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Metarecipient parents' #Bluey tweets as a distributed fandom affinity space

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ABSTRACT

This article explores children's and adults' online fandom and engagement with the children's animated television programme *Bluey*. This Australian cartoon has proven extremely popular worldwide with its primary recipients, that is children, and has also received significant attention and positive evaluation from parents, who – we suggest – offer a *metarecipient* perspective on the series as they tweet about it, both voicing their own opinions and serving as their children's mouthpiece. Proposing the notion of a *distributed fandom affinity space*, we explore parents' discourse on Twitter around the commonly adopted hashtag #Bluey and discern several fundamental categories of posts that provide insight into child and metarecipient parent fandom in the #Bluey affinity space. The tweets revolve around the concepts of parenting, family life, education and language that arise from watching *Bluey*, which both parents and children evaluate in positive terms. Overall, the distributed fandom affinity space realised through the #Bluey hashtag highlights the capacity for user engagement in popular culture offered by Twitter outside dedicated fandom accounts.

1. Introduction

Pop culture fandom has been significantly bolstered through the continued development of digital technologies and, in particular, social media. This has been achieved through the manner in which social media facilitate direct communication and interaction among fans and, potentially, between fans and the actors, writers, performers of a programme, film, or musical item. This is especially true on Twitter, where accounts dedicated to artists and productions communicate news and information about the objects of fandom and – most importantly for the present purposes – where fans tweet about their interests. [Bednarek \(2017a\)](#) points out that fans tend to be characterised by their behaviour rather than being bound to any strict definition. Typically, they can be said to adopt “practices of consumption that go beyond viewing the media text and that reflect a heightened emotional engagement” ([Bednarek, 2017a](#), p. 545). Generally, fan practices divert from common expectations of audience behaviour ([Costello & Moore, 2007](#)). Thus, we propose that random tweeting about a selected programme can be a sufficient indication of fandom on social media as long as the content of the tweet reflects the user's offline engagement and/or their underlying positive evaluation.

This paper contributes to the research on *online fandom*, also known as *digital fandom* ([Booth, 2010](#)), by focusing on its specific

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manifestation on Twitter involving hashtag use that creates what we consider an *affinity space*. Tweets commenting on television series are indicative of the “participatory turn” (Crawford et al., 2014) and “networked publics” (Ito, 2007), being a contemporary manifestation of “audience engagement” (Walmsley, 2016). Previous research has given attention to fandom and audience engagement with popular culture (Min et al., 2019) or, specifically, with fiction, both films and literature, in the context of affinity spaces shared by fiction mongers (Curwood, 2013; Lammers et al., 2012; Vlieghe et al., 2016). However, as yet, none of these studies endorsing affinity spaces has focused on Twitter fandom, where the hashtag serves as the basic “searchability” and “findability” tool (Zappavigna, 2011) deployed by fans.

Also, the research that addresses specifically cartoon-related fandom, rather than cartoon literacy or engagement with fiction (e.g. Gotz et al., 2005), seems to be very scarce, which Hunting (2019) laments in her theoretical paper. The dearth of such empirical research is, presumably, the consequence of the difficulty of obtaining empirical material, with the data collection methods being reduced to observation (see Hunting, 2019 for references). Studying young children’s online fandom of cartoons appears to be almost impossible. Not surprisingly, there has also not been much research on adult reception of cartoons addressed to children. A notable exception is a paper by Hunting and Hains (2021) on adult male fandom of the cartoon *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. Most importantly, none of the previous research has explored both adults’ and young kids’ online fandom of a cartoon series. The present study aims to fill this gap, facilitated by the availability of adequate data.

We examine parents’ tweets in English about a very popular and acclaimed children’s cartoon series entitled *Bluey*. Such tweets provide insight into not only their own fandom but also that of their children, in some cases, thus suggesting two viewer perspectives at the same time. In this sense, parents take the *metarecipient* perspective (see Dynel, 2011a). The *metarecipient* is defined as an informed receiver of telecinematic fiction who, rather than immersing themselves in the fictional world (see Dynel, 2021), analyses chosen aspects of the fictional product, getting more insight into it than a regular target recipient does. This may concern the characters’ discourse (a linguist’s focus), film-making techniques (a film critic’s focus) or real-life lessons that can be learnt from a television series. In other words, the idea of the (meta)recipient is related to the level of reception and the type of insight the viewer experiences. Importantly, it must be understood that (meta)reception and fandom are by no means contradictory concepts; fandom may show on various levels of reception, with fans’ emotional engagement stemming from their immersion in fiction or other aspects of viewing. In the case of *Bluey*, parental interest is not in immersing themselves in the actual plot or fictional world in most cases, but in appreciating other aspects of the programme. What resonates with parents shows when they are commenting on the reception processes and the thrust of the series that transcends the rather simple meanings and effects designed for the primary recipients, that is children. The study of *metarecipient* tweets is also based on our proposal that Twitter hashtags make for the creation of hashtag-based distributed fandom affinity spaces.

This paper is divided into six sections. Section 2 is where we lay out the main theoretical proposal, conceptualising affinity spaces as a tool with which to examine Twitter fandom based on hashtag use. In Section 3, we depict our data and delineate the methods of corpus collection and the manual annotation of the dataset in the focus of our empirical investigation. In Section 4, taking the notion of a distributed fandom affinity space as our point of departure, we distil several topical categories that give insight into parents’ and children’s fandom, duly summarised in the Discussion in Section 5. The paper closes with conclusions in Section 6.

