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Normalizing the Deviance: The Creation, Politics, and Consumption of Sexual Orientation and
Gender Identities in Online Fan Communities

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Normalizing the Deviance: The Creation, Politics, and Consumption of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identities in Online Fan Communities

Abstract: Communities of fan producers have been creating and consuming works labeled deviant by both laypeople and academics for decades. Fan producers take the popular media they enjoy and rewrite it to fit their needs and desires. Online, these fan producers have found a new space to re-write what it means to be normative. These fan producers often write about slash, which depicts homosexual relationships as normal, and genderswap, which plays with the idea of gender by physically switching characters' sex. Understanding how norms are created within fan productions can help us understand how norms are created more broadly. Through content analysis, a series of interviews (n = 26), and a survey (n = 224), of fan producers directly, this study gains a better understand of these producers' motivations for producing fan works.

Keywords: norms, fanfiction, fan producers, online communities, doing gender

Since Durkheim wrote his groundbreaking work *Suicide* in 1897, sociologists have been profoundly aware of the importance of community and society on shaping individual actions. In *Suicide*, Durkheim painstakingly outlined why psychological explanations are insufficient in explaining the reasons people commit suicide (1951). He then described the social and cultural influences on suicidal behaviors. Durkheim outlined a type of examination that goes beyond psychological influences and begins to examine social and cultural influences on individual behavior. The type of examination that Durkheim outlined is important for all areas of sociological study, not only those which affect life and death. Durkheim's approach is also important in understanding what motivates current social groups to create and define norms within their social circles. Durkheim's sociological approach is integral to studying online communities and communities that have formed around popular media and popular icons. As I will explain, communities of fan producers are often cast as psychologically different from greater society. However, harkening back to Durkheim's seminal sociological work, one can see that psychological explanations are insufficient to understand why fans create.

I have designed this study to understand why communities of "fanfiction" authors are formed around popular media. I have taken a sociological approach to answering this question. Fanfiction is a body of writing created by fans of another author's work (e.g. the *Twilight* novels) which is based on that original work.¹ As I will explain below, past studies of fanfiction have not adequately explained what motivates fanfiction authors and other types of fan producers to create in part because they have not truly acknowledged the power that community has to influence individual actions. This study attempts to expand on past scholars' work by examining fan producers as a whole, including fan authors, artists, and other fan creators to better understand how norms are created through the process of "doing" fanfiction. My interest in this topics stems

¹ For example, a published fanfiction is the play "Wicked" which is based on "The Wizard of Oz."

from an early interest in fanfiction as an author. During my middle school and high school years I was active in the fan community and wrote several genres of fanfictions during this time, including “slash” and “femslash” which I will describe later. During my post-secondary schooling I discovered that few scholars had taken an interest in fan works, and those who did presented a picture that did not match my own experiences within the fan community. I resolved to further scholars’ collective knowledge of fan productions and to present the interpretations of multiple fans, not simply my own interpretations.

In order to adequately explain why fan producers create we must also understand what they are creating. There is a large amount of dissimilarity within genres such as "fanfiction" or "fan art," just as there is a large amount of dissimilarity within the original works these fans enjoy. Just as we cannot directly compare “Les Miserables” to “The Hangover,” so too can we not directly compare “Les Miserables” fanfiction to “The Hangover” fanfiction, or a fanfiction where the “Les Miserables” characters discover they are all gay to a “The Hangover” fanfiction where the characters travel back in time one hundred years. In order to make these comparisons we must first break down the category of fan productions into smaller, more manageable chunks.

This study is primarily concerned with two main genres of fanfiction and fan productions: “slash” and “genderswap.” I examine why fan producers create works related to deviant genders and sexualities, and the implications that these genres have on the lived experiences of fan producers. Further, I attempt to answer the broader question “what motivates fan producers to create?” acknowledging that the answer may be different for non-slash and non-genderswap genres. In order to answer this question I examine two aspects of fan culture by using the methods described below. First, I examine and test past scholarly theories on fan productions. Scholarly theories on fan productions are mutually exclusive. Second, I examine

how deviant acts become normative through fanfiction. Many scholars have positioned fan productions as deviant acts because they are deviant within our broader social structure.

However, within fan productions these acts are not labeled deviant. Social norms within fan communities are often very different from the norms within our broader society.

“Slash” is a genre of fan productions dating back to early-modern fanfiction literature. Although fanfiction can trace its roots to the oral tradition of Homer, it was in the 1960s that modern fanfiction—and modern slash—took hold. Slash, by definition, depicts a loving, romantic, or sexual relationship between two members of the same sex, usually male. The term “femslash” or “femmeslash” is sometimes used to distinguish slash about men from slash about women. In the early 1960s amateur magazines known as “fanzines” grew to astonishing popularity. These fanzines contained self-produced fanfiction, fan art, and fan essays on numerous popular television shows like “Star Trek.” These magazines were a not-for-profit venture and, because of high printing and shipping costs, they were generally read by middle class women who had the free time and monetary resources to devote to reading and writing fanfiction. Fanzines gave rise to many popular modern fan genres, including slash.

The first known type of slash was known as “Kirk/Spock” or “K/S” and derived from the original “Star Trek” series. Fans and fan scholars have traced the first Kirk/Spock fanfiction to a 1974 fanzine called *Grup #3*. The first slash fanfiction was titled “A Fragment Out of Time” and was written by Diane Marchant. “A Fragment Out of Time” was not sexually explicit when compared to modern slash. Some have even indicated that it may have been difficult for readers to realize that the two people having sex were both men.² This genre was dubbed “slash” to denote the difference between “Kirk&Spock” fanfiction, which was non-sexual. Because of its

² For more information on this piece of fanfiction lore, see the Fan Lore Wiki page. (http://fanlore.org/wiki/A_Fragment_Out_of_Time)

substantial influence on fanfiction and fan creations as a whole, and because of its sexually deviant nature, slash is often the focus of scholarly work on fanfiction. Most scholarship on slash is related to male pairings, although recently female pairings have gained attention as well (Zhao 2012).

“Genderswap” is another genre of fanfiction whose origins are less well known. Scholars and fans have not traced the origins of genderswap to its roots, although it often goes hand-in-hand with slash productions. Genderswap can take two forms. First, what I call genderswap type-A, depicts how a character would live differently if they were born in a body of the opposite sex. These stories may depict the adventures of *Harriett Potter: The Girl Who Lived*, or the mystery-solving duo Shirley Holmes and Jane Watson. These stories often indulge in explorations of essential character traits, such as a love for friends or predilection for drug use, and how these traits would be expressed if they character were raised as another gender. Second, what I call genderswap type-B, depicts characters undergoing a sudden change in physical sex. These changes may be mystical, magical, technical, or may happen for no apparent reason at all. What holds true is that these changes are sudden, unexpected, and generally unwanted (at least at first). Genderswap type-B often explores characters reacting to and interacting with their new bodies and dealing with the social implications of presenting as a different sex. Few scholars have examined genderswap and little is known about the intentions of genderswap producers.

Gender and gender studies have been the focus of sociologists for a number of years. When West and Zimmerman published their groundbreaking article “Doing Gender” in 1987, and eight years later West and Fenstermaker wrote “Doing Difference,” they introduced a new theory of gender, which remains a leading theory in the field of gender studies today. The study of gender and gender differences is fraught with issues related to politics, word choice,

internalized emotions, and externalized forces. West and Zimmerman defined gender as something one performs. “[I]t is individuals who ‘do’ gender. But gender is a situated doing, carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented to its production” (West and Zimmerman 1987: 126). In essence, gender is something uniquely personal, something performed and accomplished by individuals. Yet it is uniquely extra-personal as it is observed, influenced, and developed by the society around us. Further, gender can be used to examine how power and inequality are produced (West and Fenstermaker 1995).

Genderswap and slash fanfiction offer valuable insights into how gender presentation is accomplished within the context of fan work. Further, as I will show, genderswap authors who “do” fanfiction are also “doing” gender. Fan producers who reinterpret and repackage their favorite popular media are also reflecting a postmodern view of the world. This view allows fan producers to remain skeptical of the media they view and the representations encoded within those media. Far from merely accepting gendered representations within the media, fan producers are able to critically reexamine those representations by writing about them in ways that others outside the culture of fan producers find deviant and, in some cases, deeply disturbing. This is not to say that fan producers create with the intention of being rebellious. Rather, as I demonstrate, the act of doing fandom can change the individual fan. Authors do not create fan productions because they are interested in politics, gender, or deviance. Instead, their interest in these and other topics grows from their involvement with communities of fans. I describe past scholarly work on fan practices while pointing out that—although they are interesting—these studies fall short of addressing what motivates fans to create and why they create works about deviant, politically charged events. Past scholars have attempted to answer these questions in relation to the slash genre of fanfiction, but not genderswap.

Within the field of fan studies there are three conflicting theories about why fans create. These theories are generally functionalist. They rest on the belief that fanfiction fulfills some important and functional social role. First, there is the theory that fans write to subvert patriarchy (subconsciously or consciously) (Kustritz 2002; Penley 1997; Cicioni 1998), second there is the theory that fans write to reaffirm patriarchy (subconsciously or consciously) (Scodari 2003; Scodari and Felder 2000), and third there is the theory that fans write to gain physical or sexual pleasure from describing male/male sex (usually consciously) (Salmon and Symons 2004; Lamb and Veith 1986; Lee 2003). Below I describe each of these theories in detail and then provide a different view on why fanfiction authors write. These theories have been primarily applied to slash works and have been based on the assumption that the cast majority—if not all—slash producers are female. Because scholarly research has primarily focused on slash writings it is difficult to extrapolate these theories onto other genres. However, due to the relative lack of research on other genres of fan productions, the theories related to the slash genre will serve as a platform of exploration for this study.

Fanfiction authors and other fan producers are often portrayed as spending many hours painstakingly crafting stories and artwork to share with other fans. They are depicted as spending even more time watching their favorite television series or movies, or reading their favorite books while closely examining each character interaction, plot element, and universe description. Many have questioned why these fans devote hours of their day to a hobby that is considered by some to be useless. Past scholars have acknowledged and dealt with suggestions that fans need to “get a life,” or at least a more socially acceptable hobby (Jenkins 1992). Fan producers are part of the larger society within which we all operate, and understanding their motivations and goals can help us to understand the motivations and goals of that larger society. These dedicated fans

are not uncommon. For example, the fanfiction website Archive of Our Own boasts over 120,000 registered users as of March 2013. Registered users on Fanfiction.net have written over 630,000 individual works for *Harry Potter* alone, and over 31,000 for the various “Star Trek” series as of March 2013. The large number of people spending significant time at an apparently “useless” hobby has led many to question why fan producers create. In order to understand this principle question, I will first explain which type of fan this project is concerned with.

