

# **Navigating and Exploring LGBT Identity in Fandom**

An essay submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for graduation from the

## **Honors College at the College of Charleston**

with an Artium Baccalaureatus in

Sociology

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May 2016

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**“”: Navigating and Exploring Queer Identities in Fandom**

Abstract:

To date, very little qualitative research has been completed and published on how exactly those who identify as LGBT use the internet to explore and define their own identities. This research aims to fill this gap by studying how LGBT members of fan communities explore, navigate, and define their personal identities through their experience in the community and work in the realm of speculative fiction (“fan-fiction”). To accomplish this result, a number of LGBT-identified members of this community were interviewed and asked about their interactions with their community and their personal work affected them in their personal coming-out process. The researchers then analyzed the interviews to identify common themes in the experiences of LGBT members of fandom communities. This research investigates the unique experience of defining one’s sexuality in the internet age from the viewpoint of a member of a queer-positive, accepting community. Characteristics of such a community that makes it an ideal place for individuals to safely explore their sexual identities are identifies and explored.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This research project aimed to investigate how LGBT members of fan communities explore, navigate, and define their personal identities through their experience both within the fan community and through the production of fanfiction. Sixteen self-identified LGBTQ members of fandom were interviewed in a semi-structured interview process to explore these experiences. In these interviews, I explored how queer members of fandom interact within the existing social norms of their community and how these norms positively affect their personal sexual identification process. In particular, I sought to determine how the norms of fandom interaction and content creation facilitate the creation of a nontoxic and tolerant environment for the purposes of personal identity exploration and definition that is rarely seen to the same degree in other environments both online and offline.

Fandom, as defined by Henry Jenkins, is “The social structures and cultural practices created by the most passionately engaged consumers of mass media properties.”[cite] These consumers produce massive daily amounts of analytical and creative work surrounding their favorite books, movies, TV-shows, webseries, and more to express their love for the content at a rate that is staggering to outside observers. [cite] The community that these fans have created has existed since the earliest days of the internet. Its size has exploded over the years, moving from site to site with the growth of the internet. Currently, fandom can be found comprising a majority of the traffic on several large social media websites. Most community-based interaction occurs on the nominal blogging site Tumblr, with occasional interactions on Twitter and Facebook. Fanfictions are usually hosted separately from the sites in which the community interacts, on others specifically designed for the purposes of archiving fan works such as Fanfiction.net, Wattpad, and Archive of Our Own (AO3). These communities usually divide themselves into subsets based upon their

primary media material and then their favorite characters or romantic pairings. To explain the typical fanfiction and fandom interaction pipeline, I will give a concrete example of how one participant's fanfiction was imagined, posted, and reviewed.<sup>1</sup>

One member of a particular fandom, the one surrounding the webseries *Carmilla*, suggests that the main pairing would be a good fit for a story that reimagined them as the protagonists of a popular Broadway musical, *The Last Five Years*. The member posts this publicly while giving permission for someone else to write the idea as she herself is busy writing her own projects, and it is “reblogged” or reposted by her followers and other members of the fandom in the hopes that one member will be personally inspired to write this fanfiction. The participant sees this post and decides to write it herself. She posts her own public call for beta readers to help outline and edit the fic while writing it. The finished fanfiction is then posted to the archive site Archive of Our Own. Usually, authors will post links to their Tumblr on the archive site and links to the fic itself on their personal Tumblr, so that interested readers can read the fic on the site specifically designed to host it and then leave feedback on the site designed for social interaction (See Figures 1 and 2). In turn, readers then interact with the author via her Tumblr, expressly mentioning what they enjoyed about the fanfiction, giving the author the confidence to continue. This represents a fairly

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<sup>1</sup> In the consent form and interview, participants were asked to consent to researchers searching their public, published fanfiction and blogs for research data. This participant explicitly consented.

normal interaction for the inception and writing process of any particular fanfiction.

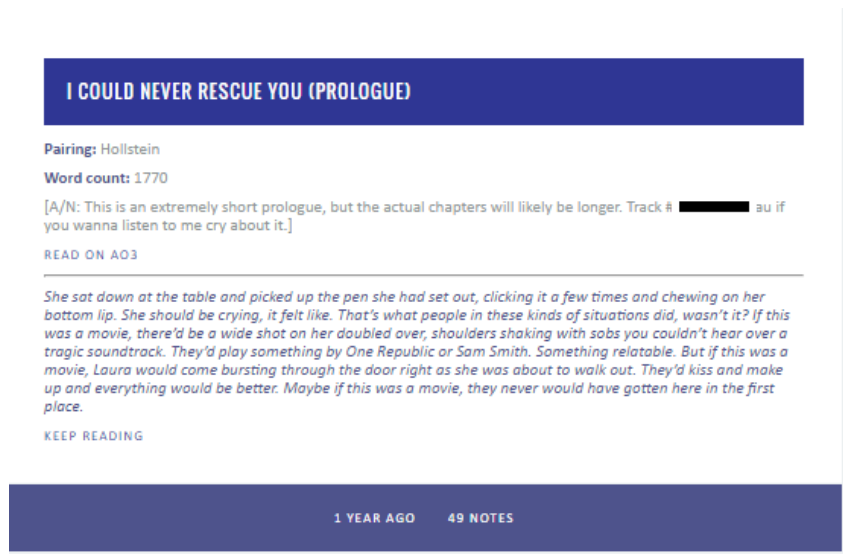


Figure 1. The post that links to the fanfiction in question from Claire's Tumblr account.

Notes:

This chapter is extremely short, but don't worry. There will be plenty more where that came from!

follow me on tumblr at [REDACTED] and track # [REDACTED] au if you wanna watch me destroy myself over this dumb idea

↑ Top Next Chapter → Kudos ♥ Bookmark Comments (7)

Figure 2. A screenshot of the notes below the fanfiction itself on Ao3, encouraging readers to interact with the author on Tumblr.

One significant subset of fandom which merits further study is the subset known as “queer fandom,” which for the purposes of this study is defined as the community of fans who identify themselves as a unique subset whose primary commonality is their queer identities. Though no peer-reviewed study of queer fandom demographics has been completed and published, all current

evidence suggests that queer members of fandom comprise a large minority of fandom at a rate much higher than the general population. Many informal surveys [cite: centralumina] performed by members of fandom themselves in the past have identified the rate at 50% of fandom identifying as non-heterosexual or higher. According to one survey in particular [cite: centralumina], more members of fandom identified as non-cisgender gender identities than as cisgender men. The demographics of fanfiction works written and posted seems to support this data, with a full 70% of stories posted to the popular fanfiction archive website Archive of Our Own featuring characters in non-heterosexual relationships, according to one analysis of the site [cite: centralumina]. Though it is certainly not the case that all fanfictions highlighting queer characters were written by LGBTQIA-identifying individuals, the sheer preponderance of works reveals the need for the study of a community that heretofore has not been.

## 2. BACKGROUND

The study of queer fanfiction, also known as slash fanfiction, has been a significant sub-discipline in the culture of fandom studies since the field's inception in Henry Jenkins's 1992 monograph *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* [1][2]. In the decades since, queer and slash studies have formed a small and sporadic but still vibrant aspect of the fan studies discipline. However, most of this extant research focuses upon either the quality and characteristics of the fan works themselves or as a survey of the larger culture from an ego-centric viewpoint of so called aca-fans, authors who co-identify as both observers of and participants within fan culture. The most well-known queer fandom work is Constance Penley's *NASA/TREK*, in which she presents her personal interpretation of the deeper goals and motivations behind subversive queer fan work and culture and how this relates to contemporary society with minimal input from others within the community [3]. Even among researchers who do examine the experiences of individuals within this queer and subversive cultural space, none to date have focused solely upon the experiences of LGBT-identified fandom members [4]. As queer fanfiction consists almost entirely of the appropriation of traditionally or "canonically" heterosexual characters and stories, the population who benefits the most from the existence of this exploratory space is fandom's LGBT-identified participants [5]. Thus, the current state of queer fan studies would be greatly enriched by the inclusion of research focusing upon the experiences of these marginalized minorities. This researcher has been unable to identify any previous research in this specific area.

There is a need for research which explores positive sexual-identification or "coming-out" experiences of LGBT-identified individuals. Approximately 30% of LGB youth have attempted suicide at least once before they turn 22, a rate four times higher than their heterosexual peers

experience [6]. Statistics for transgender-identified individuals are even more alarming; approximately 50% of transgender individuals report attempting suicide at least once in their lives [7]. Although the experience of a tolerant, supportive community can lower the risk for suicide in LGBT individuals immensely, queer individuals do not always find such communities online. Past research shows that many explicitly queer online spaces often engage in severe identity-policing; if an individual does not exactly meet all of the social identity, sexual identity, and other criteria of the community exactly, they will be driven out [8]. Some online spaces even explicitly encourage suicide [9]. The inherent queerness and pseudonymity of fandom establishes it as an unusually tolerant space for LGBT individuals [10]. This research aims to identify the specific characteristics of fandom that causes its members to regard it as an exceptionally safe space for the exploration of non-normative sexual identities from the perspective of these community members themselves, with an ultimate goal to identify aspects which can transfer to other communities, allowing for safer experiences for LGBT individuals and more communities in which people may co-exist peacefully. Greater numbers of welcoming online communities will invaluablely aid LGBT youth seeking to become more comfortable with their own sexuality, form common friendships and bonds, and thus decrease the risk of self-harm.



### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study was undertaken as a year-long project to investigate the practices, norms, and experiences of the queer fandom community, especially regarding fanfiction. Participants were recruited via the internet and then interviewed via oral or IM methods. The data was then analyzed using iterative qualitative coding to identify emergent themes regarding the experiences of participants regarding fanfiction and the community as a whole. Each phase of the study is described in detail below.

#### A. Recruitment

The methods of recruitment and data collection used in this study are similar to methods used in previous research studies within this community, which resulted in exceptionally rich and compelling data. Participants in the study were recruited through a mix of online recruitment and snowball sampling [cite]. The primary recruitment method was a public enlistment post targeted to LGBT fandom members who interact with queer fanfiction, stating a preference for those who had both read and written fanfiction. This public recruitment message was posted on Tumblr and given appropriate tags ("fan fiction", "LGBT", etc.) and garnered 139 "notes" on Tumblr by the end of the study. In the message, those unable or unwilling to participate were encouraged to share and reblog the post as well (standard practice on the Tumblr website). An image of the recruitment post used can be seen in Figure X. Finally, after completing a successful interview, participants were encouraged to pass on the study information to any personal friends who also identified as queer, to encourage snowball sampling recruitment. Several participants were directly recruited in

this

way.

## College of Charleston LGBT Fandom Studies

All questions welcome! [Submit](#) For more about our current project, check out the about page!

Are you an LGBTQA-identified fan fiction writer?

We are seeking participants in a research study about LGBTQA online creative activity and communities of creators. We want to learn more about how your fanfiction and the fandom community helps you explore and understand your own identity.

We are offering compensation in the form of a \$9 Amazon gift card for study participants!

If you have any questions about this research study, you can check out our about page [here](#) and, of course, submit any other questions to our ask or via email to our primary investigator, Shannon Morrison, who is also a LGBTQA-identified member of the fandom community.

If you would be willing to share your experiences in a one-hour interview over the phone or online, please contact Shannon Morrison at [morrisonse1@g.cofc.edu](mailto:morrisonse1@g.cofc.edu) to set up an interview time.

— 1 month ago with 138 notes

[#lgbt](#) [#fandom](#) [#fandomstudies](#) [#lgbtfandom](#) [#fandomresearch](#)

Figure 3: Recruitment advertisement posted to Tumblr.

Any potential participants who saw the post or contacted the official study Tumblr were instructed to contact the researcher via email and approximately 25 overall contacted the researcher. They were then asked to complete a short survey of two questions via email asking for age and LGBTQIA identity to determine eligibility in the study. Participants who were eligible (over the age of consent and identified on the LGBTQIA spectrum) were then given a consent form, to be orally acknowledged and approved at the beginning of interviews, and asked to set up an interview time. Of all those who reached out in initial contact, only a few (2-3) did not complete and return the study. Of the remaining participants, two never finalized an interview time. Three participants contacted the researcher after recruitment efforts ended. A total of 16 participants were successfully interviewed.

It should be noted that recruitment ended earlier than anticipated due to an outside event which significantly changed the landscape of the community with which most participants

identified. A particular television show, *The 100*, which featured two canonical queer female protagonists in a healthy relationship, abruptly killed off one of these characters in such a derivative way that many queer fans received the episode as a personal betrayal. Many of the interviewed participants were heavily involved in this show's fandom and explicitly mentioned it in interviews as an example of ideal mainstream queer representation. As I will explore more in the results and discussion sections, the pain and trauma caused by this event within fandom would have irrevocably tainted future interviews, especially those performed so briefly after the episode aired. Thus, after March 3<sup>rd</sup>, future interviews planned were cancelled and recruitment efforts were halted.

## **B. Participants**

Sixteen participants were interviewed for approximately one-hour through phone/Skype (12) or over an instant message client (4). Participants were allowed to select the medium with which they were most comfortable. Research has shown that there is not a significant difference in the amount of information conveyed between verbal and instant messaging interviews. [11] The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, in order to permit the interviewer to adjust questioning based on responses. [12] Participants were compensated upon the completion of the interview with a stipend of \$9. This aided significantly with recruitment, encouraging those both younger and older in fandom to participate. The final age range of participants was 18-29, an ideal range to allow for those with both fixed and non-fixed gender and sexual identities to participate, alongside those who had come out in previous eras of fandom. The mean age of participants was 23. 13 of the participants originated from the United States, while three listed their location as outside of the United States (Australia, Poland, and the Russian Federation). In terms of

gender, 13 of the 16 participants identified as females who used she/her pronouns, though several indicated they were still in the process of determining their full gender identity. The final three participants identified as genderfluid, agender, and trans-questioning. In terms of sexual orientation, 6 of the 16 participants identified on the asexuality spectrum, either exclusively or in addition to a romantic orientation. Five other participants identified as lesbians or gay, seven identified as bisexual, one identified as pansexual, and one identified as queer. A summary of this information can be found in Table 1.

Though typically participant names are anonymized in research publications, there are times when using real names or chosen pseudonyms is appropriate, particularly for creators who deserve credit for their work [5]. Following Bruckman et al.'s advice that allowing participants to indicate how they want to be identified is as important as whether to identify them [5], the publication process was explained to the participants at the end of the interview and they were given a choice of being anonymized or using their chosen name. Their chosen name may be their given name or a Finnish pseudonym. A full list of all participants and their pseudonyms can be found in Table A. A glossary of identification terms used over the course of this study can be found in Appendix B.

### **C. Analysis**

Once the interviews were complete, the voice interviews were transcribed by an outside source. The transcriptions resulted in 266 pages of text, with an average of approximately 16.5 pages per interview. Iterative qualitative coding was used to identify emergent patterns and themes from this data in the tradition of thematic analysis [13]. Once every interview was coded and the themes were considered finalized, each interview was then re-coded for any final emergent themes. Coding began with an inductive approach

and then themes were grouped deductively under the framework identified. Themes fell into two large categories: 1) how the fanfiction itself aided in queer identity exploration and acceptance; or 2) how the community of queer fans aided in queer identity exploration and acceptance. These two categories were then each divided into two smaller subcategories, leading to four major thematic areas: 1) Fanfiction as Representation, 2) Fanfiction as Performance, 3) Community as Mentors, and 4) Community as Educators. Smaller themes were derived from each of these larger headings and categorized as either positive or negative. Significant themes identified can be found listed in Table 2 below.

Name	Age	Gender Identity	LGBT Identity
Aimee*	21	Cis Woman	<u>Lesbian/demisexual</u> <sup>2</sup>
Claire	27	Cis Woman	<u>Bisexual/Asexual</u>
Elizabeth	19	Cis Woman	Lesbian/ <u>queer</u>
CJ	18	Cis Woman	Asexual
Riley*	20	<u>Genderfluid</u>	Asexual/ <u>Biromantic</u>
Olivia	25	Cis Woman	Lesbian
Sophie	18	Cis Woman	Lesbian
Madison	18	Cis Woman	Bisexual, <u>Ace/Aro</u>
Rae*	25	Cis Woman	Queer
Izzy*	19	Cis Woman	Gay
Savannah	18	Cis Woman	Bisexual
Sy ltha*	27	<u>Agender</u>	<u>Pansexual</u>
Mia	29	Cis Woman	Bisexual
Lessandra*	24	Cis Woman	Bisexual
Elise	29	<u>Trans-Questioning</u>	Bisexual
Charlotte	27	Cis Woman	Asexual, <u>Arospec</u>

Table 1. Interview participants. A \* indicates a chosen name rather than anonymization..

<sup>2</sup> A full definition of any underlined term can be found in the appropriate glossary (Appendix A for fandom terms, Appendix B for gender and sexual identity terms). Terms will only be underlined once at initial occurrence for ease of reading.

## 4. RESULTS

Category	Positive Sub-Categories				Negative Sub-Categories		
Fanfiction as Representation	Normalizing Queerness	Positive Queer Representation	Visible Queer Representation	Niche Outside of Published Fiction	Negative or Problematic Representation		
Fanfiction as Performance	Legitimizing Queerness	Working Through Real-Life Issues	Exploring Alternative Identities	Competing Representations/Sexualities	Ship Wars		
Community as Mentors	Models for Questioning and Coming Out		Models for Behavior in Fandom	Recognition of Others	Dividing by Identities	Toxic Community Outcry	Overwhelming Individual Narratives
Community as Educators	Education Regarding Non-Traditional Identities	Sexual Education	Creating a Safe Space	Finding a Queer Community	Aggressive or Hostile Education	Incorrect Education	

Table 2. Emergent themes in the content analysis.

### A. Positive Representation

A theme found throughout every interview was the incredible reaffirming power that seeing positive representations of queer people and queer relationships in fanfiction had upon participants. This theme was represented by participants identifying fanfiction as “normalizing” queerness, portraying positive queer role models, and giving visibility to queer representation. One negative aspect portrayed within this theme was the issue of negative or problematic queer representation appearing in fanfiction.

