# "Okay Twitter… trend this, sucka! #Supernatural": A Content Analysis of the Supernatural Fandom's Use of Live-tweeting

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Live-tweeting a TV show has become an important publicity practice for the TV industry, even though it is the fans doing the live-tweeting (not the show's strategic communication team). The fans behind the TV show *Supernatural* are one example of how fandoms actively use Twitter to promote their favorite show. This study presents a quantitative content analysis of live-tweets posted by fans during the last season premiere of *Supernatural*. Results indicated emotional and pure information messages were the most frequently used message type.

Message type did not affect how many retweets messages received, but visual components in the tweet increased the number of retweets. Results provide insight into how TV shows' strategic communicators might contribute to fandoms' live-tweeting and indicate that the gratifications obtained through live-tweeting science-fiction TV may differ from live-tweeting other TV genres.

*Keywords: live-tweeting, Twitter, content-analysis, fandom, Supernatural*

Ninety percent of brands such as Netflix, Disney, and Fox use social media to increase brand awareness, and 77% expect their use to increase (Newberry, 2019). Brands publish social media messages to promote themselves, and the messages are consumed by their social media followers who further promote the brand, sometimes by sharing the message with their own followers. This process, and social media broadly, has become crucial to the entertainment business (Ilar, 2014, p. 7). For many brands, the popular social media platform Twitter is particularly important. Twitter's features (e.g., hashtags, retweets) make it easy for people to discuss what they are watching, connect with the creators of their favorite entertainment brands, and share other messages they encounter on Twitter (Hargittai & Litt, 2011; Recuero et al., 2012). To further increase Twitter's utility for marketing and branding, TV shows'

strategic communicators can benefit from learning how and why their fans use the platform.

Fans, or active and passionately engaged supporters (Jenkins, 2010), of the TV show *Supernatural* and their use of Twitter may be especially informative for strategic communicators. *Supernatural* fans are invested in the show, in part, because of the show's emotional nature:

> Sibling rivalry, unresolved oedipal drama, reluctant heroes. A story of family ties, love, and loyalty. An emotionally intense relationship between the two main characters that generates enough chemistry to power a small city. Cinematography and directing that make each episode look more like a 42-minute feature film. Two very hot actors (Larsen & Zubernis, 2013, p. 7).

Although the show's Nielsen ratings have not always been great, the fans' dedicated and active Twitter presence has helped the show trend on Twitter multiple times (Ulaby, 2014; Wilkinson, 2014). *Supernatural* fans also were one of the earliest fandoms to engage in live-tweeting (Reback, 2016), or posting messages on Twitter while watching an original broadcast TV show. Fans' live-tweets can be integral to strategic communicators' promotion and marketing.

To illuminate the promotional and marketing options available for TV shows' strategic communicators using Twitter, this study examines why and how *Supernatural's* fans live-tweet. We first examine how Twitter can be used as a promotional tool generally, how the *Supernatural* fandom in particular has used Twitter, and then we review uses and gratifications theory to identify the gratifications obtained, or needs fulfilled, by posting and retweeting messages.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Twitter as a Promotional Tool

The microblogging site Twitter has become an important promotional tool for the TV industry (Beck, 2014; Nielsen, 2013). Twitter's features allow strategic communicators and other users to easily disseminate messages to users, which can help promote their favorite TV shows (Ilar, 2014; Recuero et al., 2012). Tweets are user's own messages created to share information, opinions, and socialize with other users and may include

text, pictures, videos, and GIFs. Users also can retweet another user's tweet. A retweet essentially copies and shares a tweet, ensuring it appears in followers' timelines (Suh et al., 2010). Retweeting circulates a tweet to a larger audience, increasing the number of people exposed to the tweet. Thus, retweeting a message gives it larger reach, or expands the number of Twitter users who encounter it (Baym, 2015).

