CAPILANO UNIVERSITY

The Unpopular Culture of Online Fandom and Where to Find Them

by

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in the

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Approval

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Ethics Statement

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this work, has obtained, for the research described in this work, Human Research Ethics approval from Capilano University Office of Research Ethics.

A copy of the approval letter is attached

Dear Louisane Kaniki and Dr. Alaa Al-Musalli,

The Capilano University Research Ethics Board (REB) has reviewed your revised application for the project entitled "*The Biopolitics of Online Fandom and Where to Find Them*."

We are pleased to inform you that your application has been approved.

For your records:

REB Protocol ID: 2025-001-CAPS-KANIKI
Date of Approval: March 13, 2025
Expiry Date: March 13, 2026

Throughout the duration of this REB approval, all requests for modifications to the approved ethical protocol must be submitted using a CapU REB Application for Amendment Form.

If you have any questions about the REB review and approval process, please contact the REB Office at reb@capilanu.ca.

We wish you the very best with your project.

Sincerely,
Capilano University Research Ethics Board

Abstract

This study examines the history of fan culture, highlight online fandom issues: (a) fanfictions impact on diversity, (b) representation in publishing, and (c) the influence of AI on fan practices. Literature in fan studies has yet to engage in race, regulation, and AI discussions within fandom. The popular view that fandom is inherently progressive dismisses the very human behaviours individuals carry into these spaces. The lack of diversity in fiction encourages fanfiction authors to close those gaps with diverse depictions, but fans who enforce the canonical text and its ideologies often dictate what is and isn't allowed. Through an online survey (n = 59) and online interviews (n = 2) this research showcases first-hand fandom experiences in online spaces and explains that fandom, however inclusive, deals with issues often discriminating BIPOC and LGBTQ+ communities. Research suggests acknowledging the lack of representation in fandom depends on authors and dominant fan studies scholars recognizing such issues, which can further promote diversity in publishing. Furthermore, while AI is innovative, it carries both positive and negative consequences on fan content. If authors "do not see colour", how can they understand the issues or concerns of their audiences?

Keywords: Fandom; Fanfiction; Media History; Publishing; Virtual Communities

Dedication

This research is dedicated to the fandoms that are misunderstood and underrated, fandom that were created to represent the niche interests, and to the fans that can only geek out in private. I would like to thank my parents for raising a child that looks to the world with open eyes, fresh ears, and a dedication to learn about the world. To my sister, it is our random conversations about popular culture that brought me here.

Acknowledgements

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List of Acronyms

Check "Thesis Notes" for the full list. There, the acronyms are organized in alphabetical order.

AO3	Archive of Our Own
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AU	Alternative Reality
BIPOC	Black, Indigenous, People of Colour
BWWM	Black Woman, White Man
CYA Literature	Children and Youth Literature
DNF	Did Not Finish
FMC	Female Main Character
LGBT+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer peoples
MMC	Male Main Character
OC	Original Character
CYA Literature	Children and Youth Literature

Glossary

Angst	In fanfiction, emotional and anguishing stories that focus on strong emotions; genres range from dramatic to dark.
BookTok	Online community on TikTok focused on sharing, creating content around books.
Canon	Events that occurred in the original source material (video game, novel, story, etc).
Fanfiction	Or fics, are fiction based off popular culture (people, teams, literature, gaming, TV/film, etc.).
Fandom	Collective following of fans.
Fanon	Fan-created content that is widely accepted by fans.
Fanwars	Online or offline conflicts between different fandoms about various subject matters.
Fluff	In fanfiction, lighthearted, pleasant stories focused on affectionate interactions between characters.
Headcanon	Fans personal interpretations of the source material that are not apart of the canon.
K-Pop	Korean popular music.
Queering	A form of reading between the lines in novels and noting possible queer topics. Most common in LGBTQ+ fandoms and fans
Ships	Romantic pairing of fictional characters who are not officially together in the original source material.
Speculative fanfiction	Fiction based on pre-existing media that explores various possibilities.

Image

Image 1: RDF Television's (2007) *Sherlock Holmes and the Baker Street Irregulars*. Pictured above from right to left are Finch (Aaron Taylor-Johnson), Sherlock Holmes (Jonathan Pryce), and Sticks (Dean Gibbons).

Chapter 1.

Introduction

Among the various forms of fan practices, content curated for and within fandoms, written expression encourages fans to share stories creatively. Fandom refers to the community of fans of popular media (TV/film, books, podcasts) who gather, discuss, share, critique, and celebrate a piece of media with shared understanding (Fielding, 2020, p. 1139). Fanfiction, or *fanfics,* is fiction based on popular media franchises (Kidd, 2023, p. 6) such as people and/or teams, film and television, literature, gaming, etc. In online fandom spaces, fanfiction offers writers a chance to represent both themselves and OCs (Original Characters) in media that previously excluded their representations. Jenkins (2009) defines fandoms as a participatory culture where members are both consumers and contributors of content, artistic expression, and engagement. Online fandoms are escapist networks for LGBTQ+ peoples where all are seen and respected for what makes them different (Stich, 2022, p. 1). Floegel (2022) studied the "deaths" of queer content and texts on social platforms and found that while fanfiction on Archive of Our Own (AO3) is predominantly white, texts produced by BIPOC that go against "white-washed narrative expectations" are more heavily monitored, policed, and critiqued (p. 92). Non-white, heterosexual, European, and American cultures and representations are the models' fandoms focus discussions and canonical texts, excluding those unwilling to conform to popular idea.

Exclusion of diversity and representation in fandom is also found in publishing. Previously characterized as niche, LGBTQ books have increased; 63 titles featuring LGBTQ+ characters were released in 2018, down from 79 in 2017 (Tyner, 2017; HBG, 2021). A study by Huyck and Dahlen (2018) reported that 50% of the titles released in 2018 featured white characters, and Lee & Low (2019) reported that only 11% of books in 2018 were written by BIPOC. The problem is that no matter what spaces BIPOC

occupies in mainstream media, publishing, or fandom, their content and experiences continue to be overlooked, regulated and censored.

While inherently progressive in its conception and public belief, online fandom is also to social influences, such as discrimination, homophobia, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) use. Increasingly used for content moderation, AI is popular for chat bot use , effective in personalizing content feeds and user-generated content but is also prone to human bias. Roselli et al. (2019) found that because AI algorithm systems are embedded with historical data, it is not possible to avoid AI bias. In a Reddit subgroup where various fandom members share their experiences with Wattpad's artificial intelligence system shadow-banning queer content, k-ramuser, a member of the subgroup, says:

> Yall, I checked my stuff and all but 4 pieces of my queer fiction are shadow banned. All but 4. I have over 80 works on Wattpad. 20 are queer. The 50 straight works are completely fine, but 16 of the 20 queer books are hidden. Most of the straight works are far more explicit than the queer ones.
>
> I'm tired. I'm so fucking *tired.* I've been on Wattpad for 2015. I use it daily. I'm like one step from nuking my account right now (I have backups on everything and going to Inkitt.

AI is primarily based on Western languages, cultures, and perspectives, like fandom, create narrow representations on what is moderate content. LGBTQ+ and BIPOC content may be affected by AI bias based on human stereotypes, bias, and attitudes. Fanfiction and fanart are susceptible to replication from AI generators, risking creative freedom and originality. This goal of this paper is to showcase that online fandom is not as diverse compared to popular belief and that the practice of fanfiction is used both as an exclusionary and inclusionary tool for marginalized populations. Then we explain the effect of biopolitical and AI social regulation in these spaces, and we end with highlighting the consequences of limited diversity in publishing and its impact on fandom and fanfiction.

