in relation to the first assessment. Thus, one of the problems in analyzing the data resulted from the disrupted turn-adjacency caused by the medium. As stated in section 5.1.1, disrupted turn-adjacency is a challenge in CMC because it sometimes makes the conversation harder to keep track of, as there can be several messages between an initiation and a response. As also mentioned in section 5.1.1, one way to adjust is to use quotations to juxtapose the initiation and response within one message. Indeed, almost all of the messages in the discussion group studied by Baym (1996: 325-326) included a quotation with a reference to the original poster. However, as quoting a prior poster did not happen as frequently on the *Supernatural* message board, determining the initiating message in an assessment-second assessment sequence was not always easy.

Although, the links to prior messages were not always made apparent on the *Supernatural* message board, the initiating message to a response was usually implicitly referenced in some way, and the meaning of some posts only make sense in relation to specific, prior messages. Furthermore, the posts that either did not include a clear link to a prior message or the initiating message could not be determined from the content of the post, were categorized as agreements or disagreements in regard to the position they took in comparison to the opening post. While not all participants necessarily read all the prior turns, they would have at least read the opening post and be responding to the topic of conversation before sending a message.

As mentioned in section 5.1, computer networks as an environment challenge the traditional linguistic units. In addition to adjacency pairs, another concept of conversation analysis that caused difficulties in coding the data was turn-taking. As stated in section 5.1.1, turn-taking does not always proceed in an orderly fashion in CMC: some initiating messages can have several or no responses, while, single messages can respond to several initiating messages. Indeed, some of the posts on the *Supernatural* message board responded to more than one prior message often agreeing with one and disagreeing with another, thus, performing two different conversational moves within one message.

Thus, categorizing some messages as simply agreements or disagreements was impossible. As a result, the messages that performed both an agreement and a disagreement were counted into both categories, which caused some overlap between the categories. Of the 208 messages in the data, 12 (5.8 %) contained both an agreement and a disagreement. However, I separated the two conversational moves within the messages from each other as clearly as possible to determine which message components were used to create which response. Thus, the message components included in the posts were only counted into either agreement or disagreement categories.

In addition, there were difficulties in distinguishing between some of the categories of message components. As stated in section 5.2.1, reasoning and elaboration can be difficult to distinguish from one another, however, the difference can be clarified by defining reasoning as anything that could follow the utterance *I agree because…* and elaboration as following the utterance *I agree and…* Despite this clarification, several message components that could be considered reasoning or elaboration required some thought as to which category to place them in. Furthermore, there were some features on the *Supernatural* message board that Baym (1996) did not include in her categories. These features were categorized as *Other*. Most of the elements placed under this category are features that can be seen as typical of language used online, such as the use

of acronyms, asterisks and features that emphasize parts of a text such as using all capital letters.

7 THE FINDINGS

In this chapter, I will report the findings of this study, the aim of which is to examine what message components agreements and disagreements consist of in the context of an online message board discussing the tv series *Supernatural*. The emphasis will be on qualitative analysis, however, there is also a quantitative element to this study. In addition to examining the different message components agreements and disagreements consist of, I will examine how frequently the different message components appeared in the data. First, I will present the results of the quantitative analysis. Second, I will describe the different message components found in the agreements, and, third, I will describe the message components found in the disagreements.

When presenting the findings of the qualitative analysis, I will provide examples of the different message components selected from the data. The examples will not always include complete messages. As some of the posts in the data contained different conversational moves in addition to agreeing or disagreeing with a prior post, the examples will include the parts relevant to performing the agreement or disagreement. The user names of the posters will be omitted from the examples to protect the posters' anonymity. The topic line of the post will appear in bold font at the beginning of the example. In addition, parts of the messages will be in bold font when it is necessary to highlight certain message components. Otherwise, no changes will be made to the posts concerning orthography or punctuation. Some posts also included emoticons, unconventional use of keyboard characters, and cursive or bold fonts, which will not be changed in the examples.

Presenting examples from the data raises an ethical question, as the messages could be found online by doing a web search, thus, revealing the identity of the posters. As mentioned in section 6.2.1, I consider the messages to be more public than private, as they were available to be read by anyone visiting the site. Furthermore, because messages are not stored indefinitely by discussion forums, and also because IMDb has closed down the message boards on its website, it is unlikely that the messages can be easily found on the Internet anymore. In addition, as most of the messages were posted

under what were obvious screen names, it would be difficult to connect the messages to users' real identities. Moreover, the subject matter discussed on the board is not very sensitive or personal in nature and, thus, quoting some of the messages is not likely to cause the posters harm.

In order to give some context for the examples, I will provide a summary of the plot of the episode being discussed, which is the first episode of the sixth season of *Supernatural*. Season five of the series culminated on the protagonists, Sam and Dean, preventing the biblical apocalypse by Sam sacrificing his own life to cast Lucifer back into Hell. Afterwards, Dean gives up hunting supernatural creatures in order to respect his promise to Sam to live a normal life, and reunites and settles down with a woman named Lisa, who Dean had had a brief relationship with in the past. However, it was revealed to the audience at the end of the final episode of the fifth season that Sam had somehow returned back to life. The beginning of the first episode of the sixth season depicts Dean working on a construction site and living an average life in a suburban neighborhood with Lisa and her son, Ben, without knowing that his brother is alive. This is a deviation from the life Dean had previously led, which was characterized by constant travelling and dealing with dangerous creatures. During the episode Dean is drawn back into hunting supernatural creatures and encounters Sam, thus, finding out that he is alive. Sam reveals he has been back for a year and hunting with previously unknown members of family from their mother's side.

7.1 Results of the quantitative analysis

I this section, I will present the results of the quantitative part of my analysis. I will begin with the agreements and then move on to the disagreements. As stated in section 6.2, 111 messages in the data included an agreement, whereas disagreements were found in 46 messages. The number and percentage of how frequently different message components appeared in the agreements on the *Supernatural* message board can be seen in Table 1, and how frequently different message components appeared in the disagreements can be seen in Table 2.

Table 1. The message components of agreements (N = 111) by frequency of appearance in the data.

	Number	Percentage
Affirming assessment	96	86.5 %
Elaboration	77	69.4 %
Explicit indication of agreement	38	34.2 %
Qualifier	38	34.2 %
Reasoning	37	33.3 %
Other	29	26.1 %
Quotation	14	12.6 %
Emoticon	11	9.9 %
Reference to previous talk	6	5.4 %
Use of the other's name	5	4.5 %
Other ways of linking to a prior message	3	2.7 %
Acknowledgement of another's perspective	0	0 %
Expression of gratitude	0	0 %
Expression of the *need* to reply	0	0 %

As shown in Table 1, the message components that appeared in the agreements most frequently were those used to create the agreement and elaboration. The most frequently used message component was affirming assessment, which appeared in 86.5 % of the agreements, followed by elaboration, which appeared in 69.4 % of the agreements. The second most frequent way of creating the agreement was using explicit indication of agreement, which appeared in 34.2 % of the agreements. After message components used to create the agreement and elaboration, the most frequently appearing message components were qualifiers, which appeared in 34.2 % of the agreements, and reasoning, which appeared in 33.3 % of the agreements. Both qualifiers and reasoning are categorized as offense mitigators. Furthermore, message components categorized as Other in this study appeared in 26.1 % of the agreements.

The message components that appeared in the agreements less frequently were components used to link one's post to a previous one and to align oneself socially to a prior poster. The most frequently used message component linking to previous discourse was quoting, used in 12.6 % of the agreements. In contrast, references to previous talk only appeared in 5.4 % of the agreements and other ways of linking to a prior message

in 2.7 % of the agreements, whereas none of the agreements included an expression of a *need* to reply. In addition, emoticons were the most frequently used socially aligning element, appearing in 9.9, % of the agreements, whereas using another poster's name only appeared in 4.5 % of the agreements. Neither acknowledgements of another poster's perspective nor expressions of gratitude appeared in the agreements on the message board.

Table 2. The message components of disagreements (N = 46) by frequency of appearance in the data.