Hashtags, or the combined use of the symbol "#" before keywords or phrases, also allow Twitter to function as a promotional tool. They index tweets by grouping tweets with the same hashtag into categories and create ongoing, live public discussion (Wilkinson, 2014). This helps users easily find tweets related to a topic, add to the conversation, or simply monitor the ongoing conversation (Highfield et al., 2013). Hashtags also extend a message's reach, which is otherwise restricted by the number of followers a user has. In 2018, 125 million hashtags were shared on Twitter every day (Newberry, 2019). Hashtags with the most tweets are featured in Twitter's "trending topics," which provides users the latest news (Lahuerta-Otero et al., 2018). Therefore, if a user desires a large reach and maximum public attention, hashtags are necessary for tweets (Lahuerta-Otero et al., 2018). Though Twitter's features allow for quick and easy promotion and message dissemination, it is Twitter's users who actively employ its functions.

Twitter is popular among fandoms (Hargittai & Litt, 2011; Recuero et al., 2012). Though the words "fan" and "fandom" can have negative connotations outside of sports (Larsen & Zubernis, 2012, 2013), fans are simply people immersed in a fandom or the "social structures and cultural practices created by the most passionately engaged consumers of mass media properties" (Jenkins, 2010, para. 7). In general, fans tend to feel a stronger psychological sense of community with their fandom than with their local community (Chadborn et al., 2018), so it is no surprise that fandoms have a strong presence on social media sites, which are mediums to connect with their fellow fandom community members. Fans consume the content strategic communicators post on Twitter and create their own content, such as hashtags, campaigns, and fanart (Guerrero-Pico, 2017). The content they create offers a way to express their adoration, share opinions, and communicate with other members of the fandom or creators of the TV show. For example, fans used Twitter to campaign to save TV shows, such as *Fringe*, from being canceled (Guerrero-Pico, 2017; Savage, 2014). This highlights how powerful fandoms can be on

social media (Ilar, 2014; Recuero et al., 2012). Fans' work can be integral to the media industries' communication strategies, so "[a]ny neglect of this workforce further compromises the professional media position in a market where the increased number of players already hinders efforts to keep audiences captive" (Guerrero-Pico, 2017, p. 2075). Thus, by studying the online activity of a show's fandom, we can learn what it is about fans' content that gives it such great reach (DeMeo, 2016; Walden, 2016).

### Twitter and the *Supernatural* Fandom

Although many fandoms are active on Twitter, not many rival the activity and success of the *Supernatural* fandom. *Supernatural* centers around two brothers, Sam and Dean Winchester, whose lives are dedicated to fighting demons, monsters, vampires, or any creature imaginable. Together with their angel friend Castiel and their beloved '67 Chevy Impala, the brothers traveled the United States, saving the world one slayed monster at a time. With seven People's Choice Awards and 37 professional awards total (imdb.com), this show is supported by many. By 2015, it was the longest-running sci-fi genre show in the United States (Andreeva & Petski, 2019; Rocha, 2015). By spring 2019, when Season 14 ended, *Supernatural* was The CW television network's longest-running series, second most watched show, and highest rated show in Live + Same Day views among 18 to 49 year olds (Andreeva, & Petski, 2019).

Over 14 seasons, *Supernatural's* cult-like fans have engaged in extensive fan labor (e.g., postcard campaigns, online award show voting, magazine cover contests; Wilkinson, 2014) and have actively use Twitter to promote events, anniversaries, and live-tweet episodes and fan conventions. For instance, hashtags helped fans at *Supernatural* conventions create a real-time, ongoing conversation about convention events (Wilkinson, 2014). Near the Season 5 premiere, fans used the hashtag "#luciferiscoming" to draw attention for the show, but in the hours before the premiere episode as the hashtag topped Twitter's trending topics, Twitter management banned the hashtag from appearing in the trending topics because other users who were unaware of its meaning and purpose complained (Wilkinson, 2014). Fans also use Twitter hashtags to live-tweet or share their thoughts and experiences while watching the show as it airs on TV. *Supernatural* was one of The CW's shows with the most live reaction on Twitter (Furlong, 2017), and its fans were some of the first to live-tweet on a large scale (Reback, 2016).