#### a. Normalizing Queerness

One example of the positive effects of fanfiction representation of queer characters and relationships was its effect of normalizing queerness. For participants for whom the coming out process was difficult or stressful, seeing characters they already identified with and idolized in happy, queer relationships gave them hope for a brighter future.

*Taking characters that you identify with on television and putting them in a relationship that you identify with, kind of strengthens*

**Commented [S1]:** Should I “signpost” like this for every section?

*that bond even further and gives you a hope that you're not alone,  
this is completely normal, and people like you can have  
relationships and be happy and healthy. --Sophie*

For these participants, who might live in communities where being outwardly queer is unknown or even dangerous, reading and writing about people living out relationships where their queerness is not a concern can be incredibly helpful in envisioning a brighter future for themselves. One participant lives in Russia where homosexuality is outlawed and punishable by jail time or worse. This participant said that fanfiction was her escape into a better world:

*Possibly it's the feeling of normalcy that is so gratifying: that I get  
to read something where people can be ace, and gay, and trans,  
and pan, and everything else, and no one bats an eyelash, and that  
is already more than enough. --Less*

Fanfiction serves a similar role for all participants who identified as coming from conservative communities. It allows the very concept of “being gay” to become something that they could be comfortable identifying as themselves, rather than seeing it as a mark of the dangerous, sick, or sinful Other.

*Being able to see actual couples in healthy domestic relationships  
kind of told me that, "Hey, you can probably have this one day too.  
This is normal, it's not sick and it's not a sin or anything like that.  
This is a normal, healthy relationship that you can have." --Sophie*

#### **b. Positive Queer Representation**

Fanfiction representation of queer relationships serves another important purpose of giving participants representation they lack in traditional media. It is a common trope [cite] among stories featuring gay characters in popular media that the stories end tragically, with the death or break up of the characters. This can be an incredibly harmful representation to vulnerable youth still trying to come to terms with their identities and attempting to explore how their lives could be queer and still tolerable.

*If you look at a lot of mainstream media there aren't a lot of stories out there for queer identifying people. There's not a lot of really strong and deep narratives about queer people unless it's tragic. You just look at the Netflix section, like the gay and lesbian section on the Netflix, and it's all like they're gay, and they have to run away from their families, and then one of them dies. Nobody wants that to be their life. –Claire*

Fanfiction has become a place where queer-identifying people can go for stories by them, about them, in which they can be guaranteed a happy ending. In fact, stories on Archive of Our Own by site policy must have a public, visible warning in case of character death. These positive stories exploring queer relationships is consistently mentioned by participants as one of the primary benefits of fanfiction.

*Fandom has kind of become one of the only places where if you are queer or gay you can have your story and see characters that have happy endings, and are still like you. That was one of the things that really made me realize because I was like, "Oh, I want this. This is something that I want in my life." --Claire*

One participant even specifically pointed to this phenomenon as the impetus which caused her to seek to publish her own fanfiction:

*I was basically told that all gay people were miserable, and reading stories that had happy endings was really important to me because it kinda proves that I could have one, and that I wasn't destined to be miserable if I decided to come out. That's why I started publishing my fanfiction, because I was determined to put out more queer happy endings. --Rae*

### **c. Visible Queer Representation**

Finally, many participants explicitly mention fanfiction as the only easily or publically available representations of queer people that they could obtain. In small communities where



they might be the first person to come out, fanfiction gives them a model of queerness and helps show them that they are not alone in the world.

*Also, fanfiction I think played a huge role. It was basically the only exposure to people like me that I had. Like I said, I was in a homophobic environment, I didn't know any queer people at all, I was the only out lesbian at my high school. The only gay people I ever saw were in fanfiction so it was a big deal to me. –Rae*

Some participants even talked about fanfiction in a tone bordering on reverent, as if it was their personal life ring or savior. Many point to fanfiction as the sole catalyst for helping them discover their identities before they were entrenched in a heterosexual lifestyle, in addition to showing them that queer people had the capacity to live happy, healthy lives.

*I see lots of posts going around about how grateful people are that they discovered fanfiction and how it saved them and opened their eyes. I know I'm not alone in feeling this way, about how important it is. –Rae*

*It's safe to say that if I hadn't found fanfiction, I might have ended up mistakenly thinking I'm straight and being miserable. – Less*

In summary, fanfiction fills a gap in queer representation for participants that many consider to be vitally important to their successful coming out processes. Specifically, positive, visible queer representation can normalize gender and sexual identities that have negative stigmas attached to them in today's society and help give queer members of fandom the confidence and ability to embrace their own identity.

#### **d. Niche Outside of Published Fiction**

Participants considered the strong, positive representation they found in fanfiction not to be replicated in commercially published queer novels that seemed to be explicitly for their community. Participants complained consistently that published queer content seemed to repeat

the same themes in every book and that some novels even seemed to be written with a heterosexual, cisgender audience in mind:

*A lot of the novels I read follow a very similar format. I see the same stories over and over again, especially with how they deal with coming to terms with their sexuality. Which is great, but I just don't really feel like reading about that all the time. –Madison*

*I have this idea in my head that queer novels a lot of the time are about 'dealing with being queer'. And, like, I know what it's like to be queer. I realize that it's not considered 'the norm', I don't really read novels to have that reiterated to me, you know? –Olivia*

Those interviewed commonly mentioned disliking commercially published queer novels for focusing on the coming out process or struggling to live a queer lifestyle to the exclusion of all other queer stories. On the other hand, participants lauded fanfiction for rarely focusing upon these themes of characters coming out or coming to terms with their sexuality, and instead featuring stories of action, adventure or romance about queer people who have already accepted themselves and instead happen to be opening flower shops, going on pirate adventures, or simply living out their lives.

*I don't want to read another coming out story. I want to read a story about lesbian space pirates who just are lesbian space pirates. They're lesbians, but that's not the big thing about them. --  
Riley*

*There's stuff about dragons, there's stuff about Hogwarts. It's different, it's not necessarily created in a subset of just, "This is a modern AU where we both exist and don't do anything interesting, and our only narrative is that we're queer people." –Izzy*

A final benefit participants consistently identified in queer fanfiction over its published counterparts is its accessibility. Fanfiction, as opposed to commercially published novels, can be obtained freely and anonymously online with little to no personal risk of discovery.

*The thing is, while telling my family I'm queer is one thing, I honestly don't really know what their reaction would be to me*

*actually engaging in reading/writing queer things. I don't think I would be in any danger or anything. It would just be really awkward and embarrassing. So I keep all my queer reading on the internet. -CJ*

To queer-identified members of fandom who are uncomfortable publically advertising their queer identities, or live within communities where it is unsafe to do so, fanfiction can be their only method of safely obtaining the positive representation of themselves and their sexualities that they crave. Thus, fanfiction represents an important, significant alternative to commercially published queer novels.

## **B. Negative Representation**

### **a. Negative or Problematic Representation**

*That's a real problem, not all fanfiction representation of queerness is good. --Rae*

The wide array of gender and sexual identities, authors, and author education levels that can be found in fanfiction results in queer representation that not all members of the community consider to be good. In fact, many participants mention seeing representations in fanfiction that they consider to be actively harmful. One participant avoids reading fanfiction which features characters with their same gender identity because they believe negative representation is almost inevitable:

*I tend to not specifically search out fic where characters that identify as either with my sexuality or with my gender just because in the fandoms that I'm in there's not a whole lot unless I write it myself or it's another taste of somebody writing a trans character who is very obviously not trans. It's frustrating, so I'd rather just stick with my femslash than get into an argument with a writer who is trying to be diverse but failing. I like constructive criticism as much as the next person but when it's about your life it's kind of hard to be objective. --Riley*

Many other participants mention this same phenomenon, of finding harmful or problematic representation of their identities in stories that were written by authors who did not identify the same way as the characters do. Participants seemed to view much less risk in writing for heterosexual couples, cisgender characters, or even male slash couples than homosexual female or nonbinary couples. As one participant describes it:

*I have a problem writing femslash because I feel like I don't know where to start. I don't have enough reading behind me to know where to start. On the other hand, when I write het, there's so much of it flying around me that I know what to subvert. --Mia*

The knowledge and fear of creating problematic representation in some cases even chills the creation of new stories. This could explain why femslash fanfictions tend to be so much less prevalent than the other two romantic orientations. However, this also leads participants to expend exceptional effort to create positive representation in the stories they do write.

### **C. Positive Performance**

#### **a. Legitimizing Queerness**

In this study, the normalizing of queerness refers to the process of interacting with fanfiction and members of the community through which LGBTQIA individuals come to regard queerness as a whole as a normal, non-harmful identity with which they can be comfortable and proud. The legitimizing of queerness refers to the process of interacting with fanfiction and members of the community through which LGBTQIA individuals come to regard their own personal identities and experiences as valid. The coming out process, queer narrative, and individual ways in which people view their own identities is unique to every queer individual. [cite] Thus, it is extremely important for young queer fandom members especially to observe the experiences of others to view their own as legitimate methods of experiencing queerness. One of

the most common ways participants mention experiencing this phenomenon is through fanfiction where they are already predisposed to view their favorite characters in a positive light.

