Fandom Discussion:
Knowledge, Intersections, and Tensions of Self, Community, and Social Justice

by

Adrienne E. Raw

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(English and Education)
in The University of Michigan
2020

Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Megan Sweeney, Chair
Professor Anne Gere
Associate Professor David Gold
Professor Lisa Nakamura

Adrienne E. Raw

araw@umich.edu

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-7642-8906

Dedication

To my family:

Mama, Papa, and Brendon, your love and support made this possible

Acknowledgements

I am profoundly grateful for the mentorship and support of my doctoral committee: Melanie Yergeau, whose compassion, breadth of insight, and unflagging encouragement made it possible for me to do this project; Megan Sweeney, whose insight and interest made my engagement with my data so much richer and deeper than it otherwise could have been; David Gold, whose questions helped me figure out the kind of project I actually wanted to do; Lisa Nakamura, who helped me ground this project in the many fields I wanted to speak to; and Anne Gere, whose insights at the final stages helped me elevate this project immensely. My conversations with all of you have been invaluable and this project would not have been possible without your support and guidance.

My committee has been one part of the valuable support structure in the Joint Program in English and Education (JPEE) and at the University of Michigan. Thank you to my amazing cohort, Emily Wilson and Casey Otemuyiwa, for the friendship, support, and encouragement. Part of what drew me to JPEE was both of you; I met you and thought, "I could do my PhD with these people," and our weekly lunches for encouragement and support have made this program a delight. Thank you also to all my JPEEple; the close community in this program was an essential support to this project. Special thanks to Merideth Garcia and James Hammond, whose interests in fandom and fannish things helped convince me that I could find my people in this program, and to Michelle Sprouse, Bonnie Tucker, Elizabeth Tacke, Meg Garver, Anna Knutson, and Ann Burke, who read parts of this project as chapter drafts and project proposals. Thank you also to my graduate student colleagues across the university Katharine Campbell, Elizabeth Collins, Marisol Fila, Nadav Linial,

Yael Kenan, Ashley Moon, and Raquel Parrine who read pieces of this dissertation as part of interdisciplinary writing groups; your perspectives helped me communicate my work beyond the bounds of my specialist audience and helped me look at my questions in new and important ways.

The Joint Program in English and Education made this work possible and has been my much-loved home for the last five years. Many thanks to Anne Gere for the many opportunities to grow as a scholar and to Anne Curzan for helping me to always think about who my work was touching. Thank you both for welcoming me to the program. This program would not run without the immense work and kindness of Jeanie Laubenthal; thank you for always brightening my day.

Thank you to my wonderful family and friends for your support. Mom, Dad, Brendon, thank you for always believing I could do this and encouraging me when I decided to set out on this adventure. Thank you for always listening to me ramble about my work, even when it didn't make sense. Thank you for being there when I was stressed, when I was excited, and every when in between. To Kristina, a cheerleader when I needed it, who asked the right kind of questions to make me realize the things I assumed where "obvious" where actually really cool ideas from my data that I could write about, thank you for your support and friendship. To Jess and Dinh, thank you for always making time to get together and for your friendship.

And lastly, this dissertation would not have been possible without the incredible support, generosity, and willingness to share from the fans who participated in my study. When I started collecting data for this project, I expected to get maybe a hundred responses, if I was lucky. The number of you who took the time and energy to respond and who shared such thoughtful and personal reflections blew me away. I always knew my community was amazing, but I am humbled by your willingness to be part of this research and to be so open. I have more data than I could use in a decade, but I hope I've done justice to a tiny part of it with this dissertation.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Appendices

Abstract

This dissertation builds on research in digital rhetoric, multimodal composition, media studies and digital culture, feminist ethics, and fandom studies to better understand the role of the metatextual discussions across fandom that surround the community's consumption and remixing of media objects. This dissertation draws from autoethnographic reflection, surveys from 671 fans, and in-depth interviews with 12 demographically diverse participants to explore knowledge of, intersections between, and tension within self, community, and social justice in fandom discussions on Tumblr.

Fans perceive fandom discussion as operating in seven keys ways: building and breaking community relationships; building and breaking interpersonal relationships; facilitating criticism of content and fan behavior; modulating relationships to canon materials; prompting self-reflection; surfacing new perspectives; and recording fan and fandom history. Through these seven processes, fandom discussion mediates fans' relationships with and understanding of themselves, their communities and those in them, and social justice. The entanglements and tensions within these themes are evident in the ways that fans approach reading and writing fandom discussion, analyzed through the lens of curation. Fans' practices of curation are driven by a feminist ethics of care that encompasses the underlying themes of fandom discussion—self, community, and social justice—within two guiding ethics: an ethic of self-care that attends of fans' selves and individual experiences of fandom and an ethic of community care that attends to community interrelationships and social justice. Many fans conceptualize their production of fandom discussion in terms of the self-image their writing creates and conveys and in relation to the

complex direct and indirect audiences they address. They curate their consumption of fandom discussion for content they do and do not want to consume in ways that similarly highlight entanglements of self, community, and social justice and the conflicts that can arise between an ethic of self-care and an ethic of community care. These conflicts are concretized in the ways that actions driven by self-care (e.g., avoiding contentious content) can inhibit community care (e.g., social justice) and actions of community care can inhibit self-care (e.g., mental health). Many fans recognize these driving ethics of care in their theorizations of the purpose, place, and value of fandom discussion in fandom, and, exhibiting the self-reflection that is characteristic and unique in much of fandom, most fans theorize the place of fandom discussion in fandom by dwelling in these tensions. This capacity for and willingness to dwell in tension may prove a productive approach to addressing the many negative and harmful aspects of fandom discussion that fans raise when describing its function in fandom.

This dissertation has implications for fans, fan studies scholars, digital studies scholars, and instructors. For fans, it can facilitate a greater understanding of fandom culture and the diversity of perspectives that engage in fandom discussion, thereby potentially helping fans improve fandom discussion and reduce conflict. For fan studies scholars, it highlights the potential of collaboration with fans as a central part of research practice and offers a fandom-wide framework for investigating discussion within the community. For digital studies scholars, the similarities between fandom and other digital spaces means that the insights from this project can stand as departure points for re-thinking knowledge-making and discussion online. For instructors, this dissertation offers a foundation to question the potential of collaborative knowledge-making about self, community, and social justice in the classroom.

Chapter 1:

Introduction:

Fandom Discussion as Entanglement of Self, Community, and Social Justice

> **Oceaxe,** SURVEY RESPONSE**:** *I think it's crucial to discuss what we're doing, why we're doing it, what impacts it might have, and how to do it respectfully and productively. Fandom is "free," but it is not free of consequence.*

"Can we please stop sexualizing Latino men?" I'm halfway through re-reading one of the many pieces of *Star Wars* fanfiction I bookmarked after the release of *Episode VI: The Force Awakens*, and this plea of fandom-critical fans is echoing in my mind. The plea was the subject of a collection of posts and conversations that had crossed my Tumblr dashboard in the previous weeks. In these posts, other fans—mostly fans of color—had criticized the *Star Wars* fandom for a trope that was prevalent in fanfiction: the sexualization of character Poe Dameron, played by Guatemalan-American actor Oscar Isaac. These fans argued that the trend of making Latinx-coded characters promiscuous, talking about their accents exclusively as "rough" and "sexy," and having them use Spanish exclusively in sexual situations was part of a racist trope that sexualized and stereotyped Latinx characters. I remember reading these critiques with fascination and an eye towards learning. I was in the midst of writing my own piece of fanfiction in response to *The Force Awakens*—later abandoned for unrelated reasons—and I wanted to make sure my work didn't include these kinds of racist tropes. I was vaguely proud of myself for my socially just sensibilities,

1

but I remember thinking at the time that it wasn't a trope I had ever encountered in the fanfiction. I didn't disbelieve the critics; if they said it was there, then I accepted it as a common trope. It just wasn't, I thought, in any of the fanfiction *I* read.

Several weeks later, sitting at my laptop with a story I was re-reading for the fourth or fifth time—though only the first time since I'd encountered these discussions—I was forced to revise my perception. I hadn't, somehow, sidestepped the fanfiction that sexualized Poe Dameron; here it was in a story I'd read several times and bookmarked for future re-reading. I *had* missed seeing the racialized stereotype in the work I was reading. Worse, now that I was re-encountering the story with the knowledge of this trope in my mental landscape, I realized that it appeared in many of the other works this author had written, and many more of the hundreds—thousands—of pieces of fanfiction written in the wake of the release of *The Force Awakens*. I can't tell you how prevalent this trope is within the *Star Wars* fandom, but Poe Dameron is one half of the third most popular relationship[1] in the sequel trilogy and there are, at the time of this writing, almost 7,500 works that focus on that relationship. Even if only a small portion of these works include the trope that fans were critiquing, that's still a lot of stories.

Once I recognized the trope, I couldn't finish the story I was reading. And while it remains in my bookmarks because it's an otherwise great work whose plotting and characterization I still enjoy, I haven't been able to re-read it since.

This reading experience happened because of "fandom discussion," the online, largely text-based discussion that happens within and around online fandom communities, and the ways that

---

[1] The relationship most prevalent in *Star Wars* sequel trilogy fanfiction is between heroine Rey and later-redeemed villain Kylo Ren/Ben Solo, followed by a relationship between Kylo Ren/Ben Solo and villain Armitage Hux. These relationships have been critiqued individually by fans for misogynistic and/or abusive dynamics (especially Rey and Kylo Ren's relationship) and their popularity critiqued as a racist erasure of the sequel trilogy's male lead, black former-stormtrooper Finn.

discussion had reshaped my understanding of fandom. Fandom and fandoms[2] are the online spaces

where fans gather to appreciate, critique, and respond to media works. While "fandom" might be

broadly defined as anyone who identifies as a fan of anything—enjoying football or Taylor Swift

music, for example—there is a difference between merely enjoying something and belonging to

the distinct subculture represented by the concept of "fandom." In the preface to the twentieth

anniversary edition of *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins writes, "When my mentor, John Fiske

(1992), said he was a 'fan', he meant simply that he liked a particular program, but when I said I

was a fan, I was claiming membership in a particular subculture" (xiv). As Jenkins acknowledges,

the subculture of fandom is distinct; whereas a "fan" is someone who likes a particular media

object or celebrity and might engage with that object of appreciation by attending their concerts or

purchasing merchandise, "fandom" refers to a subculture that participates in the creation of

transformative creative works such as fanfiction and fan art wherein fans borrow the characters,

plots, and settings of published work for their own creative projects. In this dissertation, I use "fan"

and "fandom" in this latter sense: fans are members of the particular subculture of fandom that

interacts transformatively with media objects. Rather than solely appreciating these media objects

in the cinema, the concert hall, or the sports field, we fans take them home with us to create new

stories, new art, and new conversation.

Fans' critical conversations about our transformative engagement with media objects are

the focus of this dissertation. While fandom itself, and much of fandom studies scholarship, centers

---

[2] "Fandom" is a term used in online fan spaces to refer to both a sense of collective online fan community and to a specific media object, its fans, and their fan works. For example, the Hunger Games fandom refers to all of Suzanne Collins' canonical works and the created fan works (e.g., fanfiction, meta-commentary) that surround it. Individual fandoms (e.g., *Hunger Games* fandom, *Star Trek* fandom) are collectively part of online fandom. When fans say they are part of fandom, they may be referring to a specific fandom, to a broader collective sense of community that includes numerous individual fandoms, or to both, depending on the context. My use of this word is primarily a recognition of the way fans refer to their space and, secondarily, connotates transformative fandom (e.g., fanfiction, fan art) rather than all of online fannish interaction (e.g., following a singer on Twitter), though there is overlap between the two.

around the creative projects that fans undertake, fandom is also home to robust discussion among fans about the media objects, about the nature of fandom, about the narrative and visual tropes in our fanfiction and fan art, about the nature and experiences of being a fan, and about the behaviors and etiquettes we should practice as part of the community—the kinds of conversations that include pointing out racialized stereotypes to other fans. This dissertation asks: *What role(s) does fandom discussion play in fans' identities and experiences within and perceptions of online fandom?* The following research questions guide my interrogation of this topic:

1. What rhetorical and/or social functions do fans perceive fandom discussion as playing within fandom?

2. How is fandom discussion implicated in knowledge of self, community, and social justice and what does it illuminate about the ways these values intersect?

3. How do fans narrate their relationships with fandom discussion and their reading/writing practices surrounding it?

4. How does fandom discussion influence fans' perceptions of and relationships with fandom and/or other fans?

To answer these questions, I build on existing research in fandom scholarship and more broadly in the various fields interested in digital culture and communication. A large body of research exists across the fields of rhetoric and composition, digital humanities, science and technology studies, and education about the rhetorics of online interaction, concerned with the characteristics of user engagement, its similarities and differences to offline genres of writing and discussion, its impacts on such conditions as social relationships and political perspectives, its affordances for identity and performativity, and its potential in education (see, for example, Warnick and Heineman). Similarly, scholarship in fandom studies has begun to explore fans'

interactions outside of and around their transformative works, including activism, identity performance, writing development, and metatextual engagement with source material. Yet fandom studies has not yet significantly explored the particular genres of fandom discussion, nor has scholarship outside of fandom yet fully considered online discussion as a complex web of interconnected social purposes that is mediated by participants in addition to mediating participants' perspectives and practices. Thus, at the intersection of fandom studies' attention to the complex, vibrant community of online fandom and work in writing studies and digital studies' about online communication and community across digital spaces, there is space to consider how discussion online forms and expresses the self, the community, and the practice of social justice and where perceptions of discussion illuminate tensions in these entangled ideas.

Fandom is a generative space for exploring questions about online discussion more broadly. Fandom is small enough to be considered a distinct community within the vast ocean of the internet: fans participate on specific and recognizable platforms, feel a sense of kinship and community across "fandom" broadly conceived, and share vocabularies and practices that make them distinct from other groups. Yet fandom is also diverse enough—consisting, as it does, of many subcommunities organized around particular media objects and including participants from around the world—to suggest that trends in the roles of discussion within this community have something to tell us about how discussion functions in other digital spaces. As fandom itself is also highly self-reflective and much fandom scholarship is undertaken by fans, this research also has the potential to help fandom communities better understand their practices and perceptions around fandom discussion—which might help fandom communities mitigate the problems many fans acknowledge within these conversations.

As a fan who's been in the community since elementary school—a length of time that would earn me the title of a Fandom Old within the community—and a doctoral candidate with research interests in digital communities and composition, I want this study to inform my own understanding of my community and to contribute to a greater understanding of how discussion within online spaces functions to mediate between participant and community and might serve as an avenue for community change. Through autoethnographic reflection, analysis of survey responses from nearly 700 fans across the fandom community, and in-depth interviews with 12 of those fans, this interpretive study explores fans' perceptions and practices around fandom discussion in their own words to facilitate an extended analysis of the mediating and mediated nature of discussion in fans' expression and understanding of self, community, and social justice in fandom.

FANDOM AS COMMUNITY AND ECOLOGY OF WRITING

As I note above, this dissertation focuses specifically on fandom discussion as a reading and writing practice, interrogating in purposes in the making and expressing of knowledge about the self, community, and social justice within online fandom communities. In my dissertation, I position and explore this writing within its place in fandom, so it is necessary to first explain this larger context. In this section, I explain fandom writ large as a digital community that shares characteristics with offline communities but whose online contexts introduce notable distinctions. I then theorize the networked writing of fandom as an ecology of writing within which fandom discussion operates and argue that examining fandom discussion through this lens of networked writing helps us understand the cumulative impact of thousands of individual posts on identity, community, and social justice.

Fandom as Community

At the heart of this project is the idea of fandom as a community within which discussion plays some role. While my study does not advance a new definition of fandom as community, the concept of community in fandom *is* a key idea in my project, in much of fan studies scholarship, and, indeed, in much scholarship in both offline and online contexts. While many fields use the term "community" and are interested in communities in their various forms and compositions, both the term and the concept remain amorphous. Anthropologists Vered Amit and Nigel Rapport, for example, position community as a slippery term that is "too vague, too variable in its applications and definitions to be of much utility as an analytical tool" (13; see also Winland 372). Nevertheless, the idea of community remains a persistent site of inquiry because of its "emotional resonance" (Amit and Rapport 13) and its ability to evoke a sense of belonging or togetherness. In this section, I draw from research in the digital humanities to consider how scholars have defined community in online contexts; I then turn to the work of fan studies scholars and their engagement with fandom as community. Theorizing fandom as a community is necessary because, as I will show in the findings of this dissertation, many fans theorize fandom discussion in relation to its impacts on community and membership within that community.

In positioning online spaces such as fandom *as* communities, digital studies and new media scholars have embraced the idea of community "as a relationship among people as much as a place" (Trend 251), a perspective that highlights the parallels between online and offline interaction between members for a shared purpose while recognizing the distinct differences that exist in communities whose geographic "place" is online. In considering community online, digital scholars must work at an intersection between the digital platforms on which the community is based and the social interactions and purposes that have defined scholarship of communities

online. Marcella Kehus, Kelley Walters, and Melanie Shaw, for example, use these concepts in conjunction to examine how a web-based environment supports adolescent writers in both their writing and interactions around writing. They argue that technological factors such as privacy, anonymity, and technological mediation, as well as community characteristics such as common purpose and social ties all serve to constrain and enable the formation of a community (Kehus et al). Similar work by Lisa Newon considers the way the online community of *World of Warcraft* develops through a combination of mutual interest and engagement that shapes practice within the constraints of this particular platform. In her chapter in *Digital Discourse,* Newon argues that members of the *World of Warcraft* community perform authority, authenticity, and expertise through ways of speaking/being/acting and through appearance, which are constrained by the semiotic affordances of the platform (i.e., the options for character appearance, the facilitation of voice and text chat, the game environment, the limitations and options for character movement, etc.). Newon's work highlights the ways in which this online platform enables particular kinds of communication and the ways in which players take up those affordances to build and convey identity. Thus, for many digital scholars, community online is inseparably intertwined with consideration of platform, an approach which informs my study of fandom within and on Tumblr as a particular context.

Like many fan studies scholars, I recognize the existence of a sense of community among those who participate in fannish activities like reading and writing fanfiction or drawing fan art, and this recognition of fandom as community exists for both its offline and contemporary online incarnations. In reviewing fan scholarship from its earliest seminal works (see Jenkins, 1992; Bacon-Smith, 1992), Rhiannon Bury notes that "community has always been at the heart of participatory media culture" (628). The language of fan scholarship itself reflects this perception

of fandom as community. Henry Jenkins's seminal work *Textual Poachers*, for example, explicitly identifies fandom as both an interpretive and social community in the opening pages of the book's introduction (2). More recent work in the field—such as Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse's 2006 collection *Fan fiction and fan communities in the age of the internet* or Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss and C. Lee Harrington's 2007 collection *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World,* which both include the word "community" in their titles—follow this trend, explicitly connecting the concepts of fandom and community as foundational to the work of fan studies.

In defining "community" within the fandom context, fan studies scholars have emphasized the coming-together of fandom around shared media objects, the creation of new and transformative creative work and discussion about and with those media objects, and an interaction among fans who engage in these activities. In *Digital Fandom*, for example, Paul Booth defines "community," in reference to fan communities, as "the social grouping of individuals with shared interests, joined together through some form of mechanism of membership; the self-selected organization of a group of fans who both enjoy an extant media object, and who create additional content about that extant media object" (22). Nancy K. Baym, writing about soap opera fandom, similarly describes these communities as ones that "co-opt mass media for interpersonal use" (4) and transform texts "into socially meaningful fields through interaction that is ongoing and patterned in subtle yet community-constituting ways" (5). Thus, for fan studies scholars, "community" is defined by shared purpose and interaction geared towards this shared purpose.

Though fan studies scholarship has long-recognized fandom as a form of community, the sense of community within fandom has not remained uninterrogated by scholars. Both fan studies' earliest theoretical work and its more recent empirical and qualitative studies have recognized that

fans often "perceive themselves to be part of larger communities of similar others who also like the same interest—fandom" (Chadborn et al 1). Empirical work—for example that by Daniel Chadborn, Patrick Edwards, and Stephen Reysen—has also shown that fans generally feel a greater sense of belonging, sense of identity, and emotional connection to their fan communities than to their local communities. Several scholars within the field have, further, conducted research aimed at understanding this sense of community in various formations and through various mechanisms. Recent work from Bury, for example, interrogates "the technocultural formation of online community in the context of fandom and its relationships to specific platforms from Usenet to Tumblr" (627). She argues that while fandom's use of older platforms in its initial transition online (e.g., Livejournal, listservs) enabled community by providing more access points to fandom, fostering individual relationships among participants, and facilitating sustained discussion, contemporary social media platforms are not structured to enable the same kind of sense of community despite their capacity for sociality. Her work demonstrates fan studies' current interest in both the technological platforms on which fan communities operate (see also Busse and Hellekson's essay collection) and fan scholars' growing interest in revisiting fandom history and considering fandom's evolution over time. Additional work also considers the potential impacts of a sense of community within fandom. For example, in a 2015 study, Christine Schreyer argues that the sense of community felt by Na'vi language learners is a motivating factor that keeps them engaged in learning the language. These studies on the sense of community and the connection between community and technology highlight the varied ways that many fan studies scholars understand community as a foundational part of fandom.

While the idea of fandom as a community is largely uncontroversial within fan studies, scholars do not agree on the nature, scope, formation, or intensity of that sense of community.

Schreyer, for example, recognizes that members of the community itself have different conceptions of "what exactly constitutes their community, whether or not that community has a culture, and how digital technologies play a role in both" (5.13). Scholars also debate whether fandom should be studied as a collective community (see Chadborn et al; Jenkins) or whether focus should be concentrated on sub-communities (i.e., individual fandoms) and specific practices (see Hills). Despite a lack of agreement within fan studies scholarship about the nature of the fan community, the concept of fandom is closely aligned with the concept of community and fan studies scholars widely recognize the existence of a sense of community in fandom.

However, these studies have largely focused on understanding participatory fans' sense of community through their responses to researchers rather than focusing on the way community is understood and enacted in interactions within fandom. Fandom has a long history of discussing its community within itself and for an audience of its participants. Recent discourse by fans in the *Star Wars* fandom, for example, has centered around the ways in which fandom might be promoting racism through racist narrative tropes in stories containing characters of color like Finn, Rose Tico, Poe Dameron, and Cassian Andor. Other fans have posted about feeling exhausted by constantly facing fanworks[3] that erase characters of color or by encountering fans who deliberately attack characters of color and hound fans of those characters (see, for example, posts by diversehighfantasy (Tumblr) and Stitch (stitchmediamix.com) for commentary on this trend). Fandom is increasingly aware of these tensions and is having conversation about them, and about how fans believe fandom should conduct itself. Scholarship has not, however, paid sufficient attention to this negotiation and discussion of fandom that occurs among fans.

---

[3] "Fanworks" is a collective term for the creative work of fandom which includes fanfiction, fan art, fan videos, gif and photosets, podfic, and podcasts.

I build on existing scholarship on fandom as a community to address this gap. In positioning fandom as a community, I define "community" as a grouping of individuals, joined by mutual interest and a sense of connection, that participate in shared social practices of communication and collective engagement. Community is central to my work in this dissertation because it emphasizes the shared interest and sense of connection that many fans feel in fandom while connecting that shared interest with specific communication (writing) practices that can be studied. Further, community is important because while much scholarship on community emphasizes a sense of connection, it does not discount tension and conflict as a part of the community, which is important to my study because of the productive role tension plays in knowledge-making in fandom. While the study I propose is aimed at scholars, I seek to leverage a fan-centric approach by examining how fans discuss fandom as community within fandom and for an audience of other fans.

Fandom as an Ecology of Writing

Theorizing fandom as a community is one pillar of understanding fandom. The other pillar I emphasize in this dissertation is a critical examination of the writing that creates such community. To conceptualize this writing, I turn to the intersection of ecologies of writing and Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS). An ecological approach to understanding writing envisions it as a complex, dynamic, relational, and social system (Dobrin). In addition to providing a systems model for the interrelated genres of fandom, an ecological approach to fandom also suggests key features of writing within systems that help situate writing within fandom generally and fandom discussion in particular. Early theorists in the field of ecology and composition studies (see Marilyn Cooper, Richard M. Coe, James Thomas Zebroski) critiqued the then-contemporary emphasis in composition studies on the writer as individual, writing in a vacuum. Instead, they proposed what

would become the foundational ideas of ecology and composition: writing as a system; writing as a social act within "socially constituted systems" (Cooper 367); and writing (systems) as dynamic, flexible, and evolving. Similar themes emerge in Rhetorical Genre Studies, which make these two approaches to studying writing particularly compatible.

RGS is concerned with the functionality of genre, understanding genres as not just communication tools, but also "socially derived, typified ways of knowing and acting; they embody and help us enact social motives, which we negotiate in relation to our individual motives; they are dynamically tied to the situations of their use; and they help coordinate the performance of social realities, interactions and identities" (Bawarshi and Reif 77). In other words, genre, in the RGS framework as in the ecological approach, is socially constituted and dynamic. The additional theme emphasized with RGS, which makes it helpful for interrogating fandom discourse, is the emphasis on the social role of the genre. Studying a genre in RGS "requires both a knowledge of a genre's structural and lexico-grammatical features as well as a knowledge of the social action(s) a genre produces and the social typifications that inform that action: the social motives, relations, values, and assumptions embodied within a genre that frame how, why, and when to act" (Bawarshi and Reif 77).

These perspectives well-suit the complex, social system of multimodal genres that comprise fandom, and of which fandom discussion is merely a single part. As a digital ecology, fandom is a system of genres both creative and metatextual that constitute a social system wherein fans engage with popular media objects. Fanfiction, fan art, fan video and other transformative works are complemented by fandom discussion and its genres of metatextual analysis, cultural critique and appreciation, and personal relationship building. Understanding fandom discussion as a component of this system requires a theoretical approach that accounts for a systemic approach

13

to writing, the dynamic nature of digital community, and the sociality of fandom's genres. Together, ecologies of writing and Rhetorical Genre Studies facilitate this interrogation and emphasize three key themes that guide my interpretation of the findings of this dissertation: writing as socially situated, writing as dynamic, and writing as playing a social role.

First, ecologies of writing and RGS both contend that writing is a socially situated and constituted system. In ecologies of writing, this social model, currently shared by much of contemporary composition scholarship, posits that writing must be understood within the social frameworks that constitute it and that writers must be equally envisioned as existing in relation to these social systems. As Cooper argues, "all characteristics of any individual writer or piece of writing both determine and are determined by the characteristics of all the other writers and writing in the systems" (368). In other words, a writer and their work exist not as a disconnected island isolated from context, but as fundamentally embedded within that context. Their interactions with their ecology—both their physical, natural environment and their less tangible sociocultural networks—are both shaped by that ecology and, in turn, shape that ecology. Writing, consequently, serves a social function within this ecology in that it shapes the communication ecology in which it is situated and the writers who exist within this ecology.

Like in the ecological model, RGS envisions writing (genre) as socially situated and situating. In RGS, scholars argue that writing is best understood as residing within community *because* of its role of embodying ways of knowing and acting (Bawarshi and Reif). This model, called situated cognition, posits that knowledge about a genre is linked to knowledge about the situation in which it is occurring and the conditions, values, and accepted practices of that situation (Bawarshi and Reif 78-82). Bawarshi and Reif write that genres are "typified ways of acting within recurrent situations, and as cultural artifacts that can tell us things about how a particular culture

14

configures situations and ways of acting" (78). In other words, genres in the RGS model can be used as tools to interrogate how a particular system acts, but they also serve as ways of acting within the system. Within my project, RGS serves as a model for considering fandom discussion as a knowledge-making system and examining the ways knowledge about community values inflects knowledge about and resistance to communication practices in the community.

Second, an approach that envisions writers and their work as being both influenced by and influencing their context reflects another foundational theme in ecology and composition that is particularly applicable to my dissertation study: writing is dynamic. In an ecological model of writing studies, writing systems are envisioned as dynamic, unstable, and fluctuating, and the ecological approach, rather than attempting to stabilize understanding, embraces the instability inherent in the system (Dobrin; see also Coe, Cooper)—an approach that is particularly helpful in the "hyper-circulatory" (Dobrin 4) system of online writing that is more dynamic and complex than earlier writing systems. As an online system of writing, fandom exemplifies this dynamic character of writing.

Finally, the third theme from which I draw heavily is the emphasis in RGS on genre as social action. RGS is particularly concerned with the social roles that genres are taking and the ways interactions between genres can facilitate particular social outcomes. For example, notions of uptake and relations between genres (see Freadman) argue that one genre can lead to another and can prompt particular action in response. Similarly, RGS's concern with understanding groups of genres—genre sets and genre systems—attends to the ways these groups do and do not interact to achieve particular goals with activity systems or ecologies. As Bawarshi and Reif argue, "Part of what defines a genre system or genre set as such are the actions that these genres, working in dynamic interaction with each other, enable individuals to perform over time, within different

contexts of activity" (87). Genre as social action can thus be understood as a foundational principle of RGS. It is also a foundational principle of this dissertation; in the chapters that follow, this understanding of writing as dynamic, contextualized system of social action serves as a premise on which I build my analysis of fandom discussion's mediations, driving ethics, and tensions.

FANDOM DISCUSSION 101

In the previous sections, I positioned fandom discussion as one part of an ecology of writing

Figure 1.1. Sample Fandom Discussion Post

eyeloch

Characters: interact

Fans:

READY TO SHIP
WARNING!

READY TO SHIP

READY TO SHIP

READY TO SHIP
WARNING!

#fandom culture #shipper culture #shipping culture #tumblr culture #shitposting

41 notes   Jun 27th, 2018

in fandom. Before I attend to the relevant literature about discussion online and fandom on Tumblr that provides the foundation for my study, I want to provide a brief overview of the "fandom discussion" I propose to study to familiarize readers with the key writing genres about which my participants share their perspectives and experiences. As I note earlier in this chapter, in addition to their transformative creative work—fanfiction, fan art, etc.—fans also engage in extensive conversation around the media objects of which they are fans, the nature and history of fandom and fandom communities, behavior and norms within fandom spaces, and trends and tropes with transformative fanworks. Though varied, these conversations can be grouped together under what I call "fandom discussion" as distinct from the creative works of fandom. Posts range from humorous memes and heartfelt personal stories to

in-depth analysis and critical rants. Figure 1.1 (above) and Figure 1.2 (below) provide two examples of fandom discussion. Figure 1.1 is a meme told in image and text format that offers a humorous commentary on the culture of fandom, particularly fans' tendency to see romantic and/or

Figure 1.2. Sample Fandom Discussion Post
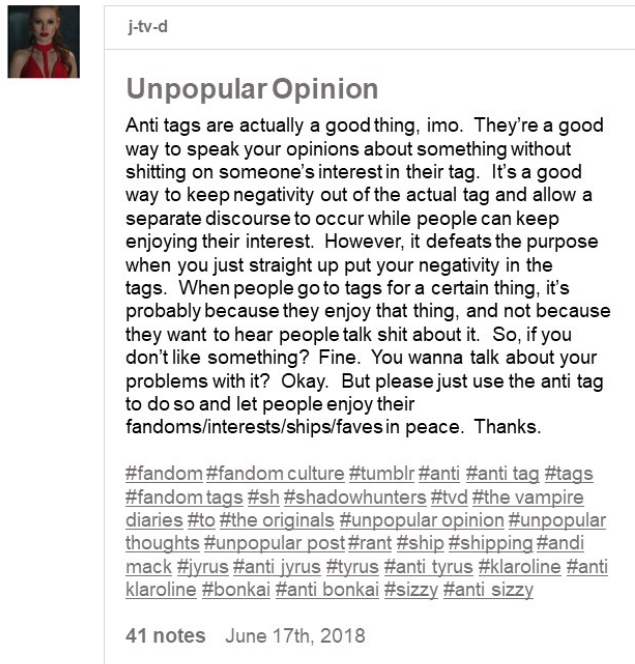
sexual chemistry (called shipping) between any two characters who interact on screen or on the page. The labels are likely not originally intended to communicate about fandom, but have been appropriated to juxtapose a "warning" with a fan practice: "ready to ship" refers to fans' willingness to create relationships or "ships." The "warning" likely refers to the ways fans can be particularly intense about romantic relationships; "ship wars" (conflicts between fans who like different ships) are often a significant part of tension in fandom. Figure 1.2 is a text-only commentary on behavior and etiquette norms within fandom. Specifically, this post is an argument within a common debate within fandom about whether fans should be writing posts that are critical of characters or relationships that other fans love and, if shared, how those posts should be tagged to facilitate critical conversation but avoid other fans feeling attacked or overwhelmed by negative commentary. Though different in form, purpose, and tone, both examples offer commentary about fans and fandom, and it is this kind of conversation—both fun and critical—that this dissertation explores.

In the remainder of this section, I offer a more detailed explanation of my use of the term "fandom discussion" and its origins in relation to the weighted terms that fans use to describe these

conversations. Throughout this dissertation, I use the term "fandom discussion" to refer collectively to fans' conversations about and around their transformative fanworks, though most fans themselves do not use this term collectively. Indeed, fans do not have a collective term that refers to all of the genres of discussion within fandom. Scholars use the term "discourse" to name these acts of metatextual theorizing, discussion, debate, conflict, critique, and appreciation. While I will use the scholarly term "discourse" in reference to scholarship, I do not use this term to refer to discussion in fandom because fans attach "discourse" to a particular kind of fandom discussion and often associate negative connotations with the term.

When I began this project, I entered with the more scholarly outlook on terminology; "discourse" was a neutral term I recognized as encompassing acts of discussion, persuasion, debate, etc.—the very acts I had participated in and observed in fandom. Recognizing that there were many names for these discussions in use across fandom, I wrote my survey using "fandom discourse" as the umbrella term for all fandom discussion but asked survey respondents what they called it. I was curious whether the different kinds of posts I read—the theorizing about characters' backstories, the critique of racist fanfiction tropes, the calling out and critique of trends and behaviors—would be correlated with different names. What I did not expect was the number of respondents who identified the term "discourse" not as the neutral umbrella term I imagined but as associated with a particular kind of discussion and bearing almost universally negative connotations. This reaction gave me pause and suggested that rather than using a term generated solely from my own experiences and researcher-influenced positionality, I should draw my term from responses fans had already provided to my survey. From asking this question about terms, I learned two things through my survey: first, that fans don't share a universally common term for discussions in fandom though several terms are commonly used in reference to certain kinds of

discussion, and second, that "discourse" was not the appropriate term to use in this dissertation project because of its connotations in fandom.

The first key idea that came from reviewing these survey responses was one I already, in some sense, was aware of: that there were many different names for discussion in fandom and that those names were often associated with particular kinds of posts and responses. When I asked fans to share their own terms form naming fandom discussion, they offered options including "fandom meta[4]," "fandom discourse," "fans talking," and "fandom wank," among others. Many fans also offered more than one name, making it clear that different names were associated with different kinds of discussion. For example, Rahirah[5], a 56-year-old white American fan of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, offered this description of the different names she attributes to fandom discussion in her response to the survey question *When fans talk to each other about fandom, what do you call it?*:

> Depends on the context. Critical discussion of the source material I usually call meta. Fandom wank as a term is rather dated nowadays, but it used to be reserved more for interpersonal feuds or self-aggrandizement disguised as meta. Discourse can be either, but it also (at least in my primary fandom) carries the implication that "This is one of those perennial arguments that will never be resolved, but people will keep resurrecting the horse in order to beat it some more."

Rahirah highlights the two most common terms attributed to fandom discussion and, simultaneously, two significant categories in which writings fall. The first is fandom meta, a term most-often attached to "critical discussion of the source material," which might include speculations about a character's backstory, analysis of character interactions or plot points, and critiques of how the source material handled issues like LGBTQ+ representation or racism. For example, after the release of *The Force Awakens*, many fans speculated that Finn, its ex-

---

[4] "Meta" typically refers to fans' commentary and analysis about character backstories, motivations, etc.
[5] All fans in the study were given the option of having their responses publicly associated with their fan identities of being assigned a pseudonym. All demographic data was provided by the fans. See Chapter Two for more information.

stormtrooper male lead was Force-sensitive because of his reaction to the destruction of the Hosnian system and the parallels between that scene and Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi's reaction to the destruction of Alderaan in *A New Hope*. This kind of detailed analysis of the source material constitutes a significant portion of discussion in fandom as fans celebrate, critique, and expand canon material.

The second term Rahirah presents is fandom discourse. She, like many other fans who responded to this survey, attaches negative connotations to the term. She likens the topics of fandom discourse to dead horses that fans are constantly beating: arguments that have no resolution and, implicitly, are pointless to bring up. In her survey response, another fan, lisafer, a 39-year-old white American fan in fandoms including *Gundam Wing, Harry Potter*, and *Supernatural*, adds that the term "fandom discussion" is often deployed when arguments have a moral component:

> But most often I use "fandom discourse" when the discussion includes a sense of "you're a bad person if you believe X." I really got into fandom on tumblr, so that was most often how I saw it being used--to talk about why X shippers were wrong and bad, or why if you picked Y ending for a Dragon Age character you were condoning abuse, that kind of thing.

In these discussions, fans engage in arguments about the perspectives and behaviors of other fans, often on moral grounds. For example, fans might argue that relationships—or "ships" to use fandom terminology—are inherently pedophilic if they included an age difference or abusive if they occurred between a hero and a villain. These arguments sometimes also include dimensions wherein fans who like these relationships are themselves accused of being racist, pedophiles, abusive, etc. The boundary between critique of problematic representation and attacks against other fans is often blurry and critique can often escalate quickly into controversy. "Fandom discourse" is used to condemn this kind of discussion and the term thus often, though not always, is negatively connotated for fans. Though many fans do use "fandom discourse" to describe

discussion broadly, as I did at the start of this project, because of the negative connotations and association with a specific kind of discussion, I have chosen to use the more neutral and generalized term "fandom discussion" to describe the writing and writing practices that I interrogate in this dissertation.

As I have highlighted in this section, fandom discussion is not a single distinct genre but rather a collection of different recognizable types of writing that together can be grouped into what Rhetorical Genre Studies scholars (see work by Amy Devitt; Bawarshi and Reif) have described as a genre set: a "more loosely defined sets of genres, associated through the activities and functions of a collective but defining only a limited range of actions" (Bawarshi and Reif 57 quoting from Devitt). Unlike genre systems, wherein genres interconnect in serving an overarching purpose, genre sets include multiple genres that are associated through the activities that these genres perform, but do not necessarily function together towards a larger purpose. Fandom discussion consists of many different genres which are associated by their mediating and mediated social role with fandom; their impact on making knowledge about the self, community, and social justice; and their collective purpose in critiquing both the media artifacts around which fandom is gathered and fandom itself.

DIGITAL WRITING LIVES: A LITERATURE REVIEW

We are now writing more than we read (Brandt), and in an increasingly digital age, more and more of that writing is happening in online spaces from collaborative workplace writing and online education to social media and online communities like fandom. It is no surprise, then, that composition scholars are increasingly interested in our digital writing lives. Scholars are investigating mass writing as a consequence of workplace demands (Brandt), the potential of online writing for political and public participation (Warnick and Heineman), the use of writing to

establish or conform to social structures (Bourlai; Malinen; Spilioti), the issues of technology access and learning technological literacies (Selfe and Hawisher), and the place of online writing as a performance and discovery of identity (P. Boyd et al; Daniels; Malinen). Work on the digital writing lives of people online extends composition studies' long interest in writing as socially contextualized and rhetorically grounded, with the added dimension of the increased publicity of online writing and the complexity implicated in that publicity. In her book *The Rise of Writing*, Deborah Brandt writes, "For the first time in history, masses of humans have keyboards under their hands that connect them to people at a distance and screens that shine back at them the public look of their own written utterances" (Brandt 158-159). As Brandt suggests, writing in our digital age is increasingly something that is part of our everyday lives, that is publicly done, and that connects with a much broader and more distant audience than it ever did before. Not only has writing itself become more ubiquitous, but writing online has become "an essential component of literate activity" (Selfe & Hawisher 2). Recognizing the increased ubiquity of digital writing and increasing essentialness of digital platforms in the very foundations of writing, composition scholars are increasingly interested in the writing we do online—in the ways that writing can be transferred to other spaces, in the ways writing online is a reflection and performance of our identity, in the ways writing online constitutes a *life* online across platforms, contexts, identities, and modalities. As with our attention to writing historically, our developing interests in writing lives online are also concerned particularly with the persuasive and argumentative dimensions of this online written interaction.

Debate, discussion, and interaction online happen in hundreds, if not thousands, of digital communities and spaces, from Reddit gamer discourse to Twitter political commentary to the forums of mommy bloggers. Digital scholars have considered many of these communities and the

social and rhetorical functions of discussion within these spaces. Digital writing has been the focus of scholars from numerous fields including composition studies, political science, and education. However, though many scholars of digital spaces and interaction recognize a sense of community within those spaces, the relationship between that sense of community and behaviors within the community remains less deeply explored. In a review of 83 articles published about online communities, Sanna Malinen argues that while empirical studies have recognized the influence that the social structures of online communities have on their participants and behaviors by those participants, research has not yet fully explored the "social influence" (239) that people have on each other within those communities. In other words, research has recognized the influence of a social situation online on the writers within it, but it has not fully explored how writers intervene in the construction of these online social situations nor the full extent of their relationships and community-building with other participants.

My research begins to explore this space in online fandom communities. As I will describe later in this chapter, Chapter Three of this dissertation confirms the influence of the online community but focuses on the ways that participants understand the social influence of each other's writing on identity, community, and social justice. Chapter Four considers how curatorial practices reveal conflict in the ethics of care underlying these practices of discussion, and Chapter Five looks more deeply at the intervention fans make in these mediating processes by developing their own narratives of tension about the influence of fandom discussion. As I will argue, there is a need for further research into the relationship between writing/discussion online, the community's social structures, and the identities and actions of its participants. Undertaking this research requires reviewing existing scholarship on identity, community, and knowledge-building online. Toward this end, in the remainder of this section, I first highlight the continued focus on

community as socially situating context in research into digital writing lives, with attention to the ways scholars recognize digital spaces as complicating the work of writing in social contexts. Second, while scholarship on debate and discussion online does not currently focus on this writing as knowledge-building, I argue that it should attend to the ways this writing works as knowledge creation and dissemination. Third, I review existing literature on discussion in fandom spaces in particular, highlighting the opportunities for more attention to the social and rhetorical roles of discussion in this space.

Writing Online Remains Socially Situated

Digital scholars recognize that writing in online communities is just as socially situated as writing in other spaces. Participants online work within the social structures and systems of their online spaces, which often constrain what and how they write online. Behavior norms within a community are a measure against which participants evaluate the reception of their message and through which they compose their messages, influencing both content and form of these messages (Bourlai; Iversen; Spilioti). For example, in her study of tagging practices on Tumblr, Elli E. Bourlai argues that the social systems of Tumblr broadly and of particular Tumblr communities influence how users tag their posts. Specifically, in addition to using tags as a space to facilitate searching, users also use the tags as a space to attach commentary to their posts. This practice arises, Bourlai argues, from a social norm to avoid cluttering the original post with commentary; while the content of the post remains unchanged across reblogs, the tags are distinct to an individual reblogger and can thus be a space for each user to attach their own commentary. These social norms are particularly evident in fandom spaces with etiquette practices about where to put commentary and how to tag posts to express membership in a particular Tumblr community.

The publicity and potentially broad audience of online social contexts can add rhetorical complexity to the writing that happens in these spaces. Writers online are often required to do the rhetorical work of speaking to both a specific audience and a broader audience who might potentially read the work (Marwick and d. boyd; Spilioti; Iversen). For example, Twitter users write messages for their followers, which may be primarily friends and family, but they must contend with the potential of a tweet going viral and reaching a much larger audience than they intended (Marwick and d. boyd). The rhetorical impacts of writing to these dual intended and actual audiences can be accidental, as in an unintended viral tweet, or intentional in the creation of digital messages that convey a specific message while simultaneously providing metatextual commentary on posting etiquette (Bourlai; Iversen) or demonstrating a relationship with the reader (Spilioti).

Knowledge-Making Online

According to Sanna Malinen's review of 83 articles about online community participation, most studies that think about online communities as knowledge-sharing or knowledge-building spaces typically do so from an organizational standpoint by studying professional communities or formal academic spaces (235). Much attention has been paid, for example, to the role and impacts of online discussion in formal learning spaces where it has been argued that they scaffold social learning when used as a complement to traditional classrooms (Nachowitz), disrupt and reinforce traditional institutionalized learning models (Rambe and Moeti), or facilitate or hinder students' ability to absorb knowledge. Work on knowledge-making outside of recognized learning spaces has been less explored, yet my own experience with learning about social justice suggests that this knowledge-building is certainly happening in fandom. Though online spaces as knowledge-making spaces is underexplored, especially in literature on social and entertainment communities,

I argue that literature on these spaces shows three aspects of knowledge-making online: knowledge of the self, knowledge of a specific community, and knowledge beyond the community (e.g., social justice).

The theme of "knowledge of self" is best represented in scholarship that attends to identity online. Malinen's review suggests that identity is a common focus of studies on online community participation. In particular, studies often focus on identity traits (such as demographics) and motivations/values that can influence users' orientations towards participation (Malinen 235). For example, a cross-cultural comparison of online participation among users in the US, the Netherlands, and South Korea suggested that the cultural values of community interaction affected online participation: participants from South Korean culture, which places a higher value on collective action, tended to seek out both online interaction and in-person interaction within their communities, while participants from the Netherlands and the US tended to be more involved in only online communities (Grace-Farfaglia et al). Scholars are also particularly interested in how identity is constructed and expressed online, with attention paid, for example, to the expression of gender and sexuality in social media spaces (Fox and Ralston; Oakley; Yartey), authenticity and intimacy online (Bargh et al), the ways a sense of self evolves online and is impacted by online spaces (Fox and Ralston; Tiidenberg; Turkle), and the intersections of identity, representation, power, and marginalization (de Montes et al; Nakamura & Lovink; Yartey). This research highlights that scholars are interested both in the ways that identity is expressed or constructed online and in the ways that online identities interact with users' offline contexts.

The internet is a space where, by virtue of its relative anonymity and multiple avenues of interaction independent from each other, the identities of interlocutors are in some ways unknowable. We can make inferences from what our interlocutors say about themselves and the

content they post, but the internet often separates us from the observable identities of those we interact with. Paradoxically, this separation results in many users expressing online a version of themselves that is *more* true than in their offline interactions (Bargh et al; Fox and Ralston; Oakley). Indeed, a distinction exists between a person's identity and their performance of *an* identity which might, in various circumstances, be more or less "true" to themselves. Several scholars address the division between identity and expression of identity as a distinction between the *true self* and the *actual self*: "*true self* refers to the participants' inner self, and *actual self* is their public presentation of self" (Oakley 7; see also Bargh et al 2002, M. Gray 2009). We might see *true self*, then, as a *knowledge* of the self and *actual self* as the *expression* of that self, but we must recognize that the expression of the self is not always an accurate or complete representation of the inner—*true*—self. This distinction is particularly true online where the question of identity expression is also tied to questions of authenticity in communication.

Authenticity online is sometimes perceived as fraught because of the anonymity or pseudonymity of online spaces, yet as I note above, research has consistently shown that users not only represent themselves truthfully online but may, in fact, express more of their *true self* in anonymous online communities than they might elsewhere (Oakley). Rather than encouraging users to fabricate their identities, the anonymity of many online spaces instead facilitates a truer representation of the self than is possible in spaces where that information is available to family, friends, coworkers, etc. In Chapter 3, Karima makes just such as argument when she shares that fandom offers her a space to be openly bisexual, something that isn't possible within her conservative family and offline community. In part, this authenticity online may be due to the possibility of exploration afforded by connections to people outside of offline communities and by access to new perspectives (see Chapter 3; Fox and Ralston). The relative anonymity of many

online spaces may also afford space for experimentation with new identities in ways that present little risk to an individual or their standing in their offline communities (Bargh et al; Fox and Ralston; Turkle). Thus, in allowing users to be unknowable, online spaces give them the freedom to be safely known in those particular contexts.

A more "true" expression of the self online also positions online spaces as places where identity expression can disrupt traditional power hierarchies. Abigail Oakley, for example, argues that labelling of LGBTQ+ identities in Tumblr blogs is a disruption of hegemonic binaries of gender and sexuality. Though the use of labels may reproduce some power structures, she argues that the online space of Tumblr, in part because of an interface that allows users to self-label, offers greater potential for users to create and explore the nuances of sexuality and gender. The complexity of labelling in these spaces includes, for example, distinctions between sexual and romantic attraction, the use of a range of sexuality identifiers beyond the binary of straight or gay, and the ability to claim gender identities that can recognize felt and expressed identities beyond the male/female binary and claim, if desired, biological aspects of gender identity (e.g., claiming a cisgender or transgender identity, identifying a particular gender identity as assigned at birth versus the current expressed gender). In facilitating a greater diversity in the expression of gender and sexuality and a greater exposure to diverse gender and sexual identities, Oakley argues that unstructured online spaces like Tumblr allow users to subvert power structures that exist in identity binaries.

However, just as online spaces can disrupt power hierarchies, they can also reinforce them, particularly when those power hierarchies relate to marginalized identities such as race. For example, in an interview with Geert Lovink, internet and race scholar Lisa Nakamura argues that "the Net is as racist as the societies that it stems from" (60). Online spaces are not distinct from

the society that creates them; instead, they are often reflections of that society, reinforcing society's institutionalized prejudices (de Montes et al; Nakamura & Lovink). Consequently, interfaces online can reinforce society's marginalizations by limiting the identity definitions available to users, and the push to move commerce, education, and community online can highlight differences in economic access that are often racialized (Nakamura and Lovink). Identity is thus a point of tension online; users may find online communities where they can explore and express their true identities while simultaneously re-encountering the marginalization they face in spaces outside the digital.

Identity online intersects powerfully with the view that online spaces are communities. Users online seek these spaces as places where they can be their true selves, but they are also seeking acceptance from these online communities (Oakley 7). The true self that users develop and express online is thus a mediated venture that is deeply impacted by social exploration (Oakley 7; see also Fox and Ralston; Gray 2009). For example, a community's acceptance of particular identities and rejections of others could inform how users choose to express or hide these identities. A desire for acceptance from these communities might prompt users to identify in particular ways, express support for particular beliefs, or forgo asking particular questions. Identity online can thus also be seen as a negotiation between knowledge of self (the expression of a true self) and knowledge of community (the norms, values, and dislikes of the community).

As I highlight in the previous section, writing online remains highly situated in the social contexts of online communities. I argue that this social situatedness is also evidence of online communities as spaces for building knowledge about these particular online communities. As I noted, a user's individual identity can be inflected by the communities in which they participate, but this necessitates *knowledge* about those communities. Users of a community might develop

knowledge about the community's norms and values, the kinds of content that are considered appropriate or inappropriate, how content is categorized within the community, and how users should behave when interacting with each other—all the aspects of social interaction that similarly exist in offline spaces. The mechanisms for developing that knowledge are varied; online communities might include instructions for users, users can observe the posting and interaction practices of their peers, and users who break community norms might be corrected by other members of the community. In her article on blogging about *The Sims,* Ruth A. Deller narrates an experience of blogging about playing the legacy challenge in the game and receiving comments from a reader instructing her to change the style of screenshots she included in her posts or readers might stop reading her work. Jesse Fox and Rachel Ralston similarly highlight the process of learning community norms. Participants in their study described experiences of, for example, correcting homophobic behavior within a community and learning which kinds of content were and were not the norm within a community. One participant described attempting to use the hook-up app Grindr as a place to develop LGBTQ friendships and abandoning the effort when interactions on the app made it obvious that this was not the norm for this community. Experiences like these highlight the existence of both norms within these communities—norms which are known though not necessarily codified in writing—and of mechanisms by which users can learn about those norms. In this dissertation, I focus on fandom discussion as one of these methods for both learning about the community and conveying information about the community to others.