	Number	Percentage
Contradicting assessment	43	93.5 %
Elaboration	29	63.0 %
Reasoning	28	60.9 %
Qualifier	18	39.1 %
Other	17	37.0 %
Explicit indication of disagreement	12	26.1 %
Partial agreement	12	26.1 %
Emoticon	3	6.5 %
Reference to previous talk	3	6.5 %
Acknowledgement of another's perspective	2	4.3 %
Framing as non-offensive	2	4.3 %
Quotation	2	4.3 %
Other ways of linking to a prior message	2	4.3 %
Use of the other's name	1	2.2 %
Apology	0	0 %
Expression of the *need* to reply	0	0 %

As shown in Table 2, the message components that were included in disagreements most frequently were those used to create the disagreement, elaboration, and two offense mitigators, which are reasoning and qualifiers. The most frequently used message component was contradicting assessment, which appeared in 93.5 % of the disagreements. It was followed by elaboration, which appeared in 63 % of the disagreements, whereas reasoning was included in 60.9 % of the disagreements and qualifiers in 39.1 % of the disagreements. Other offense mitigators, however, were used less frequently. Framing as non-offensive appeared in 4.3 % of the disagreements and

apologies appeared in none of the disagreements. In addition, message components categorized as Other appeared in 37 % of the disagreements

Both explicit indications of disagreement and partial agreements appeared in 26.1 % of the disagreements. Partial agreements followed by explicit indications of disagreement formed a recurring sequence in the disagreements on the message board, which will be discussed further in section 7.3.5. Apart from partial agreements, other social aligners were used less frequently in the disagreements. Emoticons were included in 6.5 % of the disagreements, acknowledgements of another's perspective in 4.3 % of the disagreements and the use of another poster's name in 2.2 % of the disagreement. Furthermore, the least frequently used message components in the disagreements included components linking to previous discourse. References to previous talk appeared in 6.5 % of the disagreements, and both quoting another poster and other ways of linking appeared in 4.3 % of the disagreements. In addition, expressing the *need* to reply appeared in none of the disagreements on the message board.

7.2 Message components of agreements

Considering that the aim of this study is to examine how agreements and disagreements are performed on the *Supernatural* message board, I will begin with the message components that were used to create the agreement itself, and then move onto the message components surrounding the agreement. As this study uses Baym's (1996) categorical scheme as a basis for analyzing the data, the different message components will be grouped the same way they were in her study. Thus, the different message components of agreements will be presented in the following sections under the headings of creating the agreement, elaboration, offense mitigators, other, components linking to previous discourse and social aligners. The order is based on how frequently different types of message components were used, beginning with the ones that appeared most often. I will also examine the message components in each section beginning from the one used most frequently by the participants.

7.2.1 Creating the agreement

As stated in section 5.2.1, agreement can be expressed by using an explicit indication of agreement or an affirming assessment, however, a participant can also express a similar position by providing reasoning for the other poster's claim or elaborating on another poster's assessment in a way that implies a similar point of view. Agreements on the *Supernatural* message board were created by using affirming assessments, explicit indications of agreement and elaborations. In addition, the participants indicated agreement with emoticons and the use of asterisks, which is a message component categorized in this study as Other.

First, affirming assessment, as also mentioned in section 5.2.1, refers to an assessment which restates the point of a prior message. Affirming assessment can appear as the sole indicator of agreement. This is demonstrated in Example 1 (26th of September 2010, 05.31), in which the participant is responding to the original poster, who had expressed a very positive view on the episode, with a simple affirming assessment:

(1) **Re: Post here if you loved it!**

Loved it!

Agreements on the *Supernatural* message board, however, varied in length and complexity from simple agreements with few if any additional elements, as seen in Example 1, to more complex responses which included several different message components. Furthermore, affirming assessments also appeared together with explicit indications of agreement (see Example 2).

Second, as stated in section 5.2.1, sentences that include either a version of the phrase *I agree* or a strong agreement token, such as *indeed*, are categorized as explicit indications of agreement. An explicit agreement that utilizes the word *agree* can be seen in Example 2 (24th of September 2010, 19.07), in which the poster is responding to the original poster who had found the episode's narrative lacking in some respects. The explicit agreement is indicated in bold font:

(2) **Re: Anyone else VERY disappointed in Ep 1 S 6?**

Agree 100%. This episode was missing everything! The editing was weird. The FX with the tattoos were pretty sweet, though. I don't know what was up with this episode. I am very disappointed. No story, no drama, hardly any action. AH!:/

Example 2 includes an explicit agreement, followed by affirming assessments, as well as reasoning, elaboration, message components categorized as Other, and an emoticon. The abbreviation FX in the example refers to special effects.

In addition, an agreement token is illustrated in Example 3 (24th of September 2010, 22.28), in which the poster is agreeing with the original poster about how the episode and especially the relationship between the main protagonists, the two brothers, seemed different than in earlier seasons. In addition to the agreement token (indicated in bold font), the example contains a qualifier, affirming assessments, reasoning and a message component categorized as Other:

(3) **Re: It just feels off**

That's how I felt. Like everything was off, but especially the interaction between Sam and Dean. It was like they didn't have 5 seasons together before and the actors had just met. And not wild about the 'cousins'.

Furthermore, the agreement tokens in the data included phrases such as *Well said*, *exactly* and *I was thinking the same thing*. In addition, phrases coded as agreement tokens that appeared in different variations included *You summed up my thoughts exactly*, *I couldn't have summed it up better* and *You summed up what I felt too*.

Third, elaborating, as stated in section 5.2.1, expands the discussion by introducing a new angle or topic of conversation that is related to the one being discussed. The use of elaboration in creating an agreement can be seen in Example 4 (24th of September 2010, 19.30), in which the message is a response to the original poster who had stated that the episode felt off and uncharacteristic for the series:

(4) **Re: It just feels off**

Could have used a little more humor. It will probably feel much more like Supernatural once Cass shows up

The name Cass (or Cas), seen in Example 4, refers to a recurring character in *Supernatural* called Castiel, who did not appear in the episode. The entire message in Example 4 is an elaboration on the issues raised by the original poster, and the agreement is implied especially by the second sentence. Elaborations will be examined more closely in section 7.2.2.

Fourth, emoticons were one of the ways the participants used to indicate a similar position on the *Supernatural* message board. As stated in section 2.2, emoticons, such as the smiley face, are used to add expressiveness and emotion to the communication. The post in Example 5 (24th of September 2010, 22.18) includes an animated emoticon, which imitates nodding one's head and translates as *yes* if an indicator is placed over it on the message board, and it is followed by an elaboration:

(5) **Re: Post here if you loved it!**

Can't wait to see where they're going to take us this season!

The poster in Example 5 has replaced an explicit agreement with an emoticon that indicates a physical action expressing agreement. Emoticons will be examined more closely in section 7.2.6.

Fifth, the use of asterisks is another creative and playful way of creating an agreement that does not include any explicit indications of agreement or affirming assessments. In Example 6 (25th of September 2010, 08.31), the agreement is implied by the described action of raising a hand, which is enclosed by the asterisks:

(6) **Re: Post here if you loved it!**

raises hand

disappears into the fog

The post seen in Example 6 did not contain any other elements to indicate a similar position, yet the message could clearly be identified as agreeing with the original post. The physical action, which is described in the text enclosed by asterisks, creates a clear mental image of the poster taking the same stance as the original poster. Asterisks will be examined further in section 7.2.4, which looks at message components categorized as Other.

Looking at how frequently different components used to express agreement appeared in the data, the affirming assessment was the most often used by the participants appearing in 96 (86.5 %) of the agreements, whereas explicit indications of agreement were included in 38 (34.2 %) of the agreements. As stated, affirming assessments and explicit agreements either appeared by themselves (see Example 1) or together (see Example 2) in a post, possibly accompanied by additional message components such as reasoning or elaboration (see Example 2). Indeed, 28 (25,2 %) of the agreements included both an affirming assessment and an explicit agreement, whereas in 68 (61.3 %) of the agreements a similar position was indicated only by an affirming assessment and in 10 (9.0 %) of the agreements only by an explicit agreement.

In contrast, six (5.4 %) agreements included neither an affirming assessment nor an explicit agreement; instead, elaborations were used to create an agreement in three posts, emoticons in two and asterisks in one post. In the last two instances, the use of an emoticon and asterisks to express agreement was made possible by the phrasing of the topic line of the original post, i.e. *Post here if you loved it!*, which would result in any message posted in the thread to be interpreted as an agreement, if not clearly phrased as a disagreement. Overall, affirming assessment was by far the most commonly used way of creating an agreement on the *Supernatural* message board.