2. Affinity spaces and online fandom on Twitter

Gee (2004, 2005, 2007) famously puts forward the notion of *affinity spaces* as an approach to digital media participation and learning in online environments, such as those on social media. Min et al. (2019, p. 614) aptly summarise an affinity space as a kind of “social semiotic space (SSS) shaped by generators (sign system/content), internal grammar (content design), external grammar (patterns in thoughts, deeds, and interactions), and portals (spaces of interaction)”. These portals may involve (and sometimes merge) offline contexts and online ones. Thus, affinity spaces can be viewed as loosely organised sociocultural settings in which many people operate, sharing and drawing on one another’s expertise and interests (Gee, 2005). While, by design, the concept of an affinity space originally concerned informal learning, it has been widely employed with reference to various communicative practices by participants who “‘bond’ first and foremost to an endeavor or interest and secondarily, if at all, to each other” (Gee, 2007, p. 98).

Gee’s (2004, 2005, 2007) proposal stems from his criticism of the notion of the *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998) and aims to eschew its theoretical load. Even though this latter concept has been successfully used with regard to various online platforms dependent on specific practices (see e.g. Dynel & Poppi, 2019 and references therein), it is not as straightforward a task to apply the notion “community” to all forms of online communication (see Angouri, 2016). This is because the idea of a community seems to place emphasis on personal ties and a sense of belonging. In many online contexts, these are irrelevant, and the boundaries of membership tend to be blurry (Gee, 2005). Even if some of the examples Gee gives can be questioned, there is no denying that sometimes people’s practices online are not about community membership, affiliation or solidarity building but rather about relating “to each other primarily in terms of common interests, endeavours, goals or practices” (Gee, 2005, p. 225). The objective of this proposal is to capture the interactional space and people’s joint product. Indeed, social media tend to prioritise shared interests over relationships (boyd, 2006), which is germane to fandom practices on social media.

Digital technologies have played a role in reinforcing fandom in many ways through various online platforms ranging from the now obsolete message boards and chatrooms to the prevalent social media sites (see Bennett, 2014; Jenkins, 2006). Communication speed has increased, and fandom has expanded considerably in size and reach, operating transnationally (Jenkins, 2006). Consequently, what is particularly significant here is that online fandom benefits from a plethora of opinions that fans can voice and learn from (Jenkins, 2006) in their public communication with countless many, often unspecified, users.

Online fandom displays users’ immense creativity (Bennett, 2014) and diversified manifestations of cultural production (Pearson,

2014), sometimes divergent from offline forms (Hills, 2002). These include “traditional” forms, such as fan fiction writing (Pearson, 2010; Coppa, 2006; Costello & Moore, 2007; Petersen, 2014), and new ones specific to social media, such as character accounts on MySpace, where users take on characters’ identities and rewrite the narratives (Booth, 2008). A similar practice is that of tweeting as characters in order to comment on fictional events, to engage in storytelling by inventing events, and to exhibit and bolster character personalities (Wood & Baughman, 2012). This last goal may involve role playing (Kalviknes Bore & Hickman, 2013b; see also McClellan, 2013; Petersen, 2014). All these forms of online fandom represent users’ recipient engagement with the fictional works and their fictional worlds or extensions thereof (see Dynel, 2011b, 2021).

Digital technologies have also paved the way for fans’ interaction with one another and direct communication with the object of fandom (Bennett, 2014). Both options are amply manifest on Twitter. Users may tweet at the official account of a work of fiction, either starting a new interactional strand or replying to a tweet sent from it. Alternatively, they may simply share public tweets (again, whether spontaneously or in response to a previous tweet) with a relevant hashtag signposting a work of fiction, presumably considering such sharing worth their while. Users may also interact only as lurking message receivers thanks to searches based on the use of such hashtags on Twitter (Bednarek, 2017a). As Bennett (2014, pp. 6-7) rightly observes, “On Twitter, discussions surrounding hashtags have indeed facilitated new connections (although not all communication through this medium results in conversation), offering strong possibilities for mobilization around topics and fan interests.”

When posting a tweet to be potentially read and reacted to (via responses, likes or retweets) or looking for and reading one, a user may reveal their emotional engagement (Bednarek 2017a) with a fandom object. Hence, Twitter has become a form of a backchannel which “catalyses audience discussion, interaction, fandom and other social activity” (Harrington et al. 2013, p. 405). Twitter fandom need not involve tweeting *at* the object of fandom (which is typical in the case of celebrities), but only tweeting *about* it, as is usually the case with fiction, be it films or television series. Such tweets are common in relation to ongoing series, which is what *Bluey* fandom illustrates. Thus, Twitter users may implicitly indicate their fan status and take part – even if only for a brief moment as they submit or read one fandom tweet – in what is called the *distributed fandom affinity space*, which is the result of many tweets being similarly tagged by users. It is impossible to speak of fandom communities of practice being thus formed, given the ephemeral nature of the interactions and lack of affiliation among the many dispersed individuals contributing to the collective product in the form of myriads of tweets bearing one hashtag. The “affinity” aspect refers not to the forming of relationships but to users’ understanding and sharing of content (relevant to countless many users), typically unbeknownst to one another, within one *semiotic social space*, which captures “the way in which people get and give meanings to signs within them” (Gee, 2005, p. 216).

Additionally, the “distributed” element of a fandom affinity space on Twitter relates to the manner in which the relevant tweets are scattered across the social media platform and can only be brought together by the relevant hashtag search, usually for the purpose of research only. This conceptualisation merges previous ideas of online fandom and online affinity spaces to go beyond focused engagement of group members to the much broader online practice of social media users who – typically – not only do not know one another but also do not need to engage with one another at all or even know about one another’s existence; rather, they concentrate on the topic of interest, even if only once. While remaining a fan offline, a tweeter who has sent a post or a few about an object of fandom cannot be considered a member of an online fandom “community”, which necessitates relationship forming. Fans contributing to the distributed fandom affinity space must be aware of the joint endeavour, but they can hardly appreciate it in its entirety or recognise the number of active or lurking fans, let alone build any relationships with them. However, it is important to acknowledge that not every tweet posted about a particular film or TV programme, for example, indicates with full certainty that the poster is its fan. Hashtags can be used in many different ways and for different purposes, such as for marketing and promotion or even to communicate negative sentiment about what others may consider the object of fandom. It is thus essential to analyse the qualitative content of the tweets to be able to confirm a tweeting user’s fan status.