*But when characters serve as mouthpieces for the same feelings that I've been experiencing, it somehow magically becomes relatable and a mirror-image of myself, and serves as an epiphany: that yeah, this is legitimate, your feelings are legitimate.*  
--Less

Similarly, reading about the struggles of characters who have also not yet completely defined their gender or sexual identities can aid those undergoing the same process.

*Then because of that, because you have these people that are struggling with their identities and they're writing that struggle into fan fiction, you then also have people who are reading it and going, "Yes, I understand that. This is how I feel. This is what I'm going through and they're going through it and they're doing okay, so I can get through this. I can be okay too." --Sy Itha*

Simply knowing that their experiences are not unusual can help young queer members of fandom view their experiences in a more positive light. For if their favorite characters also are unsure how to label themselves, then their experiences are legitimate instead of invalid. Many fanfiction authors, who experienced this phenomenon themselves in their own coming out processes, use fanfiction as a tool to advise younger members of fandom.

*I know that a lot of what I've written, characters will say things that I wish I had heard when I was younger and hope that that's a way for the characters to be speaking to someone in the fic but really be speaking to the audience. --Elizabeth*

#### **b. Working Through Real-Life Issues**

In a similar way, writing fanfiction in particular can help queer members of fandom navigate their own personal coming out process.

*Writing is a very good tool to help students or people in general to understand themselves. Writing it out can be very helpful to kind of pinpoint where the problem is. Then you can go back and see what your thought process was. --Sy Itha*

*Probably fandom and TV sort of supercharged that [my coming out process], and sort of expedited that process, and gave me a ... I don't want to say outlet, but gave me a way to channel that curiosity, I guess you would call it, that I didn't have before. -Izzy*

As fanfiction, like all fiction, is ultimately a reflection of the person who authored it, writers often draw on their own experiences to create the struggles of their characters. Thus, writing fanfiction can serve as a therapeutic process, especially for uniquely queer experiences. One participant notes how the struggles characters often face in fanfiction usually replicates the current issues in the queer community:

*If you take fanfiction that was being written even ten years ago, there is a lot of stuff that deals with closeted homosexuality and general sadness that it brings. There were a lot of unhappy endings. A lot of fanfiction in the fandoms that concerned military personnel used to deal with Don't Ask, Don't Tell and the struggle of always keeping it under the lid. -Less*

Such stories are usually positively received by an audience that is also queer and so understands the struggles from which the particular story stems.

### **c. Exploring Alternative Identities**

Finally, another positive way in which fans utilize fanfiction to navigate and define their own sexual and gender identities is by using it to explore alternative identities. Participants admit that it might not be what they consider to be the best-written fiction, but that it serves an important purpose of allowing younger fans a safe place for exploration.

*For a young fan to be able to take a character and make them bisexual and write a little bit about, a little 500 words about their life, it's stepping into their shoes. It might not be the most in character fic but it's how they're ... It's another way of exploring. It's a very safe way of exploring because queer fandoms tend to be very protective of our own. --Riley*

*An author might write something headcanoning certain character as trans, or ace, because it's who they are, and they wanna talk about it, and there's an unspoken understanding that they're not making anyone else accept it, they're not forcing it on anyone, and if it's not your slice of cake, you can just move along. --Less*

When a young queer fan writes a fanfiction in which the characters identity in a way that they do not, it is an opportunity for them to explore performing a different identity, and see how comfortable that identity feels. Fandom has a strong normative bias against leaving negative feedback on others' fanfiction, so it serves as another safe way for queer members of fandom to explore identities they have not yet settled upon.

*I think it's an opportunity to try on different hats. You can go "asexuality, what is that?" And you can go to an advice tumblr blog and get a definition of it, and read about other people's real experiences. But you can also go to Archive of Our Own and read stories about being gay, or bi, or ace, or trans, that are written about characters you already identify with and are very familiar with. And you can read those and go "Oh, that hat! That hat works for me, for what I'm thinking and feeling and identifying with right now. --Charlotte*

#### **D. Negative Representation**

##### **a. Competing Representation/Sexualities**

One of the issues inherent to this process of fans performing different gender or sexual identities through their favorite characters is that the fictional space allotted for these representations can be somewhat limited. When each fan uses the same two or three characters to explore a nonbinary identity, a trans identity, a bisexual identity, and a lesbian identity, the

representations are often naturally compared against one another. This can lead to some feeling as if their personal identities are invalidated because they receive pushback against their portrayal of a character's gender or sexual identity, which aligns closely with their own:

*If there's sort of a canon element that you can pull out and say this is why I think this fans typically will be more accepting, especially if it's a large part of the character. If it's just like you're pulling at a character and saying, "You know what, this character is trans because I want them to be", people don't like that even though ... People in real life don't have a reason to be trans, they just are. --*  
Riley

If one transgender fan writes a story in which a certain character from *Once Upon a Time* identifies as transgender, this directly conflicts with cisgender fans who write the same character as cisgender so that they can more closely identify with her. As Riley mentioned, fans often resort to logically defending their chosen portrayal by using material in the canonical fiction, but such battles always leave at least one portion of the fanbase feeling as if their identity or the process through which they came to use that identity is invalid. However, the queer fandom community itself recognizes this as an issue, and some participants offered pushback to the idea that such conflicts are inevitable:

*If somebody wants to head cannon a character as trans or bisexual or anything like that, let them do that, let them project their identity onto that person, because that's helping them come to terms with themselves, and if they can find their identity in a show that they love, then that's great, let them do that. --Sophie*

It is currently uncertain as to whether this is an issue the queer fandom community will be able to resolve on its own through the establishment of community norms.

## **b. Ship Wars**



These struggles to reconcile different character identities can become especially acrimonious when wrapped up in a phenomenon fandom terms a “ship war.” Oftentimes, characters are paired with a number of different other characters romantically in fandom. As fans usually identify as a member of some subsection of a fandom using these identities, i.e. “I’m a member of the Clexa fandom of *The 100*,” competitions between different ships can get especially personal and bitter. Members of fandom who support different ships which cannot simultaneously exist (i.e. shipping the same female character with a male character or a female character) often resolve to using personal attacks to resolve their ideological differences.

*The 100 is one of the most divisive fandoms that I've ever encountered. There is a competing heterosexual ship for Clexa called Blarke. The drama is so great that the executive producer is aware of it and gets confronted with questions and hateful messages.*

*--Rae*

*The Swan Queen or the Once Upon A Time fandom is a hellhole of a fandom. It's awful. ...One of the other ships, which is sort of the bad boy turned good trope, a lot of those shippers really, really hate Swan Queen shippers because they view us as a threat.*

*--Riley*

As these quotes illustrate, the most spiteful ship wars generally occur when queer fandom and “mainstream” fandom, usually called het fandom, overlap. Because these two different subgroups of fandoms have differing norms regarding respecting others identities, it is common for queer fandom members to feel as if their personal identities are being invalidated by those who reject the queer interpretations of character with which they identify, in addition to the general hostility, abuse, and insults that accompany online disputes. However, it is not unheard of for the same issues to occur solely within queer fandom:

*But besides just het shippers, the Carmilla fandom has been especially hostile. This stemmed from a huge divide between*

*Hollence and Hollstein shippers [two different female/female pairings]. Hollstein shippers didn't really understand the fact that some people didn't ship the same thing as them, and I myself received a lot of anonymous hate for not shipping them. That's ultimately why I left the fandom. --Aimee*

These ship wars are an undeniably negative aspect of fandom which can sometimes drive its own members out.

## **E. Positive Mentorship**

### **a. Models for Questioning/Coming Out**

The community itself represents another important aspect of fandom through which younger queer members gain advice, respect, and validation. Queer fandom incorporates members who represent a large number of different points in the coming out process, from those who have only recently discovered their new identities to those who have identified as a queer person and a member of queer fandom for over a decade. These older, more established queer members often offer advice and aid to younger members, especially those just beginning the process of their own identity exploration:

*There's a lot of younger kids in these fandoms, like teenagers, and a lot of them are coming to terms with their identities or coming out. Sometimes people will ask for advice and I'll tell them what I can. I've gotten a few anonymous questions asking me how I knew I was gay, or how I came out. I always make it clear that I'm here if anyone needs advice or just someone to talk to on the matter, because I wish I had had someone to talk to when I was their age and figuring things out. --Aimee*

As early online communities researcher Howard Rheingold established in 1993, one of the primary demarcations that separate online hobby groups or those united by a common interest from online communities was groups that offered material or real world support to one another. [cite] These sorts of interactions in queer fandom where one member will seek out the advice of

another in establishing and becoming comfortable with their own identities is incredibly common, and it is mentioned by all participants as something they frequently see happening even if they do not participate in it themselves. These interactions can be literally life changing for the members who reach out in this way, seeking to find some way to reconcile their newer queer identities with their current lives and previous sense of selves. One participant puts it thusly:

*Fandom and fan fiction, and this really honestly and truly helped me fully blossom into my identity because before this I was very closeted, there were only specific people that I would admit this to. This community kind of helped me really own the fact that this is who I am, this is not a phase, and it's not going away, and I'm happier because I recognize that about myself. --Claire*

Finally, seeing others talking publically about their own coming out process can validate their own feelings and process.