In many ways, everyone is a fan of something whether it is sports, television, historical figures, books, movies, music, or something else. I have developed the following continuum of fandom to illustrate how fans interact with their source material in relation to one another (Fig. 1):

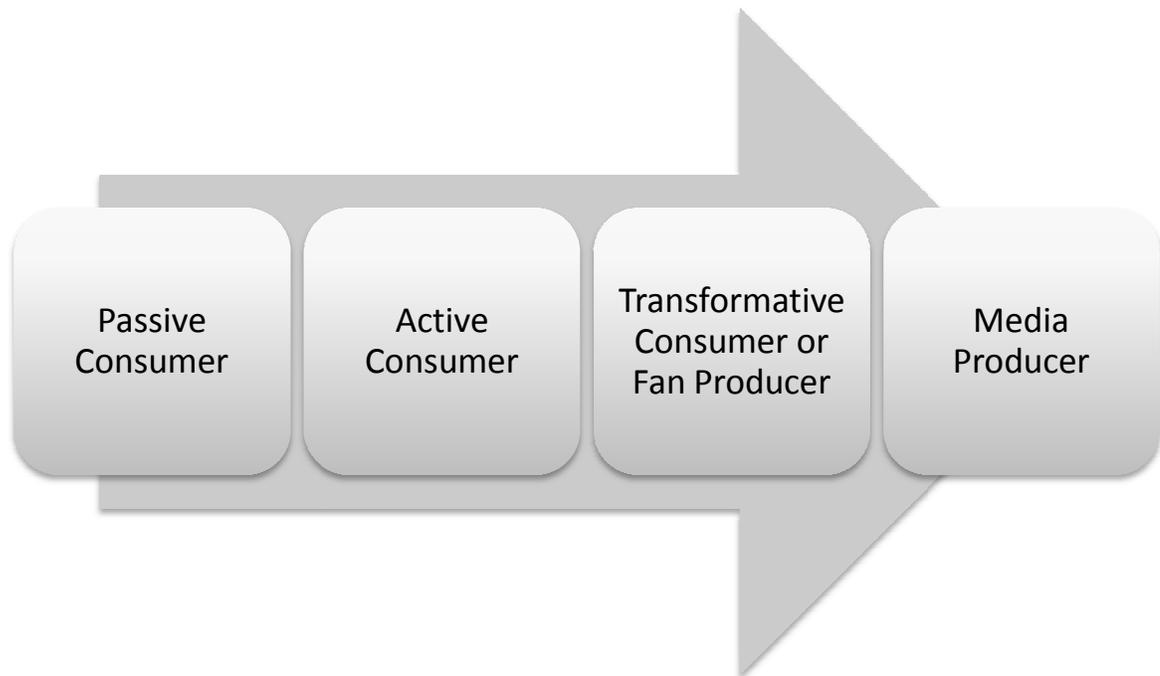


Figure 1 “The Continuum Model of Fan Activity”

The passive consumer is at the least involved end of the spectrum. This consumer does not think critically about what they are viewing. An example of a passive consumer is one who listens to rap or hip hop music without understanding the race and class messages embedded

within them. Next is the active consumer, who thinks critically about what they are consuming, but does not necessarily attempt to change or affect the source of that consumption. For example, this type of consumer may criticize a cliché plot, but fall short of writing a letter to the director about it. Next is the transformative consumer, the primary focus of this study. The transformative consumer or fan producer is critical of their media, and they attempt to shape the media they enjoy into something new to reflect that criticism. They may see a lack of overweight characters, for example, and develop a website dedicated to the fat version of a particular character.³ These producers bridge the gap between “mere” fans of a series and the creators of a series. They are able to shape some aspects of their favorite media to suit their needs, yet remain separated from media producers. The media producers have direct access to and artistic control over the media enjoyed by others. These boundaries are not solid, and an individual fan may cross them at any time. The “transformative consumer” will be referred to as a “fan producer” throughout this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

I draw on the theories developed by Durkheim, West, Zimmerman, and Fenstermaker as I have described them above. Their interpretation of human interaction provides the theoretical basis for this project, which endeavors to explain how deviant acts become normative through fanfiction to answer the broader question “what motivates fans to create?” I would be remiss, however, to ignore the substantial work done by non-sociologists in the field of fan studies. Many have attempted to answer the question of why fans create to varying degrees of success. In general these scholars have split themselves into three conflicting schools that offer theories of why fan authors write. These theories are generally based on authors of fanfiction, although I will show that the fan community is not made up solely of writers. Recall from above that these

³ See “Fatty Thor” at fattythor.tumblr.com for one example.

main theories are that 1) fan producers create their work to subvert patriarchy (Kustritz 2002; Penley 1997; Cicioni 1998); 2) they create to affirm patriarchy (Scodari 2003; Scodari and Felder 2000); and 3) they create because it fulfills a sexual urge (Salmon and Symons 2004; Lamb and Veith 1986; Lee 2003). These conflicting paradigms have influenced interpretations of fan work for many years. I discuss each of these views in detail, and then offer an alternative view.

Fanfiction as a Subversion of Patriarchy

The theory that fanfiction subverts patriarchal structures relies on certain notions of the prototypical male hero who dominates air time as the principle or main character. This hero reproduces hegemonic masculinity in his actions. The prototypical male hero is strong and cunning, handsome and sleek, and smart and funny. But more importantly, he is emotionally detached and always saves “the girl.” It is precisely this emotional detachment and female disempowerment that some scholars claim fan productions are designed to push against. According to Kustritz “[slash] allows women to construct narratives that subvert patriarchy by appropriating those prototypical hero characters who usually reproduce women’s position of social disempowerment” (2002: 372). Kustritz describes fanfiction as attempting to reframe male heroes as sensitive and supportive of feminist ideals. If the idealized male hero is strong, emotionless, and staunch and his love interest is the vapid, weak, and emotional female, then our “slashed” male hero will be quite different. He is emotional to the point of falling in love with a close male friend (or enemy) and he is flexible enough to divert from years of heterosexual practice in the name of his one true love, but he still associates with other males almost exclusively. Here, slash is seen as a way to change masculine character to feminist—and *feminine*—icons.

This act of women changing “men’s” media to “women’s” media seems to have its roots in typical American fiction on race around and before the time of the U.S. Civil War of 1861-1865. As Penley describes, the story of the white male and the black male engaging in homosocial acts and eventually reconciling extreme differences and heartache is common in genres of the time (Penley 1997: 136). Homosocial acts are non-sexual acts of friendship between same-gendered individuals. In modern media, we see alien men taking the place of black men in similar narratives. From “Star Trek” we have the half-Vulcan-half-human Commander Spock, whose story and interactions with the human white male Captain Kirk are similar to these narratives on race. Penley continues to describe how we can easily interpret these male homosocial bonds between men as sexual in nature. In some ways slash authors may be continuing the American tradition of obscuring racism yet also celebrating perceived “miscegenation” which occurs through alien-human relationships (Penley 1997: 139). We can see that the roots of male friendships in popular media are complicated, yet the image of the prototypical male hero as patriarchal remains.

Kustritz expands this idea by declaring that slash fanfiction would not exist if it did not fulfill some social role (Kustritz 2002: 372). She declares that slash fanfiction must serve some function in society or it would not exist. She asks, “What parts of our society leave us empty?” and “Why are fan narratives written at all?” (Kustritz 2002: 372). In answer she declares that fan narratives reflect ideologies taken by their authors, and that slash relationships are structured differently from other relationships in popular media (Kustritz 2002: 378). Here, characters deserve happiness and one another because they are complete people. Slash authors may develop character flaws which emphasize good traits. In this way characters in media are made to resemble real and—as Kustritz claims—*gender-neutral* people (2002: 379). Though they possess

male bodies, these slashed characters are written in ways that emphasize both female and male traits, and sex between these characters may be written without reference to male sex organs at all. By rewriting male characters as gender-neutral and real-like persons, fanfiction authors are able to comment on their own social standing. Because fanfiction authors are thought to be almost exclusively female, it is assumed that they would be commenting on their femaleness. Kustritz declares that slash fanfiction should not be trivialized. Even if authors are not attempting to change the world, and even if such an attempt would be ultimately futile, they may be able to change an individual. By creating anti-patriarchal and female-reaffirming texts, these fan authors encourage other fans to examine their lives through these lenses.

A key component of patriarchal discourse is the perpetuation of a heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy. As Cicioni argues in her article “Male Pair-Bonds and Female Desire in Fan Slash Writing,” slash is able to complicate typical heterosexist ideals (Cicioni 1998: 154). Based on an examination of slash texts about two popular British television series, Cicioni explains that female desire is constantly redefined in slash texts. From these two television series and their associated fanfictions, Cicioni explains how fans might interpret homosexuality in particularly vibrant homosocial bonds. She describes the male leads as they “exchange tender and intense gazes; touch each other often and at times in ways that are subtly, but clearly, sexual; and tease each other verbally with a good deal of sexual innuendo for the sole benefit of each other” (Cicioni 1998: 156). This description epitomizes the slash fans’ interpretations of the two male leads.

On the other hand, some fans reject the idea that these actions should be interpreted as sexual; instead they declare these actions are evidence of strong friendship. Within the series itself these men are never shown to engage in homosexual intercourse with each other or

participate in other homosexual relationships. In this way, fans are complicating the dialogues on sexuality even within their own community. When examining stories that describe males engaging in sex for the first time, Cicioni says that these stories allow characters to “acknowledge the depth of their mutual dependency” (1998: 161). Slash is written as a fantasy “involving two equal partners” (Cicioni 1998: 173), thus further complicating traditional narratives of homosexual relationships that follow the Male/female power dynamic by assigning one partner the identity of butch, or “top,” and the other the identity of femme, or “bottom.” This stereotyping often allows one male partner to express “female” emotions but not the other. By casting both characters as equal and able to express “female” emotions, slash is said to push against the patriarchal assumption of gendered emotions.

Fanfiction as an Affirmation of Patriarchy

The description of slash as a *subversion* of patriarchy also highlights the main argument supporting slash and other fan works as an *affirmation* of patriarchy: the women are decidedly absent. Despite the so-called female or genderless nature of the characters in question, female-bodied individuals are rare. Further, it perpetuates the idea that “two equal partners” must mean two male partners. Indeed, many scholars have asked how slash can subvert male patriarchy without the influence of female-bodied people. Although slash is thought to be written almost exclusively by women, it does not often depict women in important (or any) roles. Some have said that slash is in fact not a subversive text at all, but rather reproduces hegemony “and that fans sometimes appropriate resistive rhetoric in defense of hegemonic proclivities” (Scodari 2003: 111). In this manner fans may be using their seemingly subversive texts to assert that they are not reproducing hegemony. Because of the decisive lack of women in fanfiction, Scodari declares that fanfiction cannot possibly subvert patriarchy due to its lack of matriarchal

affirmation. Scodari continues her critique of slash fanfiction by quoting a fan that appears to be engaging in this “resistive rhetoric.” The fan states, “I am bloody insulted by people in general insisting that I need ‘strong female role models.’ Some of us already have one. It’s called a mirror” (qtd. in Scodari 2003: 115). Scodari describes this quote as one fan removing herself from the problem at hand. In essence, this fan is unable to recognize the under-representation of women in the media and refuses to take responsibility for remedying the issue. Even texts portraying heterosexual couples (such as Mulder/Scully from “The X-Files”) do not always go far enough to reaffirm female presence (Scodari and Felder 2000).

Further, some scholars have posited that slash is not actually written exclusively for women. Indeed, bisexual men are accepting a larger role in slash fanfiction production and consumption. Davies says that “slash [...] overflows with masculine energy, profanity, explicit male/male sex, rape, sadism, life and death adventures, and endless other adult male-oriented subjects” (Davies 2005: 198). Here, slash is positioned as a male enterprise highlighting and supporting male sexuality and male adventures. It also further removes the female author from her work by placing bisexual males as the new author worthy of study. Here, we can also position the exclusion of heterosexuality not as subversion of patriarchy, but in support of it. As women are removed from the original media, the fanfiction, the fan circles, and subsequently the available pool of authors scholars Scodari, Felder, Davies, and others show that we are also removing the subversive elements of fanfiction—or perhaps they were never there at all.

These statements about fanfiction, and in particular slash fanfiction, seem to indicate that fanfiction reaffirms patriarchy. If this is true, then genderswap may be positioned as a remedy to this situation. Genderswap more frequently depicts female characters that were male in “canon” than vice versa. The term “canon” derives from the biblical use of the word, and refers to the

“laws” expressed in the show. This is separate from “fan-canon” or “fanon” which refers to fan-made laws. As I shall discuss in my survey findings, fan producers are more than twice as likely to report creating “always-a-girl” productions over “always-a-boy.” Recall that “always-a-girl” productions are genderswap type-A productions that involve recasting a formerly male character as female. If fanfictions depicting formerly male characters as female are more common than the reverse, this may be a response to the lack of female characters in media, though not necessarily a conscious response. This tendency certainly complicates the theory that fans leave out women from their productions and consistently resist efforts to place women back in them.

Fanfiction as Women’s Pornography

Many scholars have pushed back against the theory that slash is primarily designed to titillate the female viewer (Kustritz 2002). Despite this, it remains a common theme in literature written by scholars, fan-academics (or “aca-fans”)⁴, and non-academic fans alike. Again playing on the idea that slash fills a void not filled by any other media, Salmon and Symons posit that slash is designed to provide sexual gratification to women (2004). Salmon and Symons draw on their past research with romance novels to make conclusions about slash. They find some similarities between slash and the romance novel, but the only substantive one is that they are both presumably written for women.