Just as writing might be a place to build knowledge within a community, writing can also be a place to build and disseminate knowledge beyond a specific online community. Social spaces online have also become places of, for example, activism, political participation, and social justice. Some scholars see digital spaces as solutions to problems like political and public participation

(Warnick and Heineman), while others decry these same spaces for limiting engagement and promoting shallow "clicktivism" rather than in-depth activism (Gladwell). This attention to digital writing as activism and political participation suggests that writing is doing work beyond interest-based affinity groups, and that such work is implicated in knowledge-making. Activism, for example, can be framed as a rhetorical act of both persuasion and education as it seeks to create knowledge about issues of social inequality, climate change, and political malfeasance, among others. As study participant Johanna narrates in Chapter 3, for example, fans use discussion in fandom spaces to learn about racism, teach each other about indigenous violence, and become activists in their communities beyond the digital.

Knowledge-making beyond the confines of community practices can also be more individual. As the research on identity online suggests, communities online can be places to develop knowledge about the world, such as nuanced conceptions of gender and sexuality. This knowledge might be personally relevant to the identities of users but might also serve merely as new perspectives. Fox and Ralston describe both these kinds of learning as one aspect of informal learning in LGBTQ spaces online. Their participants reported using online spaces to learn about their own developing sexualities, encounter new perspectives that challenged binaries of gender and sexuality, and educate their non-LGBTQ networks about their identities and issues within their communities. Participants in these online spaces become both knowledge brokers and knowledge recipients, both learning about knowledge beyond their digital communities and constructing that knowledge.

In my dissertation, I use these foci of knowledge-building online to examine the rhetorical and social functions of fandom discussion. Studying fandom discussion through the lens of knowledge-building helps, in turn, reframe social and entertainment spaces online as spaces in

which knowledge-building happens in non-traditional, interlocking ways. Positioning fandom discussion's relationship to identity and community in terms of knowledge-building helps us to see the intertwining of the social influence that the community exerts on participants and that participants exert on the community and each other through writing, processes I will explore through the theoretical frameworks of mediation and feminist ethics of care.

Studies of Fandom and Fandom Discussion

Fan studies has long been concerned with fans' creative and transformative works. The earliest fan studies scholarship focused on these transformative practices (see Bacon-Smith; Jenkins) and fans studies has continued this work in arguing for fanfiction's place as literature (Jenkins *Textual Poachers*; Pearson; Sandvoss) and theater (Coppa; Lancaster) and in exploring fanfiction as expression of identity and feminism (S. G. Jones; Lamb and Veith; Russ). Recent work has also expanded the scope of fan studies research, considering the relationships between fandom and media producers, fandom as a pedagogical tool (Howell; Black), and the potential of fandom to do activist work. As these examples suggest, growing interest in fandom from digital studies scholars and fans engaging in academic work about their own communities presents new and multiplying avenues for considering fandom and its intersections with other digital studies scholarship.

Interrogating the rhetorical and social practices of fandom discussion is one such avenue, though it remains an emerging and underexplored interest in fandom studies. Current work on fandom discussion largely uses discussion posts as evidence to make claims about a particular fandom or media object, rather than specifically interrogating the functions of such discussion within fandom. Though fandom scholarship has not yet significantly attended to discussion, fan studies scholars do recognize that it plays a key role in the community. Nancy K. Baym's work,

for example, argues that fandom transforms texts "into socially meaningful fields through interaction that is ongoing and patterned in subtle yet community-constituting ways" (5). While Baym's work was conducted in 2000 before contemporary fandom on Tumblr and thus does not attend to current models of fandom discussion, her argument that *interaction* in fandom is "community-constituting" (5) and exists beyond transformative fanworks suggests that the idea of discussion playing a role within the construction of fandom community is not new to fan studies scholarship.

Though fandom discussion across fandom is yet underexplored, some scholarship in fandom studies has also begun to attend to self critique within fandom communities on Tumblr, one important role that fandom discussion takes (see Chapter 3). For example, Indira Neill Hoch's work on the tagging practices of the Yogcast Tumblr community calls attention to the different tagging practices for conduct control within these communities. Neill Hoch attends to two options for conduct control on Tumblr: reblogging the post in question with added commentary or posting a general comment not directly tied to a specific post. Both of these options operate as a form of controlling content within this community, but also point to a level of self-critique within fandom. The ways fans either accept the critique and post an apology or reject the critique by ignoring it or posting a rebuttal suggest that fans are reflective around their own behaviors in fandom. Judith May Fathallah's work on blogs that critique the BBC's *Sherlock* and its fandom similarly highlights scholarly attention to self-critique in fandom. These blogs, Fathallah argues, demonstrate both a critical response to media artefacts like the *Sherlock* TV show and a self-reflexive examination of the fan communities surrounding these shows, yet the authors deliberately undercut their own authority, allowing them to both critique fandom and remain a part of it. The research of scholars like Fathallah and Neill Hoch begins to consider the kind of self-reflexive

critique from *inside* the community that fandom discussion represents and that I attend to in this dissertation project.

However, as these examples highlight, most current work on fandom discussion primarily uses text analysis and observation as methods. Interviewing fans about their perceptions and practices around fandom discussion is an as-yet underutilised approach to this exploration, yet such interviews could provide important insight into the work of fandom discussion. As I will show through the chapters of this dissertation, foregrounding fans' perceptions and practices around fandom discussion highlights the entanglements of self, community, and social justice at the foundations of fandom, illuminates the tensions within this entanglement, and showcases fans' agency in navigating these intersections.

CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK: PLATFORM STUDIES AND TUMBLR

The physical tools of a culture play a role in the discourses of that culture. I draw from platform studies to ground my work in the specific digital space, Tumblr, where fans create and share the discussion I study. Consequently, I also draw on the field of platform studies to facilitate interrogation of the ways Tumblr as a platform offers particular affordances and constraints for fandom discussion, and how these affordances and constraints subsequently influence the roles fandom discussion can play and the mediating impact of these roles on fans and their relationships to fandom and other fans. Platform studies, a strand of digital studies particularly concerned with the material interfaces of culture and interaction, represents part of that field's turn away from the culture and content of the digital and towards its form—a turn towards materiality that continues to drive digital studies theory. Specifically, platform studies asks us to consider "the lowest level of computing systems" (Montfort and Bogost vii)—to open the black box of our computing systems and interrogate the hardware and software on which they operate. Platform studies is not

solely concerned with the technological systems themselves, however. This approach seeks to understand the ways that digital culture and content depend on a relationship with the physicalities of the digital. According to Montfort and Bogost, studies that approach the digital through its platforms "investigate the relationships between platforms—the hardware and software design of standardized computing systems—and influential creative works that have been produced on those platforms" (2). These studies look at the connected "levels of computational creativity" from the "physical form of the machines" to the representational capabilities of its code to the "social and cultural contexts in which it came to exist" (Montfort and Bogost 1). In its interest in digital materialities, platform studies aligns with various other approaches including: Ernst's media archeology, which focuses on "how stories are recorded, in what kind of physical media, what kind of processes and durations" (Parikka, "Archival Media Theory" 7); digital materialism that gives technology agency and seeks to understand the ways that media technologies "structure how things are in the world and how things are known in the world" (Parikka, *A Geology of Media* 1); studies of infrastructure that interrogate the ways "content and form of contemporary media […] are shaped in relation to the properties and locations of these distribution systems" (Parks and Starosielski 1); and studies that attend to the ways in which digital labor is materially embodied (see Wark, Mayer). These approaches to digital studies are primarily concerned with the materialities of the digital and of specific digital spaces; they share a common interest in understanding that culture through its materialities of production, consumption, and distribution.

In my dissertation project, these materialities take the form of the various platforms—AO3, Fanfiction.net, Tumblr, Livejournal, Twitter, etc.—on which fandom operates and interacts. Each of these platforms, particularly the affordances and constraints of each platform, can impact the social actions of the writing that is represented on this platform. Though this project remains

focused on the social actions and systems of fandom discourse within fandom, I argue that platform is a necessary—though often undertheorized—component of this discussion. Thus, my dissertation seeks to make conversations about platform inseparably intertwined with conversations about writing ecology and the rhetorical functions of genres.

Most of fans' current discussion about fandom as community—and about fandom in general—happens on the microblogging platform Tumblr, though this has not always been the case. Fans began migrating en masse to Tumblr in 2012, but that fandom's presence on Tumblr began in 2007/2008 after a series of conflicts with Livejournal, the previous home of much of fan discussion and content. The first of these conflicts were Strikethrough and Boldthrough, both in the latter half of 2007. These two events involved the unannounced mass deletion of a number of journals based on the interests of those journals. The purge, reportedly driven by a right-wing, conservative Christian group, resulted in the deletions of blogs including age-restricted fan groups, book discussion groups, and rape survivor groups based on unfounded claims of child pornography (Fanlore, "Strikethrough and Boldthrough"; Morimoto and Stein 2.1; Winterwood). Around the same time, a for-profit fanfiction archive FanLib was created, leading many fans to critique the attempted commercialization of fandom (Fanlore, "FanLib"). Only a year later, a Russian corporation acquired Livejournal, and the resulting visual and functional changes to the site, changes to the Terms of Service, and fear of further mass deletions spurred fans' retreat from Livejournal as the central fandom platform (Fanlore, "Strikethrough and Boldthrough"; Morimoto and Stein 2.1). Around the same time, and partially as a result of these controversies, the fan-created and fan-run Archive of Our Own (AO3) was established to provide a safer, uncensored place for fandom, providing fanfiction hosting but not the fan forums of its predecessor Fanfiction.net. Tumblr, with a social media feel that many younger fans were familiar and

comfortable with, became the new home of much of fan culture and visual fanworks (fan art, memes, gif sets, etc.). Today, Tumblr is one of the most-used fandom spaces online. In Casey Fiesler's current work about fandom migration between platforms, Tumblr and AO3 are far-and-away the most popular fandom platforms (see, for example, Fiesler and Dym). My own experience with fandom tells a similar story. When I joined fandom, our platforms were Fanfiction.net and Livejournal. In the years since, I have observed the migration to AO3 as the platform for posting fanfiction and the emergence and growth of Tumblr as the home of fans' conversations, debates, and arguments about fandom.

Despite the significant use of Tumblr as a conversational platform, there is less scholarly work done on Tumblr generally than on other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and scholarship about fandom on Tumblr is a relatively new avenue of inquiry into fan studies. Similarly, scholarship attending to fandom on Tumblr is only recently emerging among fan studies scholars. As Lori Morimoto and Louisa Stein exhort in their editorial introduction to *Transformative Works and Cultures'* special issue on Tumblr and fandom, fan studies scholarship about Tumblr, while a growing field as evidenced by this special issue and other recent work, is only just starting to interrogate the wealth of creative uses to which fans put Tumblr (1.2). Current avenues of inquiry include locating Tumblr fandom within a history of bricolage (Gledhill), the methodological and ethical issues and affordances of Tumblr as a research space (Bourdaa; Downey et al), the uses of Tumblr in fan studies pedagogy (Booth, "Tumbling or Stumbling?"), as well as Tumblr's potential as a platform for fan reaction and reflection (Fathallah; Pignetti), for negotiating a reading of canon (Christensen and Jensen; Taylor), and for political activism (Chew). Of particular note to this research project is recent work that considers fans' use of tagging on Tumblr to define community (Neill Hoch; Taylor), the ways tagging language has changed as

fandom has migrated from Livejournal and other blogging sites to Tumblr (Winterwood), and the role of self critique in fandom spaces (Fathallah).

Fandom community is more difficult to establish on Tumblr than its previous incarnations on Livejournal. Unlike Livejournal, which allowed users to join communities organized around interest groups, Tumblr has no such structural affordances for groups. Users may follow another user's blog or subscribe to a specific tag, but there are no structural affordances for interest groups. Similarly, Tumblr does not facilitate that same kind of easily-navigable discussion forums provided on many early fan archives, the community-forming functions of community or interest pages on Facebook, or the organizing structures of fanfiction archives of AO3 or Fanfiction.net. However, fans have found ways to use the affordances of Tumblr to facilitate a feeling of community within particular fandoms and across the broader fandom community. Indira Neill Hoch argues that though Tumblr, as a platform, does not facilitate defined communities in the way other fan spaces such as LiveJournal or AO3 might, fans use particular tags in specific ways to define the readership of their work. In her content analysis of two tags used by fans of the Yogcast Youtube creators, Neill Hoch argues that the differences between the use of each of these tags— for example, users of one tag posted more sexually explicit content than users of the other, and that content is more frequently endorsed in the notes of the post—suggest that each tag is serving functions beyond simply organizational. These tags are also serving as ways of signalling identity within a community with particular content and conduct norms. In similar works on the functions of particular tags, Lily Winterwood argues that the lexical shift of tags from "wank" to "discourse" and "squick" to "trigger" is indicative of both a cultural and demographic shift within fandom. While these tags may not facilitate community in the ways ship tags do in Neill Hoch's study, the clear distinction between tags used on older fandom platforms (Dreamwidth, Livejournal) and tags

used on Tumblr suggests a distinct community on each platform that has adopted particular lexical norms. This research thus suggests that fans have found ways to facilitate the creation and definition of a community within Tumblr's open structure, despite the constraints in the platform's functionality.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This existing scholarship on our digital writing lives highlights the value of studying these writing lives and the important places where questions linger in scholarship on digital discourse in general and on fandom discussion in particular. I designed my dissertation to investigate these intersections of writing, identity, and knowledge-making. In this section I will detail the theoretical frames I leverage to guide my study of these questions. First, I use theories of mediation and remediation to explain the processes of discussion operating within the fandom community on Tumblr. Second, I turn to a queer and feminist digital humanities lens to consider the implications of these mediating processes for knowledge-making in fandom. Third, I theorize feminist ethics of care as a spectrum through which I can analyze the driving impulses of fans' participation in fandom discussion.

Mediation

Media scholars have long contended that "something is going on with media in our lives" (Couldry and Hepp 191). Media, they argue, have social, cultural, political, and economic consequences in our lives—consequences at both the societal and personal levels (Couldry and Hepp). Mediation is the process by which these consequences can occur—"the continuous interchange whereby media shaped or were shaped by broader life and culture" (Couldry and Hepp 193)—though the term has long been a contested one with multiple meanings and variable

boundaries within the field of media studies. The "continuous interchange" that Couldry and Hepp describe suggests that the process of mediation is also a process of communication: ideas are *communicated* across spaces, between media and life/culture. John Corner describes mediation as "the processes and modes through which the media extensively act as the means for a very wide range of perceptions, knowledge and feelings to be circulated in modern societies." Mediation, he says, plays a "constructive" role in "'brokering' aspects of reality" (Corner), representing not just the relay of knowledge and perception, but a role of negotiation, influence, and change on those knowledges and perceptions. Mediation is an ongoing process of "meaning construction" (Couldry and Hepp 197). At its broadest level, then, we can define mediation as a process through which media constructs meaning and reality in the interchange between producer, consumer, and culture. In my dissertation, I deploy the concept of mediation to investigate fandom discussion as a process through which fans construct meaning in the interchange between fanwork producers and consumers, their fan texts, and the culture of fandom they all inhabit.[6]

While early definitions of mediation positioned the concept in ways that reflect the broad applicability of the term, media studies takes up a more narrow definition that focuses specifically on mediation as a process involved in the relationships among media, media producers, and media consumers. Raymond Williams's 1976 definition of mediation in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* demonstrates the breadth of its conceptualization:

> (1) the political sense of intermediary action designed to bring about reconciliation or agreement; (2) the dualist sense, of an activity which expresses, either indirectly or deviously and misleadingly (and thus often in a falsely reconciling way), a relationship

---

[6] I use the language of producer and consumer here to reflect the distinction between the corporations, studios, and people (directors, authors, actors, etc.) who create and profit from media properties and the population of individuals who consume those media properties. This division is not, however, a clear distinction, especially in fandom. Fandom is a space where consumers are also themselves producers: they create fiction, art, video, and commentary which is, in term, consumed by other fans (who might themselves be producers). Further, the producer/consumer distinction is typically framed as a unidirectional, hierarchical relationship in which work is sold from the producer to the consumer. This too is a model challenged by fandom where vocal fans often interact directly with producers and can influence the directions of media properties.

between otherwise separated facts and actions and experiences; (3) the formalist sense, of an activity which directly expresses otherwise unexpressed relations. (154)

Or, in simpler terms, we could say that mediation's three aspects are "(1) conciliation; (2) ideology or rationalization[…]; (3) form" (Williams 154). Williams' definition is focused more on negotiation and reconciliation than on media, but it offers a useful starting point from which to explore both its evolution to contemporary, focused definitions in media studies scholarship and its breadth of applicability in different fields. A quick survey of recent scholarship shows the concept of mediation being deployed in a diverse set of fields including law, with attention to the legal mediation process and the role of mediators (e.g., Khouri); psychology, with attention to mediation as a variable in statistical analysis (e.g., MacKinnon et al); and social work, with attention to relationship conflicts between parent and child or parent and social worker (e.g., Fredman et al; Yoon et al). This scholarship reflects Williams's broad definition of the term and his attention to mediation as conflict negotiation, particularly evident in the emphasis on mediation in the fields of law and social work.

The attention to relationships among individuals, communication of ideas, and form is also what makes mediation applicable to media studies, and scholars have imported this broad concept into the field by focusing on its applicability to the relationships among media, media producers, and media consumers. Sound and music scholar Keith Negus's definition of mediation offers one example of the reworking of the concept of media studies scholarship. As explained by Nabeel Zuberi in his 2004 chapter on media and music cultures in *The SAGE Handbook of Media Studies*, Negus offers three broad categories through which we should consider mediation:

> firstly, as transmission (i.e., technologies used for the production, distribution, and consumption of the sounds, words, and images of popular music culture); secondly, as intermediary action by those cultural intermediaries involved in these processes; and thirdly, as the mediation of social relationships (i.e., differences in power relations that mediate the production and reception of music). (70)

Like Williams, Negus recognizes form (e.g., technologies of production), function and relationships, and individuals (e.g., cultural intermediaries) within his definition, and other media scholars make similar recognitions in their work. Scholars of education and literacy development frequently take up a focus on social relationships, individuals, and intervention in discussing the role of parents in children's literacy learning and engagement with social media (see for example Collier et al; Daneels & Vanwynsberghe; Jiow, et al). Negus's attention to mediation as a process involving social function and individual participants is also reflected in work studying the impacts of social media on individuals' social and emotional states. For example, Shaohai Jiang's study on the impact of social media on cancer survivors' emotional well-being argues that while social media use was shown to positively impact emotional well-being, it required individual activation and engagement. This contemporary scholarship reflects Negus's attention to form and function in theories of mediation, as well as highlighting both the role of the individual and the impact of the relationships between individuals and texts.

Common across the definitions advanced by media scholars—and evident in early and broader work like Williams's—are two key threads that I use to guide my deployment of mediation in this dissertation: (1) mediation as form, or the materialities of transmission, and (2) mediation as function, or the cultural and social action that occurs between production/producer and consumption/consumer. I focus on these threads because of the relevance of form and function to the digital writing of fandom, particularly movement across form inherent in transformative fanworks. Fans frequently shift forms as they create transformative works: turning audio-visual movies and television shows into alphabetic fiction and commentary, creating visual art from textual description. Both form and function are present in the works of fandom and important to understanding them, but also necessary is consideration of the ways that shifts in form often go

hand-in-hand with shifts in function (e.g., from entertainment to commentary). In this form-function relationship and shift, we also see functioning the concept of *re*mediation, which I will address later in this section. First, I will define how I approach the two keys threads of mediation that I use in my dissertation.

Interrogating the forms through which mediation is facilitated and the constraints and opportunities those forms create is a key approach to media studies. Referencing Marshall McLuhan's seminal arguments about medium and message, Terry Flew emphasizes the importance of considering the materialities of transmission, particularly in a media context: "Since the ways in which we communicate, and hence our culture, are embedded within the technological forms that we use, the media influence not only what we think but also how we think" (48). In my dissertation, I thus think of mediation and form in two senses. Form appears first, as described earlier in this chapter, in the platform of Tumblr and the ways that its affordances and constraints facilitate particular kinds of communication. Second, form also includes the form of the discussion post through which communication occurs on Tumblr. Though I do not include textual analysis in my dissertation, the primarily-text-based, publicly visible form of discussion posts themselves are important to consider as a key component of Tumblr's functionality because of the ways fans navigate the visibility of their discussion and the intermediary roles these posts play in relationships among fans. Though the arguments of my dissertation attend more explicitly to mediation as cultural and social action—mediation as function—mediation as form undergirds every aspect of these arguments because the form of fandom discussion, both its posts and its platform, facilitate particular kinds of function.

The second key thread I identify—mediation as function, or the cultural and social action that occurs between production/producer and consumption/consumer[7]—is the primary focus of this dissertation. In *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin argue, "We employ media as vehicles for defining both personal and cultural identity" (231). In defining identities, media are mediating in the functional sense of the concept: taking social and cultural action to define the realities of their producers and consumers. As I narrated at the beginning of this chapter, this definition of reality might look like an encounter with a set of discussion posts that redefines how a fan thinks about a topic like racism in the fanfiction they read. This redefinition of reality might also, as Johanna and Karima narrate in Chapter 3, involve a reshaping of how fans understand their own identities, from realizations about sexuality to developing confidence as an activist.

My attention to the (re)definition of reality among fans reflects broader scholarship about online spaces defining personal identity, as I describe in my review of the literature on making knowledge about the self (above). Reflecting this literature and the narratives of fans that I interviewed, the approach to mediation that I take up in this dissertation is that media and mediators have "the capacity to reshape the social, rather than simply being shaped by the social" (Flew 44). Scholars of writing and rhetoric largely recognize the act of writing and its products as socially situated—influenced by the social contexts, actors, and purposes in which and through which they operate. Considering mediation as cultural and social action brings together writing's social context and its rhetorical purpose in questioning what writing might be doing as a mediator. In my

---

[7] As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the distinction between producer and consumer is particularly unclear in fandom where consumers are also producers and where consumers can exert considerable influence on the direction of a production. I recognize the complexity of this relationship, particularly in fandom, but have used this terminology as a reflection of the typical dynamic produced in media scholarship. The complexity of the producer/consumer relationship in fandom may suggest the need for scholars to complicate our conceptualization of this concept more broadly.

dissertation, investigating mediation as cultural and social action takes the shape of considering the kinds of action fandom discussion is taking in defining the realities of fans' social relationships with others and their cultural relationships with the fandom community and the media objects around which the community is organized.

This thread of mediation as cultural and social action has a second, more specific, definition that is also important to highlight: cultural/social action in its particular association with conflict. With this second dimension, I draw on the colloquial definition of mediation as diplomacy and/or negotiation between opposing agents; mediation in mainstream, non-academic contexts is associated with resolving contention between, for example, spouses (e.g., divorce) or co-workers. Williams and Negus both highlight this dimension of mediation as social and cultural action in their definitions of the concept; Williams draws from the more colloquial understanding of "interceding between adversaries, with a strong sense of reconciling them" (152) as a main sense of the term, while Negus, attending more specifically to media theory, highlights conflict in mentioning "differences in power relations" (70) as a key factor in mediation of social relationships. Conflict online has been an increasing focus of digital scholarship, with researchers interested in the legal and ethical implications of doxxing (see for example McMahon, et al; Pittman; Scheller), the ways platforms and community culture facilitate toxicity in online gaming communities (see for example Chess and Shaw; Massanari; Mortensen), and the nature of political debate on social media platforms (see for example Bassilakis; Hunt).

I highlight this dimension of mediation within the larger thread of mediation as social and cultural action because its emphasis on considering conflict and power relations has productive implications for thinking about fandom discussion. Fandom discussion is a place of appreciation, critique, and debate, and as I will show in this dissertation—and as I know from experience in

fandom—conversation in fandom is often contentious and can escalate into serious conflict. Dynamics of power are similarly present in fandom as race, gender, and sexuality are deployed in debates between fans as points of critique or places to establish rhetorical ethos. Thus, considering the dimension of conflict in mediation—particularly, considering fandom discussion as a process of mediation attempting to *resolve* conflict—is helpful for understanding how fans perceive the roles fandom discussion plays in fandom.

It is also important to distinguish the concept of "mediation" that I employ from its counterpart in new media studies, "mediatization." While the definitions and applications of both terms remain much-debated in the field (see Corner), they can be differentiated in part by their scope and emphasis. Where *mediation* is concerned with the influencing of knowledge and perception at the level of the individual, their social activities, and their identities, *mediatization* has a much more infrastructural scope than *mediation* in emphasizing "shifts in the *organisational order* of political and public life" (Corner) and "the pervasive spread of media contents and platforms through all types of context and practice" (Couldry and Hepp 191). Another way to think of this division is process (mediation) and consequence or result (mediatization). As Couldry and Hepp argue, "While 'mediation' refers to the process of communication in general—that is, how communication has to be understood as involving the ongoing mediation of meaning construction, 'mediatization' is a category designed to describe change" (197). So while mediation describes the processes by which individuals, societies, and infrastructures might change, mediatization examines the results and origins of that change. In the context of my study, investigating fandom discussion as mediation considers fandom discussion as a process of changing the perspectives of fans and behaviors of fandom, while investigating fandom discussion as mediatization might consider the differing natures of fandom as digital technologies have connected fans globally and

made critique through discussion possible. The latter study would, I believe, be best facilitated by longitudinal analysis of discussion, a greater focus on the texts themselves, and a more abstract attention to the community and its members. My dissertation does attend to a different aspect of the infrastructure of fandom—the platform, in particular—but as my research questions attend to the realities of individual fans and the roles of fandom discussion operating in these individual relationships, *mediation* in the above definition is a more fruitful approach for this project.

Feminist Queer Digital Humanities

Theories of mediation help me explain *what* is happening within fans' literacy practices around fandom discussion on Tumblr. As I will argue in Chapter 3, mediation helps to illuminate the varied ways fans perceive fandom discussion to involve taking social and rhetorical action in their communities as well as the ways fans actively construct narratives about their relationships with fandom. To explain *why* fans might adopt these practices and *how* these practices are relevant to a critical understanding of fans' knowledge-making in fandom, I draw from feminist and queer digital humanities theories as a lens for more broadly examining why fans create and mediate particular relationships with fandom discussion. At the intersections of queer studies, feminist theory, and the digital humanities, we find a common commitment to interrogate knowledge production and meaning-making in digital contexts. Feminist theory is concerned with interrogating societal systems of power, particularly as they impact and create gendered experiences, and with an eye towards justice and equity for women (Maeckelberghe; Mendes and Carter; Steiner). These feminist principles are applied in media studies and the digital humanities to examine media artifacts and processes through the lens of power, hierarchy, and justice (Steiner). Queer theory interrogates normativity and the construction of normative and marginalized sexualities in society and online. In attending to normativity and otherness, queer

theorists center "alternative ways of thinking about the world" (Alexander 371) and often dwell in that liminal space between "normal" and "other." Applied to media studies and the digital humanities, queer theory is often concerned with the experiences of queer people online, with unearthing queer desires, with queering our understanding of digital practices, and with the potential of digital tools for offering alternative ways of thinking about this queer knowledge. "Queer" operates as both a subject and verb in this work: we examine queer identities as a subject and we undertake the practice of queering in our scholarship by adopting new methods and theories for investigating digital spaces and by examining the practices of queering those spaces. A feminist and queer digital humanities perspective, then, draws these two fields together in the interrogation of systems of power and hierarchical knowledge—and resistance to those hierarchies—as they define and enact the sense of identity in digital spaces.

Within this broad perspective, I have chosen to focus on two aspects that are most helpful for examining fans' practices around fandom discussion: (1) the creation and entanglement of knowledge of self, community, and social justice, and (2) an ethic of self-care. First, I focus on the creation of knowledge and its destabilization because digital spaces give participants places to discover and perform a knowledge of self, learn and enact a knowledge of a digital community, and discover knowledge of broader socio-cultural questions. A feminist queer digital humanities perspective is a lens through which I can examine these knowledges and the practices that create and destabilize them. Second, I focus on an ethic of care and self-care because of fandom's origins and foundational ideology in providing a progressive and safe space for its members. Fans idealize fandom as a community that cares about its members and that encourages its members to care about their identities and interests and express them through creative work. Regardless of how well fandom achieves these goals, this ideology is often cited as the foundation of many of fans'

critiques of fan behavior and is deployed by fans on every side of a conflict. It is thus important to recognize the role this ideology plays in how fans construct their perspectives on fandom discussion and to consider the ways in which discussion practices do and do not support this stated ideology. These two aspects are rooted both in feminist queer digital humanities concerns and in the identity of fandom community, offering a productive intersection of theory and community practice on which I base my work in this dissertation.

Both feminist and queer media studies seek to destabilize traditional, hierarchical forms of knowledge-production and meaning. In theorizing the destabilization of knowledge in feminist queer digital humanities perspectives, I draw primarily from Bonnie Ruberg, Jason Boyd, and James Howe's theorization of a queer digital humanities approach. Though Ruberg et al's argument attends only to the intersections of queer studies and the digital humanities, feminist scholarship also advocates for a similar destabilization of knowledge. Ruberg et al make their argument for the destabilization of knowledge by noting that the intersection between queer studies and the digital humanities is "a commitment to exploring new ways of thinking and to challenging accepted paradigms of meaning-making" (108). Queerness, they argue, "has emerged as a way of being that is complex and contradictory: at once joyful and destructive, hopeful and fierce" (109). Applying this concept of queerness to the digital humanities, then, becomes a project of destabilization: "to queer is to destabilize, to subvert, or to unearth queer desire beneath the surface" (109). Much work has been done on queer content in digital spaces, such as: exploring the lives of queer individuals online (e.g., Fox and Ralston), critiquing homophobia and harassment on social media, and unearthing the queer identities and contributions in the history of computing. While the content of fandom discussion often includes discussion of queer experiences

and critique of queer representation in media and transformative fanworks, the reading, writing, and theorizing practices I examine in this dissertation do not apply only to queer content.

However, the theorizing of queerness as complexity, contradiction, and destabilization offers a method for examining digital content and interrogating issues of normativity and otherness online. Like feminist media scholarship, which applies feminist principles in the study of work that is not necessarily feminist in content or intent, a queer method would apply principles of queer studies to content that is not necessarily or exclusively about queer experiences. Queer methods might then destabilize both the communication and production of knowledge by, for example, eschewing a linear approach to communicating knowledge, a definitive answer, or even an understandable and navigable display of knowledge. For example, the concept of codework in queer digital humanities involves a deliberate discarding of the typical requirements of code—functionality, clarity, efficiency—to facilitate argumentation and exploration through deliberate messiness and non-functionality. These queer methods of presenting and archiving knowledge challenge "concise, monolithic, and often hegemonic interpretations of knowledge" (Ruberg et al 111). Feminist approaches do similar work in destabilizing hegemonic, often-patriarchal knowledge-making. By "shining light on excluded voices and marginalizing processes" (Bivens 715), some feminist approaches center the personal within research and advocate for consideration of intersectional identities and experiences of difference, similarly destabilizing knowledge production by drawing in those who are excluded to challenge monolithic understandings. Taken together, queer and feminist approaches to the digital humanities suggest approaching the study of digital spaces and cultures with an eye towards personal experience and collective care as they function to destabilize meaning-making.

In addition to attending to the distribution and individualization of meaning-making that comes from productive contradiction, a queer and feminist approach to the digital humanities also highlights an ethic of care adopted in digital communities and adopted by the scholars who study them. In both feminist and queer theoretical approaches, scholars respond to systems of subordination by turning to the lived experiences and knowledge of those outside of or subordinated by these systems. By centering the personal, feminist and queer theories have developed an ethic of care that emphasizes the individual as a subject and maker of knowledge and attends to—*cares* for—that individual. A feminist ethic of care, for example, "identifies relationality, care, vulnerability, and responsibility as privileged concepts and attitudes" (Maeckelberghe 319), while the work of queer theory often involves examining questions of identity from the inside rather than from the perspective of the outsider (Alexander). In doing so, both fields center the individual and foreground a perspective of emotional attachment, rather than detachment, in our theories and approach to research. A similar ethic of care is visible in the intersectional considerations that underlay much of the work in these fields. Ruberg et al, for example, espouse this ethic of self-care when they acknowledge that advocating for a messy approach to the digital humanities—e.g., the exploration of queer themes through deliberately non-functional code—is also a discussion of risk. Scholars beholden to institutional requirements for tenure and promotion may not be able to undertake such scholarship, while non-functionality and experimentation may create barriers for other scholars and makers to participate in the field. Other feminist scholars have advocated for radical self-care in education and academy (Lloro-Bidart and Semenko), as a practice for victim advocates (Homer), and in politics and social policy (Kelly and Gauchat). This ethic of self-care centers understanding user needs in both design and scholarly

study, positioning self-care as a principle for designing a more equitable and just society and a theoretical model of understanding culture and participation in it.

I want to close this section by returning to Brandt's portrayal of the rise of mass writing in American life. Contrasting the imagined writing citizen with the idealized notion of the engaged citizen as the informed, *reading* citizen, Brandt writes:

> "[Mass writing] became connected not to citizenship but to work, vocation, avocation, and practical living. The writing skills of everyday people were captured largely for private enterprise, trade, and artisanship. Writing belong to the transactional sphere, the employment and production sphere, where high-vaulted values of personal autonomy, critical expression, or civic activism rarely found traction and where, in fact, unauthorized writing could well lead to recrimination, if not incrimination. […] It is not surprising, given this heritage, that the idea of the quintessential citizen as an informing citizen, as an independent writing citizen, would have a wobblier presence in the national imaginary" (Brandt, 2015)

As Brandt highlights, the idea of the writing citizen—of every person engaged in regular writing— is both a comparatively recent development and one tied predominantly to the hierarchical knowledge and labor structures of the workforce. Yet, composition scholars are increasingly interested in people's writing lives beyond those structures—writing lives in the digital spaces of socialization, entertainment, and activism. Examining the mediating processes of these platforms through the lens of feminist, queer digital humanities highlights the ways in which discussion and discourse in these spaces subvert a transactional, work-focused, constrained notion of the writing citizen.

Ethics of Care

As I describe above, a key feminist theory that I draw on for this project is the philosophy of an ethics of care. In this section, I expand on this theory and articulate how I have applied it within this dissertation. First proposed by Carol Gilligan, an ethics of care is a feminist ethical theory that argues that interpersonal relationships and care are at the heart of moral action ("Carol

Gilligan"; "Feminist Ethics"). The theory is premised on the idea "that as humans we are inherently relational, responsive beings and the human condition is one of connectedness or interdependence" ("Carol Gilligan"). This sense of interconnectedness mirrors what I have long felt about the sense of community within fandom; in my experience, fandom is grounded is a sense of connection among fans and a responsiveness to the joys and pains of others in fandom. In Chapter Three, I will show how many fans consistently recognize this interrelational work as a key social function of fandom discussion, highlighting the building and breaking of community and interpersonal relationships as some of the most common results of engagement in these discussions. An ethics of care elevates a multiplicity of voices, recognizing that each voice offers different, partial understandings of the world, and it entails a foundational approach of kindness towards "fellow humans and non-humans, such as animals, alike" (Leurs 138).

Adopting an ethics of care framework in my research enables me to emphasize my respect and care for my participants and to prioritize how fans understand and practice fandom discussion as interrelational. This framework's moral imperative to challenge systems of oppression ("Carol Gilligan"; Leurs; Luka and Millette) and realize "better societies as well as better treatment of distant others" ("Feminist Ethics"; see also Held 1993, 2006; Tronto 1993) also helps me contextualize the interrelational work of fandom discussion within fandom's valuing of social justice, and to critique the enactment of these values. In Chapter Three, I show how some fans express this commitment to social justice through highlighting fandom discussion as a potential place for challenging problematic content, learning new perspectives, and engaging in self reflection. In Chapter Four, I show has this commitment to social justice can be hindered by fans' efforts to curate individual experiences of fandom. In Chapter Five, I explore how many fans

theorize fandom discussion as a tool through which fandom can be made better because of these practices of social justice.

In applying an ethics of care as a lens through which to view fandom and fandom discussion, I argue that there are two distinct forms through which this care is enacted—self care and community care—which represent the interrelational and social justice threads in an ethics of care. I conceptualize these forms of an ethics of care as a spectrum along which a fan might practice and theorize care in fandom:

Figure 1.3. Spectrum of the Ethics of Care
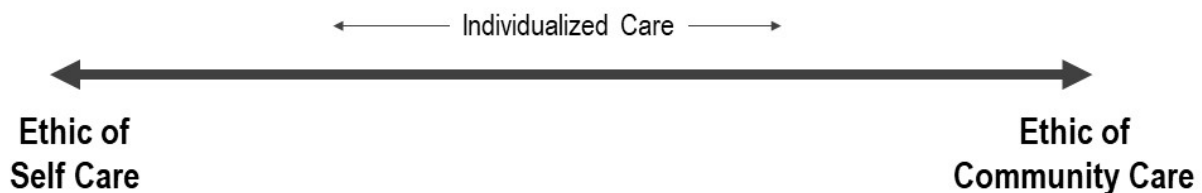
A fan's individual actions might align with either end of the spectrum: for example, curating content to protect one's mental health aligns with an ethic of self care, while challenging racist trends in fanfiction tropes aligns with an ethic of community care. Most fans also identify ideologically along the spectrum: for example, expressing that a person's individual experiences of fandom are most important or that the key focus of fandom discussion should be producing a more just community. Yet, while I have visualized the ethics of self care and community care as existing on opposite ends of a spectrum, the realities of the enactment of these ethics are much more complicated; acts of self care might also function as community care and acts of community care might also serve the individual self of the fan. As I will show in this dissertation, self and community profoundly entangled together in the social and rhetoric functions of fandom discussion.

Fans' attention to self care is a focus on caring for and creating an individualized experience of fandom that meets their own unique needs. Often expressed as an attention to fans' personal mental health, the ethic of self care is enacted through fans' curation and control of their fandom experiences: for example, their use of platform functionality to control what kinds of content they see, and their withdrawal from specific conversations and/or fandom spaces to protect their mental health. Fans also demonstrate an ethic of self care by attending to other fans' individual experiences of fandom, by recognizing that others' individual experiences differ from their own, and by caring about the nature of those experiences. Here, as fans' care for the self moves beyond themselves and to other fans, we see how self care becomes community care. Fans' attention to community care is a focus on caring for the wellbeing of the broader fandom community. This care is also expressed in a drive to "make fandom better"; the moral imperative of an ethics of care is enacted in fans' drive to ensure that other fans have positive experiences in fandom and in a drive to make fandom a more socially just space.

As I will argue in this dissertation, fandom idealizes and strives for an ethics of care, but we do not always effectively and equitably enact this care. It is inevitable that self care and community care would come into tension. As I will show in Chapter Four, prioritizing actions of self care such as avoiding contentious content may impede a fan's ability to enact community care through the work of social justice, while engaging consistently with social justice debates might be damaging to some fans' mental health. Conflicts between caring for the self and caring for the community hinder social justice within fandom, while our idealization of fandom as a safe and caring space can make it difficult for us to see and change the way we are imperfectly enacting our ethics of care.

These conflicts in fandom reflect several notable critiques of ethics of care. Hoagland and Bell, for example, warn that an ethics of care may not lead to change in institutional oppression if a focus on interpersonal relationships is prioritized over a focus on societal change. Spelman and Card also warn that the focus on interpersonal relationships in an ethics of care, and its valorization of women as caring may impede critiques of women's capacity for harm and injustice ("Feminist Ethics"). The valorization of women also serves as a space of explicitly gendered critiques of these theories: Card and Tessman both argue that this ethic of care and its association with women obscures the historical oppression of women and rigid constraints of femininity that led to associations of women with care.

Despite the sites of tension in this theoretical framework, ethics of care remains a useful framework for me for the ways that it facilitates that identification of the spectrum of care that underpins fandom's values and many fans' practices. This framework is also useful for the ways that its critiques are reflected in the findings of this dissertation. In Chapter Four, I argue that fans' practices of curation suggest we may be falling into the tendency of care for the self and immediate interpersonal relationships in ways that are detrimental to our ability to engage with the difficult work of social justice in fandom. In Chapter Five, I further highlight the tension between our ethics of self care and community care, but I argue that some fans' willingness to dwell in this tension is a promising sign of fandom's overall commitment to social justice and a way we can challenge our imperfect enactment of an ethics of care as we strive to create a more socially just and caring future for fandom. Theories of an ethics of care, and the tensions within those theories, are thus useful for anatomizing tensions between self, community, and social action/justice that emerge from my findings. Further, I argue that this ethics of care framework and spectrum of self and community care can be separated from gendered work and used to care interrogations of care into

the broader contemplation of social justice including anti-racism, disability activism, and LGBTQ+ rights.

An ethics of care framework was initially developed as a way to describe women's moral understanding and approach to moral conflict, and it has increasingly been taken up as an approach to moral action, particularly among researchers developing methodological approaches that emphasize both care for participants and social change as aims of research. In developing this project of understanding fandom discussion, I was motivated by the desire of many fans to do work that improves fandom even as I was aware of the multiplicity and partiality of my research participants' perspectives. I adopt an ethics of care framework, then, as an opportunity to use the understandings of fandom discussion developed in this project as an avenue through which I could help my fan community critically reflect on our enactment of social justice and truly enact the principles of care that many of us have so long valorized.

OVERVIEW OF DISSERTATION

While scholarship on digital writing lives and attention to writing in fandom forms the foundation of my inquiry, mediation and a queer feminist digital humanities approach shape how I build the argument across the chapters of this dissertation. Broadly, because I argue that fandom discussion mediates bi-directionally between fans and fandom/other fans, it is necessary to examine both directions of this mediation. I carry this approach into my final implications chapter wherein I describe potential implications of this study for fans and fandom scholars specifically, and for digital studies scholars more broadly, as well as ways the findings of this study could be leveraged in the classroom.

In *Chapter Two: Methods*, I offer an overview of the research method of the project. This chapter describes the foundations of my study design in my own positionality and

autoethnographic reflection on my experiences in fandom. It includes descriptions of my site and participant selection, data collection and analysis, participant population and interviewee profiles, and research ethics considerations.

In *Chapter Three: Mediating Processes of Fandom Discussion*, the first of three chapters detailing the findings of this dissertation, I argue that fandom discussion mediates fans' relationships to each other and to the community of fandom. Drawing from survey and interview responses where fans detail their perspectives on the role of fandom discussion in their experiences in fandom, I categorize and describe the mediating processes that fans perceive this genre as enacting. For example, fans highlight these discussions as the places where they learned about racism, sexism, and homophobia, and as spaces where they could reflect on and challenge their unconscious biases. One fan, Johanna, describes an experience of learning a vocabulary to describe racism that she could mobilize in her home community to combat Islamophobia. Other fans cite these discussions as the avenues through which friendships were formed or, conversely, their relationships with the broader community were broken. Because critical self-reflection is so ingrained in fandom and because these discussions touch on every aspect of fan experiences in these spaces, they reshape—remediate—how fans experience fandom and, consequently, how fandom itself operates.

In *Chapter Four* and *Chapter Five*, I argue that fans also engage in agentic mediation of their relationships with the very discussion that mediates them. In *Chapter Four: Curation and Conflicting Ethics of Care,* I turn to the intersections between Tumblr, as the platform on which these discussions occur, fans' interventions in the processes that are mediating their experiences in fandom, and the tensions in the ethics of care of drive fans' engagements with fandom discussion. Tumblr enables a particular kind of control of access to fandom discussion, and fans

navigate these platform possibilities and constraints to intervene in curating how much fandom discussion exists in their fandom experience and what kind of influence they allow it to have. Through the lens of curation, I examine, for example, how fans leverage Tumblr's blacklisting and blocking tools to create an experience that responds to their mental health needs and consequently varying desires to interact with discussion. These actions, I argue, are driven by ethics of self care and community care, which intertwine and conflict to both create powerful individual experiences of fandom and hinder community care and social justice. Exploring the history of discussion across platforms, I also argue that though fans perceive discussion as fundamentally different across these spaces, there are parallels in their use of each platform's capabilities that highlight ethics of self care and community care as abiding and guiding principles of fandom.

In *Chapter Five: "Yes But": Negotiating Tensions in Fandom Discussion*, I investigate how fans actively negotiate complex and contradictory mediating influences of discussion, recognizing it as a place of identity formation, community education, and social justice, while critiquing these same practices for their potential to enable harassment of other fans and divide the community. One fan, for example, praises discussion for facilitating a community she didn't have access to outside of fandom while simultaneously critiquing the racist expletives that characterizes some fans' interactions with her work. Rather than coming to a finalized decision of the value of fandom discussion, many fans continually negotiate and grapple with tensions within these discussions, assessing and reassessing both what discussion is doing in their communities and how they feel about that discussion. In doing so, many fans mediate their relationships to fandom discussion by refusing to be the passive subjects of this discussion's own mediating processes, demonstrating intense metacognitive reflection and complex meaning making. Fans' work in dwelling in these tensions might, I argue, provide a productive path for negotiating conflict

between ethics of self care and community care, and thus facilitate greater enactment of social justice in fandom.

In *Chapter Six: Implications*, I explore how fans and fandom studies scholars, digital studies scholars, and teachers might leverage an understanding of fandom discussion as mediated and mediating within an entanglement of self, community, and social justice. For fans and fandom studies scholars, particularly scholars who are also fans, my study helps us to better understand (1) the complexity of discussion's role in fandom, (2) our ability to influence our relationship with that discussion and the ways other fans might be similarly engaged in curating their relationships, and (3) ways in which "knowledge" in fandom is less universally understood than we might have anticipated. Conflicts in fandom are often born of differing perspectives on issues that fans care deeply about and it is my hope that better understanding how we come to and express our opinions will, if not resolve conflicts, then help us to have discussions that are less fraught, frustrating, and divisive. For digital studies scholars, this study highlights a new way to frame online communities: as knowledge-making spaces within complex value systems. Further, this study highlights that "knowledge" online is much less stable than in traditional academic, professional, or even civic spaces, and that models of understanding knowledge-making would benefit from greater attention to the place of individual experiences acting within community contexts. For instructors, this dissertation offers insight into the experiences of our students outside our classrooms and their writing lives in their online contexts. The more hierarchical, structured, and stable knowledge-making of our classrooms is often at odds with the experiences of our students in their heavily negotiated and individualized experiences online. Better understanding their online communities can help us show them how to leverage the knowledge they learn in these spaces—social justice, history, literary critique—for their academic and professional futures. Examining knowledge-

making in these spaces may also help instructors develop new models for knowledge-making in the classroom that incorporate the critical, self-reflective mindsets students have developed in negotiating their knowledge and identities online. Ultimately, just as fandom brings together people from across walks of life and interests, this dissertation offers space for discussion among fandom scholars, digital community researchers, and classroom instructors as we collectively think through the changing models of knowledge-making in our increasingly digital contexts.

Chapter 2:

Methods

In Chapter One of this dissertation, I argued that discussion in online fan spaces forms a complex ecology of genres and serves as an important component of fans' experiences of fandom. Yet, fan studies scholarship has not yet significantly attended to the role these discussions play within fandom. Nor has fandom scholarship more broadly analyzed, in depth, fans' own complex, critical engagement with our community and practices. As I argue, fandom discussion is a place where fans engage in the same kind of critical discourse about fandom that similarly occupies the work of fan studies scholars, but the fans' critical engagements with fandom are only recently emerging as a focus of scholarship. As a fan, I had long noticed this tendency of fans towards self-reflection and critique; it is, in part, what has kept me connected to fandom for so long. Approaching fandom as a scholar, I found that fandom scholarship, so robust about so many areas of fandom, had not yet significantly engaged with fans' own reflective practices and the rhetorical and social functions of those practices in the community, and I saw this gap as an opportunity to use my own experiences as a foundation for expanding scholarship on fandom. In this dissertation, I seek to move the existing scholarship in fandom studies to a closer relationship with fans' own critical conversations about fandom, while simultaneously bettering my own understanding of the fandom community that I inhabit and the experiences of my fellow fans. In this chapter, I outline the methods I employed to interrogate questions about the social and rhetorical mediations of

fandom discussion within fandom. This chapter includes my study design and data sources, research site, data collection processes, data analysis, and research ethics.

STUDY DESIGN

It *is* possible and productive to develop theories of the role of fandom discussion without talking to fans. Critical readings of a corpus of these discussions, combined with autoethnographic reflections on years of observing this discussion and its impacts, might facilitate the development of a robust theory about the characteristics and functions of fandom discussion and fans' responses to that discussion. Indeed, critical approaches like corpus linguistics, acafan reflections, and close reading have been used successfully by many fan studies scholars to develop important insights about the role of the researcher in fan studies, issues of representation and marginalization in fanworks, and questions of authorship and reappropriation across fanworks. Acafandom and corpus work have produced valuable ways of understanding fandom that are focused on drawing directly from community artifacts and on bringing scholarly lenses to bear on researchers' own lived experiences.

For my project, I chose to build on this existing knowledge base by introducing comparatively less-studied sources of data. While critical engagement with textual examples of fandom discussion and my own autoethnographic reflections on observing and participating in fandom discussion informed the construction of my survey tools and the findings of this dissertation, it felt incomplete to undertake a project on the texts that demonstrate fans' critical engagement with fandom without talking to fans—especially as fan studies scholarship has not yet significantly integrated fannish critiques into scholarly conversation. Acafannish, corpus-related, and close reading work had laid important groundwork for understanding fandom practices, and talking to fans adds another layer of depth and detail to these understandings. As I argued in

Chapter One, fans engage in significant, in-depth, and wide-ranging critical discourse about the nature of fandom, what it means to be a fan, behavior norms within and across fandoms, and issues of social justice within fandom meta, fanfiction, and art—among many other topics. Yet these critical conversations are rarely included in fan studies scholarship that often engages in similar discussions and takes up similar questions. Outside of the voices of academic fans, often shortened to "acafan," whose fandom experiences are woven explicitly into their scholarship, fans' critical perspectives on complex questions about fandom, fan culture, and fanworks are often less emphasized research. Since my project engages specifically with these discussions, it was important that my study include conversation with fans about their perspectives on the social and rhetorical work of fandom discussion, in addition to my own critical perspectives on these writings. I therefore designed a mixed-methods study that drew on autoethnographic reflection, survey responses, and interviews in what Androutsopoulos calls a "discourse-centered online ethnography," defined by its combination of "the systemic observation of selected sites of online discourse with direct contact with its social actors" (2). Below, I briefly detail the rationale for each data source and its role in the findings presented in this dissertation.