As they contribute tweets, fans may circulate practical information, for instance about new releases, as well as collectively pool their resources about a piece of fiction through sharing interesting facts, listing intertextual allusions or compiling best quotes (cf. Bennett, 2014). This makes it possible to see patterns in these shared interests and to observe the topics or parts of the fiction that resonate most strongly with the fans. Fandom practices may involve sharing knowledge and learning – in line with Gee’s original conceptualisation of affinity spaces – about the object of attention (Bennett, 2014). However, it may also rest on opinion sharing and evaluation of the hashtagged content. Indeed, apart from serving as metadata, which may be – but, in practice, need not be – searched for by multiple users, hashtags may mark targets of evaluation (Zappavigna, 2011). One such target may be works of fiction, a case in point being *Bluey*.

3. Methodology

3.1. About *Bluey*

In 2018, the Australian children’s TV show *Bluey* launched on the public broadcasting network ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation). The ABC can only be viewed within Australia, so when *Bluey* was made more broadly available on the Disney + streaming service with associated subtitling and/or dubbing, it became more accessible to an international audience. Specific scenes, but not complete episodes, can also be viewed on YouTube, which makes the ABC and Disney + the main avenues of distribution. *Bluey* (albeit for the time being, only season 1) is also syndicated on DVDs.

The programme revolves around the daily lives of the Heelers, the anthropomorphic family of Australian Cattle Dogs (heelers) comprised of the 6-year-old blue heeler Bluey, her younger red heeler sister Bingo, the blue heeler father Bandit, and the red heeler mother Chilli (see Fig.1).



Fig. 1. The Heeler family (clockwise from top left – Bandit, Chilli, Bluey and Bingo).

The show has garnered significant attention and both local and international acclaim. It was awarded an International Emmy Kids Award for the best content for young viewers, and the Season 1 episode *Sleepytime* was named by the *New York Times* as one of the top 20 episodes of television across all genres in 2020. According to film critics and media commentators, the success of the show stems from its attention to the Australian sociocultural context (Giuffre, 2021) and, more significantly, from its emphasis on familial relationships and imaginative play among young children with parental involvement. This focus on the family has also been pointed out in a 2019 article in *The Conversation*,² where the programme is described as “a gem of Australian art, carefully distilling the essence of family life and – between laughs – capturing the wonder and joy of parenting and delivering precious nuggets of parenting wisdom along the way.”

While *Bluey* has proven a runaway hit with children, it has resonated just as strongly with many parents through its evocation of “comfort and playfulness in familiar routines” (Williams, 2019, p. 39). In fact, Balanzategui et al. (2021) report on an interview with the show’s creator, who explained that this children’s cartoon was explicitly designed to be co-viewed by parents and kids. As the popularity of the show has grown, so too has parents’ use of Twitter as a fandom site, where they can discuss the programme and express their sentiments about it.

The official Bluey Twitter account – @OfficialBlueyTV – promotes the programme by providing information on new episode screenings or sharing particular moments from recent episodes, or by retweeting what the account managers deem salient tweets from viewers. However, beyond the official account, viewer tweets tend to congregate around particular hashtags, the most popular of which is #Bluey. The sheer volume of #Bluey tweets testifies to the interest that the cartoon series generates and the growing following not only in Australia but also in other countries.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

The data collection approach used in the study followed two stages. The first stage involved a netnographic (Kozinets, 1998) observation of tweets using the #Bluey hashtag over a period of approximately 20 weeks. We determined that a prevalent fandom theme to emerge from the tweets related to the notion of family, which established a rationale for this focus in our project. Additionally, it could be inferred that tweets tended to be authored by parents – this was determined through direct self-identification by the tweeters as being parents or the tweeters’ specific references to their own children.

Following this netnographic observation, on April 14th 2021, a Python data collection script and Twitter API were used to retrieve a corpus of tweets containing the query: ““#Bluey” since:2020-01-01”. The selection of this starting point was based on *Bluey*’s rapid growth in popularity in 2020. Thereby, we generated a corpus of 10,366 tweets bearing the #Bluey hashtag and posted in the specified period. An overwhelming majority of the tweets in this corpus are in English, used either as a native language or lingua franca, while the linguistic or cultural background of the users cannot be determined. We thus concentrate on the tweets in English, premised on the assumption that these offer ample data for our analysis of *Bluey* fandom, which we assume to be international, with the cultural

² <https://theconversation.com/making-up-games-is-more-important-than-you-think-why-bluey-is-a-font-of-parenting-wisdom-118583>

background of the fans being irrelevant to the purpose of our study.

Within the overall corpus, we targeted tweets that concerned the theme of family based on a series of focus words in English (in line with the dominant language of the corpus). We opted for a brainstorming approach followed by analysis of the frequency list as this allowed us to capture focus words that were low in frequency but still, importantly, connected to other focus words. We added variations on our focus words as we observed them, most notably adding the plural or singular variations even if those did not feature high on the frequency list but were of relevance. The focus words reference adulthood, childhood, parents and children, inclusive of the main character names from *Bluey* except for *Bluey* herself since, without a manual analysis of all tweets in the corpus, it would have been impossible to distinguish between “Bluey” uses as the hashtag, the title of the show, and the eponymous character (see Table 1, which features the frequency of each focus word within the corpus, with more than one being possible in a single tweet). Added up, the frequencies of the family-related focus words in Table 1 yield a total of 4,305 individual uses, which is a substantial number given that the total number of tweets in the corpus is 10,366.