7.2.2 Elaborations

Elaborations, as stated in the previous section, expand the discussion to new directions by introducing a new angle or a new but related topic of conversation. Furthermore, as explained in section 5.2.1, anything that can be considered following the sentence *I agree and...* is categorized as an elaboration. In addition, as mentioned in section 7.2.1, elaborations were also used to indicate agreement on the *Supernatural* message board (see Example 4). The use of elaborations is further demonstrated in Example 7 (24th of September 2010, 19.34), in which the poster is discussing the introduction of new characters to the show, which included the main characters' grandfather and previously unknown cousins, all of whom are also hunters. In addition to the elaboration (indicated in bold font), the example includes a quotation, an explicit agreement and a qualifier:

(7) **Re: so different**

This could have been just a character driven episode. There was no need for a monster of the week

---

I agree. **I guess I was a bit let down with the introduction of the Campbells. It's their dead grandpa and family from their mom's side and Sam introduces them as if they're next door neighbors. I was hoping both Sam and Dean would have come across them in the middle of fighting a demon and be shocked to know they're grandpa is alive as well as other relatives. It would have been nice to see their reactions from that. Oh well.**

In addition to affirming assessments, elaborations were one of the message components that appeared most frequently in the agreements on the *Supernatural* message board. Indeed, elaborations were included in 77 (69.4 %) of the agreements.

7.2.3 Offense mitigators

There were two message components found in the agreements on the *Supernatural* message board categorized as offense mitigators: qualifiers and reasoning. As stated in section 5.2.1, qualifying adds a distance between the writer and his or her statement and lessens the poster's accountability, and one way to achieve this is to frame a message as subjective. To begin with, the qualifiers on the *Supernatural* message board utilized the

verb *think*, e.g. *I think*, *I thought*, *I personally think* and *I honestly think*. Other qualifiers included phrases such as *I hope*, *I wish*, *I believe*. The verbs *feel* and *find* were also used as qualifiers in phrases like *To me it felt like* and *I still found it very* which were used in prefacing reasoning and an affirming assessment, respectively. Additionally, one way to achieve a distance between a poster and his or her claim was to indicate a conditional mood by using, for example, the auxiliary verb *would*, like in the sentence *Overall I'd say*, which was followed by an affirming assessment.

In addition to framing one's assessment with phrases such as *I think* or *I believe*, some qualifiers were more elaborate, sometimes occupying full sentences. In Example 8 (24th of September 2010, 21.03), in which the poster is expressing why he or she liked the episode despite the negative aspects some previous posters had brought up, there are several qualifiers that clearly indicate the opinions expressed are subjective. In addition to the qualifiers (indicated in bold font), the example includes an affirming assessment, a reference to previous talk and elaboration:

> (8) **Re: Seems like an unpopular opinion tonight, but I liked the episode!**
>
> I liked it too. A lot of people are complaining about the disconnect and how it felt "off" and "uncomfortable". **Maybe it's just me but I think** that was on purpose. […] After what the boys have been through the past two years [...] **I believe** that if the writers had completely ignored all of that and not had some sort of tension it just wouldn't have rang true. **Anyway, just my two cents. Take it or leave it.**

Another interesting qualifier that appeared in the agreements is *IMO*, which stands for *in my opinion*. Because it is an acronym, the qualifier in question was coded both as a qualifier and Other. IMO is a concise and clear way to qualify one's assessments.

The second mitigating element found in the agreements was reasoning. As stated in section 6.3, distinguishing reasoning and elaboration from each other was sometimes difficult when coding the data. However, as mentioned in section 5.2.1, anything that can follow the sentence *I agree because...* can be categorized as reasoning. The poster in Example 9 (24th of September 2010, 19.11) provides clear arguments for his or her opinion on the episode, even though it takes the same position as the initiating message.

In addition to reasoning (indicated in bold font), the example includes an affirming assessment (in the topic line) and elaboration:

(9) **I was very disappointed as well**

Not for the fact that no questions were answered, but **for the fact that I thought it was a poorly written episode, the direction was dodgy, and for whatever reason, it simply didn't "feel" right. The opening sequence, for example, with "One Year Ago" and "Now"...just didn't fit. Without a classic rock song for background?** I hope this episode isn't a hint of things to come without Eric Kripke's involvement. Next week looks more promising, however.

Eric Kripke mentioned in Example 9 is the creator of the *Supernatural* series who stepped down as the show runner of the series after the fifth season, which caused some concern and discussion on the message board on how it would affect the series in its sixth season and after.

Qualifiers appeared in 38 (34.2%) of the agreements and reasoning in 37 (33.3 %) of the agreements in the data. It is interesting that offense mitigators appeared in so many of the agreements. After all, they are message components that are used to mitigate a perceived offense and, thus, are seen more typical of disagreements, as stated in section 5.2.1.

7.2.4 Other

The agreements included several recurring message components quite typical of online discourse that were categorized under the title of Other. The components placed in this category included acronyms, the use of capital letters to write entire words or sentences, the use of asterisks, and the use of bold font, italics as well as single quotation marks to emphasize text, and one instance of transcribed sound. In addition to acronyms, which, as mentioned in section 2.2, are a paralinguistic cue typical of CMC, many of the other components placed in this category were used to compensate for the lack of gestural and auditory cues in text-based CMC. They mostly indicated physical gestures and tone of voice. Furthermore, many of them took advantage of the possibility to visually modify

the appearance of text to achieve this. For example, using all capital letters typically signifies shouting in CMC.

First, as mentioned in section 2.2, acronyms are abbreviations formed by using the initial letters of several words or parts of words; however, in CMC they can utilize both letters and symbols. Some acronyms used on the *Supernatural* message board, such as *IMO* 'in my opinion', *Btw* 'by the way' and *Idk* 'I don't know' are typical of CMC in general, whereas other acronyms used on the board are more specific for the *Supernatural* fandom. For example, *MOTW* 'monster of the week', refers to a *Supernatural* creature that usually only appears in a single episode, instead of being a part of a longer story arc. Other acronyms specific for this fandom that occurred in the agreements refer e.g. to the titles of the episodes, such as *IMTOD* meaning *In My Time of Dying*, which is the title of the first episode of the second season.

Second, capital letters, as stated earlier, usually indicate shouting in online communication. However, despite often signifying anger or annoyance, shouting can also be an expression of something positive. Indeed, capital letters, when indicating a raised tone of voice in the agreements, were used to express excitement and enthusiasm about the show or the episode being discussed. This can be seen in Example 10 (24th of September 2010, 21.41):

(10) **Re: so different**

> […]I've been watching Supernatural since the first season and I don't remember watching any other show in which the characters mattered so much to me! I know it's been said before, but THIS SHOW IS AWESOME!!

In addition to indicating a tone voice, typing in all capital letters was also used in the agreements to place stress or emphasis on particular words. This can be seen in Example 11 (25th of September 2010, 01.25), in which the poster is discussing what he or she liked about the episode:

(11) **Re: LOVED IT :D**

I was frankly amazed by the episode. Especially the CONSTANT fake-out scares in the first act. Every season this show seems to reach a new level of self-awareness and screwing with conventions, and I dig the ride.

The poster in Example 11 uses capital letters to emphasize the way scare tactics, which are characteristic of the horror film genre, were utilized in the episode as one of the reasons for liking it.

Third, asterisks were used for more than one purpose on the *Supernatural* message board. To begin with, they can be used in CMC to represent physical actions (Herring 2001: 623). When doing so, the described action is enclosed by the asterisks. As seen in section 7.2.1, asterisks were also used in this manner to indicate agreement (see Example 6). In addition, the use of asterisks (indicated in bold font) as a cue for physical action can be seen in Example 12 (25th of September 2010, 00.10):

(12) **Re: Rate the premier**

I liked it a lot. Highly suspicious of the Campbells, but otherwise pretty good. Not a fan of Lisa, I don't think she and Dean have chemistry, but her acting was solid. The reunion scene could've been a bit more emotional on Sam's side, but ***shrugs*** that's just me.