*Being surrounded by other people who've had to come out and have their own stories means I don't really feel embarrassed talking about it. --CJ*

The end result of this process is a positive feedback loop which allows for more young queer members to feel comfortable with their identities and openly discussing them, which increases the visibility of the phenomenon and allows a message of positivity and acceptance to reach even more of those who need to hear it.

#### **b. Models for Behavior in Fandom**

Beyond serving as models for the entire coming out process, older, more established fan community members often serve as models for the norms and practices of fandom behavior.

*It's a mindset that is cultivated online: that we are here to celebrate creativity, to do our own thing, and enjoy it, be happy about it, so I'm thinking I would attribute the peacefulness of*

*fandoms to this mutual understanding. We teach each other to be respectful. --Less*

Many older fans consciously fight against the more toxic fandom community practices that have been mentioned earlier in the paper. As they have more established identities which are less vulnerable to suffering invalidation through fandom practices, they realize the value of allowing younger members to freely experiment without retribution.

*I believe that when you are older you are sort of at peace with the fact that you can separate yourself from this pressure to cater to men. It's not that vitally important to you to make that claim. Then it's easier to navigate. The stakes are lower for you because you're more settled. --Mia*

By teaching younger community members not only about the norms of the community itself but how to improve those norms, the general level of fandom respectfulness and positivity also improves over time. Many fans mention former negative aspects of fandom, such as pushback against slash or femslash ships or the prevalence of bi-phobia, which have been mitigated or eradicated due to this slow mentorship process of learning what is and is not appropriate fandom behavior.

### **c. Recognition of Others**

Finally, simply seeing other queer people, especially those with the same identity that they themselves have, can be incredibly empowering for younger fans who do not have positive queer models in their own communities to look up to.

*There are so many different identities, and it can be so easy to feel alone. So actually getting to see that you aren't, and that there are other people like you, can be a very powerful thing. --Olivia*

*People share a lot of the details of their everyday lives on tumblr and sometimes it's really mundane detail. Similar to going to college and seeing people walking around living all of their*

*different lives, fandom sort of made me realize that things are possible, that a trans identity might be possible in a country that did not seem possible before. –Elise*

For those without clear queer role models, the internet is often the only place in which they have the ability to observe the lives of other queer people and see that this is a valid identity that can lead to a happy life. Even the older, more established members can benefit from this informal mentor relationship:

*In some ways, helping others actually helps me because it validates how I've chosen to identify myself, actually. Other people who believe they're asexual have the same experiences as I have, which is kind of nice to know. –CJ*

## **F. Negative Mentorship**

### **a. Dividing by Identities**

A negative aspect of the community identifying with others who share their own identity is that it can lead to the queer fandom community becoming fractured along identity lines. Not only does this lead to a more splintered community, it can lead to infighting among different groups and a degradation of respect for each other's identities.

*I've seen some of these lesbians be total shit-holes to trans women and it's not okay. If the fandom could be a little less divided by sexual identity that would be great. –Rae*

This hostility and lack of respect for one another can cause queer fandom itself to invalidate one another's identities. This is incredibly harmful, because as previously discussed, queer fandom can be one of the few safe and visible places for its members to receive said validation. As one participant says, if members cannot find respect in the queer community, there can be few others places for them to turn:

*[On non-traditional gender identities] I think that's definitely something that's difficult for people to accept. Even people in the LGBT community, which makes it much more difficult for the people who identify like that because, since my sexuality is so common in the LGBT community, I am pretty easily accepted by other queer people, but if your identity isn't more common in the LGBT community, sometimes it's difficult to find acceptance even there. If you can't find it in that community then there is almost no place you can find it. --Sophie*

#### **b. Toxic Community Outcry**

In the same way that members of fandom can serve as role models for positive behavior, they can also serve as role models for negative behavior. Because queer fandom is an online community, it suffers from many of the same negative behavior patterns found in other online communities.

*[One particular fandom] We have a lot of harassment problems, especially in a fandom of people getting death threats, people getting hacked, people getting threatened, just harassed and harassed and harassed and being told to kill themselves. --Riley*

Because of the nature of anonymity and the internet itself, there can often be few recourses for those who suffer such abuse at the hands of fellow fans besides leaving fandom entirely. Though patterns of positive mentorship can sometimes alleviate this in the long term, in the short term little can be done except trying not to engage.

*Sometimes I think fandom takes things too seriously. If someone, say, makes a post that you don't agree with on tumblr and it's not tagged, it's better sometimes to just leave each other alone. Discussion and debate is important but only if both sides are open to listening. Otherwise it's just yelling and that makes things less welcoming for everyone. --CJ*

#### **c. Overwhelming Individual Narratives**

A final negative issue that can occur within the structure of queer fandom mentorship is individuals who have their own personal experiences and narrative overwhelmed by the collective consciousness of what “being queer” looks and feels like. For those like participant Mia, having a different experience of the coming out process means that much of the traditional queer narrative, advice, and stories do not apply to her:

*Because there is this huge narrative you'd say, in culture in general. That discovering you're not straight is dramatic in some way. It wasn't a dramatic moment for me, more like things coming together. –Mia*

In addition, young queer fans who naturally feel the desire to model themselves after their friends and other fans can feel pressured to align with certain identities they do not truly identify as in order to fit in among the community.

*I just think it's very easy to fall into the whole social peer-pressure, "I have to have this identity because everybody else I've read on Tumblr has this particular narrative that I must adhere to." –Izzy*

Though such issues would naturally tend to resolve themselves as these younger members mature and grow more comfortable with themselves, the pressure to conform to a certain depiction of the “queer narrative” can certainly invalidate the experiences of some individual members whose personal narrative differs significantly.

## **G. Positive Education**

### **a. Education Regarding Non-Traditional Identities**

The fan community also serves as an important source of information and education for its members, especially regarding subjects like queer studies and identities. Fanfiction itself serves as a common method through which new fandom members learn of identities that they did not previously know existed.

*When I first started writing on Archive of Our Own, there were like 2 stories with asexual characters. Now, it's an expansive tag and it's a subgenre of stuff because people have been educating each other within the community about what it's like and just raising awareness, so I definitely think that education within fandom is a very big thing. --Savannah*

*I didn't even know about the whole romantic orientation divide until I was probably 16 when I was having my "Oh gosh, do I like girls" crisis. I've never heard of nonbinary 'til last year, or any other genders that weren't cis or trans. I think that just by reading it in fan fiction, people will have discovered it sooner and open their minds up to more identities because if they never see it and they're never exposed to it, then they have no point or reference for it. They don't even know that it exists. --Savannah*

This sort of education in particular is vitally important for queer members of fandom who are still trying to determine their identities. If members do not know that a label for their particular identity exists, they cannot use it and they cannot connect with others who identify the same way to discuss and validate their own experiences. One participant explicitly says that she would not have found the asexual label or have been able to understand and identify as it without the aid of fandom.

*The asexuality thing is kind of still a little bit new to me, but it was definitely the fandom community that kind of helped me realize that that might even be something. --Claire*

Finally, fans can also utilize the experiences of other members of fandom themselves to learn about alternative gender and sexuality identities from the people themselves who identify as them.

*If I want to see people who have demi-gender experience, I can find that on Tumblr, where I could never find that before. I think Tumblr has both facilitated and, just independent of that, been present for lots of evolution and transformation of sex and gender identity. --Izzy*

## **b. Sexual Education**



The community of older queer fandom members also often serves as educators for younger members regarding sexual education, a resource they can rarely find anywhere else. As participant Rae states:

*There are not a lot of resources for people, especially young queer people, to learn about sex that involves them. There just really aren't. Society doesn't consider it important to discuss those things in schools, parents don't think it's important to discuss those things with their children, usually, and you need to see healthy, consensual sexual relationships modeled for you so that you can have a healthy relationship yourself. I've kind of found myself in a role online of a sex educator about things like consent, kink, BDSM, polyamory, and the things that society doesn't want to talk about. --Rae*

Fandom members are extremely cognizant of the fact that their status as minority sexual identities often leaves those just discovering their identities few trustworthy places to obtain information about themselves, especially in more sensitive areas such as sexual education.

Community members have purposely attempted to fill this gap.

*I think that that education should be a much bigger emphasis [in fandom] because that's not something that they're ever going to learn in school. I think that if we're going to have younger members of the community, that if they can't talk to their parents about it or they can't talk to anybody at school about it, where else are they going to go? --Claire*

Sexual education can be transmitted in the form of blog posts reiterating safe sex practices, but oftentimes fans find it easier and more effective to transfer such information using fanfiction. In a genre of fiction that so often focuses upon the development and progress of romantic relationships, scenes with sexual are extremely common and usually viewed as a natural progression of the story. Many of the participants discuss how they were extremely conscious of the sex practices they wrote into such scenes in their fanfictions:

*The smut scene that I wrote was written very intentionally to not be problematic and to model what sex should be. It should be fun and awkward at times because that's a really weird thing to do if you actually think about it and you should be able to laugh with your partner. --Elizabeth*

Fanfiction authors like Elizabeth know very well that these may be the practices younger queer members model their own, real life sexual practices upon and so do their best to educate through their fanfiction itself.