One key difference between slash and romance novels is the idea of equity in romantic partners. In romance novels female partners might be portrayed as strong in spirit, but eventually breaking under the male lead’s gaze. In slash both characters are usually portrayed as equally emotional, spirited, and strong. Salmon and Symons say that “slash exists because a sizable

⁴ This term describes fans who study their own creations and the creations of others in their community. It is noted here to differentiate aca-fans from academics that have no lay-interaction with fandom. Scholar Henry Jenkins uses this term on his website “Confessions of an Aca-Fan” (<http://henryjenkins.org/>). Some fans have expressed distrust for plain academics who attempt to comment on the motivations of fans. I consider myself an aca-fan.

international community of women derives pleasure from writing and reading it” and “[slash] must contain information about human female mating psychology” (2004: 94). They go on to describe how slash is a sub-genre of the romance novel that depicts pornography in a way many viewers find more enjoyable. There are several issues with this claim, not least of which that many fans disagree directly with this theory. Some fans have also drawn a connection between Salmon and Symons and an unethical survey of fans which was conducted by Ogi Ogas and Sai Gaddam in 2009. Fans report on the Fan Lore Wiki that in 2009 Ogas and Gaddam conducted a survey online which contained graphic sexual images, yet minors were not warned. Fans also indicate that the survey was methodologically unsound and transphobic and later found that this survey was not approved by any IRB (Institutional Review Board) despite Ogas and Gaddam’s claims to the contrary. Salmon and Symons both separately wrote promotional material for the book published by these researchers, which is an act that many fans deem unethical.⁵ Another key problem is Salmon and Symons’ assumption that their knowledge of mating psychology will lead them to a better knowledge of slash and not vice versa (Salmon and Symons 2004: 95).

That is not to say that many fans and “aca-fans” do not acknowledge the sexual nature of slash fanfiction. Indeed, many fans praise this aspect of slash fanfiction. Science fiction writer Joanna Russ declares in the title of one of her works on fanfiction that slash is “Pornography By Women For Women, With Love” (Russ 1985: 79). Love is a primary motivator of slash fanfiction. Some have said that women’s pornography requires the element of love in order to please its fans, in contrast to men’s pornography which is stereotypically devoid of intimate emotion. Slash is once again positioned as different from the romance novels because “the message of [Kirk/Spock] is that true love and authentic intimacy can exist only between equals” (Lamb and Veith 1986: 238). This statement highlights the need for love and romantic intimacy

⁵ For more on this issue, visit the “Survey Fail” entry on the fanlore wiki (<http://fanlore.org/wiki/SurveyFail>).

in writings intended for female sexual gratification, while again further complicating the picture of fanfiction by implying that a man and a woman cannot be equal. Whatever the meaning behind slash, some say that it fulfills the “desire for pleasure [and the] desire for titillation” (Lee 2003: 76). By portraying homosexuality as “sexy and loving” (Lee 2003: 75), slash allows the woman voyeur to participate in the relationship and gain pleasure from it. This does not, however, address the extensive number of slash fanfictions which position men as inferior to one another through the use of rape, non-consenting BDSM (Bondage Discipline Sadoomasochism), or dubious consent to sex. In general, most scholarly work has ignored the proliferation of these genres of fanfiction, and as such it cannot be commented on directly here. If fanfiction is indeed women’s pornography, then it is necessary to consider these fanfictions as part of the larger framework and understand their place. Because of the disparate views on fan practices, and the missing pieces in our understanding of those practices, a new theory which allows for questions instead of assumptions must be utilized in exploring fan communities.

Another Theory of Fan Practices

From these three disparate versions of why fans write, it is easy to see that the depth and breadth of fanfiction allows for myriad interpretations. Some scholars have provided an alternative to what might be seen as over-analyzing fanfiction. Allington asks scholars to examine fan conversations as they are without the assumption of a deeper meaning. To him, a high level of scrutiny may actually hide the complex nature of fanfiction and fans. “Fan interpretations [...] possess a level of complexity that will remain invisible so long as we continue to treat reader discourse solely as a window into something else” (Allington 2007: 60). Instead of viewing fanfiction as a window into hegemony, patriarchy, or pornography, Allington asks scholars to view it as a window into itself. Fanfiction is a rich and vibrant ground for a

variety of discoveries, not least of which is the methods by which fans annotate, repackage, and consume their primary texts and the way they present gendered—though not necessarily *political*—messages. In many ways fans examine popular media and see things which others do not. At the same time, scholars examine fans and wonder why they see those things despite the fact that this “seeing” is quite unremarkable to fans themselves.

The majority of past research has been devoted to textual or content analysis of fanfiction, fan conversations, and fan message boards. This may be where our problem lies. Far from asking fans directly why they write, scholars attempt to understand their writings without talking with them directly. While analyzing fan fiction is an essential first step in developing a clear picture of fan practices, it must be supplemented with direct communication in order to lend credence to theories of intent. Several small surveys and interviews have attempted to bridge this gap. One survey of “boys’ love” fans in the English and Italian-speaking West asked questions related to why these fans enjoyed their source material. Boys’ love is a genre of *manga* (Japanese graphic novels) which depicts men, or more often teenage boys, in romantic relationships. These graphic novels often follow conventions similar to “*shojo manga*,” or literally “girl’s comics.” Their style conventions are very similar to the conventions of slash fan productions and many authors will use both “slash” and “boys’ love” in keyword descriptions of their work.

In his survey of 478 English and 313 Italian-language speakers, Pagliassotti discovered a high amount of interactivity among fans (2008). A plurality of survey participants reported discussing fan productions with friends (42% for the English-language survey, 41% for the Italian-language survey) or other online fans (38% and 28% respectively). Many fans wrote about their interactions with the community in the open comments section. When asked

specifically about their contributions to boys' love fan productions, many said it was because they liked to express themselves creatively (38%, and 49%) or because they liked to entertain other fans or "keep the characters 'alive'" (Pagliassotti 2008). These fans were also asked specifically about issues related to GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender) politics, which they said might be helped or hindered by boys' love manga. This may imply that these fans do not read boys' love for political reasons, but rather political awareness is a byproduct of reading. This survey was one of the first to quantify fans' strong community ties and high levels of creativity. The strong community ties expressed by fans in this survey indicated that community and community norms may influence individual actions. As Durkheim points out, we should never underestimate the power of community (1951). However, this survey was directed at fans in general and leaves many questions about fan producers in particular.

METHODS

It is clear from Pagliassotti's survey that fan interactions are more complex than they might at first appear (2008). Far from speaking about patriarchy, hegemony, or pornography these fans seem more inclined to enjoy the social and artistic aspects of fanfiction. Therefore I will use Durkheim's theories of community influence on individual action to further explore the actions of fan producers (1951). It is from this basis that the following study has derived.

This study was designed to evaluate the patriarchy and pornography hypotheses created by previous scholars, and to further develop direct communication with fan producers in order to answer the broader question "why do fans create?" To that end, this study was conducted in three parts. First, in the summer of 2011 I conducted a content analysis of 19 slash and genderswap fanfictions in order to reproduce the work of past scholars, which is primarily based on reading fanfiction. Second, based on this content analysis, I developed a series of interview questions and

interviewed genderswap authors (n = 26) on their thoughts and experiences during the summer of 2012. Third, following these interviews, I created and distributed a survey to any fan producer who wished to participate (n = 224). This survey asked questions about the producers' thoughts, experiences, and motivations within the fan community. This survey was distributed online using Survey Monkey from October to December of 2012. Each of the three methods and results will be discussed separately below, followed by a discussion and synthesis of results, and directions for future research.

First, a series of 19 "Star Trek" fanfictions were reviewed for common themes. "Star Trek" fanfictions were chosen because of the historical significance of "Star Trek" in fanfiction and because of my familiarity with "Star Trek" and its canon, or the actions depicted in the shows and movies. Early-modern "Star Trek" fanfiction is believed to be the originator of the slash genre. "Star Trek" has a long history in popular culture. Created in 1956, the "Star Trek" franchise has enjoyed six spin-off series and eleven movies, with a twelfth movie currently in production.

After an initial reading of numerous fanfiction stories for themes, 19 stories were chosen using a random number generator for more in-depth analysis. The 19 fanfiction stories examined were sampled from six websites specifically designed to host fanfiction online. Three of these websites are "general purpose" fanfiction hosting sites, and contain fiction related to other popular media. Two were for specific "Star Trek" spin-off series with one website for "Star Trek: The Original Series" dedicated to PG-13 and below slash fanfiction, and one dedicated to "Star Trek: Enterprise" fanfiction. The final website was run by an individual fan author and contained only her personal work. While she has created fanfiction for other series, only her "Star Trek" related fanfiction was reviewed. These six websites allowed for a variety in the types

of fanfiction examined. After the initial examination of these websites, codes were developed for an in-depth examination of the 19 representative fanfictions. The themes expressed in these fanfictions included “real life” or twentieth-century and twenty-first-century congruent experiences of gender and sexuality, deviant sexuality, deviant gender, gender deviating from canon, sexual expression, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and heterophobia.

Based on the themes identified in this content analysis, I developed a series of interview questions. These questions were designed to determine whether fan producers agreed with past scholarly research which assumed patriarchy or titillation to be the cause of their fan productions. Twenty-six genderswap fan producers were interviewed for this study. Fan producers were recruited through several means. First, a call for participation was placed on a fan studies mailing list. Second, I contacted authors individually on the websites LiveJournal, Fanfiction.net, and DreamWidth. These are among the few fanfiction archives which have a well-designed search engine (which allowed me to search for genderswap and related works), a large number of fanfictions, and the ability to privately message their users. Of the producers who responded to my requests for interview, many also agreed to inform their friends and readers about my study. In this way the sample “snow-balled” until I reached the data saturation point in my interviews and ceased data collection. Fans were asked to describe their experiences in the fan community, hobbies outside the fan community, their attraction to their favorite media, what they “got” out of creating and consuming fan productions, and whether they would recommend creating fan works and why.

Each interview was conducted in an open-ended style, and follow up questions were employed when needed to ensure I had an accurate picture of what the participants were trying to convey. All of the participants quoted in this paper signed a consent form and had the

opportunity to create (or have created for them) a pseudonym. Those who participated were interviewed online through instant messaging or webcam, or in person. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two and half hours, with an average of one hour. Participants were relatively homogenous, with 85% under the age of thirty. There were only four non-white participants, identifying as Hispanic, black, Asian-American, and Filipino. The majority identified as female (85%) but did not necessarily prefer female pronouns like “she” and “her.” Those who did not identify as female identified as male (4%), agender (7%), and genderqueer (4%). Unfortunately, I do not have data about their country of origin, as I did not include this question in the demographic data collection. However some participants did volunteer their country of origin without being asked directly. Some came from England, Australia, Japan, and the U.S. Because this sample was so homogenous, the findings related below likely cannot be extrapolated to fan producers as a whole. However, the experiences related to me by these genderswap producers were similar enough to suggest that for genderswap producers lived experiences and community building is experienced similarly. As will be discussed below, authors did not usually affirm past scholars’ hypotheses about their motivations to write.

In order to sample a broader range of fan producers, I expanded this research to include an online survey. This survey was designed to reach a wide range of fan producers, not simply fanfiction authors or slash and genderswap producers. Participants were asked about their demographic information, their fan demographic information (e.g. “How many years have you been actively producing or consuming work in the fan community?”), the type of fan productions they create, their experiences in the community, how often they saw someone like themselves in different ways in popular media and fan works (e.g. “I see someone of the same sexual orientation in [popular media or fan productions] at least 50% of the time”), and a series of

Likert-scale questions related to why they create and their experiences in the fan community creating fan works.

Survey participants were recruited through a variety of means. Calls for participation were posted on a fan studies mailing list, on my personal academic blog⁶, and on the Archive of Our Own calendar of events. In addition, I utilized the website Reddit and its unique compartmentalizing of interests to place calls on a variety of fan “sub-reddits” or sub-websites hosted within the larger website. These websites are all national. Participants were allowed to stop taking the survey at any time, and needed to agree to take the survey in order to begin. No personal identifying information was collected from the participants. The survey was active from October through December of 2012 and attracted 224 participants, 139 of whom completed the entire survey (62%). Survey fatigue likely accounted for the majority of non-completions, as the survey was exactly 100 questions long. Future surveys of fan producers should have the benefit of now knowing which questions do not yield significant data, which should allow them to reduce the size of their questionnaires. Complete results, including those results which were not statistically significant in ways which were contradictory to past fan scholar theories, will be discussed below.

The fans surveyed were relatively homogenous. Most of the demographic questions were open-ended to allow participants to answer as they felt was most appropriate. After the answers were collected they were coded into fitting subgroups. To increase reliability I waited one month after initial coding and then re-coded the work. The new codes were compared with the old codes and any differences were reconciled. Most participants identified as white (74%)⁷, and a small number (17%) as non-white. About 9% of participants gave an answer that could not be

⁶ This blog is used primarily to discuss my research and develop my own understanding of sociological theory. It can be viewed at sociologyfornerds.com.