Autoethnographic Reflections

My work on this dissertation began with a critical reflection on my own experiences in fandom and my personal sense that there was something happening with fandom discussion in this space. This sense developed from almost 20 years of experience in online fan spaces and it is this experience in fandom that was a first point of inquiry for my work on this project. When I started developing this project, I had already been a Tumblr user for several years and over the course of that experience, I had observed the impact of discussion in my fan communities: that it influenced how I felt about fandom and other fans, that it changed how I understood myself, that it introduced

me to new ideas about identity and society. My instinct as a fan that fandom discussion was doing something in fandom prompted an academic consideration of fandom discussion for its rhetorical and social functions, and the combination of these two perspectives was the driving force behind this dissertation project. For example, as part of my participant observation for this project, I created a fandom discussion-centric blog, fans-on-fandom.tumblr.com, where I curate and reblog fandom discussion from across Tumblr. This blog provided a sustained source of fandom discussion to fuel my academic observation, but it was also my contribution to sharing new perspectives and insights with fans. It is this combination, this dual identity as fan and scholar, that I have attempted to maintain as I designed and carried out the research and writing in this dissertation. The academic lens represented in the pages of this dissertation would not be possible without the fannish instincts and understandings that guided my study design, data collection, analysis, and writing.

My experiences as a fan were first helpful in developing my approach to this project. As a long-time fan, I had already had years of access to examples of fandom discussion and could draw on my own responses to these texts. What I lacked was direct conversation with *other* fans focused on accessing their understandings of fandom discussion, which I knew from experience observing the conflicts in fandom might be vastly different from my own perspectives. I thus recognized that what would be most helpful for my study was to use my knowledge of fandom discussion texts as a base, and supplement that knowledge with surveys and interviews to access the perspectives I lacked. Developing survey and interview questions was also a process of drawing on my experiences as a fan. What kind of language would fans already be familiar with (e.g., the contentious term "fandom discourse")? What kinds of questions would elicit stories that would help me see their perspectives on fandom discussion?

Beyond the development of my data collection instruments, my experiences as a fan have also been foundational in the analysis of fans' responses, and my autoethnographic reflections have shaped the analysis and interpretation of data throughout this dissertation. As I describe in the "Positionality" section later in this chapter, this process has been a challenging one as I have wrestled with negotiating my instincts for celebrating rather than critiquing fandom, the places where my opinions as a fan differ from those of my participants (suffice to say, I disagree with some fans about the definition and deployment of the term "anti"), and the places where my perspectives as a scholar challenge how my participants and I understand fandom as fans. Despite these challenges, drawing on my experiences as a fan and my long-time participation in and observation of fandom discussion on Tumblr helped me recognize potential trends in fan responses, helped me know where to ask clarifying questions and push for more detail in interviews, and how to interpret fans' references to insider knowledge. For example, fans' references to ship wars in particular fandoms and specific instances of advocacy and controversy were often clear to me because I already belonged to those fandoms, had observed the controversy as it was happening, or had seen examples of the posts they were referencing. In the "Research Ethics" section later in this chapter, I talk about the importance of insider research in fandom and the challenges of fandom's relationship with academia. Beyond the ethical concerns of researcher positionality in fan studies scholarship, autoethnographic reflections based in years of fandom participation were key to helping me understand the peoples and communities I studied in this project and to representing fans and fandoms in ways that accurately reflected them.

Surveys and Interviews

As Robert Weiss argues in his book *Learning from Strangers*, "interviewing gives us access to the observations of others" (1). This access was key to my choice to ground this study in

qualitative data gathered through surveys and interviews. While my own critical, academic engagement with the texts of fandom discussion and my personal, autoethnographic reflections on fandom could and did facilitate rich observations into the nature and role of fandom discussion, they represent only a single perspective on the questions I undertook to answer in this study. Qualitative data from surveys and interviews were an avenue to a more holistic description of fandom discussion that integrated multiple perspectives and accounted for differences in experience not possible through only a single perspective.

Surveys were valuable to my study because they allowed me to ask the same questions to a very large number of respondents. By asking both open-ended questions about fans' practices and perceptions of fandom discussion, as well as questions about respondent demographics and histories in fandom, I was able see both the range of perspectives across fandom and trends that are only visible with such a large sample.

While the survey data I collected provided a rich source of observations beyond my own perspectives, from fans who'd had both similar and very different experiences from my own, surveys alone were not sufficient to fully access the perspectives and experiences of fans at the depth that was necessary to answer my research questions. Interviews provided access to a more complete and complex glimpse of the experiences of individual fans. As Weiss argues:

> We can learn also, through interviewing, about people's interior experiences. We can learn what people perceived and how they interpreted their perceptions. We can learn how events affected their thoughts and feelings. We can learn the meanings to them of their relationships, their families, their work, and their selves. We can learn about all the experiences, from joy through grief, that together constitute the human condition. (1)

Weiss suggests that interviewing can facilitate a greater understanding of the "interior experiences" (1) of participants: the thoughts, feelings, and nuanced perspectives best accessed through the personalized, flexible environment of an interview. I designed my surveys to facilitate access to a large number of respondents, and my interviews to facilitate deeper understanding of

the trends visible in the survey sample. Where surveys might surface a particular role fans perceive discussion as playing, interviews could access specific experiences with fandom discussion operating in this role and, through tailoring the interview to each respondent, probe individual fans' perceptions of and responses to discussion operating in its different social roles. Collectively, the survey and interview data provide a rich source of data through which I worked to learn about all the experiences that together constituted the condition of fandom and of discussion within fandom.

SITE SELECTION: TUMBLR AS A FANDOM RESEARCH SITE

My research questions attend to the role of fandom discussion within fandom broadly, but analyzing the entirety of fandom, spread as it is across platforms and subgroups, would be an impossibility for any scholar. To address my questions within the scope of this dissertation project, I selected fandom on Tumblr as my research site. Tumblr is home to over 470 million blogs[8] publishing over 21 million posts per day in 18 languages ("About"). As of April 2019, it saw over 376 million unique visitors worldwide per month; during the period in which I interviewed fans on the site, it saw between 642 million unique visitors (July 2018) and 538 million unique visitors (November 2018) (Clement). At the time I began collecting data, Tumblr was one of the major sites of conversation within fandom; while major archives like AO3, Fanfiction.net, and DeviantArt house millions of transformative works of fiction and art, these spaces often do not facilitate discussion, which happens instead on more conversational platforms like Tumblr. In addition to being a primary site of fandom discussion, Tumblr also facilitates discussion across and among fandoms in ways that siloed sites, such as the chat groups on Discord or the forums on

---

[8] Not all Tumblr blogs are currently active and some users, including myself, maintain more than one blog for varying reasons including, for example, different blogs for different personal and professional identities and different blogs for different interests.

a site for a particular fandom, do not; consequently, Tumblr also afforded me access to a cross-section of fandom.

However, despite the features that made it a desirable research space, I also acknowledge its limitations: because Tumblr operates on networks of followers, your content is visible primarily to your followers and the content you see is governed by who you follow. As I will argue in Chapter Four, curation and control are thus large components of fandom on Tumblr and an individual fan's perception of fandom may be highly influenced by who they follow and who follows them. At a practical level, the pool of fans who participated in this study might have been similarly impacted as the survey I used for recruitment was distributed through my blog and thus primarily visible to my followers and to their followers if they chose to reblog the post.

One additional event is important to note about fandom on Tumblr in the context of my study. In the months following the collection of my survey and interview data, new policies instituted on Tumblr drastically changed its user base and have, as of this writing, thrown into question the future of fandom on Tumblr. In December 2018, after the Tumblr app was removed from the Apple App Store over child pornography concerns, Tumblr enacted a ban on any adult content including sex acts and genitalia. While Tumblr staff promoted the ban as part of creating "a better, more positive Tumblr" (Tumblr Staff), users responded with dismay. In particular, fandom communities, for which NSFW (not safe for work) content has long been integral, and communities promoting sex and body positive spaces—including LGBTQ+ and assault survivor networks—feared the ban would cast a censorious pall on the community building and identity exploration that happened in these spaces (Roy; Sands). As the ban was implemented and algorithms took over the task of flagging inappropriate content, many of these users found their fears justified as algorithms flagged content like two men kissing (Romano), while many users

posting safe content also found themselves caught up as the algorithms incorrectly flagged as inappropriate content everything from classical paintings to pictures of sand dunes and vases to the Tumblr staff's own post about the ban (Roy; Sands). In the months following the implementation of these policies, Tumblr saw its number of global unique visitors per month plunge from 521 million (December 2018) to 376 million (April 2019) (Clement). While the site remains an active community, reporting over 21 million posts per day at points of July 2019 ("About"), many of its users, fan and otherwise, left the site in protest over its policies and their often-buggy implementation. As of this writing, Tumblr remains a space with a critical mass of fan activity and an ongoing space for fandom discussion, but I have also observed an increasing number of fans migrating to new platforms including Discord and Pillowfort and/or returning to older discussion spaces including Livejournal and Dreamwidth. There is not yet any clear consensus about the future primary platform of fandom discussion and it is possible that much of fandom will remain on Tumblr for years to come. However, the mass migration of users away from Tumblr and the growth of fandom on other platforms suggest that a shift in the spaces, and perhaps consequently the nature, of fandom discussion may be underway. I briefly address the implications of this event on the generalizability of my findings and their relevance to understanding fandom in the future in the "Research Ethics" section of this chapter.

DATA COLLECTION

In this section, I describe my process for collecting survey and interview data for this study. Participants for this study were recruited through a survey posted to Tumblr on my blog Fans on Fandom (fans-on-fandom.tumblr.com). As part of the survey, I asked participants whether they would be interested in participating in the second interview portion of the study, so the survey also served as recruitment for interview participants. I selected interview participants from survey

respondents with attention to developing a diverse group of fans that could represent the breadth and diversity of fandom. I conducted data collection between July and November of 2018.

Survey Publication and Distribution

Survey recruitment for this study took place entirely online and almost exclusively on Tumblr. I published a link to my Qualtrics survey through a Tumblr blog, Fans on Fandom, that I established four to five months prior to the publication of the survey for several purposes: (1) as a space of informal observation of the fandom discussions that I intended to study, (2) to establish my presence as an acafan, both a researcher and a member of the community, and (3) to build a following that would facilitate the distribution of the survey. The survey was initially published on June 5, 2018 and remained publicly accessible for 17 days. During that period, I reblogged the survey twice from my blog to continue to attract attention from anyone who had not seen the initial post. The post about the survey also received 963 notes that were divided between likes and reblogs. The reblogs of the post functioned as a form of snowball sampling wherein some of my followers reblogged the survey to their followers who then reblogged it for their followers, etc. While Tumblr does not provide statistics on the number of likes versus reblogs for a post, I reviewed the first 100 notes on the post and estimate 40-45% of notes were reblogs, suggesting that the post was reblogged between 385 and 434 times. Additionally, while I only posted/reblogged the survey on Tumblr, at least one of the respondents to the survey messaged me privately for permission to share the survey link on Pillowfort. Other fans might have similarly shared the survey link on Twitter, Discord, and/or through personal messages to friends—common behaviours for sharing interesting information in fandom—though I am not aware of any specific instances.

Survey Responses

During the period in which the survey was available, various users accessed it over 1600 times. I had initially intended to leave the survey available until the end of August 2018 while I was completing interviews; however, after the survey got such a significant response so quickly, I decided to close the survey earlier than planned to make the data pool for this dissertation project more manageable. Though the number of users who accessed the survey was high, not all users chose to complete the survey. However, because Qualtrics enables auto-submission of incomplete surveys that had not been accessed in over a week, all survey attempts were logged. To avoid including in my sample any surveys that a participant had not intended to submit, I discarded all surveys where the final question was not answered. This final question, which asked users to indicate whether they would be willing to participate in the interview portion of the study, was one of only two questions where users were required to respond. As participants could not choose to submit the survey without answering this final question, I deemed that any surveys where this question had not been answered had been abandoned and were thus not intended to be submitted by the participant. Once these partial and incomplete responses had been eliminated, 674 responses remained. I eliminated one further response from this pool because the participant had answered only the two required questions and provided no further information. Two additional complete responses were eliminated because the participants listed their ages as 15 and 17 respectively, below the 18-year-old age minimum required by my IRB application, leaving 671 survey responses for analysis and inclusion in this project.

Interview Participant Selection

To select participants for the interviews, I first separated out those participants who had indicated interest in participating in the survey. Due to the significant number of responses, I began

by only reviewing the survey responses of respondents who were willing to be part of the interviews, thus facilitating a more rapid selection of interview candidates. My goal was to select as diverse a group as possible for my interviews, with attention to demographic and geographic diversity as well as diversity of opinions about and relationships to fandom discussion. As much as possible, I also wanted my pool of interview candidates to reflect the demographic/geographic breakdown of my survey respondents, with the intention that the interview subjects would serve as a somewhat-representative sample of both the broader group of survey respondents and of fandom generally. In the "Participant Data" section below, I discuss in greater depth the demographic/geographic breakdown of my survey sample and its representation of fandom.

To enable the selection of a group of interview participants that represented the demographics and perspectives in my larger survey group, I first reviewed the demographic data to determine the general breakdown of the sample by gender, race, nationality, and age, then read through a sample of approximately fifty responses to get a sense of the perspectives represented in the sample. I found that one of the multiple-choice questions that I included on the survey—asking fans to select their relationship with fandom discussion with categories including "actively avoid" and "actively participate"—was a relatively good reflection of the perspectives that fans shared in the open response questions. I therefore sorted the survey responses by fans' responses to this question to generate a set of groups from which I would draw participants, with the intention of representing each group in my interview subjects.

Next, I selected five key questions to use as preliminary selection criteria. These questions were places where fans' perspectives about fandom discussion were most immediately visible, allowing me to begin to see trends across responses as well as identify individual fans with unique perspectives and/or compelling articulations of larger trends. Responses to demographic questions

and questions about fans' histories in fandom were not considered at this stage. The five questions for which I reviewed responses were:

- What do you see other fans write about fandom?

- What kinds of fandom discourse do you or would you read? Why?

- What kinds of fandom discourse do you or would you write? Why?

- Do you think discourse is important in fandom? Why or why not?

- What should be the role of fandom discourse?

Using these five questions, I read the survey responses of all 390 participants willing to be interviewed. During this reading, I identified participants I might want to interview through the use of highlighting. At this point, participants were highlighted as potentially interesting to talk to because they (a) had experiences with or opinions about fandom discussion that were unique from other participants or (b) narrated experiences or perspectives that were shared by many fans in a way that was particularly compelling, articulate, or comprehensive. At the end of this stage, I had identified 88 participants as potential interview candidates. As this was many more than the 10 to 15 that I planned to interview, I knew I would need to do another round of reviews and narrow down my shortlist of potential interview subjects.

For the second round of narrowing down my list of potential interview subjects, I entered the information for all 88 shortlisted candidates into an Excel spreadsheet. This information included their demographic details, their length of time in fandom, their general relationship with fandom discussion, and my brief notes about the key and/or interesting features of the participant. I then re-read each fan's response to the five key questions I had identified. I grouped participants who had similar responses or experiences and highlighted any participants that stood out as unique and/or particularly articulate or reflective. From these groupings, I divided the potential interview

candidates into three lists: my 10 first choices to interview; a list of back-ups who, for demographic and/or experience similarities, were my second choices if a particular candidate on my initial list didn't respond or no longer wanted to participate; and a list of the remaining candidates. In creating this list, I took into account fans' demographic characteristics and fannish histories to ensure that the prospective interview candidates represented the diversity of fandom. As much as possible, I tried to recreate the demographic breakdown of my survey sample, detailed in the "Participant Data" section, as well as represent the breadth of fans' participation in fandom from new fans to fans who had been in fandom for 25+ years.

Using the lists that I generated, I began contacting my prospective interviewees via the preferred contact method they had indicated on their survey. I left this choice open to my participants and their preferred contact methods included email, text messages, phone calls, Tumblr private messages, and Twitter direct messages. While most of the fans I contacted responded to my messages and were still interested in participating, three of the potential interview candidates I had selected did not respond. Fortunately, the back-up lists I had made allowed me to find other candidates to contact. To effectively represent the range of perspectives and fandom characteristics in my interview sample, I eventually selected twelve fans to interview for the study. Each of these fans is profiled in the "Participant Data" section of this chapter.

Conducting Interviews

I interviewed the twelve fans in my study between July and November 2018. I conducted two 1 to 1.5-hour interviews with each fan, with one to three weeks between the first interview and the second interview. All interviews were conducted electronically through phone, Google Hangouts, or Skype; most interviews were audio only, with most participants electing not to share video of themselves, but one participant requested to conduct the interview via the typed

messaging feature in Skype. Following each interview, I memoed about the most interesting moments of the interview and any commonalities I had noticed with previous interviews. Each interview was recorded to facilitate transcription and following the interview, recordings were submitted to Rev.com for the initial transcription. After receiving the transcription, I re-listened to the interview and made any necessary edits to the transcript.

DATA ANALYSIS

Analysis of my data proceeded through a grounded theory approach wherein my claims and codes emerged from the data as much as possible (Charmaz). While my own experiences within fandom suggested possible codes, categories, and theories I might develop about the nature and function of discussion in fandom, I recognized that my experiences are not universal and so privileged an inductive approach where codes and findings would emerge primarily from my participants' responses (Charmaz; Moss and Haertel).

I also adopted an iterative approach to analysis that began during data collection and continued through data analysis. During data collection, I began to develop "insights, speculations, and small-scale theories" (Weiss 151) about my data which would eventually aid in the development of codes and categories. During the data analysis stage, I also returned iteratively to my coding by using samples, open coding, and focused coding to refine my data, and returning to my coding during the writing process. Both the survey responses and interviews would provide rich data for analysis; when I began the coding process, I anticipated that the survey responses would facilitate the creation of categories and the identification of trends, while the interviews would provide the more in-depth narratives and examples that would flesh out and nuance my developing theories. As coding progressed, this assumption would prove true, but I did not foresee

the complexity of data available in the survey responses and the ways that many fans used the surveys to share narratives that were just as rich as those I elicited in my interviews.

I began open coding with a small set of surveys because I anticipated that open coding all 671 surveys would take a considerable amount of time. A small sample would be sufficient to identify trends and categories in the data and develop focused codes that could be used to code the remaining surveys. Working with the sample, I coded fans' responses to every question in the survey. Codable units for these survey responses were a participant's complete response to a question. I did not code individual sentences or sections of a response to a particular question because I was interested in places where multiple codes might be collocated. During the process of open coding, I wrote daily memos about the themes emerging from the data, which I later used to develop focused codes and findings. This process of open coding was more fruitful than I anticipated; it helped me develop (1) a set of key themes that would become the focus of my findings from this study, (2) a set of corresponding focused codes, and (3) an awareness of which questions facilitated the most fruitful responses and would therefore be the most beneficial to code. I was also still completing interviews at this time, so my thinking was influenced by ideas emerging from the interview process and my interviews were similarly shaped by the themes emerging from the open coding. For example, one key theme emerging from the survey was the prevalence of tension in the way many fans talked about fandom discussion, from acknowledging both positive and negative roles, to narrating experiences of community and experiences of conflict, to practices adopted to control the amount of tension a fan might encounter in their experience of fandom discussion. The knowledge of this prevailing theme helped me direct my questions in interviews and be more aware of places where I could ask fans to talk more about their experiences. Knowing

what themes were emerging from the data helped me decide during the interviews which of the interviewees' responses were most important to follow-up on.

Once I had completed open coding of my 75-survey sample, I used my memos and open codes to develop a set of focused codes (see Appendix D). First, I identified the key themes that had emerged from my data and their alignment with my research questions: fans' discussions of the roles they perceive discussion as playing, fans' positively or negatively aligned judgements of fandom discussion, and fans' practices of controlling their relationships and interactions with fandom discussion. These key themes would become the key findings of this dissertation. Focusing on these key themes, I re-examined the open codes I had developed and created categories and hierarchies for my codes. For example, when refining the open codes for the roles fans' assigned to fandom discussion, I moved from 33 open codes to 13 focused codes grouped under seven structuring categories (later further refined), which became the structure for Chapter Three of this dissertation.

Developing the focused codes that I would use to code the rest of my data also involved deciding which themes I would not code for. For example, one of the survey questions asked fans to report on the name they used to describe fandom discussion and the different kinds of discussion that existed. These questions were intended to pair with extensive textual analysis for a descriptive chapter on the diverse kinds of discussion in fandom, and while the questions did contribute to the overview of fandom discussion in Chapter One, in the interests of scope I had to set this avenue of investigation aside for future research. I thus decided not to develop a set of focused codes and not to code responses to these questions for the rest of the surveys. Similarly, I had asked fans two different questions that might have elicited responses about the roles of fandom discussion. During open coding, I noticed that while fans discussed the roles of open coding in those two questions

and elsewhere in their responses, a single question on the survey consistently elicited the most generative responses, and these responses aligned with what fans had written elsewhere in their surveys. I thus elected to focus primarily on responses to this question when doing focused coding for this theme. Other themes were similarly aligned with specific questions in the survey, and so once I had developed a set of focused codes, I recoded those specific questions in all the surveys. While engaged in focused coding, I also refined my codes as new situations and ideas emerged from the data and necessitated decisions about which category they should be sorted into.

During this focused coding process, I reformatted my data so that I could code all responses to a particular question together, rather than code survey by survey. My approach to coding and data organization was largely issue-focused, attending first to "what has been learned from all respondents about people in their situation" (Weiss 153) rather than focusing first on specific cases. Coding all responses to a particular question was helpful in facilitating consistency in my application of my focused codes because I was focused exclusively on a particular theme and subset of codes, which was also helpful for developing my analysis of these particular categories.

As I developed the theories that would become the major findings of each chapter, I also incorporated some case-based analysis by coding each interview participant's full survey and both interviews. During this process, I coded these texts using the focused codes I had developed but also returned to open coding, both to identify any new themes that were only visible in the interviews and to facilitate a more comprehensive picture of each interview subject as a case study. Though my dissertation presents an issue-focused response to my research questions, the process of developing a case-based analysis for each interview subject also proved fruitful. As expected, the responses shared by the fans I interviewed offered nuance and narrative to the more general descriptions developed through analyzing the surveys. The case-based analysis also facilitated

understanding of the categories I was developing for each major theme. For example, one of the major themes I coded for was fans' positive or negative judgements of fandom discussion in their narratives about whether it was important to fandom. The surveys offered three important categories: positive narratives, negative narratives, and narratives of tension. The case-based analysis of a particular interview subject offered a narrative that tied together these three categories and highlighted the importance of tension and fans' use of it to negotiate between contradictory narratives. It was, in fact, a memo about this particular interview subject that first suggested these codes to me during the open coding process. As you will see in Chapter Five, this particular case-based analysis became the organizing structure of the chapter as it offered a way to easily grasp the narrative tension that many fans developed when they talked about fandom discussion. The ideas developed in this case-based analysis were used to further refine and define my focused codes, and the coded interview transcripts became a rich source of narratives to enhance my analysis of the themes identified in the survey data.

PARTICIPANT DATA

The participants in my study can be divided into two pools: (1) the larger group representing all 671 participants who responded to the survey and whose responses were the basis for the trends described in this dissertation, and (2) the smaller group of twelve participants who were interviewed in greater detail and whose narratives add clarity, depth, and detail. In the following sections I describe the demographics of the survey population and provide profiles of the fans who participated in the interview portion of the study.

Survey Respondent Demographics

The fans who responded to my survey were primarily white (70%), female (77%), and American (60.5%), but my sample also includes a significant representation of international fans and fans of color, suggesting that the survey reached many corners of fandom. The demographic breakdown represented in my sample is not unexpected as fandom is generally female and users of Tumblr are generally white and American.

In the demographic section of the survey, fans were asked to share their demographic information in open response fields. I chose to use open response fields to give fans the greatest freedom to express how they perceived their identities and, in the case of some categories such as race, to avoid potentially imposing US-centric racial identifiers on a global population. To compile demographic data for inclusion in this chapter, I reviewed fans' responses and noted emergent identifiers, then refined that list into a set of categories for each demographic characteristic. I recognize that these categories are thus somewhat subjective and that there may be cases where I have, in deciding between categories for some participants, placed a fan into a category they would not have chosen for themselves. In my descriptions below I have tried, as much as possible, to account for the individual identities that have been grouped together within a category. Nevertheless, because the categories I have developed to simplify the data for this chapter do not account for the true diversity of fandom, I use this demographic data only to give readers a general sense of the demographic composition of the fans in my study, rather than a definitive overview of all the identities represented in this study.

In addition to tracking these more traditional demographic categories, I asked fans to share information about their fandom history including how long they had been in fandom, the number of fandoms they participated in, the kind of fandoms they participated in (e.g., TV show fandoms,

book fandoms, movie fandoms, etc.), and how and how often they participated in fandom (e.g., created/consumed fanfiction, fanart, etc.). In the sections below, I provide more detail on the key demographic/experience categories I used when selecting participants for the interview portion of the study: gender, age, race, nationality, and length of time in fandom.

Gender: The fans who responded to my survey were predominantly female or genderqueer; female (including transgender female) respondents represented 77% of fans and genderqueer (including agender, fluid, nonbinary, unspecified transgender, and questioning) respondents represented 16% of fans. Only 5% of fan respondents were male; 1% of respondents chose not to answer the question and 1% of respondents indicated a gender of "other" including a respondent who identified their gender as "female sometimes. or an octopus. yes octopus is a gender." The chart below offers a visual of the gender breakdown represented by fans in this study.

Figure 2.1. Survey Participants by Gender
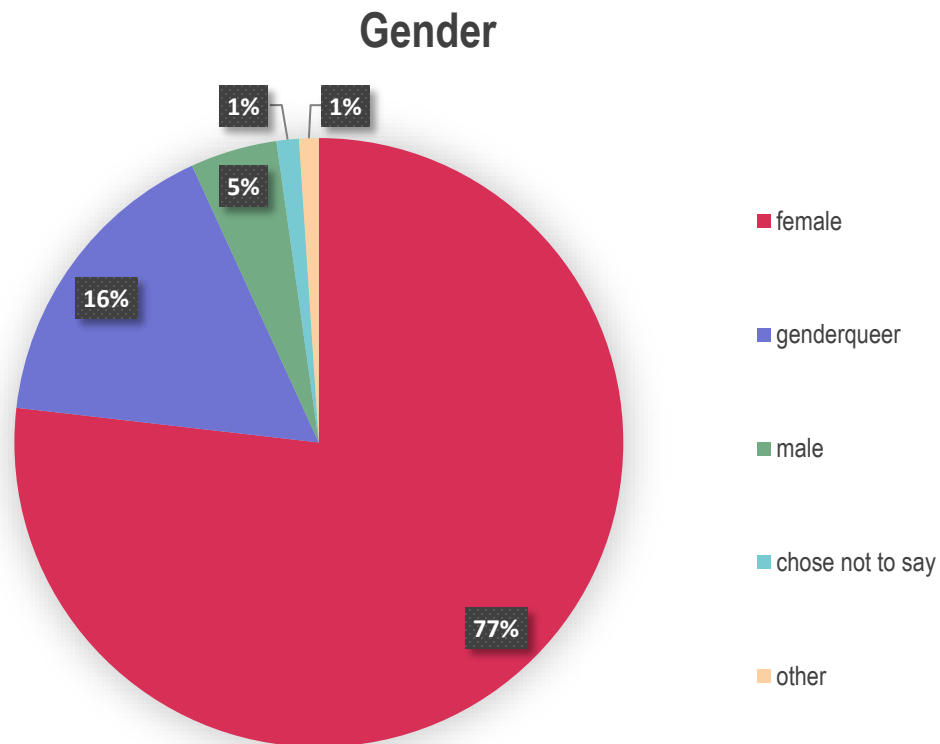
Age: The fans who responded to my survey ranged in age from 18 to 69; the median age in my sample was 27 and the average age was 28.8. Not surprisingly, most of the fans in my sample were between the ages of 18 and 30; 16% of fans were 18-20 and 50% were 21-30. If I had been able to include fans below the age of 18, I suspect that the under 20 category would have been as large or larger than the 20-30 categories because most fans join fandom as teenagers and, if they're going to leave fandom, seem to do so in their twenties. The chart below offers a visual of breakdown of fans by age.

Figure 2.2. Survey Participants by Age
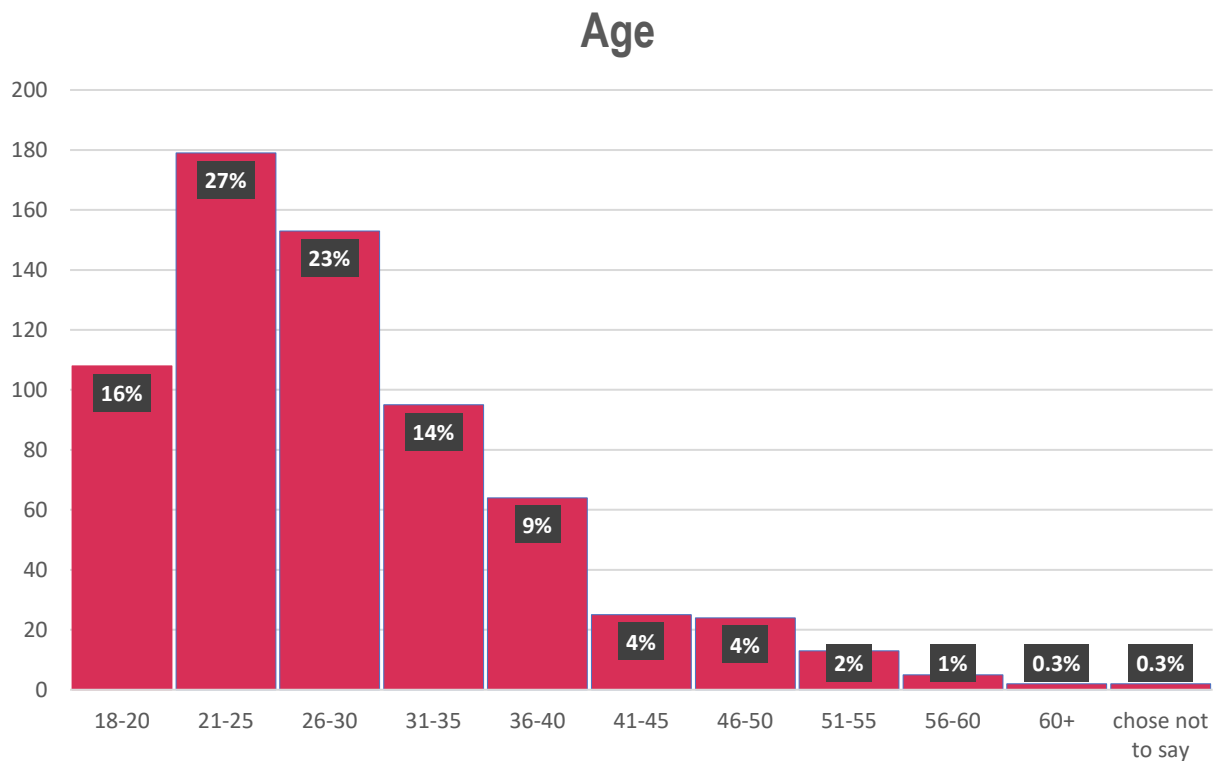
Race: The fans who responded to my survey were predominantly white/Caucasian; these fans represented 74% of respondents. As noted in the opening of this section, white users are particularly predominant on Tumblr and white voices are particularly strong in fandom, though

the predominance of white voices in fandom may also be due in part to fans of color experiencing

racism and/or hostility in fan spaces.

Figure 2.3. Survey Participants by Race/Ethnicity
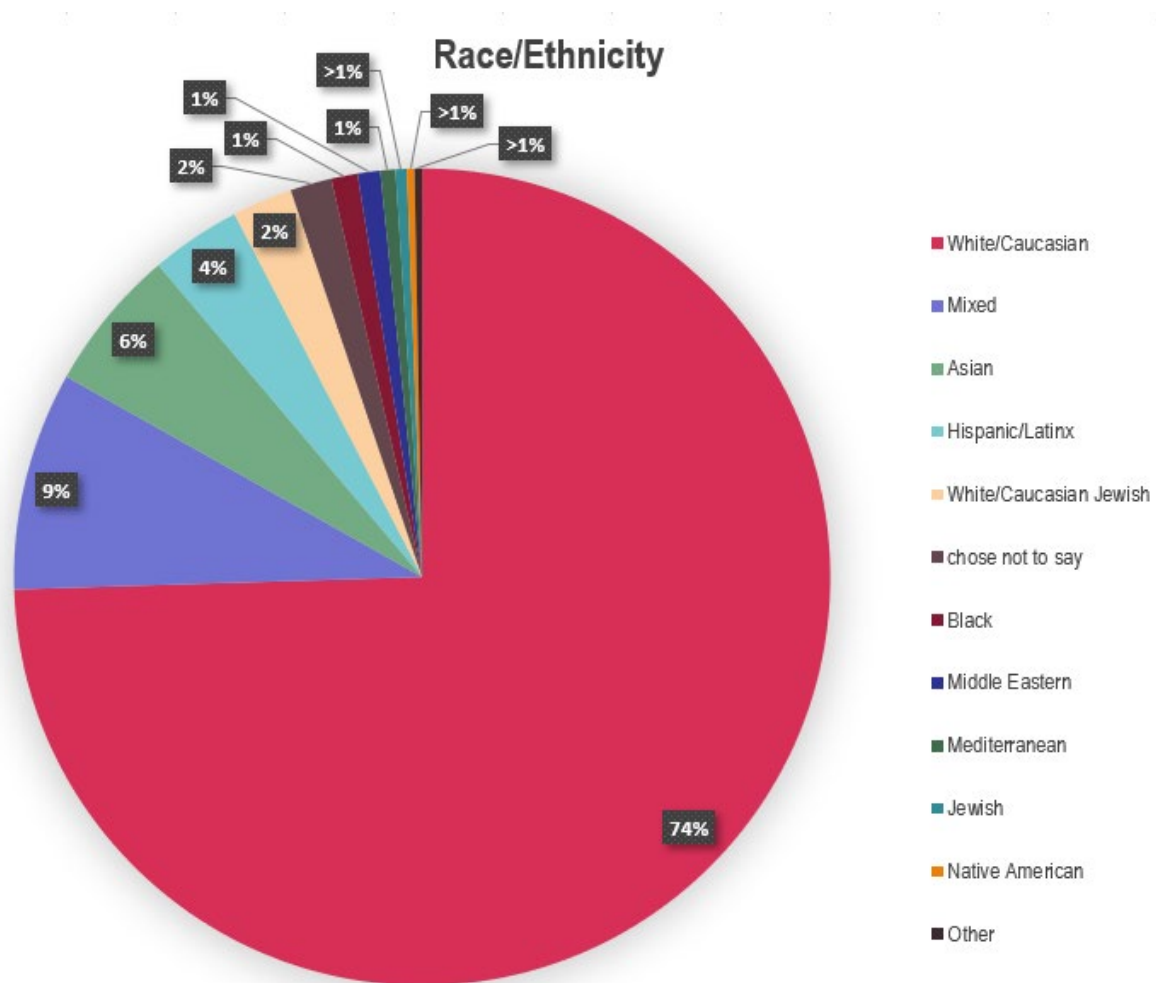
Nationality: Respondents to my survey included fans from every continent and represented

47 different countries. As the graph below shows, almost 90% of fans were collectively from North

America (67%) and Europe (20%), with 60.5% coming from the United States alone. Only five

countries were represented by more than 10 fans: the United States (406), Canada (43), Britain

(38), Germany (25), and Australia (17). These results are not unexpected from a survey distributed

on an English-speaking, US-dominated platform like Tumblr, but it is appropriate that my survey

respondents reflect the community that I am studying.

Figure 2.4. Survey Participants by Nationality
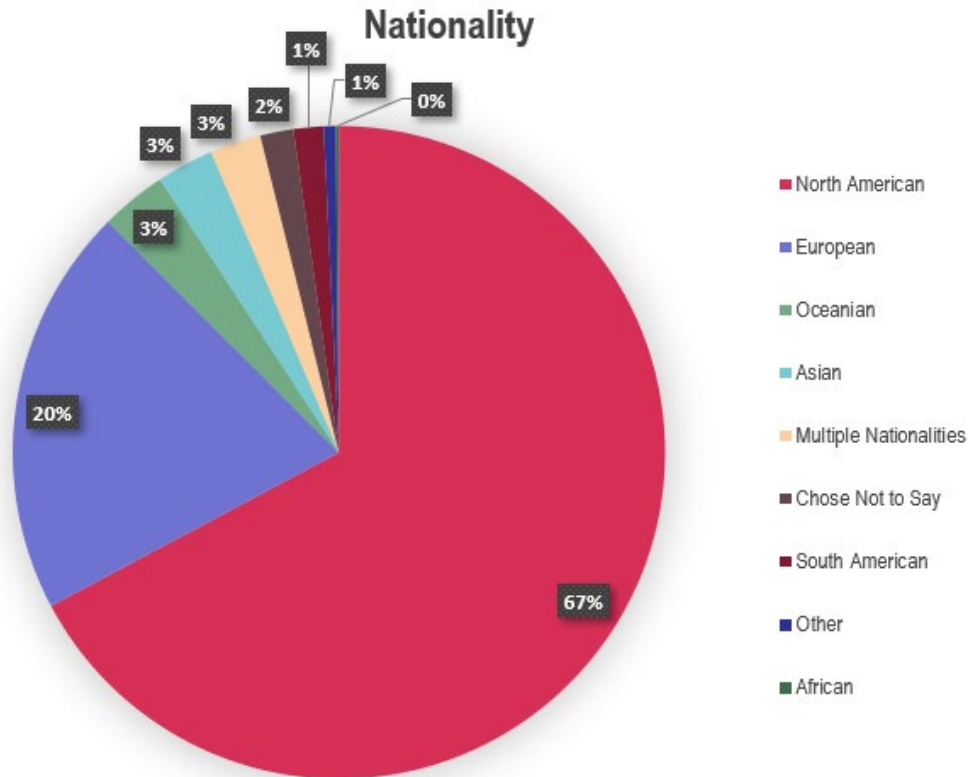
Fandom Participation: Where other demographic characteristics showed a clear trend

towards one group of participants, fans were much more diverse in their fandom participation,

including the number of years they'd been in fandom, how they participate in fandom, and the

number and types of fandoms they participate in. Fans who responded to the survey included both

new fans who'd only been in fandom for a few months and fans who'd been in fandom for over

50 years (see Figure 2.5). The average number of years participants had been in fandom was 12.8,

and the most common response was 10 years. Over 50% of fans have been in fandom between 6

and 15 years. Since the average age of my participants was 27-29, this suggests that most fans join

fandom in their early teens to early twenties.

Figure 2.5. Survey Participants by Number of Years in Fandom
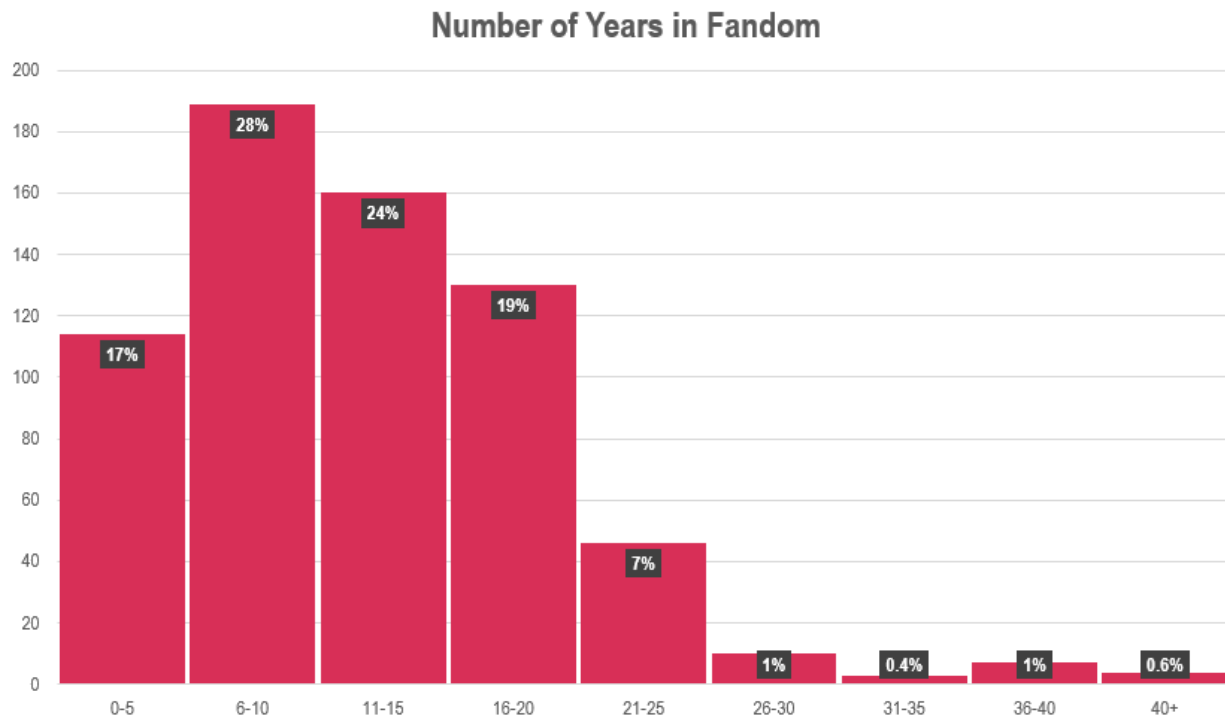
Over 80% of fans participate in fandom at least once a day, with over 50% of fans participating more than once a day. Their interaction is most often with written content; over 79% of fans responded that they primarily create or consume written content including fanfiction, metacommentary, and other discussion. However, visual content is also a considerable part of fans' interactions with fandom: 93% consume fan art, 90% photosets and gifs, and 59% fan video. The division is greater in the kinds of fan content fans produce: 80% produce fanfiction and 56% produce metacommentary, but a total of only 30% or less produce fan art (30%), photosets and gifs (19%), or fan video (7%). Most of my respondents participate in multiple fandoms, with some fans participating in a dozen or more fandoms. These fandoms include book fandoms (e.g., *Harry Potter*), TV show fandoms (e.g., *Supernatural*), movie fandoms (e.g., *Star Wars*), video game fandoms (e.g., *Mass Effect*), anime fandoms (e.g., *Gundam Wing*), and real-person and music fandoms (e.g., One Direction).

Interview Participant Profiles

I interviewed 12 participants for my study, all over the age of 18 and all active participants in transformative fandom. My interview participants were specifically chosen in an attempt to represent in my study both the demographic diversity of fandom and the diversity of fan experiences with and perceptions of fandom discussion. In this section, I provide a brief profile of each fan, representing that fan at the time they were interviewed for the study. Recognizing that fandom is a primarily pseudonymous community, I gave each fan a choice about how they wanted their responses attributed in the study. Both survey and interview participants could choose to have their responses attributed to their fan username, which they could provide, or be assigned a pseudonym.

actualvarric: actualvarric is an 18-year-old white non-binary fan from the United States who has been in fandom for over four years. actualvarric is currently part of fandom communities on Tumblr and AO3 but reports using Fanfiction.net and Deviantart when they were 13. They were introduced to fandom through websites their friends used and were drawn in by seeing other fans who shared similar ideas about expanding the existing content. They were excited to have an idea for a new story and find another fan who'd already partially written the idea. They engage with fandom almost every day where they create fanfiction and fan art and consume fanfiction, fan art, fanvids, photosets, and metacommentary, though they don't feel they have as much time to read as they used to. They participate in several video game fandoms including *Animal Crossing, Ace Attorney, Mass Effect,* and *Pokémon*, and they claim *Dragon Age* as their current "biggest" fandom.

Ayda: Ayda is a 26-year-old Armenian female fan from the United States who has been in fandom since she was 12. She lurked in fandom for years and has only been active within the last

87

year when she began writing fanfiction and "making really bad memes." She was drawn to fandom because it provided opportunities to "see more about a universe you really love" and started writing because it was an opportunity to add whatever she wanted. She first encountered fandom discussion in the last year and calls the experience of participating in it "disconcerting." She is involved in the *Voltron* fandom where she consumes fan art and photosets/gifs and produces fanfiction and metacommentary.

diversehighfantasy: diversehighfantasy is a 46-year-old Black female fan from the United States who has been in fandom for over 20 years. diversehighfantasy joined fandom in the 1990s through an email group for the animated show *Battle of the Planets*, and her first impression suggested that fandom was a fun, exciting place for conversation and the discovery of new things about the show. While commentary was not part of the original draw of fandom for her, she now cites it as a "big part" of how she interacts with fandom, saying: "I don't just immerse myself in it without looking and paying attention to what's going on." She currently runs a Tumblr blog dedicated to representation in media and is involved in fandoms including *Star Wars*, *The Walking Dead*, *Killjoys*, *Being Human*, and *Misfits*.

Jae: Jae is a 29-year-old white non-binary fan from Britain who has been in fandom for about 17 years. Currently participating in fandoms from *Les Misérables* and Marvel to *Steven Universe* and *Sense8*, Jae's first "official" fandom was the BBC *Robin Hood* series, which they encountered in their teens. Early episodes of the show prompted both love for the characters' dynamics and ideas about how the show *should* have gone, which led Jae to the then-vibrant Livejournal community and to writing fanfiction. Jae currently writes fanfiction and consumes fanfiction, fan art, photosets and gifs, metacommentary, and fannish podcasts.

Johanna: Johanna is a 38-year-old Jewish female fan[9] who has been in fandom for over 20 years. She found fandom through Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes books, tabletop gaming, and the online fandom community for *Kindred: The Embraced.* She was nearly scared away from fandom by author Anne Rice's profound and vocal aversion to transformative content but found a community through the fandom for *The Sentinel.* She lists *Star Wars* as her current primary fandoms and *Star Trek*, *Sherlock*, *The Sentinel*, and *The Vampire Chronicles* as fandoms that she's been previously active in. She consumes fanfiction, fan art, fan video, photosets and gifs, metacommentary, fan wiki content, and chat room discussions, and she produces fanfiction, photosets and gifs, and metacommentary as well as engaging in site management and backend work.

Karima: Karima is a 29-year-old Arab female fan from New Zealand who has been in fandom for 18 years. She began participating in fandom offline by writing fanfiction about the Spice Girls, then joined online fandoms through chatrooms when her family got a computer around 2000. She describes fandom as a place to "find people who I couldn't see, I didn't know, who were living a completely different life from me, yet they were interested in the things that I was interested in, in the same way, and with the same kind of like significance that I was interested in them." She currently participates in fandoms including *Marvel Cinematic Universe*, *Harry Potter*, *Hamilton*, *Captive Prince*, and real person fiction (RPF)[10] where she creates fanfiction and consumes fanfiction, fan art, fan video, photosets and gifs, metacommentary, and wiki content.

Leanne: Leanne is a 23-year-old Mi'kmaw/white female fan from Canada who has been in fandom for seven years. She participates in fandom by consuming and producing fanfiction, fan

---

[9] Johanna chose not to share her nationality with her demographic information.

[10] RPF is a genre of fanfiction in which fans create fanworks about real people, for example writing a romance between characters of a band or sports team who are not in a relationship.

art, photosets/gifs, metacommentary, and fan wiki content. She was introduced to fandom through fans and eventually began producing commentary for the *Hunger Games* fandom on DeviantArt. She currently participates in fandom on Tumblr, Discord, and AO3 by consuming and producing fanfiction, fan art, photosets/gifs, metacommentary, and fan wiki content. She lists *Marvel* comics, *Dragon Age*, and *Star Wars* as the main fandoms that she currently participates in.

Marley: Marley is a 22-year-old genderqueer White Jewish fan from the United States who has been in fandom for 10 years. He first encountered fandom while searching for more information about *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and began reading fanfiction on Geocities personal web domains. He lists over 15 current fandoms including movie fandoms like *Star Wars* and *Pacific Rim*, animated fandoms like *Fullmetal Alchemist* and *Yuri on Ice*, and book fandoms like *Animorphs* and Tamora Pierce's Tortall series. In these fandoms, he consumes fanfiction, fan art, fan video, photosets and gifs, metacommentary, fan wiki content, and cosplay, and he produces fanfiction and fan art.

redeyedwrath: redeyedwrath is an 18-year-old white male fan from the Netherlands who has been in fandom for five years. He joined fandom after being "broken up" about the ending of *Final Fantasy X*, looking for fixes online, and discovering Fanfiction.net. He currently participates in the *Merlin*, *James Bond*, and *Dishonored* fandoms where he consumes and produces fanfiction, photosets and gifs, and metacommentary, and also consumes fan art.

Sam: Sam is a 32-year-old white American woman who has been in fandom for over 20 years. She discovered fandom in middle school through a crossover[11] fanfiction of *Animorphs* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. As a self-identified "huge *Animorphs* fan," Sam found this

---

[11] A "crossover" is a genre of fanfiction that puts together two or more otherwise-unconnected canons. Crossover stories may involve, for example, characters from the two canons meeting or being related, one set of characters participating in the story arc of the other set, one set of characters being transported into the universe of the other set, etc.

discovery exciting, and it prompted her search for more fanfiction and fanfiction websites, and eventually the writing of her own fanfiction. As a long-time fan, Sam has followed fandom across platforms from Livejournal and Fanfiction.net to AO3 and Tumblr. Though she wrote a lot of fanfiction as a younger fan, today Sam calls herself more of an "absorber," preferring to read rather than generate content. She currently participates in fandom on AO3, Tumblr, and Reddit in the fandoms for *Animorphs*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Games of Thrones*, *The Expanse*, and *The Magicians*, and she says that her current "favorite part" of fandom is historical meta from the *Game of Thrones* fandom. She also works on the television show *The Blacklist*.

Sana: Sana is a 20-year-old Asian female fan from India and the United States who has been in fandom for six years. Her entry into fandom was through *Death Note,* which she describes as the first piece of media she read that she wanted to know more about. Friends introduced her to Fanfiction.net and various anime fandom where she began writing fanfiction. She lists her current fandoms as "too many to count!" but highlights *Harry Potter*, *Voltron*, various anime, KPop, *Rooster Teeth/Achievement Hunter*, and *Doctor Who* as the fandoms she is currently primarily participating in. In these fandoms she consumes fanfiction, fan art, fan video, photosets and gifs, metacommentary, and fan wiki content, and she produces fanfiction, fan art, and metacommentary.

Shuang: Shuang is a 27-year-old Chinese female fan from Singapore who has been in fandom for around 15 years. She got involved in fandom in her early teens while living through the gap between the publication of the fourth and fifth *Harry Potter* books, during which time she was "sucked […] down into the rabbit hole of fandom" when she went looking for more *Harry Potter* content to read and discovered Fanfiction.net. As an English and Chinese speaker, she participates in both English-speaking Western fandom on sites like AO3, Tumblr, Discord, and Reddit and in Chinese fandom on sites like Lofter (a Chinese equivalent to Tumblr) and Weibo.

She spends most of her time in fandom writing fanfiction and looking at fanart, meta, and discussions on Tumblr. Though she blogs and reads fanfiction for many fandoms, she identifies her current main fandoms as *Star Wars* and *Black Panther*.

