

Investigating Denarrativization of Modern Life and the Rising Impact of Media Fandoms on Identity and Meaning-Making

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Abstract

This study sets out to explore and understand denarrativization, the weakening of traditional meaning-making frameworks such as religion, cultural heritage, and political engagement, and examines whether media fandoms function as alternative sites of meaning making and belonging in contemporary life. The study follows a qualitative approach, conducting thematic analysis of media texts, in-depth interviews with fans, and a review of fan discussions on social media. It looks at how fans engage with the philosophical and narrative ideas presented in these media texts and how these ideas become part of their own understanding of themselves, their lives, and their relationships with others. The findings suggest that fans find both the narratives and the fan communities around them as important sources of meaning, emotional support, and belonging, particularly where traditional institutions no longer provide the same sense of connection. At the same time, such systems of meaning making can promote isolation, commodified forms of self-love, and fragmented identities. The study therefore suggests that fandoms may increasingly operate as supplementary, and sometimes substitute, meaning-making structures in an increasingly individualized and media-saturated society.

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Introduction

Media fandom has its roots in early science fiction fandom, particularly communities that developed around pulp magazines and later expanded with the popularity of science fiction television and films. Fandom subsequently developed into a broader cultural phenomenon encompassing television, film, literature, comics, music, anime, video games, celebrities, and other forms of popular culture (Jenkins, 1992). While early fandoms communicated through the sharing of physical text and art, and gathered at fan conventions and fan meetings, today, most fan interaction is internet-based (Obst et al., 2002). Today, thousands of fandoms exist, and while different fandoms display different traits, nearly all centre around a specific object, forming a community bound by fans' mutual 'love, devotion, and appreciation of the (object of the fandom)' (Bird, 2002). These fandoms thrive on fan-based discussion, as well as artistic creation (Jenkins, 1992). For example, the BTS ARMY, which represents the fandom of the global sensation BTS, has developed a unique lexicon, including terms such as 'fanchants' and 'fan accounts' used to interact with idols and fellow fans (Saraswati, 2021; Kim & Hutt, 2021). This participatory culture allows fans to co-create the idol experience through social media, leading to a phenomenon known as 'parakin', in which fans perceive themselves as active participants in the idol's narrative (Yan & Yang, 2020). Such developments suggest that fandom can operate as a space in which fans experience belonging.

Global interactions through trade, travel, and media exposure have produced cultural hybridization, spread capitalist ideologies that tend to prioritize consumerism and individualism over community and collective well-being. Simultaneously, the late-modern achievement society, centered on labour and achievement, dominated by frantic anxiety amplifies a sense of transience. Byung Chul Han, in his book *The Burnout Society*, says, "Life has never been as fleeting as it is today. Not just human life, but the world in general is becoming radically fleeting. Nothing promises duration or substance [Bestand]. Given this lack of Being, nervousness and unease arise. Belonging to a species might benefit an

animal that works for the sake of its kind to achieve brute *Gelassenheit* (calmness). However, the late-modern ego [Ich] stands utterly alone. Even religions, as thanatotechnics that would remove the fear of death and produce a feeling of duration, have run their course.” This widespread loss of narrative in the world, he says, intensifies the sense of impermanence, leaving life stripped down to its bare essence. Work, too, becomes a bare activity, with the act of labouring aligning perfectly with this diminished state of existence. Bare labour and bare life mutually define and reinforce one another.

Traditional religious practices, cultural heritage, and political engagement, all of which once provided deep connections to places and people, are losing their grip. The erosion of these frameworks has created a vacuum. This disconnection goes beyond a simple lack of social contact. It is a deeper ontological crisis, one where the story of a person’s life no longer fits into a larger, coherent narrative. With increasing media saturation and fandoms forming social and cultural spaces, individuals search for meaning turns toward the pervasive narratives of popular culture. Media franchises supply the narrative material that contemporary identity formation now runs on with their expansive lore, familiar characters, and global communities. This paper examines that shift through the lens of denarrativization: the gradual erosion of the grand, stable stories that once told individuals who they were and why their lives mattered. This paper starts by asking a simple question: when the old stories fail, what do people reach for instead? To answer this, it turns to two of today’s largest transmedia universes, the Wizarding World of Harry Potter and the Bangtan Universe of BTS and listens closely to the fans who have made these worlds their own.