Fans' live-tweeting can be valuable to TV shows and their strategic communicators. TV viewers are still tuning in live to watch shows, and many live-tweet as the program airs on TV (Twitter Marketing, 2017; Woodford et al., 2015). Although there is no correlation between Twitter activity and traditional TV ratings, live-tweeting actively engages the fans and provides showrunners and networks instant fan feedback (Furlong, 2017; Maas, 2018). It allows fans to promote the show—fans' live-tweets appear on non-viewers' Twitter timeline because someone they follow may retweet about the show or a show-related hashtag may be trending—which can bring new viewers to the show (Maas, 2018). Most Twitter users who live-tweet use a show's official hashtag (Brandwatch Study, 2013; Castillo, 2015), and 83% of TV shows also use an official hashtag in their tweets (Windels, 2013), which can increase visibility of the show among Twitter users. Because fans' communication on Twitter affects a TV show's success and longevity, examining fans' live Twitter messages may help identify communicative practices that strategic communicators could emulate when using Twitter to promote TV shows.

The *Supernatural* fandom and its social media use has been studied in various ways (e.g., Brennan, 2014; Hautsch, 2018; Larsen & Zubernis, 2012, 2013), but their live-tweeting during the season 15 premiere episode may be especially enlightening for the entertainment industry's strategic communicators. *Supernatural* was planned to end in 2020 with its 15th season and a total of 327 episodes (Andreeva & Petski, 2019). After it was announced Season 15 would be the last, thousands of fans swarmed to social media expressing their thoughts and feelings about the news (Faulkner, 2019). The premiere episode was highly anticipated, and with 1.225 million viewers, ranked third for all CW shows that week (Ingham, 2019). Ratings for season premieres are positively correlated with the online activity surrounding them (Proulx & Shepatin, 2012). Thus, the season 15 premiere of *Supernatural* is an optimal episode to observe live-tweeting to learn about fans' social media communication practices.

## Uses and Gratifications Theory

To begin to identify fans' communication practices and explain how and why they live-tweet during TV shows, like *Supernatural*, we turned to uses and gratification theory (UGT). UGT emphasizes that audience members, or media users, actively engage with media to fulfill their social and psychological needs; in other words, people use certain

media to gratify their needs (Blumler, 1979; Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973; Palmgreen, 1984). Needs are the desired outcomes, or gratifications sought, for using a medium. Gratifications, sought or obtained, refer to the desired or achieved satisfaction of a need (Blumler, 1979; Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973; Palmgreen, 1984), or "when a person's needs are met by certain types of media sources that match their expectations" (Sundar & Limperos, 2013, p. 506). These can be unique to an individual as they arise based on the individual's lived experience – their social roles and the situations they encounter, their personality and disposition, skills and capabilities, past patterns of media use – all shape a person's needs and selection of media to use (Blumler, 1979; Palmgreen, 1984).

People's media use and, thus their needs and gratifications according to UGT, is a cycle. People are goal oriented; they actively choose and engage in the media to gratify specific needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). An individual's needs (as well as other individual and contextual factors) shape their expectations, affect their media use, and ultimately the gratifications obtained (Auverset & Billings, 2016; Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973, 1974). The gratifications obtained inform future needs, and the cycle begins again (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973, 1974). Based on this process, it is the individual who determines and connects their needs, media choices, and gratifications (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). Because it is ultimately up to individuals to determine what they will get out of using a medium, different people might have different needs gratified by the same media selection. For example, sports fans have been known to use the same social media platform, Snapchat, for different motives (Spinda & Puckette, 2018). In addition, culture seems to play a role in the level of gratifications that people experience, even while using similar types of media. For example, Chinese sports fans have been found to experience higher levels of gratification after using social media sites than American sports fans (Billings et al., 2019).