⁷ Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

coded into a particular race category (many identified with their country of birth, or as simply “human”). Most were female (67%) or male (26%), with a small number identifying as neither gender (6%). Participants were also young (Fig. 2).

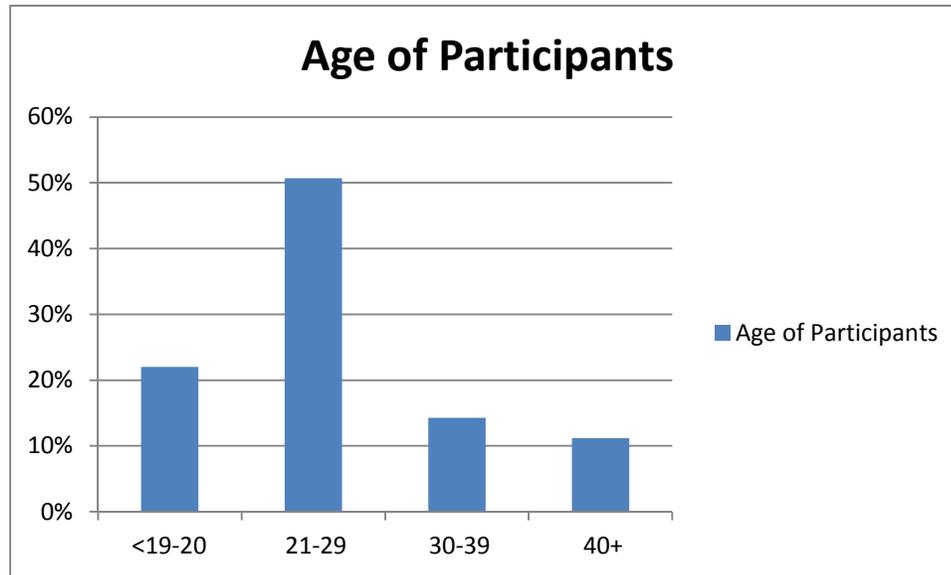


Figure 2

When asked about their sexual orientation, the results were more interesting. Only 55% identified as heterosexual or straight. 28% identified as queer or other (usually bisexual). Only 4% identified as homosexual. However, 7% of participants identified as asexual. Future researchers may wish to examine the connection between asexuality and fan productions. In addition, most participants (62%) said they were single. Participants were generally not religious and did not have a spiritual connection, with only 39% identifying some sort of religious or spiritual affiliation and 10% giving an answer that could not be coded. Participants in this survey also tended to be highly educated, with 83% having at least some college and 28% possessing a graduate school degree. This tendency for highly educated subjects should be analyzed more fully in future research. Taking into consideration the relatively homogenous nature of the survey participants, the complete results of the survey will be discussed below.

FINDINGS

Content Analysis of Slash and Genderswap Fanfiction

In general, the content analysis performed reaffirmed past scholarly work, including its inconsistencies. I chose to review slash and genderswap fanfiction in particular for related reasons. First, I chose to review slash fanfiction to position myself in relation to past research. Because of the large amount of disparate data that has resulted from past scholars' reading of slash, it was important that I familiarize myself with that data set before making assumptions about their theories. Recall that past theories on slash work have been related to patriarchy and titillation. These theories are all relatively well developed, yet mutually exclusive. Genderswap was chosen because it is relatively unstudied, yet is very similar to slash in a number of ways. Both depict deviances, and generally depict romantic relationships of some kind. Evidence both for and against each of the three main theories about why fan authors write could be pulled from these new data. Because of this, I shall present the main themes evident in the content analysis followed by an interpretation of the data through the lens of the patriarchal and titillation theories.

Four main themes were apparent during the content analysis. First, romantic physical or sexual contact was common. Second, the fanfictions reviewed tended to privilege homosexuality above heterosexuality, and bisexuality above both hetero and homosexuality. Third, these fanfictions often presented comments on "real life"—or contemporary 20th-and 21st-century—experiences of transgender, transsexual, and intersex persons. These types of comments were noticeable absent from the discussion of bisexual and homosexual characters. Fourth, the fanfiction community was presented as a safe space within which individual authors could express themselves creatively without fear of negative or hurtful comments.

Fanfiction as a vehicle for romantic or physical contact

First, romantic physical or sexual contact was a common theme throughout the fanfictions reviewed. “Porn Without Plot” or “PWP” fanfiction appears to be a common enough genre to receive its own search term on some fanfiction websites. Despite the apparent prevalence of this genre, all of the fanfictions reviewed contained substantial plot elements, even when sexual encounters were present. The existence of this genre, and of sexual elements in plot-driven stories, may indicate that at least some authors gain sexual pleasure from their writing. Further, many of the genderswap type-B fanfictions involved the changed characters “discovering” their new bodies in various ways, including sexually. For example, in one fanfiction Captain Jean-Luc Picard was turned into a woman by the cosmic trickster Q. Q had spied on the captain’s dreams and saw that he was objectifying women sexually within them. In order to combat this objectification, Q changed Picard’s sex. Only through a growing approval of his new body was Picard able to convince Q that he should be allowed to change back. This approval included acceptance at his place of work, in interpersonal relationships, and in the bedroom.

This sexual gratification is not without its consequences—at least for the characters involved. Some characters may become pregnant as a result of intercourse. In one genderswap type-A fanfiction the “always-a-girl” Doctor McCoy found herself impregnated by Captain Kirk. Upon informing him, she was abandoned. Captain Kirk did not feel prepared to be a father. Doctor McCoy retained many of the character traits evident in “Star Trek,” including a cantankerous personality. This strong personality eventually lead the Captain and Doctor to reconcile their differences. Pregnancy is not unheard of even in male-bodied characters within “Star Trek” canon. In “Star Trek: Enterprise” canon, the male-bodied Commander Tucker

became pregnant after an alien encounter. Pregnancies like this, and pregnancies of characters rewritten as female in fanfiction, are a fairly common staple of fanfiction. The consequences of an active sex life are not ignored by fanfiction authors. In many cases these consequences become central parts of the plot as characters find themselves faced with regulations forbidding fraternization, the development of family quarrels, or even pregnancy. This may be a result of fan authors' desires to present these characters interacting in "real" ways (Kustritz 2002).

Despite limitations in their research, Salmon and Symons' comparison of fanfiction to romance novels is not without merit (2004). Many fans write about, or request others write about, explicit sexual scenes. This lends support to their theory that fanfiction is greatly concerned with the sexual gratification of its creators and consumers. What is missing from the equation is direct contact with fan producers, which I will discuss later. Recall the continuum model of fan activity. "Fan producers" are also known as "transformative producers." While their work is not the only way of interacting as a fan, it is the most visible. Because of the visibility of this work it is important to understand the motivations of these producers, not simply external interpretations of their productions.

Equally missing from this discussion of titillating fan productions is fanfiction which does not fall under the stereotypical umbrella of "women's pornography." This stereotype defines "women's pornography" as pornography of emotion, in particular love. While it is true that many fanfictions seem to depict characters in equal relationship, there are many more which depict characters in unequal power relationships which complicated the idea that women are primarily interested in the "fluffy" emotions. As Davies (2005) has stated, sadism and bondage-discipline and sadomasochism (BDSM) are prevalent in fanfiction. While I do not mean to imply that BDSM relationships require unequal power distribution—quite the opposite is true,

according to its proponents—in some cases fanfiction relies on unequal power to tell stories of rape and so-called “dubious consent.” These stories have an important place in fanfiction, and should not be left out of future discussions related to fan producers.

The privileged nature of bisexuality and homosexuality

Second, the fanfictions reviewed tended to privilege homosexuality above heterosexuality, and bisexuality above both. This hierarchical positioning was evidenced in the author’s tendency to write about bisexual or homosexual characters even when writing about these (or any) orientations does not advance the plot. In some cases, writing about these orientations may even delay the plot. In some instances, the use of bisexual characters may have been an attempt to reconcile character’s past canon with current fan-canon. Recall that canon refers to the actions which took place in the original media and fan-canon or fanon refers to the actions which are codified in fan productions. For example, if an author is to place Captain Kirk in a relationship with the male Spock she must explain why Captain Kirk engaged in intercourse with a number of females in canon. Fanon usually allows for some flexibility here by stating that Captain Kirk is truly bisexual. This bisexuality allows for the reconciliation of on-screen actions and fan wishes. Further, the re-writing of bisexuality is often supported by numerous fan essays which detail small looks, touches, and words that seem to indicate that same-sex attraction has been present all along.⁸

However, this does not explain why some fans write about bisexual and homosexual characters even when this reconciliation is not necessary. For example, in one genderswap type-A fanfiction, an always-female McCoy has begun to develop an attraction for her platonic roommate Kirk. While recalling the root of this attraction, she remembers an incident during

⁸ For one example, see Laura Goodwin’s fan essay on the love between Kirk and Spock. An examination of the “Star Trek” episode *Naked Time* can be viewed at allyouretrekarebelongto.us/naked.htm.

which Kirk brought another male to their shared room for a sexual encounter. Further, in another fanfiction the narrator declares “[Starfleet’s] three most senior officers [...] are all bi” (Original Data). In this way bisexuality, which is usually viewed as deviant, is privileged. It is written about more commonly than not. There are a number of possible explanations for this. First, many authors may feel that they may as well write about bisexual characters. There is no intrinsic harm in doing so, at least within fan communities. Fan communities seem to privilege writing about bisexuality, which does not occur in broader U.S. society. In the larger society bisexuality is often stigmatized both by heterosexual and homosexual individuals, and by larger social forces. Fans may also feel that bisexuality is the way it has “always been” in fanfiction. As stated earlier, fan producers tend to be under the age of thirty. This would mean that they have been writing and reading fanfiction in the years after the invention of slash in the 1970s. In some ways bisexuality and homosexuality may have become unremarkable as a result of repeated exposure. This may also be a result of a large minority of fan producers identifying as queer or bisexual, as evidenced by my survey. Finally, as some scholars have indicated, this use of bisexual and homosexual themes may be an attempt at pushing back against patriarchal themes common in popular media.

As mentioned earlier, the exclusion of heterosexuality can also be viewed not as a dismantling of patriarchy, but as supporting of it. Some scholars have pointed to the prevalence of bisexual and homosexual characters as a clever way of excluding female characters to give male characters more attention. If indeed fan authors write about bisexual characters because that is the way things have always been done, then fan authors may be unconsciously ignoring the lack of female characters. Fan authors may not be as critical of the fan media they enjoy as some scholars have suggested. In some cases, these stories may also be a reproduction of heterosexual

hegemony as bisexual characters fall in love with an opposite-sex partner. Clearly the anti- and pro-patriarchal arguments are extremely complex, and interpretations of fan work may vary when viewed through different lenses.

Comments on real life transgender, transsexual, and intersex experiences

The third theme evident in these fanfictions was the extensive commentary on real-life contemporary transgender, transsexual, and intersex experiences.⁹ This was coupled with a general avoidance of comments related to real-life bisexual and homosexual experiences. In many ways bisexual and homosexual experiences were idealized, as I discussed in the previous theme. Only one fanfiction depicted a character that had to “come out” as gay. Although this character did meet with an initial dislike, the other characters were eventually convinced that the human race had come far enough that sexual orientation should not be discriminated against. This tendency to idealize the future depicted in “Star Trek”—a future where humans do not war with each other, monetary problems do not exist, there is no starvation, and social issues are all but eliminated—may explain why bisexual and homosexual characters are not discriminated against in these stories. It should be noted that “Star Trek” has never shown a same-sex couple in any of its television series or movies, however. This idealization does not yet extend to the experiences of transgender, transsexual, and intersex characters.

Some fanfictions labeled their work using the keywords “transgender” or “intersex,” which may allow readers looking specifically for real life experiences to discover their work.

One example of a fanfiction with this label also involved a potential slash pairing. Ensign

⁹ The distinction between these terms is important. “Transsexual” usually refers to an individual who wishes to undergo hormone or surgery in order to change their physical sex. Transsexual individuals experience strong feelings of their gender not matching their physical sex. “Transgender” is an umbrella term which may refer to transsexual or other gender nonconforming individuals, including agender and genderqueer individuals. “Intersex” refers to individuals who have been born with genitalia, chromosomes, or hormones which do not fit strictly into our rigid ideas of maleness and femaleness. These individuals often face severe social stigma and may be forced to undergo surgical alterations as infants.