RESEARCH ETHICS

Ethical Questions in Fan Studies Scholarship[12]

Fandom and fan studies scholarship have not always had an easy relationship, and their relationship remains complicated to this day. Though the field of fan studies is today populated by a large number of acafans—scholar who identify as both academics and active members of the fan communities and spaces they study—its relationship with fandom has been strained by several early and more recent missteps. Incidents such as 2009's SurveyFail, where researchers proposed to study erotica in fandom as a lens through which to understand the differences between male and female brains, or 2015's controversy about fanworks that were added to college syllabi have been criticized by fans as offensive intrusions by outsiders into fan spaces. This "context collapse" (Marwick and d. boyd), wherein fan communities and the creative work within them became visible to audiences their authors could not anticipate and didn't intend, left many fans wary of academic researchers in their spaces, especially if those researchers were not insiders within the community. While the work of fandom is done in largely public spaces—most Tumblr blogs are public and fanfiction archives AO3 and Fanfiction.net do not require a password to access works—most fan authors expect that the only people who will encounter and engage with their work are other fans. Further, fan spaces have historically been idealized as places where marginalized populations—women, LGBTQ+ people, people of color, people with disabilities—can safely

---

[12] Work in this section draws extensively from a paper written for David Gold's "Literacies in American Life" class and later reworked for an article published in *Transformative Works and Cultures* volume 33 (2020).

explore narratives, identities, and experiences left out of mainstream media. Thus the work of academics within the community can feel violating and exploitative by exposing that safe space to public scrutiny.

In designing this project, I was aware of these controversies in fans' experiences with academic scholarship and sought guidance on ethical fandom scholarship from other fan studies scholars and acafans. There is currently limited scholarship about the ethics of doing research in fandom, though it is becoming a topic of conversation within the field. Brittany Kelley's 2016 "Toward a goodwill ethics of online research methods" offers the most comprehensive foray into this topic in fan studies scholarship; in this article Kelley undertakes an extensive survey of her own positionality as the foundation for developing a position on ethical approaches to doing research on fans and in fan spaces. Recognizing the inherent tension between the position of power occupied by academics and often-marginalized positions occupied by fans, Kelley advocates for a "goodwill ethics heuristic approach" (Kelley) that acknowledges both fans' concerns about academic critique and academics' interests in scholarly development in the field of fan studies. She describes this approach as one characterized by ongoing negotiation and open dialogue, requiring "researchers' willingness to abdicate their expert status where necessary; ongoing negotiations between researchers and participants; and researchers' taking sufficient time to establish both an emic perspective of the community or site being researched and relationships with participants" (Kelley 0.1). Her argument positions fan studies scholarship as needing both negotiation and an ethic of care, and this argument is echoed in current perspectives on the ethical care of research subjects—particularly in online and archival contexts. McKee and Porter, for example, explicitly recognize ethics as an ongoing process "woven throughout research" (64) and d. boyd advocates for face-to-face interactions with research subjects, even when that research is

focused on online behavior, for the purpose of enacting an ethic of care for her research subjects and her own voice.

Kelley's argument is also echoed by other acafans (and those who inhabit both fan and scholar identities but reject the term "acafan" for various reasons) in less scholarly spaces. Notable fan studies scholar Henry Jenkins's blog, for example, is the site of much such discussion in his 2011 series "Acafandom and Beyond," in which he spends fourteen weeks interviewing over two dozen acafans and other notable scholars in the field about their perspectives on the concept of the acafan and the relationships between fandom and scholarship. As one of Jenkins's interview subjects, fan studies scholar Rhiannon Bury, notes, "[B]eing an acafan may be a fraught, complicated, even contradictory identification" (Jenkins, "Bury and Yockey"). This complication is echoed throughout Jenkins's series as his subjects, and he himself, wrestle with questions of how acafans negotiate their academic and fan positions, the relationships of those positions to their work, and the issues that arise around their "subjective experiences as consumers and participants always implicated in the popular culture we study, one way or another, whether or not we want to admit it" (Jenkins, "Concluding"). Jenkins's contributors come to no consensus about these questions, echoing Kelley's approach of constant negotiation in light of acknowledged tension.

This current tension in the role of author positionality is reflected in a lack of established guidelines within the community of fan scholars regarding insider/outsider research and disclosing such positionality in scholarship. *Transformative Works and Cultures*' current guidelines for authors instead focus on negotiating ethical obligations to the subjects of fan scholarship from the perspective of obtaining permission to cite a fanwork (and thus open that work to outside criticism):

> TWC strongly recommends that permission be obtained from the creator for any fan work or blog post cited in a submitted article.

When citing fan blog sites such as LiveJournal or Dreamwidth, only unlocked posts may be used. TWC prefers that the direct URL to a page not be provided. Instead, submissions should use the following format: blog source (LiveJournal, Dreamwidth), user or community name, and date of post. This provides correct sourcing information while permitting fans a modicum of privacy. Direct URLs to these sources may be provided if explicit permission has been obtained. ("Submissions")

While this policy addresses fans' concerns that through scholarship their work may be opened up to outside critique without permission or notification, it does not address the problematic role of the acafan's negotiation of power dynamics, subjectivity, and disclosure in their work. It provides scholars with guidelines for acquiring permissions and citing fanworks, but it does not offer similar guidelines for how authors should address their own identities as fans in their scholarship. It does not offer guidelines for scholars attempting to mitigate or address their positions as authorities backed by the power of the academic institution. It does not offer guidelines for acknowledging or addressing the subjectivity that arises from fans performing critique on their own communities and spaces. And it does not require, recommend, or address the question of whether scholars should disclose their fan identity, nor how to engage in that disclosure or the potential impacts of such disclosure on readers. The 2020 special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures* on Fan Studies Methodologies, released shortly after this writing, may open additional conversation about these questions, but at the moment, many fan studies scholars must wrestle with these ethical questions individually. Though no recent scholarship has surveyed how fans feel today about academic research into fandom, as a fan first and academic second and as someone committed to the ethical treatment of my community, I was guided by this historical critique and by fan studies scholars' early engagements with these questions to remain vigilant about ethical issues in my approach to this project.

In response to these ethical questions, I have incorporated several key approaches into my work on this project. First, I have limited my inclusion of fandom discussion to rare specific

95

examples. While I include some more general examples to contextualize this project and concretize fandom discussion for less familiar readers, I rely primarily on the voices of fans shared through surveys and interviews and who have thus consented to have their perspectives published as part of academic research. While text analysis is beyond the scope of this project in general, I have also decided to use textual samples only minimally and to avoid critiquing fan texts that I have not sought permission to include in my research. Further, where necessary, I have elected to offer general descriptions of discussion texts as context for fans' perspectives, rather than use samples where (1) the authors of those examples might not want their writing included in an academic work and (2) the text example might not accurately match the kind of text the surveyed/interviewed fan was envisioning in making their comments

Second, in designing my approach to data collection, I have attempted to be as transparent as possible with the fandom community about my role as a fan and as a researcher. Several months before distributing my request for survey and interview participants, I established a blog on Tumblr focused on fandom discussion. Through regular reblogging, this blog helped me established myself as a recognized member of the fandom community. The blog's description also made it clear that I was both a fan and a scholar, making my dual identities visible to the community from which I hoped to recruit participants. When publishing my survey through this blog, my materials also made it clear that I was coming from a perspective of both a fan and a scholar; I wanted to make both my identities visible for the purposes of transparency and to reassure potential participants that I was doing my research from the position of an experienced fan—an insider—to the community. The blog remains active to create a space from which I can share the project's findings and solicit feedback from fans on my research in the future (see below).

Third, I have chosen, as much as possible, to give my fan participants and the fandom community the greatest amount of control over how their identities and perspectives are represented and protected in my work. This approach takes the form of (1) allowing my participants as much anonymity or visibility as they desire, (2) representing fans' words with as little editing as possible, and (3) committing to transparency and community participation in the publication of my work. First, recognizing that fandom is a predominantly pseudonymous community, I did not require my participants to share any personal information they were uncomfortable with. Fans were not required to answer any demographic questions on the survey and could choose to leave any other questions blank. Further, as I mentioned above, I gave participants the choice to remain anonymous by being assigned a pseudonym or publicly claim their perspectives by having responses associated with a username that they provided. In approaching my interactions with fans this way, I hoped to ease potential concerns among fans that my work might bridge their offline and fannish contexts in ways they did not want, while also recognizing fan voices in my research. In recognizing fans' rights to have themselves represented as they wanted, I also chose not to edit, wherever possible, fans' responses to my survey or interview questions. I have chosen not to make edits to spelling or grammar and instead, to make any necessary clarifications in my analysis wherever possible. I copied responses directly from the survey form to represent how fans chose to communicate their ideas.

Finally, I am committed to transparency and community participation in the publication of my work as a reflection of my commitment to represent fan voices and the culture of fandom as accurately as possible and with minimal distortion. I am committed to sharing my work with the fandom community as part of the publication process. I describe my plans for this public dissemination and community-led revisioning in Chapter 6, but in short, this process will involve

sharing my data and proposed findings with my participants and with the fandom community broadly to solicit fans' critical feedback on the work. Discussion involves, in part, a process of collective and collaborative consensus-seeking, and while I do not expect that all fans will agree with my work, I want to give them the opportunity to engage with it and to recognize that their input will further shape my conclusions as they continue to evolve beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Positionality

I offer two positionality statements in this chapter. I first drafted a positionality statement for this dissertation as part of my prospectus in the Winter 2018 semester. It underwent relatively minor revisions and additions in the many months that followed as it transitioned from prospectus to dissertation chapter. Revising this chapter for the submission of my final draft of this project, I returned to this positionality statement. So much of my thinking about myself in relation to my project had changed and, as you will see below, I was grappling with some significant personal challenges in revising this project. I debated integrating these two statements, but in the end, I have decided to leave them as distinct entities. They both detail important parts of my thinking and my work in addressing my biases and relationship to this project, and the distinction between them is a productive representation of the changes I have undergone while completing this project and the ways context is so important to understanding myself in relation to my work.

August 2020: This dissertation was incredibly difficult to write. I did not set out to write a project about social justice, conflict, and tension in fandom. When I imagined this project—and even as I collected the data and began my analysis—I thought I would be writing a reflective, perhaps celebratory, appreciation of fans' rhetorical thinking and the powerful potential of fandom discussion for friendship, a sense of community, and the learning of social consciousness. But

everywhere I looked, the tensions in fandom discussion seeped out. The more I talked to fans, the more I wrote, and the more my committee challenged my stubborn, utopic view of fandom, the more I realized that I couldn't shy away from the problems in my community. To write about fandom's successes and our potential, I also had to write about the toxicity and tensions and lurking problems that have driven so many fans out of our community. In mid-May 2020, I turned my draft in to my committee in advance of my defense and in late May 2020 the killing of African-American George Floyd by police sparked national and international protests that, as of the submission of this dissertation, are still ongoing. It felt more important than ever to talk about the problems of fandom discussion: to acknowledge the problems in our community and to dwell in the ways that discussion, and fandom, profoundly fails to be a safe and productive space for many fans.

And yet, this was a difficult task for me. As I have revised this dissertation in the midst of a national reckoning with racism, I have struggled not to shy away from the difficult work of shining a light in fandom's dark corners because fandom, for me, has always been a positive experience. There is a part of me, even now, that does not want to tarnish the shining light that fandom is for me and many other fans. Yet, in an attempt to do justice to the participants who shared their beautiful and painful stories with me, I have tried not to turn away in the hope that grappling with the problems in our community will help us to fix them. I have not been wholly successful in this endeavor; I have done my best to restrain my urge to minimize problems and recognize that my privileged experience of fandom does not reflect the experiences of every fan, nor should it define how I write about fandom. This remains an ongoing site of self-reflection and critique.

~**March 2019:** As I developed and worked through this project, I had to wrestle with the tension between my fan and scholar identities. My fan experiences and my scholarly lenses helped me see both fandom and fan scholarship in new ways. As I have described in my autoethnographic reflection above, my identity as a fan helped me to identify spaces where fandom discussion occurs and to design data collection to capture this discourse. For example, as a long-time, active fan, I knew that Tumblr was a hub of contemporary fan activity and the platform on which most discussion in fandom currently occurred. Further, my knowledge of fandom helped me to frame survey and interview questions in a way that signalled membership in the community and built on my existing knowledge as a fan. However, my identities as a fan and scholar were also in tension as the biases and goals of each identity potentially came into conflict. In particular, my own perceptions of fandom as community, my subconscious desires for a utopian or less divided fandom, and my experiences within fandom sometimes made it challenging for me to see the variety and difference in textual examples from fandom and in the narratives of other fans. My experiences and perceptions are not shared by all fans, and because I wanted to understand the variety of perspectives within fandom, I had to take care not to privilege my perceptions in my interactions with participants or in my analysis. For example, I found it particularly challenging to work with the narratives of fans who have a highly critical stance towards fandom and/or who emphasized negative experiences in fandom. I have not had these kinds of negative experiences, and while I was aware of them before I began this research, I had a distant awareness. I viewed fandom and fandom discussion as a largely positive experience, and navigating contradictory perspectives was challenging. In conducting this research, I have worked to keep both my identities in mind and to actively question the ways in which each identity might shape the collection and analysis of my data. Through memoing, feedback from writing groups, and consistent re-

examination of my conclusions with my biases in mind, I have tried to create a more representative examination of how fandom discussion is operating in fandom, and I have sought to actively engage with the tensions that have not been prevalent in my personal experiences with fandom discussion.

I also want to acknowledge that beyond coming to this project with a particular kind of fandom experience, I also come to this project with a particular identity that has inflected my experience and can influence how I interpret the stories of fellow fans. While this project sought to identify trends across the breadth of fandoms, I do not participate in all fandoms. In particular, I do not actively participate in anime or video game fandoms. Many fans from these spaces participated in my study, and while their experiences echoed patterns that included fans from every fandom space, I want to acknowledge that my lack of personal familiarity with these kinds of fandoms may have influenced how I interpreted these fans' responses. In my interviews, I worked to clarify any terms or references I was unfamiliar with, but I must acknowledge that I was more familiar with the experiences of some of my participants than others and could thus more easily provide additional context for analysis in some cases than in others.

Further, I come to this project as a cisgendered white woman who does not personally engage in significant contentious discussion in fandom. Consequently, my experiences with fandom and fandom discussion were often different from those of many of my participants who had encountered critique directed at their non-White identities. As I mentioned, these experiences were often more challenging to process because of how they differed from my own. In writing this dissertation, I have sought to foreground the experiences of my participants, particularly those whose experiences contradicted my own, and worked to be aware of my biases in analyzing those experiences. Returning to memos and interview notes, checking participants' experiences against

101

themes in the breadth of my data, and engaging critically with writing groups helped me ensure that my findings represented the experiences of my participants with as little of my own bias as possible.

Generalizability

Many fan studies projects are comprised of small-scale studies that focus on a single fandom community, subcommunity, or practice. The scale of much research in fandom is likely because of the threat of trying to generalize from a small group of fans to the entire fandom community. However, in preparing to conduct this project, I believed that there was something in the patterns of fandom discussion that was bigger than a single fandom and that fan studies scholars could find value in looking at trends across the breadth and diversity of fandom. In order to facilitate generalizability, I designed a survey that could be widely circulated and could show trends across the breadth of fandom, with the accompanying interviews designed to provide additional depth. The 671 fans represented in my survey population show a diversity of age, gender, nationality, race/ethnicity, and participation in fandom, including the number of years they've been involved, the ways that they participate, and the fandoms that they participate in. Based on the scope and diversity of the responses I received, I am confident that the patterns and insights described in this dissertation are representative of the larger fandom community, though they cannot, of course, account for every fan's experiences.

My survey allows me to show trends in the data, and the scope of responses from across fandom suggests that these findings are not isolated to a single fan community. Further, matching patterns across interview and survey data allows me to nuance trends in the survey data with narrative depth from the interviews and support the singular narrative experiences of interview participants with trends in the survey data. While I do not suggest that any of the individual

narratives that I include in this project can be generalized to all of fandom, I have worked to ensure that the trends and insights represent as broad a swath of fandom as possible to enable fan studies researchers to think about fandom discussion capaciously in fandom on Tumblr.

Beyond fandom on Tumblr, my insights may apply to fandom on other platforms, and fans certainly see similarities, as they describe in Chapter Four. However, generalizing my insights beyond Tumblr would require further research. Because fans participate on many platforms, ethnographic observation of other fan spaces might facilitate this confirmation; however, this research was not within the scope of my study. Also not within the scope of this study was confirming whether the patterns that I observed in fandom discussion could apply to non-fandom spaces. As I describe in Chapter Six, I do believe that there are significant similarities which would make such generalization possible and productive, but further research would also be required in this area.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that my surveys and interviews do not include the full scope of fandom. Specifically, I limited my study to participants over the age of 18, and I know from personal experience and the survey data that many fans are younger than this cut-off. I chose to restrict my study to participants over the age of 18 for several reasons: I was not asking participants to deanonymize, but speaking with anyone under 18 would require them to share personal information with me (so that I could obtain parental permission for their participation in the study), which would thereby out their fandom participation to their parents—who might, understandably, not be comfortable with their children speaking to a stranger online. The potential of outing participants as fans to their families was also of particular concern because fandom's goal of being a safe space for marginalized identities means that many participants may come from unsafe home

lives, such as LGBTQ+ youth who face discrimination and find safety only in fandom. This choice to exclude fans under the age of 18 means that my findings do not represent fandom's teenaged population and, consequently, are comprised mostly of individuals who have been in fandom for a long time, most fans having joined fandom as teenagers. Thus, both the perspectives of teenage fans and fans new to fandom are not well-represented by this study.

Further, as a result of the dynamic nature of ecological systems of writing in fandom, I can also only represent the writing system of fandom at the particular time in which this study was conducted. As Cooper writes, "though [a writing system's] structures and contents can be specified at a given moment, in real time they are constantly changing, limited only by the parameters that are themselves subject to change over the longer spans of time" (368). Thus, I can only represent the features, parameters, and social functions of fandom discourse (and its role within fandom) as observed during the data collection period (June to November 2018) and based on participants' recollections of fandom discourse's evolution prior to data collection, though participatory observations gathered through the analysis period permitted additional observation of the changes in this system over time. My study, therefore, can speak to the nature of fandom and the role of fandom discussion within this system during the snapshot of time during which the study was conducted, but I cannot presume to speak for the role that fandom discussion might play as the system continues to evolve and change, or even how fandom *did* change during the course of data collection. For example, as I described earlier in this chapter, shortly after I finished collecting my interview data, Tumblr changed its terms and conditions around the inclusion of adult content on the site. Much adult content was flagged and thus no longer displayed on the platform. Many fans vowed to leave the platform, and other platforms like Twitter, Pillowfort, and Discord saw a surge in fan activity. Fandom on Tumblr remains a robust community—in part because fandom has yet

to find another platform that would sufficiently accommodate us—but this event and its impact on fandom is not represented in my interview or survey data. Further, I expect that fans will someday migrate from Tumblr to another platform, at which point this study may no longer accurately represent fandom and fandom discussion's place in this community. Fandom is also a dynamic and ever-evolving space, so even if it remains on Tumblr, I expect it to change considerably. Thus, my work presents only a snapshot of fans' perceptions and practices around fandom discussion.

CONCLUSION

I designed this study to build on the ethnographic, close reading, corpus, and acafannish research on discussion practices in fandom. This research has laid a foundation for considering specific discussion practices and discussion with specific fandoms. My study was designed to extend this research by asking: What are the trends in fandom discussion across fandom, and how might extensive qualitative data help us better understand the practices of discussion in the fandom? In the chapters that follow, I explore the answers to these questions by examining how fans describe specific practices of discussion, how they theorize the role of discussion in their communities, and how they intervene in their relationships with discussion through practices of curation. In the final chapter, I consider the implications of this dissertation for the many groups that brought me to this research: fans, fan studies scholars, digital studies scholars, and instructors/students.

Chapter 3:

Mediating Processes of Fandom Discussion

A meme that used to circulate on Tumblr goes something like this: the way to identify a fellow Tumblr user when talking to them in the "real" world is to have this conversation about shoelaces:

Person 1: I like your shoelaces!

Person 2: Thanks, I stole them from the president!

The exchange is meant to serve as a community marker, a way to identify fellow users of the often-strange, often-fannish space of Tumblr. The first half of the exchange was originally posted in late 2012 or early 2013 and the whole exchange evolved through conversation with several other fans (see Figure 3.1 on the right). It is considered to have originated in part as a reference from *Supernatural*, a television show that was massively popular within transformative

Figure 3.1. "Tumblr Code," Origin of the "Shoelaces" Meme

fandom and remains one of the largest fandoms on Archive of Our Own with over 225,000 stories as of this writing. The post became very popular in Tumblr fandom, seeing over 3.5 million reblogs and spawning several anecdotes of users trying the exchange in real life.

The height of this meme's popularity was before I became a very active user on Tumblr, but it still circulates, and when I saw it years after it was first posted, I felt an instant sense of kinship. At the time, I had only begun to be publicly open about my participation in fandom and I don't know that I would have been brave enough to try this exchange with a stranger. All the same, the idea that there was a secret handshake that I knew and a community of people willing to recognize each other as kindred beyond our digital space made me feel warm and connected to my fellow fans. The oddity of the exchange, its origins in *Supernatural* (my fannish obsession at the time), and the sense of lighthearted friendship the post evoked made me think, without hesitation, "These are my people. This is my place." This capacity of fandom discussion to evoke identification and community, to create a sense of belonging, and to forge connections built on shared interests—and to do all of this through a foundation of caring for other fans and fandom as a community—is the focus of this chapter.

In the "Theoretical Framework" section of Chapter One, I proposed mediation as a productive framework for understanding the place of fandom discussion within the ecology of writing that is online fandom. Specifically, I argued that mediation can help us understand *what* is happening with fandom discussion—what it is doing, socially and rhetorically, in fandom—as a foundation for then unpacking how entanglements and tensions in fandom's ethics of care influence fans' practices and theorizations of fandom discussion. In this chapter, I focus on describing this work of mediation in fandom discussion, drawing on mediation theory because it helps emphasize the dynamism of the exchange of information in fandom and the interconnection

between these conversations and the ways that fans experience fandom. Media studies theory understands mediation broadly as a process through which media constructs meaning and reality in the interchange among producer, consumer, and culture, and various media scholars have attended to the many dimensions of this process. In this chapter I argue that fandom discussion is a process of mediation as social and cultural action. In other words, in this process, the discussions that fans have are mediating their relationships and behaviors towards and knowledge of themselves; their community, including fellow fans; and their context, particularly as it relates to social justice. I begin the chapter by identifying seven key dimensions where the mediating processes of fandom discussion are operating, drawn from fans' responses to my survey and from my interviews with selected participants. Because these actions are rooted in the social and cultural relationships that make up the internal worldviews of fans, I use fans' descriptions and evaluations of fandom discussion to develop a set of mediating processes they perceive fandom discussion as playing.

Though I have individually described and examined each mediating process in this chapter, these processes are by no means completely separated, and this interconnectedness is important for understanding the themes of identity/self, community, and social justice that underlie the entire chapter. As I will show, a single fandom discussion post or a trend of similar posts can serve multiple rhetorical and social functions within fandom. For example, posts that rhetorically function as critiques of individual fans or trends within fandom (e.g., racist narrative tropes) may also function socially to make fans feel disconnected from their fandom communities. The interconnectedness I emphasize across these mediating processes is both a reflection of fandom as a networked ecology of writing, writing spaces, and writers and a reflection of the themes of community, identity, and care that I argue underlie fandom discussion.

Perhaps unsurprising because of fandom's origins in providing community for those with marginalized identities and interests, themes of community, identity, and social justice remain foundational to fandom today. As I argued in Chapter One, they are also key points of interrogation for scholars of digital spaces and participation. These themes are expected in work that considers both fandom and rhetorical activity online, and in this chapter, I show their presence across the many mediating processes of fandom discussion. Though I have organized the chapter around these mediating processes, the recurring threads of community, identity, and social justice serve to draw these mediating processes together. By examining these threads, I will begin to unearth the character of the knowledge-making system of fandom discussion.

In this chapter, I try to represent the many and complicated mediating processes fans perceive and as such, I cannot analyze each process in the depth it deserves. Some of this deeper analysis is represented in the work of Chapter Four and Chapter Five, but much of that work will require future scholarship. Rather than focus on a deep consideration of specific mediating processes, I intend this chapter to provide a description of each process and emphasize their interconnectedness, interrogating questions such as: How do fans perceive fandom discussion as operating within their community? What characteristics or values of fandom might motivate these perceptions? How does fandom discussion build knowledge in fandom? The focus of this chapter is arguing for fandom discussion as mediation broadly and highlighting the foundational role of identity, community, and social justice in the nature and existence of that mediation. This analysis lays the foundation for the work I do in Chapter Four and Chapter Five. In Chapter Four, I examine how curation serves as a way of intervening in fandom discussions' mediating processes and comes from an ethic of care that persists across platforms. In Chapter Five, I step back from the

specific processes described in this chapter to look at how fans theorize fandom discussion broadly and grapple with tensions between its positive and negative potential.

SEVEN KEY MEDIATING PROCESSES

The fans who participated in my project talk about the roles of fandom discussion throughout their survey responses and interviews. But as I analyzed the survey data, I consistently found that fans' responses to one of the survey questions—*Do you think discourse is important in fandom (i.e., for building relationships, making fandom better, calling out problems)? Why or why not?*[13]—were the clearest articulations of their perspectives on the roles or mediating actions of fandom discussion. Their responses to this question often repeated or referenced the themes, narratives, and affective judgements they wrote elsewhere in their surveys. Additionally, their responses to this question most often presented fans' comprehensive perspectives, where other questions tended to only surface pieces of this perspective. Drawing on the responses to this question, I used open-coding to code an initial sample of survey responses for all possible ways fans were articulating discussion as operating in fandom communities, resulting in dozens of codes. Using grounded theory, I reviewed these open codes for themes emerging from the data. These open codes highlighted a sense that fandom discussion was a process operating in fandom— specifically a process that intervened in fans' relationships, perspectives, and identities. Drawing on theories of mediation, which emphasized these elements of media as a reshaping process, I used these initial open codes to generate a list of focused codes that represented the processes that fans

---

[13] My survey used the term "fandom discourse" as an umbrella term for all aspects of discussion within fandom. While the term is broadly recognized by fans, many respondents to the survey wrote that the term "fandom discourse" had an affiliation with a particular kind of discussion in fandom and that the term has connotations, for many fans, with the kinds of behaviour they critique in fandom spaces. For this reason, I use the more neutral term "fandom discussion" when talking about the concept within my dissertation project but acknowledge the original term used in the survey as it may have influenced fans' responses to this question.

identified. These focused codes were refined during the data analysis process and became the categories analyzed in this chapter and represented in Table 3.1. Using these focused codes, I recoded my initial sample, then coded the remaining survey as well as fans' interview responses.

Fans' responses to this question offered not only descriptive categories but also judgements on a particular dimension of the mediating process as positive or negative—or, in fans' language, the "good" and the "bad," "toxic," or "problematic." Consequently, and because fans' responses were so often shaded by these value judgements, I have used "positive" and "negative" as descriptors for the various aspects of each mediating process that I describe in this chapter. In addition to representing what fans were telling me and the language they used, my use of "positive" and "negative" also highlights the duality and contradiction in the mediations that fans identified. In my analysis of fans' perspectives on the roles of fandom discussion, I identified seven key dimensions, four of which had both positive and negative processes and three of which were discussed as positive. Where both positive and negative aspects were highlighted by fans, these processes were often in direct opposition—for example, building and breaking community—and fans almost-universally agreed on valuing an action as positive or negative. For example, when fans talked about building community, it was positioned as positive or valued and when they talked about breaking community it was positioned as negative or something they wanted to see no longer happening in discussions. My use of "positive" and "negative" therefore reflects fans' judgements and vocabulary and highlights fans as metacognitive and critical of the conversations in their community. As I will argue in Chapter Five, many fans theorize fandom discussion as tension between its productive and harmful potential, and this tension is evident in the ways fans differently describe its individual processes.

Highlighting the duality in fans' perceptions of fandom discussion through the use of "positive" and "negative" labels is also important because it opened up space to consider the ways in which individual fans might differently perceive a single piece of text or exchange from the discussion. I know, from my own experience and from fans' responses, that a piece of discussion that one fan might categorize as, for example, productively challenging a problem in fandom (such as racism), another fan might classify as harmful harassment or policing of fan engagement. One fan might therefore value that piece of discussion as positively mediating fandom culture while the other might value it as negatively mediating their relationship to the fandom community. Thus, while a positive/negative binary might seem reductive and the labels simplistic, I argue that they offer space for examining where the binary breaks down and thus where the processes of mediation are more complex, rhetorical, and implicated in questions of authorial intent and audience reception.

In Table 3.1 below, I will provide a brief definition for each of the processes that I identified and an indication of the frequency with which that process was mentioned in fans' responses. It's important to note that many of fans' responses mention multiple processes, so each response was coded for every process that it mentioned. The frequencies in the table below thus represent the number of fans who mentioned a particular process. In the following sections of this chapter, I will define each process and its various dimensions in greater depth, using responses from both survey and interview data to illustrate the complex ways fandom discussion is mediating fans' relationships with themselves, fandom, other fans, and canon material.

Table 3.1 Mediating Processes of Fandom Discussion

Community Relationships

Building Community (positive)		*Breaking Community (negative)*	
Fans perceive interacting with fandom discussion as building a sense of community and a sense of connection between a fan and fandom(s).	21.3%	Fans perceive fandom discussion as breaking a sense of connection between a fan and their fandom community.	3.3%
		Gatekeeping (negative)	
		Fans perceive fandom discussion as preventing a fan from entering a new fandom community and/or preventing a fan from building a sense of connection with a community.	0.7%

Interpersonal Relationships

Building Relationships (positive)		*Breaking Relationships (negative)*	
Fans perceive fandom discussion as facilitating the creation and maintenance of relationships with specific other fans (e.g. making friends through fandom discussion).	19.1%	Fans perceive fandom discussion as breaking relationships with specific other fans (e.g. causing disagreements that mean two fans no longer talk to each other).	1.1%

Criticisms

Identifying Problems and Challenging Them (positive)		*Policing Fan Engagement (negative)*	
Fans perceive fandom discussion as a space for identifying (or "calling out") problems within fandom such as specific fan behaviors or racist narrative tropes, and a space for debating and/or attempting to solve these problems with other fans.	35.3%	Fans perceive fandom discussion as "policing" the nature of other fans' engagement with fandom (e.g. decrying that a certain relationship should not be enjoyed by other fans).	2.9%
		Harassing Other Fans (negative)	
		Fans perceive fandom discussion as a tool through which other fans are harassed, including bullying and doxing.	4.6%

Relationships to Canon

Building Relationships to Canon (positive)		*Harassing Canon Creators (negative)*	
Fans perceive fandom discussion as facilitating a relationship to the canon material of their media objects and/or the producers and creators of these objects.	11.8%	Fans perceive fandom discussion as a mode through which fans harass canon creators (including authors, showrunners, actors, etc.).	0.7%

Self Examination, Self Critique

Fans perceive interacting with fandom discussion as leading to self examination and self critique both personally and more broadly for the community.	14%

New Perspectives

Fans perceive fandom discussion as a space for sharing new perspectives and educating other fans and/or a space where they see other space or are educated by other fans.	13.4%

Fan/Fandom History

Fans perceive fandom discussion as a space through which fans can archive the history of fandom and/or ensure that new fans are educated in this history.	2%

As I will show in the following sections of this chapter, each of these processes is a dimension of fandom discussion's mediation of fans' relationships to other fans and to fandom. Within each role, fandom discussion enables particular social and/or rhetorical action by defining fans' personal identities (e.g., building and breaking relationships to other fans) and the cultural identity of fandom (e.g., offering new perspectives in fandom debates or challenging behavior perceived as problematic). These processes also reflect different aspects of mediation: for example, the processes involving fandom history, community, and interpersonal relationships represent mediation of relationships, the processes involving criticisms and new perspectives represent mediation as persuasion and education, the processes of self-examination and self-critique represent mediation as identity building, and the processes involving canon materials represent mediations at the boundaries of fandom and beyond to media producers and objects. In describing

each of these processes, I use individual fans' narratives as both representations of trends across

narratives and points of the analysis for how fans understand each process and its interactions with

the fandom experience. While each narrative can only offer insights from the perspective of a

single fan, I have chosen narratives that represent ideas shared by many of the fans included in my

sample. As a result of these trends and of the diversity and scale of my survey, I argue that the

insights from individual narratives can be broadly applied across fandom. While no two fans'

experiences or perceptions will perfectly align, the processes described in this chapter echo across

the experiences of many of the fans that I surveyed and interviewed.

MEDIATION 1: COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

The first set of mediating processes that I examine in this chapter concerns fans'

relationships with fandom as a community broadly and with specific communities within the

fandom space, such as the community of fans of a particular show or a subgroup of those fans who

like a particular character relationship or participate in a particular forum or group. Fans perceive

fandom discussion as mediating their relationships with fandom communities by building or

facilitating community relationships (positive), breaking community relationships (negative), and

gatekeeping or preventing fans from accessing a community (negative). In defining and redefining

these relationships, fandom discussion mediates between fans and the fandom community by

defining the personal identity of the fan as a member of fandom community and the "cultural

identity" (Bolter and Grusin 231) of fandom *as* a community. Fans' narratives demonstrate

mediation as socialization—both the "sociohistoric production of people" (Prior et al 15) and their

being "brought into alignment with others" (Prior et al 18) as part of a community. As the fans

quoted in the following pages show, fandom discussion is often the avenue through which they

come to feel a part of fandom or through which they feel they have been separated from the

community. Their comments show fandom discussion as a process that shapes and reshapes the realities of their relationships with fandom, often in ways intrinsically connected to their identities. Fandom discussion creates fans as people and creates fandom as a community in which rhetorical work can be done.

Process: Building Community

Fans perceive fandom discussion as positively mediating their relationships with fandom communities by *building community*: creating and maintaining a sense of community among fans and a sense of connection between a particular fan and the community of a specific fandom and/or the broader fandom community. Fan scholars have long recognized the sense of community, connection, and togetherness that many fans experience in online fandom spaces, and the participants in this study echo these sentiments. When asked in my survey whether fandom discussion was important, hailie, a 36-year-old European-Arabic woman from Morocco and France, said:

> I don't know, for some fandom is the only place where they have friends or it's the only place when they can share some of their passion without being mocked or ridiculed. So maybe it's important for them to be able to be themselves without being judge.

As hailie suggests, for many fans, fandom not only provides a sense of belonging—a community— but may also be the *only* community to which they belong. Introverts who have difficulty making friends, LGBTQ+ youth without family or community support, and youth who feel more intense connections with fictional characters and worlds than their day-to-day existences might all find solace in fandom spaces among others who are equally passionate. Fandom has its origins in providing connection space for those who felt marginalized from mainstream media narratives (e.g., women, LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities), and while fandom has become much more mainstream, it retains a reputation of being a space open to and supportive of marginalized

116

identities. Consequently, many fans articulate, as hailie does, a sense that fandom is for many a significant place or the only place where they feel a sense of community. A sense of community, then, can become intimately connected with a sense of identity—fandom is, according to hailie, a place for fans to "be themselves" without judgment and among others who share their passions. For fans who face marginalization outside of fandom, their identities might lead them to find community in fandom where those identities are more accepted. This is not limited to marginalized identities; fans who feel disconnected because they are alone in their intense love of and connection to a fictional world may similarly express that their sole or strongest sense of community comes from fandom spaces where this appreciation is validated and their identities as fans serve as points of connection to the community.

Many fans in my study cited fandom discussion as the mediating process that built those community relationships and facilitated a sense of connection to a community of fans. Ana, a 19-year-old Hispanic woman from the United States, offers one such example of this perspective on fandom discussion when she writes in her survey about how fandom discussion facilitates a relationship with the *Supernatural* fandom:

> **Survey Question:** *Do you think discourse is important in fandom (i.e., for building relationships, making fandom better, calling out problems)? Why or why not?*
>
> **Ana:** Absolutely I do. (I'll use *supernatural* as an example).
> *Supernatural* as a show is... heavily flawed, especially the later seasons. The narrative is blatantly biased to the point of ridiculousness, it's decisions bordering on ludacrous, and the internal logic... well, the less said there the better.
> The one and only reason I follow this show is for the fandom discourse, especially that surrounding my favorite character. It's incredibly validating to see that other people agree with me, that there are others who see the problems and the absurd double standards.

Supernatural, a dark fantasy drama series which recently finished its fifteenth and final season, is a show with a large and vibrant fanbase. For context, it is currently the third-largest TV show fandom on AO3, which currently hosts over 225,000 pieces of *Supernatural* fanfiction. Yet for

Ana, it is not a community she would be part of if not for the existence of fandom discussion. This discussion, for her, is a place where she can see both her appreciation for a favorite character and her critiques of the show validated, and this validation fosters a sense of community for her. Thus fandom discussion shapes and reshapes the reality of her relationship with the *Supernatural* fandom community by building a community that she wants to be part of and that opens space for her participation, creating a sense of community that might not otherwise exist for her because of her complex feelings towards the show. In addition to mediating Ana's relationship with the *Supernatural* fandom community, we can also see in her response that fandom discussion mediates her relationship with the show: a relationship that would similarly be non-existent becomes possible because fandom discussion makes the reality of the show more palatable to this fan. Ana is far from alone is attributing to fandom discussion her sense to community. For her, this mediation is personal: fandom discussion has created a community that she wants to be a part of, and it has reshaped the reality of her relationship with *Supernatural* by opening space to negotiate that relationship.

For other fans, the mediating processes of fandom discussion are not only personal, but also essential to the existence of the community. For these fans, fandom discussion is part of enabling a sense of community and a necessary foundation on which fandom operates. I-Had-Bucky, a 28-year-old white female fan from the United States and also a fan of *Supernatural*, credits fandom discussion with the continued existence of fandom in her survey response:

> I remember being a kid, thinking there was something wrong with me for various reasons, and then I found fandom. I found people who were like me, people who I love and who have stuck by me through the worst moments of my life even though we've never met in person, or have only met once in sixteen years.
> Without these discussions about what fandom means, what it could be, and what it is? It would stagnate and die, and then we would all be left rudderless.

Just as hailie suggests when she calls fandom "the only place when [fans] can share some of their passion without being mocked or ridiculed," I-Had-Bucky identifies fandom as a place of shared interests, particularly for those who feel isolated or marginalized in their everyday lives. Fandom, she says, is the place where she found people like her who helped her through the tough points in her life. In her response, we again see fandom and its community as profoundly connected to the identities of its participants. In both I-Had-Bucky's and hailie's responses, we also see the marginalization that might drive fans to feel a lack of community outside of fandom. I-Had-Bucky articulates this feeling as something being wrong with her, hailie as facing ridicule outside the fandom community. For these fans and fans like them, fandom discussion mediates their relationship with fandom community by facilitating a sense of community built on discussion that validates fans' identities outside of fandom without, for many, perpetuating the marginalization and isolation they feel outside fan spaces. As hailie and I-Had-Bucky suggest, identities and the realities of living them might draw fans to fandom but might also constitute a basis on which friendships and communities are formed through the mediations of fandom discussion.

These shared interests and experiences are not, however, the only glue holding the community together. The discussions among fans about "what fandom means, what it could be, and what it is" are an essential structure in fandom, as I-Had-Bucky suggests. Not only do such discussions facilitate that individual sense of community that Ana references; they also make this sense of community possible because, in part, they make *the community* possible. As these fans have articulated, fans' participation in fandom is often closely tied with their identities, whether that be passionate devotion to a media object or identities like sexuality, gender, and race. Fandom discussion provides a bridge between the identity of the individual fan and the collective identity of the community, allowing the fan to define themselves as part of the community and the

community to redefine itself in relation to the identities of its members. As I will show later in this chapter, fandom discussion mediates through processes of critique, education, and self-examination, all of which can contribute to shaping and re-shaping fandom as a community. Fandom discussion mediates fans' relationships with community by facilitating the ongoing meaning construction within the community and by, as the fans in this section suggest, building a relationship between the individual fan and that broader community.

Process: Breaking Community

In direct contrast to building community, another dimension of fandom discussion's mediation of community relationships is the breaking of those relationships. When I say "*breaking community*," I refer to fans' perceptions that fandom discussion can drive fans away from a particular fandom community or from fandom altogether. In driving fans away from a community, fandom discussion mediates fans' relationships with that community by deconstructing the bond between fan and fandom. As fan perspectives in this section show, this mediation happens through fandom discussion being used as direct critiques or attacks against individual fans and through the trends and opinions conveyed in fandom discussion creating an environment in which individual fans feel unwelcome in the community. In both these cases, a fan's identity often intersects with their sense that they are unwelcome in the community, either because of a direct attack on that identity or because their identity is implicitly or explicitly portrayed as unwelcome in a fandom community.

In the age of Tumblr fandom, where most communication on the platform is public and can spread widely, fandom has seen an increasing surge of direct critique leveled at other fans. Later in this chapter, I discuss this critique for its more rhetorical purposes, but it is also important to discuss its ability to break a fan's sense of their community relationship with fandom. When

asked in her survey about the importance of fandom, Evelyn, a 22-year-old white female fan from the United States, identified "attacks" against individual fans as harmful to the fandom community:

> ***Survey Question:*** *Do you think discourse is important in fandom (i.e., for building relationships, making fandom better, calling out problems)? Why or why not?*

> ***Evelyn:*** Yes, but when it escalates to the point of ad hominem attacks against the individual, discourse can be toxic to the community. It's important to acknowledge problems, but sometimes the "call-out culture" doesn't allow for remedy. This is especially true for Tumblr, or at least this is what I've observed.

Evelyn characterizes this kind of engagement among fans as "ad hominem attacks against the individual," highlighting that these discussions often occur in relation to a debate among fans on another topic. Such debates are common in fandom and might concern, for example, fans' disagreements about the appropriateness of a particular relationship between two characters. For example, some fans disapprove of fanfiction or fanart that depicts relationships in which one of the characters is an adult and the other is a minor, in some cases regardless of the age difference between the characters (e.g., a relationship between 16- and 18-year-old characters). Other fans disapprove of fanfiction or fanart about characters that have an antagonistic relationship in the canon materials, particularly a female hero and male villain, and they believe that such relationships are often tinged with abuse and misogyny.

During these debates, some fans will label other fans as, for example, pedophiles or racists or abuse apologists in response to their shipping preferences. Evelyn cites these engagements as "toxic" to the community and calls this kind of interaction "call-out culture," a term used to describe a pattern of interaction in which an individual is publicly shamed for behaviour perceived as offensive. The term is often associated with "cancel culture," wherein a public figure or corporation is "cancelled," or considered no longer someone to look up to, interact with, or buy from, in response to perceived offensive or criminal behavior. Evelyn's response highlights the critique often levelled at this behavior: that it "doesn't allow for remedy" by facilitating the kind

of conversation that might lead to change. This pattern of interaction is important to note; because of its perceived inability to facilitate productive conversation, it often results in a sense of conflict that can divide a community and prevent fans of differing opinions from wanting to interact.

Other fans, citing similar engagements, provide more detail about why these engagements are perceived as particularly harmful to a sense of community in fandom. Jwab, a 44-year-old white female fan from the United States, characterizes these engagements as part of the process that breaks down relationships between a fan and the fandom community:

> ***Survey Question:*** *Do you think discourse is important in fandom (i.e. for building relationships, making fandom better, calling out problems)? Why or why not?*
>
> ***Jwab:*** Yes, when it's directed at making us better as thinkers, citizens, critics, and transformational creators. Really really no when it amounts to personal attacks that drive people out of fandom.

This feeling of being driven out of the community might happen because a fan feels bullied or attacked by other fans. Particularly if the critique is public, it might prompt critique from a number of other fans with similar perspectives. Consequently, as Jwab suggests, a fan might feel that they are being driven out of the community by consistent critique from a number of others. As the place where much of the community socialization of fandom takes places, fandom discussion can also facilitate the breaking of community bonds if it becomes a space of critique and negative experiences.

Interestingly, while the responses from Evelyn and Jwab both recognize the possibility of fandom discussion to drive fans out of fandom, their comments also both explicitly recognize that fandom discussion can still be valuable to the community. Jwab, for example, acknowledges that fandom discussion can make fans "better as thinkers, citizen critics, and transformational creators." This tension between these narratives of the productive potential of fandom discussion and its equally disruptive aspects is explored in greater detail in Chapter Five. Its visibility in these quotes,

though, is worth highlighting here because it demonstrates how different fans might have different feelings about the same kind of content. As I will demonstrate, fans can differently interpret a single piece of critique as, for example, an important challenge to racist narrative trends *and* a harassment of another fan who might have written a piece of fanfiction using a racially stereotyped trope.

Driving people out of fandom can also, as Evelyn suggests, become "toxic to the community," changing the nature of the community and how fans feel about a sense of community in fandom. Fandom discussion can break down the community itself by creating a space that feels unwelcoming to fans. Evelyn and Jwab's quotes suggest that fandom discussion mediates the relationship between fan and fandom by facilitating direct, negative engagement among fans; fandom discussion can also mediate this relationship between individual and community without this direct engagement. Marley, a 22-year-old genderqueer white Jewish fan from the United States, offers a case study of this kind of mediation. In his first interview with me, Marley reveals how this breaking down of community can be more complex than a fan simply feeling driven away from fandom by another fan. When I asked about whether Marley had ever left or considered leaving a fandom, he said:

> There are definitely fandoms that I stopped interacting with. Like stopped following things, stopped looking [at things]. I don't think I've ever completely had my enjoyment of a thing spoiled by fandom, but sometimes fandom becomes a place that I no longer want to be, so I withdraw in that way.
>
> But I don't entirely consider myself as having left it, 'cause I still like The Thing[14], I still like what fandom has done with The Thing. I'm just not okay with what fandom is doing right now.

---

[14] The media object (book, TV, movie, etc.) around which the fandom has formed and about which transformative fanworks are created.

Here Marley suggests that the breaking of community bonds might not be a complete severing of that relationship or sense of connection. The comment highlights a distinction between no longer enjoying a media object and no longer being part of the fandom community for that media object. Marley then narrates an experience in the *Voltron* fandom that highlights this complexity; the experience resulted in Marley drawing away from the fandom but remaining connected to the media object. Marley talks about being a fan of the series for several seasons but disliking the fandom because of the discussion of the morality of relationships between the characters, what he calls "the anti movement." As Marley describes,

> The anti[15] movement is primarily based around the idea that fiction affects reality to a huge degree, that fan fiction specifically, can have enormous repercussions on the behaviors and morality of people who read and write it. And therefore it is an incredibly important form of activism to prevent people from creating and consuming this content.

This fannish behavior—the critique of particular kinds of fannish content—is often itself criticized as being part of or facilitating harassment, including doxxing and calling law enforcement on other fans. Marley sees this kind of engagement as having a profound, community-breaking impact on fandom:

> It's a movement that I feel started with good intentions, but in a lot of ways has run away from that and created a culture where if you're part of this movement and you disagree with something that other people are doing, you can't openly state that disagreement because then you become morally suspect and a target of this kind of mob mentality that leads people to try to drive other people out of fandom and off the internet.

---

[15] While many fans define the "anti" movement similarly to Marley's definition, it is important to acknowledge that this definition is not universal and that some of the fans characterized as being "antis" would categorically *not* define themselves this way. For example, many fans in the *Star Wars* fandom are labelled "anti" when they critique what they perceive is a racist narrative trend when the canonical friendship between black protagonist Finn and white protagonist Rey (and what many perceive as a romantic set-up in Episode VII) is erased to facilitate a relationship between Rey and white villain Kylo Ren. These fans argue that erasing Finn from the narrative or re-characterizing his actions with Rey is a negative light represents a racist trend of demonizing relationships between black men and white women. Other fans label this behavior as "anti," feeling that the critics are equating an individual fan's enjoying of a particular character dynamic with an identity as a racist. Definitions of the term "anti" are particularly difficult to untangle. I have used my participants' definitions throughout the dissertation, but acknowledge that they are not definitive or agreed on throughout fandom. My use of participants' definitions is meant to acknowledge the ways individual participants perceive fandom and are not necessarily universal or generalizable to all fans.

This behavior is perceived as leading to fans' departure from fandom and sometimes the internet entirely—the breaking of the relationship with fandom. Marley, like Evelyn and Jwab, cites fandom discussion as a mediating force that reshapes the relationship between fan and fandom by breaking those bonds.

During our interviews, Marley narrated a story about his complicated relationship with the *Voltron* fandom that highlights how fandom discussion can break apart this sense of community, and also how this process does not require a direct engagement with another fan. Marley had been a long-time fan of *Voltron* and was engaged in writing and publishing a lengthy fanfiction in the fandom. Encountering discussion in the community about relationships between the show's characters made Marley uncomfortable with the community, particularly as his identity and relationship were implicated in the discussion:

> And there is this enormous obsession with the ages of characters and how the ages of characters indicate who it is okay to want to be in a relationship with other characters. Which then leads to this completely extreme argument that if someone who is 18 or older dates someone who is 17 or younger, then the 18 or older person is a pedophile and should go to jail.
>
> Which I found personally upsetting, because I am in a long term, committed relationship with a person who was over 18 when I was younger than 18, and it is not an abusive relationship, and it is not a pedophilic relationship and I've known this person for almost 10 years now. We've been together for I think six years at this point.
>
> And that's an important part of my life. So when I was in a fandom where this rhetoric was circulating, I felt not only like, "Hey guys, this is kind of ridiculous. You're misusing the definition of pedophilia and I don't feel like you can make claims about someone's moral status based on which characters they want to see kiss."
>
> But I also felt personally attacked and uncomfortable because that was not at all my experience in my relationships and it made me nervous and concerned for the well-being of my partner, if I talked about them and our ages, because these people then apply their logic about appropriate ages for ships to our real-world relationship and that made me feel real uncomfortable and unsafe.
>
> So yeah, I don't really interact with the *Voltron* fandom much. But if I see incidentally cute fan art of the characters from *Voltron* with house cats, based off of their lion bots, then that's adorable and I'll try to say, "That's adorable."

In this narrative, Marley talks about one of the specific discussion points that is heavily addressed in the *Voltron* fan community (and in many other fandoms): how the ages of individual characters affect how some fans perceive the morality of fan-imagined relationships between those characters. In this case, Marley highlights the arguments of some fans that characters older than eighteen should not be imagined in relationships with characters younger than eighteen and further that fans who ship these relationships are themselves immoral or pedophiles. For Marley, this discussion and the perspectives it relays breaks down his relationship with fandom discussion because he feels that his own relationship is being judged and that he or his partner might face harassment from other fans if he talked about their relationship. Marley directly relates his experience with this fandom discussion to his unwillingness to interact with the *Voltron* fandom, despite remaining a fan of the show and still liking fan art. Observing the discussion in the community was sufficient to break down his relationship with that community and ultimately result in a separation between Marley and the fandom.

The contrast between Marley's narrative of observing alienating content and Evelyn and Jwab's characterization of community break-down happening through direct "personal attacks" highlights the rhetorical distinction between "addressed and unaddressed" (Prior et al 10) listeners. The distinction highlights how different rhetorical strategies (e.g., direct engagement versus discussion about a theme) can nevertheless similarly mediate the relationship between fans and fandom communities.