Chapter 2.   Literature Review

2.1. The Fandom Space and Art of Fanfiction

Fan culture and fanfiction can be traced back to 18th century England. Following the final adventure and death in *The Final Problem* (1893) of the fictional character Sherlock Holmes, both author Arthur Conan Doyle and character amassed a following from the English public, who had grown more literate following the Industrial Revolution. By 1934, The Baker Street Irregulars (BSI), a literary society based on Sherlock Holmes and the first recognized fandom, was founded in New York City. Entrance into the society was invite-only and members were only known by novel-based names which appeared in the series (Faye, 2012; Kaska, 2014). Early fandom activities included "the game" where members, who share the belief Holmes and Watson were real-life people, solve inconsistencies, or plot holes, in the novel series. Since 1946, BSI has released the Baker Street Journal, a collection of speculative fanfictions fantastical or imaginative aspects of the series. Across the 20th century, prominent writers, journalists, and academics would join the fandom, which would influence the founding of sister organizations across the United States and into Canada. By the 1960s, fan culture had expanded into various forms of media. Jenkins in *Textual Poachers* (1996, p. 10) describes the negative stereotyping of *Star Trek's* Trekkies from the 1960s to 1990s who, unlike the distinguished image of the BSI, were regarded and reported by the media "brainless consumers" who were socially devoid of intimacy, awkward, feminized, and unable to discern fantasy from reality which came after star William Shatner's 1986 appearance on *Saturday Night Live.* Gong (2022) found across popular fandoms in the 1990s, fans were characterized as radical, out of control, and challenging: martial arts fans were seen as fetishistic, on top of real-life martial artists debating against the arts fandom following. The harshness from mainstream society forced 1990s fandoms to be selective in order to preserve the values of 'the fan': in-person and online fan clubs, often on Yahoo and Usenet were monitored to ensure 'real' fans joined and mailing lists

determined whether or not fans would receive fanzines. The emergence of social media, for most fans, changed the exclusivity of fandom in the coming century.

Jia et al. (2021) examines the impact social media has in fans and found that rather than being passive consumers, with the wide accessibility of platforms like Instagram and TikTok, which are marketed to younger audiences, fans are active producers in pushing fan culture practices – merchandise, collectibles, photo cards – into mainstream society that can positively affect the economy. A great example of this was Taylor Swift's "The Era's Tour" which in 2024 the CBC reported to have generated an estimated $439 million dollars between Toronto and Vancouver. Middlemost (2022) found that older fandoms that age alongside their central media/figure and relevance highs and lows, remain relevant with younger fans creating memes; the memeification of Keanu Reeves after the release of *John Wick* (2014) by new fans between 17-25 years of age reinvented his public image as an ordinary, private man outside acting. Using social media, new and younger fans are not only making fandom spaces younger and socially adaptable but sharing content and ideas to wider audiences which can further increase consumption, influence marketing strategies, and validate their experiences. A value many fandoms, but not limited to music and sport fandoms, carry is the inherent need to compete with other fandoms to assert the dominance of their central figure and/or media. Fanwars in the K-Pop fan community have increased with the introduction of social media in the 2000s; then-Twitter and online forums offered wider spaces to engage in arguments and attacks. We can argue that BTS's ARMY, whose fans ages range from late-teens to early-twenties, are known for their hostile fan-war activities with other K-Pop and international music fandoms, arguing their idols' position as the "best global boy band". MCU and DC Comics, although pitted against one another in mainstream media, are rather lighthearted towards each other across discussion forums and have no negative perception of the other (Havard, 2020). Fandoms provide fans a space to be passionate, dedicate mental and emotional involvement into their practices, and exchange experiences with like-minded people.

On AO3, the most popular tags (genres) in 2024 were Fluff, Angst, and Alternate Universe (AU). Where fluff is soft, wholesome and feel-good, angst focuses on drama, emotional pain, and trauma. AU takes stories either to a different timeline or period from the original (canon) story. This is done to for authors to change the events for characters that align with their interest. An example is *Avengers: Endgame* (2018) and Tony Stark's death. Where many fans did not agree with the decision, AU fanfiction can circumvent that by positioning Stark and other Avengers in an alternate world where Thanos does not exist. Character pairings (ships) unexplored in the official canonical fiction (canon) can be unpacked and uniquely coded in fanfiction, making the work "fanon" (fan-created content widely accepted by fans). In *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019*,* HBO), the on-screen relationship between Jaime Lannister and Brienne of Tarth diverged from its canon-counterpart. For disappointed or dissatisfied, viewers, fanfiction authors could explore the "what-ifs" and write their own ends to the story.

Mirroring academics in fan studies, representation in fandom-related content lacks diverse representation. In *Where We Are on TV* (2024, p. 10), GLAAD reported that during the 2023-2024 season of 454 series regulars, only 39 are LGBTQ. Including 25 recurring characters, the number increases to 64 across the top five broadcasters in Canada and the United Staes: ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, and The CW. This is a significant decrease from 87 characters between 2022-2023 and 141 characters between 2021-2022. If media lacks diversity, the same may follow in fandom. While fanfiction can offer new representations of canonical and original characters, if they are not engaged with, algorithms and floods of content will override them. Both before and behind the camera, racial diversity slowly continues to climb and drop. McKinsey and Company (2021) reported the underrepresentation of Black talent in film and television. Between 2015 and 2019, of 89 lead or co-lead talent in films, 11 were Black (p. 5). Off-screen, of the 94 Directors, Producers, and 96 Writers, only 6, 6 and 4 were Black, respectively (p. 5). Films and TV are more likely to include Black characters if production includes a Black director, which is 42%, and a Black writer at 73%.

Pande (2018) examines race in fan studies and questions the lack of acknowledgement that "the fandom" or fangirl has historically referred to US and UK contexts, which are composed of middle-class and cisgender women. Non-white fans are only recognized when their presence either disrupts normative operations or when their ethnic identity becomes an issue. An example is the fictional character Annette in Netflix's *Castlevania: Nocturne* (2023—present). In the canonical game, Annette is a White woman and fiancée of the MC (Main Character), Richter Belmont, who ultimately falls into the damsel-in-distress trope when she is kidnapped by Dracula, where she can either be saved by the MC or turned into a vampire. Unlike the source material, Netflix adapted Annette into an Afro-Caribbean woman, a former slave born in Saint-Domingue, has earth-related magic, but follows canon in being Richter's love interest. Many discouraged fans voiced their outrage with the change across Reddit and questioned the need for a Black character, some suggested a 'woke' agenda was behind the race-swap, while others shipped Richter with other female characters.

This does not recognize LGBTQ+ fans of colour, who are stuck at the intersection of their social identity and race. Because White privilege equates whiteness as central to social identities, is the norm in media representations and daily interactions across North America, whiteness has also become the center of LGBTQ identities (Logue & Rwigema, 2014). Alike in mainstream society, when BIPOC fans discuss race/racism within fandom, they are "creating discomfort" for those unwilling to open discussion space and "destroying fandom" for what it represents: freedom, feminism, and queerness. Pande uses the term "fandom killjoys" (Kidd, 2023, p. 5) that describes someone who has the intention to "threaten the invocation of a broadly inclusive, woman-centric, and queer-coded community". If BIPOC audiences do not see their representation, BIPOC people are less likely to be represented. Nielsen (2024) found that Black audiences spend 81 hours a week consuming media (p. 2), more than any identity group, and that 68.5% of Black American audiences want to see more representation of their identity group (p.4). In the *Hollywood Diversity Report* (2025), UCLA reported that 25.2% of lead actors in theatrical films were BIPOC, compared to

74.8% who were White (p. 13). Characters with physical immobility's, however, were represented at 8.7%, compared to the US's disability population being 26% (p. 14). The lack of representation has the potential to discourage viewers from seeking relatability in mainstream media, impacting self-esteem and feelings of marginalization.