9/10

Example 12 also includes reasoning, a qualifier and an affirming assessment. The Campbells mentioned in the example refer to the new characters introduced in the episode who are related to the main characters, Sam and Dean, and Lisa is the name of Dean's girlfriend. Furthermore, similar to capital letters, enclosure by asterisks was also used to place emphasis on words in the agreements. This is demonstrated by the sentence *I *hate* that feeling*.

Fourth, in addition to capital letters and asterisks, other ways posters used to place emphasis on words included the use of bold font, italics and single quotation marks. Bold font used as a way of adding emphasis can be seen in Example 13 (24th of September 2010, 19.29), in which the poster expresses an affirming assessment, by

taking a similar position to the original poster, but stressing that he or she was not quite as disappointed in the episode. The assessment is followed by reasoning and elaboration:

> (13) **Re: Anyone else VERY disappointed in Ep 1 S 6?**
>
> I wouldn't say I was **very disappointed** but it did make me a little sad. It's not what I was expecting for a season premiere. But I'm sure (I hope!) this season will keep getting better with each episode as more things are explained and explored.

Furthermore, italics were used to add emphasis in the following sentence: No, no it wasn't *that* bad. Similarly, single quotation marks were used to emphasize a word in the sentence *And not wild about the 'cousins'*, which is also found in Example 3.

Overall, message components placed in the category of Other appeared in 29 (26.1%) of the agreements in the data. Most of the features were acronyms, which were included in 13 agreements, and capital letters, which were included in 11 agreements. Asterisks only appeared in three agreements, the bold font in two, and italics and single quotation marks both only appeared once in the agreements. In addition, as stated earlier, there was one agreement that included transcribed sound in the form of *AH!* (also found in Example 2), which at the same time demonstrates the use of capital letters.

7.2.5 Linking to previous discourse

As mentioned in section 5.2.1, there are different ways a poster can create a link between his or her message and a prior one. One of the message components linking to previous discourse identified by Baym (1996) is quotation with a reference. As none of the quotations on the *Supernatural* message board included a reference to the original source, the message component will simply be referred to as *quotation* in this study. The message components that were used to link a message to previous discourse in the agreements on the *Supernatural* message board included quotation, reference to previous talk and other ways of linking to a prior message.

To begin with, quotations on the message board were either marked by using a quotation tool offered by the IMDb website, which makes the quotation appear on a post separated from the rest of the message content, or by quotation marks. The use of the quotation tool is demonstrated in Example 14 (24th of September 2010, 19.49), in which the poster discusses a character called Lisa, the romantic interest of one of the main protagonists. The quotation is shown between two lines:

(14) **Re: so different**

Plus I actually REALLY liked Lisa in this and I hope to see her much more

---

As do I. I think her's is a very interesting character, of the type that this show hasn't explored yet. And I'd rather see them deal with the fact that she is in his life rather than sweep it under the rug like it means nothing. For a character that spent 4 years womanizing, I'd like to see Dean actually deal with the type of commitment that goes with having a family. It's another facet of the story that hasn't really been explored yet.

The post in Example 14 is structured so that the quotation is placed at the beginning of the post immediately followed by the poster's own response to it.

The use of quotation marks can be seen in Example 15 (25th of September, 2010, 13.15), in which the poster is discussing Dean's possible return to hunting and the explanation of Sam's return after his apparent death at the end of season five. The quotations are indicated in bold font:

(15) **Re: Someone spoil me and confirm this is just one long poorly written dream**

"Dean considering leaving the girlfriend he's been playing house with for a year after spending five minutes with his family, seemed a bit low (glad he changed his mind)"

I thought this was kind of bad too. Dean was really quick to consider leaving his new family for the opportunity to go hunt again. It's not like he couldn't have both. Lisa seemed very understanding, and in real life, this kind of situation happens with the military. Plus, he did need to stick around and protect them. It was great that he did the right thing in the end, but it was still kind of weird. He didn't even seem to be in love with Lisa. It was more like an obligation. There was just something weird about the whole episode. I really liked the first 15-20 minutes but the rest of it was kind of off.

"The mysterious "something brought us back" is lame and uneventful after dealing with Lucifer and angels"

Agreed.

The poster in Example 15 is responding to more than one point by including two quotations each followed by the poster's own opinion. Thus, the poster is repeating the sequence of an initiation and a response seen in Example 14.

Furthermore, the participants also used quotation marks to enclose individual words. In these instances, quotation marks seemed to be used to emphasize specific words or to create distance to the content by not taking credit for using someone else's words. The words enclosed by quotation marks could not necessarily be traced to any specific posts within the message board. For example, in the phrase *Something is ”off”*, tracing the use of the word *off* to a particular original source would have been difficult, as the episode was described as *off* in several messages in the data. Thus, only quotations that could be traced to a particular prior message were categorized as quotations in this study.

As stated earlier, in addition to quotation, linking one's message to a prior one was achieved in the agreements by making references to previous talk and other ways of linking to a prior message. References to previous talk were performed on the message board by using phrases such as *I know it's been said before*, *as* [poster's screen name] *put it* and *As previously stated*. However, messages that referenced previous talk in a more ambiguous way without necessarily pointing to a specific issue the poster wanted to discuss were categorized as other ways of linking to a prior message. For example, in one agreement, there was a reference to a different message thread where the poster had elaborated on his or her views, and in another agreement, a poster simply complimented the other poster's review of the episode.

Including a quotation was the most frequently used way of linking one's message to a prior one in the agreements. Indeed, quotations appeared in 14 (12.6 %) of the agreements in the data. In contrast, references to previous talk were included in six (5.4 %) of the agreements and other ways of linking to a prior message were included in three (2.7 %) of the agreements. One of the ways of linking messages to previous

discourse identified by Baym (1996), which is expressing the *need* to reply, did not appear in any of the agreements analyzed in this study.

7.2.6 Social aligners

As stated in section 5.2.1, social aligners are message components that are used to enhance the alignment between participants. One of the socially aligning components identified by Baym (1996) is the smiley face. However, as there is much more variation in CMC presently when it comes to using visual means to indicate emotional cues, I have included all emoticons in this category. The agreements on the *Supernatural* message board included two different socially aligning elements, which are emoticons and using another poster's name.

First, as stated in section 2.2, emoticons, such as the smiley face :), can be created by using keyboard characters, and are used both for aesthetic reasons as well as to compensate for the emotional cues that are lacking in a written medium. In addition to using emoticons created from keyboard characters, such as the emoticon :/, which can also be found in Example 2, the IMDb website offered a variety of icons for users to include in their posts on the message boards. The icons are here categorized as emoticons as they seem to be an elaborate version of emoticons. The icons include e.g. facial expressions, such as a smile, but with added color and movement. They also seem to serve the same purpose as emoticons by adding visual aesthetics and expressiveness to the communication.

The use of icons provided by the message board can be seen in Example 16 (24th of September 2010, 19.07), in which the first four emoticons jump up and down when viewed on the IMDb site:

(16) **Re: Post here if you loved it!**

 AMAZINGLY AWESOME! 

Examples 2 and 16 demonstrate the variety of emoticons used on the board from a visual standpoint and also represent very different emotions and gestures. Furthermore, as stated in section 7.2.1, emoticons were also used to create an agreement twice on the *Supernatural* message board.

Second, using another poster's name was another social aligner that appeared in the agreements. However, referring to other posters was accomplished without actually using the other posters' full names. The participants either used the abbreviation OP 'original poster', to refer to the poster who had initiated the message thread, or an abbreviation of another poster's screen name, which can be seen in the sentences *I agree CS* and *Nice review RI*. Although another poster's name was not used explicitly or in their original form in the agreements, all of the above-mentioned examples were categorized here under the use of the other's name.

Despite the various emoticons available for IMDb users, emoticons were only used in 11 (9.9 %) of the agreements in the data. Another poster's name was referred to in five (4.5 %) of the agreements. Furthermore, Baym (1996) noted two other socially aligning elements used in agreements, which are acknowledgement of another's perspective and expressing gratitude. However, neither of these two message components appeared in the agreements on the *Supernatural* message board.