UGT's needs or gratifications can be summarized into five types (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973), which have been transformed into a typology for social media messages that can be "both a means of gratification (for television) as well as a type of use (for Twitter)" (Wohn & Na, 2011, para. 50; see also Giglietto & Selva, 2014). Cognitive needs (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973) or pure information messages (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973) refer to a desire for or offering of information, knowledge, and understanding about

a topic. Affective needs (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973) or emotional messages (Giglietto & Silva, 2014; Wohn & Na, 2011) refer to emotional, aesthetic, and pleasurable experiences. Personal integrative needs focus on building up confidence, credibility, and status and can also include cognitive and affective needs (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973). In social media messages, personal integrative needs manifest as subjective opinions, objectivized opinions, and interpretations (Giglietto & Silva, 2014; Wohn & Na, 2011). Social integrative needs (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973), or attention-seeking messages (Giglietto & Silva, 2014; Wohn & Na, 2011) refer to a desire to interact with others. Finally, tension release needs relate to diversion and escaping from reality and responsibilities (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973).

The most common message type, or gratification sought, during live-tweeting likely varies by TV show genre (Ji & Zhao, 2015). However, across genres, opinion messages tend to be the most common (Auverset & Billings, 2016; Giglietto & Selva, 2014; Han & Lee, 2014; Wohn & Na, 2011). Objectivized opinion messages were the most common live-tweeted message throughout a season of a political TV talk show (Giglietto & Selva, 2014). During the 2011 World Series, Twitter users used the #WorldSeries when expressing their fanship with other fans and the teams playing in the World Series, which reflects opinions and attention-seeking (Blaszka et al., 2012). Audience members watching the premiere of a season of *The Walking Dead*, a sci-fi genre show like *Supernatural*, live-tweeted primarily objectivized opinion messages (Auverset & Billings, 2016). These past findings lead to the first hypothesis:

> **H1:** When fans live-tweet during the premiere episode of Season 15's *Supernatural*, opinion messages (subjective opinion, objective opinion, or interpretation) will be more common than the other messages (pure information, emotional, or attention-seeking).

In addition to tweeting messages, part of the live-tweeting experience is interacting with the messages other fans tweet. Part of that interaction includes retweeting messages. Identifying if certain message types are retweeted may help TV shows' strategic communicators craft messages more likely to be retweeted by fans. This leads to a research question:

**RQ1:** When fans live-tweet during the premiere episode of Season 15's

*Supernatural*, what message types are retweeted most?

In addition to the type of message, the visual content included with tweets may influence retweeting. For the *Supernatural* fandom, visual content on social media was important (Hautsch, 2018; Wilkinson, 2014). Generally, tweets received more engagement if they included videos or GIFs (Newberry, 2019), and when a brand used images in their tweets, the tweet generated a higher number of retweets (Taecharungroj, 2017). This leads to the final hypothesis:

**H2:** When fans live-tweet during the premiere episode of Season 15's *Supernatural*, tweets with a visual component (e.g., GIFs, images, videos) will receive more retweets than tweets without a visual component.

In summary, by examining the textual and visual content of live-tweets, a stronger understanding about how people use Twitter to gratify their needs while watching a TV show can be obtained. This can shed light on how fans use Twitter and can identify the characteristics of a tweet that allow it to have a wider reach, which may be informative for TV shows' strategic communicators. To achieve these goals, a content analysis of live-tweets posted during *Supernatural's* 15th season premiere episode was conducted.

## METHODS

The unit of analysis was a tweet. After receiving an exclusion approval from our IRB, tweets were collected with NCapture, a web browser extension that captures a tweet's original text and user id. Data included publicly available tweets on Twitter that (1) were published during the US east coast airing (between 8 pm and 9 pm EST) of the first episode of Season 15 of *Supernatural* aired on October 10, 2019 and (2) used the show's official hashtag, #Supernatural. NCapture was chosen because of its user-friendly interface and web browser accessibility. However, Twitter's application programming interface (API) determines the access NCapture can have to the site's data, thus, limiting the tweets NCapture can collect. In particular, NCapture can only compile tweets that are less than one week old, and when collecting tweets with a certain hashtag, only a limited percentage of the most recent tweets are captured. Because of these limitations, we decided to collect tweets as close to when they were published as possible. Therefore,

tweets were collected as the episode aired, but this meant that there was high traffic on Twitter as people watched the episode and live-tweeted. To avoid Twitter's API influencing which tweets we recorded or capturing an overwhelming amount of tweets (NCapture could collect hundreds of tweets in seconds), we systematically captured tweets by modifying procedures used by Auverset and Billings (2016).