Essentially, using these words, we extracted tweets from the automatically generated corpus to arrive at a sample indicative of *Bluey* fandom that was amenable to manual analysis. This selected dataset was the focus of our rigorous qualitative text analysis (see e.g. Kuckaratz, 2014) aimed to establish the prevalent topical trends that gave insight into distributed fans’ perspectives on the series. Using a grounded-theory approach, each of the authors undertook an independent analysis of the tweets to identify and unpack themes that were not immediately obvious. This process facilitated the emergence of the categories from the data. The findings were duly brought together, compared and agreed to be exhaustive of the dataset. Thereby, we arrived at a coherent and exhaustive picture of the user-generated comments, thus showing what it is that parent fans appreciate about the series and what they find worth sharing, also with regard to their children’s fandom. The categories are presented in Table 2, along with their brief explanations.

A few general remarks about our dataset and analysis are in order. First, it is important to point out here that the text analysis yielded no single negative tweet. This is, presumably, because if one does not like a cartoon, it is unlikely that they will tweet about it. However, some tweets are mildly critical towards the parents on the show – Bandit in particular – as being unattainable role models, but we did not take these tongue-in-cheek comments to be genuinely critical towards the programme itself.

Second, it might be argued that we cannot always categorically know whether the tweeter is a parent whenever this is not made

Table 1
Focus words used for analysis of #Bluey tweets

Focus Word	Frequency
adult	36
adults	44
Bandit	493
Bingo	788
child	51
childhood	20
children	141
Chilli	271
dad	356
dads	31
daughter	126
daughters	20
family	284
father	28
kid	144
kids	816
mother	23
mum	249
mums	39
parent	70
parenting	91
parents	184

Table 2
Emergent categories

Category	Description
Children’s positive evaluations	Parents describing their children’s positive reactions to <i>Bluey</i>
Adults’ (own) positive evaluation	Parents commenting on their appreciation of <i>Bluey</i>
Educating children	Parents highlighting the show’s educational value for their kids
Children’s copying characters	Parents describing their kids mimicking behaviour and actions observed
Educating parents	Parents commenting on what they have learned from the show (about parenting or otherwise)
Aspiring to role model parenting	Parents perceiving <i>Bluey</i> as setting top parenting standards to follow
<i>Bluey</i> affecting idiolects	Parents demonstrating the language of <i>Bluey</i> influencing their own language use

overt. However, we suggest that it remains unlikely for #Bluey tweeters in our corpus to be people other than parents. The concept of the “parent” is understood generically here; it may concern a biological parent, a foster parent or a guardian, who shows engagement with both the child and the series that they are used to watching, which seems to be the underlying motivation for the fandom tweets. Users tweeting about Bluey cannot be one-time viewers since the tweets’ content implies that the users know the programme well. Thus, while the majority of the tweets do indicate the parent status explicitly or implicitly, in the few tweets that do not, we argue that this status can be presupposed. Importantly, none of the tweets in the corpus makes a clear indication that the tweeter is not a parent but rather a child-minder or a different family member; such disclaimers explaining the users’ sudden interest in a children’s programme could be expected from non-parent tweeters.

Third, we need to indicate that we did not seek to quantify the results of the study; rather, the emergent categories themselves are the result of our investigation, and we do not aim to demonstrate any distribution of these categories in the larger corpus of #Bluey tweets. These categories will guide the subsequent qualitative analysis supplemented with evidence from the dataset.

4. Analysis

In this section, we draw on tweets from the corpus to highlight the different categories of parents’ comments on *Bluey*, whereby we investigate the prevailing topics of fandom in the selected distributed fandom affinity space. The tweets in our corpus provide insight into the fandom of both children and parents, who seem to have different purposes in watching the series, as evidenced by the tweets. The categories of metarecipient comments discerned are mutually exclusive; however, it is possible for some tweets to encompass several components and straddle multiple categories given their complex content.

4.1. Children’s positive evaluations

The core target audience, i.e. the recipient (see Dynel, 2011a), of *Bluey* is children, so it is essential that children enjoy it. In our dataset, there is ample evidence of this, as expressed through parents’ reporting their children’s positive responses, and hence evaluations, in the distributed fandom affinity space. Establishing the child viewer’s perspective and fandom through adults’ tweets helps to differentiate how Twitter is being used here in comparison to previous studies on Twitter television fandom (cf. Harrington et al., 2013). Some of the tweets place emphasis on the laughter that *Bluey* evokes from kids, indicative of the humour that children find in this series (see Martin & Ford, 2018 on laughter as a response to humour), as evidenced by Examples 1 and 2.

Example 1. I saw so many posts about #Bluey that I decided we should try it. Within 2 minutes the kids were giggling more than I’ve ever seen them giggle at a show!

Example 2. My new favorite show to watch with my daughter is #Bluey on @Disney my daughter loves this show and laughs so hard and loves every episode. It’s a joy to watch ❤️ #mommyanddaughter #disney

Laughter is also at the centre of Example 3, but, in this instance, the laughter comes from the parents, while the daughter’s positive evaluation is explicitly communicated too. This tweet also confirms the way *Bluey* induces familial bonding as parents and children watch and enjoy it together, also through engaging in a dancing ritual. Likewise, Example 4 encapsulates this bonding and highlights the laughter evoked. However, it also suggests that positive reactions must lie at the heart of children’s singing, dancing and quoting lines of dialogue.

Example 3. Out of all the kids shows I have watched over this year I become a parent I have to say #Bluey on @DisneyJunior is the best. My daughter loves it and my husband and I find ourselves laughing out loud at the parents in the show. We also dance as a family at the beginning credits.

Example 4. Me and all of my kids ADORE #Bluey and have watched all of the episodes. We sing the songs. We quote the lines. We dance and laugh. It is a delight in every way!

Overall, many examples in the corpus encompass positive evaluations of both children and their parents and report on their deriving pleasure from viewing the programme together. Most tweets could be said to align with this type of evaluation to some extent; in fact, positive reactions underpin much of the discursive activity using the #Bluey hashtag. Together with parents’ reports on their children’s positive evaluation, this category may then be considered the prototypical and anticipated realisation of the distributed fandom affinity space at hand in the sense that it presents positive evaluation from both parents and children.