Review of Literature

Meaning is central to human existence, especially when people confront highly stressful or traumatic experiences (Park, 2013). Meaning making restores coherence through cognitive readjustment: either assimilation, adjusting an event’s meaning to fit existing beliefs, or accommodation, revising the beliefs themselves. It involves a search for comprehensibility and significance. Among the belief systems central to identity, political ideology is particularly salient (Feather, 1979; Jost & Amodio, 2012; Jost et al., 2009); it shapes interpersonal relationships and group affiliations. Ideology, however, is not the only structure

through which selfhood is constituted. It is one instance of a broader process by which individuals are situated within systems of meaning larger than themselves. Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation captures this broader process: pre-existing social structures constitute individuals as subjects. Louis Althusser in his book *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (1970) states, 'Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence'. Applying Althusser's framework to media, Gauntlett argues that audiences may be interpellated through their engagement with media texts, tacitly adopting the assumptions and worldviews embedded within them (Gauntlett, 2002).

Cultural heritage performs a similar function. It links individuals to historical lineages, giving them continuity and identity (Jokilehto, 2005; Graham et al.), while a related body of scholarship connects spirituality and religiosity to meaning making (Chan et al., 2015; Park, 2005). Ideology, media, heritage, and religion, then, are parallel and historically overlapping vehicles for the same underlying human need: constructing a coherent, meaningful self within a larger symbolic order. This need becomes especially pressing under conditions of globalization, understood as the planetary extension of modernization (Ogunbanjo, 2023), which is widely theorized as incompatible with the traditional structures just described (Marx, 1848; Weber, 1905). Where heritage and religion once offered continuity, globalization substitutes constant change and rationalization.

Two mechanisms underpin this rupture: disembedding, the lifting of social relations from local contexts (Giddens, 1990; Taylor, 2004), and commodification, whereby market logic subsumes culture (Hayek, 1974; Dyer, 1995; Hopkins, 2011). Marxist, Frankfurt School, and Weberian analyses converge on the claim that modernization diminishes political thought, replacing class consciousness with commodified ideology, spectacle, ideological fantasy, or bureaucratic rationality. If globalization erodes the traditional anchors of meaning, the question becomes where, if anywhere, those symbolic functions migrate. One answer lies in Lacan's notion of the Symbolic Order, the 'big Other,' which frames subjectivity as constituted through socio-linguistic structures; the unconscious itself, in this view, is political (Hanlon & Žižek, 2001; Hook, 2018). Despite modernity's erosion of symbolic depth, humans continually reconstruct shared symbolic realities, and it is here that mass media takes on new significance. As Mihai Coman argues, mass media operates as a cultural system that generates meaning and social cohesion, taking

up functions once held by myth and ritual. Media takes on the symbolic importance that heritage, religion, and ideology once held.

BTS exemplifies a fan-centric, participatory cultural paradigm (Lazore, 2021), marked by emotional reciprocity, transmedia storytelling, and fan labour as a form of co-creative meaning-making (Jenkins et al., 2005). Harry Potter scholarship (Gymnich & Scheunemann; Hartmann) shows a similar dynamic: world-building across texts, translations, and fandom functions as an extrapolation of folkloric symbolic order, a process akin to textual poaching. Yet this participatory vitality has a darker underside. Žižek's account of pop culture as ideological fetish suggests that fandoms and consumer objects fill the void left by declining ideology, but at the cost of a diminished self (Bain-Selbo, Eric., 2009). This raises the question of how fans internalize and transform media content into personal meaning, and it is here that the transportation-imagery model becomes useful. The transportation-imagery model (Green & Brock, 2002) explains how narrative-linked mental imagery reinforces belief change: vivid images encountered in a story become linked with the beliefs the story implies and recalling that imagery later reinforces the associated belief. This shows how persuasive a narrative can remain over time. Ricoeur positions the subject as fundamentally textual: always situated within, and interpreted through, inherited language. Fans thus engage media not as passive consumers but as active interpreters, using the metaphors, symbols, and tropes of a text to articulate their understanding of the world. Central to this process is figurative discourse. Metaphor functions as a 'heuristic fiction' that generates an excess of meaning, letting fans extend media messages beyond their literal content to uncover deeper truths about identity, morality, and society. Ricoeur's mimetic model clarifies how this interpretive process unfolds across three stages. In Mimesis I, prefiguration, fans approach a text already equipped with culturally embedded background knowledge. In Mimesis II, configuration, fans actively construct meaning through fan fiction, discussion, and critical reinterpretation, linking narrative fragments to their own lived, temporal experience. In Mimesis III, refiguration, this internalized narrative reshapes the fan's self-understanding. Fictional texts function here as 'referential illusions' that nonetheless offer insight applicable to real-world experience.