Auverset and Billings' (2016) content analysis of another sci-fi show examined tweets from three different episodes, including the season premiere. They collected tweets as each episode aired, in the hour before, and in the hour after. This amassed an unmanageable number of tweets which they narrowed down to 2,977 (over the 3 episodes) by removing retweets and non-English tweets then using stratified random sampling to create a more manageable sample.

We used Auverset and Billings' (2016) systematic approach on a smaller scale by capturing tweets at three different points as the premiere episode aired: the first minute, 30th minute, and last minute, resulting in a database of 900 tweets. Tweets not in English ($n = 49$), retweets ($n = 548$), and one tweet published by the official *Supernatural* Twitter account (and therefore not a fan) were removed from the sample. This left a final sample of 302 English-language, original tweets for analysis. Three months after collecting the sample, the first author searched each tweet in the sample on Twitter.com to record the total number of retweets each tweet received since it was published and whether each tweet had a visual component or not, information not included in NCapture when originally recording the tweets.

## Coding

**Message Types.** Each tweet was coded using Giglietto and Selva's (2014) expansion of Wohn and Na's (2011) uses and gratifications coding scheme. Only the text in each tweet was coded – emoticons and other images were not coded because they can have multiple meanings. Each tweet could be coded as only one message type: pure information, emotional, subjective opinion, objectivized opinion, interpretation, and attention seeking (See Table 1 for codes, definitions, and examples). A seventh code, "other," was added, which was applied to tweets that did not fall into one of the six a priori codes. These were inductively coded to determine if there were other message types that prior research had not identified.

The authors each independently coded tweets for their message type. During training, the coding protocol was refined. For instance, if a tweet vaguely referenced a scene without specific details, the tweet was coded as emotional because it lacked a clear, detailed reference about the scene. If a tweet demonstrated both an emotional message and objectivized opinion, it was coded as objectivized opinion unless the entire message was written in all capital letters. The first author coded the entire sample, and the second author coded a randomly selected 25% of the sample. Cohen's (1960) κ, an estimate of intercoder reliability, was .78. When the 3 opinion categories (i.e., opinion, objectivized opinion, and interpretation) were collapsed into a single category, κ = .86.

**Retweets.** The number of times each tweet was retweeted (displayed by a number next to an arrow icon located at the bottom of a tweet) was recorded by the first author. Table 1 indicates the number of retweets for each message type and the total number of retweets each message type.

**Presence of a visual component.** The first author reviewed each tweet to determine if the tweet contained a visual component ($n = 50$) or did not contain a visual component ($n = 252$).

## RESULTS

Analyses were conducted using SPSS 24. For all statistical tests, alpha was set at .05, so the research hypothesis was accepted, and the null hypothesis was rejected when $p \leq .05$.

The first hypothesis (H1) stated that tweets expressing an opinion (i.e., opinion, objectivized opinion, or interpretation) would be more commonly used than the other type of messages (i.e., attention-seeking, emotional, pure information, and other). This hypothesis was tested using a nonparametric $\chi^2$ test to compare the frequencies of each message type. The omnibus test indicated that the frequency counts were significantly different than expected ($\chi^2 = 188.60$, $df = 6$, $p < .001$). Table 1 summarizes the frequencies of each message type. Emotional messages were the most common message type, and pure information messages were the second most frequent type. The other message types (attention seeking, subjective opinion, objectivized opinion, interpretation, and other) were

Table 1 *Message type definitions, examples, and frequency counts and retweet counts (N=302)*