7.3 Message components of disagreements

This section is focused on the message components used to express disagreement on the *Supernatural* message board. As stated in section 6.2, 46 posts in the data included a disagreement. As with the agreements in section 7.2, I will begin with the message components used to create the disagreements, and then move onto the surrounding message components. Following the pattern of section 7.2, the message components are divided into subsections the same way they were in Baym's (1996) study. Furthermore, as in section 7.2, the message components are organized according to how often they were used by the participants, beginning from the ones that appeared in the disagreements most frequently. Thus, the subsequent sections are organized in the

following order: creating the disagreement, elaboration, offense mitigators, other, social aligners, and linking to previous discourse.

7.3.1 Creating the disagreement

As stated in section 5.2.1, disagreement can be achieved by providing an explicit indication of disagreement or a contradictory assessment to a prior message. However, as also mentioned in section 5.2.1, disagreement can be expressed more implicitly by providing reasoning that contradicts a prior message, by elaborating on a topic with counterexamples or by posing questions that challenge a prior assessment. The disagreements on the *Supernatural* message board were created by using contradicting assessments, explicit indications of disagreement and reasoning.

To begin with, as mentioned in section 5.2.1, disagreement can be expressed by offering an assessment that contradicts a prior message. This is demonstrated in Example 17 (26th of September 2010, 21.48), in which the message is a response to the original poster who had expressed a very positive opinion on the episode. In addition to the contradicting assessment (indicated in bold font), the example includes elaboration and reasoning:

> (17) **Re: LOVED IT :D**
>
> I have been a fan of this show since Day 1. I even took time out of my vacation to make sure I was in front of the TV for the first episode of the season. **Having said that, I was very disappointed.** I didn't like who Dean had become and the fact that Sam had been back the whole time and didn't tell Dean was very upsetting. Sam's character is different and Dean's character is different. I fell in love with both of these characters and how they've grown over the last several years and it just seems like I didn't know either of them anymore. Of course, I'll keep watching it, as it's my favorite show but I sure hope that the old Sam and Dean show up at some point.
> I guess I still have the reruns on TNT...

As seen in Example 17, contradicting assessments occurred in the data with elements such as elaboration and reasoning. Furthermore, they appeared in sequences where the contradicting assessment was preceded by a partial agreement and an explicit indication of disagreement (see Example 20).

However, contradicting assessments also appeared in posts that included both an agreement and a disagreement. This can be seen in Example 18 (25th of September 2010, 06.31), in which the poster is providing a contradicting assessment (indicated in bold font) to the original poster who had rated the episode 10/10. The contradicting assessment is followed by an agreement to other prior posts, and it includes an explicit indication of agreement, a qualifier, an affirming assessment and elaboration:

(18) **Re: Rate the premier**

5/10 I agree with a few other posters I also felt is wasn't executed very weill and came off weird and disjointed. hope the season gets better.

As the message seen in Example 18 was responding to several prior messages, disagreeing with one and agreeing with others, it was categorized as both an agreement and a disagreement. As stated in section 6.3, because posts could contain different conversational moves in response to different prior messages, the agreement and disagreement categories overlapped slightly, and 12 (5.8 %) of the messages in the data were included into both agreement and disagreement categories.

In addition, there was one post in the data in which the poster expressed a contradictory assessment while in fact agreeing with the prior turn. As stated in section 5.1.2, there are some circumstances in which disagreement is actually a preferred response to an assessment, self-denigration being one example. This can be seen in Example 19 (25th of September 2010, 00.20), in which the poster is responding to the original poster (OP) who had stated a negative opinion on the episode by raising several points that he or she had found disappointing. However, the original poster had also remarked that maybe he or she was in the wrong frame of mind when watching the episode. The contradicting assessment is indicated in bold font:

(19) **Re: Someone spoil me and confirm this is just one long poorly written dream**

O.P. you were not in the wrong frame of mind. The storyline was poor and the execution poor as well. There was no spark to this episode, and it looked like Padalecki was bored by it all. Things better get better quickly.

In addition, Example 19 includes a reference to another poster (OP), which is also an acronym (categorized as Other), reasoning and an elaboration. The name Padalecki mentioned in the example refers to Jared Padalecki, who is the actor playing one of the protagonists, Sam, in the series.

As mentioned earlier, another way of expressing disagreement on the *Supernatural* message board was to mark a post explicitly as a disagreement. As stated in section 5.2.1, sentences that include any variation of the word *disagree*, or a disagreement token, are categorized as explicit indications of disagreement. All of the explicit disagreements on the *Supernatural* message board utilized disagreement tokens, such as *actually* or *but*. The use of a disagreement token can be seen in Example 20 (24th of September 2010, 19.23), in which the poster is responding to a prior poster's comment on how detached and devoid of personality all the characters seemed in the episode. The disagreement token is indicated in bold font:

> (20) **Re: so different**
>
> Definitely noticed the detachment, **but** it seemed to come from everyone -but- Dean. It makes me wonder if it's intentional.

Example 20 demonstrates a recurring sequence in the disagreements, in which the disagreement token appeared after a partial agreement and was followed by a contradicting assessment. Partial agreements will be examined more closely in section 7.3.5.

Finally, disagreement was also achieved on the *Supernatural* message board by providing reasoning that contradicts a prior message. This can be seen in Example 21 (24th of September 2010, 20.30), in which the poster is reacting to prior messages that had commented on how different the episode was compared to previous episodes and had expressed concern with how the season would progress. Several posters had expressed disappointment in the change in the brothers' relationship and the fact that they were no longer hunting together now that Dean had settled down with his girlfriend

Lisa and her son Ben. Reasoning that contradicts prior assessments is indicated in bold font:

> (21) **Re: I feel let down**
>
> I feel you need to give it more than one episode. **Dean ditching Lisa and Ben and returning to the life a few hours after reuniting with his family doesn't seem very fluid to me.** Although you know he will soon enough, so relax.

In addition to reasoning, the post in Example 21 includes a qualifier and elaboration. Reasoning as a mitigating component in disagreements will be examined in section 7.3.3.

Disagreement on the *Supernatural* message board was expressed most frequently by using a contradicting assessment which appeared in 43 (93.5 %) of the disagreements in the data. In contrast, explicit indications of disagreements, all of which were disagreement tokens, only appeared in 12 (26.1 %) of the disagreements. Furthermore, there were three posts (6.5 %) in which the disagreement was created by using reasoning on the *Supernatural* message board. All in all, the vast majority of disagreements were achieved by providing contradicting assessments.

7.3.2 Elaborations

As explained in section 5.2.1, elaborations expand the discussion to new angles or topics of conversation, and anything that can follow the sentence *I agree and…* can be categorized as an elaboration. Although, in this case, an elaboration would follow the sentence *I disagree and…* In addition, as mentioned in section 5.2.1, when appearing with disagreements, elaborations could be considered a mitigating element as they move the discussion away from the disagreement. The use of elaboration in a disagreement is demonstrated in Example 22 (25th of September 2010, 07.19), in which the message is a response to the original poster, who had rated the episode 10/10. The elaboration is indicated in bold font:

(22) **Re: Rate the premier**

8/10. Not my favorite premiere, but certainly not the worst. **I think it's left the rest of the season very open to a lot of different interesting storylines.** I agree that I was a little slow in parts, but if it had been all action, there wouldn't have been enough time to focus on Dean and what he went through. **I'm also glad they didn't focus a lot on the monsters (and I know some of you are not liking that aspect, but trust me - had the episode been all monsters, you would have complained that it was too MOTW) I lurk around this board enough to know how everyone is... ;)**

Example 22 also includes a contradicting assessment, a qualifier, a partial agreement followed by a disagreement token and reasoning, the acronym MOTW 'monster of the week' (categorizes as Other) and an emoticon. In total, elaborations appeared in 29 (63.0 %) of the disagreements on the *Supernatural* message board.