Marley's identity is also powerfully implicated here and directly contributes to the development of this sense of alienation from the community. Just as other fans found their identities validated in fandom, Marley finds his identity threatened, and that threat comes from perspectives raised in fandom discussion. Fandom discussion has thus mediated the relationship

between Marley and the fandom community by alienating Marley from the community, and it has potentially changed Marley's understanding of his own identity in the context of fandom by reframing the fandom community as a threat to that identity. Marley's experience highlights the ways that critique from other fans, whether direct or observed, can intersect with identity. It is not hard to imagine how, for many fans, such a critique could be perceived not only as a critique of their perspectives but also of *themselves* and thus drive them from their fandom communities. Fandom discussion is the process by which these relationships between fan and fandom are mediated; by facilitating critiques among fans and the observation of trends in fandom perspectives, fandom discussion becomes a process through which fans' sense of community can be disrupted and reshaped.

Process: Gatekeeping

Like the process of breaking community described in the previous section, gatekeeping[16] involves fandom discussion mediating the relationship between fan and fandom by creating barriers within that relationships. However, while *breaking community* involves the destruction of already established community bonds, *gatekeeping* involves the prevention of these bonds from forming. This gatekeeping often involves fandom discussion making the community less appealing for potential new members. Gatekeeping involves similar mechanisms to those of breaking community, including direct critique of fans. In our interviews, Sam, a 32-year-old female fan from the United States, suggests that a negative experience with fandom discussion can make a community feel unwelcome to new fans:

> Yeah. I think that [fandom discussion] can make the community less inviting to new people. I think if your first exposure to a community is people telling you that you're wrong. Not even just in that one [idea], but just in general. If your first exposure to a

---

[16] I chose "gatekeeping" as the name for this mediation process of fandom discussion because it is the term fans most frequently use when discussing these situations and experiences.

community is being yelled at, then I feel like you're not going to feel welcome, and that would change the community in that if it, maybe, was once bringing new people in, and getting new voices, it isn't.

Sam highlights an experience that is not limited to new fans: being critiqued by other fans for your perspectives is alienating and less likely to foster a positive community relationship between a fan and the fandom. Later in the interview, Sam provides a specific example of how this experience with fandom discussion can serve as a gatekeeper. She describes her experience observing the *Animorphs* fandom community in which she saw newcomers to the community post questions or meta that the rest of the community disagreed with. In particular, she narrates observing fans who were not part of the community creating fancasts[17] that were poorly received by more established community members:

> And just as an example, sometimes somebody'll post to Tumblr, like, "Hey, remember *Animorphs*? That series from the '90s. Here's x, y, and z things that I remember about it." And then they'll tag it *Animorphs*, and then it'll show up in the tags. But it shows up in the tags for all of these people who have been discussing it at length, and say... One of the big things that sometimes people is "Oh remember *Animorphs*!" And they'll do a fancast of it, but they'll do a fancast— So you probably don't know anything about it, but one of the characters is an alien, and he can turn into a human and his human is a mix of the DNA of the other animorphs. And not all of them are white.
> But sometimes, people when they're doing a fancast, they cast a white actor and not a mixed-race actor. And so this person who, again, hasn't thought of *Animorphs* in ten years, except to do this little fancast, just doesn't pick up on the fact that this character's human morph would be mixed-race. And so they post a white actor, whatever. And the fans who talk about it every day get super upset about, you know, "How could you do this? This is so racist. You're erasing this character." And it's like, "Whoa, this person isn't a part of our community, isn't a part of our discussions. They don't know how much we've talked about this."

In this narrative, Sam talks about one way fandom discussion can become a tool of pushback against other fans. In this moment, a newcomer to the *Animorphs* community uses fandom

---

[17] "Fancasts" refers to a type of transformative fanwork in which fans create a hypothetical cast who would play the characters in a book, comic, anime, etc. that has not yet been made into a live-action movie or recast an existing television show or movie. These recasts often involving changing the race and/or gender of the original cast.

discussion as a way to try to enter the community by sharing an interesting thought they had, but instead of feeling a sense of community is instead confronted by other fans. The new fan has not yet been a part of the critical conversations in the fandom. Their discussion post may single this lack of familiarity with the fandom, but fandom discussion also then becomes a tool for fan critique. As Sam suggests in the first excerpt, for new fans, this experience of being immediately "yelled at" when entering a community is unlikely to encourage fans to stay in that community. Thus, fandom discussion functions to mediate fans' relationships with these particular communities by preventing the relationship from forming.

MEDIATION 2: INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The second mediating role I examine in this chapter concerns fans' interpersonal relationships: their relationships with specific other fans who may be friends, acquaintances, or strangers to them in fandom spaces. Fandom discussion mediates these relationships in both facilitating positive identification with other fans through shared interests and ethos and in producing conflicts where rhetorical styles, ethos, and perspectives clash and lead to disconnections among fans. On the one hand, fans perceive fandom discussion as a space to meet new people from around the world who share your interests and your approach to interacting with media content and fan communities—meetings which often lead to lifelong friendships. On the other hand, fans perceive fandom discussion as a trigger for the breakdown of friendships because it can surface opinions and styles of interaction that cause conflict between fans. Fans perceive this mediation as having one positive dimension—building relationships—and one negative dimension—breaking relationships.

Process: Building Relationships

Fans perceive fandom discussion as facilitating the creation of individual relationships with other fans, a positive mediation of fans' relationships with each other that I have categorized as *building relationships*. This mediating process is closely tied with the process of building community. Luciana, a 28-year-old Latina female fan from Colombia, echoes the sentiments of fans like hailie, Ana, and I-Had-Bucky in identifying fandom discussion as community-forming by highlighting the relationships formed with specific people in that community:

> **Survey Question:** *Do you think discourse is important in fandom (i.e. for building relationships, making fandom better, calling out problems)? Why or why not?*

> **Luciana:** I wouldn't say "important" but a lot of people stop being alone because of fandom. I've met wonderful people that aren't in the same geographical area than me because of fandom. I learnt about other cultures because of fandom. Important? No. But it is really a way to connect people. one very strong.

As I have previously highlighted in this chapter, many fans perceive fandom discussion as mediating their relationships with fandom as a community by facilitating that community bond. Luciana echoes that sentiment, noting that "a lot of people stop being alone because of fandom." For Luciana, that sense of connection is about connection to other individual fans. Fandom discussion, she argues, is a way to forge strong connections with other fans and to build bridges over cultural and geographic divides. DC Logan, a white female American/Canadian fan who has been in fandom for 40 years, agrees with Luciana, citing fandom as a place for developing long-lasting friendships that can move beyond the boundaries of fandom:

> **Survey Question:** *Do you think discourse is important in fandom (i.e. for building relationships, making fandom better, calling out problems)? Why or why not?*

> **DC Logan:** Yes. I have 20+ year friendships that evolved from fandom contacts to prove it. You don't get to that point by just upvoting or liking something, you need to explore it with someone.

DC Logan cites fandom as a place where she developed friendships that have lasted over twenty years. These friendships, she argues, are not developed solely through shared interests in a media object but through collaborative exploration of that media object. This collaborative exploration is done through fandom discussion, where fans build on each other's ideas as we explore the media objects we love and the transformative work that arises from them. For DC Logan, it is this process of exploration—this active engagement in the rhetorical practices of fandom discussion—that facilitates the interpersonal relationships she values.

It is understandable that collaborative engagement in a rhetorical exploration of fandom discussion might prompt affinity and identification with other fans. Building on another's ideas and seeing them build on yours can feel like a conversation, which might prompt feelings of connection with your interlocutor and a sense that you are getting to know them through their ideas. Kay, a 31-year-old white female fan from Britain, suggests that this process happens both because of direct connection with other individuals and because it exposes us to new ideas and helps us decide how we want to interact with fandom:

> ***Survey Question:*** *Do you think discourse is important in fandom (i.e. for building relationships, making fandom better, calling out problems)? Why or why not?*

> ***Kay:*** Very important. Talking about other fans/fandom gives us the opportunity to interact directly with other people through the medium of something we share a love for. It highlights issues we may not have encountered, or introduce a perspective we hadn't considered. Seeing how fans interact with me and with other people helps me choose which aspects of fandom I want to engage with, or not.

For Kay, fandom discussion is a communication tool through which fans can "interact directly with other people" through a medium we share and about something we love. These interactions can, she argues, help us encounter issues we weren't aware of and perspectives we hadn't considered. Kay's response suggests that this kind of learning and relationships building can happen both as part of direct engagement and as part of indirect observation. As Marley's

comments suggested, the social mediations of fandom discussion happen just as readily through fans observing but not contributing to fandom discussions. For Kay, these observations serve as a tool for judging whether and how to engage with particular fandoms.

These interactions, whether observation or direct interaction, can also facilitate a sense of personal connection by giving insight into the ethos of another fan and facilitating identification with them. Through another fan's posts, you learn about what they like, how they interact with that content, and how they engage with fandom. Much scholarship attends to the performance of identity through writing in digital spaces. As I discuss in later sections of this chapter, fans similarly see fandom discussion as a place to perform identities, such as performing social justice allyship. As a reader, engaging with fandom discussion is a space to see the identities that other fans convey, decide whether you want to interact with them, and develop a deeper connection.

Let me offer an example of how this has looked for me: It's December 2016 and Disney has just released their newest *Star Wars* film, the *Episode IV: A New Hope* standalone prequel *Rogue One*. Like many fans, I fall deeply in love with the film and its characters and lament the beautiful, tragic ending of the film. I plunge headfirst into fandom, looking for fanfiction that stars lead characters Jyn Erso and Cassian Andor and their evolving relationship, and that saves them from their tragic end. I find another fan whose content I like. She writes alternate universe stories in which the characters survive the film, and character studies that explore their individual backstories. I click through to her Tumblr blog and begin scrolling. The first dozen posts are a mix of links to her own fanfiction, reblogs and recommendations of other writers' work, and gif sets depicting the most poignant moments of these two characters' story arc. I like her already. We share a love for these characters, their relationship, and the movie. A dozen posts into her blog, I come across a reblog of a critical perspective for another fan who appreciates the movie for casting

men of color as lead characters in the movie but wonders why the only female leads in the movie franchise to date are white women of a similar physical type. Huh, I think. She is interested in the same content as me *and* interested in critical, social justice-oriented critique of that content. I immediately subscribe to the blog. Just those few posts have given me a glimpse into who she is as a fan and a person; it's an ethos of intertwined appreciation and critique that I identify with. Over the next few years, I come to see her incisive response to bullying, her pointed critiques of racism and sexism, and her unwillingness to accept harassment. With each post, I learn a little more about her and her approach to fandom engagement. Fandom discussion has mediated our relationship, revealing her ethos and facilitating a sense of connection.

Process: Breaking Relationships

Just as fandom discussion can build relationships between fans, it can also break them or prevent them from forming. Where fandom discussion might facilitate identification and affinity between one set of fans, those same discussions might prompt disconnection for another set of fans. As this response from Danielle suggests, fandom discussion can separate fans into groups, and the division between these groups can facilitate conflict and harassment between individuals:

> ***Survey Question:*** *Do you think discourse is important in fandom (i.e. for building relationships, making fandom better, calling out problems)? Why or why not?*

> ***Danielle:*** I do think [fandom discussion] makes fandom better, but I also think it can make it worse, as it creates divides between people, which I've seen happen. Fans attack each other and send threats, based on single thoughts and short posts.

As Danielle suggests, fans might become divided by fandom discussion because of attacks and threats by other fans. Sam offers a perspective on what this divide between fans might look like and how it might be expressed:

> [O]n my show there are two ships in the fandom, and one side accuses the other of liking incest, and the other side accuses the first side of liking rape. And it's pretty toxic

between them. And they, from my understanding, it just kind of feels like no one can be friends with somebody on the other side. That's the way it looks as an observer on Tumblr. And I just kind of feel like "Wow, you want to spend so much time fighting over this, and so much time arguing about…"

Sam's response references conflict between two ships, meaning groups of fans who like different relationships between characters on the show. While liking different ships is common in fandom, for many fans, liking one ship and disliking another can rise to the level of conflict when they perceive a ship they dislike as, in some way, problematic. For example, some fans perceive a relationship between one character who under the age of eighteen and one character who is over the age of eighteen as pedophilic, while other fans might perceive these relationships as acceptable depending on the actual ages, age difference, and differing power relationships between the characters. Many fans will write commentary—fandom discussion—about the ships they like and many will also critique the ships they don't like or find problematic, including, for example, critiquing the fans who like those ships as perpetuating harmful narratives or policing the enjoyment and creative output of other fans. These critiques are what Sam refers to above when she says that the two ships accuse each other of liking rape or incest. What's important about Sam's comment is not only the conflict between these ships, perpetuated through the discussion they engage in, but the impact that this conflict has on the potential for relationships between fans. As Sam suggests, "it just kind of feels like no one can be friends with somebody on the other side." Fandom discussion creates an environment where fans perceive themselves as existing on different sides of a conflict and where they cannot form relationships with someone who is "on the other side." Fandom discussion thus mediates the potential for relationships in fandom by reshaping a relationship that might have existed based on shared interest in a media object into a division and antagonism that prevents that shared interest from facilitating a personal connection.

It is important to note that despite the prevalence of fandom discussion creating division between fans, this breaking of the potential for personal relationships is among the least common mediating actions mentioned by fans in their survey responses, perhaps because individual relationships tend to form most often between like-minded individuals. As I have discussed, the establishment of common interests between fans can facilitate the creation of deeper bonds that evolve into individual friendships and relationships. Because these relationships are formed on the foundation of shared perspectives, they may be less likely to break through fandom discussion. The breaking of a relationship is more likely to be the relationship between fan and fandom community, as suggested by the greater prevalence of this response among fans. This might also suggest that relationships to community and/or a sense of community are more important considerations for fans than individual relationships, or that the prevention or destruction of these community relationships feels more profound. Individual relationships might be subordinated to a sense of community, and the sense of community felt with those who agree with a fan might be stronger than the breaking of potential relationships with fans who disagree with them. Much more common, as this section illustrates, is the prevention of feeling a sense of kinship with particular other fans because of conflicting perspectives on fandom and/or an issue in fandom.

MEDIATION 3: CRITICISMS

The third mediating process I examine in this chapter concerns fans' use of fandom discussion for critiquing fandom trends (e.g., fanfiction tropes), fannish behaviour in general, and other specific fans in particular. Fans perceive this mediation as having one positive dimension—identifying and challenging problems—and two negative dimensions—policing fan engagement and harassing other fans. Connecting these dimensions is the theme of self-governance, a sense in fandom that it is the responsibility of fans to govern or police the behavior of fandom:

Survey Question: Do you think discourse is important in fandom (i.e. for building relationships, making fandom better, calling out problems)? Why or why not?

spartanguard: Yes! It's not like there's an overarching authority in fandom, so unless someone is truly hurting another, there's not much in the way of policing other than ourselves. It's important to say what's okay and what isn't accepted.

spartanguard, a 30-year-old White American female fan, highlights that no authority governs how fans interact. There are no codes of behavior and no one with the power to force misbehaving fans out of fandom. From this arrangement arises a sense in fandom that the community must be self-governing—that it is up to the community to discuss and decide on appropriate standards of behavior and a moral code, and then enforce that code and standards. In this section, I will show how this concept of fandom self-governance drives perceptions of fandom discussion as productively identifying problems and challenging them or negatively policing fan engagement and facilitating harassment among and between fans.

Evident in the tension between productive critique and harmful harassment is the ethic of care in fandom for the self and for the community. I discuss this concept of fandom's ethic of care in greater detail in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, but I introduce it here because of its role in driving both critique and criticism of that critique. By "ethic of care," I mean that a foundational ideology of fandom is that the community cares for its members by creating a safe space for diverse voices and by valuing the safety and enjoyment of its participants. Further, fandom's ethic of care manifests in a valuing of self care for the individual fan, where mental health and a fandom experience free of racism, homophobia, etc. is sought after. I have become aware of these ideologies through years of participation in fandom and seen them manifest in conversation about including trigger warnings in fannish content, discussions about identifying and removing racist and other harmful narrative tropes from that content, and support for fans facing health crises. Yet, as you will see in this section and in more depth in Chapter Four, fans interpret this ethic

differently, which can lead to conflict and different interpretations of how fandom discussion mediates fans' relationships with community and understandings of appropriate behavior within that community.

Process: Identifying and Challenging Problems

Many fans perceive a purpose of fandom discussion to be critiquing what they identify as problems within fandom. This approach might include critiquing narrative tropes that are racist, sexist, or abusive; critiquing fans' behaviors towards other fans or towards the actors, producers, or authors of a media object; and "calling out" individual fans for engaging in what is perceived as "problematic" behavior. Some fans perceive these actions of critique as part of an initiative to improve the community and to care for marginalized voices, as these responses suggests:

> ***Kai***: Yes! Its good to think about how our communities function and how our culture develops, both so we can fix problems and make it healthier and safer for more at risk individuals (minors, queer people, poc, etc) but also because its just really cool in my opinion!

> ***I-Had-Bucky:*** I tend to read it all out of curiosity. Particularly the kind that calls out issues within media that we consume like lack of lgbt content, or POC representation because I respect the people who are demanding change in the media. This kind of discourse is a good kind.

In this survey response, we see Kai, a 20-year-old nonbinary White fan from the United States, explicitly identifying fandom discussion as important to "fix problems" within the community, and I-Had-Bucky's response specifies that these problems might be "lack of lgbt content, or POC representation." Representation for LGBTQ+ characters, disabled characters, and characters of color are often important points of critique in fandom, and focus on these issues highlights fandom's attention to social justice. The value that fandom places on addressing issues of social justice is evident in the way fans like Kai and I-Had-Bucky talk about *why* fandom engages in these critiques. Kai, for example, highlights that the goal of identifying or challenging problems

in fandom is to "make it healthier and safer for more at risk individuals" and that such critique is essential for the functioning and development of communities. I-Had-Bucky similarly highlights that attention to social justice is about acknowledging and supporting marginalized voices in fandom, writing, "I respect the people who are demanding change in the media." These motivations highlight a valuing in fandom of care for marginalized individuals and a community ideology of addressing concerns *because* of that care. For these fans, fandom discussion is a positive force because it can productively and positively change fandom.

Kai and I-Had-Bucky's emphasis on critique tied to identity categories like race and sexuality also highlights the close interconnection between critique and identity. Fans' identities can powerfully inform how they feel about critique and be a motivator for engaging in critique. Throughout my surveys and interviews, I heard from fans who were part of marginalized groups, especially fans of color, who participated in critique because they felt particularly impacted by racist narrative tropes in fanfiction and fan art and racist behavior from other fans. diversehighfantasy, a 46-year-old female American fan who participates in particularly contentious fandoms like *Star Wars*, frames her identity as a Black woman as important to both why she engages in critique and how she participates in these conversations. Early in our first interview, she shared that she first started writing critical commentary while part of a fandom where one of the TV show's lead characters, a Black woman, was being treated very poorly by fandom. diversehighfantasy often found herself drawn to other fans of color in private discussions about the racist way fandom was treating this character. Eventually, she and fellow fans felt it was important to make those conversations public: "It wasn't benefiting anybody to just do it privately."

diversehighfantasy currently maintains a Tumblr blog focused on critical commentary and discussion of representation in media and fandom. In describing her reasons for creating critical

commentary despite sometimes negative responses from other fans, she echoes Kai and I-Had-Bucky's responses that these discussions are, in part, a support for the marginalized community, saying, "I mostly do it for other fans who are marginalized who don't feel like they belong. That's always the first thing that I'm thinking about. It's not just yelling at people. It's more about the marginalized community." On her blog, she is open about being a Black woman, and later in our first interview, she shared her reasons for being open about her racial identity as part of her commentary:

> That[18] became something that I started openly identifying as a fan, not just as a person, because I just saw so much abuse. I just saw so much racism and abuse toward fans of color, characters of color, and then also a lot of people would assume that you were this white, liberal person trying to get cookies if you talked about that.
> That's another reason why it was important to identify because otherwise everybody would assume that you were a white person just trying to ruin their fun or trying to be mean. Personally, white fans who are supportive of a more inclusive whatever I never feel like they're ... I think that's good but definitely people will use that as a weapon. Immediately they'll make assumptions and say, "Well, you're just trying to virtue signal and stuff."

diversehighfantasy's narrative highlights the way identity can be weaponized in contentious discussion about topics like racism. Fans who engage in this critique can be accused of "virtue signalling"—in other words, participating in discussion only to perform a particular identity for other fans, without meaningfully contributing to the discussion. diverhighfantasy feels it is necessary to share her identity as a Black woman to avoid these accusations, highlighting the way that she must leverage her identity to convince her readers of her authority in the discussions.

diversehighfantasy's identity is an important part of her perspective on and practices around critique, but it is also important not to suggest that her identity is the sole driving force of such critique. I note this point because people of color often face additional emotional labor online

---

[18] Her identity as a Black African-American fan.

as they feel called on to educate others about racism and to defend themselves and their communities. They simultaneously can face criticism for being too sensitive to content and/or for deploying the "race card" to shut down conversation. The experiences of people of color—and people of other marginalized identities—online and in fandom is complex and merits further research, which fan scholars like Rukmini Pande and Rebecca Wanzo have called for (Jenkins and Proctor 2018a, 2018b). I want to acknowledge the importance of these identities to fans' experiences of fandom, but I do not want to suggest that diversehighfantasy's—or other fans'— identities as fans of color, LGBTQ+ fans, or fans from other marginalized groups is the only important insight to take from their narratives. diversehighfantasy's narrative is compelling because it shows the profound ways that identity can inflect a fan's practices of fandom discussion, but her stories also highlight the important motivation of community care and improvement that underlie much of the work of such critique. For example, in our second interview, I asked diversehighfantasy what motivates her to create critical commentary in fandom and her response echoed the motivations of Kai and I-Had-Bucky, both of whom are white fans:

> So one thing about calling it out is that first it tells other people who are seeing this stuff and are like maybe not saying anything, but they're feeling bad, that like they're not the only ones who see this, and like have a reaction to it. And I think that's kind of one of the more important things about it. I think that's, and then that also gives other people more confidence to say like, "That's a really ugly thing to say." Or something like that, when they see those things that I think for a long time people were able to, that kind of stuff didn't even really register as being wrong or racist. Because maybe they didn't actually ... the big thing would be like they didn't use a racial slur so there's nothing racist about it.
>
> And so it sort of took a lot of different people having conversations about how that there's implicit racism, there's explicit racism, there's different ways of expressing it. It's not all about slurs.
>
> So, yeah there's that. And then there's also, you know, there is the, I guess, educational part of it. I do know people who, there are people for sure on Tumblr who have sort of... they become more aware of maybe their habits, or they've ... just sort of learned things, or been able to recognize things that they maybe didn't think were a problem.
>
> And maybe it makes them think more about other people's feelings. And I think that's part of it. I think sometimes a lot of people are just not going to listen no matter what.

But I still think that it's important for the other people who are out there and they're marginalized, and they're being affected by it, and if nobody speaks to it, they're just going to think that everybody thinks that's okay.

Like Kai and I-Had-Bucky, diversehighfantasy emphasizes improvement of fandom rooted in community care. She argues that it takes "a lot of different people having conversations" to make the community aware of issues like racism so that they can be addressed. diversehighfantasy's narrative is also particularly illustrative of the two audiences that fans recognize for critical commentary posts: those from marginalized identities whose experiences might be the subject of the post and those who are not aware of the issues and who might be engaging in problematic (e.g., racist) behavior. The first audience that diversehighfantasy recognizes is marginalized people who are seeing negative content about something they identify with. diversehighfantasy offers Martha Jones as an example. This character from the revived *Doctor Who* television show was a lead character for a season of the show and was the first Black companion of the show's titular time-travelling alien. Martha Jones was not universally well-received by fans, replacing the much-loved White female lead of the previous two seasons, and there were many negative posts about her character. For fans of color, especially women, who strongly identified with the character, these posts were often difficult to encounter. Critical commentary that highlights implicit and explicit racism in these posts, diversehighfantasy argues, is important for showing these marginalized fans that they are not alone in their experiences because "if nobody speaks to it, [these fans are] just going to think that everybody thinks that's okay." She argues that critical commentary validates marginalized fans' experiences of racism in fandom; this validation might give these fans more confidence to speak out about their experiences. This engagement with marginalized fans and attention to their experiences might be important to their sense of community. As I discussed previously with Marley's narrative about becoming disconnected from the *Voltron* fandom, fans

who feel that their identities are not accepted or welcomed in the community can feel a sense of separation from that community and be driven away from participating. These critical commentaries, then, might mediate the experiences of marginalized fans by validating that they have a place in the community even as they also seek to change the behavior of other fans.

These other fans are the second audience that diversehighfantasy identifies. Just as critical commentary may validate the experience of marginalized fans, it also serves the rhetorical purpose of challenging the perceptions of other fans. diversehighfantasy argues that many fans find it difficult to identify racism that doesn't use explicit racial slurs. For a long time, she says, "that kind of stuff didn't even really register as being wrong or racist." Critical commentary has educated fans about the many ways of being racist without just using racial slurs. In highlighting this potential for fandom discussion, diversehighfantasy's comments illustrate that the goal is to make the community less racist by helping other fans confront their unconscious racism and learn not to engage in those practices. So, as diversehighfantasy emphasizes, community improvement is about engagement with individual fans. Through this engagement, she has seen that fans can "become more aware of maybe their habits, or they've ... just sort of learned things, or been able to recognize things that they maybe didn't think were a problem." Here, the practices of critique are connected to two other mediations that I discuss later in the chapter: self examination/self-critique and the sharing of new perspectives. For these audiences, critical commentary can mediate their perceptions of fandom by changing how they perceive particular behaviors in fandom. It can also mediate their sense of self by giving them opportunities to confront bias and change their behaviors. Recognizing these two audiences is important because it highlights the rhetorical complexity authors must navigate when engaging in fandom discussion and their awareness of this complexity. These audiences represent potentially very different populations in fandom who may

have contradictory perceptions and experiences of fandom and who may have very different emotional responses to critique. As I explain below, reception to critical commentary is often mixed, and this may, in part, be because of the differences in the audiences that are engaging with the same content.

For some fans, receiving criticism can provide a moment of self-reflection and opportunity for growth. Committed to self-improvement and improvement of the community, many fans are receptive to the critical commentary and educational efforts of other fans. Johanna, a 38-year-old White Jewish woman who also creates a lot of critical commentary, offers an example of what this process of criticism might look like from the perspective of the fan being critiqued:

> Let me use myself as an example, because in fandom, the first time I was really rather brutally confronted with my own racism, was in connection with a horror, where I got called out rather viciously. And yes, it was absolutely a shock. I'd say I'm lucky, but I respond to these kind of things the way you do, because it's like, due to my upbringing and my childhood, I kind of ran away. You know, it's happened online, so I can just, you know, get up and walk away. No one's going to say. And then think through, are people actually angry at me for, is this just a friendly angry, or are they overreacting? Just kind of dive in so I can say, "Well, whoops." What I had said, that was not good. Really not good. It wasn't a huge thing, but I could see it was basically the Strong Black Woman type, I had just lumped in to.

In this narrative, Johanna identifies a moment when she had used a particular racial stereotype of the Strong Black Woman and been confronted by other fans about her writing. Here, fandom discussion is a place where other fans identified an unconscious bias in Johanna's thinking and helped her correct it. Though she describes being conflicted about receiving the critique, Johanna's narrative characterizes her experience as positive. Being challenged was a process through which she could recognize what other fans perceived as a problem and thus confront her own biases and change her behaviour to better reflect community norms. Identifying and challenging problems has functioned as a form of self-governance to change Johanna's behavior in the community by

mediating how she understood the community and the guidelines of appropriate behavior within it.

Johanna's narrative, though, highlights that much about the reception of critique in fandom is influenced by the identity of the fan; she describes initially running away from the critique, which is uniquely possible in online interactions. But she returned to engage with the critique, asking herself whether her critics were "friendly angry" or "overreacting," a question which seems to be her way of both engaging with the motives of her critics and questioning whether there was something problematic in her behavior. Johanna's narrative is important because it illustrates that the process of responding to critique is a complex one. While critique is attempting to rhetorically mediate a fan's perceptions of fandom and behavior within fandom, fans are also intervening in this process, negotiating whether and how to incorporate the critique into their worldviews.

Process: Policing Fan Engagement

While fans like Johanna are receptive to critique, this feeling is not universal and many fans find critique very difficult to encounter, whether directed specifically at them or generally at the things they love. In several of my surveys and interviews, fans describe receiving critique as difficult because it can also feel like an attack on a fan's identity or on something they love. In this section, I examine the ways fans perceive that criticism and critique in fandom discussion as *policing[19] fan engagement*. Fans refer to policing when fandom discussion is used to attempt to control how fans interact with fandom and/or particular fan objects. For example, some discussion focuses on ships that fans believe are problematic for various reasons (racist overtones, LGBTQ

---

[19] Like my use of the term "gatekeeping" earlier in the chapter, I use the term "policing" to label this mediating process because it is the term most-used by fans in their responses and is the label for the concept that is most recognized in the community. In addition to reflective the terminology that fans use, the term itself also presents and interesting dichotomy as the concept of policing in contemporary society raises notions of protection and responding to criminality, but also the abuses many marginalized individuals suffer at the hands of police forces.

erasure, age differences, power imbalances) and debate about whether those ships are morally permissible in fanfiction and fan art. For many fans, attempts by other fans to state what kinds of fiction or art should and should not be created or how fans should interact with other fans are perceived negatively as attempts by one group of fans to dictate the nature of fandom for all fans and/or to impose their moral standards on all of fandom. The survey responses from Audra and Jennifer demonstrate this perception of fandom discussion as negatively policing how other fans experience and enjoy fandom:

> ***Survey Question:*** *Do you think discourse is important in fandom (i.e. for building relationships, making fandom better, calling out problems)? Why or why not?*
>
> ***Audra:*** I think it's important to have because it gives people a space to discus things that are important to them, but I also think it can be harmful when people feel entitled to say whatever they want regardless of who it hurts. It seems to be becoming a lot more common that people are trying to force others to believe what they do for some reason and become belligerent when they do not. This is in no way acceptable and people need to just try to enjoy what they enjoy without ruining things for other people for no reason.
>
> ***Jennifer:*** I think we could do without a lot of it. Fandom is supposed to be fun. I'd gladly go back in time ten years and let everyone write what they wanted. It's not supposed to be perfect, sometimes fiction is messy. Characters do terrible things to one another, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't write those stories. I understand that we're trying to move forward as a society toward acceptance and equality and I support that wholeheartedly, but again, fandom is supposed to be fun. I'd appreciate it if everyone would stop trying to be right all the time and just keep their eyes on their own papers and have a good time. Fandom discourse can be valuable, but only when it's productive, not when it's just screaming at one another to do it YOUR way which must be the RIGHT way.

There are three very interesting dimensions of these responses: (1) fandom is meant to be fun, (2) a sense of "staying in your own lane," and (3) a very personal, individual-centric response to the idea of policing fandom experience. Together, these three dimensions speak to the sense of self-governance that seems to guide critique in fandom: discussion is a tool of limits, control, and setting boundaries on the experiences of other fans and their interactions and participations in fandom. Both Audra and Jennifer frame this limiting as one group of fans telling another group or

individual what they can and can't do in fandom: what kinds of fiction they can and can't write, what kinds of narrative tropes are and are not allowed in that fiction, what kinds of commentary they can and can't write on others' fiction, etc. Both participants also frame this issue not just behaviorally but ideologically, saying that this behavior is "trying to force others to believe what they do for some reason." Implicit in this perspective is the ideology that fandom and fans should not be limited, and more explicitly, that imposing limits is "policing," which for these fans has very negative, restrictive connotations. Where participants in the previous section ascribed positive values to this self-governance, here fans ascribe much more negative values.[20]

First, both Audra and Jennifer express the idea that fandom is meant to be fun or enjoyable, and that fandom discussion—particularly when that discussion critiques some aspect of fandom—is preventing fandom from being fun or enjoyable for other fans. Jennifer is explicit about this belief, writing repeatedly that "fandom is supposed to be fun." Audra is less explicit but still raises this belief about fandom when they say that fandom discussion is "ruining things for other people for no reason," implying that the experience of fandom and enjoying it can be ruined by fandom discussion. In these responses, we see fans define fandom as a community, then judge the mediations of fandom discussion against that definition. When fandom discussion fails to produce the reality that these fans expect, they evaluate it as unimportant or unwelcome in fandom.

Second, both participants' responses suggest a belief that a standard acceptable behavior in fandom is, or should be, a form of "staying in your own lane"—that fans should focus on what they like and enjoying that content, rather than critiquing other fans for what they like and potentially ruining that experience of fandom. This principle implies that fandom discussion—specifically, fandom discussion that critiques an aspect of fandom—both violates an implicitly

---

[20] Interestingly, fans only use the word "policing" when its connected to the negative perceptions of this dimension of fandom discussion, which might suggest a particularly loaded definition of the word within fandom.

understood behavior norm in fandom and crosses a boundary between fans. Fandom discussion is thus rewriting what these fans perceive as the appropriate realities and boundaries of fandom.

Third, these responses suggest a more individualistic perspective on the relationship of fan to/in fandom. In the previous section, Kai valued critique for its potential to make the community of fandom better, suggesting a perspective focused on the collective good. In contrast, Audra and Jennifer's responses suggest a more individualistic perspective. Rather than emphasizing the community as a whole, they focus specifically on groups of people or individuals whose actions might negatively impact the experiences of other individuals or groups of people. Community is not absent from their responses, but the community good is presented as reflecting whether individuals have positive/good experiences. For example, consider again this excerpt from Jennifer's response: "[F]andom is supposed to be fun. I'd appreciate it if everyone would stop trying to be right all the time and just keep their eyes on their own papers and have a good time." Jennifer here sets up a relationship where the community good—fandom as fun—relies on the possibility of individual fans enjoying their experiences in peace and without the possibility of other fans "screaming at one another to do it YOUR way which must be the RIGHT way." The same actions which are perceived positively by some fans as promoting a better community are perceived here as doing the opposite by hindering the experiences of individuals within the community, and this is even more pronounced when these actions are perceived not just as controlling fans' experiences but as active harassment of fans. Consequently, we can see here a tension between two values in fandom: community good and individual experience. Audra and Jennifer's responses thus highlight a tension in the idea of self-governance in fandom: How do fans balance the experiences of the individual fan with an impetus towards the collective good of fandom? Fans do not have clear consensus on the answer to this question and have produced

147

different knowledges of what their community should be. As this section and the previous one show, fans differently perceive the results and motives of fandom discussion—differences which may be tied to their prioritization of individual or community—and consequently, as I will discuss in Chapter Four, must hold fandom discussion and its roles in fandom in a constant state of tension.

Process: Harassing Other Fans

As Audra and Jennifer suggested in the previous section, fandom discussion is negatively valued by many fans because, from an individualistic perspective, it can negatively impact the fandom experiences for many fans. While the previous section dealt with that negative experience in the context of policing fans' engagement and participation in fandom, this section deals briefly with these negative experiences in the context of harassment. Though both are concerned with individual experiences of fans, harassment deals with sustained and deliberate action against a particular fan, while policing references a more general sense of what is permissible within the community. Harassment might take many forms. In their survey and interview responses, fans narrated experiences of receiving messages of hate from other fans, exhortations to kill themselves, deliberate cruelty in the Tumblr inboxes and fanfiction comments, and even harassment that crossed over into their offline lives, including doxxing and having a SWAT team called on them. For many fans, these possible consequences to fandom discussion for individuals outweigh its potential for improving fandom.

In prompting these behaviors and, consequently, this perspective on fandom discussion, fandom discussion has thus both mediated fans' relationships to other fans and fans' relationships to fandom discussion. In functioning to prompt or facilitate harassment, fandom discussion is a tool through which fans can reshape their relationships to other fans and attempt to reshape the experiences of other fans within fandom, thus operating as a deliberate tool of mediation. Less

intentionally, fandom discussion also mediates itself because its potential to negatively mediate the experiences of other fans in turn mediates some fans' perceptions of and relationships with those discussions.

MEDIATION 4: RELATIONSHIPS TO CANON

Fandom is built in response to and in connection with media objects, and fandom discussion mediates fans' relationships to the canon—as opposed to fan-created—materials of those media objects. The primary process operating in this mediation is the building of relationships between fans and the canon material. Much of this relationship-building involves celebration and appreciation of these canon materials. Fans also mention critique of canon as part of this process but tend to perceive this action as positive. Also addressed briefly in this section is fandom discussion as a mediation of the relationship between fan/fandom and the creators of the canonical material. Although participants in my study infrequently focus on this issue, fans' observations of interactions with content creators can influence how those fans feel about fandom communities.

Process: Building Relationships to Canon

A significant portion of the fandom discussion that circulates and operates on Tumblr and in fandom is meta, a category of fandom discussion that encompasses fans writing their theories about various aspects of a canon media object. This meta might include speculations about the untold backstories of particular characters, attempts to resolve plot holes in a narrative, and analysis of the visual symbolism of an episode or scene. For example, after the release of the Amazon Prime adaption of *Good Omens*, fans noticed that the demon character Crowley almost always walks, sits, and stands on the left of the angel character Aziraphale. This character blocking

became a point of analysis when fans looked at the rare moments in the show when the blocking was reversed, such as where it served as an initial visual cue that the two characters had switched appearances to fool their respective superiors and avoid death. Below, Sam shares another example of the meta in the *Game of Thrones* fandom and her interaction with this meta:

> I just really like reading fanfic, and I just really like reading meta. One of my favorite things about the *Game of Thrones* fandom is just how much it's treated like sort of a real history sometimes in the books. And you can read all of these beautifully researched historical papers about historical figures, whatever, and you're like "Wow, I did not realize that that much was in there!" And so I think that's probably my favorite part about fandom right now is the historical meta about *Game of Thrones*.

Game of Thrones, an elaborate fantasy television series based on George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* book series, constructs a complex world with numerous noble houses fighting to rule the fantasy kingdoms. Martin has constructed histories for these houses and has, in interviews, cited historical events as the inspiration for the events of his novels (Tharoor). Many of these details are replicated in the show and many fans further construct and reconstruct the histories of the Seven Kingdoms and its noble houses that are only hinted at or passingly referenced. The result is "beautifully researched" historical analysis that, as Sam suggests, adds increased depth to the narrative and world of the show. It can also reshape how fans perceive a particular character or interpret canonical events; the mildest example might be when fans collectively agree on the name of a character who is not named in the canon text and the fan-chosen name becomes universally accepted. While this meta is not necessary to appreciate the show (or any media object) and while most of it is not confirmed as true or "canon" by the creators of these media objects, many fans find, as Sam does, that consuming meta about a show increases their appreciation of that object. Sam's response, for example, frames meta as a way of learning more about the world of a show she appreciates, a process she associates with joy and revelation. Fandom discussion can thus mediate a fan's relationship with the canon materials by providing an avenue of greater

engagement with those materials. Rather than only being able to consume, for example, the *Games of Thrones* episodes, fans can extend their time in Martin's fictional universe with the additional content provided by fandom meta. This extended contact with these fictional universes can help deepen the connection between fan and canon.

When describing the role of fandom discussion within their relationship to the canon material, fans overwhelmingly describe this process as a positive mediation that builds their relationships to canon, as Sam does above. Even when this engagement with canon material involves critique of that material, many fans still regard this as a positive process. And as highlighted by Emory, a 29-year-old nonbinary fan of media universes like *Supernatural* and the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* that often receive critique of their canon, critiquing the media objects we love is important:

> **Survey Question:** *Do you think discourse is important in fandom (i.e., for building relationships, making fandom better, calling out problems)? Why or why not?*
>
> **Emory:** I think it can be nice to have people discussing the source material in depth. This is helpful for all to maybe see a different perspective or enjoy the source in more depth. I think calling out problems can be good too. Sometimes there are problems in the source material and if someone doesn't call attention to it then fans might think it's okay or normalize problematic behaviors.

Emory highlights the value of fandom meta visible in Sam's response: that discussing this material in greater depth can increase a fan's appreciation of the canon material. Emory also highlights not just appreciation of the source material but critique of it. In this context, even critique is often framed positively because it represents a deeper engagement with source material. Emory's perspective on critique also highlights the connection between critiquing canon content and the ethic of improving the fandom community. They write that critiquing problems in the source material is necessary to educate fans and avoid normalizing issues like racism, sexism, and ableism. We can interpret this drive as connected to the theme of community—and of improving

the community—that underlies many of the mediating processes described in this chapter. Pinkerton, a 36-year-old female who is also a fan of *Marvel Cinematic Universe* and the similarly critiqued canon of *Harry Potter*, argues that this critique of canon is *necessary* to the fandom community:

> ***Survey Question:*** *Do you think discourse is important in fandom (i.e., for building relationships, making fandom better, calling out problems)? Why or why not?*
>
> ***Pinkerton:*** YES. Transformative works can only exist if fans poke at, build onc and sometimes destroy a text, and we need to bounce ideas around to achieve that.

Emory and Pinkerton's responses highlight that attention to community underlies even interaction focused beyond the community on the media objects themselves. Engaging in critical work with canon materials is perceived by these fans to be a fundamental part in facilitating other aspects of fandom as a community: its creative content and its cultural mores. In mediating a deeper and more critical engagement with canon content, then, fandom discussion is also mediating the nature of fandom as a community.

Process: Harassing Canon Creators

In our contemporary media and digital society, the distance between fan and creator has been erased to almost nothing. We see this in the ways fans tweet at their favorite actors, singers, and showrunners to ask questions and share support, and we see this in the ways these creators will increasingly respond to fans' questions and theories publicly. For example, this relationship is visible in fan and creator interactions around the Amazon Prime show *Good Omens* where showrunner and writer Neil Gaiman and lead actor Michael Sheen frequently interact with fans on Twitter. Notably, both Gaiman and Sheen have confirmed fan theories and questions that the primary relationship on the show—between Sheen's character the angel Aziraphale and David Tennant's character the demon Crowley—was intended and played as a romance, though the show

itself does not make this explicit. But as fans' work in building relationships to canon material extends beyond the relative boundaries of fandom, fans have also seen a rise in harassment of creators that aligns with some of the conflicts in fandom and the theorizing/meta work that fans create. Brooke offers an example of what this harassment might look like:

> **Survey Question:** *Do you think discourse is important in fandom (i.e., for building relationships, making fandom better, calling out problems)? Why or why not?*

> **Brooke:** I think [fandom discussion is] good and bad. It's great fun to find others on the internet that like the same shows, the same ships, the same themes, but it's also toxic in some fandoms or some sects within a fandom. For example, in the *Glee* fandom, some Klaine (Kurt and Blaine) shippers were so adamant and vocal about their ship that they extended their ship to the actors, Chris Colfer (Kurt; gay) and Darren Criss (Blaine; straight) and sent hate to Darren's real-life girlfriend. That's not cool. We, as fans, need to know the difference between the characters and the actors who play them and recognize that they are not the same.

Brooke narrates an instance when the appreciative discussion of fandom meta evolved into an attempt to share that perspective with the creators of the show that evolved into harassment of the actors of the show based on a fan theory that the actors should (or did) share the same relationship as their characters. This kind of harassment is not strictly the territory of fandom discussion, nor does it mediate fans' relationships to fandom in the way other mediating processes of fandom discussion do. In fact, it is one of the least mentioned roles of fandom discussion in the survey responses. However, I have included it in this analysis to highlight the ways in which fandom discussion is increasingly leaving the domain of transformative fandom and stretching to begin (attempting to) mediate the canon itself and the creation of that canon. I have also included it to highlight the profound impact that fandom discussion can have on fans' perspectives within it; it is strong enough to convince fans of opinions that they then feel compelled to share with content creators in an attempt to force change in the content and the world beyond the content.

MEDIATION 5: SELF EXAMINATION, SELF CRITIQUE

Self-examination and self-critique is a reflective mediating process in which fans perceive fandom discussion as facilitating self-reflection among fans. This self-reflection is often implicated in fans perceiving themselves as having grown and changed as well as fans perceiving the community to have grown and changed as a result of these discussions. For many fans, even those who consider themselves highly self-reflective and self-aware, engagement with fandom discussion can prompt critical self-reflection. Johanna's story offers a powerful example of this self-reflection. Johanna is a 38-year-old Jewish-European woman who's been participating in fandom for over 20 years. Johanna sees her identity as a Jewish woman as having strong ties to her identity and participation in fandom. She first joined fandom because of a Jewish character in the television show *The Sentinel* and is currently an active commentator on racism, sexism, homophobia and other issues of social justice in fandom. Yet, despite entering fandom with a greater awareness of issues of social justice and a more critical consumption of media, she still narrates a process of continuous learning through fandom. As I described above, at one point in our interviews, Johanna described a moment of being confronted by another fan about her use of a racist stereotype. She felt taken aback by the critique, but it also became a moment of reflection for her. Here is how she describes it:

> I would like to say something, I'm not perfect. I have done a lot of shit and said a lot of shit in my time, but I try my best to learn. A lot of these conversations have made me change myself and made me question my own priorities in fandom. Why do I favor this character over this one over here? Why do I act like this? Why do I think like this? And a lot of the times I have to look at myself and say, "Well, fuck, because we all grow up within a racist and antisemitic society." We learn this constantly. We learn this from the moment we're born.
> Unlearning it is going to take a long time, too. I have unlearned a lot in my years of fandom, and in real life too […] A lot of the times, you have to accept that you've done something to hurt other people. And across time, you can't really go back and fix it. All

you can do is realize what you did, be certain it was wrong, and then don't do it again. Even better, try to make sure other people don't do it either.

The conversations she references are, in this case, critical discourse about issues of race and racism, antisemitism and other critiques of fandom. Johanna narrates an experience that is quite common in fandom: being challenged by another fan because of the racist, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise biased dimensions of something you've written and posted. As her reflection highlights, many of us have been raised in a society of structural marginalization, and the impacts of that marginalization linger in unconscious prejudices that take a lifetime of reflection to unlearn. For fans like Johanna, fandom discussion is the place to challenge those beliefs in yourself. For Johanna, this process involves questioning her preferences in fandom: why she favors particular characters or engages in particular behaviors. This process of questioning has, she narrates, made her change herself and her priorities in fandom. Particularly notable in her response is the way Johanna frames self-reflection as both a confrontation with the self and a confrontation with the potential harm your behavior has had on others. Here, then, we see identity and community intertwining in the way fandom discussion mediates both a fan's sense of identity and their behavior in fandom.

Self-examination and self-critique can also manifest in a critical examination of one's own identity. Karima, a 29-year-old Arab female from New Zealand who has been in fandom for eighteen years, emphasizes fandom as a space to explore a more diverse perspective of herself in a way that would be impossible in her home community:

I come from a very, very conservative background, and so it was through fandom that I was exposed to particular ideas that I never would have been exposed to, and I had conversations that I otherwise never would have had. And so it's been a source for me of things that I could not get in my daily life, but at the same time because it's isolated my parents have no idea what I do, neither do a lot of my friends, and I enjoy that kind of safe, isolated sandbox. Kind of like, "let's keep this away from everybody in life" kind of thing.

In this narrative, Karima positions fandom discussion, and fandom in general, as giving her access to perspectives she might not otherwise have had. Specifically, fandom discussion gave Karima space to re-examine her relationship with her religion and her sexuality, both of which were things she expresses not being able to explore in her conservative community. She suggests that fandom discussion is the space that gave her access to renegotiate these key aspects of her identity. In negotiating that identity, however, Karima finds herself isolated from family and friends who no longer have access to the aspects of her identity that Karima expresses online. Despite the difficult work of grappling with identity, fandom is a "safe, isolated sandbox" for Karima; her response thus highlights an important tension in fandom discussion between fandom and spaces beyond fandom. Acknowledging this tension is an opportunity to think about the mediation of identity and community and how these mediations might create tensions as a person moves from one space of engagement to another.

Karima speaks to an experience shared by a lot of fans: a sense that fandom and fandom discussion have exposed them to things that are taboo or even just not spoken about in their lives outside of fandom. Through fandom discussion, Karima has developed new facets of her identity that aren't supported by the background she came from. She expresses this clearly later in our interviews, saying,

> In my real life I'm a Muslim woman of Arab heritage. In fandom I am a Muslim woman of Arab heritage who is openly bisexual, which is not something that I would ever do in my real life. I mean, I want to, but I don't know if I can, but fandom was probably the first... I came out to my fandom friends before I came out to anybody in my real life. And I recognize that it's a function of the inclusivity of fandom at its best and also again the isolation.

Fandom discussion, for Karima, is not only the place where she explored ideas and identities that were taboo in the culture of her upbringing, but also the place where she can *express* a marginalized identity that she can't express outside of this space. Her story is not uncommon among fans.

156

Fandom has its roots in providing space for the exploration of stories and identities not expressed in mainstream media. Many fans find it a place where they first encounter stories about LGBTQ+ identities, where people of color and people with disabilities who are often portrayed as secondary characters become the stars of their stories, and where critique about narrative tropes, lack of diversity, and harmful narratives is not only common but expected. For fans like Karima, fandom discussion is a place to learn about yourself and to express yourself in ways that are impossible, difficult, or uncomfortable in other spaces.

Both of these examples highlight self-examination and self-critique at an individual level. Johanna re-examines her biases and Karima re-examines her identity in the context of new perspectives that she accesses through fandom discussion. In addition to helping fans re-examine and critique themselves, fans suggest, this process of self-examination also occurs in the ways that the community collectively re-examines itself. I argue that this collective re-examination, in particular, highlights fandom's ethic towards improvement, contextualized by an ethic of care towards the individual fan.

MEDIATION 6: NEW PERSPECTIVES

The sixth mediating process that I examine in this chapter is *sharing and learning new perspectives*. Fans perceive fandom discussion as a space where fans can learn new perspectives about fandom and educate or share their own perspectives with other fans. As we have seen, this sharing of new perspectives is often closely tied with the impetus to "make fandom better" that drives many fans to create critical commentary. For many fans, engaging in this critical commentary is also about trying to share a new perspective with other fans. In this section, I consider how fans might receive those new perspectives and how, consequently, fandom

discussion can mediate fans' perceptions of transformative content and their engagement outside of fandom.

I will start with my own narrative about how encountering new perspectives in fandom mediated my relationship with a particular piece of fanfiction. I learned about racist character stereotypes for Black and Hispanic characters while reading fandom discussion, which reshaped how I perceived the media I consumed, particularly how I viewed the fanfiction I read. For example, in my early days in fandom, when *Harry Potter* was one of the most active fandom and a fandom I was heavily involved in, I bookmarked a particular comedy story involving Harry Potter and Sirius Black ending up in an alternate universe and deciding to abandon propriety and live as eccentric, rich vigilantes. The story had frequently brought a smile to my face and had, at many points, brought me to tears of laughter. A decade later, though, after immersing myself in critical discussions of racism and racist tropes, I re-read the story during a moment of nostalgia and found that I couldn't get through the entire thing. What I hadn't noticed on my earlier reads were the racist, sexist, and homophobic narrative tropes that the author deployed: the House Elves in the story were given speech patterns stereotyped to Black slave characters, the female romantic love interests were objectified and their sexual activity was treated with disdain while the male leads were valorized for the same behavior, and any hint of homosexual content was treated as both a joke and something to be derided. I barely made it through a third of the story before I had to stop reading, and I have felt conflicted about bookmarking it ever since. The new perspectives I had been exposed to through fandom discussion reshaped how I saw the world and consequently my relationship with some of the stories that I had long loved and could now no longer consume.

