

Culture and Community Online
How Fanfiction Creates a Sense of Social Identity by Reshaping Popular Media

by
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A thesis presented to the Honors College of Middle Tennessee State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the University Honors College

Spring 2017

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Abstract

The internet contains an ever-expanding space where people interact, forming groups and developing customs which, to an outside observer, may seem strange. This project focuses on the motivations behind writing fanfiction and the communities of fans who reinterpret popular media plots and characters—here considered a form of modern folklore—in order to make it more appealing to female and queer identities. The chapters focus on individual issues, such as the nuances of digital ethnography and a brief ethnographic survey which places respondent answers within the larger context of scholarship on online activities, and form as a basis through which further research on fanfiction and its creators/consumers may be conducted.

Acknowledgements

Dr. Fadzillah

If we tried to count how many different topics I brought up over the years, I think we might be far into the grave before we ever got near the end. You stuck with me through them all and helped me shape this project into something I'm proud to present to the world. No matter what I do, I will always be grateful for your care in helping me develop as a scholar.

MTSU Anthropology Faculty

Thank you to all the members of the anthropology department. Learning from you has been a pleasure, and I'm excited to take what I've learned to graduate school and beyond.

Steven

I never thought a dumb kid I met in high school would end up being my buoy throughout college. You've been by my side through everything, and your patience with my flaws is impossibly kind. Your encouragement and critiques helped me make this project into what it is, and I'm grateful to have you as a partner in life.

My Parents

You never censored me, not from books and not from curiosity. Other parents may have tried to steer me into a different direction, but you allowed me to become myself. Thank you for everything.

I hasten to add here that imitation is natural and necessary to the beginning writer. In the preparatory years, a writer must select that field where he thinks his ideas will develop comfortably. – Ray Bradbury, *Zen in the Art of Writing*

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Introduction

Online culture cannot be grouped into a single category. There are as many cultures in the virtual space of the internet as there are in the physical world, and each one has come to be its own unique entity filled with specific interpersonal interactions and expectations. Choosing to focus on fanfiction as opposed to the plethora of other cultural phenomena available for study, then choosing further still to generalize the many, many subgroups that exist around fanfiction is limiting as much as it is liberating. There is no way for a single study to incorporate the vast amounts of information needed to explain the occurrences online. Anthropologists and cultural researchers would need to spend as much time with their community online as they would off.

This project was formed knowing it would be impossible to collect extensive ethnographic data on a specific group of people. Instead, it focuses on the importance of digital anthropology in a world that is becoming increasingly more connected while examining how Western cultural ideals—ideals which shape how we view sexuality and gender—can be reshaped and modified to conform to a different set of expectations. The four chapters of this work culminate to lay the groundwork for further study.

Chapter 1, “Anthropology in the Digital Age,” explains the development of digital modes of thought and how the online/offline dichotomy should be rethought as more information is collected about the interactions of digital natives in the virtual world. There are a number of considerations to be made when researching people online, and this chapter attempts to make clear ways in which the field site and methodology may be reformed to incorporate the growing corpus of digital interaction.

Chapter 2, “Fanfiction Then and Now: The Controversy,” establishes the history of transformative works and the problems of the genre, both the criticisms from outsiders as well as the strife from within. It concludes with a section on legality, a topic which is still being thought and rethought as more people gain access to the internet and are able to spread their stories to others with similar interests.

Chapter 3, “An Ethnographic Survey,” contains the responses of fanfiction writers and readers in regards to their expectations when creating and consuming stories. It provides a glimpse at the average person participating in fanfiction communities and will hopefully serve as a guideline for future research topics to be explored.

Chapter 4, “Fantasies of Sex, Fantasies of Violence, Fantasies of Power,” was written with folklore and fanfiction in mind. Women and queer individuals use fanfiction as a means of showing their struggles and needs by reinterpreting popular media. In this sense, television shows, movies, comics, video games, etc. all function as a shared symbolic language through which individuals can explore identities closed off to them in real life. Fanfiction is the way in which minorities can give themselves a chance at being the hero or the villain. Because it takes the same story cores and reuses them time and again, it can be seen to follow a process of folklore.

Throughout this project I use terms that may be foreign to non-fanfiction readers as well as sources that are not necessarily academic in nature. My reasoning is that these terms are crucial in understanding the patterns of fanfiction’s development and the sources are anecdotal insights into the minds of fanfiction creator-consumers. Because my research was limited to a few months in scope, rather than the multi-year process preferred in anthropology, these supplement the knowledge basis. Time and again, I rely

upon other's words to inform my own and use my personal knowledge (as a type of autoethnographic method) to generate questions.

Overall, it is my hope that this be a starting point for my own research and the research of others. Very little has been done on Western cultures online, which no doubt influence other online cultures—for instance, people in diaspora who communicate with their homelands through computer-mediated conversations. Less has been done on fanfiction. This is the beginning and is by no means definitive, but as we learn more about community developed through the internet, this will be a means by which we can examine the changing scope of digital anthropology and the people it seeks to study.

As a dear friend of mine put it, people who don't write fanfiction “just accept when something ends. They accept the confines of what the creative team has given us.”

Fanfiction allows us—the unhappy but inspired bunch of fans—room to change the ending and manipulate the contents of media. With nothing but an idea, we can create whole new pieces to attach to whatever we like, to make something good *great*.

Chapter 1: Anthropology in the Digital Age

Studying online culture requires understanding the offline social constructs that influence it. Modern online interactions rely upon the decades-long history of the internet. In this chapter, I will explore the development of digital anthropology through cybernetics, the false premise of the real/imagined dichotomy as it is applied to the online world, the creation of the field in a virtual space, and how the first research conducted to explore digital culture was influenced by the mindset of the digital immigrant, treating the internet user as an exotic Other.

Anthropology is a latecomer to the study of digital media (Wilson and Peterson 2002); however, it is important to note that the system of ethnography, as well as the theories that explain internet use and the cultures which surround it, are derived from anthropological thought. For a more comprehensive summary of much of the work done on internet research, see Coleman (2010) and Wilson and Peterson (2002). These earlier works provide a detailed historical record on the efforts of anthropologists and others to deconstruct and understand online culture.

The worldwide abundance of internet access has dynamically changed the digital landscape. Research is being done on Indigenous populations (Wochowich and Scobie 2010), the diaspora of refugee communities and immigrants (Bernal 2005), the way people shift from online to offline personas (Vodanovich, Sundaram, and Myers 2010), how the internet is incorporated into daily life (Burrell 2009; Boyer 2010), and the overall influence that the internet has had on the way people shape and express their experiences (Brewer and Gardner 1996).

Much like the internet itself, there is no way for a team of researchers, let alone one person, to analyze and present all the data that is being collected every day. For this chapter, I discuss cybernetics and the methods of digital ethnography that I utilized during my research (see Chapter 3).

First, a note on calling the study of online culture digital anthropology versus its other common names: I chose this term purposefully because it allows the greatest breadth of understanding and conveys the largest scope of meaning. This is because the words *cyber* and *virtual* imply a lack of reality, that is, they designate that the offline world contains an objective realness that the online world lacks. It then follows that the cultures and relationships people form online are false when contrasted with the “true” cultures and relationships that occur offline. As modern life across the world has incorporated the internet into the fabric of society, the online/offline dichotomy no longer exists with the clarity it once had (though that the dichotomy ever existed is questionable). It is my experience that, much like the telephone, the medium through which we communicate does not determine the importance or quality of our human interactions.

Cybernetic Theory

The Macy Conferences ran from 1941-1960, but the focus on cybernetics in human social systems did not begin until 1946. They ended in 1953, seven years before the final conference was held, and the results of these intensive talks are still being felt today.

Cybernetics sits at the root of digital anthropology. It deals with feedback systems in general and communication in particular. Its scope covers how machines interact with

one another, how people interact with machines, and how people interact with other people. The creation of cybernetic theory was one of the primary influences on the development of the internet—without these critical talks by Cold War thinkers, the likelihood of digital anthropology’s existence today would be slim. That the internet would have formed, I have no doubt, but the study of its ability to bring people together may have been stunted.

The development of culture online follows the cybernetic idea of the feedback system as well as a basic anthropological thought: humans congregating together will, over time, create their own group characteristics. As more people enter the fold, the group will incorporate old ideas and expect newcomers to abide by established norms (Postmes, Spears, and Lea 2000; Baym 2010). These norms form culture, and each subdivision online is its own subculture, although the boundaries of these different groups are blurred and many have significant overlap. Lipin and Lipin state it most clearly. “Cyber-anthropology is concerned with the merger of natural and artificial worlds mediated by human imagination, as well as the compatibility between people and the virtual and embodied forms of digital life they have created” (2005, 148).

This is a broad area of interest for scholars conducting research. All work done online falls into the category of digital anthropology, although not all digital anthropology need be done online (for example Boyer 2010). Due to the ever-increasing reliance on digital technology and the internet, anthropology must direct its efforts to study the cultures that exist only because of an internet connection.

Although there is an expansive amount of information to be studied, it is important to note that the fetishization of face-to-face communication, as opposed to

computer-mediated communication, or CMC, has far-reaching theoretical repercussions.

Baym notes this, stating:

The perspective that mediated communication is a diminished form of face to face communication ignores many other factors that affected mediated communication, such as people's familiarity with the technology, whether they know one another already and what sort of relationship they have, whether they anticipate meeting or seeing one another again, their expectations and motivations for interacting, and the social contexts in which interactions are embedded. But, more significantly, it sells people short, failing to recognize the extent to which we are driven to maximize our communication satisfaction and interaction. (Baym 2010, 56-57)

The belief that offline relationships have more value than online relationships shapes how researchers perceive internet users and study their cultures. When conducting ethnographic research, we need to remind ourselves that all communication is inherently mediated. The sender first shapes a message—with physical sounds or with characters on a screen—and the receiver interprets the message. We must ask “...[t]o what extent does physical proximity insure direct, or any, access between two speaking subjects?” (Axel 2006, 374). In other words, the ethnographer's job is to contextualize the meaning behind communication whether or not the mode is face-to-face or via a technological medium. This is especially relevant based on McNeill's (2009) interpretation of online communication as equivalent to face-to-face communication for the digital native. They rarely perceive a difference between online versus offline interactions.

The Unimagined Internet

[C]ybernetic-informational epistemology ... encouraged anthropologists to think about various aspects of semiosocial order (for example, 'culture') in systemic, recursive, and informationalist ways. (Boyer 2010, 78)

To emphasize what it is that anthropologists and other cultural researchers should study online, we first need to deconstruct the false dichotomy of real versus imagined communities as it is applied to the internet.

The initial thoughts on online communities proposed that the internet would strip physical locations of their relevance (Wilson & Peterson 2002). I have witnessed the opposite. People group together based on interests that are not bounded by physical location, such as they did when they mailed fanfiction back and forth before the internet (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992). These communities still function well and come together despite the constraints of not living within close geographic proximity. Doubly, there are still people who live outside the internet (“digital immigrants”) and go online to mediate offline relationships. The use of Facebook as a tool to connect with family, friends, and colleagues does not make these relationships imagined; rather, it enhances the offline presence of the individual by giving them an identity that can be present when they cannot.

For the digital native, communication online is not a lesser version of offline communication, but rather a different mode of conveying the self to others. Cybernetic thought applies well: the human brain is not an organic machine, but it does rely on the signals given by its environment to function properly. These environmental signals can be sent via machine—the phone, computer, radio, television, etc.—and the receiver of the signal must interpret the meaning of the message. Whatever the mode of communication, the process is the same. A person receives, interprets, and internalizes.

Online, people are sending and receiving messages constantly. A trusted news report posted online is no less real than the one broadcast via the radio, but the

commentary underneath shifts and changes with those who engage with the information (Baym 2010). Rather than relying on authority figures, people take it upon themselves to discuss the implications of the report. When applied to fanfiction, the cybernetic system does not differ. A popular novel is an environmental signal whose messages are the result of the surrounding culture. People read the novel, interpret the messages contained within, and then either accept it and internalize the content or seek to change the content and recreate a message to send to others. Peterson does not describe this exact process, but his general statement on acts of media interpretation apply well:

Media practices simultaneously serve functions in the immediate social milieu, engage with textual structures themselves part of a complex web of intertextual meanings indexed during consumption, and link such acts to similar acts elsewhere in time and space through historically contingent flows of images, technologies and economic exchange. Every act of media consumption or production offers insight into a world of meanings, relationships and systems of interaction. (Postill and Peterson 2009, 338).

The internet is a mode of getting a message to people. If a person who wants to change the content was to call a friend to discuss how they would have written the popular novel differently, then they are engaging in an act similar to the person who writes a new story based on the novel's characters and posts it online. As we will discuss later, the back-and-forth dynamic of online communication via comments is a way of responding to problems within the text and adjusting it to match the various perspectives brought to the story, thus forming a text that is built off human discourse rather than the imagination of a single individual.

After this happens several times, a community begins to form around discussing the popular novel and debating the message (as no method of communication is a direct way for people to express themselves fully to another individual). What certain symbols

mean and what a character might do under a given circumstance becomes a way for people to express their cultural ideas to others. Creating their own characters to occupy the universe of the novel is another way for the individual to explore the meanings they can create through common archetypes, and those who participate in this activity will begin to form connections with like-minded individuals. From here, it is easy to see how these groups, though they may never meet face-to-face, become a subcultural unit dedicated to the reinterpretation of important cultural icons.

Thus, the ethnographer of the digital culture must consider the fact that these relationships are not split by what occurs online and off. People will internalize the messages of their culture and slip between worlds, thereby influencing both spheres. What we must seek moving forward is not what constitutes a real or imagined community based on a physical or non-physical location, but rather how we can examine online cultures in the same way we have examined offline ones: by asking the people to explain it themselves and drawing conclusions from those explanations.