Ricoeur frames identity as a dialectic between *idem*, sameness and continuity, and *ipse*, selfhood and change, such that fans' identification with characters reflects an ongoing negotiation between who they are and who they might

become. Adopting a media worldview, in this sense, resembles a sustained commitment to shaping a self through narrative engagement.

Objectives

The overarching goal of this research is to explore the phenomenon of denarrativization, analysing how the decline of traditional meaning-making frameworks such as religion, cultural heritage, and political engagement; alongside the pressures of modern hyperactive labouring, contributes to identity crises and the search for alternative narratives in contemporary society. To achieve this general objective, there are set out specific research questions:

1. How can media content, especially within popular culture fandoms, be analysed to identify the alternative identity and worldview frameworks being offered?
2. How do fandom participants internalize media messages and integrate them into their personal identities?
3. In what ways do communal and emotional bonds within fandoms serve as substitutes for traditional sources of belonging and structure?
4. How can we understand these meaning making frameworks in broader societal context, situating it with modernisation, commodification, disembedding and isolation.

Methodolgy

This study follows a qualitative, multi-method approach. To look at how people find meaning through popular media, this study conducts thematic analysis of media texts, in-depth interviews with fans, and a review of fan discussions on social media.

Thematic Analysis of Media Texts

The Harry Potter films and the BTS multimedia universe were examined for cohesive philosophy and meaning making frameworks. The analysis moved through six stages: becoming familiar with the material, coding it, identifying

possible themes, reviewing those themes, defining them, and presenting the findings. Both inductive and deductive coding were used. This analysis also sits within broader societal and historical context, informed by Marxist conceptions of the analytic 'unit'.

In-depth Interviews with Fans

The study included semi-structured interviews with ten fans (8 females and 2 males) from different parts of India. The sample composed of individuals between the ages of 20 and 35. Participants were reached through social media and fan communities, using criterion and snowball sampling. The main requirement was that they had an active and sustained engagement with either Harry Potter or the BTS multimedia universe.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes, with an average length of 83 minutes. Four took place in person and six were conducted online. Before the formal interviews, informal conversations were also used to establish some familiarity and make the interview setting more comfortable.

The interview material was analysed through grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss; Charmaz & Bryant). Initial and focused coding were carried out alongside memo-writing and theoretical sampling. Rather than treating categories as something that simply existed in the data waiting to be found, the analysis recognised the role of the researcher in developing them. This constructivist approach let categories such as 'meaning-making through media' emerge organically through researcher-participant co-construction of data.

Review of Fan Discourse on Social Media

The study also looked at fan discussions on Reddit and Twitter/X. These included conversations, reflections, and personal accounts shared by Harry Potter and BTS fans. Looking at these discussions provided a way to understand how fans articulate identity and meaning, based on the media within fan communities.

Analysis and Summary of Findings

The findings of this study are drawn from a thematic analysis of two globally influential media texts, the Harry Potter film series and the BTS (Bangtan Sonyeondan) transmedia universe, together with in-depth interviews with ten participants (five fans of each franchise) from diverse regions of India. Together, they show how contemporary audiences absorb, resist, reinterpret, and are transformed by narrative media.