### **c. Creating a Safe Space**

The queer fandom community fulfills another unique role for its members by acting as a safe place for personal identity exploration and education.

*Creating a safe space for the younger generation to explore and creating a safe space for them to ask questions and for them to get answers is I think vitally important, especially on the internet. A lot of them don't have it in real life. They don't have anywhere to go in real life. To create that safe space on the internet where they feel safe about experimenting, whether it's just in their writing or talking or trying on new pronouns. They want to be start being addressed with these pronouns, creating that safe space for people where their internet friends will respect that is I think important.—  
Riley*

Even in communities where queer fandom members do not have to fear personal retribution for publicly identifying as a gender minority, individuals can feel uncomfortable asking all of their friends and family to speak to them differently when they may not be completely settled into an identity yet. The internet in general and the queer fandom part of the internet specifically allows those still attempting to define their identities to try new labels or pronouns at will, free of judgment. As nearly all of the members of fandom are queer and have experienced such fluctuations in identity during the coming out process themselves, they intimately understand the necessity for an individual to identify as a nonbinary person with they/them pronouns in one

week and a transgender girl with she/her pronouns the next. As Izzy states, the freedom to identify as “I’m not sure yet” is one of the most important benefits fandom affords its members:

*I think there's a lot more room for fluidity, and there's a lot more room for people to be like, "I don't know." I think saying, "I don't know" in response is totally okay, now. At least it's more okay, and there are more people on the internet who are like, "I feel that, that's cool." -Izzy*

An identity cannot be settled upon without some modicum of acceptance and respect for the label chosen, and the queer fandom community provides that all-inclusive acceptance without fear of discrimination.

*The real world might not be prepared to accept all these trends, but at least here, online, we are building the kind of world we would like to live in outside of it, welcoming to everyone. --Less*

#### **d. Finding a Queer Community**

Finally, the queer fandom community most clearly provides a place where queer members can find a community of their own. Though this may seem like an obvious and therefore unimportant benefit, the lack of visibility of queer identity especially in locations wherein publically identifying as queer would be unsafe can make it incredible difficult for queer individuals to find a community wherein they are a majority rather than a minority. Very few real life social structures exist explicitly for queer people and queer people only to help them build a community. However, in fandom, where one can publicly label themselves as queer in their blog descriptions without fear of reprisal, finding or building a community of fellow queer people can be as simple as following a favorite queer fanfiction author or leaving a message in another’s inbox asking them about their own experiences.

*I cannot overstate how great it is that internet provides the opportunity to talk about it, to form queer communities. It helps to unite people internationally, and provides an outlet for people*

*living in places where you cannot talk about such things publicly. It provides a platform for people with anxiety who could have never talked or even listened to such things publicly. --Less*

*For people who weren't as lucky as I was, the internet's fucking great, because there are people who get it, and there are people who want to help you, and there are people who want to be there for you and people who want to see you okay. The internet makes it a little bit less lonely, I guess you could say. -Azy*

Though the members of queer fandom can hail from a variety of countries, backgrounds, or viewpoints, they all share a significant part of their personal identity in common that elevates the community from mere social interaction to a vital point of human connection that members usually have great difficulty finding anywhere else. Having these shared identities or experiences in common helps create a community wherein those who usually consider themselves to be the minority, or the strange stray lesbian who does not fit in, or the only queer person they know, can instead be one of many in a community dedicated to being a safe and welcoming place for them.

*I think that most of us have come from a really bad background where we know what it's like to be rejected, and we've kind of formed our own little family, even though not all of us know each other's names, not all of us follow each other, there is still a sense of community of being with other people who have gone through the same things that you have, and know what it's like. Knowing you're not alone is a very powerful thing. -Sophie*

## **H. Negative Education**

### **a. Aggressive/Hostile Education**

Of course, no community is perfect, and the fandom community has its own issues in the areas of member education. One that is more commonly mentioned by participants is the issue of educating members in a harmful or hostile way.

*Sometimes on Tumblr you're in such an isolated little pocket of acceptance that you forget how the rest of the world works. You can kind of forget that not everyone is as educated and exposed as*

*you are. Then if someone who is not as educated and exposed accidentally crosses your path, they might say something offensive without meaning to just because they're not educated. Then the reaction on Tumblr, especially since Tumblr, especially since Tumblr is such a young demographic, is essentially to just insult that person. I think it can drive them away from the movement. --*

Rae

This issue especially presents itself when conflated with the age divide that often permeates fandom. Although the circumstance of decades-old veterans and days-old newly queer-identifying teenagers can lead to incredibly rewarding mentoring relationships between the two, it can also lead to older members losing patience when teaching younger generations the lessons they themselves learned years ago. As one participant states:

*On Tumblr, there are people of all ages interacting with each other without necessarily understanding that it's a 27-year-old interacting with a 14-year-old. There are some things, like differences and like age and therefore knowledge, that aren't talked about. I think sometimes kids writing in for the advice that isn't obviously from a young person sometimes get advice that's not necessarily appropriate for a young person. That's potentially problematic. --Elizabeth*

One participant even personally experienced this phenomenon in her early days in fandom.

*I got into this really dumb exchange and I don't even remember what it was about, but I was really young, so I said stupid things, I'm sure. I'm sure that I was an idiot, but afterward I was so ashamed of myself because I got worked over, essentially, by this other person that was 5, 6, maybe even 10 years my senior, I don't even remember, because I wasn't allowed to make that mistake. --*

Claire

Nearly all participants specifically mentioned or alluded to this issue within fandom, which might lead to norms alleviating such concerns in the future. Nevertheless, at the time of this study, it is still a very real and pressing issue within fandom that can drive potential members away.

## **b. Incorrect Education**

A final issue inherent to the process of queer fandom educating its members is that not all information given is helpful or even accurate.

*One problem I see happening is that someone will ask someone else a question, and really the person answering the question probably shouldn't have been the first person to go to. I feel like a lot of the time the people who are asking these questions have no knowledge, like they did no other research. I feel like asking one particular person and nodding with what they say isn't the best strategy to find out any information. --Madison*

Many members of internet communities in general notoriously rarely confirms the validity of their own information, leaving individuals to determine where the falsehoods and gaps in their education lie. This can be especially dangerous in fandom, where members are educating others on incredibly important topics such as what it means to identify using a particular label and safe sex practices.

*But that conversation [about safe sex practices] isn't written into the fic, so then you get these fics that you can't tell if it's abuse or BDSM because you don't have that context for it. I worry that that would lead to really unsafe practices with people who aren't familiar with BDSM who think that that's okay without having had that conversation because they never see that conversation happen. --Elizabeth*

Although this issue is an undeniably negative aspect of fandom education, the lack of other reliable or professional options for many queer fans leaves no reasonable alternative source of education for such individuals.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to attempt to identify what makes queer fandom an unusually accepting space for its members that allows them to freely explore and define their identities in a way that few other methods offer. To achieve a parallel between this section and the results section, the discussion will be split between the medium of fanfiction and the medium of the queer fan community.

### A. Fanfiction

As the interviews with these participants show, queer fanfiction that features queer female and nonbinary characters is almost exclusively written by members who identify in the same or similar ways. Such fiction usually includes positive, empowering representations of relationships that normalize and validate queerness for younger, newer, or vulnerable queer readers. This stems from authors who tend to explicitly write such narratives to aid these individuals, knowing that these were the stories that they needed to read during their own coming out processes. Several participants mention being able to immediately identify queer fanfiction that was not written by queer-identifying members; the effect of these representations can range from harmlessly ignored to actively toxic for the individuals they inaccurately represent. However, the vast majority of such fanfiction, especially the fiction that is popular and well-regarded within the fan community, is either written by individuals who identify in the same way as their character or those who expend exceptional effort to consult those who do to ensure that such representations are accurate and beneficial.

In addition, reading and especially writing fanfiction is a low-risk method for individuals beginning or in the midst of their coming out process to explore new identities. Writing a

fanfiction in which a character identifies as transgender in order to determine whether those experiences align with one's own or even to explore the "fit" of using the label is an incredibly safe and widely available practice. Writing a story in which a character explains their new pronouns to their family is infinitely safer and less intimidating than having such a conversation with real family members and friends. Such alternatives are vital to young queer people for whom the coming out experience is often traumatizing even with such methods.

Finally, a significant portion of what makes fanfiction unique and an entirely different experience for participants than writing original fiction or reading published fiction is the community surrounding fanfiction. It is difficult to summarize the uplifting effects the community surrounding fanfiction has upon its members. Fandom's built-in preexisting audience for stories encourages young writers to continue writing and take risks that they otherwise might not have. Simply having access to an archive with thousands of stories in which fan favorite characters act out queer stories, knowing that these stories are primarily written by other fans who identify as queer, can have an extremely powerful and sometimes literally life-altering effects for young, vulnerable queer fans. There is a type of acceptance and validation that can only be found through observing others happily living out queer lifestyles in a manner remarkable similar to one's own. The fanfiction of the queer community not only provides that, it explicitly encourages its members to create more of it, infinitely, for every new character or television show or gender or sexual identity that enters the world. This creates an endless positive feedback loop wherein positive representations of queer characters allows and encourages real queer people to become comfortable with their own identities, to join the community of queer fans, and to eventually aid in the creation of similar portrayals to pass on that representation to the next generation of fans.