Chekov, who is portrayed as biologically male in “Star Trek,” was written as a transgender man. His attraction to a male coworker forced him to confront the idea of coming out as a transgender man in the hopes of engaging in a relationship. However, he eventually decided to keep his birth sex a secret. This decision was primarily made to protect himself from the dangers that may result if he came out. Chekov feared that his friend will forsake him if he as a man—but especially a *trans* man—professed his love for him. Another example of these real experiences involved Captain Kirk. Although portrayed as biologically male, in one fanfiction he is rewritten as possessing non-traditional intersex genitals. He must overcome his own perceptions of his body after it is revealed to Spock on a dangerous away mission. Although ostensibly slash fanfictions, the introduction of non-traditional gender and sex identities in these fanfictions serve to complicate the picture of romance in ways that simple sexual orientation do not.

Characters undergoing genderswap type-B also face complications. Recall that genderswap type-B describes characters that undergo a sudden change from their canon sex to a different sex. In many cases these characters must face the fact that their womanly or manly nature—which they had always viewed as essential—is now under question. In some cases these characters find dislike for their new bodies, which may be seen as akin to the dislike many contemporary transgender and transsexual people hold for their biological bodies. One major critique fans levy against genderswap type-B, however, is that many characters immediately accept their new bodies and the stereotypes that go with them. Some characters may even go so far as to shave their legs or start lifting heavy things in congruence with their new bodies. In the example of Jean-Luc Picard becoming female due to the trickster-nature of Q used above, Picard’s sexual acceptance of his new body may be seen as an acceptance of his role as a female bottom during sexual encounters. However, it could also be viewed as a comment on the lack of

essential male or femaleness—that is, that his *expression* is not a result of his new body, only our *interpretation* of that expression is.

Fan communities as safe spaces

Finally, fanfiction communities are generally presented as safe spaces within which these complex issues of gender and sexuality can be discussed, qualified, and further complicated without fear of homophobic or transphobic comments. As I have discussed, it is difficult to determine if fan authors are intentionally commenting on GLBT politics, or if this comment is a byproduct of the supposedly politics-free genres of slash and genderswap. Even if these comments are not intentional, they still have the effect of creating safe spaces. After analyzing the 19 “Star Trek” fanfictions, I went on to examine their associated comments. No negative reviews were found. Occasionally, reviews related to constructive criticism—usually involving grammar or word choice—were found. To make this point clear, in stories about gay and bisexual men having explicit sex and switching to female bodied persons, no homophobic or transphobic comments were found. In fact comments seemed to find much of these deviant acts to be unremarkable. Most focused on the positive, often commenting on the strong emotions that the story invoked.

Further, several fanfiction websites have developed ways to leave positive comments with little effort. On Archive of Our Own, “Kudos” can be given to fanfictions the reader enjoyed. This is similar to a Facebook “Like.” There is no corresponding anti-Kudos for stories the reader did not enjoy. On fanfiction.net users can arrange their favorite stories and authors for lists that other users can see and utilize. This is a way for users with similar interests to share recommendations to other users. The site does not offer an option for stories that users dislike or wish to warn other users against reading. These examples seem to indicate that fanfiction

creators and consumers prefer to emphasize positive traits over negative ones. In some ways, this emphasis on the positive may be artificially created. Although I did not personally witness this happening, it is possible on many fanfiction websites for the author or another moderator to delete reviews and posts they do not agree with. It is therefore difficult to tell if the positive comments occur naturally unaccompanied by negative comments, or if negative comments are removed. Future research should examine this in more detail to determine the how truly accepting the fan community is.

This is not to say that fans do not critique one another. A recent study by Stanfill interviewed fans of “Xena: Warrior Princess” and found that fans have conceptions of “good” and “bad” fans. Bad fans are generally those fans that “devote their lives to the cultivation of worthless knowledge” (Stanfill 2013: 10, emphasis removed¹⁰), are social misfits, exhibit infantile or immature emotions, and are feminized or even de-sexualized (Stanfill 2013). Interestingly, many of the critiques of “bad fans” by “good fans” parallel critiques levied against all fans by the larger society as described by Jenkins (1992). For example, “bad fans” are said to cultivate useless knowledge such as a favorite actor’s favorite food. This is positioned against supposedly useful knowledge, such as an actor’s inner motivation during a particular scene. Stanfill declares that fans have created a social hierarchy that privileges some types of fans above others. Further, it should be noted that I only analyzed reviews attached to the original fanfiction. It is unknown if the authors were contacted privately or if they faced a review of their

¹⁰ Emphasis was removed due to the original author’s use of emphasis to denote a list. This emphasis was not necessary for clarity or to stress a particular point.

fanfiction in the style of “Mystery Science Theater 3000” (MST3K).¹¹ Reviews in this style may not be attached to the original fanfiction, and in some cases may never reach the original author.

Interviews of Twenty-Six Genderswap Fan Producers

In the findings discussed above it is easy to see that, with the appropriate lens, the work of transformative fans can be interpreted to mean a variety of contradictory things. Because of this it is difficult to gain a true understanding of what fans actually intend to portray simply by reading their work. That is to say, a scholar or lay person can make a statement about how they interpret fan works, but not about how they were *intended* by the authors to interpret those works. While the way these fans’ works are actually perceived is a very important piece in understanding fans as a group, we must also understand what these fans intend. This intention continues to shape fan practices, and reflects upon society as a whole. To this end, based on the above content analysis I developed a series of interview questions to engage directly with genderswap fan producers to discover their own perceptions about fans as a whole, and about their personal contribution to fandom. As discussed above, genderswap fan productions parallel slash fan productions in a number of ways including the propensity for romantic relationships and the portrayal of deviant sexual and gender presentation. Because few scholars have had direct contact with genderswap these transformative fans, it is important to establish what these authors are actually intending to accomplish with their work. Recall the continuum model of fan activity, which explains that transformative fans or fan producers are those fans which are most actively engaged with original source media. This active engagement ideally positions them to critique, recreate, and examine media. Participants (n = 26) were asked a variety of questions,

¹¹ Some fans devote their time to picking apart fanfiction they view as particularly bad, or unrepresentative of their favorite characters. See “The MST Community for Stinky Fanfiction” for an example (<http://jesterlylove.livejournal.com/>).

both direct and indirect, in order to more fully understand their motivations for creating work often viewed as deviant (see Appendix A).

Notably, many fans expressed trepidation to my request for an interview. Some began the process of setting up an interview time only to drop out when asked to sign a consent form to use their quotations. In addition, some fans asked for my online alias to ensure I was really a fanfiction author. I discuss these practical limitations more thoroughly in an upcoming article on ethics in fandom studies (Freund and Fielding forthcoming). The type of fanfiction I created in my younger days did not seem to be the focus; rather, these fans seemed to be determining whether or not I had the authority to comment on fan experiences as a whole. One participant explained that fans often get “burned” by studies like the one I was conducting. This participant may have been referring to the survey conducted by Ogas and Gaddam. Several fans asked for confirmation that I had received IRB approval, which I had. This is important and crucial to note. Not only does this hesitancy possibly affect the data that an interview instrument can obtain, it also brings to light many questionable ethical choices that fans have seen researchers make in the past. If scholars are to continue to conduct research on fan producers, and fans more generally, they must understand that not all fans will accept them—especially if they are not noticeably fans themselves.

Participants were first asked to describe hobbies they enjoy outside of fan productions. Participants described a variety of different hobbies ranging from woodworking, to sports, to childcare. This may imply that the act of being a fan is just one hobby among many. Participants also described their friend groups. Many described friends who were similar to them in a variety of ways. Some also described “high school” friends and “college” friends, which may be a by-product of the relatively young sample. Many asked for clarification on this question, and wanted

to know if I was asking about online or offline friends. In some cases participants had a mixed group of online and offline friends, with friends moving fluidly from one category to another, but many explained that they had online friends that they had never met in real life that they discussed fandom with.

Participants were asked to describe the types of fanfiction they most enjoyed writing or reading, and what they least enjoyed. Although engaging in genderswap production was a prerequisite for participation, many participants described enjoying other types of fanfiction as well including technically non-canon fanfictions like slash and alternative universe fiction. Fans generally had positive things to say about all types of fanfiction, even those types they did not enjoy. One genderswap producer, Karen¹², stated that fanfiction was enjoyable because “[it] fills in the gaps for me...the narrative changes and transforms in more interesting ways than the original stuff a lot of the time, or showcases [what] directions [and] layers, [or] characters [and] stories might have [been] but aren’t explored.”¹³ Interviewees also described participating in fan productions in general before gaining an interest in genderswap.

Some fans described an initial dislike for genderswap. Several fans stated that a gradual appreciation for genderswap fanfiction coincided with a gradual appreciation for the importance of gender in general. One fan described this process:

I have a hard time remembering why I used to avoid it [genderswap], although I think I used to feel like genderswap was somehow unnecessary or gratuitous, and not close enough to the canon characters. I didn't use to like AU [Alternative Universe] as much either, I used to be very attached to canon. But also my interest in gender as a whole has developed since I've been in Sherlock fandom, so my interest in genderswap has also grown (Anna).

¹² Names of participants are pseudonyms. Gendered pronouns used were also chosen by participants.

¹³ Quotes used here have been edited slightly to remove typos and line breaks that resulted from the use of instant messaging chat services.

Recall that “canon” describes the actions that occur within the original media. This author describes genderswap as a subset of Alternate Universe fan productions. These productions intentionally deviate from canon by taking characters and placing them in a different environment. Modern adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* which place the characters within the 21st-century are one example of Alternate Universe productions. Another fan declared that, despite initial ambivalence, the “gender politics that can get encoded in the fic” is “the best part now!” (Victoria). Caitlin described her initial impression of genderswap as “weird,” but that later she “liked how it made me think about Important Things [sic] like what’s on the outside matching the inside, and I like how it changed the way other characters reacted to the switched character, even if the switched character was basically the same.” These statements imply that genderswap yields a growing knowledge of gender, gender presentation, and gendered actions in general. It is notable that these producers did not enter genderswap with the intent of making a political statement about gender, but rather their perceptions of gender were shaped as a result of their reading. This process of “doing fanfiction” coincides with the process of “doing gender” more broadly (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Some fans also explained that they enjoyed genderswap fan productions precisely because it allowed them to write about strong female characters. One fan, Chelsea, said “I liked it [genderswap], because it allowed me to have female characters I could relate to while keeping the characteristics I liked about the originally-male character.” Participants in general expressed interest in characters expressing male traits in a female body, and some even wished that this type of female character would occur in popular media more often. When asked if she preferred characters switching from male-to-female or female-to-male, Jenny expressed this sentiment:

I love the idea of having more female characters, particularly in fandoms where there are mostly male characters, and I love the [particular] type of female character you tend to

get when they're genderswapped the way I like. There's a sort of strength and interest there that catches my attention. [...]It sounds a bit strange, but they tend to be the most interesting female characters you can get in fanfic. Like, they're so very much women, and that's such a central part of their character, but they also get to do and be all the things that the male version of them got to do. It just makes it... really interesting to me. Like we're getting to see what female characters are capable of, if only people would put them like that into canon more.”

Fans were also asked if they had a favorite romantic pairing within fandom. Some had an immediate answer, while others struggled to pick just one. This question was employed to gain a better understanding of how fans interpret and examine their favorite media in order to determine which characters “go” best together. Participants generally described their interpretations as ones which were logically derived from the source media. One fan described the subtextual looks that characters gave, which hinted at a larger relationship: “[The] way that they look at each other is super epic. Brad looks at Nate like he hangs the moon, and Nate looks at Brad like he's his moral compass” (Puckling). Another fan explained that is the act of exploring these characters’ lives that makes pairing them so interesting. She said, “[It’s] interesting to play with the dynamic of them both wanting the same things [a career] and only one of them gets to have it...” Later, about a different pairing she said that she likes “that two pretty famous professional athletes are kind of sidestepping the traditional machismo of their profession and being very open about crashing on each other's couches and watching romantic comedies on Friday nights” (Hannah). Participants described enjoying the aspects of their favorite pairing which make creating fan production plots possible.

Near the end of the interview participants were asked if they would encourage or discourage other fans from creating fan productions. Participants said that they had gained a lot from creating fan productions and, if other fans wished to produce, they would encourage them. Many participants believed that fandom had benefitted them in direct and tangible ways. One fan

author attributed her score of 100% on the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) to writing fanfiction. English language acquisition through fanfiction has not gone unnoticed by scholars (Black 2005; Black 2006). One fan named Engage described writing fanfiction as “great fun.” Further, one fan explained that fandom’s safe space allowed them to realize their own gender.