The Ideological Structure of the Wizarding World

The thematic analysis of the eight Harry Potter films finds a narrative structure organized around restoring a flawed status quo rather than transforming it. The wizarding world rests on deeply entrenched hierarchies: pureblood supremacy, the institutionalized servitude of house-elves, and a rigid segregation between the magical and non-magical, or Muggle, worlds. Critically, these structural injustices are never resolved by the narrative's conclusion. Hermione's activism through S.P.E.W., the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare, is consistently framed as naive or comedic rather than as legitimate political action, and the series' epilogue gives no indication that house-elf servitude, blood-based discrimination, or Ministry corruption have been meaningfully addressed. Harry's eventual appointment as an Auror, an enforcer of Ministry authority, seals his arc as one of integration into existing structures of power rather than resistance against them. In this reading, Voldemort is not an aberration from wizarding society but its logical extreme, a figure produced by, and reflective of, the same ideology of blood purity that pervades institutions such as the Ministry of Magic. His defeat therefore represents the elimination of a symptom rather than a cure for the underlying disease. A psychoanalytically inflected reading of the series extends this analysis further. The Ministry of Magic operates as a 'Big Other,' a symbolic authority whose laws and propaganda, epitomized by the Daily Prophet, naturalize hierarchy and present contingent social arrangements as inevitable. Hogwarts houses function as a mechanism of interpellation: they hail students into predetermined social roles and moral binaries that obscure the arbitrariness of the sorting process itself. Magical objects, the Elder Wand and the Horcruxes among them, operate as fetish objects that mask the systemic violence underlying their power. Spectacles such as the Triwizard Tournament and

Quidditch provide a form of ideological enjoyment that binds subjects to the existing order even as that order remains fundamentally unjust.

Interview Findings

In-depth interviews with five Harry Potter reveal considerable variation in how the series' messages are internalized. First, several respondents described the series as having reinforced, or actively shaped, their core ethical commitments: ideals of equality, human dignity, loyalty, and the belief that personal growth, rather than lineage or origin, determines moral worth. One respondent pointed to Kingsley Shacklebolt's affirmation of universal human value as emblematic of a worldview they still hold; another, a former addict, cited the series' assertion that one's character is defined by one's choices as personally redemptive. The degree of internalization seemed to depend on when in a person's life they encountered the books. One respondent who read them only at age thirteen, after their core values had already solidified, said the series reinforced rather than originated their ethical framework. Second, character identification emerged as a central mechanism of psychological engagement. Respondents frequently identified with characters who mirrored their own experiences of marginalization or difference. One respondent connected deeply with the ostracization experienced by Sirius Black and Remus Lupin, relating it to their own mental health struggles; another found in Hermione Granger's studiousness and social awkwardness a validating mirror for their own introversion. These identifications offered both comfort and aspirational models for personal development. Third, several respondents explicitly distinguished between the influence of the core narrative and that of the surrounding fan community. Some reported that the fandom communities itself played an influential role in shaping their personal identity. For several respondents, the relationship with the text was solitary and textual rather than social and communal. Fourth, on the question of denarrativization, most respondents reported weak or absent connections to traditional institutions such as religion or political ideology. For some, the Harry Potter narrative offered an implicit framework for self-acceptance: one respondent connected the series' themes of difference and belonging to their own process of understanding their sexuality. For others it offered explicit emotional refuge during periods of mental health difficulty and social isolation. Other respondents, however, reported continued strong connections to inherited

traditional frameworks. One respondent maintains a personal Christian faith while at the same time critiquing the institutional church as ‘a failing institution in many ways.’ Another respondent describes a broader generational drift away from traditional structures without fully repudiating them herself. Most explicitly, one respondent described a pronounced sense of institutional disillusionment, saying that traditional structures such as religion and politics ‘don’t provide security or guidance anymore’ and ‘can’t be trusted,’ a condition that, in their view, leads people to ‘withdraw and do their own thing.’

Fan discussions on the Wizarding World

Analysis of fan discourse reveals a fanbase engaged in active renegotiation of canonical meaning. Emotionally resonant character moments still anchor fan affection, such as Molly Weasley’s defence of her daughter, Fleur Delacour’s declarations of loyalty, and Luna Lovegood’s quiet empathy. But contemporary fans increasingly apply a retrospective ethical lens. Behaviour once framed as comic mischief, such as the bullying of Severus Snape by James Potter and Sirius Black, or Fred and George Weasley’s dangerous treatment of a fellow student, is now widely reappraised by fans as unambiguous abuse. Fans describe this shift as part of a broader pattern in the fandom’s discourse: a growing critique of the narrative’s implicit logic that ‘violence is acceptable when directed by the hero.’