2.2. The Effect: Politics and Representation Regulation of Fandom

Duggan (2022) examines the trans and queer reading practices within the *Harry Potter* fandom and how it disagrees with dominant exclusionary alignments of representation. Within the Potterheads fandom, different groups read the text differently; queer and LGBTQ+ audiences read the silences, subtle cues, and lack of information differently to non-queer audiences, which is known as "sensitive reading". Many queer fans have regarded the titular character as queer and shipped Potter with Draco Malfoy even though both characters sexual identities have not been explicitly mentioned. Reading into the gaps mirrors the practice of "queer reading" (p. 152) or queering, coming from queer theory, is a is a strategy that looks at media from a queer perspective and deconstruct heteronormative assumptions. It was developed due to queer topics being seen as taboo and never fully discussed/written. Where queer reading may seem like it ignores the primary text, Doty (1993) and Tosenberger (2008) argue that queer reading focuses on the subtextual, or surface-level queer elements. Fanfiction allows queer readers to engage in writing based on their own interpretations. In the Potterhead fandom, queer reading combats Rowling's own vision and politics in her texts—politics that are less progressive than her mostly female and prominently LGBTQ fanbase.

In collaboration with educators, students, authors, publishers, and advocates, PEN America released a report in 2016 that explored the pattern of book bans and the subsequent decrease of diversity in CYA publishing. Books pending banning featured racialized characters, feature LGBTQ+ topics, and discussed social issues within the United States and around the world. Featured books on the ban list include *The*

Handmaid's Tale (1985) by Margaret Atwood, *Nineteen Minutes* (2007) by Jodi Picoult, and *Thirteen Reasons Why* (2007) by Jay Asher. In a 2019 survey, Lee and Low (2019) found that 84% of publication employees were White, while 8.4% were Multiracial and Asian/Native Hawaiian, 6.3% were Black, and 4.7% were Hispanic. If the bodies within publishing lack diversity, how can audiences be assured that texts produced reflect their diverse compositions? In 2023, EdTrust reported that across 300 CYA texts they examined, White authors and character were more prevalent (80%) than any authors of race or ethnicity; characters of colour were often one-dimensional and had limited agency; when social issues were mentioned, histories were "sanitized" or were disconnected from the reality of the situation (p. 11).

In the first week of March 2025, a review of Sophie Lark's *Bloody Heart* trended across TikTok's BookTok community. Alfie on Goodreads left a review on August 14, 2024 that says:

> HARD DNF at 66% -- you got me f*cked up if you think I'm going to continue a BWWM romance where it has this line:
>
> He can be my master and I'll be his slave, if that's what it takes to get him back again.
>
> And then proceeds to have the BLACK FMC strip bare, bent over, and have her whipped with a belt. Who tf green lighted this crap? Who read that line and was like "oh, the girls will love this" I'm so disgusted and disappointed because I was really enjoying this book up until that BS line. Auto DO NOT BUY author.

Lark, a White transgender woman, wrote a BWWM (Black Woman, White Man) romance story where, in an intimate scene, the Black FMC (Female Main Character) allowed herself to be whipped and regarded as a slave while the MMC (Male Main Character) whipped her. This caused controversy across BookTok, Instagram, and YouTube when many women of colour condemned the depiction of violence and commented their displeasure of Black female characters equating themselves to slaves. Soon after, social media users found more alarming quotes in Lark's upcoming release, *Sparrow & Vine* from its pre-release:

"But shouldn't there be a crew of people with questionable work visas picking these grapes for us?"

"It was extremely unexpected. Like an alliance between Israel and Palestine, or cats and dogs."

Due to the backlash, Lark's publisher, Bloom Books, withdrew the series' scheduled April 2025 release and in her apology, Lark mentioned she ignored publishers' recommendation she remove the offensive lines. Since the community grew popular in 2020, #BookTok has gained 36 million videos, which have accumulated over 200 billion views (Yale Daily News, 2024). This controversy brought attention to the lack of diversity discussion, the prevalence of stereotypes in books popularized on BookTok, and whiteness in the publishing industry. De Melo (2024) examined that White female creators and authors within BookTok achieve higher achievement and fame than their Black counterparts, and that there is a lack of racial and sexual-orientation diversity. If popular authors like Colleen Hoover, who has a list of upcoming book-to-film Hollywood adaptations, do include racially and sexually diverse characters, they often receive bad treatment by other characters, authors, or readers. There is a lack of cultural depth in racially and sexually diverse characters, which negatively affects LGBTQ+ youth who rely on BookTok for queer literature, resources, and media excluded in mainstream media. It was through BookTok that Black creators shared their stories and experiences with a discriminatory publishing industry, but the community has now drowned out their voices. Furthermore, BookTok can influence readers into popularizing certain books, as shown in bookstores. The "romantasy" genre, a mix of romance and fantasy, originated from BookTok after creators emphasized romantic storylines in series such as *A Court of Thorns and Roses* by Sarah J. Maas and *Fourth Wing* by Rebecca Yarros. We can say a common theme in fandom, fanfiction, and publishing burdens marginalized communities: that lack of BIPOC or LGBTQ+ representation within these spaces perpetuates their exclusion, leading to stereotyped or biased portrayals by the dominant social group, heterosexual White peoples.

Bias is not reserved for humans alone. AI agents and algorithms are both an increasing positive and negative in fandom. Sneddon (2024), who supported in launching TikTok across Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, explains that AI promotes community, interaction, identity, and self-expression. In 2023, musician Grimes invited her fans to use a computer-generated version of her voice, GrimesAI, in their music. AI is beneficial to brands and social platforms algorithms in collecting user behaviour information to cater specialized content on their feeds. AI art generators can produce landscapes, characters, architecture, and designs for fanfiction authors who are unable to pay artists for commissions, and provide concept art for artists for projects, including book covers, character cards, or banners.

What is missed, however, is that AI is not fully accurate and may be influenced by human bias. When Tumblr's rules updated in December 2018 to no longer permit adult content, it stated that a mix of human and machine moderation would identify remove impermissible content. An issue arises when identifying content. For users exploring their sexual and gender identities, Singh (2019) uses an example where AI could wrongly identify images of female breast and remove that content without understanding context, unlike human moderators who would investigate its background. The images could discuss gender-confirming surgeries, in this example mastectomies, or a guide to breastfeeding. Abbas (2025) addresses that common AI systems are modeled by Western cultures, languages, and perspectives, which may result in algorithms being biased against other global populations, or AI bias. Across Tumblr and Wattpad, gender and sexually diverse content face higher scrutiny and monitoring from AI algorithms which are trained to moderate content that goes against their rules. Platforms that were once escapist spaces for diverse fans are now suppressing audiences that need their resources to not only validate their experiences, but for some, to survive.

We can say every person seeks community and engage in both general and niche interests. Ramler (2021) defines the term "queer usability" as the anticipation of marginalized communities on user-based social platforms. In the wake of political

agendas converging on non-binary identities, social platforms should prepare for diverse audiences. As long as the world remains multicultural and culture spans continents, online fandom and fanfiction will continue to be resources fans use to connect, share, and strengthen their culture.