It is due to Sherlock fandom being willing to explore "risky" topics not seen as often in mainstream media or even fandom that helped me realize I am transgender. It was the kindness of others and the works they wrote that helped me explore what being trans even meant to me, and it's through writing about being transgender I've started to sort it out. When I entered this new fandom I could introduce myself with a new pronoun seamlessly, and everyone accepted it without question. That is more than I can ever hope to get in my offline experience. Those that know I am transgender in fandom don't ever question my gender or give my problems about it--quite the opposite. Fandom is my support group, and was one before I'd even mentioned it to my offline friends (Eli).

Although this particular story was unique, all participants were able to describe some benefits from engaging with fan productions. Eli’s quote also exemplifies fans’ ability to “do” gender through the production of fan works. By discovering what gender means to characters within media, Eli was able to discover what gender meant to them.

Many fans stated that they enjoyed seeing how characters changed, or how they remained the same, when their bodies became different. In all, fans expressed a variety of motivations for creating genderswap work. Those who said they initially found genderswap “weird” coexist with those who wish there was more female representation in the media they enjoy. Much like any movement or group of people, the diversity of opinions can be masked by the literature fans put out. Genderswap provides numerous comments on gender, and in many ways helps shape fan producers’ norms of how men, women, and others “do” gender (West and Zimmerman 1987). When a character changes the sex of their body, they may find that the ambitions they had before—to succeed at sports, to become a leader, or to have sex with many people—are interpreted differently. Genderswap fan producers may not intend for their works to be a

comment on real men and women, but in many cases they do. Further, fan producers are shaping more than just the minds of scholars. They are also shaping the minds of genderswap consumers, who may gain a better understanding of gender through the process of consuming genderswap works. However, the fact that many fan producers create genderswap simply because it is fun should not be ignored. Despite the ability to read important gendered themes within their productions, those themes need not be the only—or even the *main*—reason for generating fan productions.

Survey of Fan Producers

This series of interviews makes the diversity in fan producers clear. Because of this variety, I developed a survey designed to interpret the motives of fan producers more broadly—not just genderswap producers. This survey was designed to understand key questions of fan intent under the belief that the outcome of their productions is certainly important, but is only one part of the broader picture of fan creations. Scholars must be able to understand fan producers' intent as well as the outcome. I designed this survey to test the hypothesis that fan producers create in order to fill perceived gaps in the media they enjoy. In order to answer this question I will discuss the three main sections of my survey. First, I will discuss the general demographics of participants. Overall, the fans who participated in this survey came from a variety of backgrounds. Second, I will discuss a series of questions which asked how often participants saw people like themselves in a number of ways. These questions were asked about representations in popular media and in fan media to allow for a direct comparison. These questions determine whether fan producers see someone like themselves in fan media more often than popular media. Finally, I will discuss several of my Likert-scale questions designed to determine participants' general agreement with a number of theories posited by scholars.

Participants were asked to note their agreement on a scale of “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” No neutral variable was provided in order to encourage participants to choose a side. (See Appendix B for a full list of survey questions.)

Fan demographics

Recall that survey participants were highly educated, young, heterosexual (with some notable exceptions), single, white, and many did not have a religious or spiritual affiliation. In addition to these social demographics, I also asked fans a series of “fan demographic” questions. When asked how long they had been actively producing or consuming work in the fan community, most indicated they had been doing so for several years. Only a handful (6%) stated they had been within the fan community for less than one year. Most (62%) said they had been participating in the fan community for at least seven years. Participants also indicated that they spent at least one hour a day consuming fan productions, such as fanfiction or fan videos. Only 6% said that they spent zero hours per day consuming fan productions. Interestingly, far more said they spent zero hours per day consuming their original source media, such as through watching a television series or reading a book (24%). Fans were four times more likely to go through their day without consuming their favorite original media than they were to avoid consuming fan productions. This disparity may be a result of the continued variety and new updates within fan productions that does not exist in syndicated television, movies, or books.

Participants were asked what types of fan productions they created. They could choose multiple responses. Eighty-one percent of participants indicated they wrote short stories. Creating long works was less common, with only 40% indicating they had written a novel-length fanfiction. An equal number said they created “roleplays” that depicted character actions. Slightly more than half indicated that they drew or created artistic fan productions. Only a small

minority (19%) indicated they created fan videos. The general lack of art or video creations may be explained by fear of copyright violations, or of a lack of technical expertise. A plurality of fans (37%) said they create fan productions monthly, but the distribution of answers was fairly even (Fig. 3). In general, fans spent much more time consuming fan productions than they spent creating them. However, fans contributed to their community in a variety of ways. Some indicated that they edited other producers' work. Over three-quarters had commented on the work of others. Participants were also given the opportunity to fill in their own answer. The most common open ended response to this question was the creation of "meta" fiction, which is fiction that is aware of the fact that it is not real.

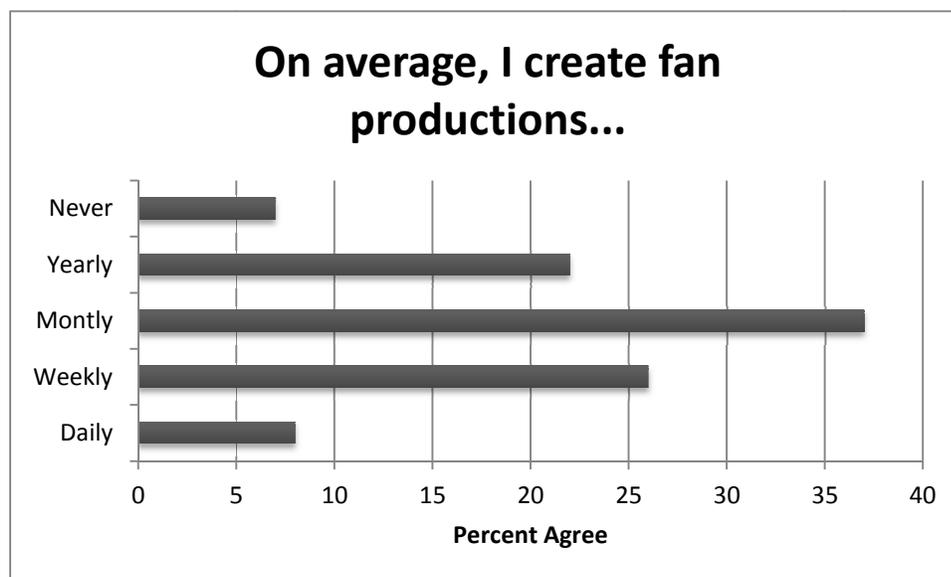


Figure 3

This variety of fan productions went hand-in-hand with a variety in genres. I asked participants to indicate which genres of fanfiction they had written for, and received mixed reviews. Interestingly, this question produced the most responses in the "other" category, some of which surprised me. Several respondents pushed back against my use of terminology or against my role as a researcher in general. I wrote this question with the knowledge that I could

never name all of the possible genres of fan productions, but the variety described to me still came as a shock. Participants were allowed to choose more than one category, and of those who felt able to fit themselves within my narrow definition of genres, most created work that could be called “pairing” or “romantic” fan productions. Three-quarters created “het” or heterosexual-based pairing fiction, and 61% created slash. This is significant when related to past scholarly research, some of which positions fan productions as outlets for sexual expression. Alternate Universe productions were also common, with 70% indicating they create these “AU” productions. Recall that Alternate Universe productions place characters into different worlds. Because of the high amount of AU fiction, further scholars may wish to explore why fan producers design new worlds for their favorite characters. The creation of general non-pairing based productions was slightly more likely than slash, with 69% creating general fiction. The creation of non-pairing fiction was nearly as likely as pairing-based fiction. This may indicate that both types of fiction are equally accepted within the fan community. Future scholars should examine which types these authors write about most often, not simply which types are written about in general.

Noticeably, genderswap was a relatively uncommon genre. Of those who said they created genderswap productions, most indicated they created genderswap type-A “always-a-girl” fiction (21%). Only 8% wrote type-A “always-a-boy” productions, and 14% wrote about sudden transformations, or genderswap type-B. Recall that genderswap type-A depicts characters that have been rewritten as the opposite sex from birth. “Always-a-girl” fiction depicts formerly male characters as female. Fan producers may be creating these fictions more often for a number of reasons. First, they may be trying to fill a perceived void in the media they enjoy. However, as I will discuss later, women are not more likely to see someone of the same gender as them in fan

productions over original media. This suggests that women are not actively adding women to fan productions. Fans may also be creating male-to-female characters simply because it is pragmatic. Few female characters exist on screen which leaves fan producers with fewer characters to genderswap. Other minority fan producers indicated writing “real person” fiction and BDSM fiction. One-fifth of respondents indicated they created works about real people and about one-quarter indicated they created works related to BDSM. Future scholars may wish to study these smaller groups of fan producers.

There was a large variety among those who could not confine their work to my narrow options. Several pointed out potential methodological issues in how terms are defined. One said, “I’m taking Genderswap to mean ‘sex & gender swap’. I’ve also only done genderswap (always-a-boy), though it’s complicated.” The complicated notion of terms may have led some to skip over genres others would say they have created for. In particular, the term “slash” has several connotations which cannot be effectively dealt with during a short survey. One participant, who said they also researched fans, said they wrote male/male fiction but classified that as distinct from slash:

‘Slash’ characteristically transforms and ships ‘straight’ male characters into gay. ‘Femslash’ does likewise, either by writing/shipping presumed-straight female characters as lesbian pairings or [...] by transforming a male canon character into female [...]. To my mind, a ‘het’ fic[tion] simply ships two canon presumed-het characters [...] If my definitions above are correct, I find it curious that your categories EXCLUDE [sic] the production of LGBT fanworks that respond to LGBT canon characters/texts/fandoms [...] as I understand it, these are not ‘slash’ or ‘femmeslash’. [sic] It’s interesting—revealing, but worrying—to discover that (your) fanfic[tion] terminologies appear to exclude such works.

Although it was not my intention to exclude GLBT fan works written about GLBT characters—my personal definition of “slash” includes such works—this was how it was perceived by at least two respondents who left comments in the “other” box. This may indicate potential problems

with terminology that should be dealt with in future surveys. Another participant indicated that there was potential ageism in the questions I was asking, stating “Please do take into consideration that some fan people have been doing it longer than you’ve been alive!” and referred to “ships” as a “new and rather irritating fashion.” The term “ships” generally refers to the verb form of “relationships.” In essence, when one “ships” two characters they are attempting to get them to form a relationship. This fan seems to be indicating that the act of “shipping” characters is a new one, however historically pairings fictions have existed for almost 50 years.

Despite this potential age gap, it is important to note the majority of survey participants first encountered fan productions online (70%). This indicates that most fans currently active have been creating fan productions since the era of slash. This is important in understanding how slash has become normalized in the fan community. An entire generation of fan producers has grown and matured online, where slash has been a mainstay of fan work. This statement should not be taken to belittle the relevance of heterosexual and general fanfiction. These genres are also important in understanding the community of fan producers. However, the fact that stories about male/male pairings can co-exist alongside stories about male/female pairings with relatively little contention, something which does not happen as often in the contemporary U.S., is central. Further, survey participants indicated that comments on their work were generally positive. Ninety-two percent said comments on their work were positive, with less than one percent saying comments were generally negative. The positive nature of comments may create a culture that allows for these expressions without fear of negative response.

Frequency of representation in media and fan productions

Participants were asked a number of questions related to how often they see someone “like themselves” in media and fan productions. They were asked if they saw someone who had the same race or ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, body type, economic class, profession, religion or spirituality, personality, and social relationships at least 50% of the time, as well as how often they saw someone like themselves overall. Results were interesting, and in some cases contradicted past theories about fan productions. Scholar describing fan productions as a subversion of patriarchy (Kustritz 2002) or as titillating (Salmon and Symons 2004) have positioned fan productions as tools to fill in gaps left by media, or as essentially functional enterprises. These authors have also assumed that fan producers are of typically-underrepresented groups (e.g. women or gays and lesbians). Based on this assumption, it is reasonable to assume that fan producers would attempt to produce works which represent themselves. However, fans report that they are less likely to see someone like themselves in fanfiction than in the original media on a number of measures. Respondents reported a drop in how often they saw someone of the same race in media versus fan productions. Ninety-one percent said they saw someone of the same race in media, but 85% said they saw someone of the same race in fan productions for a six-point drop. Similarly, 75% said they saw someone of the same gender in media but only 68% said they saw someone of the same gender in fan productions, a seven-point drop. These drops are small, but significant. Hypothetically, fan productions should be identical to the media they are based on or should include better representation. They use the same characters, often the same settings, and similar story structures. In practice this is not the case.