4.2. Adults’ (own) positive evaluation

Besides the tweets reporting children’s positive evaluations and entertainment shared together by children and parents, the corpus contains ample evidence for the positive evaluation of *Bluey* coming from parents alone. The positive evaluations that parents offer in their tweets revolve around the show being funny, engaging and touching in its storylines and character portrayals, overall highlighting parents’ emotional engagement (Bednarek, 2017a), as Examples 5 and 6 indicate.

Example 5. If you haven’t watched #Bluey because you think it’s for kids, you don’t know how wrong you are! It’s funny and clever and will make adults (and kids) laugh and laugh. #HammerBarn

Example 6. I absolutely adore the cartoon Bluey. Gorgeous designs, voice acting and the stories are unbelievably sweet and funny. I love watching this with my son. #bluey @OfficialBlueyTV

Both users acknowledge the humour of Bluey and indicate that the positive evaluations are not being made purely in terms of the enjoyment that children derive from it, but that it is a kids show that parents can enjoy, too. It is also clear that, alongside the humour, the users appreciate the cleverness, charm, and overall aesthetic qualities of the series.

Positive evaluations, such as those in [Examples 7](#) and [8](#), allude to Bluey's capacity to evoke an emotional response from parents.

Example 7. I frequently complain about modern kids TV but #Bluey and #KiriandLou are profound and beautiful. The Sleepytime episode of Bluey this morning was one of those "Dad, why are you crying?" moments. Australia and NZ are way ahead of the UK for kids tv nowadays

Example 8. Spending Friday morning watching #Bluey with the kids laughing and bawling my eyes out all at the same time. It's all the feels.

Through the reference to emotion-induced crying in [Example 7](#), the user demonstrates their amplified emotional engagement. Similarly, [Example 8](#) presents a positive evaluation of the emotional impact of the show but contrasts the adult reaction with the child's own positive response (adult bawling vs child laughing) as a means of indicating the way the show facilitates these shared viewing experiences with differing emotional reactions that are influenced by age and maturity.

By contrast, another salient subtype of the positively evaluative tweets testifying to the enjoyment adults receive from *Bluey* encompasses admissions to parents' viewing the show solo, *without* their children, which can be considered an unexpected outcome, as [Example 9](#) illustrates.

Example 9. Just realised I've spent like an hour sitting on the couch watching #Bluey by myself. Kids left to play & then shower...I failed to notice lol

What this parent indicates is, first, the extent of their own enjoyment, and second, that they are more than happy to undertake their viewing experience on their own. In particular, this example not only points out the solo viewing but also highlights the degree of absorption in the show by acknowledging the failure to even notice the kids' absence.

The solo viewing of parents is also presented in a humorous but subversive or conspiratorial tone. Parents not only admit to watching *Bluey* solo but also revel in doing so. In sharing this experience, the parents reveal their fandom to other users in this distributed fandom affinity space. Whether this experience is genuine or only reported in the fabricated stories, it is intended primarily to hyperbolically and humorously represent the extent of their fandom. To illustrate, [Example 10](#) presents a dialogue between the parents excited about a new episode, which they decide to watch together, with the kids playing outside, oblivious to what the parents are doing.

Example 10. Kids are playing outside, said to my wife, 'hey we missed the new Bluey episode today!'

Wife: 'let's watch it!'


Me: 'should we get the kids?'

Wife: '...nah, they're fine...' #Bluey

4.3. Children's copying characters

Presumably as a result of their enjoyment of the show (cf. [Section 4.1.](#)), children draw inspiration from what they see on screen. Many tweets in the distributed fandom affinity space report children's demonstrating a desire to replicate the behaviour of Bingo and Bluey. The mimicry is often purely in the name of fun and is often characterised by kids' (re)circulation of the dialogue ([Bednarek, 2017a](#)), as shown in [Example 11](#).

Example 11. Thanks to an episode of #Bluey she watched recently, my 3 year old daughter is walking around randomly saying (quite loudly too) "I've got BUM WORMS!"

Funny at home (it comes with a booty shake), not so funny in public. #ParentLife 

Here, the parent alludes to a scene from the show that used a humorous reference to a common child ailment (pinworms). The experience the parent recounts is of the child, oblivious to the vulgar word or the ailment, spontaneously copying the character's (Bandit's) verbal expression and non-verbal behaviour. The child is reported to do so both at home and in public, where it may receive a different reaction when removed from the context of the show.

The manner in which kids copy the characters is also evident in the way they utilise props from the show and replicate imaginative and creative games they observe Bluey and Bingo engaging in.

Example 12. Back in the office for the day today, my daughter isn't happy about it so she tried to 'heavy' me with her featherwand #Bluey #wfh

[Example 12](#) refers to the pretend play "heavy", in which Bingo creatively uses a feather as a wand to make objects too heavy to lift in a game participated in with fervour by her family members. The daughter is described in the tweet as using this as a form of preventative tactic to ensure that her parent remains at home.

The tweets presented in this section highlight the children's fandom through parental observation and reporting, which is an insight that has been largely absent from previous studies on children's reception of cartoons, as well as Twitter fandom research.

4.4. Educating children

As reported by parents operating within the distributed fandom affinity space, apart from offering inspiration for children's play, *Bluey* has educational value for young viewers. In [Example 13](#), explicit mention is made of creative play as kids recreate games from the show. Interestingly, the parent suggests that the replication of *Bluey*'s and *Bingo*'s games is a stepping stone to heightened creativity, whereby kids begin to develop their own creative games, as is done on *Bluey*.