Researching Online Culture

As early as 1994, anthropologists were calling for a more intensive study of online communities (Escobar et al). Many realized the potential of the new field and its ability to provide a lens through which researchers could examine how cultures form.

Anthropology relies on the ethnography to inform its theories about human culture, and the ethnography has traditionally relied upon a bounded field site in which to work (Burrell 2009). Historically, anthropologists sought out small communities with the incorrect assumption that they would be isolated from cultural diffusion. As anthropology grew and developed, this notion of isolation and purity was abandoned in favor of

examining the differences between people and their unique experiences, but the field site remained a crucial component in determining which people belonged to which groups.

Modern globalization further complicated matters. In *Mama Lola* (Brown 2001), the field site is not a geographic location, but a human being. Alourdes moves between Haiti and New York, and the values of Voudou are attached to her actions. The meanings of objects and locations shift regularly to incorporate changes in daily life, and rather than confine information to a single set of physical places, the ethnography follows the person as a source of knowledge.

This fluidity continues with the rise of internet access across the world. No longer must an individual rely on their ability to travel to make large global connections. A personal computer or an internet café are all one needs to go online and explore life worldwide. For the ethnographer, this is both a blessing and a curse. Accessing people has become easier than ever, with people more likely to trust and share opinions over the computer (Bruckman 2002).

However, the digital field site is nebulous at best and impossible to navigate at worst. For my ethnographic research, I chose to follow the outline Burrell demonstrated in her 2009 article.

Steps for field site construction:

- Seek entry points rather than sites
- Consider multiple types of networks
- Follow, but also intercept
- Attend to what is indexed in interviews
- Incorporate uninhabitable spaces
- Know when and where to stop (Burrell 2009, 190-194)

These methods can be applied to almost all online research, even if it enters the offline world.

The second concern in conducting research online is the amount of personal information the research has access to. Bruckman (2002) discusses the potential ethical issues that arise when collecting data without informing the participants and when/if the researcher should disguise the participants involved. Because the internet encompasses so many types of people moving through multiple groups, it is impossible to determine the exact ethical protocol involved in documenting what a researcher has found.

I chose to divide my research into two sections: the public and the private. Bruckman makes the argument that art posted in a gallery is free to be commented upon, but that art in a house must first be viewed with permission granted by the homeowner (227). Following this logic, the “public gallery” is whatever has been put on a website specifically for being viewed. The “private home” is the collection of private responses to my survey.

In dividing it this way, I hope to add a new layer in navigating the ethical concerns of online research. The internet is widely considered a public place where users post at their own risk. Much like the art gallery or newspaper editorial, works and comments placed in a position to be seen should be treated as public information that can be cited and used with little to no change. The private conversation, whether it takes place on the street or in a chatroom, should be approached more cautiously. Even in public, those speaking can expect a certain amount of privacy. Not being recorded to be used in research is a part of this, and being online does not exclude an individual from this expectation.

More simply, art and articles online are in the public sphere. They are meant to be seen, and they provide support for arguments in the same way an offline source does.

Human interactions are in the private sphere. All conversations between people and researchers should be disguised as is appropriate. Rather than treating the internet as a strange territory, we should fall back on methods of concealment used offline. In this way, credit can be given where credit is due and private identity can remain private.

The Native as an Exotic Other

A native, in the digital sense, is a person who has grown up with computers (Vodanovich, Sundaram, and Myers 2010). An immigrant is a person who has moved to computers from a non-computer world. This would seem to be a generational divide, but upon closer inspection, the reality is not so simple. In my experience, there are people in their early twenties who lack the same base knowledge that I have as someone who has been using the internet and computers since a young age. Despite being peers offline, we are fundamentally different in how we perceive the online world and how we access the internet. They are immigrants. Their use of the computer is peripheral to daily life, and relationships formed online are rare. The internet is a way to seek entertainment, and socializing is limited to interacting with offline relationships in the same way one might use a phone. Of course, they still would seem to the older immigrant to have a vast technical knowledge regarding computers, and likely they do, but their cultural use of the internet is what marks them as non-native.

Natives, likewise, are not limited to the young. Those first intrepid users are natives, though not of the same cultural stock. Generations work differently online, and determining the length of internet use is a skill one only develops after many years interacting with others. For instance, because I began using the internet at a very young

age (around ten), I was interacting with people older than me a majority of the time. As the years have gone by, we have all aged, and now I am in my early twenties while they are in their late twenties or early thirties. Despite a decade between us in the offline world, where they may have families and careers while I am still in college, we are the same online generation. We frequent the same websites, share the same linguistic quirks, and know the same memes. I connect better with older natives because I am an older native. Those digital natives my own age who started using the internet later in life are not of my online generation.

Suffice it to say, determining what makes a person a “native” versus an “immigrant” is a complex issue that requires its own article of explanations. For our purposes, it is important to understand that much of the research that has been done on online communities has been conducted by immigrants, that is, by people who lack the internalized elements of culture necessary to function properly in online spaces. It is the same as the American ethnographer going into the field with a minimal understanding of the language and culture and bumbling around until they begin to acclimatize.

This is the traditional way of things, but it comes with a dangerous edge: the thought that the group being studied is exotic. It is the time-worn problem of ethnocentrism. As an issue, it has been dealt with repeatedly by anthropologists, and the modern ethnographer treats their subject with respect and the understanding that all cultures are of equal value. Anthropology deals with the exotic, but its purpose is to demystify humanity by showing that the things we may find strange are commonplace in other parts of the world.

Online culture has not been so lucky. The issue is explained easiest through a collection of simple points. First, the internet began as the domain of nerds and geeks. Second, nerds and geeks have always been an Exotic Other in American culture (Kelty 2005; Buhs 2010). Third, much of the research done on online culture has been about either nerds and geeks, Indigenous groups, or the people of non-Western countries and their diaspora (Wochowich and Scobie 2010; Bernal 2005). These are all important areas, and indeed my research for this thesis is done on a segment of the online “nerd” community, but here it is crucial for the ethnographer to look critically at the research being conducted because it can, and often does, utilize an ethnocentric gaze. What appears to happen is that researchers treat the internet as virtual, bordering on the unreal. The bias towards face-to-face communication as more legitimate and more social leaves digital immigrants unintentionally forced into the etic perspective. This objective viewpoint, for anthropologists, is unattainable, but it is in use because the internet, to them, can be studied without the same intensive amounts of interaction that the offline world requires. As we have discussed, there are different ethical issues in tackling different modes of communication done online. Likewise, those different modes indicate different cultural styles and expectations. A digital immigrant may not take the time to understand website subcultures, and so they might accidentally make broad generalizations that do not apply.

To take any undergraduate anthropology course is to hear of the early days and the armchair anthropologists who conducted research by reading the journals of sailors and missionaries. Seeing a digital immigrant pull haphazardly from a collection of forums without properly interacting and conducting fieldwork (no matter how hard it may

be to form a field site online) is to see armchair anthropology remade in the Twenty-First Century. The same ethnocentrism happens, and it can be alleviated once modern anthropologists understand the problems inherent in their methodology and assumptions.

The benefit of digital natives growing older is that they offer a new perspective on online research and have the ability to conduct it themselves. Rather than be constrained by assumptions regarding how people create new cultural spaces online, they have witnessed and likely taken part in community-building efforts. It is not that they have better credentials in researching online, but it does change the dynamic between the observer and the participant. Digital natives know where to look and how communities are bounded, much like a native speaker of a language knows the grammatical rules without much forethought.

The “naturalness” allows for an autoethnographic approach, which I have used and will continue to use. By externalizing my knowledge, I can better inform the digital immigrant of what goes on in the mind of someone who has been exposed to the internet for well over a decade. In practicing participant-observation, a key component of all ethnographic research, I can more fully immerse myself into the cultural milieu that takes place online. I know where to look for information and how to ask for it. Indeed, my methods for distributing my survey relied upon the connections I have previously made “in the field.” That is, by utilizing my understanding of how posts are distributed on *Tumblr*, I spread the survey where it would garner the most views and received almost 100 responses in less than a week. This ability, which does not come naturally and can be learned by digital immigrants (those who have been “naturalized,” to use common parlance), provides an easy access to the different subcultures of the internet. In the

following chapters, I will focus on a specific group that has formed around NBC's *Hannibal* and the fanfiction it creates, but it is only by knowing online cultures well that I could narrow in on this specific subject.

When cybernetic theory discusses the cyborg, it is discussing the fluid interaction between person and machine. The digital native is this cyborg. They move rapidly between the online and offline spheres, merging both until neither is distinguishable. It is a ground floor view of culture, and much like the emergence of non-Western anthropologists, the research digital natives conduct will be crucial in falsifying the real/imagined dichotomy and removing the Exotic from our perceptions of the internet.

Chapter 2: Fanfiction Then and Now

At first glance, writing fanfiction does not seem to have a specific purpose. Surely time spent writing original work—work that can be published without violating copyright and trademark—is more worthwhile than the time spent on fanfiction? Beyond this, what fanfiction *is*, its actual definition, remains nebulous to most people outside its scope. Often, I run into others who quickly dismiss it as "fake writing," never having read or written it themselves (see Miller 2015 for a good example of the negativity attached to fanfiction). There are also those who have never heard of it and cannot imagine what it might entail, and so not only is fanfiction "fake" to them, but it is ignored by many academics in both the disciplines of English and anthropology.

I seek to challenge these misconceptions. Fanfiction brings with it not only a valid exploration of creativity, but also a variety of cultures that take shape around it. Fanfiction is not *just* fanfiction. It is a medium through which people can connect to each other and share pieces of themselves that would otherwise be kept out of sight. Fanfiction

allows authors and readers to challenge preconceived notions of what our culture deems appropriate.

In order to explore these topics, it is important to develop a working definition of fanfiction, one that at first encompasses far more than stories online but also makes room for the narrow interpretation that readers and authors of fanworks gladly accept.

With that in mind, I will provide two examples that include what might be considered a fanwork, that is, a work derived from another creative source.

The most general way to describe a fanwork is to include all potential media which draws from another. This includes: movies and television shows based off books—*Hannibal* being a prime example we will discuss later; musicals such as *Wicked* which refocuses the narrative on another character; books adapted from television series, such as the novels set in the *Star Wars* universe; and books or movies based around tabletop roleplaying games like *Dungeons and Dragons*. This is a brief list and is by no means definitive. Rather, my intention is for it to be a guide in exploring how fanfiction, which is not explicitly approved of by copyright and/or trademark holders, functions in a similar manner.

This brings us to our secondary definition. Fanwork, then, is anything that is created by a fan of a piece of media, and by many standards, includes those media that are produced with official permission as they are still derivative works of an original concept. Fanfiction is simply the specific genre where one writes about the media. Whether the author has permission to reimagine the story or not, any person who is inspired to create a new story based off an old one is participating in fanfiction.

I use the term media here because fanfiction can be written on any subject a person desires. It ranges from video games to books, from movies to television shows, from music to celebrities, and from cartoons to comics. A general rule of thumb is to assume someone out there, at some point, has written about someone else's story.

From my own experience as a writer and reader of fanfiction, the majority of people interested in it tend to be women and those who fall outside of the gender binary. This is supported by Jenkins' research and personal accounts in his books *Textual Poachers* (1992) and *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* (2006) as well as the history of fanfiction as told by bloggers (centrumlumina 2013). There have been numerous, not all academic, reasons attached to this, but the most commonly accepted thought is that many women desire to subvert gender norms while exploring their sexuality.

Fanfiction functions to shape individual and group identity, especially in the imagined spaces of the internet where a person can mentally retreat away from the outside world. Its purpose continues when a person then starts a dialogue with other fans about the content of the media. Whether through *Tumblr*, *FanFiction.net*, or *Archive of Our Own* (the three most popular websites for posting and reading fanfiction; see Chapter 3), the individual expression transforms into group expression when members share their fanfiction for others to discuss. This is a common form of bonding, and it often leads to physical encounters. Within my personal communities tied around the video game series *Fallout*, I had the chance to meet two of my European counterparts and spend time at their homes; other friends travelled to meet each other and work on group artwork and stories. Conventions, too, are a result of fandom. Rather than isolating an individual from the "real world" or excluding them from a "life" (Jenkins 1992), fanfiction is an active

way to engage with the literary media of the day and with others who share a similar set of passions.

Fanfiction functions as a way for communities to establish themselves around a common interest (Knight 2012). Think here of sports in the United States. A man, seeking to bond with other men, participates in hosting parties for important games, joins fantasy sports leagues online, and commonly has an entire room, the “man cave,” dedicated to his television-based hobby. He is willing to spend money to visit stadium games in order to see his favored team play live and will plan his life around these major events.

There is no doubt that football, basketball, baseball, etc., are valid cultural artifacts that exist to bring people together. Here, time and money spent on sports as a hobby goes unquestioned by the mainstream media; arguably, it is encouraged, as when one sees a man requiring a specialized room for himself on shows where families search for homes.

Sports is a fandom. It requires zealous attention to “seasons,” knowledge of details considered obscure to those not involved in that fandom, unbelievable amounts of merchandise, and even “fanfic” in the form of fantasy teams. But this is a masculine-coded fandom. And as such, it’s encouraged - built into our economy! ... and can you imagine being laughed at for admitting you didn’t know the difference between Supernatural and The X Files the way you might if you admit you don’t know the rules of football vs baseball, or basketball?

Former *Tumblr* user linzeestyle (account deleted) draws the line between the accepted fandom of sports and the unaccepted fandom of television series: gender. Masculine hobbies are more valid than feminine hobbies. On top of the stigma against women’s forms of self-expression, the media they consume is directed towards a male

audience. Female characters are sidelined and sexualized, unrepresentative of real people. The fanfiction derived from this is naturally focused on the well-rounded male characters, and many women are beginning to comment on the misogynist trends of fanfiction's history as well as the lack of decent female characters in popular media.