Participants also reported that they saw someone like themselves more often in fan productions in some cases. They were 17% more likely to see someone of the same sexual orientation in fan productions over media. They also indicated seeing someone of the same religion or spirituality 17% more often in fan productions over media and 18% more likely to see someone of the same personality. The likelihood of seeing someone with similar social relationships also jumped 17% when moving from media to fan productions. The other measures of similarity did not change substantially. In the end, participants indicated that they saw someone like themselves in fan productions 55% of the time but in media only 37% of the time. This may lend support to past scholarly theories that posit that fans create works which fill in gaps in their favorite media, however the fact that some of the variables that scholars have deemed significant (e.g., gender) decrease should not be ignored.

Fan motivations for creating

Finally, respondents were asked a series of Likert-scale questions to determine whether they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements. Answers to these questions were input into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and cross-tabulated against a number of other variables. To begin, I will discuss general findings for survey participants as a whole. I will then discuss the findings of the cross-tabulation, and how these findings relate to past scholarly theories. The majority of fans agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I am into fandom for the social interaction.” Sixty-eight percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Participants also agreed that they love talking about their fandoms (89%)¹⁴, and that talking to other fans is the best way to learn about fandom (81%). Overall, participants indicated

¹⁴ Percentages reflect a combined total of the “strongly agree” and “agree” or the “strongly disagree” and “disagree” attributes unless otherwise noted.

they enjoy discussing their fandom with others. Some fans did indicate that they like to keep to themselves in fandom. Slightly more than half of respondents agreed with the statement “I like to keep to myself in fandom.”

Respondents did not agree with the statement “I create fan productions because they are empowering for women.” Sixty-one percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. Women were not more likely to agree with that statement. Participants also declared that creating fan productions did not help them support a political issue (69%). This is an important point that goes against much of the past scholarly literature on fan productions. Past scholarly theories generally revolve around the idea that fans are creating fan productions in order to go against (or inadvertently support) patriarchy. In particular, Kustritz has positioned slash as a subversion of patriarchy (2002). Further, only half of the respondents indicated that creating fan productions helped them to be represented in the media. When responses to this question were compared to gender, race, sex, religion, and age there was no statistically significant correlation. However, fans did indicate that creating fan productions helped them represent *others* in the media (66%) and that creating fan productions helped them support a social issue. Fifty-seven percent agreed that creating a fan production helped them support a social issue, but only 31% agreed that creating a fan production helped them support a political issue. This may indicate a desire to separate fan productions from politicized terms like “patriarchy” or politicized actions like marriage equality for gays and lesbians.

Participants did indicate other reasons for creating fan productions. Ninety-eight percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “creating fan productions helps me to be a better writer or artist.” This is a strong statement. Survey participants did not agree on any other measure as strongly as they agreed on this question. It is fair to say that for nearly all fans,

creating a fan production is an artistic expression first and other expressions (e.g., political or sexual) are secondary. Fan productions were also thought to build strong friendships, with 85% agreeing with that statement. Fans also felt that creating fan productions brought them closer to the media they enjoy (96% agree or strongly agree). Overall, the expression of creativity was the best reason to create a fan production. Sixty-five percent of respondents strongly agreed with the statement “creating a fan production helps me express myself creatively” and 35% agreed. In total, 90% believe that fan productions help to express creative impulses. Notably, fans do not create fan works to become famous. Eighty-one percent disagreed with the statement that creating a fan production helps them to become famous. These responses indicate that fans do not create fan productions because of political issues, but rather because it is a fun and creative hobby that helps them build friendships and other relationships.

Participants were also asked how creating fan productions affect their sexuality. Overall, three-quarters indicated they had created relationship or pairing productions. Those who did create relationship or pairing fiction were more likely to agree with the statement “I see romance where others don’t.” They were also more likely to agree with the statement “creating a fan production helps me explore my sexuality” These relationships were statistically significant according to the Pearson Chi-Square test at .0001, indicating that an outside variable is not the cause of these relationships. They were not more likely to agree that they create fan productions because they are empowering for women. These responses seem to support past scholarly theories that some fan producers create their works because it is sexually gratifying for them (Salmon and Symons 2004; Lee 2003). The fact that those who have created relationship fiction were more likely to agree that fan productions aid them in exploring their sexuality than those who do not may indicate that fans of relationship fiction obtain sexual pleasure from creating

relationship fiction. They should not be taken to mean that all fan producers create in order to explore their sexuality, nor should it be used to reduce the significance of fan productions. This relationship should be explored more fully in the future.

Respondents' sexual orientation was cross-tabulated to the question "creating fan productions helps me explore my sexuality" There was a correlation between the two responses. Heterosexual respondents were less likely to agree with this statement than those who were queer (statistically significant at .003). Gay or lesbian respondents did not answer in a particular way, and asexual respondents were slightly more likely to agree. Age and relationship status did not impact these variables. Further, 87% of those who created BDSM productions agreed with the statement that creating fan productions helped them explore their sexuality. In addition, 63% of those who created heterosexual pairings, 71% of those who created femslash, and 70% of those who created slash agreed with this statement. Overall, the exploration of sexuality seems to be an important motivating factor in the creation of some types of fan productions. However, this exploration is not consigned to only slash productions, as past scholars have assumed (Salmon and Symons 2004). Future scholars should take into consideration other types of sexually gratifying fan productions. If, as I have argued above, slash fan productions are normalized within fan communities, then they should not be viewed as deviant by scholars attempting to explain their existence. To do so would be to ignore important social factors in the creation of fan productions.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

My study provides important insight into the motives of fan producers. Recall my continuum model of fan activity, which states that we are all fans on a "continuum" of

interaction with our source media. Understanding the motivations of the most visible portion of this model—the transformative fans or fan producers—can also provide valuable insight into how media interacts with individuals and communities. I designed this study to answer the question “why do fans create?” In order to answer this broad question I have examined past scholarly work on fan producers by testing past scholarly theories related to patriarchy and pornography, and I have examined how fans create norms through their work. As I have shown, fans rely strongly on social ties and creative expression. Further, these communities provide valuable insight on how gender is conceptualized and produced, and how fans make decisions as social actors. Below I discuss some of the limitations of this study and provide directions for future researchers.

Limitations of This Study

Several challenges arose during my study of fan producers. In particular, many fans expressed an unwillingness to engage with me as a scholar until I proved I was also a fan. Some never fully engaged with me or with my questions. Studies that are able to invest more time in earning fan producers’ trust will undoubtedly expand our knowledge of fan intentions. The research I conducted also brought up several issues related to ageism. Although young fan producers are the unintentional focus of this study, older fan producers may have different experiences that are necessary to understand fan communities as a whole. Future researchers should also determine participant’s country of origin in order to better determine what is normative within their society. The global nature of fan productions may complicate this.

The survey section of my study may also have been premature. As I have explained, there is no singular “fan community,” just as there is not singular “black community” or “male

community.” Although fan producers as a whole share many similarities, future scholars may benefit from concentrating on one genre of fan productions at a time. As I have mentioned, race swap, BDSM works, “real person” fiction, and many other genres all offer a rich field for analysis. Scholars should work to expand our knowledge of more than just slash-based works. My methods were also influenced by their online-nature. If possible, future researchers should be encouraged to contact fan producers directly and in-person (Freund and Fielding forthcoming). Some fans may feel more comfortable speaking with researchers who they know personally.

Directions for Future Research

The picture of fan producers is a complicated one which cannot be explained simply by consuming their works. Far from informing us of the motivations of fan producers, the simple consumption of fan productions can create myriad theories depending on the scholar’s preconceptions. Because of this tendency, the only way to truly understand the motivations of fan producers is to ask them directly. Further, the norms created within fan communities differ from norms expressed more broadly in contemporary U.S. society. Durkheim explained that individual actions are strongly influenced by social forces (1951). In fan communities, the tendency to privilege or normalize “deviant” sexualities and genders has allowed individual fan producers to view their works as unremarkable. Slash, femslash, and genderswap are simply a few genres of many and hold little special significance. Past fan studies scholars have been preoccupied with the psychology of what makes these producers perform deviant acts but as I have shown these acts are not considered deviant at all.

I began my study with an analysis of past scholarly work. I read and interpreted fanfiction and found support for and contradiction of scholarly theories about fan productions.

Finding that this complicated picture could not be remedied by archival analysis alone, I surveyed 26 genderswap fan producers for their motivations. I found that fan producers were generally motivated because creating was fun and socially beneficial for them. Any considerations of gender came after their introduction to genderswap. Following this I expanded my research to a survey of fan producers as a whole. I found a vast variety in motivations. In general, nearly all producers could agree that creativity and artistic expression were important motivating factors in creating fan productions. Social ties and friendship also motivated fan producers to create. This supports Durkheim's theories of social influence on individual action. Some indicated that the expression of their sexuality was important, but political factors were not motivating.

Further, fan producers and genderswap fan producers in particular often "do" fanfiction in much the same way we all "do" gender (West and Zimmerman 1987). Genderswap fan producers describe how the process of creating and consuming genderswap type-A and type-B works allows them to examine important questions related to gender essentialism, gender representation, and the relationship between sex and gender. These fans do not report entering genderswap *because* it had these features—in many cases, they found these features to be strange at first. Rather, an enjoyment of these features came after their initial introduction to genderswap. Future scholars should examine the power of fan productions to change fans' opinions on questions of sex, gender, race, and other measures. In particular, future scholars may be interested in the genre of "race swap" which recasts minority actors into important roles. For example, a race swap may recast Gandalf from "The Lord of the Rings" as played by Morgan Freeman. These and other genres of fan productions are becoming more popular with fans, and their influence should not be ignored.

In the future, scholars should realize that fan producers are not a homogenous group. The varied nature of fans may lead scholars down a number of different paths. In general, scholars should respect fan producers as individual actors within a larger social context by asking what their motivations truly are before making assumptions. As I have discussed, the findings produced by past scholars related to patriarchy and titillation may indeed be a *result* of fan productions, but that does not mean they were the *intent* of the fan producers. Those who consume fan works, including scholars, bring their own sets of assumptions to the table. Assuming that the reader's assumptions are the same as the original fan producer's assumptions is misleading and has led to an inaccurate picture of fan producers and to a community of fan producers distrustful of scholars in general. Future scholars may wish to study aspects of the fan community in detail, and should begin to focus on genres other than slash. Heterosexual, femslash, BDSM, genderswap, "real person," and general non-pairing fiction producers all hold different views that may interest future researchers.

In many ways fan producers "do" their fandom in ways similar to performing gender (West and Zimmerman 1987). In particular, the genderswap fan producers indicated that gendered considerations became very important after their introduction to genderswap. The creation of genderswap fanfiction could be seen as a representation of how norms around gender are created in the genderswap fan community. Norm creation was also emphasized in the survey of fan producers. The fact that producers of heterosexual and homosexual creations can coexist online is very significant. This coexistence seems to indicate new norms forming around what is and is not appropriate expression of sexuality and gender. These norms are generally different from the norms defined by society as a whole. Because of this variety, however, it is important for future scholars to consider fan producers not as a unified "fan community," but as a series of

small communities which join together. Future scholars would benefit from further direct contact with fan producers through interviews and surveys. They may also benefit from concentrating on one aspect of the fan community at a time (e.g. real person fiction authors, or BDSM authors) instead of attempting to lump together a complicated and varied community.

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Appendix A

Below are the questions I asked the genderswap interview participants. Questions were not always asked in this precise order. If the interview participant mentioned something that would normally come later in the interview I discussed it when they mentioned it. Follow up questions were employed in some cases to assure I had an accurate understanding of the participants' views.

- What is your gender? Race? Class? Age? Level of education?
- Before we begin the fanfiction part of the interview, I would like to know a little bit about some of your other hobbies.
- You like to write fanfiction/I've read some of your work: what do you enjoy writing about most?
 - What specific tags do you use (genres do you write for)? Why?
 - When you write about this tag, what motivates you? Why do you write?
 - What is your favorite ship (pairing)? Why?
 - When you write about this pairing, what motivates you? Why do you write? Is it about love, sex, romance? Do you find parallels in your own life? Do you wish you could be with these people? Do you fantasize about being with these characters?
 - What do you most like to read about?
 - When you read these stories, what happens in your head? Is it about relaxing, exploring, learning? Do you read maturely rated stories? Why?
 - What characters do you like to write about?