Chapter 3.   Methodology

Data collection for this study was divided in two sections: an online survey and online interviews. Data collected were both qualitative and quantitative.

Participants for the research were recruited from Tumblr, Facebook, and Reddit fandom communities. These platforms were selected because they features support large gatherings of online; Tumblr Communities is a feature similar to Facebook Groups, which can host an unlimited amount of fandom members Existing Tumblr and Facebook accounts were used, while a new Reddit account was created for this project. Some online communities focused on televisions shows the *Arcane* (2021-2024, Netflix) and *Bridgerton* (2020—present, Netflix), four focused on fanfiction authors – one specifically on Black fanfiction, one hosted a queer book club, and one focused on Black female users. As *Arcane* features a cast of LGBTQ+ characters, it was hypothesized that most participants from this fandom will identify as LGBTQ+. After analyzing posts, comments, and language used on posts by members, members of this fandom range from mid-teens to early forties, are artists, and are college/university educated. Members of the *Bridgerton* fandom seemingly ranged in age from late-twenties to late-sixties. Members of the fanfiction author communities seemed to be diverse in age and backgrounds, but with the use of English, were mostly assumed to be based in North America.

Six communities were found on Tumblr, two on Facebook, and one on Reddit. Recruitment notices were posted to all fandom pages containing the background of this project and that encouraged users to take a survey, which was hosted on Google Forms.

The idea that certain individuals with certain influences, appearances, and followings carry different perspectives of fandom into the community.

3.1. Online Survey

Participants (n = 59) were asked to fill out a survey that took an estimated amount of 10 minutes. The purpose of the survey was to understand fan experiences within online fandom and what popular social issues affect their spaces. The survey was anonymous so no identifiable information was asked nor could connect participants responses. Additionally, questions allowed participants to reflect on their various online fandom environments and the effect of fanfiction fan practices has on their identity. Seven questions were asked from participants about their age, fandom participation, and current issues of diversity, representation, or bullying are found in their fandoms. Questions were framed to ask participants how they view their fandoms and whether or not they feel excluded or discriminated due to their identities. Half of the questions were formatted using the Likert Scale to measure attitudes and representation opinions fans held about their fandoms. Three short-form questions and one long-form were used when asking participants about their fandoms and preferred platforms. Because fans are not reserved to just one community, keeping general questions open-ended would allow the data to navigate and evolve the research questions.

A limitation found in the survey is the bias to Tumblr. Due to the platform's highest age demographic ranges between 18-24 years of age, was the first platform and mostly used platform to search for participants, most of the participants would be young people, which would exclude older fan generations. Another limitation was not asking participants their racial, gender, or sexual backgrounds; excluding more demographic questions, other than age, was done to avoid misinterpreted bias in the framing of the survey and possible chances of discrimination to participants. Even though the survey was short, understanding that fandom members value privacy and discretion influenced the lack of personal demographic questions.

3.2. Online Interviews

To further explore in-depth fan experiences in online mediums and the impact fanfiction has on their experiences, 30-minute individual online interviews (n = 2) were conducted sequentially to the survey over Zoom. At the end of the survey, a recruitment banner invited participants to email the investigator for a consent form and further information to be discussed. These interviews were audio-recorded then transcribed using Otter.ai, which was attended for close accuracy. The transcripts were sent to the interviewees to ensure consent and whether the information shared was accurate. This feminist model stance of interviewing was followed. This model encourages interviewees to treat participants as close friends (Tracy, 2013, p. 144), prior to the recording, interests in fandom and fanfiction where shared between the principal investigator and interviewees. Due to the survey being anonymous, participants were asked to share at least one of their fandom communities or interests. Interviewees were asked about their level of engagement in fandom, the different practices they take in, and how fandom has changed their in-person and online environments. At the end, participants were asked to share the titles of fanfictions that resonated with them to perform a content analysis on.

A limitation for the interviews is the small sample, in comparison to the surveys. Because they were elapsed for thirty minutes on Zoom, once the time had finished, the meetings were shut down, cutting off the participants final answers and/or remarks. Additionally, all two participants were based across North America, which excluded non-Western experiences in online fandom.

Chapter 4.   Findings

Below are the findings from the surveys and interviews conducted, with emphasis on fandom culture, cultural clashes, and social issues affecting fandom.

4.1. Surveys

4.1.1. Age demographic

The only demographic question asked for participants ages. In Figure 1 below, 66.1% (n = 39) of participants are aged 19-24; this supports the idea that fandom demographics across social platforms are getting younger. This was followed by 22.1% (n = 13) who are between 25-34 years of age; this coincides with the rise of fandom culture in the 2010s when these participants ranged from mid-teens to mid-twenties. Those aged 35-44 and 45-54 are tied at 5.1% (n = 3), which leads to the minority of the same, participants aged 55-64, who responded at 1.7% (n = 1). 0% (n = 0) of participants responded being 65 and over.
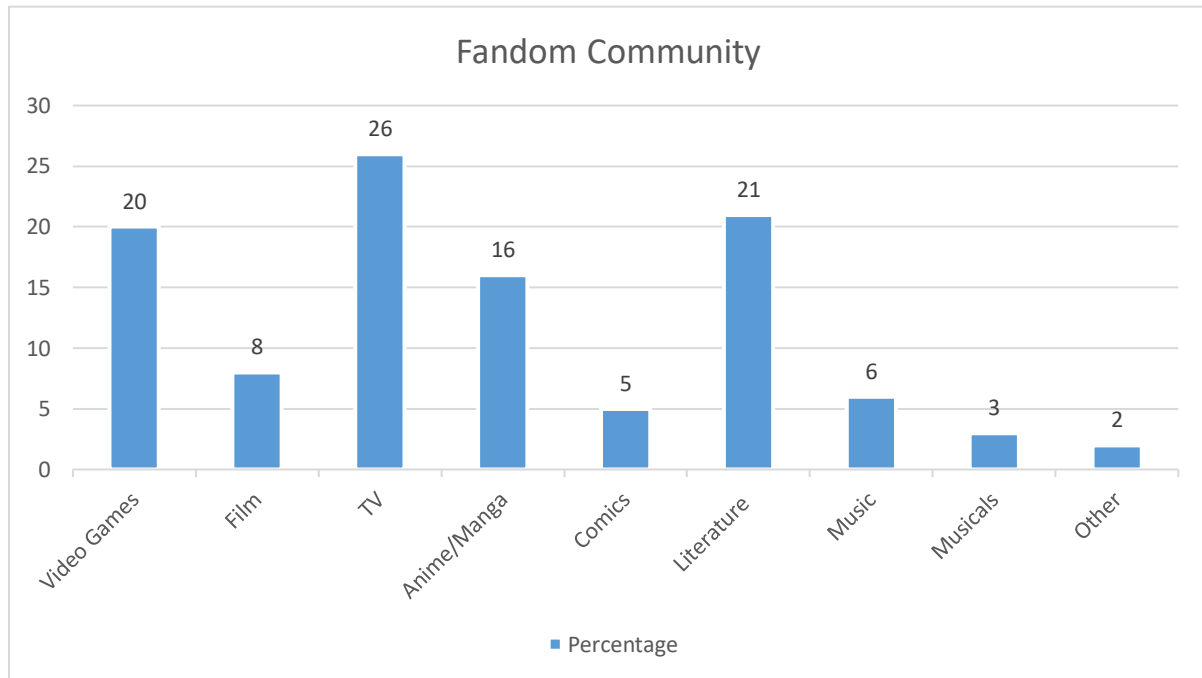
Figure 1: Age Demographic
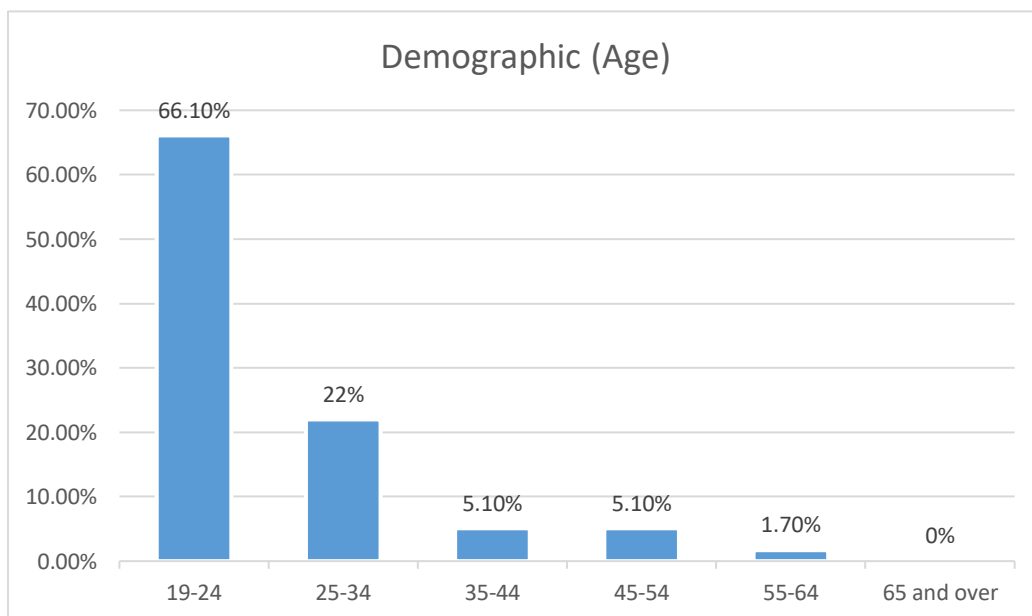
4.1.2.   Fandom community demographic