This being noted, women have consistently fought against the sexism of fan communities and a culture which dictates that their time be spent on household duties more than hobbies. This has allowed for large, diverse communities to form around popular fandoms, and each fandom has its own structures expressed through fanfiction. In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins notes the archetypical setup of slash stories (1992, 211-225). Over time, this model of fiction has changed for every new interest fans have, and those who participate find themselves breaking the mold of gender while simultaneously creating group norms new members must abide by.

Fanfiction's Long, Complex History and Modern Trends

Like, how do you not know about fanfiction? How do you not know about Rule 34? How do you not know that there are millions of people producing trillions of words all over the world because just consuming stories isn't enough? How do you not know about this practice that is literally as old as storytelling itself? (West 2014)

Much like all underground practices, fanfiction's history is a difficult one to trace, especially when one considers that its origins exist long, long before the internet.

For the educated fanfiction connoisseur, the common knowledge is the fanfiction which circulated around *Star Trek*. It still exists, to some extent, especially with the modern movie remakes of the original series, which could be considered authorized fanfiction when we take into account its alternate universe plot and moderate reinterpretation of characters.

Historically, though, the issue of copyright and intellectual property simply did not exist (Jamison N.D.), and this served to generate stories based on other stories in a cycle that likely stretches back to the beginning of storytelling itself. Archetypes, a feature of every class on literature, are cultural creations. An author using someone else's work was simply contributing to the collection of tales already in existence. Now fanfiction writers are split between those with permission given by corporate interests and those who work "underground" to produce stories based on the literary traditions of our time. It has been argued time and again that originality does not exist, that we are the product of our ancestors rely on the same plots and characters with little twists. A trademark or copyright never stopped anyone before, and it does not stop people now.

That being noted, fanfiction likely began *en masse* in the late 1800s as literacy became the standard among North Americans and Europeans. Newsletters abounded about the happenings of Sherlock Holmes, and it is commonly known that the fans are what brought him back to life (West 2014; Armstrong 2016). Early science fiction enthusiasts wrote amateur stories and published together in magazines. These were labelled fan fiction, but they were not the same type of literary reworking as we see now. The name stuck and moved on to encompass what we consider fanfiction today (Wikipedia Contributors 2001; Reich 2015). Video games and *Star Trek* changed the playing field forever, and the internet now allows for fanfiction and fandom to spread rapidly across the globe. It would seem today that every piece of media has its followers, and that line of reasoning is not incorrect. Fanfiction archives abound with content, and the numerous blogs bring people together to discuss everything from the recent

happenings of the series (whether it be comics, movies, books, or shows) to the fans' own creations.

Which is not to say fan communities don't have their problems, although many of these problems are simply a reflection of Western culture in general. The lack of POC in media is a general problem amplified by fandom's dismissal of the characters when they are presented. Misogyny, too, has always been a major issue in Western media and its fandoms. It takes two forms: one created by men in fandom, the other created by women.

The first is the men who often celebrate the title of geek or nerd. These men are often considered lonely outsiders by mainstream media, which perpetuates negative stereotypes about fan culture (Jenkins 1992; Ciciora 2009; Maciak 2010; Westcott 2012), and the presence of women in their communities detracts from this image. Being that the majority of fandoms are portrayed incorrectly as consisting of white, cisgendered men, it allows them an access to a pseudo-minority status. They do not share the traits of normal masculinity, like an interest in sports discussed above, and so their exclusionary practices ensure that they remain insular.

Phoebe Young notes in an article discussing common misogynistic practices of gaming culture specifically and nerd culture generally that,

There is a sense of camaraderie about being a nerd, about banding together and being bonded by your differences. But recent events [death threats against Anita Sarkeesian and the UC Santa Barbara shooting] have revealed that it's not a haven for everyone: there is still an immense amount of misogyny and female-directed violence in the nerd world and in nerd culture—and very few people are willing to talk about it. (2015)

Not many talk about the sexist portrayal of women in popular shows, movies, and games. This status quo has been questioned by a variety of feminist scholars and the lay public, but it has yet to truly enter a dialogue with the producers of this type of content. *The Big Bang Theory* is often cited as being part of a problem, and it holds as a good example of the invisibility of nerdy women (Chu 2014; howlpendragons 2016). Movements like #GamerGate are notorious for claiming a minority status while simultaneously expressing their position as the largest gaming demographic (Hathaway 2014; Backe 2014).

Women are silenced because they are cast as a “fake” demographic in the realm of nerd media. Despite their status as high-quantity producers of fanmade content, they do not exist when it comes to the outside perceptions of nerds. In the fight to claim a “chic status,” women are left out entirely. Men are painted as the true fans whose territory has been invaded by feminist commentary, rather than as the people who have been present the entire time. As women attempt to be included in the conversation, their nerd status is questioned. Men dominate the conversation and insist the misogyny felt by thousands of women (not to mention the racism felt by thousands of people of color) is a way to divest men of their rightful place at the top of the nerd castle.

Chu’s criticism of male entitlement perhaps says it best:

To paraphrase the great John Oliver, listen up, fellow self-pitying nerd boys—we are not the victims here. We are not the underdogs. We are not the ones who have our ownership over our bodies and our emotions stepped on constantly by other people’s entitlement. We’re not the ones where one out of six of us will have someone violently attempt to take control of our bodies in our lifetimes. (2014)

The blame does not lie exclusively with male fans, however. Misogyny is also conducted by female fans, whose internalized hatred of womanhood undermines the small assortment of characters women receive as representation.

The late 2000s were a notably strange time in many fanfiction communities. The demographics shifted, and more and more young women were getting involved with writing derivative stories. These teenagers, exposed to the negativity attached to femininity in fandoms (especially those fandoms geared towards girls), began to invest their time in *yaoi*—a Japanese comic or show in which two beautiful men are shown in a romantic and sexual relationship.

Yaoi in and of itself is not negative, and it is an important outlet for women to explore their sexualities (Levi 2009). However, the mixture of misogyny and underdeveloped female characters started a trend where fanfiction writers would kill off the women of a story in order to make room for a homoerotic romance between two male characters. This had somewhat existed before, and it continues in mass media where “disposable women” abound (TV Tropes Contributors 2017b), but it gained a popularity that gave it a place in fanfiction’s archetypical story constructions.

Sakura Haruno is a young female ninja in *Naruto* (1999): a manga and anime which has consistently drawn fans since it spread through Western culture. The show was syndicated on Toonami—the Saturday night segment on Cartoon Network dedicated to anime—and it boasts a whopping 292,000 fics on *FanFiction.net* and a much more modest 21,000 on *ArchiveOfOurOwn.org*. This stark difference is due to *AO3*’s newness as a fanfiction platform rather than a difference in communities who frequent these sites.

Yaoi fans have never liked Sakura. Since *Naruto* was my first fandom and the show that drew me into fanfiction, I paid witness to the rampant hatred of a rather innocuous character as it played out across the internet. She is cited as being boring, weak, and stupid (Poison_Ivysaur 2014). Her obsession with the antagonistic Sasuke, a young male ninja on her team, has led both men and women to despise her presence. Men identify with Naruto, the protagonist, who has an enduring crush on Sakura despite his feelings never being reciprocated.

The yaoi fans do not identify with Naruto per se, but they do love SasuNaru.

Sasuke and Naruto, being opposites, are a common type of pairing in the world of fanfiction. Sasuke is dark and brooding; Naruto is bright and bubbly. Their names mashed together form their couple name (another example being Brangelina for Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie), and the name listed first is the *seme* while the second name is the *uke*. These terms signify who is the “top” or “masculine” position and who is the “bottom” or “feminine” position. No longer in common use (as it is seen as heterosexist, homophobic, and it reeks of the fetishization of Japanese culture), in 2007 it was common. People could easily identify the contents of the fic by the order of names, and there were “flame wars” over who should be listed first. In my youthful ignorance, I was always a SasuNaru fan, never a NaruSasu.

Where does this leave Sakura, the romantic interest of both men?

Well, in the manga she grows up and excels as a ninja, leading her village against dark forces. Her fate is not as good in fanfiction, where she is used as the bait of character angst, or worse, killed off in a desperate attempt to solve the problem of her existence.

okay, i was pissed off at sakura so i did a small story of sasuke and naruto...killing sakura...and being happily together! NOT for people who

like sakura,cos she dies,lol not really romance...kinda...humor if you dont like sakura...sasunaru! SAKURA DIES

The summary of “KILL SAKURA!” by Sans Fire was posted on November 10, 2007. This story of less than 300 words has 94 reviews and 51 favorites on *FanFiction.net*, and it is the quintessential representation of the trend that killed off female characters at a rapid rate.

My friends and I were really bored so we decided that we would find out how many ways we could kill our least favorite character, which happened to be Sakura. **WARNING: This is DEFINITELY not for a Sakura lover. So if you some how like her DON'T READ THIS!**

The summary of “100 Ways To Kill Sakura” by FallenAngelsFeelNoLove on October 30, 2007. This is more of a list than a piece of fiction, but the cruelty inherent in the fact that the writer and friends would spend time conjuring up various ways to kill a female character of the popular manga/anime is quite telling toward the overarching hatred of women in fandom.

The profile of Sans Fire identifies the user as a heterosexual woman, and this sadly plays into the violence enacted by women against female characters (SansFire 2007). While FallenAngelsFeelNoLove does not display profile information, it is safe to assume that the author is also a woman.

Although these two are short examples of the misogyny in fanfiction, they are not alone. It has, fortunately, gone by the wayside as a mechanism for “disposing of” female characters. For better or worse, authors who dislike women in shows will simply ignore their existence or dismiss them in short paragraphs of exposition. A lucky few will find themselves in actual roles, and of course, heterosexual pairings exist (although the

women in these pieces are usually an original character dating a male character from the media).

An Argument for Folklore

50 Shades of Grey, the subject of a litany of controversy, had its start as a fanfiction. Admittedly, it gave a bad name to fanfiction as a hobby, but the misrepresentation of modern fanfiction goes far deeper than a set of erotic novels which poorly portray a BDSM relationship.

Despite claims to the contrary, fanfiction is not simply a matter of copying another's story, but of reframing characters and settings to exemplify certain cultural practices. Although there is a large, vocal group of people against fanfiction's pornographic side (Morrison 2012, among others), this too is an expression of culture, albeit in a way that subverts the status quo. The popularity of *50 Shades of Grey*, both as a *Twilight* fanfiction and as a novel, rests on the fact that it is sexual, that it allows the reader to fantasize about elements often criticized in the larger culture, a culture which hides sexual content from the public eye.

Yet, sexual content is not the primary draw for readers and writers of fanfiction. Romance itself also has a powerful pull, but not all stories are solely focused on the development of a relationship, although this is the majority.

What makes fanfiction so prominent and so highly sought after is that it is the modern equivalent of folklore.

The internet has been shown time and again as a locus for people to come together and shape culture through posting, commenting, and sharing content (Blank 2015; McNeill 2009; Snodgrass 2016; Marwick & boyd 2010; Jenkins 1992; Jenkins

2006; Ellis 2015; Lysloff 2003). Storytelling is a part of being human, and so to see it rapidly develop into subcultural communities online is no great surprise.

Fiction is how we define ourselves as a culture and as individuals. In their article addressing the social psychology of fiction, Mar & Oatley state, "Narrative fiction models life, comments on life, and helps us to understand life in terms of how human intentions bear upon it" (2008, 173).

Narrative fiction, in this sense, is any type of story which is not based primarily in facts (i.e., news stories). It covers a large distance which includes movies, television shows, and books of all lengths. Although the authors do not mention fanfiction, it stands to reason that this, too, is a mode by which people attempt to work through their understanding of life and culture. Being that every person incorporates fiction into their lived experience, fanfiction is a way to explore the common stories shared by national and international audiences.

Every story which has existed has been reshaped by authors of every stripe. This is not a new or novel phenomenon, and it has not suddenly sprung back into being with the advent of the internet (noting, as we have, that fanfiction existed long before the internet). Morrison, though his facts and premise were largely inaccurate, does point this out. Any transformative work, whether it is considered derivative or not, is a work of fanfiction.

This is the modern concept that writers abide by, though few express it in these terms. A recent example would be *The Hobbit* (2012), which had three films based on it. These movies were not accurate, not entirely. A female character was added, which was met with disdain by "fanboys" of Tolkien's work. As a fanfiction writer and a student of

anthropology, the situation was almost laughably perfect. There I sat, watching a multimillion dollar set of movies insert a woman, remembering the fanfic authors of the late 2000s cry out with utter contempt at the thought of an original character infringing upon the natural order of things, a trend which continues today. To see the movie industry mirror such a mistake was to confirm within me and other writers that, perhaps, we are laughed at because people do not understand that our works are the same as Peter Jackson's. They simply take less money to make.

Thus, fanfiction drifts into the realm of folklore. Fanfiction, being a transformative work, matches the nature of folklore, which relies on people interfacing with one another and adapting stories to life by reimagining them in subtle (or not so subtle) ways. It is not the only example of folklore in the digital age (for academic studies see Blank 2015; Miller 2008; Kibby 2005; Duffy, Page, & Young 2012; Howard 2008; for a user-generated community see SCP Foundation 2008), but it is an expansive and divided genre.

The argument for a folkloric interpretation of fanfiction is simple: fanfiction is a collection of stories that follows a broad narrative structure; it is reproduced within (relatively) small groups; it contains a history of itself, told and retold by subsequent generations; it has its own linguistic terminology; it has its avid proponents, its sage elders, and its excitable young; it is a group activity, and each story is shaped to fit the cultural milieu of the time; and most importantly, it is done by the “folk” of the internet, those people who lack geographic proximity but come together to create a collective identity through overarching themes that exist beyond any one person's singular ownership.