| Code | Definition | Example | Frequency of message type *n* (%) | Unique messages retweeted *n* (%) | Total retweets across message type |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pure information | Offering of objective information, knowledge, and understanding. These often contained quotes (with or without quotation marks), announcements about what is happening or going to happen next, or links to articles or blogs | • "We got work to do" #supernatural15 #supernatural" | 64 (21.2%) | 14 (4.6%) | 50 |
| Emotional | Expressions of emotional, aesthetic, and affective (e.g., anger, happiness, fear, love, hate, hope, curse words). These may be written in capital letters or contained exclamation points | • I'M CRYING #Supernatural #supernatural15<br>• I just saw my 9 years old self with that flashback and I am in fucking tears... Oh this season is gonna hurt like mother fucker and I'm not gonna survive. CALL 911!!!!! #Supernatural | 118 (39.1%) | 23 (7.6%) | 855 |
| Subjective opinion | Opinion in the presence of personal pronouns | • I always knew he cared. They are both hurt with each other but once something happens to the other, they will fight for the other and Help them. #Supernatural<br>• demon jack kind of reminds me of soulless sam #Supernatural | 18 (6.0%) | 4 (1.3%) | 105 |
| Objective opinion | Opinion without openly presenting it as such, for example, it expressed an opinion without using personal pronouns | • If Jeffery Dean Morgan would've been brought back properly you and Dean would have help fighting. But, of course the show had to be a huge disappointment on that return #Supernatural<br>• like he seems like he'd be fun to get drunk and sit on the curb eating street tacos with at 2 in the morning #Supernatural #BackandtotheFuture | 29 (9.6%) | 4 (1.3%) | 5 |
| Interpretation | Opinion framed by a reference to the content broadcasted (such as a quote or description of a scene) | • That final scene. Of the Winchester brothers closing the trunk to Baby from way back… the reflections are going to have me in tears every week. #Supernatural | 19 (6.3%) | 8 (3.0%) | 505 |
| Attention seeking | Expression of an intention to or directly engaging in dialogue with someone. They may contain an "@" (i.e., a mention of another Twitter user), question marks to indicates a (non-rhetorical) question, or other phrases that might solicit a response | • #Supernatural @Alex8Calverts new character he is playing is hilarious I would like to see Alex in a comedy movie in the future he's so funny<br>• Guys we made it through the last ever season premiere how are we feeling? #supernatural15 #supernatural. | 36 (11.9%) | 8 (2.6%) | 20 |
| Other | Used for any tweets that did not fall into one of the other six a priori codes | • Could you not hurt Sam just for ONCE in his life?! #Supernatural #spnspoilers | 18 (6.0%) | 2 (0.7%) | 2 |

not different from one another in their frequency. Thus, H1 was not supported because opinion messages were not the most common message type.

A one-way ANOVA was used to answer RQ1, which questioned what types of messages would get the most retweets. Levene's test of homogeneity of variances indicated significantly different variances across groups ($F = 5.03$, $df1 = 6$, $df2 = 295$, $p < .001$). Results indicated that there were no differences between message types in terms of the mean average of retweets a message received ($F = 1.47$, $df = 6$, $p = .19$). However, descriptively, emotional messages were retweeted more than the other types and received the greatest total number of retweets (Table 1). An independent sample t-test was used to test the second hypothesis (H2), which stated that tweets with a visual component (e.g., GIFs, images, links attached to images, and videos) would get more retweets than tweets without a visual component. Levene's test for equality of variance indicated unequal variances for the two groups ($F = 85.587$, $p < .001$). Results of the independent samples t-test indicated a statistically significant difference between the tweets with visual content ($M = 26.34$, $SD = 89.32$) and tweets without visual content ($M = 0.89$, $SD = 5.92$): $t = -2.01$, $df = 49.09$, $p = .05$. Hypothesis 2 was supported.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined how *Supernatural* fans used Twitter to live-tweet the show's final season premiere to identify the types of fan message content that has the furthest reach. This content analysis indicated emotional and informational messages were the most frequent, and although textual message content may not influence a tweet's reach, incorporating a visual component may be useful for increasing reach. These findings expand research about fans' uses and gratifications for live-tweeting and identifies some opportunities for increasing strategic communicators' Twitter use to promote their TV shows.