A second major axis of fan discourse concerns the fracture between ‘the canon’ and ‘the fandom’ as separate interpretive spaces. Many fans report that their primary engagement with the Harry Potter universe now happens through fan fiction, fan art, and transformative reinterpretation, particularly of morally ambiguous or maligned characters such as Snape and Draco Malfoy. J. K. Rowling’s public statements on gender identity have substantially accelerated this move toward fan-authored meaning; a considerable portion of the fanbase sees those statements as a betrayal of the series’ ostensible themes of inclusion. Many fans explicitly describe their engagement as an act of ‘reclaiming’ the Wizarding World from its creator, separating authorial intent from textual meaning to preserve the franchise’s emotional and ethical significance for themselves. This tension also shows up in fan responses to commercial extensions of the franchise, such as the *Fantastic Beasts* films and the video game *Hogwarts Legacy*.

Mythopoetic and Philosophical Architecture of the BTS Universe

Where the Harry Potter analysis foregrounds structural and ideological critique, the analysis of BTS's transmedia 'Bangtan Universe' (BU), which includes the Smeraldo Blog, the Save Me webtoon, and the HYYH ('The Most Beautiful Moment in Life') Notes, reveals a narrative architecture built primarily around trauma, psychological individuation, and healing. The BU follows seven friends bound by fate through a cycle of repeated suffering. One character, Seokjin, is granted the ability to travel backward in time, and he uses it to rescue his friends from tragic fates. The Smeraldo Blog, a metafictional companion text, builds a mythopoetic framework around a fictional flower that represents 'the truth untold': an epistemic and aesthetic object that symbolises repressed emotional sincerity. Its central legend, about a disfigured man whose declaration of love arrives too late to reach its intended recipient. It evokes Sartre's contention that individuals are condemned to freedom and are therefore accountable for choices deferred as much as choices made. The Save Me webtoon and its extension in the HYYH Notes engage explicitly with philosophical debates about fate, determinism, and free will. Seokjin's repeated, ultimately unsuccessful attempts to alter his friends' fates dramatize both the Butterfly Effect, the idea that minor interventions can produce disproportionate and unpredictable consequences, and the Novikov self-consistency principle. According to which the timeline resists paradox-inducing alterations and as a result causes unforeseen tragedy. It also gestures toward Nietzsche's concept of eternal recurrence, the idea that repeated cycles of suffering must be faced with affirmation rather than resignation.

The HYYH Notes deepen this philosophical structure through explicit engagement with Jungian psychology, most directly through the recurring metaphor of the 'map of the soul.' In it, Seokjin's quest to save his friends becomes inseparable from his own process of individuation. Individuation is the integration of fragmented, unconscious material into a coherent self, which is paradoxically achieved here through the loss of his own memories. This Jungian architecture structures BTS's later Map of the Soul album series, which draws directly on Murray Stein's introductory volume of the same name. The trajectory from Map of the Soul: Persona (2019) to Map of the Soul: 7 (2020) moves from the socially constructed persona toward direct confrontation with the shadow, explored in Suga's 'Shadow,' and eventual integration expressed through the ego, explored in J-Hope's 'Ego'.

A parallel intertextual relationship exists between BTS's 2016 WINGS era and Hermann Hesse's *Demian*, a novel built around Jungian and Nietzschean themes of duality, the shadow self, and the rejection of conventional moral binaries. There is a direct citation of Pieter Bruegel's *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* in the 'Blood Sweat & Tears' music video, staging the protagonist's confrontation with temptation and the need to integrate, rather than repress, one's darker impulses as a precondition for authentic selfhood. Finally, Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving* offers a further interpretive lens, particularly for understanding BTS's 'Love Yourself' campaign. Fromm's distinction between self-love, brotherly love, erotic love, and transcendent love maps onto the BTS's discography. Jin's 'Epiphany' dramatizes self-love; brotherly love and solidarity through vulnerability recur throughout the *Save Me* narrative and songs such as 'Spring Day'; 'Fake Love' interrogates inauthentic erotic love; and songs such as 'Magic Shop' and 'Zero O'Clock' evoke a sense of transcendence.