When asked to share what fandom communities they are apart of in Figure 2 below, participants shared both general and specific fandoms. Where participants shared multiple fandoms in their responses, each media was counted as an individual fandom.

Figure 2: Fandom Community

26% of participants are apart of TV fandoms, and of this, the most common franchises were *Arcane* (42%), *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (15%), and BBC's *Merlin* (7%). The next-highest fandom was Literature at 21% with the top books being *Harry Potter* (38%), *Percy Jackson* (23%), and both the *Lord of the Rings* and the *Hunger Games* (9%). The third-largest fandom was Video Games at 20% with varying franchises, such as Destiny 2, Blades and Banners, and Five Nights at Freddy's. Similar to video games, Anime/Manga (16%) fandoms varied from series, but *My Hero Academia* (25%) and *Naruto* (18.75%) were most common. 8% of participants in Film fandoms, the most common are science-fiction subfandoms, such as Star Wars (25%). 6% followed Music fandoms, which can be for either solo artists or groups. 5% of fans are part of Comic fandoms, the main two being Marvel (60%) and DC Comics (40%). 3% of participants were apart of Musical fandoms, but none specified which productions. Finally, 2%

responded with fandoms that did not fall into any categories: 1.7% are apart of the Creepypasta fandom, a community that share horror-related and altered images, videos, and legends, while another 1.7% responded as being apart of social media fandoms on Reddit, Tumblr, and Discord.

4.1.3. Platform preference

When asked to share which platforms they most use to engage with fandom in Figure 3 below, many participants responded with multiple sources in their responses. The most frequently-used platform is Tumblr, which 36% of participant use. Its blog-interface can host the most fan content (fanfiction, art, cosplay, edits, etc.). Not far behind is AO3 which 27% of participants reported using, whose tags organization and customization options support niche preferences. 8% responded as to using Discord and 7% to Reddit, which are both online forum-discussion platforms. 5% responded they prefer Instagram; its algorithms supports audio and visual content. 3% of participants responded to using Wattpad, Pinterest, and X, all respectively. Second-to-last, 2% of participants responded as to using Bluesky, an alternative of X, as their preferred fandom platform. Lastly and similarly, at 1.7% each, the least preferred platforms were reported being YouTube, Fanfiction.net, streaming services, Kindle, and Goodreads.

Figure 3: Fandom Platform Preference
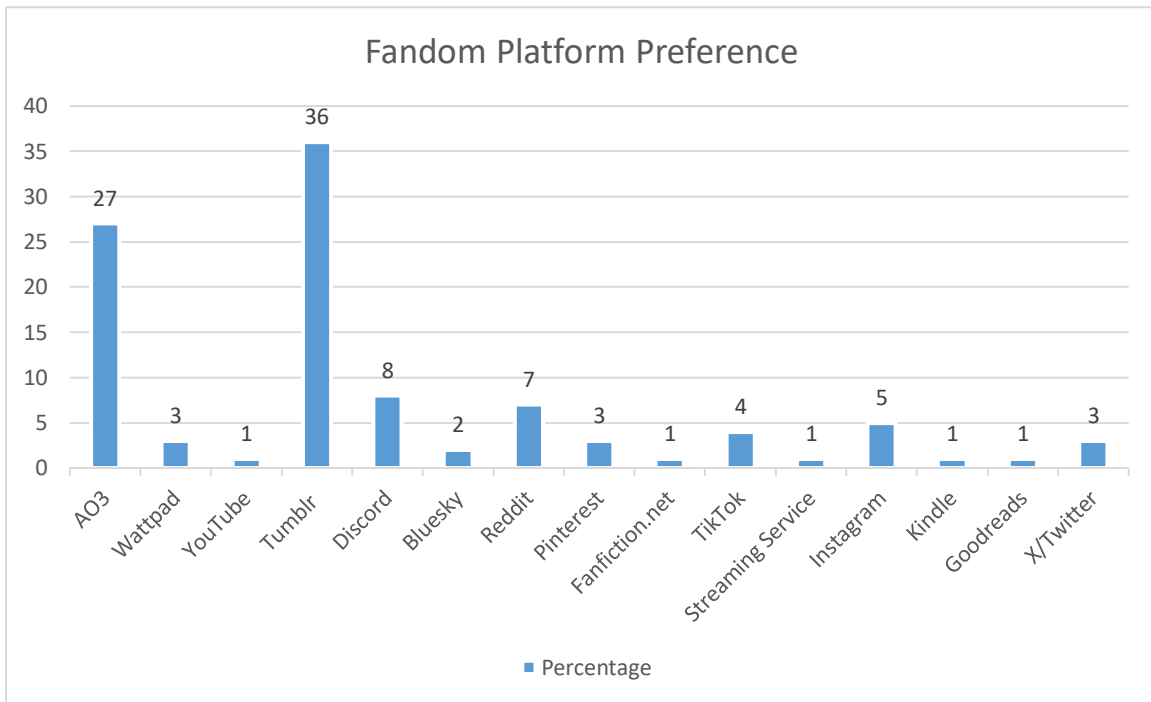
4.1.4. Fandom inclusivity

When asked to respond how inclusive they regard their fandoms as, on a Likert Scale from Very inclusive to Very Exclusive, 55.2% (n = 32) see their fandom as Inclusive. 25.9% (n = 15) of participants responded Somewhat, which shows some see both the inclusive and exclusive qualities of their fandoms. 12.1% (n = 7) of participants responded that their fandoms are Very Inclusive. 3.4% (n = 2) of participants responded that their fandoms are Exclusive and Very Exclusive, respectively, which could be due to undesirable experiences in these spaces.