Contrary to H1, emotional messages, or expressions of feelings such as anger, happiness, love, and hate (Giglietto & Selva, 2014), were the most commonly live-tweeted during the premiere episode of *Supernatural*. This contradicts past research, which indicated opinion messages were the most frequently live-tweeted (e.g., Auverset & Billings, 2016; Han & Lee, 2014). This may be due to the shows' genres. Much past

scholarship has examined political and reality TV shows (Giglietto & Selva, 2014; Wohn & Na, 2011) while *Supernatural* is a science-fiction show. Sci-fi shows may allow for integrating more emotional aspects due to the narrative storytelling. Indeed, *Supernatural* portrays emotionally intense plot lines and character relationships (Larsen & Zubernis, 2013), which may help fans become emotionally immersed and influence their live-tweets. Similarly, within online fandom forums, *Supernatural* fans have demonstrated high levels of emotions within posts involving parasocial interactions with characters from the show (Erlichman, 2016). The emotional nature of *Supernatural* exemplifies UGT's cyclical explanation of how people's needs inform their media use, which in turn explain their gratifications and future needs and media selections (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973, 1974) and why emotional messages were the most frequently live-tweeted.

The higher frequency of emotional messages compared to other message types also could be due to the unique episode analyzed. The live-tweets analyzed were posted during a long-awaited episode of *Supernatural*—the first episode after a six-month hiatus and the beginning of the last season of a show airing for 15 years. This could have led to fans' excitement, sadness, happiness, and other emotions. Fans' emotional experiences about watching the episode was likely reflected in their live-tweets. Similarly, Tumblr posts during a highly anticipated special episode of *Doctor Who*, another popular science fiction TV show with a fanbase similar to *Supernatural*, consisted of emotional expressions of excitement and enthusiasm (DeMeo, 2016). Thus, the emotions experienced by fans while watching the highly anticipated episode may have contributed to the high frequency of emotional messages live-tweeted.

Pure information messages were the second most posted message type. Similar to past research, these were the second most common type of social media messages posted during political TV shows (Giglietto & Selva, 2014; Wohn & Na, 2011) and entertainment TV programs (Han & Lee, 2014).  Like emotional messages, the frequency of pure information messages could have been due to fans' anticipation for the episode. Many pure information tweets simply stated the episode was about to start or the Twitter user was about to start live-tweeting. Direct quotes from the characters in the episode were also common, indicating fans felt there were certain quotes worth sharing with others. For example, the most common quote tweeted by fans was "We got work to do," which was said

by Dean in Season 15 premiere episode and was a reference to the very first episode of the series where Sam says the exact same quote. As a whole, live-tweeting was commonly used to share or report information about what the fans were watching.

Seventeen tweets did not fit within the a priori six message types. Most frequent among these were live-tweets that asked a question aimed at a character or the showrunners (e.g., "Could you not hurt Sam just for ONCE in his life?! #Supernatural #spnspoilers"). These were asking a question but did not appear to expect a direct response from someone, rather they seemed to be engaging with the characters on screen, making these messages different than attention seeking messages. It could be useful to add another category to Giglietto and Selva's (2014) coding scheme designated for rhetorical questions or parasocial interaction. This could be particularly useful considering that members of the Supernatural fandom commonly partake in parasocial interactions (Erlichman, 2016).

RQ1 queried whether certain message types would be retweeted more often than others. Results indicated retweets were not dependent on message type; in other words, no message type was retweeted more than others. Retweeting may not be an important practice when fans are live-tweeting an episode. Considering the results of H1 and the total number of retweets by message types, fans may be emotionally absorbed in the episode. When fans did retweet, emotional messages were most retweeted; however, this may not have occurred solely while watching the episode. Fans may not wish to be in conversation with others, but they may need to express and share emotions. In other words, live-tweeting fulfills their emotional needs. This is similar to Erlichman's (2016) research findings that found *Supernatural* fans tend to commonly engage in parasocial interactions involving emotions even though the interactions are one-sided, and they will not get a response due to the interactions being parasocial. This finding also may be an artifact of when the tweets were collected (the first minute, the 30th minute, and the last minute of the episode). If tweets were collected throughout the episode, results may have differed.