7.3.3 Offense mitigators

There were three message components that were used to mitigate offense in the disagreements on the *Supernatural* message board: reasoning, qualifiers and framing as non-offensive. First, as mentioned is section 5.2.1, anything that can follow the sentence *I agree because…* can be categorized as reasoning. However, in this case, reasoning would follow the sentence *I disagree because…* As seen in section 7.3.1, reasoning was also used to express disagreement on the message board (see Example 21). However, the use of reasoning as a mitigating component can be seen in Example 23 (24th of September 2010, 19.21), in which the poster is responding to the original poster who had expressed his or her disappointment in the episode. The example includes a contradicting assessment followed by reasoning (indicated in bold font):

(23) **Re: Anyone else VERY disappointed in Ep 1 S 6?**

I really liked it. **It might not be as big as some of the other season premiers but they introduced enough new stuff to keep the season interesting. And had they reunited and instantly had the same dynamic they had before it would have been doing the characters a disservice after everything that happened last season and how long they were apart.**

Second, as stated in section 5.2.1, qualifying creates a distance between a writer and his or her statement, and one of the ways to achieve that distance is by framing the poster's claim as subjective. Similar to the qualifiers seen in the agreements in section 7.2.3, the

qualifiers used in the disagreements on the message board also utilized the verbs *think*, e.g. *I think*, *I thought* and *I just tend to think*, and *feel*, e.g. *I feel that […]* and *I feel like […]*. Framing a statement as subjective was also achieved in the disagreements by using the expression *for me*, which can be seen in the sentences *For me my only problems with the ep[...]* and *that was the beauty of it for me*. In addition, the acronym *IMO* 'in my opinion' was used as a qualifier in the disagreements.

Third, as mentioned in section 5.2.1, another way of lessening the impact of a potential offense in disagreeing is to mark one's message explicitly as non-confrontational. Framing as non-offensive can be seen in Example 24 (24th of September 2010, 23.50), in which the poster is reacting to prior posters' dislike of the episode and their concerns with the future of the series with a new show runner. The message in Example 24 is a response to a specific poster who had defended his or her negative opinion on the episode. The framing as non-offensive is indicated in bold font:

(24) **Re: Exile....very disappointing**

Don't take me the wrong way, I'm not trying to put you down or anything.. I do see what you're saying and somewhat agree, I just tend to think complaining so FAST is just not fair. **It's not you I'm aiming most of this towards, it's just a reaction to allll the complaining threads.** People are complaining and losing faith after one episode and making accusations on the entire season already just because it's not exactly like last season as if Supernatural hasn't had bad episodes before.[...]

Example 24 also includes acknowledgement of the other poster's position, a partial agreement followed by elaboration with a qualifier, using all capital letters and multiplying letters in a word (categorized as Other) and reasoning. The disagreement itself, which is not included in the example, was performed by a contradicting assessment that was situated at end of the post, after the mitigating and socially aligning elements.

When looking at how often different mitigating strategies were used by the participants on the message board, reasoning was the most frequently used offense mitigator appearing in 28 (60.9 %) of the disagreements. Qualifiers appeared in 18 (39.1 %) of the disagreements, whereas framing as non-offensive only appeared in two (4.3 %) of

the disagreements. In addition, Baym (1996) categorized apologies as offense mitigators in disagreements. However, they did not appear in any of the messages analyzed in this study.

7.3.4 Other

The message components found in the disagreements that were categorized as Other were mostly the same components placed in this category in the agreements in section 7.2.4, and they had the same function of compensating for the lack of gestural and auditory cues by utilizing the possibility to modify the visual appearance of a text. Most of the components categorized as Other in the disagreements were used to indicate a tone of voice by placing stress on a certain word or a phrase in a sentence. Furthermore, like in section 7.2.4, the message components in this category included features that are typical of CMC. The message components placed in this category include acronyms, entire words or phrases written in all capital letters, asterisks, multiplying letters in words, italics and the use of dashes to enclose a word.

First, as stated in section 2.2 acronyms are abbreviations created from the initial letters or parts of a group of words, and, in addition, acronyms in CMC can utilize both letters and symbols. Apart from acronyms such as *IMO* 'in my opinion', which is used in CMC in general, the acronyms used in the disagreements were mostly ones specific for the *Supernatural* fandom. The disagreements included acronyms such as *YED* 'yellow-eyed-demon', which refers to an adversary of the main characters from previous seasons, and *MOTW* 'monster of the week' (see Example 22). They also included acronyms of the titles of different episodes such as *The M7* 'The Magnificent Seven' and *LR* 'Lazarus Rising', which refer to the titles of the first episodes from seasons three and four, respectively.

Second, unlike in the agreements in section 7.2.4 where the use of all capital letters sometimes indicated excitement, capital letters in disagreements were mostly used to place stress on certain words. This is demonstrated by the sentences *That's NOT true* and *I think they ARE going in a really awesome direction with it*. Emphasizing words

with the use of capital letters can also be seen in Example 24. However, capital letters were also used to indicate a raised tone of voice in the disagreements, which is demonstrated by the sentence *[...] but we didn't find out he'd been drinking demon blood until ON THE HEAD OF A PIN!*. The raised tone of voice is also indicated in this case by the exclamation mark. On the Head of a Pin refers to the title of episode 16 of season four of *Supernatural*.

Third, asterisks were utilized in the disagreements in two extremely different ways. To begin with, they were used in a humorous way, which can be seen in Example 25 (25th of September 2010, 05.03), in which the participant provides a contradicting assessment to the original poster, who had rated the episode 10/10. The example also includes a partial agreement followed by a disagreement token, reasoning and an elaboration, in addition to the asterisks (indicated in bold font):

> (25) **Re: Rate the premier**
>
> 6/10
>
> ...I give it a pass. It was alright, but I was so hyped for it, it just let me down a bit. Although another side of me was expecting worse for some reason, so it wasn't that bad either.
>
> It'll hopefully get better. **(*ahermwhen Cas comes backaherm*)**

Furthermore, asterisks were used to censor strong language in a disagreement. This can be seen in the sentence *an ep that pleases 6 of these groups, p*****s off 5 others*, which refers to how different subgroups within the *Supernatural* fandom react differently to episodes of *Supernatural* and how the series cannot always please every member of its audience.

Fourth, in addition to using capital letters, placing emphasis on specific words to indicate a tone of voice was also achieved in the disagreement by multiplying the letters in a word, using italics, and adding a dash before and after a word. Multiplying letters in a word to emphasize it can be seen in Example 24 as well as in the sentence *it could have used more action buttttt i like the episode*. The use of italics is demonstrated in the following sentence: Because he's their *brother*. Finally, the use of dashes to enclose a

word to emphasize it can be seen in the sentence *it seemed to come from everyone -but- Dean*, which is also found in Example 20.

All in all, 17 (37 %) of the disagreements included a message component categorized as Other. Most of the components placed in this category were acronyms, which appeared in nine disagreements, and capital letters, which appeared in six disagreements. Asterisks as well as multiplying letters in a word were both included in two disagreements, whereas using italics and enclosing a word with dashes both only appeared once in the disagreements on the message board.

7.3.5 Social aligners

As stated in section 5.2.1, social aligners are components used to enhance alignment between participants. The socially aligning message components that appeared in the disagreements on the *Supernatural* message board included partial agreements, emoticons, acknowledgement of another's perspective and using another poster's name. To begin with, as mentioned in section 5.2.1, partial agreements usually preface disagreements and are followed by disagreement tokens such as *but* or *though*. Pomerantz (1984: 72) also states that when a disagreement is prefaced with an agreement within the same turn, the components are conjoined by a contrast conjunction, such as *but*. A typical sequence found in the disagreements on the message board consisted of a partial agreement followed by the contrast conjunction *but*, which was categorized as a disagreement token, and a contradicting assessment (see Example 20).

However, contrast conjunctions or disagreement tokens were not always used with partial agreements on the *Supernatural* message board (see Example 24). Moreover, the partial agreements were not always followed by contradicting assessments. This is demonstrated in Example 26 (24th of September 2010, 22.38), in which the partial agreement (indicated in bold font) is followed by reasoning that contradicts a prior message. In addition, the example includes a reference to previous talk and a qualifier:

(26) **Re: And now for something positive**

[…]Some of the negativity I have picked up on seems to centre around the slightly cool feel to the episode, and to the relationship between Dean and Sam. **While I agree this was there**, I think it is inevitable after what they have been through. Building up to proper, satisfying reconnections - Dean with Sam, Sam with his feelings and then with his brother, Dean with his desire to hunt - requires pacing. It is called letting the drama unfold.[…]

In addition to contradicting assessments or reasoning, the partial agreements on the message board were also followed by elaborations (see Example 24).