## **B. Fandom Community**

The queer fandom community is what truly makes the experiences of its members truly positive and affirming. Because the community is comprised of almost entirely queer members, nearly every member of the community knows first-hand the struggle to define and come to terms with one's own identity. Thus, these members are not only superbly qualified to help new members along their own journeys, but they also have the motivation to do so because of their intimate knowledge of this internal conflict. The resources of the knowledge and experience of older fans is invaluable to younger members who are often encountering the most difficult time of their lives with nowhere else to turn.

Even after the initial struggle of the coming out process has passed, younger queer members still need role models to visualize how to safely and happily live and love as a queer person in a primarily heterosexual world. As long as mainstream representation and visibility of queer people is still lacking, it will still be vitally important that younger members of queer fandom have older members to model themselves upon. However, these older, established fans do more than teach younger members how to "be" queer and be proud of it. They also teach newer members how to behave in fandom and how to communicate and interact productively within this specific community. They can educate members regarding vital societal norms and utilize their wisdom to attempt to mitigate the issues and negativity that the fandom community often faces from within. As such knowledge is passed down and eventually implemented, some harms can be lessened or eradicated altogether, even if new ones eventually arise to take their place.

The queer fandom community gains much of these strengths from its somewhat distinctive status as an online community in which nearly every member has the same goal. Every fan has the same goal of celebrating the merits of their favorite media, even if the media itself differs.

Similarly, every queer member of the community knows the power of positive queer representation and tries their utmost to achieve that in the fiction they create. Finally, all the older fans intimately understand the necessity of a community that puts aiding its own members through their uniquely queer struggles above all else, having almost assuredly relied on such support in the past to endure their own struggles. Though individual members and subgroups may disagree, sometimes vehemently, on what exactly can be called “empowering” representation or even how to best help a member who is suffering, they all understand and agree upon the founding principle that such actions are good and necessary. These common goals allow fandom to work as a positive, uplifting space for its members in a way that few other online communities can.

### **C. Negativity**

Even the most avid proponents of the benefits of the queer fandom community admit that there are still many issues within the community that have yet to be resolved. Such issues as undesirable or harmful representation, the occasional toxicity of the community, and overbearing or even hostile education can drive away new and established members alike with their negativity. As previously established, queer fandom fulfills a number of vital roles for its members and so cannot afford to exclude those who may need it the most. The anonymity intrinsic to these such internet communities can do as much harm as good when wielded as a weapon. However, such issues are inherent to all internet communities, and so fandom is no exception. Fandom must also resolve the inevitable crashes of a community with new members constantly joining who must learn all of the specific norms of their new community, sometimes in a painful manner.

And finally, queer fandom must face many cultural clashes from within and without. In a community with so many races, nationalities, and gender and sexual identities represented, such fractions are almost unavoidable. Though each fan wants to see themselves represented, it is much easier for some fans than others to obtain the positive representation they crave, due to often unconscious cultural, societal, and racial biases. However, on the whole, these clashes tend to only occur when one subgroup encounters another with a different, opposed goal. This explanation would explain the phenomenon that many participants explicitly note of heterosexual vs. homosexual ship wars being much more vitriolic and personal than homosexual vs. homosexual ship wars. When heterosexual and queer fans attempt to claim the same character as representation, they cannot both be simultaneously represented. A character can only enter a monogamous relationship with another that is either the same gender or a different one. Though all queer fans can recognize some part of their own journey or identity in a character that identifies as any part of the LGBTQIA acronym, for heterosexual fans, a character identifying as queer would automatically make them somehow Other and thus unable to represent themselves. It is difficult to devise a solution that can achieve fulfilment for these two separate groups with such diametrically opposed goals, and thus this will most likely be an issue that queer fandom and fandom as a whole continues to struggle with for years to come.

#### **D. Conclusions**

The most distinctive aspect of the queer fandom community is that nearly all of its members share some fundamental part of their individual identity in common that elevates it from a group of humans with an interest in common to a group that usually shares the same core values and goals in this specific space and thus work together to achieve it. There is no better person to understand the needs of such a minority community than the members of the community

themselves. The incredibly positive and empowering effects of fandom that participants consistently identify is a strong argument to justify the necessity of such queer minority communities being able to design and govern themselves. Because these members all desire the same affirmation, validation, and acceptance from this community, they know how to create ideal representations and models for themselves in a way that non-queer people are fundamentally incapable of. This common, shared understanding and mutual goal causes fandom to fulfill nearly of the queer identity-related needs of its members to a degree and effectiveness that few other spaces can claim.

Finally, one unique ability afforded to queer fandom through its structure as an internet community that is not shared by many other queer communities is its ability to freely exclude allies without any negative consequences. Communities with the explicit goal of aiding and supporting queer members that exist outside of the internet, such as Gay-Straight Alliances, almost always must allow allies to be a part of the community. These communities need to permit allies entrance because it is usually the only way to afford new members personal safety and anonymity before they are fully ready to embrace their queer identities. In addition, many such organization are tied to larger societal structures such as schools or business that cannot allow affiliated organizations to discriminate members based upon gender or sexual identity. In queer fandom, however, structures for anonymity are built in to the software and social media platforms through which the communities interact. In addition, non-queer identifying people often have no need or desire to participate in a community so focused on issues and needs only relevant to queer people. The few heterosexual fans who do participate rarely have their voices privileged by the queer members of fandom over other queer people, and thus their arguably less worthwhile opinions are often drowned out by the sheer overwhelming number of genuinely

queer voices within the community. Though the researcher suspects that this aspect of fandom drastically changes the social landscape of the community in a way that makes it unique among queer organizations, more research would need to be done to confirm this theory as accurate.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

In summary, the queer fandom community represents an unparalleled online queer community that fulfills many of its members' needs for representation, exploration, mentorship, and queer community in one singular package. Much of this stems from its status as a community comprised almost entirely of queer members who intimately understand one another's struggles and desire to aid them along their queer journeys, having almost certainly once experienced similar strife themselves. Though participants interviewed all agree fandom is not perfect, the overwhelming positive language and gratitude used to refer to queer fanfic and fan community is undeniable proof that in many cases queer fandom helps its members far, far more often than it harms them.

Future work building off of this study should attempt to explore several questions that arise from the conclusions of this work. Firstly, the queer fandom community should be compared and contrasted with other explicitly queer communities that exist online. This would allow scholars to identify the particular aspects of queer fandom that make it unique and what traits successful online queer communities usually share. In addition, queer fandom should be contrasted with the norms, practices, and results of real world communities that exist explicitly to aid young queer people as they struggle with many of the issues related to identity explored in this study. In the case that one would offer some sort of benefit or advantage that the other does not, researchers could study how to influence one form of community with the qualities of the other, or even attempt to combine the two for maximum effectiveness. Finally, a unique opportunity has recently presented itself to study the incredible potential impact of fandom when studied on a societal rather than individual scale.

As mentioned previously in the study, during the recruitment process, one of the mainstream commercial shows that many participants and other members of the queer community admired for their seeming dedication to positive queer female representation abruptly and brutally killed one of their queer female characters. This event sent negative shockwaves throughout the queer fandom community. Even those who did not identify as part of The 100 fandom experienced the period of trauma, mourning, and loss of faith that Lexa's death caused. Though many queer female characters have been killed off in a similar or even exact parallel manner over the years in media, this death struck the fandom community particularly harshly because it occurred on a show that previously consciously courted a queer audience with well-above average representation and was aimed at teenagers who were most likely to personally identify with and admire sixteen year old Lexa, Commander of the Thirteen Clans.

However, this event has incited change and a call to action on a level never before seen in fandom. Many members of the community seem determined to band together to ensure that Lexa's death was one of the last sudden, derivative murders of a queer character to advance an overarching plot. Fans have utilized methods from twitter hashtag trending campaigns to confronting show creators at fan conventions they attend. [CITE] These efforts have been somewhat successful in driving down the ratings and viewership of the show, and some advertisers have even pulled themselves from the show due to the efforts of the fan community. As this movement is only several months old, scholars will need to closely follow it during the months and years to come to study how fandom can have as incredibly positive effect on the world around them as it does upon its own members individually.

**Commented [S2]:** ...I have no idea how to end this thesis after that.

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## APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY OF FANDOM TERMS<sup>3</sup>

**/:** Two letters separated by a / in the title or description of a story usually means that it's about romance between two characters whose names start with these letters. Example: "A/D" = "Alice/Derek" or Alice and Derek are the pairing. The downside to the use of single letters (and even double letters) is that sometimes figuring out who those characters are can be tricky if you don't know the fandom well. The word slash comes from this practice.

**AU:** Alternative universe: A piece that diverges from established canon history. Examples of Alternate Universes include a Star Trek story set in a universe ruled by the Borg, a Lord of the Rings story exploring what might have happened had Galadriel given in to the temptation of the One Ring and made herself Dark Empress of Middle Earth, or an Inuyasha story in which the characters are students in an American high school.