Legal Controversy

Fanfiction, largely being the domain of the young, does not fly under the radar as much as one might think. Despite the overall lack of knowledge in the larger culture, it is a well-known fact among authors, who sometimes see their works as being stolen by a faceless mass of wrongdoers.

To simplify matters, here is the controversy summarized succinctly: most authors view fanfiction as a violation of their copyright.

This is not the exact truth. Rather, fanfiction resides between copyright and trademark. Every creative work published in the United States falls under copyright, but a trademark must be petitioned for by the owner (Wikipedia Contributors 2006). Because fanfiction is rarely, if ever, published for commercial gain, there is a growing movement to recognize it as a nonprofit derivative work that does not harm the original producer. Although there are still holdouts, namely Anne Rice and George R.R. Martin (Martin 2010; Fanlore Contributors 2010), the trend has been to accept fanfiction as a way for people to come together and discuss prominent societal issues through a commonly known source. For those who write and read for pleasure, not politics, it is a shared way to express oneself through a medium others can quickly tap into. Most importantly, fanfiction has long been the method by which young authors explore ideas related to themselves and others; it is a way to reconfigure the world, to reanalyze it under new terms by using the media that constantly surrounds and inspires us.

Some fans eventually become “real” writers, their works published and on display in bookstores. It is the dream of many aspiring and talented people, and those who publish never lose their sense of community. In discussing the impact of mental illness

and fanfiction, author Gail Martin posted an inspiring anecdote about her life, how fandom transformed her, and what that means years later while participating on a conference's panel:

One of the most powerful times I saw fandom taking care of its own came at a panel on the last day of a convention. One attendee who had recently experienced physical and family trauma ... responded to something one of us on the panel said by talking about committing suicide. The whole mood in the room shifted. The audience became quietly supportive. The panelists tried to let him know he was not alone. (Martin 2016)

This is the overwhelming thought on fanfiction by authors who have been a part of the fan community since a young age. Those who got their start in fanfiction, and those who have not achieved the levels of fame that Anne Rice and George R.R. Martin have, generally view fanfiction as a neutral way for fans of their work to express themselves. Science fiction author Ryk Spoor says it well. "Fanfic is perhaps one of the greatest signs of the success of your material" (Spoor 2010).

The controversy amounts to a misrepresentation of fanfiction from published authors. There are cases in which fanfiction authors have pushed the boundaries of legality (see Martin 2010), but by and large the goal of the fanfiction writer is not to make it big off the backs of literary giants. Instead, writers utilize characters and settings that speak to them, the things that inspire their own unique brand of creativity. No one would claim that an author reinterpreting a Greek myth—say, C.S. Lewis and his novel *Till We Have Faces*—is stealing from the original creator. The flow of time does not make this process any different. A modern fanfiction writer reads or sees or hears something that touches them, something that changes the way they view the world, and they create a story based off of it.

Legally, there is a gray area, but so, too, is there one morally. When a work enters the popular imagination, the expectation that people will not embrace it and create their own (not derivative, but inspired) works from it is absurd. Fanfiction is an expression of the ideas within modern culture, and to deny it is to deny all classics that have been written from stories by the minds of others.

Chapter 3: An Ethnographic Survey

There are few studies on fan communities, and fewer on fanfiction specifically. To my knowledge, a generalized ethnographic survey has not been conducted in an academic setting. A focus on the culture of these creator-consumers of fanfiction is crucial if we wish to see the way offline media interacts with online culture.

Being a longtime writer and reader of fanfiction and involved in a few different fan communities online, I brought to my project a few generalized assumptions about the questions that should be asked to gauge what type of content is being created and what types of people are creating it. The purpose of the survey was to collect a snapshot of the reasons behind why people engage in fanfiction activities, if they choose to write romantic fiction and why or why not, and what readers search for when finding a transformative work based off their favorite pieces of media. Two questions drove the survey:

1. Does fanfiction treat popular media in terms of myth and legend, that is, does it follow a similar trend as oral and literary retellings of classic tales while utilizing common setting, plot, and character archetypes?

2. Do people engage in deep online friendships during these periods of writing and reading transformative works? How often do they engage in play (i.e, roleplaying through collaborative storytelling)?

Question 1 was not addressed directly in the survey, but respondents were given an opportunity to expand upon their favorite fandoms (fan communities centered around a piece of media), their reasons for writing certain fanfiction genres, their use of original characters (or their avoidance of them), etc. These answers will be analyzed in detail

during this chapter before being revisited in the next to underline a few theoretic concepts I seek to propose.

Question 2 was addressed in the survey itself under the roleplaying section. As the name implies, this is a type of play in which the actor takes on the role of a character and writes a story collaboratively. There are several forms online roleplaying can take, but I chose not to include specific modes so that the respondents could fill in their experiences and expectations without prompt bias. Roleplaying is not the be-all-end-all of online friendships in fan communities, but it does serve as a way for two or more people to work on non-canon stories in a way that allows each individual to express their unique personality traits through an intermediary character.

The focus of this chapter is on the methodology behind the survey and how the collected data represents the larger fanfiction subculture online. These two questions will be carried through to the following chapter, which will form the basis of the "discussion" found in scientific articles.

Methodology

Due to time limitations, an extended ethnographic research project was not possible. However, the importance of gathering cultural data cannot be understated, and I decided the best course of action would be to distribute a simple survey with broad, open-ended questions about respondents' fanfiction habits.

Because of the normalization of the internet in everyday life in the West and across the globe, research into online culture has become scarce in recent years. Although the same negative misconceptions of those who form relationships online still exist, the desire to explore how people use online spaces has not become a large part of research.

Digital anthropology is a small field, and although this survey is concerned with only a single subculture of the internet, the methods used here reflect a way to incorporate individual voices into the corpus of academic knowledge.

I hope to bring a new passion to the search for cultural meaning online. This is a preliminary step towards larger future projects. Once enough ethnographic information has been compiled, we will be able to perform comparative studies between online subcultures and the cultures of the offline world, especially ascertaining how they influence each other. Before this happens, basic demographic data must be collected.

IRB approval was obtained before research began. See Appendix B.

The survey was hosted on Google Forms because of its ease-of-access and malleable question format. Its five sections consisted of an introduction where a link to the consent form could be accessed, followed by sections on writing fanfiction, reading fanfiction, roleplaying, and respondent demographics. All questions name and age were optional. For the full survey, see appendix C.

To collect data, I posted a link to the survey on the popular social media website *Tumblr*. Here, the choice to use my main account allowed me to prove myself a part of the general community. I have taken surveys before, and as a user, I only participate in blogs I trust (i.e., see as real human beings). While I did no data collection on how people felt about the choice, I trust that my instinct as a long-time user reflects the general opinions of others.

Tumblr is a social media website where users blog and share content, but it also plays host to a number of fanfiction authors and readers who reach out and connect socially through the process of “reblogging” (sharing) others’ posts. It has a simple

system of tagging which can be used to find new blogs and content. The search function allows users to browse posts from other users they do not follow, and a user can choose to track a specific tag for new posts.

Knowing this, I tagged my posts about the survey with a variety of popular fandoms. Only an original post appears when a tag is searched, and so I reposted the link with a similar request for participation four times, each a few days apart. These posts gained multiple reblogs, and the survey gathered a total of 104 participants before it was closed.

I chose to distribute the survey on *Tumblr* instead of other social media websites for two reasons: first, it is my experience as a writer and reader of fanfiction that a large population of potential respondents frequents the site, and second, its tagging system allows me to connect with a varied set of people that I would usually not follow in my personal blogging.

It was available from January 25, 2017 to February 10, 2017. While my original IRB request stated it would run for a month, the efficiency of *Tumblr's* tagging system exceeded my expectations, and I closed the survey after it hit 100 responses.

These will be analyzed in sections. The demographics portion of the survey will be compared to earlier research findings to determine if the population of fanfiction writers/readers (which has traditionally been cisgendered women) has changed drastically over the years. The three sections on writing, reading, and roleplaying fanfiction will be used to derive cultural trends through individual reasoning, which will then be examined against anthropological theory at large to demonstrate how the virtual space of the internet is as real for users as the physical space of offline life.

In requiring respondents to be above eighteen years of age, I excluded a large potential population, but because many pieces of fanfiction are sexually explicit and I lacked the time/ability to gain parental consent for minors (complicated by the fact that parents tend to be unaware of their children's reading habits), I felt this course of action to be prudent.

Beside this, there are three main limitations to the methodology.

Because my main research focuses on the culture surrounding fanfiction and how women utilize it to explore identity, the use of a survey limits the ability for participants to respond to these inquiries. In future explorations of this subject, a more in-depth interview process should be utilized, and a survey with a larger pool of potential respondents would provide a more accurate picture of the demographic spread. Rather than dismiss the data collected here as insufficient, however, I believe it is the first step in analyzing modern fanfiction trends. Gauging the community will allow for more specific questions to be formed later, and the data collected here is a preliminary look at the areas digital anthropologists should focus their studies.

Another problem arises with the limited dispersal of the survey. My unfamiliarity with most social media website cultures prevented me from collecting data that may have impacted the demographic sections of the survey as well as the types of pairings participants wrote/read about. *Tumblr* has a biased user base, and many users do not reflect the cisgender and heterosexual reality of the offline world. Because the survey was not distributed to other websites, I may have missed participants who identify differently. However, by focusing on a single social media website, I believe I do have a good reflection of those users who write fanfiction, and their minority status as women and/or

LGBT individuals highlights previous research which shows that these are the main groups who create and consume fanfiction (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992; Jenkins 2006). Like all anthropological research, the subject is sufficiently narrow to provide a snapshot of group dynamics, and rather than consider this a broad collection of all fandom, it is merely a piece of a much larger subcultural puzzle.

The third problem is that of time, namely that the survey ran only seventeen days before collecting over one hundred responses. This trend implies that, with more posts spread to more individuals, the survey would generate hundreds (if not thousands) of responses from *Tumblr's* large user base. Any future survey would need to be run long-term with posts directing users to it circulating every week. This expansion would allow for an expansive amount of data to be collected, which would then be used to identify the larger trends of the fanfiction creators and consumers. I have found no academic research along these lines that has been conducted, although *centrumlumina* (2013) developed an *AO3* census that does a fair amount of demographic analysis.

Results

Demographics

The creators and consumers of fanfiction have traditionally been middle-aged, cisgendered women (Jenkins 1992), but this trend has shifted in recent years because of widespread internet use among Western households. Younger people can post their works anywhere and at any time, which allows their stories to reach hundreds, if not thousands, of individuals across the globe. *Tumblr* itself tends to draw in young women (Pew Research Center 2015), many of whom use the website to express their multi-faceted personalities, including a broad range of topics from political views to television shows.

Because the survey was posted here, the sampling collected does lean more toward this population segment.

The result is that 59% of the individuals surveyed were between the ages of 18-24. Further, individuals age 18-30 accounted for 82% of total responses. Figure 1 shows ages grouped into categories while Figure 2 shows the specific responses given. Answers are young-heavy, and had the survey included individuals under the age of 18, it likely would have encompassed an even larger portion under 25.

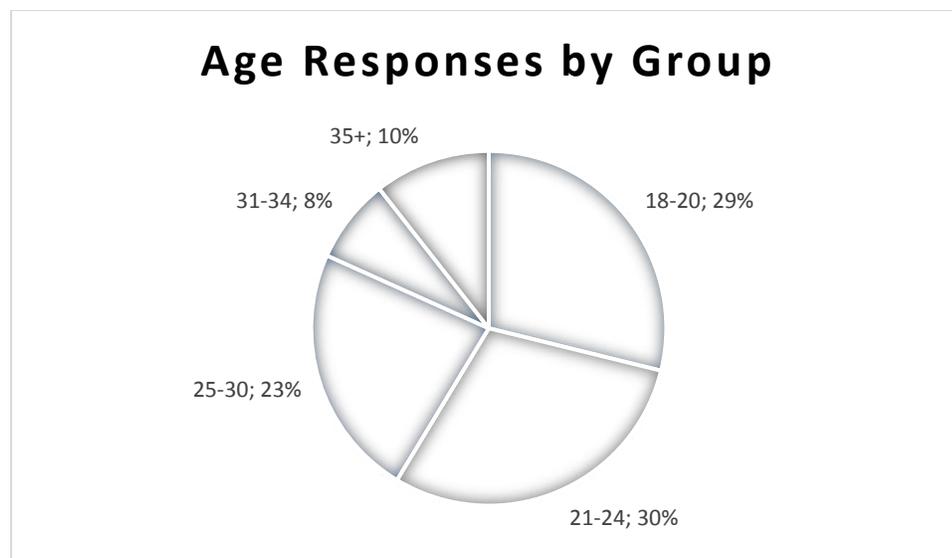


Figure 1. Respondent ages grouped into categories. Most individuals participating in the survey were 30 years old or younger.

Why young adults are more drawn to fanfiction might have more to do with the platform than the actual age composition. Although *Tumblr* users are about equally split between men and women, they are all quite young (Pew Research Center 2015). It is beyond the scope of this project, but identifying online areas where older writers and readers congregate may provide an interesting contrast to the generally young and “internet-savvy” users of *Tumblr* and *Archive of Our Own*.