Figure 4: Fandom Inclusivity
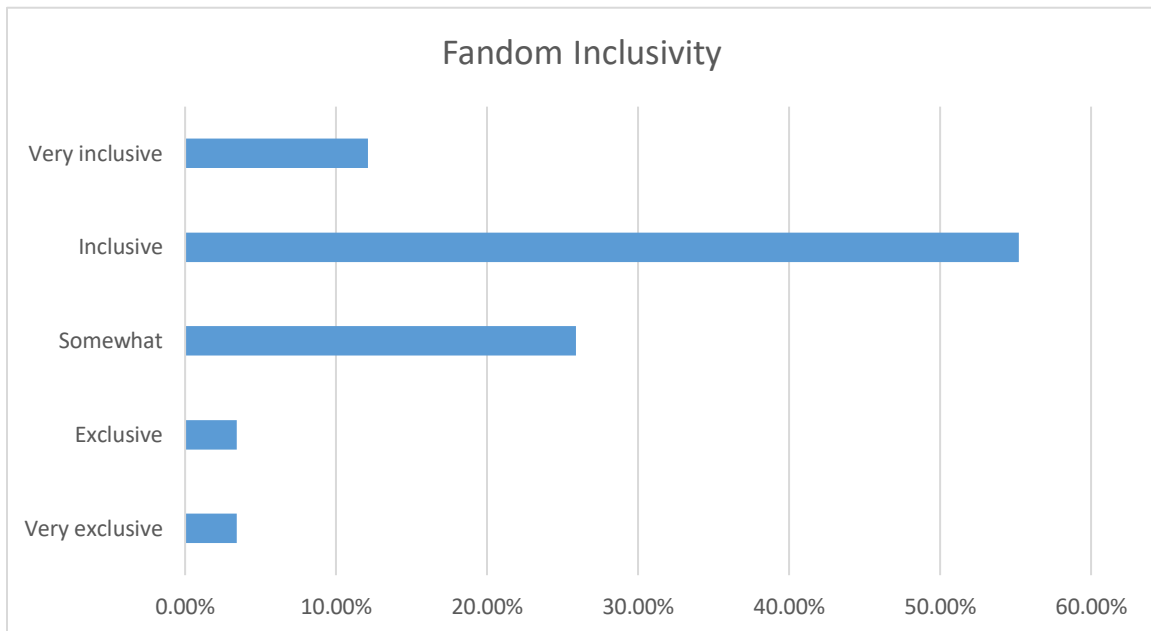
4.1.5.　　　Feelings of discrimination in fandom

On a scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree,fans were asked whether they agree with the statement, "do you feel discriminated in your fandom community because of your identity?" in Figure 5 below. The most highest response was 60.3% (n = 35) who selected Strongly Disagree, which signifidies a strong opposition to the statement. 19% (n = 11) responded Disagree, a general disagreement. Following, 6% responded as Neutral while 8.6% (n = 5) responded Agree. Lastly, 1.7% (n = 1) responded Strongly Agree. This data shows that fans within fandoms view their communities as inclusive, but this does not regard fans who may have conformed to shared ideas or formed their niche subfandoms.

Figure 5: Discrimination in Fandom
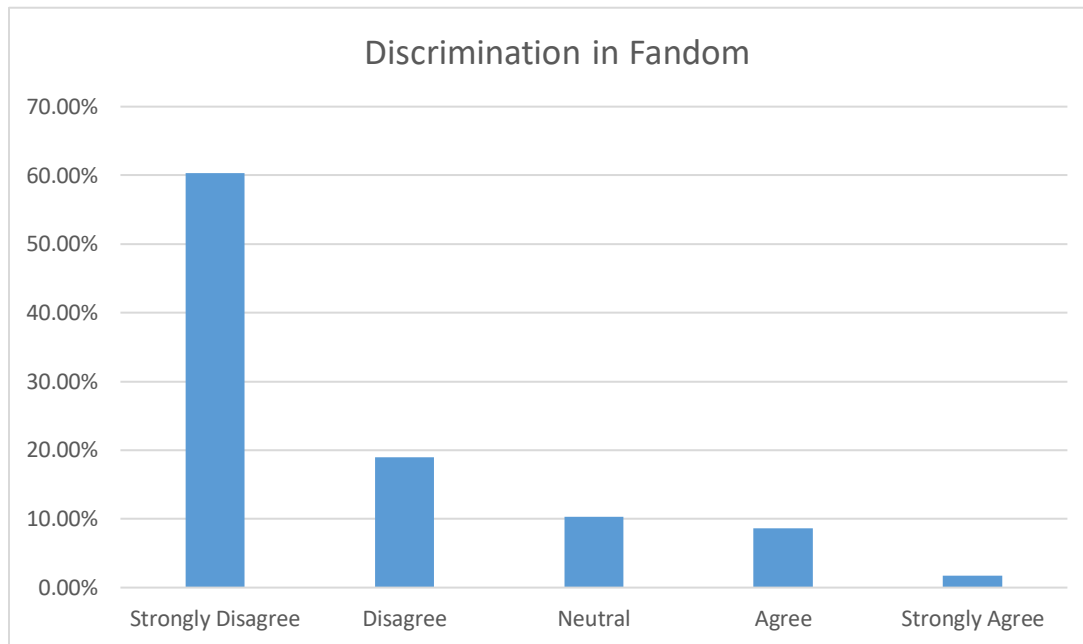
4.1.6. Reasons for discrimination in fandom

This question went in-depth asking participants who either responded to Agree and Strongly Agree or did not, as to why they feel discriminated against in Figure 6 below. Of the 58 that responded to the previous question, 15 responded to this to the question above. Five options were listed for single-choice responses: sexual, ethnicity, gender, gender and ethnicity, and all the above. 33% (n = 5) responded they feel discriminated against their sexual identity. 26.7% responded that they feel discriminated against because of their gender identity. 20% (n = 3) responded because of their gender and ethnic identities. 13% (n = 2) of participants responded because of their ethnic identities. 6.7% (n = 1) of participants responded that they feel discriminated against because of all the above (gender, ethnic, and sexual identities). These responses reflect that most discrimination is based on gender ideals in fandom, which may be carried from mainstream and social issues.