Example 13. When we started watching *Bluey*, my kids immediately saw the play potential. At first, they would just act out the shows. Now, they actually play Featherwand, etc., and create their own games. Playing IS learning. #Bluey #BestShowEver #ButtHeavy #ForRealLife @OfficialBlueyTV

The education of children also moves beyond the context of play to encapsulate qualities such as resilience, as well as broader knowledge and understanding of social customs and events. This is depicted in [Example 14](#).

Example 14. I'm not one to encourage screen time. But if there is one thing you should be watching its *Bluey*! The episode "Bike" is a masterpiece in educating kids about resilience! #Bluey @OfficialBlueyTV @DisneyChannel

[Example 14](#) emphasises the trait of resilience with direct reference to an episode in which *Bluey* is unsuccessfully attempting to learn to ride her bike in the park. Simultaneously, she is inspired by *Bingo* and her friends also attempting and achieving small tasks of their own.

[Example 15](#) references the cultural tradition in Australia of a barbecue (or "sausage sizzle") that is set up at voting centres for government elections by local organisations to raise funds for various causes; in Australian parlance, the practice has come to be known as having a "Democracy sausage". This parent applauds the way *Bluey* integrates this aspect of social and political participation into the episode. This is significant as it serves to elevate the fandom in a sense beyond the content of the self-contained nature of the show itself to consider broader implications.

Example 15. The latest #Bluey episode showing how Aus voting centres often provide community events & an opportunity to teach the kids a bit about democracy! Fantastic

4.5. Educating parents

The parents within the #Bluey distributed fandom affinity space also indicate that the educational potential of *Bluey* applies equally to parents and children. This is most evident in [Example 16](#), where the parent explicitly indicates what they and their daughter have learned. It is also significant that, in the former case, the learning ultimately transfers from the parent (who learns from *Bluey*) to the child (who, in turn, learns from the parent).

Example 16. 2 things I've used #bluey to teach my toddler: why we take a tactical wee and how to use a big girl bark. 2 things she learned from *Bluey* on her own: that's not fair and the value of a relaxing chair. We ❤️ *Bluey*!

The multimodal discourse of the series can be said to align with "parenting discourses", as outlined by [Caldas-Coulthard and Van Leeuwen \(2001, p. 159\)](#), which "tell people what to do, whether in the form of hard and fast rules, pieces of expert advice, ideas and suggestions". In *Bluey*, such lessons are to be inferred from the viewing, and the data indicate that this is taking place, as [Examples 17-20](#) testify.

Example 17. It was so cool listening to @BarstoolBigCat talk about @OfficialBlueyTV on @PardonMyTake. I watch that show every night with my daughter before her bedtime. I feel like watching it has made me into a better father. Bandit Heeler is the 🐕. #Bluey

Example 18. Does anyone else watch a kid show with their children and think: "I'm not sure my kiddo got anything out of this, but I sure as hell had quality parenting modeled for me!" #parenting #bluey

Example 19. The dad on #Bluey is legit teaching me how to play with my 4 year old

Example 20. #bluey is a show that apart from offering joy to kids, makes us, parents even better. I was happy to see that games I play with my kids were on several episodes and i also discovered new adventures and wonderful games I couldn't think of. Thanks #bluey

[Example 17](#) highlights the parent feeling as though watching the series contributes to a sense of feeling equipped to perform a better fatherly role. Bandit Heeler is singled out for particularly positive evaluation, as seen in his being visually appraised as the "Goat" (Greatest Of All Time). [Example 18](#) also points to the parenting lessons taken away from *Bluey*, with the parent casting some doubt on any relevant lessons the kids may have learned but highlighting the benefits to parents. In [Example 19](#), the parent makes explicit the show's educative potential through an emphasis on child play. The implication is that by watching *Bluey*, and in particular by observing Bandit, this parent is learning by gaining ideas about play that can be replicated in their own family life. This scenario aligns with [Briggs's \(2009, p. 29\)](#) notions of *pedagogic discourse* in children's TV, which involves "conceptualizing television as a teaching resource," as well as *romantic discourse*, which "values childhood innocence, exuberance, and play." Through the reference to being

taught, this parental sense of learning from the show is apparent. Finally, in [Example 20](#), two things are made clear. First, through the emphasis on play, this parent finds a positive affirmation of their own personal approach to playing with their kids through observing a correspondence between the games Bandit and Chilli play with Bluey and Bingo and those played with their own kids. Beyond this, the parent indicates the “new adventures and wonderful games” that have been learned as a result of viewing *Bluey*.

4.6. Aspiring to role model parenting

Another element of the fandom of the parents tweeting about *Bluey* follows on from the educational value and appeal the show holds for parents. However, in this case, the tweets focus on the standards of parenting. For instance, [Example 21](#) presents a positive evaluation (cf. [Section 4.2](#)) followed by a seemingly critical remark about the unrealistic nature of the parenting portrayed, with the games being difficult to replicate in the real world of work and other commitments, where tempers get frayed. Significantly, however, the inclusion of the “#parentinggoals” hashtag suggests that *Bluey* reminds this parent that although deemed unrealistic, the parenting standards on the show are still desirable. [Example 22](#) follows a similar structure, with a positive appraisal of *Bluey* preceding a jocularly phrased complaint about these unachievable standards set in the show to be followed in real-life parenting.

Example 21. Watching *Bluey* on Disney+. It’s an excellent children’s show, but it sure sets unrealistic expectations on parents to play along with all sorts of shenanigans! I will forever strive to be as patient and playful as these parents!! #bluey #parentinggoals

Example 22. Look, I loved the #Bluey Easter special, but bloody hell these Heelers set the expectations high for us normal parents!

The two tweets above may be seen as the parents’ recognition of their inevitable shortcomings and their being reduced to the pursuit of the parental role models. Those are sometimes explicitly epitomised by Bandit and Chilli in tweets, as seen in the following two examples.