Furthermore, as pointed out in section 5.2.1, partial agreements can indicate a temporal change in the poster's thought process where the poster agreed with the prior poster at first but eventually formed a different opinion. This is demonstrated in Example 27 (26th of September 2010, 05.48), in which the partial agreement (indicated in bold font) is followed by a contradicting assessment with a qualifier, and reasoning:

(27) **Re: Post here if you loved it!**

I loved it until Sam showed up. Then I thought the episode went downhill. Mostly for the uninspired acting by Jared.

Temporal shifts in a poster's thinking did appear in partial agreements on the *Supernatural* message board, as seen in Example 27. However, most of the partial agreements indicated that the poster agreed with a prior poster to some extent, or agreed on a particular point raised by the prior poster, but ultimately he or she had a different opinion on or interpretation of the issue (see e.g. Example 20 and Example 26).

As previously stated, another socially aligning element used in the disagreements was emoticons. As explained in section 2.2, emoticons can be created by using keyboard characters and are used for both aesthetic reasons and to compensate for the lack of emotional cues in a written medium. Furthermore, as also stated in section 2.2, emoticons can clarify or even change the meaning of a message. Unlike the emoticons seen in the agreements in section 7.2.6, which often utilized the icons provided by the IMDb website and displayed color and movement, the emoticons used in the

disagreements were visually simpler. In addition, they were mostly used to alter the tone of the messages.

To begin with, emoticons were used to indicate a joking or a lighthearted tone following assessments that could otherwise be interpreted as somewhat hostile (see Example 22). However, an emoticon was also used to replace an adjective or a longer description in a sentence. This can be seen in example 28 (24th of September 2010, 19.24), in which the poster is discussing the apparent change in Sam's personality and his relationship with Dean and the other family members who appeared in the episode. The example also includes a partial agreement, a disagreement token, qualifiers and elaboration:

(28) **Re: so different**

[…]Things were definitely off in the family dynamic department, but I feel like there's a reason for that. And I think there's a reason (tied to Hell) why Sammy is so

Several posters had pointed out how detached and devoid of emotion Sam seemed in the episode and the emoticon used in Example 28 also expresses a similar opinion. When placing the cursor above the emoticon on the message board, it reads *none*.

The remaining social aligners found in the disagreements are acknowledging another poster's perspective and using another poster's name. First, acknowledging another poster's position was realized on the message board by using the sentences *I do see what you're saying*, which can also be found in Example 24, and *I share the impatience of others*. Second, similar to the agreements in section 7.2.6, referring to other posters in the disagreements was achieved without actually using another poster's name. The acronym OP 'original poster' was used instead (see Example 19), and it was coded as naming another poster in this study.

Concerning how often different social aligners appeared in the disagreements, the most frequently used affiliative component was the partial agreement. Indeed, partial agreements appeared in 12 (26.1 %) of the disagreements. In contrast, other social aligners were used more sparingly. Emoticons were included in only three (6.5 %) of the

disagreements, whereas acknowledgments of a prior poster's perspective appeared in two (4.3 %) of the disagreements and using another poster's name only appeared in one (2.2 %) of the disagreement.

7.3.6 Linking to previous discourse

Linking one's message to a prior one was achieved in the disagreements with references to previous talk, quotations and other ways of linking to a prior message. First, a reference to previous talk can be found in Example 26, which included the sentence *Some of the negativity I have picked up on[…]*. In addition, a reference to previous talk is demonstrated in Example 29 (24th of September 2010, 20.33), in which the poster is responding to the original poster who had pointed out several issues that caused him or her to dislike the episode. The reference to previous talk (indicated in bold font) is followed by a contradicting assessment and elaboration:

(29) **Re: don't like it**

It seems like a lot of people disliked it. I liked parts of it. It seemed really emotionless. Not just from Sam, but from everyone involved except for Lisa. I enjoyed the opening, and I liked the part where Dean tried to give Sam his car.[...]

Second, similar to the quotations found in the agreements in section 7.2.5, quotations used in the disagreements followed the sequence of initiation and response, in which the quotation was placed at the beginning of the post followed by the poster's own response. This is demonstrated in Example 30 (25th of September 2010, 04.48), in which the poster is discussing Sam and Dean's reactions to finding out that their grandfather and the yellow-eyed-demon (YED) seemed to have returned from the dead. The quotation is shown between two lines:

(30) **Re: so different**

And the fact that yellow eyes and their grandfather suddenly returned from the dead didn't seem right to me. I mean Sam and Dean didn't seem to react much to the fact that their grandfather has returned from the dead. It just sort of happened.

> […]I think we didn't see anyone but Dean being emotional because they all had a year to come to terms with this stuff, whereas it was all dumped on Dean in one day. Why would Sam suddenly be like "Oh my God, Grandpa!!" when he knew he had been working with him this whole time. I'm sure that was his initial reaction, but just because we didn't see it doesn't mean it didn't happen.[…]

The quotation in Example 30 is followed by a qualifier and reasoning that contradicts the prior post, which is used to create the disagreement.

Third, message components that were categorized as other ways of linking to a prior post included the sentence *I share the impatience of others for the show to get back to its roots* and a reference to another message thread in which the poster had speculated on the plot of the series. Overall, disagreements were rarely linked to prior posts on the message board. Linking disagreements to previous discourse was achieved with references to previous talk in three (6.5 %) of the disagreements, whereas quotations and other ways of linking were both used in two (4.3 %) of the disagreements, respectively. Furthermore, none of the disagreements expressed the *need* to reply, which is another way of creating a link to a prior post Baym (1996) notes in her study.

8 DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I will discuss the findings of this study, which were detailed in the previous chapter. I will also compare the results to previous research on agreements and disagreements in spoken language. Furthermore, I will discuss the findings in comparison to Baym's (1996) analysis on agreements and disagreements in an online discussion group. I will also discuss the achievements and limitations of this study.

As stated in section 6.1, the aim of this study was to look at how agreements and disagreements are constructed in an online discussion group. This was achieved by examining what message components agreements and disagreements on the *Supernatural* message board consist of and how frequently different message components appeared in the data. To summarize the results, which were explained in chapter 7, agreements on the message board were most frequently expressed with a secondary assessment affirming the stance of the initiating message, and regularly included elaborations, reasoning and qualifiers. Following a similar pattern, disagreements were also most frequently expressed with secondary assessments contradicting the initiating message and frequently contained elaborations, reasoning and qualifiers. A notable difference between the agreements and disagreements on the message board was that the agreements were more commonly expressed explicitly compared to the disagreements.

The data for this study consists of messages discussing the first episode of the sixth season of *Supernatural*. The data was selected thematically in that the initiating messages in the threads offered a review of the episode to which other participants responded. Furthermore, as the data consists of threads started immediately following the airing of the episode and all the messages posted to the threads within a week, the messages include both first reactions and more considered assessments. The episode raised many questions and caused concern among the fans on the message board. The series had a new show runner since the creator of *Supernatural*, Eric Kripke, had stepped down after completing the five-year story arc he had planned for the series from the beginning, which resulted in fans worrying about the future quality of the show.

Indeed, the sixth season represented a turning point in the show's history, and the data collected for this study reflects the division it caused within the *Supernatural* fandom.

The agreements and disagreements on the *Supernatural* message board followed, in several instances, similar patterns to agreements and disagreements in both spoken language as well as online discussion. When compared to how agreements and disagreements are expressed in spoken language, those on the message board were similar to spoken language in that many of the agreements were less complex than the disagreements. As stated in section 5.1.2, agreements in spoken language are often structurally simple, explicitly stated and delivered without delay. Structurally simple agreements, which contained only agreement components, were not unusual on the *Supernatural* message board. However, the majority of the agreements included additional message components, and even components usually associated with disagreements, such as offense mitigators. Thus, the agreements on the *Supernatural* message board were frequently more complex than those in spoken language.

In contrast, the disagreements on the message board were in some ways more straightforward compared to spoken ones. As explained in section 5.1.2, disagreements in spoken language were often delayed, structurally complex, typically including prefaces and explanations, and varied from unstated to stated but weak disagreements. Disagreements on the message board were also structurally complex, frequently including additional message components such as elaboration and reasoning, in addition to the components expressing the disagreement itself. However, even though disagreements were not usually as explicitly indicated as disagreements, the participants clearly expressed their opposing viewpoints with contradicting assessments. Furthermore, apart from reasoning and qualifiers, other offense mitigators were rarely if ever used in the disagreements. In addition, as mentioned in section 3.1, delays are usual on a discussion forum due to the asynchronous nature of the medium. Thus, they were not an indication of a forthcoming disagreement unlike in spoken language, as mentioned in section 5.1.2.