Interview Findings

Interviews with BTS fans have similar patterns that both echo and diverge from those found among Harry Potter fans. As with the Harry Potter cohort, several respondents pointed to specific lyrics or speeches, such as Jin and Suga's 'Dear Class of 2020' address and the lyric 'not so perfect, but so beautiful' from 'Epiphany,' as sources of direct, personally transformative guidance during periods of anxiety or perfectionism. Fans often describe the group's ideology as matching their own social commitments. One respondent explicitly called BTS 'like-minded' on questions of authority and equality reinforcing her social commitment. Another respondent's engagement grew out of a prior interest in activism; she cited BTS's perceived role in challenging gender stereotypes in South Korea's conservative social context as a point of resonance for her feminist commitments. One respondent explicitly credited the international fan community on platforms such as Twitter for expanding their awareness of identity-related issues, including racism and LGBTQ+ concerns, through open discussion. The community's collective mobilizations, including solidarity campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic, were also reported to have shaped fans' understanding of social justice.

On institutional trust, responses again varied but tended toward more explicit disillusionment than those found in the Harry Potter cohort. Some respondents, including one who identifies as an established atheist and ethical humanist,

reported that BTS had comparatively little influence on their ethical or social commitments. Multiple respondents described online fandom spaces, particularly Reddit communities, as having produced lasting, emotionally substantial friendships, some of which extended into offline relationships. Several respondents reported strong anticipatory grief about the prospect of the group's eventual disbandment, describing it in terms of bereavement. This suggests an unusually high degree of parasocial and communal investment.

Fan Discourse on the Bangtan Universe

Fan discourse around BTS reveals a fandom organised centrally around emotional intimacy and mutual disclosure. Members' public discussions of burnout, depression, and self-doubt, including RM's address at the United Nations urging listeners to 'speak yourself' and Suga's candid discussion of his own mental health, are consistently cited by fans as a source of shared vulnerability rarely found in other celebrity-audience relationships. This is reinforced by explicit messaging of collective belonging ('we don't exist without you') as functioning almost therapeutically. Songs such as 'Blue & Grey' are cited as validating experiences of depression, and 'Magic Shop' as a symbol of emotional catharsis.

Conclusion

This study sets out to examine how two major contemporary fandoms, Harry Potter and BTS, function as sites of meaning-making in an era increasingly marked by denarrativization. The Harry Potter analysis shows that the series, beneath its surface narrative of good triumphing over evil, ultimately functions as a restoration fantasy. The interview data show that fans draw genuine and substantive value (ideologically limited) from the series. The analysis of the BTS Bangtan Universe similarly reveals a text of considerable philosophical density, drawing on existentialism, Jungian psychology, deterministic thinking and a narrative of trauma, fate, and redemption across multiple media platforms.

When critically analysed, Byung-Chul Han's concept of a 'hyper fixation on the self' suggests that the BU's popularisation of introspection may reify psychological fragmentation rather than resolve it. The drive toward 'transparency of the self' risks overexposing, and ultimately monetizing, the inner world. Žižek's account

of love as a violent rupture of the Symbolic Order, a 'scandal' that cannot be planned or folded into self-realization, challenges BTS's portrayal of love as something that must be authentic and pure to be valid. That framing, the analysis argues, flattens love into a normative, marketable script. It lets audiences consume an aestheticized simulation of rupture instead of confronting its traumatic core, which is exactly the kind of ideological closure Žižek associates with late capitalism's promise of a partner who 'completes' the self. Fromm's notion of self-love as the foundation of genuine love is similarly vulnerable to appropriation. Under neoliberal market logic it can shift from an existential practice into a branding strategy, as affective labour and instrumental rationality take over what was once a relational ethic. Hesse's *Demian* with its inward, individualistic focus on spiritual journeying can be read as disengaged from collective political responsibility.

Extending this logic to 'Blood Sweat & Tears,' the research argues that it converts personal struggle into consumable aesthetic content. When art functions purely as self-exposure, it abandons its critical responsibility and collapses into confession. Pain becomes content, subjects become brands, and social critique becomes monetized trauma. Beyond the textual and theoretical analysis, this research has broader social implications. It places both fandoms within the context of denarrativization: the erosion of traditional meaning-making structures such as religion and shared cultural heritage under the pressures of globalization, hyper-individualism, and labour intensification. Fandoms function as substitute frameworks that offer belonging, values, and narrative coherence, particularly for younger generations dealing with disconnection and identity crisis. Yet this substitution is not unambiguously positive. The research establishes that fandoms may contribute to broader societal fragmentation by creating insular communities, and trends of apolitical disengagement. This tension, between fandom as a site of genuine psychological and communal benefit and fandom as a privatized, commodified, and potentially fragmenting substitute for collective civic life, is the central dialectic of the study.

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