Example 23. I aspire every day to be more like Bandit. What a dad #bluey

Example 24. I think mothers everywhere aspire to being just like Chilli Heeler. #BestShowOnTV #Bluey 🤍👉 #chattermax

[Examples 23](#) and [24](#) testify to the users’ admiration of Bandit and Chilli and their aspiration to replicate their style of parenting. Tweets like these accentuate the parents’ fandom in the distributed fandom affinity space, moving beyond the enjoyment of the show itself and into the domain of personal parental improvement and development.

4.7. *Bluey* affecting idiolects

Another learning-related dimension that can be detected in the show concerns vocabulary use. Parents’ tweets indicate that neologisms, both individual words and phrases, from *Bluey* are subject to recirculation in real-life discourse, a phenomenon testifying to the interest that fictional discourse can hold for viewers (e.g. [Kozloff, 2000](#); [Richardson, 2010](#)). Expressions from the show are discussed in a metalingual manner (cf. [Jakobson, 1960](#)) as being part of the children’s or parents’ idiolects or are casually integrated into the tweets, which is also an indication of tacit metalinguistic awareness. Such metalinguistic comments are evident in [Examples 25](#) and [26](#).

Example 25. When parents stay a few days away from social media it probably means they’re doing a “Bandit” (aka doing infinite loads of laundry that were apparently not used by anyone). #Bluey #ItNeverEnds

Example 26. Massive ‘thanks’ to the dudes from @OfficialBlueyTV ... you know what you’ve done to the level of vocabulary in @AdamJS2429 and my family while in quarantine. “DUDES!” 😂 #Bluey

In [Example 25](#), the behaviour of parents is likened to that of Bandit to the extent that it is labelled as “doing a Bandit,” thus highlighting the metalinguistic element of the discourse. Similarly, in [Example 26](#), the user explicitly talks *about* the influence of *Bluey* on the family’s language use, thus showing a strong metalinguistic awareness.

Parents also demonstrated or provided examples of *Bluey* vocabulary being used in practice ([Examples 27](#) and [28](#)). [Example 27](#) adopts the expression “for real life”, whose attractiveness relies on its incorrectness. It comes from *Bluey* herself, who uses it to mean “seriously” or “for real”. Further, “wackadoo!” is used frequently by Chilli as a general exclamation of excitement and is replicated here in [Example 28](#), presumably without much semantic relevance, to preface a suggestion of fandom-based interaction and discussion among other members of the distributed fandom affinity space.

Example 27. Lucky’s dad should be Australian of the Year. For real life. Just sayin’ #Bluey

Example 28. Wackadoo! It’s almost Friday here in the states. As there’s no new *Bluey*, let’s discuss favorite moments in season 2! First moment is in Army when Jack and Rusty are sitting in the helicopter. It’s a great friend moment for Jack. Also Rusty seeing his dad. 😂 #bluey

A final example of vocabulary from *Bluey* being incorporated into everyday use is depicted in [Example 29](#).

Example 29. Has a big girl bark become a thing in anyone else’s house? @OfficialBlueyTV #bluey @disneyplus

The user reports the real-life application of the metaphor “big girl bark” as an extension of the metaphonymy (cf. [Goossens, 1990](#)) featured in the show. In the episode *Yoga Ball*, Chilli helps Bingo “find” her stronger bark as a means of being more confident and

assertive – the stronger the bark, the more people will listen to Bingo and understand what she is feeling. Transported into the real-life discourse of humans, the metaphonymy reaches another figurative dimension. It can be inferred that this metaphorical expression denoting greater confidence and self-assuredness has been taken up by the child or children of the family, and thereby casually integrated into the family discourse, apart from affecting the child’s upbringing. Needless to say, similar to [Examples 27](#) and [28](#), the use of an expression derived specifically from the programme is a means of common-ground testing (necessitating the knowledge and understanding of the lexical items), to which the actual readers of the tweet are subjected. This is in line with the postulate that using lexemes from fictional dialogues can promote bonding in interpersonal interactions (see [Dynel, 2011a](#); [Bednarek, 2017a](#) and references therein).

5. Discussion

The results of our analysis indicate that parents do not let themselves be immersed in the fictional/narrative story world (see [Dynel, 2011b, 2021](#)), which is what the brief episodes of the cartoon series do not facilitate, at least not from the adult viewer’s perspective. Such immersion would show in viewers’ comments on the fictional world (as if it is true), the plot and characters, as well as (possibly) character impersonation. These are two forms of “(re)-circulation” distinguished by [Bednarek \(2017a, 2017b\)](#), besides commenting on the production, as well as quoting the discourse. The latter two forms are indeed present in our corpus, but the posts about the plot or characters are not indicative of user engagement in the fictional story world, pointing to the tweeters’ metarecipient stance instead. Metarecipient parents’ tweets about *Bluey* adduce evidence that they tend to focus on the lessons that the show holds for them as parents, apart from commenting on their own and their children’s reception and enjoyment of the show. This aligns with [Hunting’s \(2019, p. 93\)](#) view that “fandom is an important part of childhood and one that may look different than it does for adult fans” in that while children engage with the programme much as one might expect (enjoyment of the plot, mimicry, etc.), parents share their own fandom which is based on a perspective significantly different to that of the children. The metarecipient perspective offered by the parent fans tweeting about their children’s fandom of *Bluey* helps to fill the gap in fandom research acknowledged by [Hunting \(2019\)](#).

Our analysis of the tweets indicates that parents engage with *Bluey* in a number of ways. For instance, parents’ reports on their children entering into imaginative and spontaneous play are in line with what the show seeks to encourage among its audiences, both children and parents (see [Balanzategui et al., 2020](#)). The examples presented very often involve positive evaluation of the funny, captivating and touching content among other things, with accounts of children’s own enthusiastic reactions (representative of their positive evaluations) sometimes intertwined with parents’ praise, all this testify that they bond around the show. However, this positive evaluation may extend beyond familial bonding and fun, which can be seen in parents’ descriptions of how they enjoy watching *Bluey* in the absence of their kids. These levels of positive evaluation – as presented through bonding vs watching solo – are indicative, on the one hand, of the way the show was designed to be co-viewed while, on the other, of the content appealing to adults in its own right.