When comparing the agreement and disagreements on the *Supernatural* message board to a Baym's (1996) study on how they are expressed in an online discussion group, there are both similarities and differences. Some of the differences are due to Usenet and online discussion forums being different media. For example, linking a message to a prior one, which was ubiquitous in the Usenet messages as stated in section 5.2.1, was not as frequent on the *Supernatural* message board. Discussion forums, unlike Usenet, store their messages as chronologically organized threads within the website, as mentioned in section 3.1, making all the prior messages available for the participants and, thus, making it unnecessary to always refer to a prior post. Quotations on the message board were used to clarify the issue the poster was responding to, which is useful when responding to long messages as one can quote only a part of the message, or when responding to a message significantly earlier in the thread. As mentioned in section 5.1.1, there can be several messages between an initiation and response and quoting a prior message mitigates any disrupted turn-adjacency caused by the medium by juxtaposing the two turns.

In addition, this study examined a specific group of fans and, as stated in section 2.1, different online groups can have different discourse styles depending on context. Thus, the way the different message components were utilized can vary from group to group, which makes the findings of this study differ from Baym's (1996) study of another fan group. For example, the use of emoticons was more frequent on the *Supernatural* message board, and they were in some messages even used to indicate agreement. The discussion on the *Supernatural* message board was sometimes quite light and humorous, which explains the increased use of emoticons in some threads. Indeed, emoticons are commonly used in discussions with a playful tone (Barnes 2002: 96). Thus, the tone of discussion within a group also affects the way agreements and disagreements are expressed.

Furthermore, the messages on the *Supernatural* message board contained components not included in Baym's (1996) categorical scheme. For example, emoticons, acronyms and different ways of emphasizing text to express tone of voice, physical gestures and actions, facial expressions, and other social cues appeared quite frequently on the *Supernatural* message board. Indeed, they were an important part of the communication

on the message board because they were used to set a tone, clarify or change the meaning of a message and they even functioned as expressions of agreement. It is possible that Baym (1996) makes no note of these components because they were not used by the particular group she studied. Thus, their use can be seen as a characteristic of the discourse style of the *Supernatural* message board.

What also affected the way agreements and disagreements were expressed on the *Supernatural* message board, was its' role in fans sharing new interpretations and building new meanings. As stated in section 5.2, providing new interpretative sources was an important focus to the Usenet discussion group Baym (1996) studied, as indicated by the frequent use of elaborations, reasoning and qualifiers, all which bring new content to the discussion. Furthermore, as mentioned in section 5.2.1, the participants in the Usenet group used agreements as a way to bring their own interpretation to the discussion by elaborating on the agreement. This can also be seen on the *Supernatural* message board. Elaborations, reasoning and qualifiers were all frequently used on the *Supernatural* message board in both agreements and disagreements. In addition, the content of the discussion exhibited the communicative practices, i.e. informing, speculating, criticizing and reworking, described in section 4.4.1, some of which help the participants of a discussion group find new meanings in the tv show they follow.

Reasoning and qualifiers, as stated, appeared quite frequently in the agreements on the *Supernatural* message board, despite being offence mitigators. In addition to providing new content and points of view to the discussion, they possibly appeared in the agreements due to the episode dividing opinions among fans. The changes fans perceived in the series after the creator of *Supernatural* stepped down caused concern among the fans as to the future quality of the show. Noticing that the episode divided opinions, the participants may have felt the need to qualify their opinions and justify them by providing reasoning, whether their opinions were negative or positive concerning the episode. Indeed, reasoning in the agreements that were responding to positive assessments of the episode defended the series, while the reasoning in the agreements responding to negative assessments expressed criticism of the episode. As

stated in section 4.4.1, criticizing and venting frustrations in a discussion group can be enjoyable for fans and does not lessen their involvement in the fandom.

Although providing new content was part of the interaction on the Supernatural message board, offering new interpretations was not the only purpose of the group. This is indicated by the presence of structurally simple agreements, which were not unusual on the message board. These agreements do not provide any new content to the discussion, instead they only express a shared opinion and possibly a shared enjoyment of the series or episode, particularly when expressed with capital letters and accompanied by emoticons. Indeed, the discussion on the *Supernatural* message board is a form of fan practice. As mentioned in section 4.4, in addition to helping fans in the meaning-making process, fan communities offer people a safe place where to express their enthusiasm for the object of fandom. Thus, one purpose for the discussion was to share the enjoyment of watching the series with other fans. In addition, simple agreements can indicate support for other participants opinions and possibly validation to the posters' own similar opinion.

The findings of this study indicate that the agreements and disagreements on the *Supernatural* message are more varied in the purpose of the discussion, the length and complexity of the messages, and the message components used in expressing agreement and disagreement compared to those in both spoken language an online communication. However, this study is rather limited in its scope, as it only describes how agreements and disagreements were expressed by the participants of a certain discussion group at a certain point in time. The amount of data collected was suitable for this thesis, however, to gain a more thorough understanding on the subject of study, it would have been beneficial to collect a larger set of data from a longer period of time. Furthermore, the data could have been approached with a different method of analysis. Using a study that was carried out during the early phases of linguistic research into CMC had its challenges as it did not always reflect the way people are currently communicating online. However, this study did give some insight into how the fans of *Supernatural* were expressing their agreement and disagreement on the IMDb *Supernatural* message board at a time when the series itself was changing.

9 CONCLUSION

Having discussed the findings of this study in chapter 8, I will here look at some of the possibilities for further research in the same area of study. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this study was rather limited in that it only included messages from a time period of one week, which provided an appropriate amount of data for the size of the study. However, following the discussion group for a longer period of time would perhaps give a more accurate view of the language practices of the group in general. Furthermore, the message board from where the data was collected is only one medium where the fans of *Supernatural* discuss the series. Thus, studying other discussion groups and forums within the fandom would provide a better understanding of the language practices within the *Supernatural* fandom, and possibly other cult fandoms.

As mentioned in section 2.1, the use of language online can vary greatly depending on group and context, which means the way fans on the *Supernatural* message board expressed agreement and disagreement does not necessary reflect the way other groups express them. Thus, there is a need for more research in how agreements and disagreements are expressed in different contexts by different groups of people, both within fandom and outside of it. Further studies on different fan groups could examine what kind of similarities and differences possibly exist within fan discourse in terms of styles of communication. Moreover, as stated in section 4.1, larger audiences are adopting the practices of fandom which is aided by computer technology. Fandom itself has changed over the decades partly due to the Internet, as mentioned in section 4.3. As fans have become more of a mainstream group that has a strong presence online and as larger audiences are becoming more like fans in their practices, it is relevant to continue to examine how fans communicate in online environments as it can affect other groups as well.

Furthermore, as this study focused on a discussion forum specifically, studying how agreements and disagreements are expressed in other forms of CMC would be interesting. Discussion forums have been around for a while and CMC has changed over years and new forms of CMC continue to emerge. As seen by the findings of this

study, the way agreements and disagreements are expressed in a discussion forum shared similarities with the Usenet group studied by Baym (1996). The same message components were present on the *Supernatural* message board, although in different quantities, in addition to some new components. However, as the way people communicate can vary from individual and group to another depending on context, the findings of this study do not necessarily reflect on how agreements and disagreements are expressed on other discussion forums, or in other forms of CMC. Thus, further study on the subject in discussion forums and also other online environments would give a better understanding on how agreements and disagreements are currently expressed in CMC.

The Internet has provided people in general with the possibility to easily express their opinion and defend their views. Thus, studying how people express their stance and respond to the assessments of others by taking a similar or opposing stance is worthwhile. What people say and how they say it online can have consequences outside of an online environment, and, thus, studying how people interact through CMC is important. CMC in general remains a topical area of research as people continue to utilize computers and different mobile devices, such as smartphones, for interacting with each other, and as CMC becomes ever more entrenched in everyday life for a growing number of people in both their professional and private lives. Social media applications in particular have become a significant part of people's lives within the last ten years, as they have become immensely popular. They are widely utilized by not only individuals but also organizations and companies. Thus, it is important to study how people communicate online in different contexts.

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