Figure 6: Reasons for Discrimination

Reasons for Discrimination

Gender identity ■ Ethnic identity ■ Sexual identity ■ Gender and ethnic identities ■ All of the above
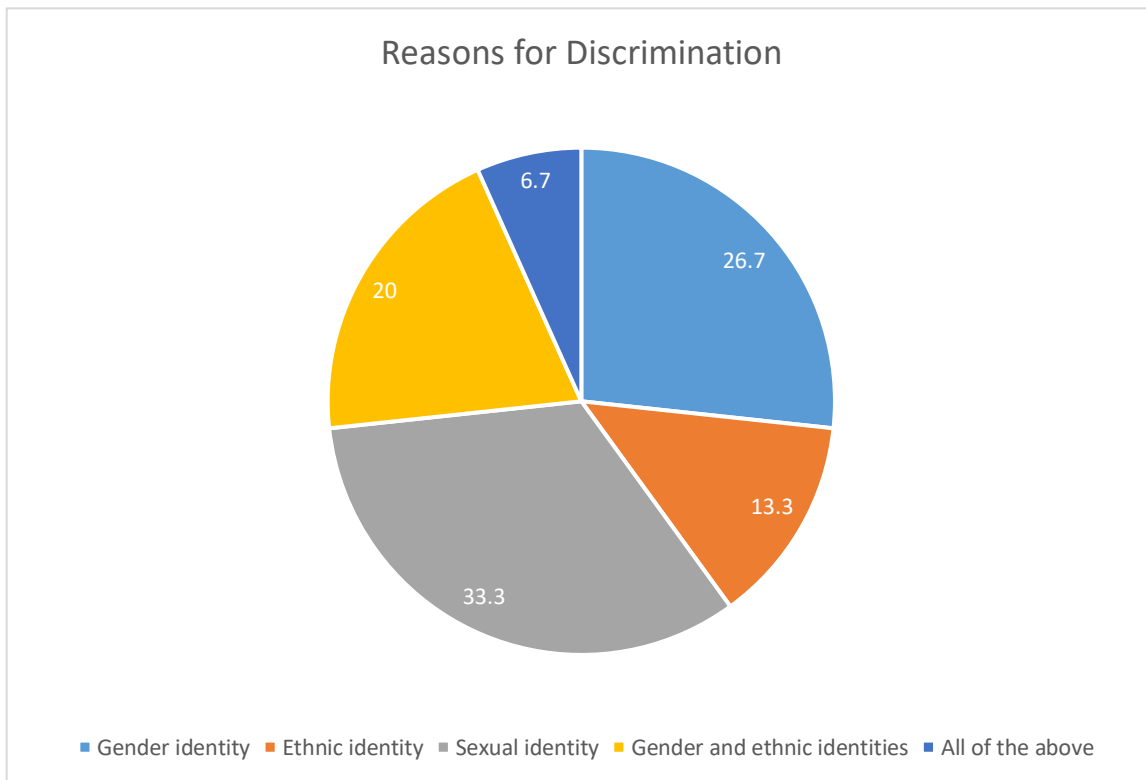
4.1.7. Issues of representation, diversity, and bullying in fandom

In a long-form response (n = 54), participants were asked to share whether or not they have experience or witnessed any issues of diversity, representation, or bullying in their fandom communities. In Figure 7 below, inductive reasoning was used to form the codes; the data was analyzed which led to these codes: Anti-LGBTQ+, Bullying, Misinformation, Canonical Disagreement, Cultural Ignorance, Racism, Sexism, and Lack of Diversity.

Anti-LGBTQ+ (n = 10) was the most common theme; this code was chosen to encompass all discrimination and bullying against LGBTQ+ members of fandom (including bi-phobia and bi-erasure). The responses under this code reported blatant homophobia against LGBTQ+ content and characters, most common in headcanon (personal interpretations of the source material; common in text) in fanfiction and art. Canonical disagreement (n = 9) was chosen due to the reoccurrence that certain fans

follow descriptions of characters from the source material. An example given was Annabeth Chase from *Percy Jackson & The Olympians*: in the books she is described as having tanned skin, "honey-blond hair in perfect princess curls" and grey eyes, but in Disney's live-action adaptation, Annabeth is darker-skinned with black grays. This casting choice along with headcanons of Annabeth caused uproar within the series fandom. Racism (n = 9) is a common theme for BIPOC fans, as reported by participants. This extended to discrimination towards BIPOC authors and artists. Lack of Diversity (n = 9) defines the need for more diverse character representation in fan content, specifically fanfiction. In many White-dominant and homogenous fandom spaces, the minority of fans, especially Black fans, are ignored when diverse topics are mentioned. One participant shared this:

> I believe that one of the main reasons we get bullied or purposely ignored when we bring diversity is because we shouldn't exist in their 'fun and fantasy' world and headspace.

This response reflects Pande's idea that BIPOC fans are referred to as "fandom killjoys" when mentioning social issues relating to their community. Bullying (n = 7) refers to the terms "mean", "bullying", and "harassment" found. Responses with this code shared that some fans bullied others for seemingly no reason and that anonymity on forum platforms such as Reddit influenced the negative behaviour. Cultural Ignorance (n = 7) examines the clashes of cultures in online fandom and its subsequential discourse, most common from responses in the Potterheads. American and European (UK), two regions that have the most book sales, read the text with different cultural backgrounds, social, political, and economic viewpoints. Americans, not understanding that the text was written in the 1990s London, may understand some characterizations or landscapes as differently than intended and bring discourse online. A participant shared this:

> There are things deemed "problematic" or "offensive" but are actually just a true representation of British of my culture or a apart of that cultural tradition, which

is clearly recognized by the (British) originally intended audience. It can be very daunting trying to explain my experiences and the way my country works, or its literary tradition, or the fact that they [Americans] are reading through their cultural lens, but we have a different history…

Sexism (n = 3) represented gendered discrimination, which included women, men, and gay men. Women in fanfiction and fan-art were reported as being sexualized. In the context of men, queer men, and gay men, sexism is linked to misogyny. Societal expectations of male-centered roles were expected, which may lead to the sexualization of women in fandom spaces. Additionally, queer men were reported to being tokenized and stereotyped by many women authors while also facing hostile attitudes. Lastly, Misinformation (n = 1) was attributed to the deliberate spread of disinformation, or trolling, a character to gain traction across social media.

Figure 7: Issues in Fandom
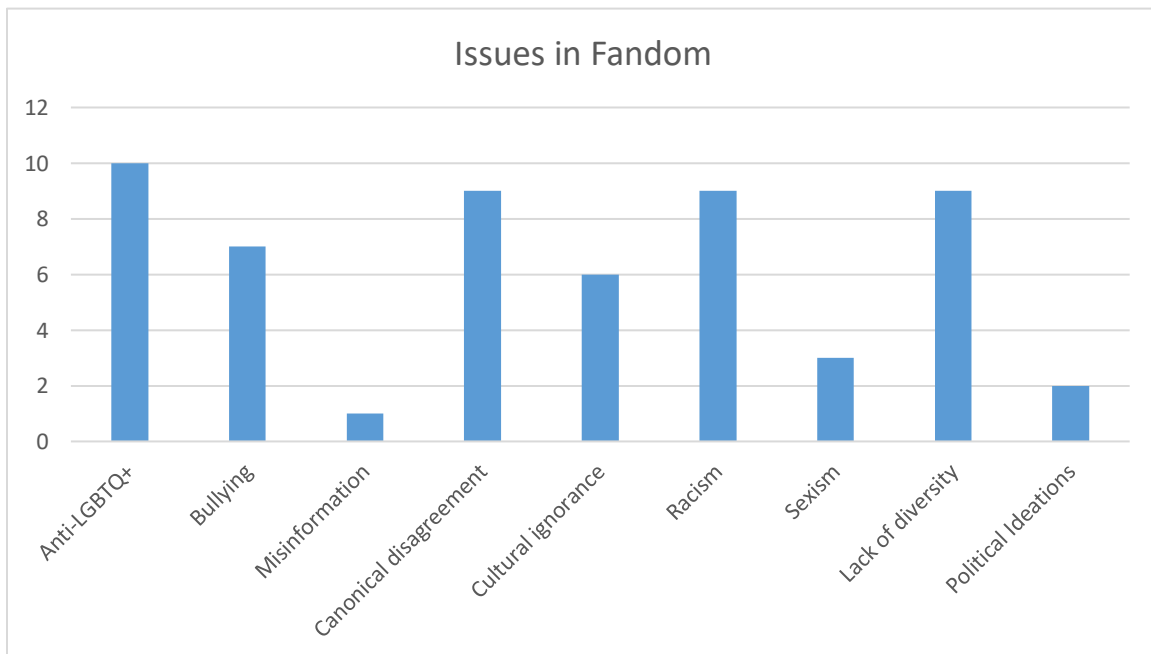
4.2. Interviews

Findings from the interviews were organized into five themes: fandom background, platform preferences, moderation culture, and representation curation.