Children’s mimicry of *Bluey* and *Bingo* (especially their games) is further evidence of positive evaluation and the cartoon series’ success in showcasing children’s spontaneous and creative play, with parents often being drawn into their children’s replication of the game. The focus on play, as shown through the various games, ties in with the sense of education and learning *Bluey* achieves for both parents and children. The learning for parents comes in the form of ideas for play and other parenting strategies depicted by *Bandit* and *Chilli*, who are portrayed as role models for viewing parents to aspire to. For children, the educational components of *Bluey* include the learning gained from play, personal characteristics, such as resilience and perseverance, and broader social education, such as that around the notion of democracy.

A final area where the tweets exhibit the impact of *Bluey* on viewers is language use. Users demonstrate how *Bluey-isms*, i.e. words and phrases used on the show, have transferred to the language use of parents and children as a form of vocabulary in practice, testifying to the parents’ metalinguistic awareness. Further, tweeters explicitly discuss language use from the show in a metalingual manner as a way of showing how the various expressions have entered parents’ and children’s idiolects. This is additional evidence of positive evaluation in that the discourse specific to the series resonates with viewers to the extent that it warrants integration into their own language use.

6. Conclusions

This paper has offered an attempt to address the dearth of research on children’s fandom ([Hunting, 2019](#)) by employing a new means of looking into its online manifestation through adults’ tweets, rather than previously known methods, notably the observation of children. At the same time, we have presented an interesting case of adults’ fandom of a cartoon series aimed primarily at children, indicating that this fandom develops along with children’s, rather than independent of it (cf. [Hunting & Hains, 2021](#)). In addition, we have conducted a study of fandom that materialises through free-floating hashtag-based tweets devoted to fiction, specifically a cartoon series for kids. Most importantly, we have contributed to online fandom studies taken as a whole by offering a conceptualisation for the common but unexplored fandom practice that is not limited to specific accounts, which is what previous Twitter fandom studies have focused on (e.g. [Wood & Baughman, 2012](#); [Kalviknes Bore & Hickman, 2013a](#)).

Drawing on [Gee’s \(2004, 2005, 2007\)](#) concept of an affinity space, we proposed the notion of a “distributed fandom affinity space” in order to capture the nature of a significant form of online fandom that does not occupy a funpage, that is a website or a social media account (e.g. on Twitter or Facebook) dedicated specifically to one cultural product or persona; instead, our focus was on fandom messages scattered across a large social media platform among other tweets. We offered this notion as a better alternative to what may otherwise be referred to as a “fan community” (cf. [Sundet & Peteresen, 2021](#)), with specific reference to the interactional activity of

fans operating on Twitter. Even though Twitter *Bluey* fans may miss the interpersonal connections typifying community members and are – likely – oblivious to the actual content of the majority of other fans' tweets, they operate premised on the assumption of other fans also contributing their tagged tweets about the cartoon. The totality of these tweets is the fans' collective, diachronic product dispersed across the vast online space.

Within the overall architecture of Twitter, hashtags allow tweets from within the distributed affinity space to be brought together, representing a particular area of interest. As fans contribute tweets about a programme of their choice, they reflect a contemporary form of audience engagement. In the case of fiction, this online engagement may show either in users' pursuing various fictional scenarios as if immersed in a world of fiction (see e.g. Booth, 2008; Wood & Baughman, 2012; Kalviknes Bore & Hickman, 2013b; McClellan, 2013; Petersen, 2014; Bednarek 2017a, 2017b) or in users' providing commentaries on the cultural product, its reception, features or the messages it communicates outside the fictional world, which is indicative of the users' metarecipient status (see Dynel, 2011a).

Taking the above postulates as its point of departure, this paper has reported the findings of a study based on an automatically collected corpus of tweets bearing the #Bluey hashtag and containing family-related focus words in order to characterise the cartoon show's fandom. Zooming in on the cartoon watched by both children and their parents, we have thus addressed a topic unexplored hitherto: the online fandom of young and adult viewers of a cartoon manifest in independent tweets marked by the relevant hashtag.

Overall, the discourse of #Bluey tweets within this distributed fandom affinity space depicts the fan status of both parents and children, as reported by the former. Through the use of the #Bluey hashtag on Twitter, parents have found a place to share their metarecipient opinions and experiences about different aspects of the show in a way that allows this fandom to be foregrounded, which could be considered a blended fandom-parenthood affinity space. However, this affinity space ultimately only exists because of *Bluey*, and thus any parenting discussion and commentary that emerge are the result of their engagement with the programme. The popularity of *Bluey* as a children's television programme continues to grow, and online spaces such as the one we have explored in our study allow an additional avenue to extend engagement with the show beyond the act of viewing.

Overall, fandom affinity spaces, such as the hashtag-based Twitter one, are the essence of contemporary online fandom. Users do not need to join any group, subscribe to a special mailing list, or even follow an account in order to signpost their fan status and potentially participate in the fan activity whenever they feel the impetus to do so, even if only for a brief moment. Regardless of their actual fan status, users are not in any way bound to the affinity space, with which they can engage at whim, not bothered by any entry or exit rituals (see Sundet & Peteresen, 2021). Given the ease with which new fans can contribute tweets and the widespread availability of the ultimate product (to anybody interested), fandom becomes more egalitarian, and the object of fandom can attract a huge following. Also, new fans may actually arise thanks to a fandom affinity space, having chanced upon individual posts and having been enticed by them to familiarise themselves with the object of fandom.

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Dedication

We would like to dedicate this work to our respective kids – Marta's Emma, and Andy's Lalin and Victoria – who showed us *for real life* the enjoyment to be gained from *Bluey* and inspired us to write this paper.

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