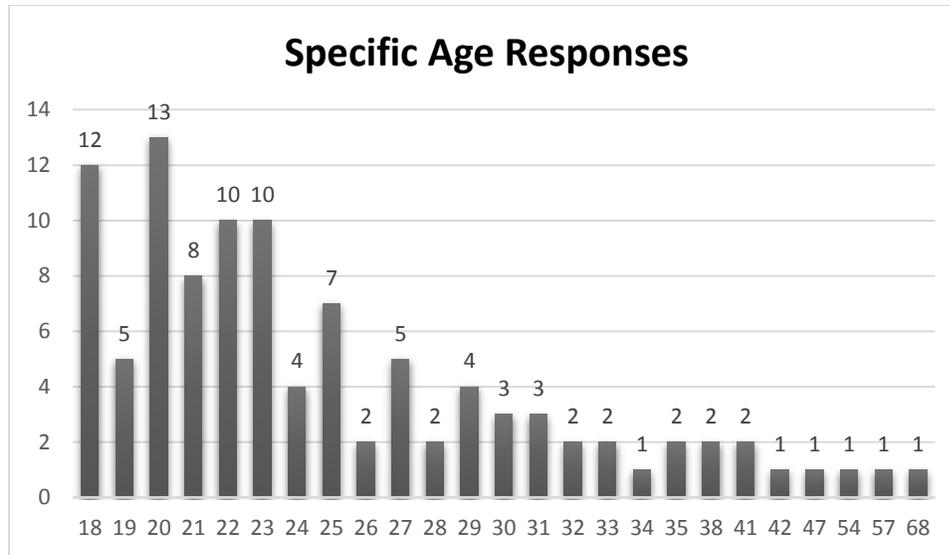


Figure 2. Specific respondent ages, which reflects the normal demographic range for *Tumblr* (Pew Research Center 2015) and *Archive of Our Own* (centrumlumina 2013).

Fanfiction is still largely the domain of women. Of the 102 responses to the question, 85 individuals stated they identified as female, 4 as male, and 13 as other. Because of this, I use woman as a general term throughout the chapters, but this is a simplistic generalization. An increasing number of people state that they do not wish to be seen as male or female. In order to allow the most plasticity in choosing a gender identity in the survey, I provided the three categories below: male, female, and other. Respondents could check only one option, but "other" allowed a space to specify. Figure 4 shows respondent answers in groups based off their most basic response. For instance, a person who identified as transmasculine nonbinary falls into the category of nonbinary despite his specific identifier.

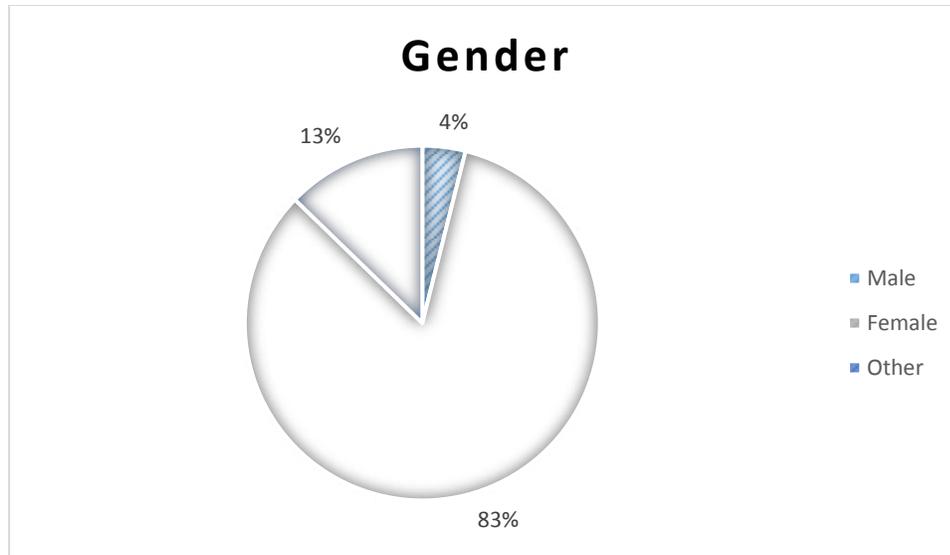


Figure 3. Individuals' responses to the question "What is your gender?" As expected, the majority chose female.

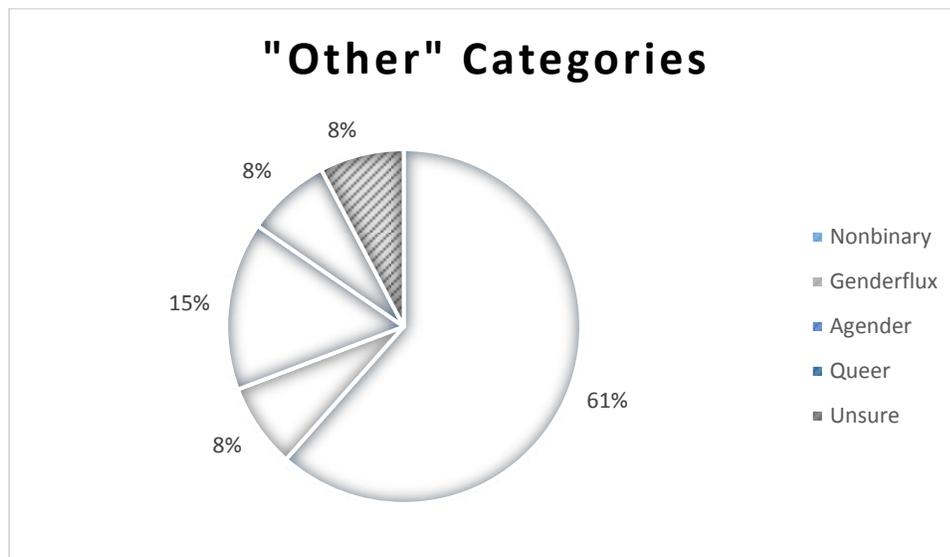


Figure 4. Non-male and non-female gender based on user response.

Understanding the gender split of fanfiction is important in understanding how it is perceived by the dominant culture, which dismisses fanfiction as both childish and feminine. Moreover, because women dominant the field, criticisms of fanfiction are more pronounced than those of other types of fan media (Lord 2015).

The next chapter will discuss the subversive nature of fanfiction and its use as a means to live vicariously through (usually) male characters who are allowed to be sexual, violent, and dominant. Because women are the main creators and consumers of fanfiction, these projections reflect their views on the subjects presented in media.

Overall, the portrayal of cisgendered women as the main participants in fanfiction communities is accurate, but it does leave out nearly 20% of the audience as it focuses people’s attention onto the “femininity” of the hobby.

Questions about country of residence and first language were asked to gauge what cultures people came from. They answer the question “Who writes fanfiction?” with perhaps the clearest answer: English-speaking people from the United States and the United Kingdom. Fanfiction is written in English, and this is largely because the most popular fandoms are derived from US and UK media.

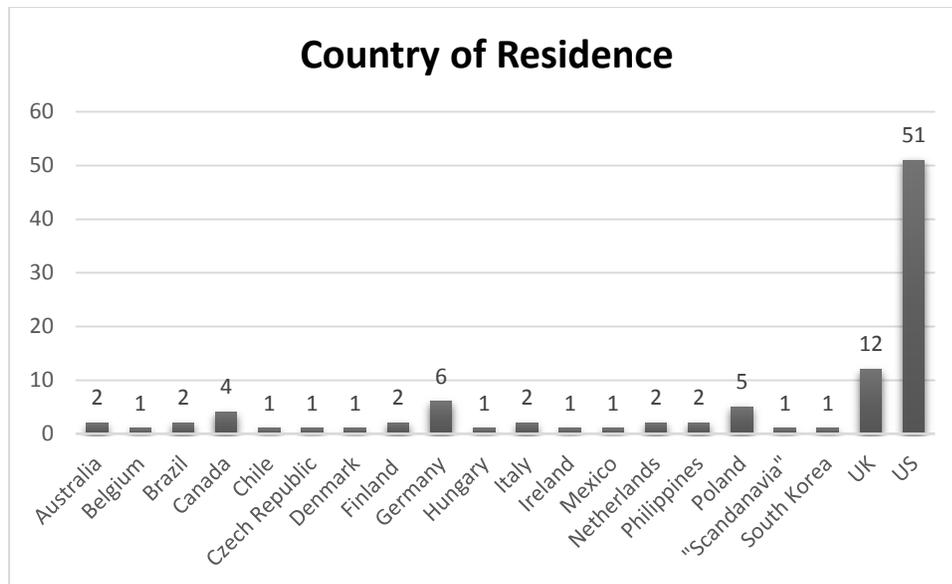


Figure 5. Countries of residence based on user response. Residents who stated they lived in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales were grouped into the category “UK.”

In asking for respondents' first language, I hoped to determine the ease-of-access some people might have over others in terms of media comprehension, and if non-native English speakers were writing fanfiction as regularly as English speakers. Out of ninety-nine responses, seventy stated their first language was English.

Those who read and write fanfiction but are not native English speakers provided a variety of reasons for their use of English in their writing. Beyond being the lingua franca of the internet (and much of the offline world as well), many non-native English speakers use fanfiction as a way of broadening their vocabularies. For them, fanfiction plays a vital role in expanding their ability to understand English. Because they are already familiar with the shows and concepts being presented, it is easier for them to pick up on certain colloquial words and phrases that are not taught in school.

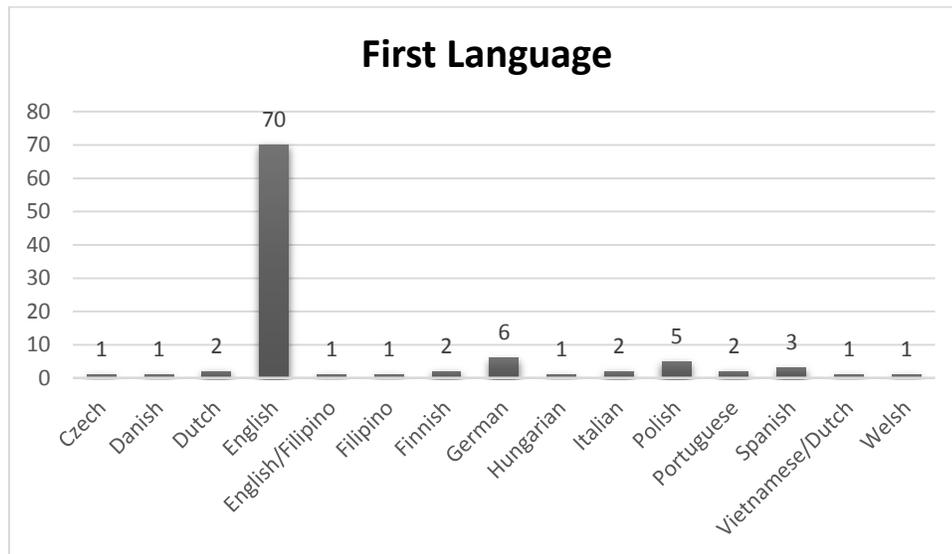


Figure 6. First language based on user response.

Although the scope of this survey is small, it provides a starting point for researchers to further understand the types of people who participate in fanfiction communities. Who the creator-consumers of fanfiction are depends on how they present themselves, both online and off. This data shows that young women from English-

speaking countries dominate the field, and from there we can begin to understand why they choose their media subjects and the methods they use to transform them.

Writing Fanfiction

Before we begin the section on writing and reading pairings (romantic and/or sexual couplings of characters) in fanfiction, it is important to note a few shorthand terms the questionnaire utilizes. M/M, M/F, and F/F refer to the two people involved in the fic. A M/M story features two men as the central protagonist and love interest. This does not mean the characters are gay, only that they are involved with a member of the same sex. While LGBT representation in fanfiction has always been important, it does not mean that every person writes with LGBT issues in mind.

Similarly, a F/F relationship will feature two women and a M/F relationship will feature a man and a woman. The term “multi” is used to reference polyamorous relationships with three or more people, whatever their gender composition. Although the usual assumption for characters is that they are cisgender, many authors are beginning to include transgender or gender nonconforming people in their interpretation of the characters, and these are also represented in the category of “other” or as whatever gender the character identifies as. For instance, a transgender man shipped with a cisgender woman would fall under the category of M/F.

The responses to why people choose to write fanfiction followed two general trends when authors discussed their reasons for writing M/M pairings and their reasons for not including OCs. Furthermore, there seemed to be an overall consensus in the legitimacy of writing fanfiction as a hobby and form of self-expression.

Authors writing about M/M pairings overwhelmed the other categories. Thirty of the sixty-four responses worked exclusively or semi-exclusively with M/M content, and the responses which chose “other” as their preferred pairing noted that they write a variety of pairing types, including M/M. This is compared to the M/F category, which had twelve responses, and the F/F category, which had one. Seven authors said that they did not write romantic relationships, citing either their own lack of sexuality or their want to explore the dynamics of platonic relationships.

As of February 27, 2017, *Archive of Our Own*, one of the most popular websites for posting fanfiction, had over one million works tagged M/M, almost doubling the second largest category of M/F.

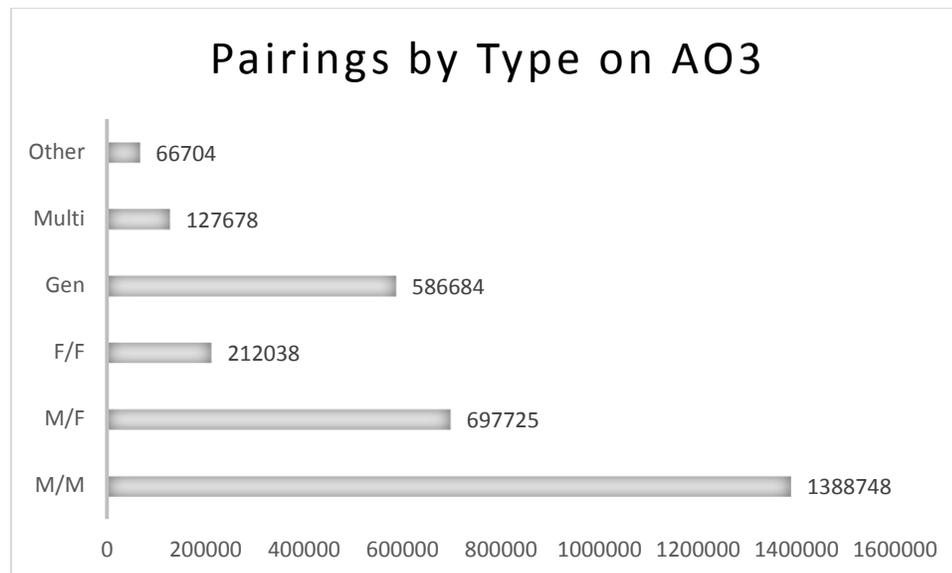


Figure 7. Data collected on 27 February 2017. *Archive of Our Own* is a major network of transformative works. Romantic fiction far outnumbers non-romantic fiction, with male same-sex stories being the most popular to write about.