Fandom discussion also mediates by teaching fans within fandom and then positioning them to take their new knowledge to contexts beyond fandom. Johanna, for example, relates the

following story about learning the framework and vocabulary of religious persecution through fandom:

> I just had to explain to city council about Islamophobia, and why a lot of what they're doing is really, really racist. It's a problem because we can't discuss race in Europe. The vocabulary doesn't really exist. It's been so taboo after World War II. You have to cut through so much coded language, it's insane.
>
> I have to say, actually, in this case, fandom—conversations in fandom—has helped with my real life work in this because I have vocabulary. I have a framework I would not have had otherwise because it does not exist in Europe even though we have the exact same problems the U.S. does. We have the exact same racism, we have the exact same anti-blackness, we have the exact same antisemitism here. We just never had those conversations.
>
> And now I can start having those conversations here, because now I have it.

In this narrative, Johanna relates that fandom discussion taught her a vocabulary and framework to identify and address racism, which she could then deploy in her local community. Fandom may not have been the first space where Johanna developed an identity as a critical consumer or ally, nor where she first developed social consciousness, but as her story suggests, it *is* a space of continuous learning about that identity, one that teaches her to confront her unconscious biases and helps her develop the tools to educate others by exposing her to new perspectives and vocabulary. As with mediating relationships to canon, this is an example of fandom discussion mediating beyond the boundaries of fandom spaces. Particularly notable in Johanna's narrative is that not only is this vocabulary of social justice something that Johanna learns through fandom discussion, it's something she learns through these discussions *because* she doesn't have access to the vocabulary in her non-fandom spaces. Johanna's narrative emphasizes not only fandom discussion as a place where fans can encounter new perspectives, but also a place of knowledge-making: Johanna developed knowledge about social justice which she could then apply.

MEDIATION 7: FAN/FANDOM HISTORY

The final mediating process that fans highlight is the recording and sharing of fandom history, a mediation that reinforces the connection between fan and community by building a community history and serving as another foundation for fandom's ethic of self improvement. Fandom discussion, fans suggest, can serve as a record of the history of fandom communities and of the work that has gone into creating, maintaining, and evolving those communities. In so doing, fandom discussion can be read as a form of cultural memory, a concept arguing that "memory can only become collective as part of a continuous process whereby memories are shared with the help of symbolic artefacts that mediate between individuals and, in the process, create communality across both space and time" (Erll and Rigney 1). In this section, I will show how fans perceive that the sharing of fandom history—the memories of fandom—mediates between the fan and their fandom community to create that community across geographic space and decades of community existence. Blair, a 19-year-old nonbinary white American-Irish-Georgian fan, highlights this potential for fandom discussion in their survey response:

> ***Survey Question:*** *Do you think discourse is important in fandom (i.e., for building relationships, making fandom better, calling out problems)? Why or why not?*
>
> ***Blair:*** yes. especially from a fandom history perspective, i think it's crucial that you document and comment on the events of fandom, bc it's so ephemeral. the work that fandom has done for copyright and content law is immense and astounding and correlated to other online and off-line affairs.

Blair positions fandom discussion as important because it serves as a record of the work of a particularly ephemeral and transitory community. Fandom's history is littered with examples of the work of fandom being lost, from fans choosing to remove their work for various reasons (such as leaving fandom because of harassment and removing fanfiction they are trying to revise and publish as original work) to platforms shutting down (for example, small fanfiction websites that

no longer have the funding for hosting) to work being purged by changes in the policies of various platforms (for example, the purging of work from Livejournal and Tumblr because of changing policies about acceptable content on these sites). Consequently, fans may feel more keenly a need to document fandom's history. By documenting fandom history, fandom discussion is building a sense of continuity that helps maintain a sense of community. In an ephemeral digital space, a sense of continuity is a reminder of connections to other fans and an articulation of collective values and creative work that often extends back before you, as a fan, might have begun to participate.

The documentation of fandom history is also a documentation of community action to improve fandom, as reflected in other mediating processes like criticism, self-examination, and access to new perspectives. In their comment, Blair suggests that the importance of documenting and sharing this history extends beyond fandom to the advocacy work fans have done on fandom's behalf. For example, Blair's comments about copyright and content law may refer to the ongoing work of the Organization for Transformative Work, whose legal team works internationally to protect the rights of fans to create transformative work such as fanfiction. Fans' advocacy work has also resulted in a much greater mainstream appreciation for fandom and fanfiction, to the point where fans largely no longer fear legal retribution for writing fanfiction, fans are more open and celebratory of their participation in fandom, and content creators openly engage with the fan communities that surround their work. Recording and celebrating this advocacy through fandom discussion builds connections among fans, fandom, and a broader socio-cultural context. Through these records of fandom history, fans might be able to see fandom as productive work in a larger context.

Documenting fandom history also facilitates the community self-improvement operating within fandom. As I have discussed previously in this chapter, fans often espouse an ethic of care for other fans and commitment to developing fandom as a safe space for diverse fans to participate in. Over the decades, fandom has evolved through critical discussion and in response to changing social mores beyond fandom, and fans see fandom discussion as a record of these changes. Nailah, a 32-year-old Caucasian Welsh and Canadian female fan, highlights this sentiment in her survey response:

> *Survey Question: Do you think discourse is important in fandom (i.e., for building relationships, making fandom better, calling out problems)? Why or why not?*
>
> *Nailah:* Yes, I think [fandom discussion is] important because fandom is always changing in the same way that technology and culture and generational attitudes towards fandom and fan-generated content is always changing. Like anything, it's good to have historical context for how fandom has evolved over the years in ways both good and bad. Sometimes with fandom there is a sense that we're all just along for the ride and no one has any control over how it develops, but I think the exact opposite is true. Fandom is for the fans, and fans alone get to decide what kind of legacy it has. Incredibly difficult to agree on, of course, but I think we should try as much as possible to keep it a welcoming and respectful place for everyone.

Nailah's response echoes the sentiments of many other fans: that fandom is meant to be a positive and welcoming space for all. In this response, she specifically highlights the importance of fandom history for creating that space. She argues that fans have the potential and responsibility of producing the kind of community that they want to inhabit. Fandom history is a tool for understanding the evolution of fandom and consequently for facilitating its productive evolution. Lacie, a 26-year-old white Canadian female fan, offers a specific example of the fandom history that is recorded and the necessity of doing so as part of fandom's ongoing evolution:

> *Survey Question: Do you think discourse is important in fandom (i.e., for building relationships, making fandom better, calling out problems)? Why or why not?*
>
> *Lacie:* I think discourse is important in fandom. Fandom has issues, and has had a lot of issues in the past, and discourse is important so fandom can continue to learn, and be

better, and avoid mistakes--e.g. it's important for fans to know about RaceFail '09 to avoid repeating stuff that happened there, etc.

The specific instance Lacie references—RaceFail '09—is a debate that raged in science fiction and fantasy fandom in 2009 that involved professional authors and fans writing about and responding to issues of cultural appropriation and racism in professional, published work. The debate not only raised these issues but also became a metacommentary about how arguments about these issues should be had, including such subjects as arguments that derail or divert from the topic at hand, policing of (others') tone, language use within an argument, and the ways the internet as a medium affected the argument (Fanlore, "RaceFail '09"). Lacie suggests that a sense of fandom history is necessary for knowing about the existence of RaceFail '09 and to prevent similar situations from arising in the future, much like Nailah's argument that "fans alone get to decide what kind of legacy [fandom] has." Recording fandom history, Nailah and Lacie suggest, is an opportunity for fans to document the productive work of fandom and construct a sense of legacy in the community.

Fandom history mediates fans' understandings of their community by complicating those understandings and, subsequently, through that knowledge attempting to change fans' behavior within these communities. Viewed as a process of cultural memory, we can see this process of mediation as one "in which individuals and groups continue to reconfigure their relationship to the past and hence reposition themselves in relation to established and emergent memory sites" (Erll and Rigney 2). By continuing to share fandom history, particularly history related to fans' activist endeavours, fandom discussion repositions contemporary fans within a community with a complex history. Fandom discussion thus becomes a reminder of an ethic of care for other fans and community and serves a rhetorical purpose of forwarding that commitment by reminding fans of fandom's historical change in service of shared community values. For example, sharing the

history of a fandom event like RaceFail '09 might be both a reminder of that history and an argument for critical engagement with racism in contemporary fandom. I have seen more than one fan deploy RaceFail '09 in arguments against tone-policing, critiques of racist narrative tropes, and commentary on the difficulty of having productive critical conversation in a space like Tumblr. For fans, reading these posts can also serve as a reminder that fandom cares profoundly about community culture and issues like racism, and thus these posts might also mediate readers' understanding of the culture of fandom. Fandom discussion that focuses on fandom history thus mediates both a connection to a sense of legacy in the fandom community and contemporary community culture through reminders about the community's ethic of care.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have described the mediating processes that fans perceive as operating within/through fandom discussion. In this section, I highlight two key themes represented across these processes—community and identity/self, intertwined with social justice—and begin to frame how mediation helps us understand fandom as a knowledge-making system with a particular character.

Mediating a relationship with the fandom community is one of the seven key mediations described in this chapter, but community also appears as an important thread throughout many of the other mediating processes. Take, for example, fans' acknowledgements that the sharing of fandom history or construction of a relationship with canon materials is also, in part, about creating communality and connection with other fans. Perhaps nowhere is the thread of community as an underlying motivation more visible than in fans' discussions of the roles of criticism and critique. Some fans perceive the purpose of critique to be identifying and challenging problems like racism with the goal of improving fandom as a community. Even when fans critique these kinds of fandom

discussion for policing fan engagement or facilitating the harassment of other fans, many also attribute positive motives to even this kind of fandom discussion. They suggest that mediations like critique, the sharing of fandom history, and the push to educate other fans are built on a foundation of an ethic of care for a community and an impetus to improve that community for all its participants. By collectively examining the mediating purposes identified in this chapter, we can see that community in fandom involves a sense of connection to others, both individual and collective; the maintenance and evolution of a distinct community culture; and the continuity of a community over time.

Unlike community, identity does not appear as a distinct mediation in this chapter because throughout fans' responses, identity was implied as a driving force behind or consequence of mediating processes rather than a distinct focal point. In building community relationships, for example, fans saw this process as also facilitating a distinct identity as a *member* of a community and a sense of self as a fan. Similarly, fans saw the mediating processes of self-examination and new perspectives as closely tied with their identities when the fandom discussion implicated in these processes derived from their identities or asked them to rethink their sense of self. Identity was also more explicitly referenced as a driving force behind some fans' desires to educate others or their sense that fandom discussion could become a tool of harassment. In addition to uniting many of the mediating processes in this chapter, this attention to identity also raises the question of fans' interventions within these mediating processes. How do fans intervene within this process? And how are their identities fundamental to the ways they intervene and the motivations for that intervention? I address these questions in Chapters Four and Five.

I discuss community and identity as separate threads that tie together the many mediating processes of fandom discussion, but these two threads are also intertwined and involved in the

rhetorical activity of fandom discussion. Prior et al offer one explanation of the intertwining of community and identity in their description of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT):

> In activity, people are *socialized* (brought into alignment with others) as they *appropriate* cultural resources, but also *individuated* as their particular appropriations historically accumulate to form a particular individual. Through appropriation and individuation, socialization also opens up as space for cultural change, for a *personalization* of the social. (18)

This explanation pulls together a great deal of what fans describe as fandom in fandom discussion. Through discussion, fans are socialized into the community of fandom, developing community ties but also learning the cultural and communicative norms of the community and its rich history. This socialization opens up space for identity-work, the individualization of communication practices (see Chapter Four and Chapter Five) and also the work of examining and developing the self. The work of identity in fandom discussion thus relies on the work of community, which in turn facilitates the space and tools for the work of identity.

The intertwining of community, identity, and rhetorical work are essential to understanding fandom discussion in the context of knowledge-making. In Chapter One, I argued that fandom discussion could be interpreted as a knowledge-making system in which fans are actively engaged in creating and consuming knowledge about themselves, their community, and socio-cultural issues. This knowledge-making is evident in the mediations that fans perceive as happening through fandom discussion. Through self-examination, for example, fans develop knowledge about their identities. Through the building and breaking of community relationships and the sharing of fandom history, fans develop knowledge about their fandom communities. Through criticisms and the sharing of new perspectives, fans develop knowledge about socio-cultural issues within and beyond their communities. Fandom discussion serves as the knowledge-making system of fandom wherein the knowledges of self, community, and social justice intersect.

These intersections are also a source of tension, as evidenced by contradictions in the mediating processes described in this chapter. In most of the mediating processes that fans identified, there were both positive and negative dimensions. Fandom discussion's relationship with community, for example, involved building community as well as breaking community and gatekeeping access to a community. The evidence of these tensions suggests that the mediating processes of fandom discussion are not smooth or universal within fandom. Further, I argue that contradictions are also evidence of the tensions in fandom's knowledges of self, community, and social justice: what one fan might interpret as a positive instance of challenging a problematic narrative trope might be interpreted by another fan as policing fandom engagement or individualized harassment. This tension also prompts the question of how fans negotiate it in their interactions with fandom discussion. Answering that question is the work of Chapter Four and Chapter Five. When a singular piece of knowledge can be received in such vastly different ways, and when there exists such fundamental tensions and strong affective responses to knowledge-making, I argue that we must interpret fandom discussion as operating on a foundation of values in tension.

In closing this chapter, I want to return to the idea of fandom discussion—and fandom in general—as a recursive process through which media facilitate negotiation and renegotiation of knowledge as it crosses media forms from canon material to transformative fanfiction and fan art to critical fandom discussion. Throughout this chapter, I have shown how fandom discussion mediates fans' relationships with other fans and with fandom by reshaping their perceptions and interactions. This process of mediation could also be read as a process of *re*mediation. Bolter and Grusin define remediation as "the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms" (273), and I argue that in reshaping fans' interactions and realities with fandom and canon

materials, fandom discussion is a refashioning of these prior materials. While fandom discussion does not necessarily attempt to re-present the prior media in a new form, it is primarily concerned with reshaping that media in the eyes of fans. Transformative engagement is at the heart of fandom, and fandom discussion asks readers to think differently about this media. In doing so, fandom discussion's remediation emphasizes Bolter and Grusin's aspect of hypermediation, whose goal is to make the medium visible to the viewer. By drawing fans' attention to the tropes of fanfiction, the patterns and practices of fandom, the underlying biases that shape both canon and fandom, fandom discussion is making visible the mediums of entertainment (both canon and fandom material) and the mediation they are doing to fans. While many of us might acknowledge that fiction and society shape how we understand the world, we cannot always point to specific details or moments. Fandom discussion seeks to make those moments clear and visible for fans, and in doing so often reshapes how fans understand fandom and their identities within it.

In the next two chapters, I examine fans' responses to the mediating processes of fandom discussion. As this chapter shows, fans tend to be highly critical and self-aware of the ways fandom discussion mediates their relationships with other fans, their sense of fandom, and the knowledge of themselves. While this chapter demonstrates how fandom discussion functions rhetorically and socially in fandom, the following two chapters engage with fans' interventions in this process. In this chapter I have focused on the "what" and the "how": what is fandom discussion doing in fandom? How is it operating? The question of "why"—why this system and how it is operating— can begin to be answered through closer consideration of fans' interventions in the mediating processes of fandom discussion and the values that underpins these practices.

Chapter 4:

Curation and Conflicting Ethics of Care

> **actualvarric,** INTERVIEW: *I've realized that what I want from fandom is not necessarily what other people want from fandom. I'm able to use that knowledge to choose my experience for myself and if something is... if I'm getting really angry over something that I can't change and I can't productively engage with somebody with, then I'll unfollow them.*

Wherever there has been transformative fandom, there have also always been fans talking about transformative fandom. Across decades and platforms, fans have paired their creative expression with critical engagement with that creative expression. Early *Star Trek* shippers on usenets and mailing lists paired fanfiction about the romance between Kirk and Spock with debates about the dynamics of that romance. *Star Wars* fans on platforms from Tumblr to Reddit paired creative work celebrating the new potential ships in the sequel trilogy with meta critiquing issues like racism and sexism in the very art they had produced. As fandom has evolved and migrated across platforms, fandom discussion has similarly evolved as fans redeploy and reimagine their critical conversations for new spaces. When I joined online fandom as a pre-teen, Tumblr, founded in 2007, didn't exist. Neither did Archive of Our Own, which was created in 2009. My earliest fandom platforms were Fanfiction.net and Livejournal. Since those years, I have watched fandom migrate across platforms, and while the content I have enjoyed has certainly changed, what hasn't changed is a desire to find ways to read exactly what I want to read. Like all fans, I have favorite

fanfiction tropes I enjoy reading—I tend to be drawn towards alternate universes and crossovers[21]—and certain discussion topics I seek out—in my case, meta commentary on common themes in fanfiction tropes and critical dissection of those tropes. Livejournal gave me communities and reading lists, Fanfiction.net gave me collections, and Archive of Our Own gives me extensive, searchable tags. I am certainly not alone in this drive to find or avoid specific content, particularly within the discussions we fans have about our community, creative practices, and behaviors towards one another. Arguably, this is a practice that is not unique to fandom; participants in social media like Twitter and Facebook use hashtags and groups, respectively, to find specific content of interest, while platforms like Reddit offer forums for organizing content topics. The commonality in these practices across platforms offers space for curatorial practices in fandom discussion to serve as a case study for the relationship of curation to the entanglement of self, community, and social justice in an online system.

In this chapter, I turn a critical lens to the practices of fans as we negotiate our relationship to and curation of fandom discussion, particularly as those curation practices intersect with our use of particular platforms. As I will argue in this chapter, considering the platform(s) on which fandom discussion takes place shows us the ways in which a platform facilitates certain kinds of control for fans, but also the ways that fans define a curatorial practice that stretches across platforms—evidence of an ethics of care that is part of fandom, not just its platform. This chapter draws on theories of mediation discussed in Chapter Three where I argue that fandom discussion mediates fans' relationships with themselves, other fans, and the fandom community. Adding to this theorizing of fandom discussion as mediating and mediated, this chapter frames fans'

---

[21] "Alternate Universe" or "AU" is a fanfiction trope that involves a significant alteration to the events of the canon story. AU stories might involve a change to a single event (e.g. Sirius Black survived in *Harry Potter and the Order of Pheonix* or Anakin Skywalker never fell to the dark side in *Star Wars*) or the complete re-imagining of the entire universe in which the story is set (e.g. the characters of *Lord of the Rings* are high school students).

intervention in the mediation processes of fandom discussion through theories of curation and its intersections with platform. This intersection helps explain the practices and processes of curation visible in how fans describe their mediations of fandom discussion. To understand *why* most fans curate their relationships with fandom discussion in particular, and *why* these curatorial practices persist similarly across platforms and in defiance of platform functionalities, it is necessary to interrogate the underlying community ethic, an ethic of care, that might drive these practices. I have previously described fandom as having an ethic of care wherein fandom culture is driven by attention to care along a spectrum between self care and community care. In Chapter Three, I outline how fandom discussion mediates many fans' knowledge of self, community, and social justice. In this chapter, I show that this ethic of care underlies many fans' curation practices for fandom discussion, and could be similarly understood to underlie the knowledges I analyze in Chapter Three. Yet, in interrogating these curation practices, I also show where the two threads of self care and community care come into tension in ways that impede fandom's and fans' abilities to engage in the social justice work fandom valorizes as a key part of our culture.

THEORIES OF CURATION

In Chapter Three, I outlined seven processes through which fandom discussion mediated fans' knowledge of self, community, and context as well as relationships to other fans and to fandom. In this chapter, I examine how many fans intervene in their relationship with these processes by curating the kinds of content they receive from various sources and when that content is visible to them. To examine fans' reading and writing practices around fandom discussion, I use theories of curation as a model to center fans' actions in their interventions in fandom discussion. Theories of curation have been used to frame research into aspects of online life including identity management (e.g., Robinson) and the development of critical digital literacies (e.g., Mihailidis).

To theorize curation within fandom, I adopt sociologist and digital media studies scholar Jenny L. Davis's model of these practices because of its distinction among aspects of curation (productive, consumptive, network), its attention to curation as a practice of sociality in digital communities, and its emphasis on the entanglement of user action and platform affordance.

Davis defines curation broadly as "the discriminate selection of materials for display" (771), a selection which involves both what we select to display about ourselves and what we select to view. Davis distinguishes these two forms of curation as productive curation—"how people curate performances of the self" (770) at the intersection of privacy maintenance—and consumptive curation—"how [people] curate content from their networks" (770). As I will show in more detail later in this chapter, in fandom, productive curation can be understood as the ways that fans select which information about their personal lives to share (e.g., how open to be with other fans) and what content to blog and reblog to convey a particular sense of themselves as an individual to other fans. Conversely, consumptive curation in fandom can be understood as the ways that fans choose what content to engage with, from the genres of fiction they choose to read to the kinds of discussion they choose to participate in, and enact those choices by leveraging the affordances and constraints of their given platforms. At the intersection of productive curation, consumptive curation, and platform are Davis's concepts of network curation and curatorial code. Network curation refers to the ways users' actions facilitate and constrain the curation of other users: for example, the content you choose to produce in part defines the content that will be consumed by your followers (Davis 775). Here the platform, with its facilitation of followers and the display of content, is the foundation on which this network curation rests. It also intervenes in this curation through its algorithm, which can influence what content is served to users and how that content is ordered. Together, the platform architecture and algorithm form Davis's concept of

curatorial code, the "machine-based third-party curation" (Davis 776) that takes place alongside users' productive and consumptive curation.

This chapter will address both productive and consumptive curation in fandom, particularly as these forms of curation intersect with the platform capacities of Tumblr. However, the focus of the chapter is on fans' consumptive curation in conversation with its platformed expression. Much interesting work has been done about productive curation and the performance of the self online (e.g., Bargh et al; Fox and Ralston; Oakley; Robinson; Tiidenberg; Turkle; Yartey), and there is certainly much to interrogate about how many fans' posting practices around discussion constitute performance of a particular self. This chapter will touch briefly on this performance of self as it relates to fans' conceptions of the audience of fandom discussion. Nonetheless, the chapter will focus primarily on consumptive curation because it is in consumptive curatorial practices that we can best see fans mediating the processes of fandom discussion as it acts on their identities and perceptions. I argue that these fan interventions illustrate the knowledge-making system of fandom as one of individual choice and engagement within a community-constructed knowledge.

This chapter also focuses on the intersections between curatorial practice and fannish platform. In the context of digital spaces in particular, curation and curatorial practice represent "an entwined relationship between individual curators, their networks, and platform design" (Davis 771). In these spaces, curation is not solely an individual act reliant on the needs and wants of the individual participants or curators, but is instead an intersection of those needs and wants within the social networks established in digital spaces and the capabilities and constraints of particular platforms. Consequently, a discussion of fans' curatorial practices requires critical examination of the platforms on which these practices are taking place. As I will argue, fans leverage the particular platform of Tumblr to curate their interactions with fandom discussion, but

these curatorial practices are not limited to a single platform. Fans perceive fandom discussion as having always been curated in particular ways, with similar motivations and curatorial impulses functioning across the many platforms on which fandom has operated. These consistent curatorial practices across platforms, I argue, illuminate fans' relationships with individual platforms but also a consistent trend of fans intervening in the mediation processes of fandom discussion regardless of the space in which that discussion is taking place.

Davis's model of curation helps me explain *what* is happening within fans' literacy practices around fandom discussion on Tumblr: what kinds of curation they practice and how those practices are informed by their platform. To explain *why* fans might adopt these practices and *how* these practices are relevant to a critical understanding of fans' relationships to fandom discussion, this chapter also draws more explicitly from feminist theories of the ethics of care. As I described in Chapter One, the theory of ethics of care holds that interpersonal relationships and care are at the heart of moral action. In Chapter Three, this theory helped me illustrate the interrelational work of fandom discussion. In this chapter, I draw more specifically on the two dimensions of fandom's ethic of care—an ethic of self care and an ethic of community care—to explore the entanglement of self and community within the moral action of social justice.

CURATION OF FANDOM DISCUSSION: SURVEY RESULTS

I turn first to data from my survey of fans. In my survey, I asked fans, *How would you categorize your relationship to fandom discourse, or fans talking about fandom?* This multiple-choice question gave fans the option to select how they engage with fandom discussion as both readers and writers, facilitating analysis of both fans' productive and consumptive curation practices. Options for the answers to this question were generated from my own experience and

174

observation of fannish practices. All 671 of my survey participants responded to this question, and the results are summarized in the table below (see Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1. Fans' Self-Categorization of Curatorial Practices for Fandom Discussion

Practices of Engagement with Fandom Discussion
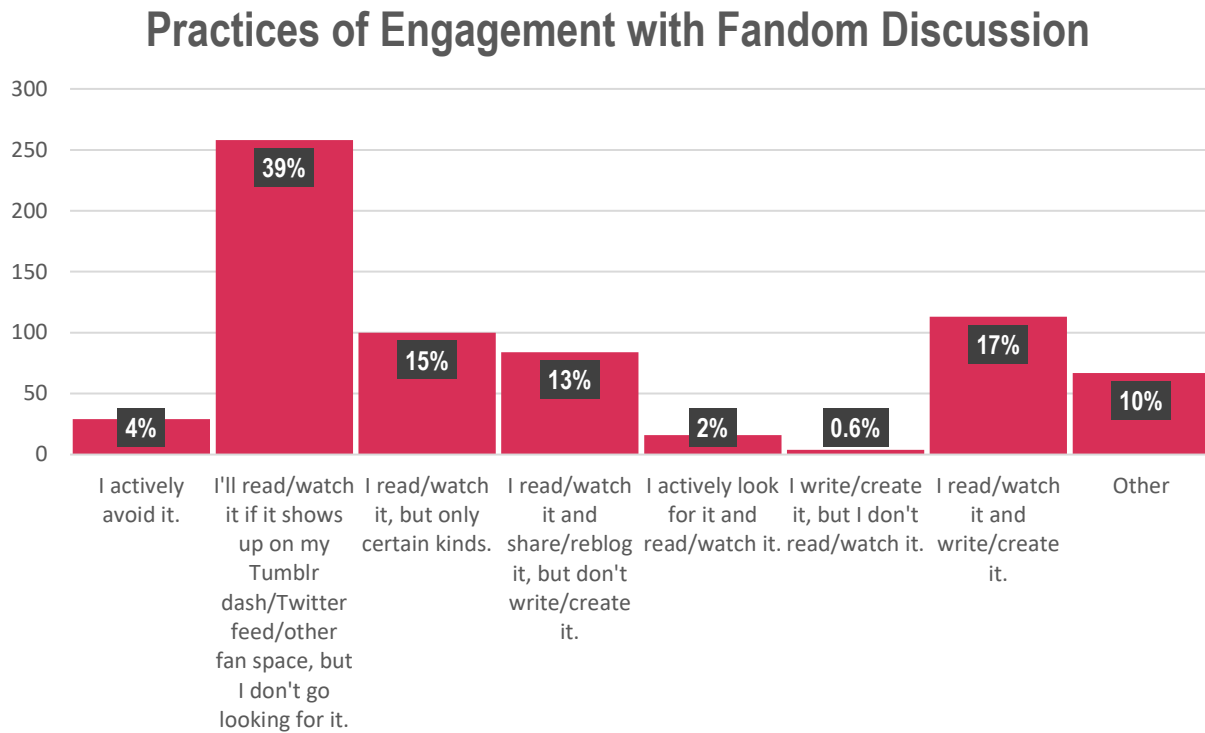
As the table suggests, most fans engage with fandom discussion in some form either through reading (84%) or writing (18%); this division also suggests that many more fans engage in consumptive curation than productive curation. Only 4% of fans who responded to the survey actively avoided fandom discussion; the most common engagement pattern, by far, was fans reading fandom discussion that crossed their Tumblr dashboard, but not actively looking for it (39%). At first glance, this might seem to suggest that fans do not actively control their experiences with fandom discussion, instead passively consuming whatever happens to cross their dashboards. However, a closer consideration of both the functionality of the Tumblr dashboard and fans' descriptions of their reading and writing practices through the lens of curation suggests that fans' relationships with fandom discussion are, in fact, highly curated. Consequently, I will argue in this

chapter that fans, by curating their experiences with fandom discussion, are intervening in the mediating processes of fandom discussion in ways that, read through a feminist ethics of care, highlight tensions in fandom's ethics of self care and community care born from the entanglements, intersections, and conflicts of knowledges of self, community, and social justice.

Fans are actively intervening in—or mediating—the processes that mediate their relationships with other fans and with fandom, and this intervention is both reflective of the unique affordances and constraints of Tumblr as the platform on which this discussion takes place and an embodiment of a long practice of curation through an ethic of care within fandom. Fans' curatorial practices on Tumblr, as I will argue, are not unique to this platform. Across platforms, fans have leveraged the platform capabilities to curate themselves, their experiences, and the interactions with other fans and the community. Their ethic of care and consideration that underlies their curatorial practices and approach to knowledge is evident in fans' metacognition about discussion within fandom. Overwhelmingly, fans express a keen awareness of the different processes involved in fandom discussion, explored in Chapter Three. They are aware that fandom discussion can act in different ways from building a sense of community to facilitating harassment of other fans and creators. They perceive both negative and positive dimensions of fandom discussion— from its potential to help the community evolve and become a safer space for its members to its equally likely potential to police fan engagement and produce negative experiences in fandom— many of which exist in tension with each other. Chapter Three and Chapter Five highlight the divergent experiences of my participants.

In this chapter, I dwell in these diverging experiences with particular attention to potential conflicts between an ethic of self care and an ethic of community care, taking up feminist and queer digital humanities' rejection of a monolithic answer to my questions. Like my fan

participants, I work to highlight fans' individual experiences, trends across experiences, and the ways that divergence and disagreement can help us understand fandom's conceptualization of knowledge, care, and community. Fans' responses to my survey highlight this awareness and metacognition, as the response of Katy L. Wood, a 24-year-old White female American, below suggests:

> *Katy L. Wood:* Fandom is what you make it and I will only participate in the parts of it that actively uplift my experience and the experience of others. I used t pay more attention to the negative aspects of it but it was not at all worth the heartache and stress it caused.

As Katy's response suggests, fans are keenly aware of the varying dimensions of fandom discussion and, in response, curate their experiences accordingly. Katy writes, "Fandom is what you make it," highlighting that for fans, the process of curation is about constructing a particular experience of fandom that aligns with what they want and that circulates content that they view as uplifting. Like Katy, many fans center not only their own identities but their emotional experiences with the community and the potential of their content to "uplift […] the experience of others" in their choices of how to interact with fandom.

Similarly, actualvarric argues that a fan's experiences in fandom is highly personal and that it is up to the fan to create that experience. In the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, I share an excerpt from an interview with actualvarric where they describe how their relationship with fandom evolved over time. I share here the fuller quote as a point of consideration for the value many fans place on the individual experience of fandom:

> I feel like I'm a lot more able to choose my own experiences now. When I first joined Tumblr, I felt like I was kind of committed to the people I had followed and I had to agree with everything they were talking about or I had to engage with everything they were posting about. That wore me out. It was really bad for my mental health seeing all this arguing all the time due to the people I was following.
> Now, I think as I've grown up, I've realized that what I want from fandom is not necessarily what other people want from fandom. I'm able to use that knowledge to choose my experience for myself and if something is... if I'm getting really angry over something

that I can't change and I can't productively engage with somebody with, then I'll unfollow them and that's just... No matter if we've been mutuals for five years or not. If they're going in a completely different direction than they were when I knew them initially, I have no problem unfollowing them because it's supposed to be my experience.

Like Katy, actualvarric emphasizes that fandom is a unique experience for each fan, but their experience highlights the ways in which many fans conceptualize that unique experience as both one that fans choose and one that they deliberately construct. "It's supposed to be my experience," they argue, and this is what guides who they interact with and who they choose to no longer interact with. Particularly critical is the ways that this perception has evolved over time for actualvarric. In their narrative, they describe their initial engagement with fandom as one in which they felt committed to particular people and beholden to engaging with particular perspectives. actualvarric's engagement practices evolved partly, as they say, in response to declining mental health, but we might also interpret this change as an internalization of the value of the individual experience. actualvarric is not alone in this perspective; Katy's narrative makes a similar point, and many other fans in my study similarly articulated that the fandom experience was an individual one which, crucially, as actualvarric highlights, is the *responsibility and right* of the individual fan to provide. I share this narrative to highlight the ways the many fans conceptualize how fans should approach their experience in fandom, which may, in part, help us understand the ways that self care is so emphasized in many fans' curation practices.

In Katy and actualvarric's responses, we see a foregrounding of individualized experiences, which can service as the destabilization of a monolithic system of knowledge-making in favor of an experience centered on the individual fan, where knowledge is centered on what the individual knows and experiences. This valuing of the individual experience is, I argue, a key factor in the tensions experienced by many fans within fandom discussion.

In the sections that follow, I will outline fans' productive, consumptive, and network curation within the context of Tumblr and show how these practices are indicative of intersections and tensions in fandom's ethics of self care and community care. However, while these practices of curation result in an individualized experiences of fandom for many fans, they can also re-inscribe a particular knowledge and mean that fans do not engage with diverging opinions and the difficult work of social justice. In the final section of analysis, I will show how fans' practices are not unique to Tumblr and are instead consistent across the platforms on which fandom has operated. This historical context highlights Tumblr as an example of a pattern in fandom practice; examining this pattern on a single platform can help us better understand both the practices and the underlying cultural ethics that are influencing those practices.

PRODUCTIVE CURATION: PUBLICITY AND WRITING FOR THE INDIRECT AUDIENCE

For many fans, writing in a space like Tumblr where posts are public and just about anyone can see what you say means that writing is not just about your direct interlocutor. If you respond to a post by disagreeing with its message, your disagreement is not intended solely or even primarily for the person you're responding to. For whom, then, are fans writing? In responding to surveys and interviews, fans suggest two distinct primary audiences and purposes for their posts on fandom discussion: writing for an audience of friends/followers to curate your self-image and writing for an audience of strangers to persuade *them* to your opinion. I position these practices as a form of productive curation: fans are directly curating how they are perceived by their followers and/or curating themselves as educators for those who may not be direct followers but might be observers of the discussion.

In both these cases, a motivation for this practice of writing to others is a sense that fandom discussion doesn't work to change the opinions of those it directly addresses (the immediate

participants in the conversation). For example, if Fan A perceives a particular ship to be problematic (racist, abusive, pedophilic, etc.) and responds to Fan B's appreciation post about the ship or writes their own post critiquing the ship, Fan A often does not expect to convince Fan B to change their mind. Rather, Fan A is speaking to Fans C, D, and E who are ancillary observers of the discussion. The difficulty of persuading direct audiences is expressed in the following comments from Sam:

> *Adrienne:* Do you think when people have those discussions that they're expecting to change the minds of other people that they're talking to?

> *Sam:* I think so, which I think is why it never works. There's an xkcd comic where it's like the girl says to the guy, "Come to bed," and he's like, "I can't. Someone is wrong on the internet." […] I pull that up whenever I want to get in a fight with somebody on the internet, especially when I want to get in a fight with a stranger on the internet. It's a good reminder to me that you'll never change somebody else's opinion on the internet as a stranger because you don't have the base for them to trust you. But I think lots of people think that they can and that's why they want to try.

While some fans, as Sam suggests, do believe that it is possible to change the minds of their direct audiences, many others recognize the challenges of persuading those whose opinions may be the complete opposite. Sam's comment suggests that while persuasion can happen among people with whom you have a close relationship, the persuasion of strangers on the internet is an impossibility. The vast public facilitated by a platform like Tumblr thus prevents persuasion because of the difficulty in forming close ties and because of the vast publics that interact in these spaces.

If convincing strangers whom you're directly addressing is impossible in a public space, what then is the purpose of having these conversations? Responses from fans suggest two possibilities: (1) writing is to construct a particular image of self that a fan wants their followers and friends to perceive, and/or (2) writing is to persuade an audience of lurkers who aren't involved in the discussion but are seeing it take place. I argue that writing to convey a particular self-image comes from an ethic of self care that attends to the individual fan and their experience of fandom,

while writing to persuade lurkers comes from an ethic of community care that attends to social justice as a key value of fandom. Particularly interesting in these motives for productive curation are the ways that they can intertwine, and that the ethics of self care and community care might, here, function in both symbiosis and tension. For example, writing for self-image might also function as community care if the self-image being constructed and conveyed is one of social justice education. Conversely writing for self-image might preclude community care if fans' focus on how they are perceived by friends and followers means they no longer attend to the harm a response might do to another fan (e.g., participating in harassment because that is what's perceived as appropriate for membership among a particular set of fans).

Writing for Self-Image

Some fans suggest that one motive for engaging in fandom discussion is to create or perform a particular self-image in their own minds or those of their friends and followers. These fans might be performing a particular image because they are signalling identities as fans who care about social justice or because they have a particular image of how to be a fan and are performing that image. In previous chapters, I have highlighted how fans' identities might influence how they perceive fandom discussion; here, we can see identity not just as a knowledge of the self, but as a perception of what the self *should* be. The relationship between identity and the practices of fandom discussion is thus more complex than the ways in which identity categories or identity-based experiences influence perception. In my interviews, several fans articulated the sense that writing in fandom is, in part, a performance of a particular identity. Sam, for example, highlights how identity might be comprised of a set of behaviors fans perform for their friends or followers by writing to an indirect audience:

Sam: I also think sometimes the audience isn't even necessarily the person who's wrong. I think sometimes the audience is their friends. Like, "Oh, look at me attack this person. Look at me trying to build awareness. Look at me so I can give you more ammo."

Adrienne: Right. So, they're doing it more for their own followers than for the person they're talking to?

Sam: I think so. I think hopefully everyone deep down realizes that you're not going to convince someone who loves Kylo Ren that he's actually evil. I hope they know that. I don't know if everybody does, but most people have to, I think.

Here, Sam suggests that many fans are aware of the unlikelihood of convincing their direct audience of an argument that audience vehemently disagrees with; writers, she argues, are unlikely to convince a passionate Kylo Ren fan to dislike the character or, for example, someone who passionately opposes trigger warnings to begin including them. Fans, she argues, still make these arguments because their own followers/friends will see their response. So instead of speaking only to, for example, the author of a Kylo Ren appreciation most they are responding to, the fan is speaking also to an audience of friends, attempting to perform a particular identity. Sam frames that identity as one inflected by social justice, suggesting that there is multiplicity and messiness in the purposes to which this identity performance is put. In the first part of her response, we can see this multiplicity in the thought process Sam attributes to authors: "Oh, look at me attack this person. Look at me trying to build awareness. Look at me so I can give you more ammo." We see the work of social justice operating in the references to building awareness and critiquing other, presumably problematic, fan behaviors, yet we also see a performative, self-directed motive in the repeated references to "look at me." Here we can see writing for self image as both community care and self care. In writing to induce fans to "look at me," a fan is motivated by their care for their own experiences in fandom, the self they imagine, and how that self is conveyed to others. In presenting that self through the critique of others, a fan might also be practicing community care, either by advancing an argument of social justice (e.g., "This post is racist and here is why")

or by strengthening community cohesion through the recognition and dismissal of those opinions that the community doesn't support.

The multiplicity and contradiction of self care and community care is also reflected in the second part of Sam's response, where she turns from performance to persuasion, focusing on how these authors might not just be performing social justice but actively engaged in attempts to persuade other fans that, for example, the character they love is not worthy of that appreciation. These persuasive efforts may be more or less obviously the work of social justice: attempting to persuade other fans that one character ship is better than another is less explicitly tied to social justice work than attempting to persuade other fans of the existence of a racist narrative trope in fanfiction, though discussions of racism, homophobia, sexism, and other social justice concerns are often part of many fans' evaluations of whether a ship is "good." In both cases, we can interpret these persuasive purposes as originating in an ethic of community care: many fans perceive addressing racism and other problematic content as necessary to building a more socially just and safe space for all fans.

The multiplicity of purpose is also a reflection of multiplicity and messiness of audience in these spaces. Two audiences are directly implicated in Sam's comments: the friends/followers of the author and the "person who's wrong" that they're directly addressing; we can assume a third audience of ancillary fans who might be observing this discussion. The multiplicity of audience and purpose suggests that there is a great deal of instability in the persuasive practices of fandom discussion. Yes, the performance of self-image seems to be key to some of this productive curation, but we must acknowledge the intertwining of author, audiences, and purposes because they help us see intersections of self, community, and social justice in fandom, as well as the places where they exist in tension.

Even a sense of the image fans should be performing is unstable in fandom. In my second interview with Sana, a 20-year-old Asian fan from India and the United States, she raised the idea of what it means to be a "Good Fan" and how that idea was connected to a performance of identity. She spoke about how she had once felt that to be a fan of a character required "actively defending" that character, but her sense of what it meant to be a good fan had changed. When I asked her to explain the change in her sense of a good fan, she said:

> I think almost definitely [it has changed], yeah it has in the sense that I still think that there is a way to be a good fan, capital letters, a Good Fan™, and that's very much about the image. And then there is a way of being a fan that is the idea of being a good fan is centered more around, "Are you enjoying the fandom the way that you want to?"
>
> So I think, I do think there is still a performative way to be a good fan where you are actively engaging in discourse, and you are actively making content or being super active and have an online persona and do get involved in the discourse and the kinkmemes or whatever. And then there's a way of being a good fan, and that way it's more personal, it's just like, "Well I'm enjoying this, and I have my small circle and I am having fun being a fan."

Like Sam, Sana highlights a sense of performativity in being a fan, saying that being "a Good Fan™" is "very much about the image," and distinguishing this performative fan from fans whose identities are centered around enjoyment of the fandom. Yet while Sam emphasizes this performance as primarily for a fan's friends or followers, Sana frames this performativity more broadly, saying that it can be about engaging in discussion and making content. This contrast raises the question: Is all participation in fandom discussion or community-wide fandom activity a performance of self-image? Sana seems to suggest it is, and in some ways this reflects much of digital studies scholarship that often connects identity and performance online. Yet there is also a sense in Sana's response of this performance as good citizenship in a broader fandom community: active engagement, creating content, participating in the discussions that, as I show in Chapter Three, are often definitional for the community. I included Sana's narrative to call attention to the complexity and multiplicity of performance in fandom and the ways that ethics of self care and

community care are entangled in this performance. Fans certainly recognize that production in fandom is, in part, a performance of a particular image of the self, but the audiences and purposes of that performance vary widely, which highlights intersections and entanglements of self and community.

I do not suggest, however, that fans actively calculate this performance of self-image with every post they create. Most fans frame their engagement as a genuine desire to change minds (even if they know it is less likely to occur) and from a place of passion and community care, as reflected by Sana's descriptions of performative fandom as something focused around active engagement. For other fans, their engagement is tied profoundly to their identities and desire to make fandom more inclusive for those identities. For example, they identify as a queer individual and feel compelled to respond to homophobia or transphobia in others' arguments. In this, we see fans practicing an ethic of self care for their own identities within their communities by advocating for and supporting those identities in public debates. In these motivations, we can understand the performance of self-image not as calculated narcissism or self-absorption, as is sometimes attributed to contemporary social media culture, but as a passionate and sometimes intimate sharing of the self within the community. The performance of a self-image may be unconscious or a deliberate, recognized practice, yet I argue that the nature of Tumblr as a public platform means it is impossible to ignore that any writing fans do is in part just such a performance. Further, in engaging in this process with all its complexities of audience and purpose, fans are purposefully wading into the complex intersections of self, community, and social justice in fandom. This negotiation, as I suggest in Chapter Five, can lead to greater metacognitive engagement with fandom and may prove a productive practice for engaging with and addressing the problems that fans recognize in fandom discussion.

Writing to Convince the Lurkers

In addition to being a performance of identity, writing to an audience of your followers may also function to convince those followers of your argument. Writing, some fans argue, is not about the person you are addressing but about the lurkers observing the conversation. These "lurkers," a fandom term for those who consume content without creating it, might follow your blog or the blog of one of your followers. As Jae describes below, engaging in a conversation may serve the rhetorical purpose of educating those invisible listeners:

> As a matter of fact, I think probably the second thing, the trying to educate people is more effective and if not against the person that you're talking to then... If you're doing it in a public sphere, then other people will see that and I can only think that, from my own experience of growing up and sort of being educated by witnessing these things happening, then other people will be out there witnessing these happening and going, "Oh, I didn't realize that perspective." So, sharing of perspectives is always useful, even in a tiny way. So, I just think it's more helpful to try to educate people, definitely, although it can feel more satisfying to just tell someone to fuck off obviously.

In this narrative, Jae draws their own experience of learning by observing to argue that fandom discussion is more effective at changing the perspectives of the observers of a conversation than it is at changing the minds of the people to whom the conversation is directly addressed. They highlight that because Tumblr is such a public platform, any conversation between two fans will also be witnessed by the followers of both of these fans and, if those followers choose to reblog the post, any of *their* followers. These potential audiences highlight again the multiplicity of audiences on these platforms. With such an unknowable audience, why do fans identify these lurkers as a potentially primary audience of their work, and what possible impact could speaking to this audience have? In Jae's response, they make a distinction between efforts to educate fans and efforts to tell off fans, saying, "I just think it's more helpful to try to educate people, definitely, although it can feel more satisfying to just tell someone to fuck off obviously." Jae's comment suggests that there is authorial intent in addressing these lurkers: an intent to educate and persuade,

186

which I have shown several fans identify throughout this dissertation (see, for example, Leanne's motivations for blogging about racial representation in Chapter Five). Jae's comment distinguishes between telling another fan to "fuck off," a direct address to a specific interlocutor, and education, a less direct engagement with a less knowable audience but directly rooted in community care and social justice. This authorial intent to speak to a broader audience is echoed in several fans' responses including those of Ayda, diversehighfantasy, and Leanne, and highlights knowledge-making as a community effort in fandom.

It might seem contradictory to argue that it is possible to convince strangers who lurk as invisible observers to a conversation when I have said above that fans perceive a lack of close ties as a detriment to convincing another fan of their argument. However, some fans cite another factor that might facilitate the success of an argument intended for lurkers that fails for its direct audience: passion about the topic in question. In my interviews, several fans noted that they were much less likely to respond positively to critique about something they enjoyed or believed in strongly. Consequently, we might say that it is possible to convince the lurkers to change their minds about topics they do not yet feel passionately about or have not yet formed a strong opinion on. Perspectives from lurkers are often difficult to access in both fandom and scholarship; once lurkers' contributions are visible to textual analysis (e.g., through posts), they are no longer lurkers, and lurkers often participate less in research; there are no self-identified lurkers in my survey sample though many of my interview participants report beginning their time in fandom as lurkers. In my own experience, *I* am much more likely to be convinced to change my opinion when I am not passionate about that thing. For example, as a young fan, I didn't have much of a stake in conversations about social justice and censorship of content in fandom because, as a privileged individual, I had not yet had to encounter these conversations. So my first encounter with issues

of social justice was in fandom, which I belonged to during several notable incidents of platforms purging content they deemed inappropriate. Fans' response to this content and arguments against fans who suggested that "problematic" content not be allowed in fandom forever shaped my view of censorship in fandom. To this day, despite agreeing with many critiques of content that is highly racist or fetishizes queer relationships or glamorizes abuse, I maintain the position that content should never be censored in fandom. I have never participated in these discussions about censorship, but the arguments of the fans that I followed have formed my very strong opinions on the subject.

CONSUMPTIVE CURATION

Most fans have a definitive idea of what they want their experience in fandom to look like; they know what topics they want to read about, the emotional tenor of the conversations that they do and don't want to participate in, and what kinds of people they want are part of their content network. As actualvarric articulates in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, fans often recognize the uniqueness of each fan's experience of fandom, that what they "want from fandom is not necessarily what other people want from fandom," and, as I have analyzed above, that fans are responsible to creating the fandom experience that they desire. Fans leverage the functionality of platforms like Tumblr to create this experience by curating the content that they consume.

One of Tumblr's major content management functions is tagging. Tumblr operates with an open tagging system in which no tags are predefined or hierarchical and users are able to add any tags they wish. Users use tags both to indicate the subject material of their posts as well as to provide commentary on the topic of the post. Users can search by tag to find content that uses that tag, and also blacklist tags to avoid seeing any content that uses that tag on their dashboard. Users' choices in consuming content are often managed through these tagging functions but their motives,

as the fans in this section narrate, may be rooted in the self care of attending to mental health and personal preference and in the community care of deliberating engaging with diverse viewpoints. Regardless of the ethic of care their drives their choices, many fans describe their consumptive curation practices as coming from a deeply personal sense of how they want to experience fandom.

Avoiding Content

Every fan has some sort of preference for the kinds of content that they engage with and the kinds of content that they don't want to engage with. Consequently, many fans leverage the platform capabilities of Tumblr to avoid the content that they don't want to see. This content might include fandoms that they're not interested in or character pairings that they don't like. As an example, I recently used the blacklist tool to keep from seeing the soccer-related posts on one of the blogs that I follow. This blog posts and reblogs interesting *Rogue One* content, which I why I follow it, but its author is also an avid soccer fan, a topic I have no interest in. Blacklisting the tags that she most frequently attaches to her soccer posts means that I can enjoy the *Rogue One* content that I like without seeing the soccer content that I don't care about.

Other fans describe similar practices of deliberately avoiding particular content that they don't care for. For example, when describing her reading practices, Luciana, a 28-year-old Colombian fan of *Pandora Hearts* and *Yuri!!! On Ice*, writes that she'll read

> almost anything that doesn't contain my NOTPs. Because I love my fandoms and most of them are dead, I tend to ship rarepairs so any piece of content is valuable even if I don't like it after I've seen it [o]r read it

NOTP is derived from the acronym OTP (One True Pairing), which can refer to the only relationship within a fandom that a fan supports and/or the only relationship for a particular character that a fan supports. For example, a fan in the *Harry Potter* fandom might ship Harry Potter with Hermione Granger. If that ship is their OTP, then they might not support, for example,

a relationship between Harry and Ginny or Ron and Hermione. A NOTP is the opposite of an OTP: a relationship that a fan actively dislikes. For example, remaining with the *Harry Potter* example, a fan might have Harry and Hermione as their OTP, not mind either of those characters in other relationships, but actively dislike, for example, Hermione paired with Professor Snape—which would then be an NOTP. Luciana is therefore suggesting that she will read any discussion content in her fandoms except for a very particular kind of content about a particular topic.

While some fans describe their practices of avoiding content as based on its topic, for others its about avoiding discussion that has a particular tone or that engenders a particular emotional response. These fans are particularly attuned and responsive to the conflict that can occur in fandom discussion. As I described in Chapter Three, while discussion can be a place for theorizing about the canon materials, building community, and developing social consciousness, it is often also a space of harassment where fans feel attacked for their perspectives and content preferences. In response to this potential for negativity, many fans describe curating their consumption to avoid all potentially contentious discussion. For example, Morgan, a 23-year-old French fan of content including Marvel and *Stranger Things*, doesn't read any fandom discussion because of the conflict that can exist in fan spaces:

> I flee from people who have a tendency to complain about others or create unnecessary conflicts. Fandom is supposed to be a fun and positive experience. Whenever i can, i remain skeptical of what i read and i keep this state of mind when dealing with fandom.