Retweets also were anticipated to be more common for tweets including a visual component, such as a GIF or video, than tweets without a visual component (H2). This was supported by the data and consistent with past research. The number of retweets, or

reach, increased with the inclusion of a visual component (Newberry, 2019; Taecharungroj, 2017). And, visual components were identified as important to the *Supernatural* fandom on other social media platforms (Hautsch, 2018; Wilkinson, 2014). As a whole, when *Supernatural* fans live-tweet, visual content appears to be important, increasing the chance the message will resonate and be retweeted and greater reach.

For strategic communicators managing the Twitter accounts for shows like *Supernatural,* these findings suggest some opportunities for increasing their social media presence and brand awareness. First, it could be beneficial to create tweets with emotional expressions or pure information as these were most commonly during the season premiere to reflect the fans' own tweets. Including visual components will likely increase the tweet's reach. Because visual components are especially important for the *Supernatural* fandom, strategic communicators of similar shows should concentrate on the quality of the visuals. It also may be beneficial to combine emotional and pure information messages into the visual component in the tweet.

This study found that, in the context of live-tweeting, retweets do not seem to be common communication practice for fans. Because fans seem to live-tweet mainly to share emotional and informational messages during premiers, there is great opportunity for strategic communicators to engage fans' messages by replying with emotional and informational messages. Ultimately, this might encourage fans to tweet more of their own original messages, and still have the show's hashtag trend without a focus on retweets because the volume of tweets will still increase. Therefore, to increase social media presence and brand awareness, strategic communicators for TV shows could focus on engaging with fans' emotional tweets.

### Future Directions

Because this study only examined tweets posted during one episode of *Supernatural,* future studies should examine live-tweets during additional episodes. This would help determine if these findings are consistent across other episodes of *Supernatural,* sci-fi genre shows, and across other genres. Additionally, the production of *Supernatural's* final season was stopped midseason due to a pandemic (as were numerous other shows); examining fans' tweets after the mid-season hiatus may provide useful insight, too. Exploration of replies among fans' tweets and interactions between the show's

official account and fans might provide useful insight into how fans use and obtain gratifications from Twitter interactions.

Future studies could go beyond examining the textual content of tweets. Language on online platforms combine both oral and written language practices (Baym, 2015), and while coding the live-tweets, unique language patterns that were not part of the coding scheme were identified in fans' messages. Thus, future studies could analyze the linguistic practices of fans as they live-tweet. Similarly, the messages conveyed in the images and graphic content (e.g., emojis) may also be informative and provide information for how strategic communicators could increase their interactions with fans on Twitter. This study could also be followed-up by using a qualitative method, such as interviews and focus groups, to understand the uses and gratifications that fans got from live-tweeting this episode. Finally, as Baym (2015) mentions, algorithms affect what content appears in users' feeds, and the algorithms vary across platforms. Future research could analyze the accounts that tweet and retweet the most to examine Twitters' assumptions about users' needs and gratifications.

## Limitations

The study's findings should be considered within its limitations. The sample size was small. NCapture limits the number and time frame in which tweets can be recorded, so tweets were recorded at particular times during the episode. A database of 900 tweets were recorded, but upon removing non-English and unoriginal tweets, the data shrank, and the small sample limits the generalizability. Coding procedures also were a limitation. To replicate research (e.g., Auverset & Billings, 2016; Giglietto & Selva, 2014), each tweet was coded into one message type by determining the most salient message in the tweet (see Wohn & Na, 2011), although several could have been categorized as two message types (e.g., emotional *and* interpretation or emotional *and* objectivized opinion). This likely negatively affected intercoder reliability. Finally, because the episode was a highly anticipated premiere episode, it is difficult to conclude definitively if the results are due to the show or the uniqueness of the episode.

## Conclusion

Using UGT as a theoretical framework, this study aimed to understand why and how fans live-tweet TV shows to learn what the types of messages fans use, what message

types were retweeted most, and if visual components increased retweets. A content analysis of live-tweets collected during the premiere of the last season of *Supernatural* found emotional messages were most frequently tweeted and retweeted, followed by pure information messages, and adding a visual component increased the likelihood a tweet was retweeted. These results provide insight into the gratifications Twitter users sought while live-tweeting the premiere episode of *Supernatural's* 15th season identified opportunities for strategic communicators to increase their use of Twitter to promote TV shows.

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