Why are there so many M/M pieces of fanfiction?

“I’m gay, so writing about gay love is closest to my heart, but since there are so few well-written women/female characters, it’s just easier to write m/m” (Respondent 82).

Authors cited their interest in exploring gay relationships and the overall lack of well-rounded female characters. Many referenced their sexuality in their responses, stating that they preferred to write gay relationships because they identified with them the most and saw LGBT representation lacking in the media they had invested so much time in. Those who chose M/F as their primary pairing type followed a similar logic: because they knew more about straight relationships, they chose to write about them in their fanfiction.

“ Often male characters get more characterization in the source work and it’s easier for me to write them and to get attached to them as couples. It’s unfortunate that F/F pairings don’t appeal to me more to be honest, I’d like to write them more” (Respondent 95).

While quite a few authors mentioned their want to write more F/F relationships, it appears that most view the few women who populate the media they consume as underwritten, which has been named as a consistent problem.

From an outside perspective, however, it might seem strange to place two men in a romantic relationship that is not textually supported while simultaneously ignoring the possibility of inserting a new female character into the fanfiction, either for a M/F or F/F story. An original character might solve the problem of too-few women, and in the eminent works of fanfiction research by Bacon-Smith and Jenkins, the authors they spoke with did indeed try and write more women into the media.

One writer who does create original female characters phrased it well: “Because a lot of these fandoms are lacking in well developed female characters. The women are always ancillary, or a plot device, a princess needing rescue. Real women aren't like that. Real women have character flaws, and usually don't need rescued.” (Respondent 52).

Yet few authors have been successful in meeting the standards set by their female readers, and thus the Mary Sue archetype arose.

Mary Sue is an intelligent, young, and sexy woman capable of doing anything with only the most minor flaws to complicate her impeccable abilities. Any female character can become a Mary Sue or author self-insert, and while the male equivalent does exist, readers seem far less critical of his presence versus that of a Mary Sue.

Survey responses showed authors’ fear of falling into this reader-despised trope, although two-thirds of respondents said they include original characters of some type in their writing.

Writers who do include OCs pointed out that they are necessary as background characters who fill in the holes of a story. If, for instance, a show mentions that the main character has a brother, but that brother is only given a name and never seen, an author might supply him with a personality to write a convincing interaction between him and the main character.

One respondent justified their use of original characters, stating, “I use OCs to fill spaces in the world - everyone deals with countless people in real life, so it is not feasible to fill every role with canon characters. Recently I wrote a story about a character's past, which is left pretty open in canon. I gave him an ex-girlfriend and a best friend. My OCs

are not main characters, but I want them to be as well-rounded as any other character” (Respondent 5).

This type of original character is readily accepted by readers. On the other hand, characters who take center stage and usurp the spotlight of the canon characters are rejected. The hatred of Mary Sues runs deep; most authors are so afraid of inserting themselves into the narrative or creating a character people dislike that they avoid it entirely, and some do not share their works in fear of the ridicule and backlash they perceive others will send because of their original characters.

Other authors do not write OCs in fanfiction because they want to save them for their original pieces—a thought mirrored by readers. “I like concentrating specifically on the characters I already know and love in fanfic. If I wanted to write original characters, I would do it in original fiction” (Respondent 102).

Perhaps the most important area of my survey for the writers of fanfiction was the last section prompting writers for additional comments. The three below represented the majority of responses. Writers write fanfiction because it allows them to express their individuality in a way that gives others near instant cultural access to their inner thoughts. A rewritten fairy tale contains typical archetypes, and shows like *Hannibal* or *Supernatural* fill this same function. Writers do not need to construct a new world and new characters for people to immerse themselves in. Rather, the agreed-upon components make the storytelling process easier and more accessible for fans. It gives people, especially young people, a safe place to practice their craft with others who know the media just as intimately.

Fanfiction to me is a continuation of what humans have been doing for thousands of years: absorbing ideas and remixing them. As with folktales,

we filter works through our own perceptions and reimagine them in new ways, filling in the gaps as we go along. (Respondent 5)

I know a lot of people look down on fanfiction as something geared toward cis straight women, but it's really important for queer representation. There are things I've read in fanfiction that I have never seen once in any other form of media: for example, a story with a trans gay main character, in which the character's body/orientation is never mentioned once. They're trans, they're gay, but the fic itself isn't about either of those things. In mainstream media, that would be like finding a unicorn. In fanfiction, it's just another story. (Respondent 53)

I love to write fanfiction, it gives me a constructive environment to explore and share my creativity with people who like the same things as me! There is such a diversity in what people like, there's a fan fiction for everyone, and my philosophy is, if you are looking for something specific and can't find it, write it yourself! (Respondent 84)

Reading Fanfiction

| <u>Writing Fandoms</u> | | <u>Reading Fandoms</u> | |
|------------------------|----|------------------------|----|
| Hannibal | 12 | Hannibal | 23 |
| Harry Potter | 11 | Harry Potter | 22 |
| Star Wars | 9 | Sherlock | 17 |
| Fallout | 6 | Star Wars | 15 |
| Sherlock | 6 | Marvel | 14 |
| Dragon Age | 5 | Dragon Age | 8 |
| Star Trek | 5 | Fantastic Beasts | 8 |
| Marvel | 4 | Mass Effect | 8 |
| Yuri on Ice | 4 | Yuri on Ice | 8 |
| Avengers | 3 | Fallout | 7 |

It is hard to know what draws people into the genres they choose to read fanfiction of, but in general the more popular a piece of media is, the more exposure it has to a larger population who will want to read more about it. When asked to provide the top three fandoms the user participates in, these were the ten that garnered the most responses. Often, writers will want to read fanfiction for what they are writing about while fanfiction readers would rather see the bigger pieces of media in their fanfiction.

From these responses, there is a clear mix of media types. *Hannibal*, *Sherlock*, and *Star Trek* are live-action television shows; *Harry Potter* encompasses both the book series and the movies; *Marvel* and the *Avengers* are by the same company but can either be the comics, television shows, cartoons, or movies; *Star Wars* is like *Marvel*, and its inherent variety has drawn science fiction fans for decades; *Dragon Age* and *Fallout* are video game series; and *Yuri on Ice* is a recent anime that has rapidly become a favorite among M/M writers and readers alike.

All of these have in common one element: they feature strong male leads whose friendship is easily reinterpreted—or in *Hannibal*'s case, hinted at by the producers.

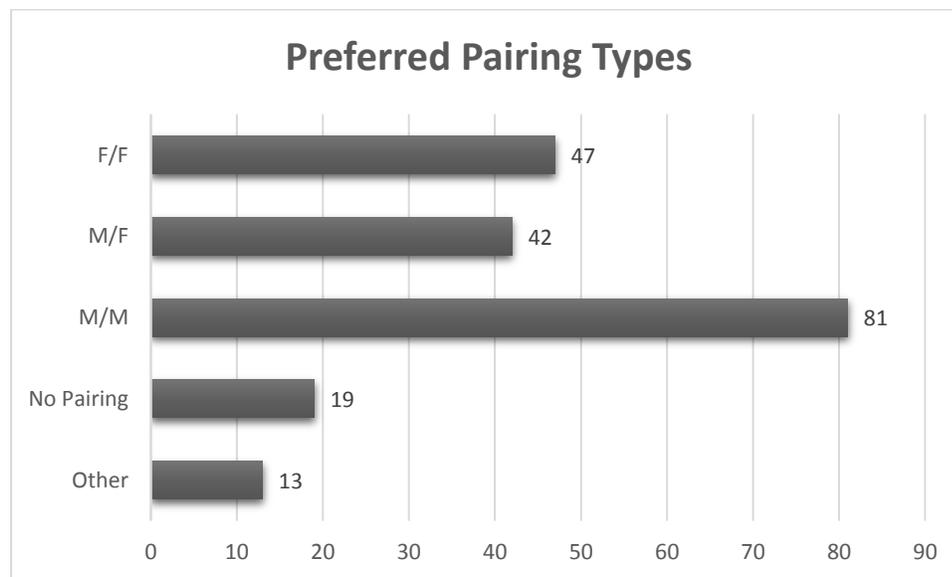


Figure 8. The types of pairings readers search for when looking for fanfiction.

To say that authors, even heterosexual, cisgendered women, want to represent a more diverse population than shown in mass media may be pushing it. There exists a large amount of discourse between fans about the right way to ship, whether or not having so many M/M ships falls into the realm of fetishizing homosexuality, etc.

Even so, the dominance of M/M fanfiction and the want to read more of it goes beyond the criticism. One reader who self-identified as gay stated, “I crave representation for same sex characters” (Respondent 41). Users were given the chance to select multiple responses in answering a question about which types of pairings they prefer. The majority wanted M/M stories. F/F enjoyed the second spot of most desired pairing type even though the fanfiction actually published on *Archive of Our Own* does not reflect this want, reflecting a disconnect between writer wants and reader needs.

One respondent pointed out a fact little spoken of in the broader culture. “I like straight tropes applied to gay couples. It's sort of wish fulfillment because gay people never usually get happy endings” (Respondent 60). The Kill Your Gays trope (TV Tropes Contributors 2017a) is the object of extensive criticism in fanfiction communities, but it does not receive much press outside LGBT circles who engage extensively with media. Because queer characters are often killed off or have unhappy lives dominated by their queerness, it becomes a matter of importance to represent happy, normal lives in fanfiction by taking the (assumed) heterosexual characters and putting them into a same-sex relationship. The lack of female characters drives this M/M dominance. Readers do not want to see original characters; they want to revisit their favorites from the media. Because there are so few women to write about, there are very few stories able to incorporate a functional F/F relationship.

It breaks down simply. Take the Bechdel Test (Sarkeesian and McIntosh 2009), a type of criticism for female representation in movies. In order to complete step one, in which two women talk to each other, there needs to be two women. In movies like

Captain America, where there is only one female lead, the inclusion of F/F relationships composed of canon characters is impossible.

And so, people seeking out representation of LGBT couples but unwilling to read about original characters are left with M/M relationships. If they want to see a happy couple whose life does not revolve around their LGBT status but rather a romance, then readers of fanfiction must seek out stories with M/M relationships.

There are numerous other reasons for the preference towards M/M, some of which we will address later and others which require their own extensive research. It is my hope that an ethnographic project like Bacon-Smith's (1992) research will be conducted with modern fanfiction communities to delve into the individual ideas about M/M fanfiction and what it means for the fanfiction creator-consumers as a whole.

Fanfiction authors avoid the use of original characters (OCs) because it is dismissed by the reading audience. People come to fanfiction expecting to read about characters they have grown to love, characters they want to see more stories about. As one respondent put it: "If I want to read about original characters, I would read original stories, not fanfiction" (12). 77 users responded that they are less likely to read a story if it has an original character. 20 users stated that they were more likely, but many of the comments mentioned the need for an "ambivalent" category—like authors, readers view original characters as an important feature of fanfiction if they are kept to the side and used to bolster the plot. Once they become one of the main protagonists, readers lose interest. They cited the fear that the author has made a self-insert, noting with distaste that this comes with the additional baggage of the OC being a Mary Sue.

Readers are seeking, usually, romantic content between the characters in a piece of media. That these characters be explored in-depth is crucial. An original character, no matter how well done, requires the reader to take an extra step in adjusting to the fanfic, and readers learn, either from their own personal experience or through critiques within fan communities, these characters are usually poorly executed.

In general, people reading fanfiction want the characters they are fans of.

Roleplaying

It's such a good thing and I hate it when people harp on it because RP'ing is like therapy to me. It lets you get out of your own head and just have - fun-. Get the right group of people together and you can make amazing things. It inspires me. It makes me want to write. It makes me want to draw. For a long time, it's what kept me from doing something stupid because I looked forward to it. It's a wonderful experience and everyone approaches it so differently. It doesn't matter if it's script, or paragraph style, it's all good stuff man. (Respondent 35)

While less than a quarter of respondents stated that they roleplay, it still warrants a minor discussion. This form of online play in which people adopt the persona of the characters is a fun way for individuals to improve their writing skills, make friends, and explore developing areas of their personality (Thomas 2006).

As a roleplayer myself, I had hoped this would warrant a larger discussion; however, I believe *Tumblr* may have been an inappropriate starting point. Those few who did answer state they rarely roleplay currently, and the handful that still do state that they do not use *Tumblr* as a space to enact their co-written stories. In future research, I plan on seeking out an active community which specializes in roleplaying in order to delve into their specific variations on the fanfiction format. For now, it is best to note that fanfiction

and roleplaying are mutually exclusive activities that do not rely on one another to function. Not every roleplayer participates in a fanfiction community, and not every fanfiction community member roleplays.

Concerning this form of online friendship and community, I believe it might be worthwhile to focus specifically on play versus fanfiction in a separate, exclusive study. With this in mind, the topics explored in the next chapter will be on author interpretations of media content and not on the interaction between people. While friendship is a crucial element of community formation online, my focus is on the creative works which serve as a locus for the development of friendship rather than the friendship itself.