Morgan characterizes the discussions they avoid as "complain[ing] about others" and "unnecessary conflicts," and their comments about fandom as "a fun and positive experience" suggest a general dislike of discord in their experiences of fandom. They thus curate an experience where they encounter no fandom discussion to avoid encountering potential conflict. A complete disengagement with fandom discussion is relatively rare; only 4% of my survey respondents

reported actively avoiding fandom discussion. Nevertheless, this complete avoidance likely represents an extreme example of curation of the fandom experience because fandom discussion is a common and pervasive part of fandom. To avoid it completely would require a significant leveraging of curatorial tools (described in the "Network Curation" section of this chapter).

The sentiment behind Morgan's curation practice is, however, much more common among the fans I surveyed. Many of these fans report avoiding particular kinds of discussion because of its potential for "drama" and conflict. Ray, a 21-year-old Chinese-Canadian fan of animated fandoms including *Pokémon* and *Steven Universe*, writes that

> Because discourse has a negative connotation I do not actively seek out this drama unless I feel the issue is very significant. Most issues in my opinion are pretty minor. However there has been some recent fandom creations that turned me off because of many content creators fetishising their work (there wasn't much discourse about it to read though as most people seemed ok with it). Harmless normal chatter about random things is something I participate in: headcanons about characters, speculation on where a show or game is headed etc.

As I note in the Chapter One of this dissertation, the term "discourse" in fandom has significant negative connotations for many fans, with most associating the term with conflict and disagreement that is perceived as harassment and/or major disagreement over relatively minor issues. While the issues themselves and the debates around them may be perceived as more or less important by different fans, the negative connotations of the term "discourse" are relatively universal. Ray's response highlights the ways in which some fans will curate their fandom experiences to avoid encountering this negatively connotated "discourse" while still leaving space to encounter discussion that they consider positive, such as analyses about characters (headcanons) and metatextual conversation about the media object.

Tess, a 24-year-old American fan in more than a dozen fandoms including movies, video games, and anime, similarly describes avoiding particular kinds of discussion because of the negative behavior that surrounds these discussions:

> There's only one predominant "discourse" anymore. Any facets of online fandom discourse route back to sexuality and purity policing. I do not actively seek posts about it, I've even went so far as to blacklist some popular terms from my Tumblr to keep my anxiety low. When I do read these posts it's because I want to see if the fandom has finally migrated onto real-life issues, or at least that the majority is finally in a general understanding that these types of behavior are ludicrous at best and terrifying at worst. Sadly, this has not happened and I had to block yet another fandom harasser only minutes before taking this.

Like Ray, Tess describes interest in "significant" (Ray) or "real-life" (Tess) issues, but feels that fandom's engagement with these issues doesn't adequately address them and/or is entangled with behavior like harassment or "policing" fans' opinions. Because many fans don't want to encounter these behaviors, they avoid discussion where this potential discord exists and often describe these practices of avoidance in terms of self care. Tess, for example, blacklists tags and blocks users to reduce her anxiety and Ray describes non-discourse discussion as "harmless," implying that contentious discussions are harmful and should thus be avoided.

These responses demonstrate that some fans' curation of their experiences in fandom can be motivated by a desire to avoid particular topics of discussion or particular kinds of discussion that these fans perceive as negatively charged. This practice of avoidance seems primarily motivated by fans' emotional responses to and judgements of the kinds of discussion they avoid: Luciana emphasizes engaging with content she loves, highlighting the emotional appeal of particular kinds of content over others, and Morgan cites "fun" and a "positive experience" as their motives for participation; Ray judges the content of most "drama" as "pretty minor" and Morgan describes some of the conversation as "unnecessary conflicts." By curating to avoid particular kinds of content, fans are protecting and creating the kind of experience they *want* to have.

Despite the value to fans' in enacting self care by curating a specific fandom experience, it is also important to interrogate the potential consequences of this practice. While most fans did not explicitly report avoiding social justice-related content, it is important to note that this content is often found within some of the most contentious discussions in fandom. For example, a debate about shipping preferences—which some fans might characterize as drama or not a significant real-life issue—might also include critique of racist, queerphobic, or misogynistic narrative tropes. Indeed, many of the social justice concerns that I have seen raised by fans have come up in the context of commentary on particular ships or shipping patterns. Fans who avoid these potentially contentious conversations might also, therefore, avoid the difficult work of social justice that can also happen in these spaces.

However, it is also important to recognize that while many fans described avoiding content that they characterized as in some way negative, many fans also did not provide definitions of what content they categorized as negative or drama or how they defined these terms. This ambiguity is a place that would benefit from further investigation with fans to clarify more specifically which content fans curate to avoid; it is certainly a question that, on reflection, I wish I had discussed in more detail with both my survey and interview participants.

It is also important to recognize that while fans may be avoiding engaging specifically with social justice content because of the contention often involved in such engagement, there are many other reasons why fans might avoid the kinds of discussions where social justice concerns are often raised. As I have described in Chapter Three, contentious discussions in fandom can become places of harassment. Numerous fans in my study reported being doxxed, receiving death threats, and being accused of racism, homophobia, and pedophilia because of the views they expressed, often in relation to conversations about shipping. As Corey, a 21-year-old American fan of numerous

TV shows including *Westworld*, *Merlin*, and *Game of Thrones*, recounts, the language of social justice is often misused to critique other fans' shipping preferences:

> Stuff like, how people w/ a 3 year age gap in their 20s are pedophiles somehow? A lot of people calling things pedophilia that I'm pretty sure arent: high school aus, future fic for child characters, a 16 year old & 18 year old dating, teenagers having any kind of romantic or sexual feelings whatsoever. A really weird ideathat writing anything queer is automatically a terrible fetish. Oh! There's this new thing where if a 21 year old actor plays a teenager people try to convince you they're litterally a teenager & thinking they're hot makes you a pedophile. Lots of things about how shipping certain characters is racist. I'm not qualified to speak on that but some of it's weird.

Corey's response highlights the way that social justice conversations can become particularly muddy in fandom. Misappropriation of concepts like pedophilia and fetishization can make it difficult for fans to engage in social justice critique. For example, redeyedwrath, an 18-year-old Dutch fan of *Merlin* and *Teen Wolf*, shared a story of being accused of misogyny for critiquing the way that straight women's representations of queer relationships often centered on heteronormative stereotypes. Corey offers similar examples where the label of pedophilia is attached is attached to numerous kinds of character pairings that are not pedophilic. I share these examples to highlight the ways in which discussions of social justice in fandom can often be entangled with other form of contention and that, consequently, fans' practices of consumptive curation embody similar messiness. Negotiating engagement with contentious content is particularly difficult for fans and, I would argue, fans' practices of curating to avoid that contention arises out of a desire to avoid that uncertain and potentially harmful conversation.

However, while we can recognize the muddiness, harassment, and difficulty that might understandably drive fans to avoid contentious fandom discussion, we must also grapple with the potential harm avoidance might do to fandom's enactment of community care. In avoiding contention, fans are potentially also avoiding engagement with social justice content and/or surrounding themselves with content that only reinforces their existing perspectives. The potential

harm of this practice is illustrated in redeyedwrath's experiences with two subcommunities in the

Teen Wolf fandom, one dedicated solely to fans who ship the characters of Stiles Stilinski and

Derek Hale (a ship called Sterek) and one dedicated to all ships except Sterek:

> Like I said, I'm basically in both of the two camps, which a lot of people don't like but whatever. So in one camp, which is the camp of the ship I ship, Sterek, or used to ship I guess, I don't feel that I can express my opinion because every time I've done that I get shoved down and I see people talk a lot more about fandom problems in broad terms, or to slander the "other side." So it's not really, I feel like it's not really getting anywhere. But in the other camp, which is everything except Sterek shippers basically, I really do see people talking about fandom specific problems, and listening to you even if they disagree, which I like a lot more. So it's about, for example racism, but also the implications of certain ships and the way canon gets transformed into fanon, and how that impacts fandom as a whole, and the way fandom sees certain characters.

When asked why he felt that discussion in the non-Sterek community was more productive

and open, redeyedwrath attributed the difference to differing levels of diversity within the

perspectives available in the two groups:

> I think it's because there are so many different people in there who like different things, so it's not just the big Sterek fans and the smaller Sterek fans, and then the smaller Sterek fans are afraid of pissing off the bigger fans. So because you have a diverse group of people with diverse preferences, you can say what you want more, I guess, and not have to worry about the consequences.

In the first group, the Sterek fans, redeyedwrath perceives a uniformity of opinion because all of

the participants in that group enjoy the same thing. Differing opinions, like the ones redeyedwrath

attempts to express, are largely unavailable, and when someone expresses them, that person is

critiqued by the group. In contrast, the differences in likes and interests in the second group

facilitates both a wider array of opinions and a greater willingness to listen and productively

engage with disagreement.

While this narrative represents only two specific subcommunities within a single fandom,

it illustrates the ways that curating to avoid content *could* result in both reinforcing particular

viewpoints and preventing the kind of disagreement and negotiation that is often a part of social

justice work. Fandom is a difficult and messy place to do this work and fans have understandable reasons for avoiding conversation that can be a space of social justice but is also often a space of harassment, accusation, and misappropriation. Yet despite these difficulties, we must continue to interrogate our avoidance. No matter our reasons for avoiding these contentious discussions, it is inevitable that in cutting them out of our engagement with fandom, we are privileging the conversation of the fans we already agree with. We are privileging dominant narratives that do not challenge our own perspectives. We are also enacting our own privilege; many fans, particularly fans of color, cannot just ignore potentially contentious conversation. Those of us who can afford to ignore these conversations—and the issues in fandom they represent—do so from a position of privilege. Even ignoring harassment is a privilege and can be read as a prioritization of the self and the personal experience of fandom over the improvement of that experience for others.

In saying this, I do not suggest that any fan who curates their experience of fandom is "doing fandom wrong," nor that all fans must engage with contentious content in order to be "Good Fans." I recognize the very real harms that fans have experienced and the important reasons they choose to avoid particular content, whether in response to particular harm or because of personal choice. Instead, I argue that we must critically reflect on what content our curation practices let us see and what content those practices let us avoid. We must be aware of the privilege we are enacting and challenge ourselves to think about our ideal fandom experience in the context of the community care we purport to value.

Seeking Out Content

Just as fans avoid certain kinds of content because they dislike the tone or topic or because they know the content will be harmful to their mental health, fans actively seek out content on topics that they enjoy or are passionate about. When describing their reading practices in my

survey, many fans indicated that their topics of choice were connected with their personal interests, as Sarah, a 28-year-old American fan of diverse TV, book, and movie fandoms, does here:

> I'll read about why people are in fandom, or polite behavior in fandom, or fandom history, because I find those topics interesting or important.

In this response, Sarah lists reading interests that include fans' personal narratives about fandom, discussion of "polite behavior," and historical perspectives on fandom, and she flags these interests as topics she finds "interesting." Her interests have thus guided her reading selections. Notably, Sarah also uses the word "important" to describe her reading interests, highlighting a second criteria for seeking content, but one that is often interwoven with interest.

Many other fans use similar language to denote topics that are interesting and that they deem important, either personally or for the community. The responses from Catalina and djtmusings below represent two examples of this intersection:

> **Catalina**: Certain kinds of social justice/identity politics discussions. Not all of them, but depending on the topic discussed, and how much merit I think the critique might have, I will read it. I do so because I care about social justice in fandom -- thought I don't always agree with other fans about what that means or looks like -- and I think fans are unusually sophisticated in many of their social justice critiques. I am also VERY interested in the historical memory types of discussions, mainly because I am fascinated by how fandom changes and doesn't relative to how communication form change (zines to online archives or Livejournal to Tumblr)

> **djtmusings:** Primarily things relating to my own fandom - SPN; things that are well written/reasoned; things that attempt to present both sides or a more objective pov; and after that, almost any topic. I am still relatively new to online fandom and am still trying to get a grasp on the culture.

Like Sarah, djtmusings' response suggests a more personal interest: discussion relating to *Supernatural*, the fandom that she's involved in. But she also frames this interest within the statement of being new to fandom and needing to "get a grasp on the culture." Her personal interests are thus interwoven with a sense that discussion is important to understanding and participating in the culture. Catalina's response also demonstrates personal interest in the topics

she reads—social justice and history—but these topics are more explicitly framed as important within fandom. She does this by bringing together a sense of what she considers important in fandom with the notion that fans are doing insightful work on this topic, implying the overall importance of this topic to fandom.

Also in these responses, we see the concept of subjective quality arise as a characteristic in fans' reading practices. Catalina, for example, writes that she reads posts in part based on "how much merit" she thinks the argument has, while djtmusings seeks out "things that attempt to present both sides or a more objective pov." In both these cases, we see the fans making judgement about the merit and objectivity of arguments presented in fandom discussion, and those judgements subsequently influence if and how those fans will engage with the content in question. Since judgements of merit and objectivity are influenced by personal bias and perspective, this suggests that fans' own identities come strongly into play. In addition to defining the interests that fans seek out in fandom discussion, the perspectives at the foundation of their identities shape the kinds of content they see as worthy of reading.

For some fans, this assessment of the worthiness of the content is based in part on an existing relationship between the fan and the author of the content, with fans being more inclined to read and respond to content from mutuals—people they follow who also follow them—or friends in fandom spaces. For many fans, this desire to read content from people they know is linked to the public nature of Tumblr as a platform and a sense of resistance to critique from strangers. In this resistance, we again see an ethic of self care being prioritized in some fans' curation practices: these fans often choose content that they are personally interested in and though this content may include posts that deal with issues of social justice, this content is sought because

of the fan's personal interest first, rather than, in most cases, a sense of commitment to community care and education.

While many of the responses I examine in this chapter suggest that fans seek out particular kinds of discussion based on their topics, subjective evaluation of the subject's worth, and personal relationship with the authors, notably absent from the content that most fans seek out is contentious discussion—what many fans label pejoratively as "discourse." Some fans report seeking out this discussion only in fandoms they aren't a regular part of or on topics they don't care about for the sake of the thrill of seeing the contention, but for the most part, fans involved in my research seem to avoid these more contentious discussions. As I suggested above, this avoidance may be tied to a valuing of particular kinds of content over others or, as earlier narratives from Morgan, Luciana, and Ray suggest, an emotional resonance with particular kinds of content and resistance to others. It is important to note here that many fans' responses did not specify what kinds of content they labelled as "discourse" or "contentious" and to be avoided, so the content fans avoid might include contentious discussions about issues of racism, pedophilia, homophobia, sexism, and colonialism as well as content in which fans are actively harassing one another. Conversely, fans might not see this content as contentious or to be avoided. While my data does not conclusively illustrate that fans are actively avoiding or failing to seek out content on contentious social justice issues, my research suggests that while fans passionate about social justice may actively engage with these topics (for example, diversehighfantasy below), fans are less likely to deliberately seek out content that challenges their perspectives.

While not common, some fans in my study did report deliberately seeking out content they disagreed with or that challenged their viewpoints. These fans were often those who were already actively engaged in social justice conversations and reported feeling the need to be aware of and

199

engage with multiple perspectives. One such fan is diversehighfantasy, and considering her motives for seeking out this content helps explain why other fans don't:

> I do search for it. On Twitter I have mostly people that I follow, and then also there's a hashtag called Star Wars Rep Matters. I think it's actually SW Rep Matters. That has some really great things in it. Then there's Reddit, which has of course, several different subs that I will follow and I will just see what people are talking about. Tumblr, that's where my blog is, so I'm on there. What else? There's the older forums. I don't spend a lot of time on those anymore. Every once in a while I'll check them out. But yeah, I do go looking for conversations, or just to sort of see what conversations are going on and things like that.
>
> I don't really rely on say my dash 100%, because I think if you curate what you see on fandom, then you really don't have a full picture of what's really going on. So, I do look beyond my own sort of curated feed.

diversehighfantasy reports actively and extensively searching out a range of content in fandom discussion beyond the work she sees on the dash that she's curated. She argues that "if you curate what you see on fandom, then you really don't have a full picture of what's really going on," highlighting that curation presents a very particular and individual experience of fandom, one that does not completely encapsulate what is happening in the community and may not provide access to contrasting perspectives. diversehighfantasy describes wanting to see the "full picture" of her fandom, which, for her, includes dissenting views and problematic content, as she describes below:

> **Adrienne:** Do you do anything to manage other things you don't want to see, and do you do anything to avoid seeing certain kinds of conversation?
>
> **diversehighfantasy:** I really don't. I don't block people. I might've said that before. I don't block people. I don't ... really do any of that anymore, because if people, or if the fandom is just really bad, I want to be aware of that. And I don't try to avoid that stuff at all. So yeah, there really isn't anything, I mean, if I'm not in the mood I'll just maybe stick with just talking to friends or something. I don't always seek it out. But, I don't really, I don't try to avoid anything like confrontational or anything that's like racism. If people in the fandom are being racist, I want to know about. So I don't block that stuff out.
>
> **Adrienne:** Right. So, it sounds like for you, knowing the discussion is a part of knowing like what the fandom is like?
>
> **diversehighfantasy:** Yeah.

Unlike many of the fans quoted in the chapter, diversehighfantasy doesn't block fandom discussion from her experience of fandom. Instead, as she states elsewhere in our interview, she actively searches for the kinds of discussion many other fans avoid and does not employ Tumblr's tools of blocking and/or blacklisting to prevent this content from reaching her (as I will discuss further in the "Network Curation" section below). As she reports in the excerpt above, her motivations for this practice are about knowing when there are things like racism or confrontational debates occurring in fandom. For her, knowing about these conversations is part of knowing what fandom is like. Like other fans, she has determined the particular kind of fandom experience she wants to have based on her values as a fan and deliberately curated the content she consumes to facilitate that experience. Despite not overtly limiting the flow of fandom discussion of any kind into her experience, she still demonstrates a considerably curated experience of fandom, highlighting the ways that an ethic of self care in creating a very particular, individual experience can function to both limit content engagement or allow for a more deliberate application of an ethic of community care for broader community interaction. Each of these fans in this chapter is similarly leveraging the affordances and constraints of platforms like Tumblr to create a particular experience of fandom that caters to their needs, whether that be only encountering "fun" and positive content or wading into the worst and most contentious corners of debate.

Mental Health and Variable Engagement

I have presented two contrasting practices of consumptive curation: curating to avoid content and curating to seek out content. The intersection between these two practices is evident in the ways that, for many fans, curation is entangled with mental health and consequently the ways their enactment of self care governs their engagement with fandom discussion. For example, in their survey responses, Corey cites mental health as a factor in their reading practices:

> I read anything against the weirdness described early, but I don't follow any blogs about it Bc it makes me feel bad so I can only seek it out when I'm in the right mental space for it

In this response, Corey describes both engaging with a particular kind of fandom discussion but also bounding their engagement with it specifically because the content makes them "feel bad" and they can only engage with it from the "right mental space."

Like Corey, many fans wrote in their survey responses or mentioned in their interviews that attending to their mental health was an important part of their curation process. For example, some fans reported using blocking, blacklisting, and tag search features to limit particular content on their blogs when they worried it might trigger anxiety or when they were feeling particularly stressed. Others reported deliberately avoiding their Tumblr inboxes or disabling anonymous commenting when they worried about receiving harassment and how those comments would affect their wellbeing. In this practice, we see clear evidence of the prioritization of an ethic of self care: fans recognize the damage certain posts might do to their mental health and take deliberate action to protect themselves and their ability to engage with fandom.

I highlight this practice of curating for mental health because it complicates the potential impacts of curating to avoid particular kinds of discussion. While such curation practices sometimes facilitate avoidance of the difficult and necessary work of social justice in fandom, not all avoidance is an ossification of a particular perspective or a refusal to engage with diverging opinions and the difficult problems of social justice. In fact, most of the fans in my study who explicitly describe avoiding certain kinds of fandom discussion for the sake of their mental health are active participants in social justice conversations and their avoidance is a temporary or fluctuating practice. Jae, for example, actively engages with content that critiques the character pairings that they enjoy because of a commitment to self-critique and social justice:

> I will usually read it really intensely because I like to think about these things and I would hate to... I wouldn't want to ignore it because I really want to know if something that I'm doing is morally inexcusable or if I could be convinced that it was. But yeah, I like to think about the moral implications of absolutely everything that I do, so if somebody's got a point about something that I'm into then I want to know what it is so that I can think about it for myself, so yeah, I'll normally pay really intense attention probably.

And yet, despite this active interest in engaging with conversations about moral issues in the fanfiction that they enjoy, at the time our interviews Jae reported having avoided fandom discussion for several weeks:

> It depends how up to engaging with other people I feel like being. Like when life is stressful I just kind of want to withdraw into myself and just look at pictures and read fic and that kind of thing, not think too much. But if I'm my normal self I feel more into the whole metadiscourse kind of thing and I find it more interesting.

For Jae, their willingness and ability to engage with fandom discussion was variable; they needed to "have the right level of energy" and stress in their life outside of fandom could make it difficult for them to engage with these discussions. Later in our interview, Jae revealed that engaging with conflict in fandom was difficult for them despite their willingness to read perspectives that contradicted their own. For Jae, addressing stress and anxiety, which were made worse by conflict, sometimes required disengaging from social justice conversations in fandom. Other fans similarly reported variable engagements with social justice and that they practiced more active curation of the consumption in response to changing mental health needs.

The recurring theme of curation for mental health highlights the importance of self care in fandom not just as attention to personal preference but as self reflection and self knowledge deployed for protection. Further, the *need* to curate for this content also reflects the many deep problems that fans identify in fandom discussion. In Chapter Three, I highlighted fans' narratives of harassment, doxing, and conflict that broke fans' sense of community, drove them from fandom spaces, and spilled over into the offline lives. These deep problems with fandom discussion mean

that intense self reflection is required when we analyze and critique our practices of self care. In catering to their own ideal of what their fandom experience should look like, many fans might curate an experience absent of the important social justice conversations that fandom values and needs to have. Yet we must also acknowledge the understandable desire to avoid harassment and the necessity of attending to mental health, particularly for fans who are otherwise active participants in social justice conversations.

As fans we must, then, examine our practices of curation and question what our practices of self care let us avoid. We must critically examine when our attendance to mental health is truly a protection against harm and when it might operate as a subconscious tactic to avoid having to confront perspectives that challenge our own? Where and how do we need to push ourselves to do the messy, difficult work of wading into contentious discussion to ensure that we engage with social justice even when it is entangled with content we don't want to see? Answering these questions requires both deep personal reflection on the part of each fan and intense community conversation.

NETWORK CURATION: FOLLOWING, UNFOLLOWING, AND BLOCKING USERS

In displaying only the posts from others that a user follows, Tumblr's dashboard, like many other social media interfaces, builds curation into the very functionality of the platform. Like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, it demands and requires that you select the individuals you want to follow as a way of defining the content that you want to see. Thus, selecting the users that you follow represents a process of curating the kind of content you expect to subsequently see on your dashboard. For many fans, a level of thought is involved in the decision to follow another user, and the users that you follow may be constrained by your own interests and your judgement of their interests—the curated self (Seko and Lewis) that their blog posts represent. This response

from thesardine, a 33-year-old American fan passing out of the Marvel fandom, demonstrates this use of Tumblr capabilities to curate a dashboard of desired content:

> I'll read pretty much anything if it crosses my dash, because I follow a limited number of blogs and I'm interested in the things posted by the people I follow. Unless it's star wars, which is blacklisted from my dash due to its popularity contrasting with my utter disinterest in it.

Visible in this response is the sense that fans follow other fans with purpose. thesardine suggests that she follows a limited number of blogs because those blogs post content that she's interested in. And even in this case, she still deploys the functionality of blacklisting to prevent certain content from reaching her dashboard, even if it's from bloggers whose content she otherwise likes. Lindsey makes a similar move when she writes, "I make a point of not following people who spread negativity or participate in trolling/harassment of other users." These comments highlight that fans deploy the tool to follow other users strategically, considering the kind of content these other users create and what therefore would appear in their own feeds if they followed that user.

The other, opposite dimension of following users is choosing to no longer follow a user and/or choosing to block that user from interacting with you and your content. The response of Nancy, a 19-year-old white German/Polish fan of *Supernatural* and *Harry Potter,* offers an example of this other dimension:

> I try to stay away from too much negativity because it makes me upset. I am a true believer in shaping your own experience on social media/fan experience so when I see someone being too negative/hateful I usually block/unfollow them. I want my fandom experience to be as positive and fun as possible since it's my place to relax and not stress further.

Nancy's response demonstrates how fans leverage the functionality of Tumblr to remove content they no longer want to interact with. In this case, Nancy does not want to interact with content she deems "too negative/hateful" and when she encounters such content from people she follows, she responds by unfollowing them and/or blocking them from interacting with her content.

As these narratives and other fans quoted in this chapter suggest, it is most common for fans to leverage the capabilities of Tumblr to limit the access of contentious fandom discussion to their fandom experience. It is notable, then, to consider the reasons why some fans choose not to limit utilize Tumblr's functionality to curate their networks. In the previous section, I shared a narrative from diversehighfantasy in which she described that she didn't block other users because she wanted the "full picture" of fandom, which was only possible if she had full access to dissenting opinions and fans creating content she perceived as problematic (e.g., racist). diversehighfantasy deliberately eschews the platform's tools for removing that content. Despite the very different deployments of Tumblr's functionality, both actively blocking users and deliberately permitting access to dissenting viewpoints represent many fans' dedication to creating a particular fandom experience that they've envisioned for themselves.

A HISTORY OF CURATORIAL PRACTICE

In this section, I turn to fans' discussion of their curatorial practices on older platforms to show that it is fandom's long-standing ethics of self and community care that drives these curatorial practices more than the affordances and constraints of the platform. By building their engagement with fandom based on these ethics of care, fans are twisting the platform to their own use. As Oakley suggests, "the way that designers intend a platform to be used may not be the way that users actually end up using the platform" (6), and in this case, the ways that fans have consistently used several different platforms across the decades suggests their active intervention in knowledge-making affordances of these platforms.

"It Used to Be Different": Discussion on Livejournal vs Tumblr

Fandom has not always been on Tumblr. That platform itself is barely more than a decade old, while contemporary digital fandom dates back to the 1960s. To understand contemporary curation practices, it's important to consider fans' perceptions of discussion in the past and on different platforms. Most of the fans in my study have participated in fandom and fandom discussion on multiple platforms, from fandom's early days on email lists, to Livejournal and Fanfiction.net, to fandom's current presence predominantly on Tumblr and Archive of Our Own. Many of the fans that I interviewed expressed sentiments that fandom and fandom discussion were significantly different on these platforms. Take, for example, the perspective of Sam, who has been participating in fandom for over twenty years and has been on fan platforms including Tumblr, Archive of Our Own, Reddit, Fanfiction.net, and Livejournal:

> I guess what I'm saying is that the way that the platforms work, on LiveJournal you are sharing with people based on your relationships, and then on Tumblr you're sharing based on interest but it's interest post by post. So you're letting all of these people in that maybe you don't know. Whereas on LiveJournal you pretty much knew everybody already that you were talking to.

Fans highlight the level of personal relationship and knowledge of audience as clear differences between fandom discussion on Livejournal and fandom discussion on Tumblr, and it's easy to see both these differences and in particular how those differences could be understood as manifestations of the different capabilities of each of these platforms. For example, conversation on Livejournal often required direct relationships between the audience and the writer. Commentary occurred in posts and directly in the comments of those posts. Where community existed, it was in private communities that often required passwords and vetted potential members. In part, this is because fandom at that time was much less mainstream and more subject to legal action from the creators of media objects. But this is also a result of the functionality of

Livejournal: the public feeds of contemporary social media platforms did not exist on Livejournal. The discovery of new content happened through a network of individuals, resulting in relatively siloed communities with much less publicity in discussion.

As a consequence of these siloed communities, many fans believe that successfully changing the minds of other fans—a purported purpose of discussion for many fans—was more effective on platforms such as Livejournal, as this response from a 53-year-old, Hispanic-American fan suggests:

> *yourlibrarian*: It's also difficult now, given the way that fandom activity is embedded in the same social media spaces used by many other groups, to say that any discourse within fandom changes attitudes or behaviors when influences can be coming from many directions. Back when "locked" communities and groups with restricted access were common they had moderators and specific rules. So it was a lot easier to say that, yes, a discussion among members about a particular topic could result in a rule change that affected the community going forward. But those aren't very common anymore. So now it just tends to be a lot of unregulated screaming at one another for any little thing that gets reposted randomly in front of many people not even involved in the original discussion.

As in Sam's comment above, yourlibrarian highlights the different level of connection between earlier platforms like Livejournal and today's discussion on Tumblr. What before consisted of small communities with restricted access and consequently close connections is now much larger and much less regulated. yourlibrarian's response highlights, in particular, differences between these two platform affordances: Livejournal facilitates closed communities while that functionality is not available on Tumblr and inversely Tumblr's large-scale public space was not available on Livejournal.

It is clear from these responses that fans perceive fandom and fandom discussion as different across platforms and consequently understand fandom discussion as being able to accomplish different things in different spaces—being able to change more minds on Livejournal,

208

for example, but being able to see more perspectives, possibly, on the open, unregulated space of Tumblr.

Parallels in Curatorial Practice and the Ethic of Care

While Tumblr and Livejournal facilitate very different forms of communication and modes of social interaction for fandom, we can also read parallels across these practices that suggest that fans have always curated their relationships with fandom discussion and intervened in the definition of these relationships. In particular, fans chose which users to establish relationships with and which content groups to join in both spaces—curation of their networks. On Livejournal, this choice is expressed through decisions about which communities to request access to and which user blogs to follow. On Tumblr, this choice is similarly expressed in which users to follow. The lack of functionality for establishing closed communities on Livejournal is on Tumblr replicated in the use of tags to represent shared interests and draw together a loose community. The link between tags on Tumblr and community on Livejournal is also highlighted by the concept of tag invasion, a concept wherein one group of fans is perceived as invading the tag belonging to another group by posting content that is not appropriate for that tag. For example, a common etiquette practice is tagging content in support of a character or relationship with that character name and the ship name, but using tags prefaced by "anti" for critical content. Thus, a post praising Severus Snape might use the tag "#severus snape" or "#snape" while a post that is critical of this character might use the tag "#anti snape." The distinction between these two tags evolved from a sense that each represented a distinct community and that putting content under the wrong tag was invading a community you were not welcome in. Thus while Tumblr lacks the community structure of Livejournal, fans have leveraged Tumblr's tools for similar functionality. These choices in joining particular communities or tagging/search for specific tags suggest fans' interventions in choosing

what kinds of content they saw, the community they built, and the kinds of discussion they interacted with because of those communities and ties. Though the functionality on the platforms for community were different, fans leveraged Tumblr's tagging capabilities to replicate the same effect. Thus, while different content platforms might facilitate different kinds of communication, fans intervene in the knowledge-making system constructed by their platforms by strategically deploying the functionalities of a platform to enable the similarly curated experience of fandom across platforms.

CONCLUSION

Platform affordances play a considerable role in defining the kinds of communication and patterns of interaction in digital spaces. In this chapter, we have seen the ways Tumblr enables a pattern of interaction dependent on publicity and public facing dialogue, where most interaction is done in the eyes of a legion of faceless strangers and where the kinds of communication that occur are ones not bound by small audiences. Tumblr has enabled a pattern of interaction wherein fans deploy tagging, blacklisting, following, unfollowing/blocking, and other practices to find and avoid certain content in deference to their identities, interests, and mental state. Fans' practices around fandom discussion and perspectives that fandom is distinctly different between Tumblr and other platforms highlight the profound role a platform plays in shaping the interactions of its users.

However, as I argue in this chapter, platform is not the only or even the most significant determiner of these communication patterns. As the motivations for fans' curation practices and the consistency of those motivations across platforms suggest, fans intervene in defining and enacting communication practices on various platforms. Tumblr facilitates many ways of finding and avoiding content, and fans deploy those tools deliberately in service of their interests, mental health, and ideological perspectives on what interaction in fandom should look like. Further, as

the final section of this chapter highlights, fans have been consistently using these curatorial practices across platforms. Though Tumblr presents unique affordances and constraints, fans have strategically leveraged tools similarly across platforms, suggesting that the platforms themselves have less of a determining role than fandom ethics of care and the entanglements of self care and community. Fans' curation practices can be understood as creating distinct personal experiences of fandom for each fan, driven by an ethic of care that prioritizes these individual experiences in fandom and a sense that fandom is outside of the mainstream system of communication and interaction. To explore this argument further, I return to the participant quote I shared at the opening of this chapter:

> ***Elf:*** I think we're outside of the mainstream and we're not following mainstream rules for what's polite or what's publishable or how to communicate, and therefore, we need constant discussion to sort those things out for ourselves.
> Even how we have discussions changes - newsgroups had different features from email lists, and then we got forums, personal blogs, and reblog-curation sites like tumblr. Each new platform comes with new options for communications, and means we have to discuss, all over again, how we're identifying ourselves, how we're managing boundaries, and how we'll talk with each other.

Elf's comment highlights fandom's ethic of care. She writes that fandom must sort out our boundaries, identities, and behaviors ourselves. Implied in this statement is a valuation of other fans and fandom as a community, as well as the self. It is this care for other fans and for the self, I argue, that drives many fans' curatorial practices. Fans care about themselves and center their own needs in their fandom practice; consequently, they curate the self-image in fandom, the content they consume, and the networks they are a part of with attention to their own mental health, identities, and needs. This seems in sharp contrast to the ethic of community care often valorized and upheld as the core of fandom culture. Yet, I argue that it is precisely within this tension that we see fandom's ethics of care operating in an entangled symbiosis and tension of self, community, and social justice. Throughout this chapter, I showed how fans prioritize their individual fandom

experience—self care—in defining their curatorial practice. Yet throughout these practices of self care, we also saw evidence of community care: fans who produce social justice education to perform their self image of the Good Fan, fans who deliberately seek out diverging opinions because that is necessary to their experience of being part of the community, fans who are dedicated to social justice work who have to take a break when the toll of the work gets too high. Fandom's ethics of care prompt fans to create highly curated experiences of fandom that cater to personal need and individual experiences, even as those practices may detrimentally hinder community care. In Chapter Five, I interrogate how some fans involved in my research theorize this tension and argue that it is a useful tool for continuing the social justice work fandom purports to value.

Chapter 5:

"Yes, But": Negotiating Tensions in Fandom Discussion

> **Leanne,** INTERVIEW**:** *I had a rough start, but things have gotten
> positive. Yeah.*

Halfway through our first interview, I ask Leanne, a 23-year old Mi'Kmaw/white fan from

Canada, how other fans respond to her regular Tumblr posts about indigenous and racial

representation in video games. Her answer is distressing: "I have had people tell me that I should

hang my dirty red-skinned neck," she tells me. Her experiences are not unique among fans or in

fandom spaces; they are also representative of the kinds of negative, often identity-driven,

experiences people have across digital spaces. As we talked through her experiences in fandom, I

was particularly intrigued by the narrative Leanne constructed, because just as she shared the

experience of being told to kill herself, she highlighted experiences with discussion that were

personally validating and helped her to build a profound sense of connection to a broader

community of fans. These contradictions highlight a complex narrative about the ways in which

fandom discussion mediates Leanne's experiences of fandom. The contradiction in Leanne's

experiences with fandom discussion and the complexity of her narrative fascinated me. As I mulled

over our conversation, I wondered, were Leanne's contradictory experiences with fandom

discussion unique among fans? And did other fans construct similarly complex narratives about

those experiences? These questions prompted the analysis that led to this chapter and, as I will

show, Leanne's experiences and narrative construction are common among fans. Building on Chapter Three's exploration of the complex mediating processes of fandom discussion and Chapter Four consideration of the ethics of care driving fans' engagements with those processes, this chapter interrogates the complexities in the ways that Leanne and other fans theorize the value of fandom discussion in fandom. I argue that these complexities and contradictions reveal a tension in two foundational ideologies of fandom: (1) fandom as an aspirational space to create a greater good and offer a welcoming community, and (2) fandom as a critical space of improvement and social justice. Further, I argue that fans negotiate this tension by constructing narratives that explicitly grapple with it, suggesting that significant metacognitive reflection is a common and key part of fans' experiences in fandom.

This argument is built on the foundation laid in Chapter Three and Chapter Four. In Chapter Three, I outline how fandom discussion mediates fans' knowledges of self, community, and social justice. In Chapter Four, I examine how fans curate their relationships with these discussions to highlight the entanglements and tensions in fandom's ethics of self care and community. In this chapter, I bring the work of those chapters together, re-examining the tensions between the ethics of care highlighted in Chapter Four in the context of the value/place of fandom discussion examined in Chapter Three and stepping back from the specific practices outlined in those chapters to look at fans' theorizations of fandom discussion more broadly. I also return in this chapter to mediation theory, arguing that in addition to conceiving of mediation as the process by which cultural tools of discussion influence thought and identity in fandom, we must also focus on mediation as the process by which fans influence their cultural tools and navigate their relationships to those tools. Thus, in addition to interrogating fans' metacommentary about fandom discussion, I also argue that the creation of these narratives is an act of intervention in the mediating

processes of fandom discussion. I do not focus on how the genres of fandom discussion have shifted over the years and across platforms, although my interviewees had a lot to say about this topic. Instead, I argue that we should extend how we understand the idea of writers mediating their genres of writing and consider the concept of "mediation" to encompass not just influencing the genres themselves but also mediating the *relationships* between writers and their genres. By relationships, I mean how fans theorize fandom discussion and its place in their experiences of fandom (the subject of this chapter) and how fans curate and control the impact of fandom discussion in their experiences of fandom (the subject of Chapter Four).

In this chapter, I analyze the overarching narratives that fans in my study construct about fandom discussion and its value in fandom. Scholars across fields from literature to composition studies to education to social studies have long viewed studying narrative, particularly in research on human perception and practice, as facilitating access to "people's interior experiences" (Weiss 1). Studying narratives helps us to see the ways in which people process their experiences. In studying how fans tell their stories about fandom discussion, particularly the tone of these narratives and the experiences fans choose to highlight, we can glimpse how fans navigate their relationships with fandom discussion and how they might attempt to maximize its positive potential and grapple with its negative dimensions. Leanne's narratives serve as an entry point to these narratives. Just as her narrative prompted me to consider the complexity of fans' theorizations of fandom discussion, it now highlights how an individual fan mediates a relationship with fandom discussion through a narrative construction that negotiates tensions between the positive and negative potential of these conversations. To examine Leanne's narrative in the context of other fans' metacommentary, I used survey data to show the distribution of narrative constructions that emphasize positive dimensions of fandom discussion, those that emphasize

negative dimensions, and those that reveal tensions between positive and negative dimensions of fandom discussion. This distribution highlights that Leanne's narrative is representative of how many fans theorize the place of fandom discussion in their experiences of fandom. Looking at these narrative constructions across my survey sample, I identify trends in the processes and values fans highlight as part of a particular construction (e.g., positive versus negative) and argue that these patterns help us see how fandom's ideologies of community, identity, and social justice can come into conflict. Highlighting the tension in narratives across the sample demonstrates that Leanne's metacognitive engagement with the role of fandom discussion is echoed across the community. This self-reflective and self-aware engagement represents fans' intervention in the ways fandom discussion shapes their experiences of fandom through the management of their emotional responses to discussion, their acknowledgement of diverse experiences and disagreement, and their decisions on when and how to participate in fandom discussion. The ways that many fans negotiate tensions in this theorization, I argue, offers space for addressing the problems of fandom discussion highlighted in Chapter Three and Chapter Four.

A NOTE ABOUT TERMS

As I was analyzing the data for this chapter, I spent a long time debating how to label the categories I developed for coding. The initial terms I developed—positive narratives, negative narratives, and narratives of tension—where drawn from the language fans used to describe fandom discussion, but they seemed both overly simplistic and not adequate for explaining the reflective and connective work these narratives were doing. Yet, each alternative seemed too specific to account for each narrative in the category and lost the affective tone of the original set of terms. For this reason, and to honor fans' framing of their narratives, I use the original set of terms—positive narratives, negative narratives, and narratives of tension—in this chapter but

explain here how I am conceptualizing each category. The category labels themselves rely on affective tone: the word choices and structures fans employ to indicate positive and negative emotional responses to fandom discussion. Narratives labeled as "positive" thus convey a wholly or overwhelming positive affective tone and include little to no negative affective tone. These narratives reference the mediating processes of fandom discussion as if fandom only or primarily results in a perceived good for the fan or the community. Contrastingly, narratives labeled as "negative" convey a wholly or overwhelmingly negative affective tone and include little to no positive affective tone. These narratives reference the mediating processes of fandom discussion only in the ways these conversations have damaged or could damage individual fans and the community. Narratives of tension, then, include positive and negative affective tone. These narratives are also sometimes categorized by a neutral tone, where both positive and negative affective tone is missing from the narratives, or by an uncertain tone, where lexical and structural choices indicate uncertainty about fans' affective response to fandom discussion.

CASE STUDY: A NARRATIVE OF NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE IN TENSION

To better understand how fans mediate their relationships with fandom discussion, I turn first to an in-depth analysis of one fan's narration of her experiences. Leanne is not unique among my survey or interview participants; she is not the only fan who narrates a particularly negative experience with fandom while also narrating equally positive experiences. However, during the interview process, I made particular note of Leanne's story, even before I had done any extensive analysis. The specific negative aspects of her narrative have been echoed by many fans over the years I've participated in fandom, and they were representative of some of the most egregious examples of harassment and other negative mediations that fans cited in their surveys. What struck me about Leanne's story was that she could simultaneously express the extremes of appreciation

for and critique of fandom discussion. While her experiences, both positive and negative, echoed those of others in the study, the way she presented her narrative was particularly compelling and offered a clear example for observing fans' negotiations of fandom discussion. Leanne's interviews thus provided the genesis for the questions I take up in this chapter, and it is appropriate that her narrative serves as its entry point. By critically examining both the individual, specific experiences she narrates and the broader narrative she constructs, I will show how Leanne mediates her experiences with fandom discussion by using contrasting positive and negative experiences and the tension between them to structure her narrative. The structure Leanne uses demonstrates her active reflection on and critical engagement with the role of fandom discussion in fandom, an approach that I will argue is reflected in the trends in my research survey data.

"A Rough Start": Early and Ongoing Negative Experiences

Like many fans, Leanne first found fandom at a relatively young age. In her late teens, Leanne, who notes that she grew up without frequent or regular Internet access, first encountered fandom through casual acquaintances, "friends of friends," who introduced her to fanfiction they had written. In the beginning, she engaged in what she called a "one-way" interaction with fandom: "I would read what other people would write but I never really engaged much myself." This situation changed when Leanne wanted to share her own thoughts and fan creations with the fandom community. She joined DeviantArt, a platform primarily for posting fandom-based and original artwork, in the *Hunger Games* fandom, but she quickly discovered fandom discussion and its potential to impede feeling a sense of community. As Leanne narrates, fandom discussion became a point of separation from the fandom community; it became a space where she noticed a difference between herself and other fans that alienated her from other fans and highlighted disagreements among them:

I found [fandom] very intimidating. I found it… not so welcoming because I just...
I found that it was scary to me to express opinions that were different from other people,
which I often found that I had.

And I think a lot of that especially came because, like I said, this was when I was
in my teenage years and I was very into the *Hunger Games* series and one of the big draws
for me for that series was that I very much interpreted Katniss as an indigenous woman.

And there were a lot of people that really did not like that.

As Leanne narrates, her first impressions of fandom were not positive. She found herself feeling alienated from the fandom community because of others' responses to her interpretations of the racial identity of Katniss Everdeen. Though Katniss Everdeen's ethnicity is not explicitly stated in the *Hunger Games* novels, many fans have argued that the author Suzanne Collins's references to Katniss's olive skin are an indication that she is not white. However, the casting of white actress Jennifer Lawrence in the movie adaptation of the series has encouraged a white portrayal of the character. In casting Katniss as indigenous, Leanne entered a contentious space in the *Hunger Games* fandom, and one that might be especially fraught because of her own indigenous identity, which has led her to experiencing racially charged harassment.

Indeed, the initial responses Leanne received to her participation in fandom discussion were so alienating for her that they drove her off DeviantArt and out of the *Hunger Games* fandom completely. Her narrative highlights the negative role fandom discussion can play in the experiences of individual fans. Leanne's encounters with fandom discussion led her to develop a negatively inflected relationship with the *Hunger Games* fandom in general and with its iteration on DeviantArt in particular—a tense relationship and one that ultimately led to her departure from the fandom. But though her experiences with creating fandom discussion led to a break with this community, they did not lead to a break with this genre of writing. Leanne remains an active writer of fandom discussion in different fandoms and different spaces.

Though her early fandom experiences drove Leanne out of the *Hunger Games* fandom and out of DeviantArt, she did not leave fandom completely. She currently participates mostly in the Tumblr fandom community, but though she characterizes this community as more "receptive" and "appealing to other minorities," negative experiences with fandom discussion remain a part of her encounters in fandom. Leanne describes her current blog about a popular video game series as "a lot of sociopolitical commentary on the comparisons between cotemporary and modern issues in this fantasy series." One of the topics Leanne addresses a great deal on her blog is racial representations in media like video games and movies, and the negatively inflected mediating processes of fandom discussion remain at the forefront of these experiences. As an example, Leanne shares her frustrations about a particular character and fandom's response to him:

> There's a character that everybody adores and he is such a white bitch. I hate him. And everybody loves him and it's impossible to insult him without apparently insulting everybody who loves him personally. It's the most tiresome thing. I just can't even get over it. Like I said, I guess, it's not even the mob mentality though. It's just the fact that everybody loves this character and I don't and it's impossible to escape this character. I wish people weren't so offended that I don't like the same character that they do.

In narrating this experience, Leanne shares an experience of frustration in frequently encountering a character—and positive discussion of that character—that she doesn't like, but woven into her story is also a narrative about the discussion of that character. It's not just the character and his fans that frustrate Leanne, but the experience of participating in discussion about this character and the response she receives from other fans. Her narrative of experiencing fandom is intertwined with a narrative of experiencing fandom discussion. Leanne later notes that she feels "like I constantly have to explain myself because everybody says, 'Why don't you like this character? What did this character ever do?'" She currently maintains an FAQ page on her blog with links to the "extensive pieces, thousands and thousands of words" about why she doesn't like this particular character. The experience of being asked to continuously explain herself is frustrating, Leanne

says. It's a frustration she shares with many fans whose critiques focus on social justice, often exacerbated when the character in question is white and, as is frequently the case with white characters, overly popular in fandom. As with Leanne, those who critique such dynamics often find themselves facing increased hostility from other fans; the racial epithet Leanne mentions in the opening of this chapter is just one such response she's received to her critical commentary.

Implied in several of Leanne's narrative moments—particularly the racially inflected harassment and Leanne's self-identification with Katniss Everdeen as an indigenous woman—is the relationship between Leanne's identity and her perceptions of fandom discussion. As I note, fans who critique racial dynamics in media and fandom often face hostility from other fans, and this hostility is often magnified if the critical writer is a fan of colour. Gender and race can be particularly fraught online, and women of colour often take up the burden of digital labour in calling out and critiquing misogyny and racism in digital spaces (see, for example, Lisa Nakamura's work). It is reasonable, then, to suggest that Leanne's experiences in fandom discussion, and thus her perceptions of it, are influenced by her own identity as a Mi'Kmaw/white woman, and her own interview responses suggest such a connection. In talking about her drive to question racial dynamics in media and fandom, Leanne claims an affinity with looking for representations of indigenous people in Hollywood productions and a dedication to challenging racism in fandom, adding, "I feel very protective over the tiny pieces [of representation] I do have, and I am bitter about the unlimited amount that other people have." Leanne adds later in the interview that she recognizes that her particular experiences with fandom discussion might not be the same as the experiences of other fans because of her identity and her desire to engage in the kind of critical digital labour women of colour often undertake. As the narrative moments analyzed in this section demonstrate, Leanne is accustomed to some of the worst behaviors that occur within

discussions in fandom. She has experienced how fandom discussion can diminish one's sense of a relationship with(in) a fandom community, and her narrative about these experiences highlights feelings of frustration, alienation from the community, and conflict with other fans. Yet, as I will show in the next section, Leanne is equally able to identify positive experiences she's had within fandom, and the final section of this case study illuminates her overarching narrative, which holds these negative and positive experiences in tension.

"Things Have Gotten Positive": Focusing on the Other Side

Despite the many experiences Leanne has had that have alienated her from fandom and other fans, she characterizes most of her interactions in fandom as positive. She highlights having relationships with other fans and feeling a sense of community with fandom: being able to have "really good discussions" with other fans, receiving art that fans have drawn for her, and making friends with people who enjoy the same media and transformative creativity that she does. As much as Leanne's narratives about some fandom experiences highlight negativity, other narratives highlight positivity. Fandom has particularly positive potential for her because of the community it allowed her to find:

> I am from rural Nova Scotia. So I have approximately 0% of people around me who share these interests and so the internet allows me to interact with people who understand and also engage in these activities.

As Leanne narrates here, fandom fills the role of community building for her. Though her experiences with fandom might lead her to narrate negative encounters with fandom discussion as a barrier to developing a sense of community, fandom itself is a community that she doesn't otherwise have access to in her offline life. But particularly important to Leanne, and something she mentioned several times in our interviews, is the potential for personal validation, not only by interacting with a community she feels a part of but, in particular, through the fandom discussions

that she participates in. Speaking about what she considers the great things about being part of fandom, Leanne says,

> Well like I mentioned, I enjoy feeling like I'm valued to people. People enjoy my stuff. That makes me feel like... Well, it makes me feel good that people care about what I have to say and what I have to think. It's really easy to feel otherwise in today's age. And it's also, in some ways, it's an escape from reality, you know? It offers... a way to leave present time and go to talk about something completely science fiction. It's not real. Of course a fiction is grounded in reality but, I mean, I go to work and I work in a hospital and so sometimes things aren't so great and then I can come home and I get to relax and talk about something I enjoy, you know?

In this narrative, Leanne shares the particular feeling of validation that comes from having other people appreciate something she's created, as well as the sense of community that comes from being able to interact with others who share her interests. Fandom discussion is as implicated in this narrative as it was in the negative narratives from the previous section. In this narrative, the "stuff" Leanne refers to is the work she posts on her blog: conversations, theorizations, and critiques about race in video games. The process of creating fandom discussion is thus part of these discussions' mediations of Leanne's experience of fandom; by writing, Leanne is participating in the community, building a sense of connection, and helping to construct her own identity and sense of self in fandom.

More directly, Leanne also narrates experiences when fandom discussion about race has led positively to self-reflection on her part. In the following narrative, she highlights the role fandom discussion can play in illuminating unconscious bias, framed in a positive narrative about a specific encounter with fandom discussion:

> So, we were talking about... I can't even remember what it was. It was something that was in this fantasy setting. And I mean, as typical of a fantasy setting, it's overwhelmingly white, unfortunately. And I was in the mindset that, yeah, of course, this fantasy setting must just be totally white. And someone came on and said, you know, here's this, this, and this that says, no, there's no reason it has to be that way. And I'm like oh, I

just defaulted to thinking that this must all be white, because that's the way media has made out for it.

And it was actually really good experience, because I now try to look at things... I now, you know, make more of an effort, and I think I'm better capable at looking at things outside of that narrow default white.