- When you write about these characters, what motivates you? What about their personality speaks to you? Do you generally feel that you are true to their on screen characterization? Has anyone ever accused you of being OOC (out of character)? Who do you least like to write about and why?
- You've written some gender-swap works. What motivated you to write these?
 - How do you define "genderswap?"
 - When did you read your first gender-bender work? Do you remember what it was? How did it shape your understanding of gender-swap work? What did you think of the genre? How has your opinion changed, if at all?
 - Do you find yourself represented in gender-swap fanfiction?
 - Do you write primarily male-to-female or female-to-male? Why? What can you explore through these writings?
 - Do you ever pair changed characters? With who? Are the pairings straights, slash, or femslash?
- How do you think other people might view your work if they stumbled upon it? Have you ever been flamed or trolled (left disparaging remarks)?
- Do you talk to your family about these writings? To your friends? Anyone?
- Do you talk online about these writings? What do you discuss?
 - Are you a member of a forum (message board) about these topics? What do they discuss?
- Would you encourage or discourage people from writing and reading fanfiction? Why?

Appendix B

The original survey questions are listed below. The survey was initially hosted on SurveyMonkey.com from October to December of 2012.

The following questions are about your demographic information. Please answer to the best of your ability. Questions with an asterisk (*) are required.

1. How do you identify your gender?

How do you identify your gender?

2. How do you identify your race or ethnicity?

How do you identify your race or ethnicity?

3. How do you identify your sexual orientation?

How do you identify your sexual orientation?

4. How do you identify your religious or spiritual affiliation?

How do you identify your religious or spiritual affiliation?

5. What is your age in years?

What is your age in years?

6. How would you identify your socioeconomic class?

How would you identify your socioeconomic class?

7. What is your country of residence?

What is your country of residence?

8. What is your marital status?

What is your marital status? Single

In a relationship

Married or partnered for life

Divorced

Widowed

9. What is the highest level of education you have achieved to date?

What is the highest level of education you have achieved to date? Some high school

High school diploma or GED

Some college

Two-year college or technical degree

Four-year college or technical degree

Graduate school degree

10. What is your current occupation or job?

These questions relate to your activities in the fan community. A fan community may be online, in person, or in print.

A "fan production" is any art, written work, video, comment, or other piece of material created by a fan based on the source material.

11. How many years have you been actively producing or consuming work in the fan community?

- Less than one year
- 1 to 3 years
- 4 to 6 years
- 7 to 9 years
- Greater than 10 years

12. On average, I create fan productions (e.g. fan art, fanfiction, fan videos):

- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Yearly
- Never

13. On average per day, I spend ____ hours consuming fan productions (e.g. reading fanfiction or watching fan videos):

- 0 hours a day
- 1 to 3 hours a day
- 4 to 6 hours a day
- 7 to 9 hours a day
- 10 or more hours a day

14. On average per day, I spend ____ hours consuming my source fandom (e.g. watching Trueblood or reading Harry Potter):

- 0 hours per day
- 1 to 3 hours per day
- 4 to 6 hours per day
- 7 to 9 hours per day
- 10 or more hours per day

15. I first encountered fan productions:

- Online
- Through a friend

- In a fanzine
 - At a convention
 - Other (please specify)
-

16. I have created fan productions for the following tags (check all that apply):

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Slash | <input type="checkbox"/> Genderswap Sudden Transformation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Femslash | <input type="checkbox"/> Gen (General Fiction with No Pairings) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Het (heterosexual pairing) | <input type="checkbox"/> Crack!Fic |
| <input type="checkbox"/> AU (Alternate Universe) | <input type="checkbox"/> BDSM |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Real Person Fiction (RPF) | <input type="checkbox"/> Drabble Fic |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Genderswap Always-a-Girl | <input type="checkbox"/> Mary Sue or Author Insert |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Genderswap Always-a-Boy | Other (please specify as many as you want) |

17. What is your favorite type of fan production (e.g. slash, Mary Sue) and what do you like about it?

Favorite type

What you like about it

18. What is your LEAST favorite type of fan production (e.g. slash or Mary Sue) and why do you LEAST like it?

What you least like

Why you least like it

19. Have you created relationship or pairing fan productions?

- Yes
- No

20. If yes, what is one of your favorite pairings? Please include their names and the series they are from. (e.g. Harry/Draco from Harry Potter, or Kirk/Spock/McCoy from Star Trek)

21. [Q20] Why do you like writing about this pairing?

22. Consider every fan production you have contributed to date. In which of the following ways have you contributed (check all that apply)?

- Drawing/creating art
- Write short stories
- Write novel-length stories

- Roleplay characters' actions
- Beta or edit for another person
- Create fan videos
- Create pod fic or recordings of fic
- Leave comments on fic
- Translate fiction from one language to another
- I don't believe I create anything that could be fan work

Other (please specify)

23. What is one of your favorite fandoms?

24. Why?

For the following questions, remember the amount of feedback you usually receive on your work.

25. For SHORT FANFICTION (less than 10,000 words) I receive an average of ___ comments:

- 0
- 1 to 5
- 6 to 10
- 11 to 15
- 16 to 100
- 100 or more
- Not applicable, I don't write short fanfiction

26. For LONG FANFICTION (more than 10,000 words) I receive an average of ___ comments:

- 0
- 1 to 5
- 6 to 10
- 11 to 15
- 16 to 100
- 100 or more
- Not applicable, I don't write long fanfiction

27. For FAN ART I receive an average of ___ comments:

- 0
- 1 to 5
- 6 to 10
- 11 to 15

16 to 100

100 or more

Not applicable, I don't create fan art

28. For COS-PLAY I receive an average of ___ comments:

0

1 to 5

6 to 10

11 to 15

16 to 100

100 or more

Not applicable, I don't create cos-play

29. For FAN VIDEOS I receive an average of ___ comments:

0

1 to 5

6 to 10

11 to 15

16 to 100

100 or more

Not applicable, I don't create fan videos

30. For ALL OF MY FAN WORK I receive an average of ___ comments:

0

1 to 5

6 to 10

11 to 15

16 to 100

100 or more

Not applicable, I don't create any fan work

31. Comments on my work are generally:

Positive

Constructive criticism

Negative

Neutral

For these questions, remember the amount of feedback you leave on OTHER fans' work.

32. I have given feedback in the following ways (check all that apply):

- Comments attached to the production
- Private messages to creator
- Private emails to creator
- In-person communication
- Through a fan production of my own based on that author's work
- I do not give feedback

Other (please specify)

33. I give feedback ___ % of the time, even if I do not finish the entire work:

This section is about representation in the MEDIA. Consider the following possible identification markers, and how similar popular media characters are to you. If you see someone like yourself represented in the media at least 50% of the time, please check “yes.”

For these questions, “media” refers to any television, book, movie, band, or other popular media created that fans enjoy.

34. I see someone of the same race or ethnicity in popular media at least 50% of the time.

- Yes
- No

35. I see someone of the same gender in popular media at least 50% of the time.

- Yes
- No

36. I see someone of the same sexual orientation in popular media at least 50% of the time.

- Yes
- No

37. I see someone of the same body type in popular media at least 50% of the time.

- Yes
- No

38. I see someone of the same economic class in popular media at least 50% of the time.

- Yes
- No

39. I see someone of the same profession in popular media at least 50% of the time.

- Yes
- No

40. I see someone of the same religion or spirituality in popular media at least 50% of the time.

- Yes
- No

41. I see someone of the same personality in popular media at least 50% of the time.

Yes

No

42. I see someone who has similar social relationships in popular media at least 50% of the time.

Yes

No

43. Overall, I see someone like myself at least 50% of the time.

Yes

No

This section is about representation in FAN PRODUCTIONS. Consider the following possible identification markers, and how similar fan-written characters are to you. If you see someone like yourself in these ways at least 50% of the time, please check “yes.”

For this section, “fan productions” refers to fan art, fanfiction, fan videos, or any other media created by fans.

44. I see someone of the same race or ethnicity in fan productions at least 50% of the time.

Yes

No

45. I see someone of the same gender in fan productions at least 50% of the time.

Yes

No

46. I see someone of the same sexual orientation in fan productions at least 50% of the time.

Yes

No

47. I see someone of the same body type in fan productions at least 50% of the time

Yes

No

48. I see someone of the same economic class in fan productions at least 50% of the time.

Yes

No

49. I see someone of the same profession in fan productions at least 50% of the time.

Yes

No

50. I see someone of the same religion or spirituality in fan productions at least 50% of the time.

Yes

No

51. I see someone of the same personality in fan productions at least 50% of the time.

Yes

No

52. I see someone who has similar social relationships in fan productions at least 50% of the time.

Yes

No

53. Overall, I see someone like myself at least 50% of the time.

Yes

No

For these questions, consider how often you discuss fan work.

54. I discuss fan production or fandom with (check all that apply):

off-line friends

on-line friends

family members

fans on message boards or internet forums

people at conventions

no one

Other (please specify)

55. On average, I discuss fan productions or fandom:

Daily

Weekly

Monthly

Yearly

Never

For these questions rate how well each statement applies to you.

56. I am into fandom for the social interaction.

strongly agree

agree

disagree

strongly disagree

57. I met most of my friends through fandom.

strongly agree

agree

disagree

strongly disagree

58. I don't like to explain why I'm a fan.

strongly agree

agree

disagree

strongly disagree

59. I love talking about my fandoms.

strongly agree

agree

disagree

strongly disagree

60. I create fan productions because they are empowering for women.

	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
61. Talking to other fans is the best way to learn about my fandom.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
62. I like to keep to myself in fandom.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
63. I feel like I have to hide my fan productions from my real life friends.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
64. I feel like I have to hide my fan productions from my family.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree

For these questions, “media” refers to any television, book, movie, band, or other popular media created that fans enjoy.

Please rate how much you agree with each of the following statements.

65. I feel like media characters belong to me.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
66. I have the power to change media characters' lives.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
67. Media characters belong to their primary author.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
68. I feel like media universes are my playground.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
69. I have the power to change media universes.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
70. Media universes belong to their primary author.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
71. I see romance where others don't.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
72. I think everyone deserves to find their one true love.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
73. Strong friendship yields the best romantic relationship.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
74. Strong antagonism yields the best romantic relationship.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
75. I like to shake the foundations of media characters.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
76. I think that each media character has only one way of being.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
77. I feel like media characters belong to fans.				

	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
78. I feel like media universes are fans' playground.				
	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
79. I feel like media characters belong to the world.				
	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
80. Fan productions can influence the work of the primary author				
	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree

Please look back on how you have contributed to fan productions, and rate how much you agree with each of the following statements.

81. I view my work as transformative.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
82. If I were an author, I would be honored to have fan productions created about my work.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
83. If I were an author, I wouldn't like fan productions created about my work.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
84. I view my fan work as a potential copyright violation.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
85. I feel my work is realistic.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
86. I almost always stay in character when creating fan productions	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
Please consider the following and rate how well you agree with each statement.				
87. Creating a fan production helps me explore my sexuality.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
88. Creating a fan production helps me to be represented in the media.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
89. Creating a fan production helps me support a political issue.	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree

- | | strongly agree | agree | disagree | strongly disagree |
|--|-----------------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| 90. Creating a fan production helps me to be a better writer or artist | strongly agree | agree | disagree | strongly disagree |
| 91. Creating a fan production helps me build friendships. | strongly agree | agree | disagree | strongly disagree |
| 92. Creating a fan production helps bring me closer to the media I enjoy. | strongly agree | agree | disagree | strongly disagree |
| 93. Creating a fan production helps me represent others in the media. | strongly agree | agree | disagree | strongly disagree |
| 94. Creating a fan production helps me support a social issue. | strongly agree | agree | disagree | strongly disagree |
| 95. Creating a fan production helps me make others interested in my fandoms. | strongly agree | agree | disagree | strongly disagree |
| 96. Creating a fan production helps me express myself creatively. | strongly agree | agree | disagree | strongly disagree |
| 97. Creating a fan production helps me to be famous. | strongly agree | agree | disagree | strongly disagree |
| 98. Would you encourage people to create fan productions? Why? | | | | |
| 99. Would you encourage people to create your FAVORITE type of fan production? Why? | | | | |
| 100. Would you encourage people to create your LEAST FAVORITE type of fan production? Why? | | | | |