Chapter 4: Fantasies of Sex, Fantasies of Violence, Fantasies of Power

But the mythy world of folk and fairy tales, of comic book heroes, soap opera characters, and old movies, can also be used by contemporary poets—indeed, those pop-mythology characters are often more effective figures because their significance is more fully a part of our popular culture. ... [t]he idea that the use of myth is limited to such [ancient] figures is to fail to see the possibilities of using material from our own culture. It makes perfect sense for the plays of Euripedes to be filled with Greek legends and for the works of contemporary American poets to be filled with American ones. (Kowit 2007, 93)

In the previous chapter, I posed a question: Does fanfiction treat popular media in terms of myth and legend, that is, does it follow a similar trend as oral and literary retellings of classic tales while utilizing common setting, plot, and character archetypes? This chapter attempts to explore how fanfiction utilizes literary conventions while also taking media and reimagining it as a space where women and queer individuals can tell their own stories through a common symbolic language containing familiar characters.

A few of my respondents noted that fanfiction is an old trend people have been taking part in for a long time. The recent dismissal of it as an art form is, after all, is only due to the rise of mass market capitalism and copyright (see Chapter 1).

Still, there is something different about fanfiction versus the literary reimagining of a story. That *Hamlet* and *The Lion King* share plot elements is no surprise, but one is not fanfiction of the other. They are their own unique entity, bounded by a unique universe with unique reinterpretations of archetypes. Moreover, they conform to acceptable standards of mass media. They have strong male protagonists with female love interests and nefarious villains to be conquered. The difference between them and fanfiction is that, on the surface, fanfiction specifically utilizes the same characters and

settings whereas original works do not. Hidden is the way in which fanfiction calls into question normal social dynamics.

When we think of media, we think of cultural concepts writ large. The more popular a books series or television show is, the more it resounds with the people of the culture. These media reflect the overall qualities that are revered within the culture itself: heroic men, beautiful women, and a normally heterosexual plot which reveals the inherent tension between the genders while exploiting the expectation that men will be the capable protectors of women, who, even if they themselves are capable, are not usually featured as protagonists.

If we take a step back for a moment and imagine our stories as the legends and myths which shape our time, it becomes clear that there is a sacred component to them. Here, fan communities in general (and fanfiction in particular) can be seen as devout worshippers of their favored media. Most members have a large general knowledge of the subject, having read the texts or seen the shows multiple times, and many come together to exchange details they may have missed or discuss fine points (Baym 2010). When a show is cancelled, communities come together to force the show back to life (see *Family Guy*, *X-Files*, and *Hannibal*). Conventions have become a way for large amounts of fans to gather together, dressed in costumes and carting around icons of their favorites heroes (in the form of action figures or posters, fan art or buttons, etc.) to venerate the media.

That the representation of fans as *fanatical* plays into a theme of religious sacredness is almost unavoidable. Indeed, Durkehim's expression of sacred religious totems (here called icons) and rituals mirrors modern fan actions. The image of the wheezing geek admiring his collection of mint-condition comics is how fans are shown to

act; their obsessions with media is treated as the butt of a joke, and their position as masculine losers dismisses a large portion of the actual fan community who are either women or fall outside of the gender binary. When women are shown, it is as the unattractive, overweight person trying (and failing) to fit in amongst the nerd crowd. She is not a true fan, and her presence displaces the male nerd's constructed image of self: as a socially ostracized loser who cannot find a woman because there are no women to be found.

Similarly, the media meant for men is treated with more dignity than the media meant for women. Although genre fiction tends to be treated as non-literary (Walter 2015; Rothman 2014), male genres are given more legitimacy than female ones. For instance, the fantasy series *Game of Thrones* or the zombie horror *The Walking Dead* are celebrated as pop culture favorites, whereas *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *True Blood* never went beyond cult status, despite the fact that they were equally popular. That the former appeals more to a generalized male audience and the latter a generalized female audience does play a role in this. Romance is exclusively for women, whereas science fiction, horror, and fantasy can be split between the sexes. Fan activities done by men are more culturally accepted than fan activities done by women. Though both may be dismissed by the larger culture as childish, video and role playing games have received more positive attention than fanfiction, which continues to be treated as a hobby done by wistful, sexually-unfulfilled women.

This is because fanfiction dismantles two sacred social constructions simultaneously: the heterosexual male hero archetype and the dominance of the cisgendered man in fan communities.

Homosocial to Homosexual

Here I will focus on M/M pieces written by women, although as previously discussed, there are a number of M/F pieces which utilize a female original character as an expression of the author's personality. This topic deserves its own study and is far too large to discuss in a such a confined space.

These types of fanfiction desecrate the two sacred social constructions above, but the former is especially guilty. It turns the heterosexual and homosocial actions of the main male characters into explicitly homosexual relationships and creates a fan community centered specifically on women's sexualities.

Slash represents a particularly dramatic break with the ideological norms of the broadcast material, even as it provides a vehicle for fans to examine more closely the character relationships drawing them to those programs. ... Slash poses complex and fascinated questions about the nature of female sexual desire, about erotic fantasy, and its relationship to media narratives; slash clearly speaks on a highly personal level to the women who read and write it. The features of slash as a literary genre may allow women to explore both their desires for alternative modes of masculinity and their fears about the limitations of contemporary gender relations. (Jenkins 1992, 227)

The male hero is the icon of what is held to be sacred in Western culture. The social attitudes of our culture are reflected in the mass media we consume, and this representation is sacred. The sports star and the daring spy are both icons of Western masculinity all men—whether they be jock or nerd—aspire to.

Women take this icon and impose feminine roles upon it, changing the heart of what it means to be male (dominant and heterosexual), and thus they desecrate the character. They go against the male hero, incorporating un-heroic (feminine) traits into him at the same time as they solidify their place as equal contributors in fan communities.

By doing this, they gain the ire of both Western culture at large and the much smaller nerd culture that exists within.

When women and nonbinary individuals take cisgender, heterosexual male characters (traits that are rarely stated and most often assumed) and change them, they are going against what is held to be normal. This is what it means for fanfiction to be socially deviant. Giving men feminine traits, making men gay, or making any person transgender is abnormal. Taking these icons of masculinity and changing them is inherently an act of transgression against the status quo. Whether it be women exploring their sexual identity or queer people wanting to see themselves in the media they love, it is blasphemous against the sacred masculine. Doing this within the confines of nerd culture draws attention away from the “plight” of the male nerd, sparking a trend of misogyny that has yet to be silenced (see Chapter 1).

Derivative works based off another popular piece of media, even when approved, share some qualities with fanfiction and thus can receive the same type of scorn. Such is the case with NBC’s *Hannibal*, which can be considered a fanfiction of Thomas Harris’ book *Red Dragon*. It manipulates original events to produce an alternate universe wherein Hannibal Lector and Will Graham meet before Hannibal’s incarceration. It characterizes the two men as complementary killers while implying an undercurrent of romance in Hannibal’s actions towards Will (*Hannibal* 2013-2015). Indeed, a tweet by the producer of the show, Bryan Fuller, implies a sexual relationship between the characters (Fuller 2017) similar to how any fanfiction writer would interpret character interactions.

This made *Hannibal* unique in media, and its popularity did not cease with its cancellation. Fanfiction continues to be made about the show despite being off the air, and many of these stories contain graphic depictions of violence, rape, and abuse. Not every fandom has stories with this type of content, however, media in which the sexual dynamic of the male characters is combined with psychological drama produces fanfiction which relies upon the same elements utilized in the show. Fanfiction is meant to be an exploration of the characters. It mirrors the media, and the most popular *Hannibal* fanfiction reflects the dark elements of the show, much like fanfiction of *Blake's 7* did before the internet (Bacon-Smith 1992, Jenkins 2006).

As my survey results show, people are still interested in *Hannibal* fanfiction, and like the majority of fanfiction consumers, this population consists mainly of women who read slash, largely because the implication of romantic and sexual feelings between Will and Hannibal is never dealt with in the show itself. Unlike many pieces of media in which LGBT relationships are ignored entirely, *Hannibal* does contain a loving and fulfilling partnership between two women (Alana Bloom and Margot Verger). A fan must ask herself: why is it that women can be represented as queer when men are not? Why is a lesbian relationship, so often fetishized by men, made canon while a gay relationship is not?

These are not questions I can answer here, but it is clear fans attempt to make sense of them by creating fanfiction which incorporates the relationship that is never enacted. They develop a romantic and sexual relationship between the male characters to explore unmet expectations while making stories that give them a sense of sexual satisfaction.

One complaint has remained consistently circulated through fan communities. Some believe slash fiction sexualizes gay men in the same way men sexualize lesbians. While understandable, I feel it lacks a certain knowledge of the people producing and consuming slash in the first place. This is not a matter of people sexualizing homosexuality, but rather a matter of women sexualizing men. It turns the male gaze on its head, allowing women to objectify men and treat them as equals—by creating a network of stories in which men are the objects of explicit sexual desire. Lezlie Shell, quoted in Jenkins' book *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*, states, "...I view slash as a product of female sexuality, and I'll be frank here [...] slash is an intricate part of MY sexuality and a sexual outlet" (2006, 78).

Sexual content is found everywhere in fan communities. Rule 34, a long-lasting internet meme, explains that "if it exists, there is porn of it" (Nukeitall 2006). This is undeniably true, but it does not account for the other themes of violence, rape, and abuse contained in *Hannibal* fanfiction. Whether set in an alternate universe or expanding the canon stories, fanfiction authors seek to reflect the subtle sickness of the characters by having them act through it.

Hurt/comfort is a common genre in fanfiction. It does not have to be sexual, but in *Hannibal* fanfiction, it often is. Like in the show, Hannibal is the aggressor and manipulator of Will, who eventually succumbs to his abuse and joins him as a killer and lover. Cynthia Jenkins, quoted by Jenkins in *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*, states about the genre: "It is as if the vulnerability of the physical body is being used symbolically to illustrate the vulnerability of the emotional makeup of men. The breakdown of the physical body leads to a breakdown of personal barriers, of emotional defenses" (2006,

85). This symbolism holds true in the show itself, but fanfiction authors create stories in which the hurt/comfort of the show is made sexual, both to examine the protagonists' characterization as well as their own need to understand interpersonal violence.

Sorting the 15,000 works of *Hannibal* fanfiction on *Archive of Our Own* by kudos gives one the ability to see the most well-liked pieces first. *Archive of Our Own* allows a user to give a kudo, similar to a "like" on Facebook, which is then a searchable metric when trying to find a popular piece of fanfiction. In the 15,000 works of *Hannibal*, the tags of the pieces with the highest amount of kudos contains a trend in the tags: sexual dominance and coercion. The idea that women use slash fiction to create a disembodied self through which they can explore themes of sexuality and violence is not new (Jenkins 1992), but *Hannibal* gives women a canon manipulative relationship between two men that delves into the depths of psychological abuse. That they then create erotic fantasies based around these themes is no surprise. These elements allow women to vicariously enact violence and abuse through a masculine identity closed off to them; they can simultaneously be the victim and the perpetrator as they attempt to make sense of the normalized cultural stereotypes that cast them as the victim—never the hero and never the villain.

Women are given two options when writing fanfiction for media: either create themselves through an original female character and risk harsh, often unwarranted, criticism from their peers, or take the male characters and imbue them with new depths by converting homosocial relationships into homosexual ones. To do this, they must rely on character and plot archetypes, retelling the same story again and again by reimagining minute details differently. The interactions between creator and consumer is important in

the formation of the final product. More often than not, fanfiction is initially posted as an incomplete work, and authors will leave a note at the end asking for opinions and advice from their readers.

Cooperative Storytelling

Yang (2015) documented the same process in the markets of Chinese villages. When the researchers would ask someone to tell the Brother-Sister Marriage creation myth, others would join in the telling and add or correct information. In this way, though core of the story remained the same, every new telling resulted in different details. The characters and premise did not shift even as the surrounding description did, and fanfiction writers and readers form a similar type of give-and-take. Writers rely on readers to correct mistakes in characterization or the writing itself, and so although many fanfictions function off the same story core, their auxiliary details remain in a constant state of flux depending on the people participating in the crafting of the story.

This is the folkloric aspect of the fanfiction, and it is not limited to the unpublished authors who explore their fantasies online.

NBC *Hannibal* is another reimagining of the vampire legend. Hannibal and Will are polarized opposites: at one extreme exists Hannibal, a refined man and a killer; at the other lays Will, simple man out to stop killers. Taking Henry's (2006) article on modern vampire stories and the inherent sexuality of vampires, it is clear that Hannibal is the sadistic vampire-made-human that women are taught to swoon for. He is dominant and elegant, and his fixation on Will drives the show forward more than the various serial killers who inhabit each episode. Will's desire to be like Hannibal and to submit to him are frequently commented upon in the show itself, subverting the usual (human) woman

succumbing to (a vampiric) man. Will's fall is inevitable and clear, and his urge to be Hannibal only increases as the show progresses.

Fanfiction made from *Hannibal* takes the pseudo-vampire elements and plays with them. Authors use the dominance and submission of the characters to rewrite the situations between them, and much like all fanfiction, it recreates modern classic plots to test the boundaries of sex, power, and violence through a woman's eyes. Women, who are often the victims of male aggression, have a place in *Hannibal* to interact with their desires to coerce and control. They write stories in which rape is treated as a semi-willing sex act with consent acting as a guideline rather than a necessity—dubious consent is a popular theme. In this way, the stories follow a similar pattern, culminating in a tradition wherein sex is predicated by violence, whether physical or mental. That it is between two men is important; women are able to distance themselves from the acts, and thus they are able to fictionalize their need to exert sexual control over men.

Creating Diversity

To state that women are sexualizing gay men through fanfiction also ignores the reality of queer individuals writing queer fanfiction. Lesbian women have long produced stories about gay men, largely in part because there are not enough well-crafted female characters on screen to allow for developed lesbian relationships. Even now, people who identify as LGBT come to fanfiction in order to see their identities treated as commonplace. A good number of my respondents said that they write characters as gay because they are gay.