**Anon:** Refers to the process of talking online without revealing your identity. Often used to describe those who will send Tumblr "asks" (short paragraphs) anonymously.

**Beta:** Beta reader: A person who critiques a story for an author. The critique normally examines the following parts of a piece: grammar, spelling, characterizations, plot, similarities to canon, and language. Essentially an editor.

**Canon:** Established history and characterizations of the show, movie or book. Much of canon is open to interpretation based on a viewer's perceptions and what is canon will differ from fandom to fandom. For example, when a book is turned into a movie, usually the book would be considered canon.

**Carmilla:** A webseries adaptation, produced by Youtube channel KindaTV, of the Gothic novella *Carmilla* by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu. It is popular among queer fandom because it features three canonically queer women in a love triangle alongside another character who explicitly identifies as genderqueer with they/them pronouns.

**Challenge:** An idea given out by a reader that encourages and tests authors to write a piece with the ideas listed. Sometimes challenges are part of a contest and the ideas are in fact a set of rules.

**FF:** See: Fanfiction.

**Fic:** See: Fanfiction.

**Fanfiction:** Original fiction by fans of a show, movie, books or video game. The fiction involves characters and the location of the show from which the person is a fan. Fans write fan fiction for a variety of reasons. One of the most popular reasons is to explore themes and ideas that will not or cannot be explored on the show, movie, book or video game. Often written without permission of the original creators, though without any intention for profit.

**Fandom:** 1. 2. The entire community of fans devoted to a particular person or work.

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<sup>3</sup> Many term definitions adapted from [Dictionary of Fanfiction Terminology](#). Other term definitions were adapted from the author's years of personal experience within the studied community.

**Fanon:** Things that are not strictly canon, but do not contradict it and are widely accepted by most fans. For instance if most fans just accept that Megabyte's middle name is Archibald, even though it is not expressly canon, it becomes fanon

**Femslash:** This designation means that the piece will feature a romantic or sexual relationship between two women.

**Het:** Stands for heterosexual. A heterosexual fan fiction (het fic) has a romantic relationship between two characters of the opposite sex.

**Pairing:** Any combination of characters who are romantically and/or sexually involved, either from established continuity or (more likely) desired together by fans. The term is often interchangeable with "ship".

**OTP:** The One True Pairing, the pairing that stands above all others as your most beloved (in this canon, at least). Example: "Arthur/Eames is my OTP." The triad version is OT3.

**RPF:** See: Real person fic.

**Real person fic:** Fan fiction featuring real people in fictional events, relationships, etc.

**Ship:** Short for "relationship." A romantic pairing. Ship can also be used as a verb, e.g. "I ship Alicia/Kalinda."

**Shipper:** A fan who supports a certain romantic pairing.

**Slash:** A piece with the central theme, plot or characterizations involving a romantic or sexual relationship between two members of the same sex.

**Smut:** A piece that has sexual content. Smut has many levels. Some smut pieces may have scenes with sexual intercourse. Some smut pieces may not.

**The 100:** A sci-fi television show produced by the CW. It is particularly popular in queer fandom because two of the main characters were explicitly queer women in a canonical relationship with one another.

## APPENDIX B: GLOSSARY OF LGBTQIA TERMS<sup>4</sup>

**Ace:** A sexual orientation label referencing asexuality. Sometimes called the “Ace Umbrella” to represent the wide spectrum of asexual identities and experiences. See also: Asexuality

**Agender:** 1. not identifying with any gender, the feeling of having no gender. 2. Having a gender identity, which isn't female or male, but neutral.

**Ally:** 1. Someone who confronts heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, heterosexual and cisgender privilege in themselves and others; 2. A concern for the well being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, and intersex people; 3. A person who believes that heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are social justice issues; A person who identifies with the privileged group.

**Aro:** See Aromantic.

**Aromantic:** individuals who do not experience romantic attraction toward individuals of any gender(s). See: Romantic Attraction.

**Arospec:** Identifying on the Aromantic spectrum. See: Aromantic.

**Asexual:** 1. A sexual orientation where a person does not experience sexual attraction or desire to partner for the purposes of sexual stimulation; 2. a spectrum of sexual orientations where a person may be disinclined towards sexual behavior or sexual partnering. See also: Ace.

**BDSM (Bondage, Discipline/Domination, Submission/Sadism, Masochism):** The terms “submission/sadism” refer to deriving pleasure from inflicting pain, often in a sexual context. “Masochism” refers to deriving pleasure from receiving pain, often in a sexual context. The terms “bondage” and “domination” refer to playing with various power roles, in both sexual and social contexts. These practices are often misunderstood as abusive, but when practiced in a safe, sane, and consensual manner, can be part of a healthy sex life.

**Biromantic:** romantic attraction toward males and females. See: Romantic Orientation.

**Bisexual:** A person emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to more than one gender. This attraction does not have to be equally split between genders, and there may be a preference for one gender over others.

**Bi-phobia:** The fear, hatred, or intolerance of people who identify or are perceived as bisexual.

**Cisgender:** A person whose gender identity is aligned to what they were designated at birth, based on their physical sex; 2) A non-trans\* person.

**Coming Out:** The process by which one accepts one’s own sexuality, gender identity, or intersex status (to come out to oneself); 2)The process by which one shares one’s sexuality,

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<sup>4</sup> Many term definitions adapted from [https://lgbt.wisc.edu/documents/Trans\\_and\\_queer\\_glossary.pdf](https://lgbt.wisc.edu/documents/Trans_and_queer_glossary.pdf). Other term definitions adapted from explanations participants gave during interviews.

gender identity, or intersex status with others (to come out to friends, etc.). This can be a continual, life-long process for homosexual, bisexual, trans\*, and intersex people.

**Demigender:**

**Demisexual:** Those who do not experience primary sexual attraction but may experience secondary sexual attraction after a close emotional connection has already formed.

**Gay:** 1. Term used to refer to homosexual / same gender loving communities as a whole, or as an individual identity label for anyone who does not identify as heterosexual; 2. Term used in some cultural settings to specifically represent male identified people who are attracted to other male identified people in a romantic, erotic, and/or emotional sense.

**Gender Dysphoria:** 1. Description of emotional or mental dissonance between one's desired concept of their body and what their body actually is, especially in reference to body parts/features that do not align or promote to one's gender identity; 2. A term used in psychiatry to refer to the incongruence between an individual's designated birth sex and their gender identity, with marked dissociation from one's physical body.

**Gender Identity:** An individual's internal sense of being male, female, both, neither, or something else. Since gender identity is internal, one's gender identity is not necessarily visible to others

**Genderfluid:** A gender identity where a person identifies as 1. neither or both female and male; 2. Experiences a range of femaleness and maleness, with a denoted movement or flow between genders; 3. Consistently experiences their gender identity outside of the gender binary.

**Heteronormativity:** Lifestyle norm that insists that people fall into distinct genders (male and female), and naturalizes heterosexual coupling as the norm.

**Heterosexual:** A person emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to people of different sex or gender.

**Homosexual:** A person emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to the people of their same sex or gender.

**Intersex:** One who is born with sex chromosomes, external genitalia, and/or an internal reproductive system that is not considered "standard" or normative for either the male or female sex. Preferred term to hermaphrodite.

**Kink:**

**LGBTQPIA:** Acronym representing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Pansexual, Intersex, Asexual, Ally. Often seen as LGBT or LGBTQ. Lesbian: Term used to describe female identified people attracted romantically, erotically, and/or emotionally to other female identified people.

**Non-Binary:** Describes a gender identity that is neither female nor male; 2) Gender identities that are outside of or beyond two traditional concepts of male or female. See also: Genderqueer, Fluid, Polygender.

**Pansexual:** 1. A sexual orientation where a person desires sexual partners based on personalized attraction to specific physical traits, bodies, identities, and/or personality features which may or may not be aligned to the gender and sex binary; 2. A sexual orientation signifying a person who has potential emotional, physical, and/or sexual attraction to any sex, gender identity or gender expression; 3. Sexual orientation associated with desiring/loving a person's personality primarily, and specific bodily features secondarily.

**Polyamory:**

**Queer:** 1. An umbrella term representative of the vast matrix of identities outside of the gender normative and heterosexual or monogamous majority. Reclaimed after a history of pejorative use, starting in the 1980s; 2. An umbrella term denoting a lack of normalcy in terms of one's sexuality, gender, or political ideologies in direct relation to sex, sexuality, and gender.

**Questioning:** A person is in the process of questioning or analyzing their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

**Romantic Orientation:** Describes an individual's pattern of romantic attraction based on a person's gender(s) regardless of one's sexual orientation. For individuals who experience sexual attraction, their sexual orientation and romantic orientation are often in alignment (i.e. they experience sexual attraction toward individuals of the same gender(s) as the individuals they are interested in forming romantic relationships with).

**Trans\*:** Umbrella term, originated from Transgender (see below). Used to denote the increasingly wide spectrum of identities within the gender variant spectrum. The asterisk is representative of the widest notation of possible trans\* identities. Aimed at promoting unification among gender variant communities by placing focus on gender transgression over specific identity labels, genders, or bodies.