4.2.1. Fandom Backgrounds

Participant 1 (P1) has a deep connection to science-fiction and fantasy literature, which stems from her background in academia and media culture, transformed their fandom experience once they moved online. Since the creation of platforms like Yahoo and LiveJournal, P1 is a member of various fandoms, but most notably, sci-fi, fantasy, and video game fandoms.

Participant 2 (P2) is also apart of many different fandoms, but is connected to South Park, Invader Zim, Lab Rats, and many Disney 2010s series which are mostly hosted online.

4.2.2. Preferred Platforms

Participant 1 and Participant 2 both share an academic background in higher education; P1's background science-fiction and academia, with a focus on media, literature, and culture, influences her fandom participation. P2, an animation major, sources different social media platforms for artistic references, such as TikTok and YouTube, on top of their fandom activities. Both responded as using Tumblr and AO3. P1 prefers Tumblr and Bluesky for its moderation settings that users can control for their feeds, whereas P2 finds Tumblr's format "unfavourable" but helpful for fanfiction. Unlike AO3, which is popular in fandom, that displays word counts, chapter lists, other fanfiction microdata, Tumblr's blog-like interface requires authors to include the length of their works.

4.2.3. Moderation culture

As a fanfiction writer and a member of video games fandoms, P1 stresses the effect of critically engagement with content creators in terms of moderation on YouTube and Reddit. Rather than being critical and being responsible for the information they share, many content creators rely on "feeding their outrage beast", which is also known as rage-baiting where triggering or provocative is produced to gain more social media traction; rage-bait ranges from misleading video titles, dramatized thumbnails, to disinformation. Rage-bait content often leads to the original and/or creator being liked, shared, and spread across different social media platforms.

In the video game fandom, there are a select amount of YouTube creators who have made it their full-time job making reviews or playing games. Lawton (2024) reported that social media creator programs, like X's Creator Revenue Sharing Program and the YouTube Partner Program, have creators to generate misinformation and share fake news to generate more income at the detriment of honest fans and organizations. Whereas YouTube retains 45% of income generated from standard videos, creators may receive 45% - 55% of the remainder. P1 explains that many creators who depend on ad-revenue are audiences first sources of the original material; instead of the game company, YouTubers are where video game fans learn of and understand its content. This in-turn affects both game companies and audiences. Destiny 2: Lightfall is a first-person shooter video game by Bungie Inc. released in 2023; it is the first game in the Destiny series to include a non-binary character, Nimbus. Following its release, many negative reviews across Reddit and YouTube targeted Nimbus as the reason why the games narratives and storytelling failed. Some comments on Reddit group, r/DestinyTheGame, shared their views on the character:

Nimbus is always trying too hard to be haha funny Gen Z surfer dude.

The story was awful and Nimbus is a bad character.

Nimbus wasn't a great character, which being the main seasonal gut isn't great for the overall picture, and often feels like a misplaced Claptrap from borderlands if that makes sense

Due to low ratings of Lightfall, the cancellation of their game Steam that was dropped due to negative opinions, and low revenue prediction, in 2014 Bungie Inc. announced a layoff of 220 employees, 17% of its workforce, due to "rising costs of development and industry shifts." P1 shares the rise of reiterated negative reviews on YouTube and Reddit have increased in the past five years. Game Industry Biz is a platform that follows and examines layoffs in the gaming industry, which has been on the rise since 2020 due to rising costs and changing consumer habits. If audiences follow the trolling and review-bombing trends of content creators, this will lead to negative audience rating reviews, which could impact the workface behind the games, resulting in layoffs. P1 stresses the financial leverage YouTube has a real-world impact and consequences that harm source materials her fandoms focus on.

P2 shared a negative experience with Amino and its lack of moderation. A forum and community-based platform, Amino was marketed to children 16 years of age and older, though some countries allowed children as young as 13-years-old to be use the platform. Since 2011, Amino has been a platform for young generations of fans to connect, hosting communities, or Aminos, dedicated to specific fandoms where members can text and share audio and visual content. The platform, however, has been criticized by fans and parents for its lack of moderation, the perpetuation of toxic behaviour, and weak enforcement of rules strict on repeat offenders. Reviews of Amino on Common Sense Media, a platform that shares reviews of technology for parents, share a common theme: content on the platform is too sexual. Some reviews say:

Only on the app 5 mins looking for essay research on artistic sketchbooks before stumbling across barely veiled predatory content.

Geard towards CHILDREN.. LITTLE children. Everything said about sexual grooming is absolutely dead on. When confronted with the behaviours, other users were like "oh well, it's my THERAPY".

P2 shared that when they were younger, it was cosplay (costume play; performing in costumes) introduced them to Amino, which quickly spiralled. During the four years of their stay on the platform, they were introduced to South Park, but due to their experience with Amino, they avoided other social media platforms for three years. AO3 and other platforms gives P2 control of the content generated on their feed and where the audiences their content is delivered to, via certain tags.

4.2.3 Representation Curation

A common theme in both interviews was environmental and representational curation. We can agree the ease of falling into cognitive dissonance in fandom; algorithms feed users different kinds of content to analyze their preferences, but the lack of accuracy in AI may leave some fans uncomfortable with content that goes against their beliefs. P1 and P2 shared that engaging with other fans on platforms that give them control to moderate and adapt their settings improves their fandom experiences. P1's academic background developed her media literacy and misinformation skills provided a model of community she surrounds herself with: critical thinking fans who are aware of anti-literacy trends, who also share fandom interest and tastes. P2, who identifies as queer, curates their fandom environment to represent queer women, who have often been excluded discussion. Fandom and fanfiction including queer woman have both validated their experience and impacted their environment. While certain real-world settings often look down at their queer identity, both producing and consuming queer-centered content in niche fandom spaces gives them the opportunity to express themselves virtually and creatively.

Chapter 5.   Conclusion

Fan culture is continuously evolving. From the exclusivity of certain fandoms in the 1940s, the boom across the 1960s, to the evermore growing popularity in the 21st century, the need for community is a global phenomenon that online fandom is based on. It is important, however, to reflect on the spaces we occupy in mainstream society and not carry preconceived biases into niche communities; just because a fans, who may be regarded as hysterical or obsessive, shares content on a certain media or figure, does not mean they are immune to social influences. The popular idea that fandom is community for all fans and people alike overlooks issues many marginalized populations deal with. In spaces where their representation is little to none, BIPOC and LGBTQ+ fans either conform to the general ideas of the fandom, voice their concerns and issues, or create their own space at the risk of less content engagement. When they raise their voice, marginalized fans risk the chance to face further discrimination for recognizing faults of the community and, in a sense to a certain extent, ruining the meaning of fandom. In spite of AI's support in user preferences and automated content analyses, have the high chance of perpetuating human biases and stigmas, considering their Western origin; at school, at work, professional and publishing settings, whoever is most represented in media and institutions controls the authority of which voices and what content recognized. The publishing industry continues to be a White-dominated space, but LGBTQ+ populations have slowly increased in past years. Although unspoken, scholars in fan studies, many of them White, have done little to acknowledge the lack of racial and ethnic discussion in fandom. If the bodies producing texts are of a certain demographic, how do broader audiences ensure that their representations are met? Further research in this area suggests a critical focus on racial model that fan studies is built on and emergence of AI in social platforms, like Tumblr and Reddit, where marginalized communities have higher rates of AI bias.

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