This is not because LGBT people are missing from modern media, but rather because they are given unceremonious deaths and unhappy endings. "Kill Your

Gays” (TV Tropes Contributors 2017a) is a toxic trope relied upon by media as it seeks to be more inclusive and diverse without crafting good characters. Usually used for shock value, any show that has an LGBT character killed is likely using this trope as a stand-in for creating an actual dramatic scenario. Rather than present queer characters leading positive lives and participating in fulfilling, loving relationships, the media creators use these characters as a colorful background for the male protagonist. Much like the female character forced into the role of love interest, the queer character (if present) gives the show a false sense of diversity.

Reshaping media means reshaping what media should contain. Fanfiction allows people put into secondary roles a chance to change the Western icon of masculinity. A woman writing herself into the context of a show wants to see a woman like her, complicated with normal faults while being adventurous and sexy. When the female writer changes a male friendship into a sexual partnership, she wants to see the dynamics of a relationship unconstrained by male/female gender roles. An LGBT individual writing a character as queer wants to see themselves in a story that offers the possibility of a happy ending and fulfilling life. They no longer wish to be sidelined and forced to die for dramatic effect—rather, they recycle characters into stories that are more inclusive.

The killing off of unimportant (female and queer) characters has led to a popular trend in fanfiction: the coffee shop AU.

Challenging Violence

Unlike the violence and dark themes explored by some fanfiction writers, this genre contains “slice of life” stories in which characters go about their everyday existence with little to no life-threatening scenarios. If the normal *Marvel* movie has Iron

Man and Captain America fighting off supervillains bent on destroying the earth and all of humanity, then a normal coffee shop AU (or beach AU, college AU, etc.) contains Tony Stark and Steve Rogers flirting over lattes. Any situation that displaces characters into a “normal” reality where the biggest problems are reflective of average people falls into this category.

These sweet and simple alternate universes show a collective need of fans to fight against the over-dramatization of their favored media, and their standardization builds upon common plot setups that are pleasing and sweet to read. Much like a fantasy tale that follows the Hero’s Journey (Campbell 1949), a fanfiction set in a world where the wrong coffee is as disastrous as an alien fleet descending upon New York is an exciting twist on the near-constant misfortune of favored characters.

But when a character’s life is an unrelenting cavalcade of misery, another heaping dose of shit isn’t all that interesting. At that point, a compelling deviation from the norm *would* be said character having a nice day where nothing bad happens. And modern fiction is chock-full of misery porn, so by this logic, it’s no wonder the coffee shop AU is such a popular fanfiction trope. (secularbakedgoods 2016)

This adds another layer to fanfiction’s folkloric qualities. The community, sharing a common interest, comes together to write and rewrite fictionalized accounts of mythic heroes. They use the legends of their time, like Kowitz suggests, to create a substantial number of new stories, all of which cover the same themes (no matter how disparate) and contain the same types of characters.

Women and LGBT individuals do not see themselves portrayed accurately in media, and when they do, they are prone to being killed off to serve as sources of Man Pain (takealittletime 2009; TV Tropes Contributors 2017c). Frustrated by this, fanfiction

authors work to create endless amounts of stories where everyone has a happy ending. Even in fandoms like *Hannibal*, where violence abounds, there are domestic stories in which Hannibal and Will adopt a dog. No one dies, no one is eaten (usually).

One of the main purposes of fanfiction, then, is to take the sacred space of media, represented by the masculine protagonist, and change it to reflect a reality that is ignored or pushed to the side. Women may be the capable heroes, or they may take the male characters and imbue their sexual desires into them. Queer individuals can write the non-heterosexual stories they wish to see, giving themselves a happy ending through the very characters who may otherwise suffer endlessly. Even when the fanfiction is to explore the dynamics of suffering, it is done to distance the creator/consumer of the piece from the real-life consequences of violence. Fanfiction allows people the ability to use their common symbolic language in a way that incorporates the modern sources of legend.

Reworking the same plots allows each individual a chance to test their personal beliefs against the background of the cultural Normal, whether it be the dominance of the heterosexual male in media or in fan spaces.

Conclusion

Online culture is not bounded by geography or the virtual space of the internet. It moves fluidly throughout the offline and online worlds, merging them as digital natives grow more numerous. Fanfiction is a means by which people take their offline culture and reimagine what it means to participate with media. Although this study is preliminary, the ideas proposed within this project should be taken and expanded upon as more knowledge about online culture is gathered.

Each chapter deals with different subjects in an attempt to form a general picture of the people who write and read fanfiction, their expectations from the genre, and the results of creating subversive stories that go against what is considered acceptable. By expressing their desires—whether sexual or social—through fanfiction, creator-consumers are using a shared symbolic language in order to demonstrate to their peers what they feel is missing in their overarching culture.

Fanfiction allows people, especially women, to explore themselves. Publishing their stories online allows for them to find like-minded individuals with whom to speak. In later studies, it is my hope the demographic and anecdotal data collected will provide a basis for forming new questions to ask of the cultures rapidly developing in the virtual spaces of the internet.

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Appendix A: Glossary of Terms

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| Alternate Universe (AU) | A fanfiction written outside of a media's canon setting, e.g., in the everyday world. |
| AO3 | <i>Archive of Our Own</i> |
| Digital Immigrant | A person who did not grow up using computers, the internet, and/or social media. |
| Digital Native | A person who grew up using computers, the internet, and/or social media. |
| Fandom | A group of people with shared interests in a piece of media. These can also be referred to by a specific name, such as a <i>Doctor Who</i> fan being called a <i>whovian</i> . |
| Fanwork | A piece of fan-made media, including fanfiction. |
| M/M, M/F, F/F | Shorthand terms which refer to the type of pairing in a fanwork. |
| Original Character (OC) | A character made by a fan to fulfill a role in a fanwork. |
| Pairing | A romantic and/or sexual relationship between two characters, often not explicitly expressed in the media itself. |
| Roleplay | In terms of fanfiction, a roleplay is two or more people who work together to create a story based off either canon or original characters; this is a generic term and is not exclusive to fanfiction. |
| Seme | The “masculine” role in a male same-sex relationship, often used specifically within the context of a Japanese work. |
| Ship | A non-canon relationship between two or more characters; when people are “shipped,” they are being discussed in terms of their compatibility. |
| Slash | A piece of fanwork where two men are put into a non-canon relationship. |
| Uke | The “feminine” role in a male same-sex relationship, often used specifically within the context of a Japanese work. |
| Yaoi | A type of Japanese manga/anime in which two men are involved in a same-sex relationship, although it is used generally to refer to any male same-sex relationship, whether canon or not. |

Appendix B: IRB Approval

IRB
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
 Office of Research Compliance,
 010A Sam Ingram Building,
 2269 Middle Tennessee Blvd
 Murfreesboro, TN 37129



IRBN001 - EXPEDITED PROTOCOL APPROVAL NOTICE

Tuesday, January 24, 2017

Investigator(s): Kellye Guinan (PI), and Ida Fadzillah Leggett (FA)
 Investigator(s)' Email(s): kag5f@mtmail.mtsu.edu
 Department: Sociology and Anthropology

Study Title: Culture and Community Online: How Fanfiction Creates a Sense of Social Identity by Reshaping Popular Media
 Protocol ID: 17-2124

Dear Investigator(s),

The above identified research proposal has been reviewed by the MTSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) through the **EXPEDITED** mechanism under 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110 within the category (7) *Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior*. A summary of the IRB action and other particulars in regard to this protocol application is tabulated as shown below:

| | | |
|--------------------|--|--|
| IRB Action | APPROVED for one year from the date of this notification | |
| Date of expiration | 1/31/2018 | |
| Participant Size | 100 (ONE HUNDRED) | |
| Participant Pool | Authors and readers on archiveofourown.org | |
| Exceptions | N/A | |
| Restrictions | 18 years of age or older | |
| Comments | N/A | |
| Amendments | Date N/A | None Post-approval Amendments |

This protocol can be continued for up to THREE years (1/31/2020) by obtaining a continuation approval prior to 1/31/2018. Refer to the following schedule to plan your annual project reports and be aware that you may not receive a separate reminder to complete your continuing reviews. Failure in obtaining an approval for continuation will automatically result in cancellation of this protocol. Moreover, the completion of this study MUST be notified to the Office of Compliance by filing a final report in order to close-out the protocol.

Continuing Review Schedule:

| Reporting Period | Requisition Deadline | IRB Comments |
|--------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|
| First year report | 1/31/2018 | INCOMPLETE |
| Second year report | 1/31/2019 | INCOMPLETE |
| Final report | 1/31/2020 | INCOMPLETE |

IRBN001

Version 1.3

Revision Date 03.06.2016

The investigator(s) indicated in this notification should read and abide by all of the post-approval conditions imposed with this approval. [Refer to the post-approval guidelines posted in the MTSU IRB's website.](#) Any unanticipated harms to participants or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Compliance at (615) 494-8918 within 48 hours of the incident. Amendments to this protocol must be approved by the IRB. Inclusion of new researchers must also be approved by the Office of Compliance before they begin to work on the project.

All of the research-related records, which include signed consent forms, investigator information and other documents related to the study, must be retained by the PI or the faculty advisor (if the PI is a student) at the secure location mentioned in the protocol application. The data storage must be maintained for at least three (3) years after study completion. Subsequently, the researcher may destroy the data in a manner that maintains confidentiality and anonymity. IRB reserves the right to modify, change or cancel the terms of this letter without prior notice. Be advised that IRB also reserves the right to inspect or audit your records if needed.

Sincerely,

Institutional Review Board
Middle Tennessee State University

Quick Links:

[Click here](#) for a detailed list of the post-approval responsibilities.
More information on expedited procedures can be found [here](#).

Appendix C: Survey Questions

Page 1

This page will consist of the consent form.

Page 2 – Authors

If you do not write fanfiction, please skip this page and proceed on to Page 3 “Readers.”

How long have you been writing fanfiction?

- Less than 1 year
- 1-2 years
- 3-5 years
- 5-10 years
- 10+ years

What types of media do you write fanfiction for? Check all that apply.

- TV Shows
- Movies
- Books and Comic Books
- Video Games
- Bands/Musicians
- Anime/Manga
- Other

Do you write for multiple fandoms?

- Yes
- No

What are your top 3 fandoms?

What types of pairings do you prefer to write about?

- F/F
- M/F
- M/M
- No Pairing
- Other

Why do you choose these pairings over others? If you don't write romantic fiction, can you give a brief description of your usual work?

Do you write original characters (OCs) for your stories?

- Yes
- No

Why or why not?

What are your preferred websites for posting content? Check all that apply.

- AO3
- Fanfiction.net
- Reddit
- Tumblr
- Wattpad
- Livejournal
- Other

Why do you prefer this/these websites?

If you use multiple websites to post content, can you explain why?

Are there any additional comments you would like to add about writing fanfiction?

Page 3 – Readers

How long have you been reading fanfiction?

- Less than 1 year
- 1-2 years
- 3-5 years
- 5-10 years
- 10+ years

Which websites do you go first when searching for a new fanfiction?

- AO3
- Fanfiction.net
- Reddit
- Tumblr
- Wattpad
- Livejournal
- Other

Why do you use these websites?

How often do you check for new stories?

- Every few months
- Once a month
- Once a week
- Once a day
- More than once a day

What types of media fandom(s) do you read?

- TV Shows
- Movies
- Books and Comic Books
- Video Games
- Bands/Musicians
- Anime/Manga
- Other

What are your top 3 fandoms?

What types of pairings (if any) do you look for?

- F/F
- M/F
- M/M
- No Pairing
- Other

Do you prefer

- Stories that follow canon
- Stories that are alternate universe (AU)
- Crack fiction (i.e., humor stories with little to no plot)
- Erotic fiction (i.e., stories that contain explicit sexual content with little to no plot; PWP)
- Other

Do you prefer

- One-shots (short stories)
- Multi-chapter (novella or novel length works)
- Both
- Other

When searching for stories to read, what do you look for?

If a story has an original character (OC), are you more or less likely to read it?

- More Likely
- Less Likely

Why?

How often do you comment on stories?

- Very Often
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

Bookmark?

- Very Often
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

Like/Kudo?

- Very Often
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

Are there any additional comments you would like to add about reading fanfiction?

Page 4 – Roleplaying

If you do not roleplay, please skip this page and proceed on to Page 5 to complete this survey.

How long have you been roleplaying?

- Less than 1 year
- 1-2 years
- 3-5 years
- 5-10 years
- 10+ years

Do you run a blog for a specific fandom?

- Yes
- No
- Multiple Fandoms

Do you run a blog for a specific character and/or person from the show?

- Yes
- No

Do you run a blog for an original character?

- Yes
- No

What types of roleplays do you participate in? Horror, action, erotic, etc.

How do you choose your roleplay partner(s)?

How long do you expect a response to be?

- A few sentences
- A paragraph
- Multiple paragraphs
- A page or more

Do you plot the roleplay first or let it develop naturally?

- Plot
- Develop Naturally
- Other

Would you rather roleplay or write fanfiction?

- Roleplay
- Write
- No preference

Can you give a brief description of how you got into roleplaying?

Are there any additional comments you would like to add about roleplaying?

Page 5 – Biographic Data and Other Comments

Note to participants: Remember, you can leave any of these questions blank should you feel uncomfortable answering, *except your age group*. You must be over 18 to take this survey.

What is your age group?

- Younger than 18
- 18-20
- 21-24
- 25-30
- 31-34
- 35+

What is your gender?

- Female
- Male
- Other

What is your country of residence?

What is your first language?

Do you have any other comments that weren't covered?

If you would like to be contacted outside of the survey, please leave your email address and/or username below.

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