In this narrative, fandom discussion serves two key roles for Leanne: she sees a new perspective through the commentary of another fan, and this realization leads to self-reflection on her part about the unconscious presumption of whiteness she had been operating within. Unlike in some of her more negative experiences with fandom discussion, here the tone of her narrative is positive. The experience of being confronted by one's biases is often challenging, but Leanne calls this incident a "really good experience" and describes herself as "better" for having experienced it.

Whereas Leanne sometimes narrates fandom discussion as a barrier to developing a sense of community, an alienator, and a set of genres that impede her enjoyment in fandom, she suggests at other times that fandom discussion plays a more constructive role by facilitating her connection with a community that is unavailable to her in her offline life. Fandom discussions are sometimes a space for education, for connection with other fans as individuals and as a community, and a space for personal validation. The contrast between Leanne's positive narratives about her fandom experiences and the negative narratives I highlight earlier in this chapter is notable because, as I will demonstrate in the next section, Leanne does not present a wholly positive or wholly negative narrative, or even a narrative that transitions from one extreme to other. Instead, she holds the positive and negative experiences in tension, using this tension to grapple with writing that has very polarized mediating influences in her life.

"But": A Narrative of Mediating Processes Held in Tension

In summarizing her relationship to fandom discussion, Leanne says, "I had a rough start, but things have gotten positive. Yeah." This quote, also this chapter's epigraph, encapsulates the

tension Leanne constructs in narrating the positive and negative aspects of fandom discussion in her fandom experiences. Within a single sentence, Leanne recognizes both the deep impact of her negative experiences within fandom as well as the profoundly positive roles fandom discussion has played in her life, yet she holds these two opposites in tension with a "but." While Leanne's quote, decontextualized, suggests a narrative of progress from negative to positive, I argue that this narrative is a more complex narrative of ongoing tension.

In her reflections on fandom discussion, Leanne highlights specific experiences within fandom: feeling forced out of the *Hunger Games* fandom on DeviantArt, being frustrated by fans' negative reactions to her dislike of a character, feeling a sense of validation when fans enjoy her blog posts, engaging in self-reflection as the result of another fan's perspective. For each of these experiences, Leanne casts the specific experience as positive or negative, demonstrating a sense of cohesion within these narrative excerpts even when their affective tone differs. Yet, when she talks about her experiences within fandom more broadly, Leanne's narrative conveys tension, which replaces the cohesion of the individual narrative snippets with contrast and discontinuity. In these more overarching narratives, Leanne negotiates both the positive and negative dimensions of her relationship with fandom discussion, as she does saying that she, "had a rough start, but things have gotten positive."

This narrative of tension is particularly evident in Leanne's verbal negotiations of the role she sees fandom discussion playing in her experiences of fandom. In the following two comments from my first interview with her, Leanne makes three distinct shifts between a positive and a negative narrative:

> I mean for the most part it's positive. But unfortunately you remember every single negative thing a lot easier than every single positive thing.
> Like I said, it brings me happiness. So I'm not about to let those negative aspects of it spoil the rest.

Here, Leanne calls out both a positive and negative relationship with fandom discussion, and in each part of this statement, she presents a narrative of tension. First, fandom (and fandom discussion) is positive, but the negative aspects can sometimes have more weight. Then, participating in fandom discussion brings her happiness so she won't allow the negative to "spoil" it. In one statement, we see a negative narrative of fandom discussion bear more weight, while in the next the positive narrative takes up that position. With these narratives, Leanne negotiates her relationship with both the positive and negative dimensions of fandom discussion by acknowledging and, in a way, valuing each. No single mediating influence of fandom discourse is allowed to dominate her narrative, thus enabling her to establish a sustained relationship with genres that can have a profoundly polarizing impact on fans' experiences in fandom.

This ongoing tension is evident throughout the narratives Leanne shares about her experiences in fandom, both when she talks about her fandom experiences generally and when she narrates specific experiences with fandom discussion. It is also evident in how she discusses the particular behaviors involved in specific experiences as well as her perspectives about those experiences. For example, Leanne deploys this negotiating move when talking about her move from DeviantArt to Tumblr, saying, "Honestly, I think moving was probably the best thing because I got thicker skin from it and, you know, thus is the internet. Not everybody's so nice and you just have to be used to that." Much like when she talks about fandom generally, when she talks about this specific experience Leanne calls out both the negatives—not everyone on the internet is nice— and the positives—that she developed a "thicker skin" from the experience of receiving negative, often alienating, and sometimes harassing responses from other fans. By holding in tension the negative and positive aspects of this experience, Leanne demonstrates a metacognitive engagement with the mediations of fandom discussion. We can see in these narrative constructions her

awareness of the influence fandom discussion has had on her experiences in fandom and her perception of fandom. For example, Leanne talks about developing a "thicker skin" in response to her experiences on DeviantArt, an indication that her experiences with fandom discussion have changed how she interacts with these discussions by making her less receptive to critique from others. Leanne is aware of this change in her relationship with fandom discussion and, I argue, the link she makes between these discussions and her changed sense of self suggests metacognitive reflection on the role of fandom discussion.

Similarly, Leanne demonstrates this metacognitive reflection in narrating tension's positive and negative aspects when she talks about her perspectives as well as the behaviors of other fans (and herself). In the following reflection, she narrates a moment when her goal to make fandom discussion educational and to engage with other fans comes into tension with the potential of fandom discussion to enable harassment, personal discomfort, and disconnection from community and among fans:

> Sometimes I will get a request to talk about something that's very uncomfortable for me and I feel obligated to do so anyway. Especially where, like I said, I have a long blog that's developed a relatively large following and so I just feel like a terrible person for not agreeing to do something.
> […] I recently got a request to talk about the fact that there is... How can I put this? In the video game, there are characters who are unable to get pregnant and I got a couple requests from the same person, I suspect although they were anonymous, to please talk about this and they mentioned they wanted me to talk about it because they were tired of people headcanoning[22] otherwise. I was really uncomfortable talking about this because I have… you know… I probably can't get pregnant myself and, you know, I don't really have interest in having kids anyway but all the same it was just... It's kind of uncomfortable, you know? So I haven't done anything yet.
> I've just been staring at those messages, debating whether or not I should say, "Hey, I'd rather not do this." In which case, do I have to explain why? Or just, you know, sucking

---

[22] "Headcanon" refers to a fan's own interpretation of an aspect of the canon material, often something that is not made explicit. For example, fans may interpret a character's habits or behaviors as indications that the character is neurodivergent or LGBTQ+, even if that is not explicitly stated in the canon material.

it up and talking about this, even knowing that this person is trying to start something with this too? That's another thing.

Here, Leanne shows how tension between the potential of education and the discomfort of dealing with difficult topics (with a person that might be attempting to "start something") is at the heart of much of fandom discussion. Much of fandom espouses a commitment to social justice, but these conversations are often fraught, whether they are in fandom, politics, or the classroom. In a space where these conversations are often undertaken by fans whose identities are implicated in the discussion, any push to educate other fans also comes with the potential of personal discomfort. In this narrative, Leanne's own identity as a woman who might not be able to get pregnant and may not want to have children inflects her discomfort with responding to requests to talk about two characters in a similar situation. Her discomfort with the topic and her sense that the requester might be trying to "start something" come into tension with her desire to educate other fans, leaving her to wrestle with the question of whether or not to respond. Leanne frames this question as a personal tension, but we might also consider it evidence of the broader tension in the mediating process of fandom. In asking this question of herself, Leanne is negotiating a tension between, on the one hand, fandom discussion's potential to mediate the perspectives of other fans by providing them with new information, and, on the other hand, her own efforts to protect herself and avoid engaging in a potentially fraught and emotional conversation. The situation is particularly fraught because of Leanne's sense that the requester might be trying to "start something"; in other words, the requester might not be making a genuine request for conversation out of a desire to learn but might instead be attempting to start a conflict. In grappling with these competing potentials, Leanne seems to be grappling with a contradiction in two core impulses of fandom: caring for the self/community and providing a place of social justice empowerment. The act of engaging in this discussion—of deciding to write and share that writing in response to this request—becomes an

act of weighing whether the value of potentially educating this fan, or other members of her audience, against her own mental health and emotional capacity for a challenging conversation.

Leanne's narratives in the first two sections of this chapter show her in some instances discussing positive and negative experiences in isolation, particularly as she narrates the details of those experiences. Yet, as she speaks about her fandom experience more broadly, Leanne's narrative about her experiences with fandom highlights how positive perspectives might be extracted from negative experiences, and how positive experiences are tempered by negative realities. In engaging in this negotiation, Leanne reveals the necessity of metacognitive reflection in fans' participation in fandom discussion. Fandom negotiation requires frequent grappling with the self in the relation to the community and with the community's goals and ideologies in relation to the self and self care. The complexity and often-fraught nature of this grappling raises the question: why do fans continue to engage in fandom discussion when it has such negative potential and when even its positive potential remains a place of tension? That fans continue engaging despite this tension suggests that there is something about engaging in fandom discussion that is more important than potential discomfort and/or that there is something valuable in the act of grappling with these tensions. In the following section, I explore this question by returning to my survey data. Examining the trends in this larger sample, I argue, illuminates what fans value that mitigates the tension *and* what fans gain from the process of grappling with these tensions.

DISTRIBUTION OF NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN SURVEY DATA

The narrative of tension I highlight through Leanne's case study first became evident while I was interviewing fans and coding the transcripts of those interviews. As I noticed this pattern emerging in Leanne's narrative and echoing across several of my interviews, I became curious about how common a narrative of tension was within fandom. Was it unique to Leanne, in which

case, it would be a useful contrast to other overarching structures that would define a diverse array of narratives fans constructed about their relationships to fandom discussion? Or was this narrative of tension common among fans, which would suggest that a more complex negotiation of the mediating influences of fandom discussion was occurring across fandom? To explore this question, I returned to my survey data which was the first set of data collected from this project. As we have seen, among the questions I asked fans in this survey was: "Is fandom discourse[23] important?" Though the question does not specifically ask fans to categorize fandom discussion as positive or negative, in the responses to this question, I found fans constructing broad narratives about the role of fandom discussion within fandom. These narratives offered insight into how fans construct their relationship with fandom discussion because they represent fans' theorizations about the role of fandom discussion in fandom. I reviewed each response to the question and assigned a single code to describe its narrative construction and affective tone: positive, negative, or tension. If a response included both positive and negative narratives or affective elements, I coded it as a narrative of tension.

Of the 671 fans who responded to my research survey, 660 responded to the question, "Is fandom discourse important?" Their responses ranged from one word to over a hundred words. In Figure 4.1 below, I show the percentage of fans who responded with each different narrative construction (positive, negative, tension):

---

[23] My survey used the term "fandom discourse" as an umbrella term for all aspects of discussion within fandom. While the term is broadly recognized by fans, many respondents to the survey wrote that the term "fandom discourse" had an affiliation with a particular kind of discussion in fandom and that the term has connotations, for many fans, with the kinds of behaviour they critique in fandom spaces. For this reason, I use the more neutral term "fandom discussion" when talking about the concept within my dissertation project but acknowledge the original term used in the survey as it may have influenced fans' responses to this question. See the "Fandom Discussion 101" section of Chapter One (beginning page 16) for further explanation.

Figure 4.1: Distribution of Narrative Constructions
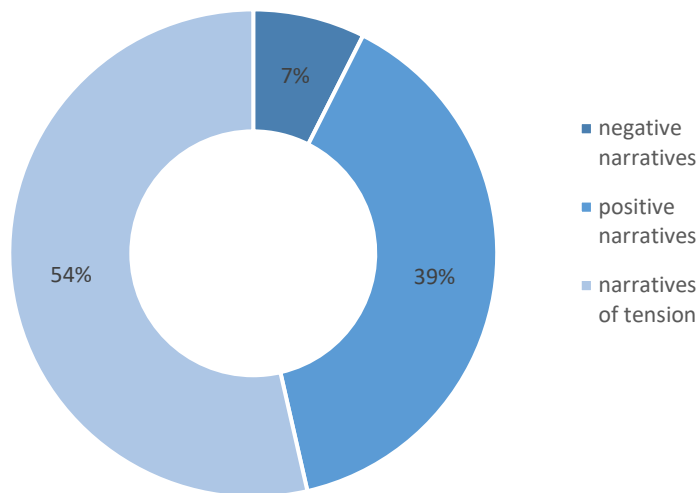
As this graph demonstrates, over half of fans who responded to this question constructed a narrative of tension, while 39% constructed a wholly positive narrative and 7% constructed a wholly negative narrative. Examining each narrative construction in depth is key for understanding how fans mediate their relationships with the roles of fandom discussion by grappling with the tensions between the positive and negative potential for these discussions to influence their fandom experiences. The prevalence of narratives of tension suggests that this narrative construction is by far the most common way fans negotiate their perceptions of fandom discussion and that fans derive some value from negotiating this tension. In the following section, I examine how trends in the narratives in each category help us explain how fans negotiate tensions and why they continue to engage with fandom discussion in light of these tensions. In fans' efforts to find room to maneuver, we see how negotiating tension offers an avenue for knowledge-making and social justice in fandom by productively forcing engagement with fandom's problems and self-reflection on fans' actions and relationships to discussion.

THE VALUE OF TENSION: ANALYSIS OF TRENDS IN NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

To analyze the trends in participants' narratives and narrative excerpts in each of my three categories, I draw from and adapt Martin Engebretsen's argument that textual structures balance between cohesion and tension. Though Engebretsen is primarily concerned with cohesion and tension in multimodal texts, where visual design is as much a concern as textual structure, his categories are equally useful for the study of narratives. Engebretsen defines cohesion as "based on *similarity, proximity* and *continuity* of various kinds, formal and/or semantic, creating bonds between semiotically heterogeneous textual elements and shaping a textual universe where all elements fit in" (146). Within a narrative, we can understand cohesion as agreement among the various narrative elements, a continuity in narrative and affective tone, and an absence of significant contradiction or disagreement. Cohesion thus becomes a determiner of either a positive or negative narrative because these narratives have a consistent affective tone and do not include significant internal tension about the overall impact of the mediating processes of fandom discussion. Cohesion also offers a point of analysis; analyzing the places of cohesion in narrative excerpts will help us see fandom's underlying ideologies and how valuing those ideologies might lead fans to create positive or negative narratives. Tension, according to Engebretsen "is the inversion of cohesion, and is based on formal and semantic *contrast, distance* and *discontinuity*" (146). Within a narrative, we can understand tension as contrast between multiple affective tones and discontinuity in the overall perception of fandom discussion. Evidence of tension thus becomes a way to distinguish narratives of tension from positive and negative narratives. As I will argue in this chapter, evidence of tension in particular is illustrative of the mediation fans are engaged in with the genres of fandom discussion. I further argue that the narratives of tension represent a conflict in the underlying values of fandom, revealing places where an impetus for

social justice and improvement (community care) clash with an ethic of self care. Fans' determination to dwell in this space of contradiction and tension—and fans' metacognitive reflection on that process of dwelling—suggest that grappling with the positive and negative potential of fandom discussion is a useful process through which fans intervene in the mediating processes of fandom discussion and ultimately improve fandom through critical self-reflection.

Negative Narratives: Valuing Community Care

The least common narrative type presented by fans was wholly negative narratives: 7% of narratives (46 fans) used this construction. These narratives, as the examples below show, critique the behaviors of other fans and the negative outcomes that fandom discussion can have. Common across the narratives is attention to fandom's ethics of community and individual fan care, and the emphasis on these ethics highlights how fans' values can shape their perceptions of the role of fandom discussions in their experiences of fandom:

> ***Survey Question:*** *Is fandom discourse important?*

> ***risingdawn:*** No, I believe it causes undue strife in the community, and smear [campaigns] can ruin people's lives IRL, whether it be doxxing or threats online or abuse.

> ***Tess:*** Absolutely not. I think "media critical" fandoms don't even feel joy anymore. This trend of picking apart shows until they are hated by the masses creates an unhealthy, unenjoyable environment.

> ***Nerdstrings:*** I think it's far too easy to create an "us vs. them" vibe, even within a shared fandom, when being critical on the internet. Specific harmful behaviors deserve to be revealed as harmful, but dragging individuals into the mud never ends well for anyone involved. Negativity promotes more negativity more often than it does positive action.

In these responses, we see several of the critiques of fandom discussion described in Chapter Three: fandom discussion doesn't ultimately change minds; fandom discussion can facilitate harassment; fandom discussion can break or inhibit a sense of community. Common across these narratives—or, the aspects of similarity and continuity that make them cohesive—is attention to

the harmony of the community and the experiences of individual fans. Specifically, fans who construct wholly negative narratives about the role of fandom discussion emphasize *dis*harmony and negative experiences of individual fans in those narratives. risingdawn, for example, emphasizes fandom discussion as the cause of "undue strife in the community," while Tess describes highly critical fandoms as "unhealthy, unenjoyable environment[s]" that "don't even feel joy anymore." Nerdstrings similarly views the critique of fandom discussion as creating unenjoyable communities, emphasizing the creation of "us vs. them" divisions that break down community bonds. These fans also emphasize harm to the individual fan as going hand-in-hand with harm to the community; Tess and Nerdstrings reference moments when individual fans are dragged "into the mud" (Nerdstrings) or "hated by the masses" (Tess) because of fandom discussion. risingdawn offers more specific examples, citing doxxing and online threats/abuse as aspects of fandom discussion that can "ruin people's lives IRL[24]." The narratives of these three fans are representative of the set of narratives characterized as negative in my sample. Many other fans similarly highlighted community breakdowns and harm done to individual fans when they described why they perceived fandom discussion as a negative part of the community.

This emphasis on the harm done to community and individual fans suggests that, for these fans, fandom's ethics of self care and valuing of fans' individual experiences have higher value than fandom's emphasis on social justice and positive change (community care). Several of the narratives in this category includes references to what fandom discussion *should* be able to do—critique problems of racism, for example—but each of these fans ultimately concludes that fandom discussion doesn't achieve this goal or that any potential good is vastly outweighed by the damage these discussions do to individual fans or to a sense of community. This sense that the well-being

---

[24] "IRL" stands for "In Real Life," a reference to internet users' offline identities, interactions, and circumstances.

of the individual fan is more important than the potential for challenging problems in fandom highlights the importance of self care in fandom. It also shows us that these values can determine how fans theorize fandom discussion and how they perceive its place in the community.

Of the fans who theorize fandom discussion as wholly negative, some report actively avoiding these discussions while most report only reading certain kinds of discussion or only engaging with discussion that appears on their Tumblr dashboards. Several of the fans whose narratives fall in the negative category also, however, report actively reading, writing, and/or searching for fandom discussion. Why would fans who perceive fandom discussion as a wholly negative part of fandom still participate in these discussions? Fans' responses provide two possible explanations: (1) the functionality of the platform facilitates encountering discussion unless fans practice extensive curation, and (2) fans make deliberate choices of the kinds of discussion they will engage with. Fans' practices of curation in relation to platform affordances is the subject of Chapter Four, so I will discuss it only briefly here. First, the functionality of the Tumblr dashboard means that fans are potentially exposed to any content shared by the fans that they follow. Fans can curate these feeds by being selective about the fans they follow and deploying tools like blacklisting to remove certain content from their feeds, but the dashboard still represents a passive opportunity to encounter fandom discussion even for fans who narrate it as a wholly negative part of their experience of fandom. The fans in my study might thus not see any value in fandom discussion but still find them engaged with it by necessity because they are engaging in fandom on Tumblr. Second, some fans actively participate in fandom discussion, including creating it and searching for it, but only engage with certain kinds of discussion. These fans typically report engaging with discussion such as character and plot analysis and other kinds of discussion they deem as unlikely to promote "drama." So while fans who theorize fandom discussion as a negative

part of fandom still engage with these discussions, they do so in a largely passive or selective way, suggesting a very deliberate intervention in their experiences of discussion.

We might also speculate that these fans who participate in fandom discussion do so, in part, because it is a key part of the community. Aimee, for example, writes in her survey that fandom discussion "plays an 'important' role but not necessarily a good one." Many of these fans recognize that regardless of their perspectives on fandom discussion, it is a significant part of interaction in fandom. They might, therefore, find it difficult to participate in fandom as a community without, at least tangentially, engaging with one of the foundational networks of writing within that community. It is also, perhaps, notable that this narrative construction is the least common across my research survey sample, representing only 7% of fans' experiences. I argue, then, that while some fans theorize fandom discussion as negative because of its potential to break down communities, the importance of these discussions to fandom means that most fans actively engage in grappling with the tensions between its positive and negative potential or, as I discuss in the next section, embrace a more aspirational approach to their narratives.

Positive Narratives: Working for a Better Fandom

The second most common narrative presented by fans was a wholly positive narrative: 39% of narratives (257 fans) used this construction. These narratives theorize fandom discussion as a wholly positive mediating force in fandom and represent, I argue, a more aspirational approach to evaluating the role of fandom discussion that emphasizes the potential of these discussions to improve fandom. Much like some of the fans who theorize fandom discussion as a negative in fandom, fans with positive narratives also highlight fandom discussion as critical to defining and enacting community in fandom:

> ***Survey Question:*** *Is fandom discourse important?*

236

Anamarie: Of course. It's not enough to just love a thing. Fandom is in the discussion of WHY you love the thing.

Shannon: Yes I think it's important. Fandom is important to many of us and thus talking about it is the basis of community

Olivia: Of course. It's all about learning. Maybe it's opening your eyes to something you never noticed, labeling a phenomenon you've experienced but didn't know, alerting you to an issue you didn't realize existed, and yes, building and strengthening a community. Fandom has its own group dialect, in a way, and fandom discourse is also where we define our vocabulary, from the infamous uses of punctuation to the difference between squicks and triggers.

As these narratives demonstrate, fans see fandom discussion as essential to giving fandom its distinct character. Reflecting how fandom scholars have distinguished transformative fandom from merely being a fan of something, Anamarie argues that fandom is about more than just loving a media object: "Fandom is in the discussion of WHY you love the thing." Shannonagrees; she cites talking about fandom as "the basis of community." Celebration of the things we love has always been key to fandom; it is, in part, what inspires the creative, transformative work that makes fandom distinct. But talking about why we love the things we love and about the community we love is key to defining and maintaining fandom. As I argued in Chapter Three, fandom discussion mediates fans' relationships with fandom by building community, fostering interpersonal relationships, and promoting an appreciation of canon, among others. As fans' descriptions in that chapter showed, much of the content that is involved in these processes involves celebrating and discussing the media objects and community we fans love. These discussions are also, as Olivia's narrative suggests, a place of collectively building a community by defining that community. Olivia's narrative highlights the many ways fandom discussion can define this community: creating a shared dialect for discussion, labelling the phenomena of the community, and building a shared understanding of challenges. Like the fans who constructed negative narratives, the fans

who construct positive narratives recognize the sense of community that is foundational to fandom, but the aspects of fandom discussion they emphasize reveal a different underlying value of fandom.

The attention to education in Olivia's narrative—seeing new perspectives, labeling new ideas, and highlighting problems—reflects another trend in these positive narratives: fans who present these narratives typically also emphasize the improvement of fandom through education and critique. This underlying value is reflected in fans' narratives that mention self-reflection, identification of problems in fandom, and the potential of fandom discussion for changing fandom:

> **Survey Question:** *Is fandom discourse important?*
>
> ***Blake:*** Fandom isn't perfect - it never has been, and it never will be - but it can be better, and I think discourse (when done right) helps improve the accessibility and diversity of fandom.
>
> ***Chloe:*** I think it does have its place. Some people may be unaware of any problematic actions that they do and in an ideal world, fandom would be a good place for them to realise their mistakes and improve on them. This could lead to better relationships between different sections of fandom and make it a more welcoming place overall
>
> ***rogue:*** Yes, discussion is a great exercise in critical thinking & analysis. Being able to engage in media both as a fan and as a critic is important for outlining the problems that are often prevalent in many forms of media (sexism, racism, queerphobia, ableism, anti-semitism, etc. etc.) & by pointing these issues out they can not only start to be addressed, but can also be made clear to those who might not yet understand why these things are issues in the first place, or why a certain scene/theme/phrasing/etc is not as benign as it may seem to the uninformed. It promotes education & progress both for the industry & for individuals to learn & understand the influences that affect their mindsets & actions

In these narratives, we see fans emphasizing the necessity of improvement to fandom. Blake argues that fandom discussion can help "improve the accessibility and diversity of fandom," while Chloe suggests that critical engagement through fandom discussion can make fandom "a more welcoming place overall." rogue's narrative offers more specific detail about this critical engagement: pointing out issues in media like sexism, racism, and queerphobia and helping fans recognize these problems and develop different mindsets. This emphasis on critique and education

238

suggests that for fans who construct wholly positive narratives of fandom discussion, fandom's underlying value of improvement through critical engagement is particularly important. This emphasis stands in contrast with the fans who construct negative narratives whose narratives emphasize an individual fan's experiences in fandom. The contrast suggests that these two key underlying values of fandom may sometimes contradict each other and that fans' perceptions of fandom discussion—and, indeed, of fandom—may be significantly influenced by the fandom values they align with, reflecting fans curation practices described in Chapter Four.

Another way of exploring this contrast is to ask, What do fans gain by highlighting only the positive in these theorizations of fandom discussion? It certainly does not indicate a lack of recognition that the negative aspects of fandom discussion exist. Some fans who construct these positive narratives have also personally experienced or observed some of the worst behaviors in fandom, including the ones critiqued by fans who constructed negative narratives. Zenolalia, for example, writes in their survey that they have been the target of online abuse and experience swatting, a practice they characterize as "murder by police" in which one person calls emergency services in an attempt to have armed law enforcement dispatched to another person's home. Despite these experiences, Zenolalia's narrative theorizes fandom discussion as a process of self-reflection, education, and improvement in fandom:

> Discourse allows us to identify our own behaviors and, if we wish to, change them, or otherwise engage with them more effectively. Before the advent of critical fandom discourse in its modern form, I spent a lot of time not understanding my interests, and flailing from one type of media to the next, never sure what would satisfy me. I now know what I like in a much more precise way than I would have realized on my own. Fandom discourse has also led to a proliferation of content warnings, which has helped me to preclude multiple panic attacks when engaging with a new piece of media, which is intensely valuable.

Like Blake, Chloe, and rogue, Zenolalia's narrative is one that emphasizes critical engagement with fandom, particularly critical engagement through self-reflection. Zenolalia argues that

fandom discussion is a space in which to "identify our own behaviors" and change both our own approaches to engagement and fandom's approach to content (e.g., the increasing use of content warnings as a support for other fans). Despite her acknowledgement of harmful aspects of fandom discussion, like swatting and harassment, Zenolalia's metacommentary on fandom discussion is framed as a positive narrative of personal and community growth. Zenolalia's acknowledgement of the extreme negative potential of fandom discussion elsewhere in their survey, then, suggests that fans' narratives about fandom discussion are not wholly defined by their personal experiences with these discussions. It holds, then, that something else—their values in fandom, I argue—is more important to the narratives they construct. The value to fans of emphasizing these positive aspects of fandom discussion might be a recognition of these values of self and community improvement. I argue that in highlighting these values of improvement, fans are taking a more aspirational approach to theorizing fandom discussion that emphasizes fandom's origins in social justice and drive to improve the community.

Narratives of Tension: Community Care and Aspirations

Over half of all fans (54% or 356 fans) who responded to this question constructed a narrative of tension when they theorized the overarching role of fandom discussion within their experiences of fandom. As I will show in this section, these narratives of tension help fans to negotiate the places where fandom's ethics of care for the individual and the community might contradict each other. In examining these narratives, we learn how fandom discussion productively promotes individualized knowledge through self-reflection, retaining connections with those you disagree with, and dynamic and evolving engagement with fandom discussion.

That there is tension between these two underlying values is evident in the syntactical patterns that fans use to frame their narratives. Most fans begin by identifying a positive aspect

that they praise, then transition to a negative aspect of discussion that they critique. More simply put, the narrative of tension shared across surveys responses can be summarized as "yes, but"—in fact, many fans use these exact words. They construct their narrative about fandom discussion as, "Yes, fandom discussion is important for [x, y, z positive aspects], but it can be critiqued for [a, b, c negative behaviors and results]." Below are some examples that make this pattern clear:

Survey Question: *Is fandom discourse important?*

Evelyn: Yes, but when it escalates to the point of ad hominem attacks against the individual, discourse can be toxic to the community. It's important to acknowledge problems, but sometimes the "call-out culture" doesn't allow for remedy. This is especially true for Tumblr, or at least this is what I've observed.

Mallory: Fandom discourse is useful for fleshing out the details of canon, but is also extremely divisive. I think people often take it to the extreme.

dusty: yes. it is important to be self aware but we should not take that as a blanket authorization to police fandom

In these narratives, we see Evelyn, Mallory, and dusty highlight positive aspects like acknowledging problems, engaging with canon materials, and developing self-awareness, then contrast those positives with negatives like attacks on individual fans, community division, and policing of fan engagement. All three of them also use a "yes, but" construction, acknowledging first and definitively that fandom discussion is important in fandom, before acknowledging the negative aspects of these discussions. This construction highlights that while these fans recognize the foundational role fandom discussion plays in the community, they also find it important to recognize tensions in that role. Identifying and analyzing the patterns in these narrative constructions will help us understand the value fans find in grappling with these tensions.

We can already begin to see a pattern of values in Evelyn, Mallory, and dusty's responses: the potential of fandom discussion to facilitate education, self-reflection, and critique is

highlighted as the value of these discussions but contrasted with the potential of these discussions to harm individual fans and create an unwelcoming community.

Survey Question: Is fandom discourse important?

Rahirah: Well... it CAN be an important tool for self-examination. But it can also easily tip over into witch hunts and self-righteousness. Like most tools, you have to be careful how you use it.

Hana: Yes, because I think discourse and criticism is necessary and valuable in all avenues of life; but I think it's often moralized and taken to an extreme, i.e. "there is no possible reason you could do this and still be a good person."

Rahirah and Hana construct an almost equal balance between positive and negative. Hana, for example, calls fandom discussion "necessary" and "valuable" but also "moralized" and "taken to an extreme," emphasizing the wide applicability of critique and conversation as well as the tendency of fandom discussion to turn such conversations from critique of an idea to critique of a person. Rahirah emphasizes that it's all about how the tool of fandom discussion is used, suggesting that fandom discussion can transition easily from productive critique into harm. In both cases, these fans find a balance between the positive and the negative by emphasizing both underlying values of fandom discussion. These are trends we have seen before in the fan narratives that were wholly negative or wholly positive: fans constructing negative narratives emphasized the same potential for harm, and fans constructing positive narratives emphasized the same potential for community and self-improvement. That they reappear in these narratives of tension, and that fans who construct these narratives of tension evaluate these potentials with the same affective tone, emphasizes both how these values underlie fandom and the potential that these values can be in conflict. In constructing these narratives of tension, fans clearly recognize the contradicting values and find purpose in grappling with the tension between them. What might this purpose be?

Drawing from additional fan responses, I argue that fans find three values in grappling with the tensions of fandom discussion: (1) an opportunity to do definitional work in the community by categorizing different kinds of fandom discussion, (2) a way to retain a sense of community and connection to fans they disagree with, and (3) an opportunity for self-reflection and metacognition. Uniting these benefits of grappling with tension is a sense that, in doing so, fans are holding on to an aspirational outlook on fandom; they celebrate the potential for improvement and growth in fandom *and* name the parts of discussion that don't work as places still requiring this critical attention and change.

Fans begin this work of identifying the parts of fandom discussion that require critical reflection and change by recognizing posts as belonging to distinct and different categories of discussion. In the following two survey responses, fans Beatrice_Otter and Jojo write that fandom discussion can be distinguished as "good" or "bad" based on its impact:

> ***Beatrice_Otter:*** Some "discourse" is incredibly important at helping fandom decide how we are going to be fans together. Some "discourse" is abuse that is bad for fandom. You can't take an overall stand because it is so varied.

> ***Jojo:*** It is absolutely important to point out problems, or behaviour that may turn into a problem, and to address them appropriately. However not all discourse is equal. Some fandom wanks are merely a petty complaint on a subject of little or controversial importance that the majority of fans will not consider necessary to consider with any great importance. Recently, a trend has begun wherein an attempt will be made by some younger fans to alter the demographic and behaviours within a fandom to their own comfort zone, rather than curating their own experience within fandom by not interacting with fans or aspects they do not like. This only leads to a sense of gatekeeping within the fandom and frustration on every side of the discourse as the targeted fans feel as though their opinions, thoughts, and contributions are not valued, while the accusatory fans feel as though their emotions and comfort are not valued.

In these narratives, we see Beatrice_Otter and Jojo defining distinct categories for fandom discussion: discussion that "help[s] fandom decide how we are going to be fans together" or "point[s] out problems, or behavior that may turn into a problem" versus discussion that "is abuse

that is bad for fandom" or is "a petty complaint on a subject of little or controversial importance." Jojo argues that "not all discourse is equal," explicitly recognizing that fans see fandom as having multiple purposes and that these discussions cannot be grouped as a single genre of writing. These categories reflect comments from other fans who cite discussion like character analysis and canon appreciation as distinctly different from discussion about the morality of a particular romantic or sexual pairing. This distinction originates in part in the content of the particular posts, but also largely in their results or, as fans say, their potential to cause "drama." The language of Beatrice_Otter and Jojo's responses explicitly devalues discussion that causes drama. While some kinds of fandom discussion are described with their purpose—for example, pointing out problems—other kinds of discussion are described with evaluative language like "abuse" and "petty" that both distinguishes them from other kinds of discussion and implies that they have no value or negative value in fandom. While Beatrice_Otter and Jojo's language reflects a valuation of different kinds of discussion—a valuation similarly present in the narratives of many other fans—their narratives also reflect the definitional work of explicitly recognizing different kinds of fandom discussion, distinguishing between them, and recognizing that the ways these kinds of discussion are differently valued by fans makes it difficult to definitively categorize fandom discussion as positive or negative in fandom. It is, therefore, more productive for these fans to construct narratives of tension that might more fully reflect the complexity of both the kinds of discussion in fandom and how fans differently evaluate them.

Beatrice_Otter and Jojo's responses also hint at another point of conflict: slippage between the purposes of fandom discussion and the potential for disagreement about whether a discussion was doing good and doing harm. We saw this above in Rahirah's and Hana's responses when they suggested that fandom discussion was a tool that could simultaneously do harm and be used for

self-examination. This slippage and dual-purpose is a conflict I have described before in my analysis in Chapter Three: what one fan interprets as productive critique, another fan perceives as bullying or gatekeeping. For example, one fan may interpret criticism of a ship with teenage characters as productive critique of the sexualization of minors, while another fan may interpret this same criticism as an attempt to censor the kinds of fiction or art they create. We can see this tension reflected in narratives like Jojo's where they describe a conflict in how some fans approach critique within a fandom: "Recently, a trend has begun wherein an attempt will be made by some younger fans to alter the demographic and behaviours within a fandom to their own comfort zone, rather than curating their own experience within fandom by not interacting with fans or aspects they do not like." The trend Jojo describes may refer, for example, to some fans' discomfort with adult fans writing fanfiction about child or teenager relationships or straight fans writing about LGBTQ+ relationships. Some fans see these critiques as important to creating safe spaces for younger fans or for addressing issues like over-sexualization, while other fans see these critiques as gatekeeping and argue that it should be up to individual fans to curate their experiences of fandom.

This tension is useful to recognize because it often lies at the heart of conflict within fandom and is reflected in the ways fans describe particular kinds of fandom discussion. As I described previously, narratives like Beatrice_Otter and Jojo's use language like "petty" and "abuse" to describe particular kinds of discussion, and this may also be a reflection of how fans can have opposing perspectives of whether discussion is doing good or harm. By acknowledging these differing viewpoints, fans may be attempting to mitigate conflict within fandom and facilitate more productive discussion. In Chapter Six, I argue that this work can be an important part of fan studies scholarship, in part because it reflects the ways fans already attempt to bridge differences

in opinion. Beatrice_Otter's response also suggests that this categorization work relates to fans' decision to grapple with tension and theorize tension as a key part of their narratives of fandom discussion: this negotiation is necessary, she argues, because fandom discussion has such varied results. For fans like her, a singularly positive or negative narrative is impossible because such narratives do not represent the complexity of fandom discussion.

Grappling with tensions in fandom discussion may also help fans retain connections with other who engage in practices they critique as negative. While many of the fans in my surveys and interviews critiqued other fans for practices they perceived as policing fan behavior, harassment, or community breaking, there were also many instances of fans acknowledging the potentially positive motives of these other fans. For example, recall Jojo's narrative above where they wrote about discussion that critiques particular fans for their interests, such as the ships they support. In their narrative, Jojo clearly critiques the behavior of the fans who try to constrain who participates in their fandom to suit their own comfort, yet when talking about these fans, Jojo also acknowledges their emotional investment in their arguments and the impacts to them of conflict in these discussions. Jojo uses the same language of "valued" to describe the responses of each of these groups of fans, implying these perspectives are equally important to fandom: "the targeted fans feel as though their opinions, thoughts, and contributions are not valued, while the accusatory fans feel as though their emotions and comfort are not valued." Their acknowledgment that both groups of fans have important stakes in the conversation is important because it suggests that Jojo, and fans like them, is attempting to retain a sense of connection to these fans. Rather than universally condemning them, Jojo softens their critical stance towards these fans, grappling with the tension between these fans' potential positive motives and what Jojo judges as the negative consequences of their actions. Jojo is not alone in making this move; several of the fans that I

interviewed shared similar perspectives. Marley, for example, characterized many of the fans they critiqued for "anti" behavior as young people trying to find a voice and express themselves in the only place that they feel like they can legitimately change. Similarly, in describing whether fandom is comprised of one collective community or many smaller, potentially conflicting, ones, Ayda, a 26-year-old Armenian fan from the United States who participates in the *Voltron* fandom, says:

> I'd say it goes back and forth a little bit. I tend to think of us all as one big group now. As much as I want to be divorced from people that are hateful and threaten to break a showrunner's lip on Twitter and that are like, "Well, no. Of course I'm allowed to do that." No, you're really not allowed to do that. As much as I don't want to be associated with those people, you have to own your community.

Despite explicitly calling out and disdaining the behavior of another group of fans, Ayda persists in naming those fans as part of her community. "You have to own your community," she says, implying a responsibility to engage with what she sees as harmful behavior and not ignore its presence in her space. Later in the interview, Ayda adds:

> I've seen everything. I've had everything lobbed at me. When someone on the internet just called you a pedophile, it's really... it sucks. It's like, "Okay. I've weathered the storm here. Jesus, oh man." It really affected me the first few times and I think it came close to making me feel like I was in a shitty place, but now I'm just like, "Those people are just kids. They're trying to get some validation somewhere."

Notably, here, Ayda empathizes with the fans she disagrees with. Despite experiencing considerable negativity within her fandom, both directed towards herself and, as she describes above, the producers of the show, Ayda characterizes the fans she is in conflict with as "just kids" who are "trying to get some validation"—she acknowledges the youth that she see as partially to blame for their behavior and empathizes with their need for validation, maintaining some emotional relationship with these fans that is not entirely negative.

In making these acknowledgements, fans like Ayda, Marley, and Jojo demonstrate continued care for even the fans that they disagree with, emphasizing the ethic of care that drives

fandom and highlighting that grappling with tension may be motivated by this drive to care for other fans in the community even in the face of conflict with those fans.

Many fans theorize this grappling with tension as an opportunity for individual and community self-reflection. Theorizing fandom discussion through its tension, and the prevalence of this narrative construction among fans, suggests that there is some form of reflective negotiation or mediation taking place among fans in which they actively recognize the multiple dimensions of fandom discussion and, to enable them to maintain a relationship with these genres, construct a narrative about them that acknowledges and holds in tension fandom discussion's positives and negatives. For girlbookwrm, a 29-year-old white female American, this self-reflection is a key part of fandom:

> I do think discourse is important, and not just to enhance the enjoyment of the source materials: Fandom does a lot of navel-gazing this way, and I've seen lots of meta that challenges us to question underlying prejudices.

girlbookwrm argues that "navel-gazing" in fandom is about more than just a fan's relationship with the canon source materials. For her, self-reflection is an important part of how fandom challenges its "underlying prejudices," a sentiment that fans have, time and time again, expressed in their surveys and interviews as key to enacting a community commitment to improving fandom for its participants. This relationship of fandom discussion and self-reflection is important because it frames fandom's ethic of care as a critical, metacognitive practice. The narratives in this section, and, indeed, in the entire chapter, demonstrate that fans' theorizations of fandom discussion are driven by attention to care—care of the self and care of the community—that is about both current positive experiences and aspirations for future improvement. To facilitate these aspirations and attentions to care, fandom discussion must be self-reflective, and tension becomes a tool through which fans can maintain a self-reflective stance. Grappling with tension by reflecting on fandom's

practices and prejudices allows fans to recognize spaces for improvement without becoming discouraged by negative experiences, and maintaining this practice of negotiation over time without resolving these tensions helps fans to remain reflective in the dynamic world of fandom where practice and perception are continuously evolving.

CONCLUSION

Discussion has long been a part of fandom from its earliest offline days in zines and meet-ups to its earliest online iterations on mailing lists and Livejournal. Today, fandom is spread across many platforms, but discussion remains a key part of the fan experience, especially on Tumblr where discussion posts seem as numerous as creative content. So while fans might choose to curate, avoid, or embrace fandom discussion, it is difficult to experience fandom without interacting with discussion in some way, even if it's for the purpose of knowing what to block out. As fandom discussion is a key part of fandom, fans must contend with its mediations within the community—both the positive potential for education, community relationships, and challenging problematic content and the often-negative experiences of harassment, policing, and separation from a sense of community. Constructing a narrative of tension might therefore be a way to mediate a relationship with a set of genres that can be both profoundly uplifting and profoundly destructive, but are a key part of interaction within fandom. Fan studies has long recognized that there are tensions in fandom and it has become increasingly interested in the rhetoric of those tensions and their origins in cultural contexts. This chapter offers additional insight to these discussions by considering how fans theorize fandom discussion, the vehicle through which these tensions are created and expressed. As I demonstrate in this chapter, fans theorize fandom discussion itself as a system of tension and most fans actively negotiate and grapple with these tensions rather than attempt to resolve them.

Why, then, is constructing a narrative of tension so valuable for fans? In this chapter, I have analyzed fans' theorizations of fandom discussion to highlight how grappling with tension is an opportunity for self-reflection and a practice through which fans can retain a sense of connection to those they disagree with. Most importantly, though, I argue that theorizing fandom discussion through a narrative of tension is, first, a reflection of two key underlying principles of fandom and, second, a strategy for honoring both these principles even when they come into conflict. Fandom is founded in an ethic of care which includes care for the experiences of the individual fan and care for the community. Both of these drives are often tied to aspirations for "making fandom better." Across the survey responses, the interview data, and my own experiences in fandom, there is a sense of fandom as a progressive space that fans are continuously trying to improve. The very presence of such extensive discussion about community definition, norms, and behaviours is evidence that fans are a self-reflective group invested in critically engaging with and improving our community for both ourselves and for other fans. Though fans often disagree about what this "better fandom" might look like—disagreements which often prompt what fans perceive as the most "toxic" elements of fandom discussion—there is a shared sense of commitment to productive change in fandom. Conflicts arise, though, when the drive to make fandom a better experience for an individual fan conflicts with the drive to make fandom a better place for the community. For example, many of the narratives of tension in this chapter critiqued fandom discussion for its potential to make individual fans feel attacked or policed, yet, as I showed in Chapter Three, what one fan might experience as policing or harmful critique, another might interpret as a necessary call-out of problematic behavior.[25] These narratives of tension, then, could acknowledge these many varying and contradictory experiences of fandom and with fandom discussion, and thus

---

[25] As I acknowledge in Chapter Three, there are, of course, certain behaviors which are less open to interpretation, for example, sending other fans death threats, doxing, and attempts to have other fans arrested for their opinions.

honor both a commitment to support positive experiences for fans now while aspiring for a "better" fandom in the future and taking steps to enact this better fandom through self-reflection.

This ongoing negotiation also reflects the often-complex ways that fans' identities are implicated in their perspectives of and experiences with fandom discussion. I argue that we can see identity as both influencing what fans value in fandom and how they negotiate tensions in fandom discussion. My case study of Leanne, for example, suggests that her indigenous identity both underlies her desire to confront racism in media spaces and is interwoven with the harassment she receives for undertaking this work. For Leanne, her aspirations for the community to be better outweigh her individual negative experiences, in contrast with the fans who, for example, constructed negative narratives that more heavily emphasize these individual negative experiences. As we saw in Chapter Three, other fans have similarly narrated how, for example, their racial identity or sexual orientation or political views can be points of connection to other fans as well as points of conflict. Identity can thus be understood in these cases as a fundamental factor that influences the mediating processes of fandom discussion. In this chapter, I argue that identity's relationship with perception is more complex; tensions evident in the ways fans perceive fandom discussion are also suggestions of tensions in fans' perceptions of themselves as they reflect and negotiate their place in fandom and relationship to fandom discussion.

While this chapter does not undertake the quantitative work of interrogating the potential of correlations between the affect and valuation in fans' narratives and their racial, gender, national, and/or sexual identities, fans' narratives offer evidence that such correlations exist. Fan studies scholarship, and, indeed, digital studies scholarship more broadly, increasingly attends to questions of identity online, particularly the ways that users' identities inflect their experiences of digital culture and of structural inequalities reflected in these spaces. This chapter adds to this

scholarship by highlighting further questions about how ties between identity and ideology are visible in the ways users theorize their online interactions. Identity is not the only factor that defines or influences how fans construct their narratives about fandom discussion, but it can inflect the experiences which influence these narratives. Identity might thus be a place of tension within fandom, but it might also help fans negotiate other tensions (e.g., Leanne's commitment to education helps her negotiate pushback from other fans). Further research could more closely examine questions such as: Are particular narrative constructions aligned with particular identity markers? How do particular identity-based experiences (e.g., receiving racist commentary from other fans) change how fans theorize fandom discussion? How can further explorations of the connections between identity and ideology help us to better understand why grappling with tension is so prevalent and productive in fandom?

The negotiation of tension prevalent in fans' theorizations of fandom discussion is also important to how fandom discussion functions as a knowledge-making system because this grappling forces fans to actively participate in that system. Engebretsen argues that both cohesion and tension are important for learning; however, "While cohesion builds the textual platform for comprehension, tension forces the reader to react, engage, draw conclusions—in other words, actively interact with the text, which is also a central condition of a fruitful learning process" (146). Amy Anderson makes a similar argument about the necessity of juxtaposing opposing or contradictory ideas for creating new meaning, a process that happens in what she calls the "multimodal gutter," the physical and conceptual space between two ideas where the reader must do the work of connection. I argue that a similar process of invention and connection is happening in the construction of fans' narratives of tension about the role of fandom discussion. The tension between the juxtaposed positive and negative mediating influences of fandom discussion forces

fans to actively engage with the varying processes of this discussion. As a consequence of this active engagement, fans might confront their own identities with fandom, reflect on where and how fandom discussion does and does not serve the community, and work to make discussion better for all fans. By grappling with tension, we see many fans produce narratives that metacognitively reflect on the nature and future of discussion in fandom. Because the negotiation of these tensions is so productive to fans' ongoing development of knowledge of self, community, and context, we see that many fans do not resolve these tensions but instead keep these contradictions actively in mind. To address this juxtaposition, fans must undertake their own process of invention by constructing a narrative that allows them to negotiate the contradictory elements of these discussions. The resulting narratives of tension both illuminate the process of invention their writers have undertaken and also demand that readers actively engage with the role of fandom discussion. They also reveal tension as an important component of knowledge-making—tension that we can read as a destabilization of knowledge and knowledge-making in fandom. By grappling with tension—and, particularly, by constructing narratives that refuse to resolve that tension—fans are ensuring that individual and communal understandings of fandom and the place of fandom discussion remain unstable. Further, they create a knowledge-making system in which, to learn or create knowledge of self, community, and context in fandom, fans must negotiate these tensions.

I also argue that by undertaking this process of engagement, invention, and reconciliation—or lack of reconciliation—fans are intervening in the mediating processes of fandom discussion. Just as fandom discussion shapes and influences fans' relationships with fandom, fans are in turn actively shaping their relationships with fandom discussion. In the opening of this chapter and the introduction to this dissertation, I defined mediation by writers through its

foundations in media studies and by similar approaches in RGS and the ecologies of writing as fans influencing their relationships with fandom discussion. Here I argue that we can also define mediation as negotiation, conceptualizing it as an ongoing process rather than a fixed result. In negotiating tensions in the ways fandom discussion mediates within fandom, fans are enacting self-reflection and metacognition that, in turn, changes and reshapes how they perceive and interact with those discussions.

We might also consider how this metacognition and active negotiation of tension might help fandom address the many problems in fandom discussion that these tensions reveal. Just as the narratives of tension described in this chapter help fans maintain relationships with fans that they disagree with, do definitional work in fandom, and challenge their own perceptions, might they also be a tool for fandom collectively to examine the problems in our community, confront them, and resolve them? Might, for example, acknowledging the conflicting needs of self care and community care be an step towards between balancing these competing needs and developing systems of engagement through which fandom can honor the needs of individual fans while collectively engaging in the work of social justice? As many fans demonstrate in this chapter, grappling with tension is something fandom is well-versed at doing. We are thus well-positioned to make productive changes to the ways fandom discussion operates in our community if we can continue to practice self-reflection and self-critique and if we can transform our ability to theorize tension into actions that can address it.

Chapter 6:

Implications

I started this dissertation by talking about the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy, so it seems fitting to end it in the same place. In the months after the sequel trilogy was released, I began to see increasing amounts of fiction depicting a relationship between the female lead Rey and the (eventually) redeemed antagonist Kylo Ren. This relationship would prompt arguably one of the most divisive and ongoing debates in the *Star Wars* fandom, with many fans seeing the relationship as abusive and critiquing fans who wrote stories featuring that ship that often erased the male lead Finn from the narrative, while fans who loved the relationship accused their detractors of censorship, harassment, and policing. To this day, *Star Wars* remains an intensely volatile and divided fandom and much of that division can be laid at the feet of this relationship.

It is a relationship that I hate.

What began as a mild dislike and incomprehension for why anyone would ship these characters evolved, in part because of the contention I observed in the fandom, into a visceral dislike of the relationship, to the point where I unsubscribed from formerly favorite authors after they began writing romantic stories featuring these characters.

I *hated* the Rey/Kylo Ren (or Reylo) relationship.

So it came as something of a surprise a few months ago to sit down with a friend, hear her describe herself as a Reylo fan, and feel almost nothing at all. We had an interesting conversation where she told about the reasons that she liked seeing a character be redeemed and thought the pair

was an interesting contrast. And I didn't want to shout *Why?! How could you possibly like this?!* I didn't understand it—and I still don't; I haven't changed my opinion about Reylo—but I could understand that she liked it. I like to think I could have had the same conversation with this friend five years ago and come to the same result, but I also think that working through this project has significantly reshaped the ways I understand fandom and how I interact with it.

Years of reading fandom discussion had solidified a viscerally negative response to this relationship—and I normally don't have a problem with hero/villain romances—but the work of hearing the diverse perspectives of fans in this study had helped me better understand the ways fandom discussion had shaped my own perceptions of this relationship and the differing values that informed how other fans interpreted the same material.

This potential impact of my dissertation on real people—people like me—is the focus of this chapter. I came to this project as a fan, a fan studies scholar, a scholar of digital studies and spaces, and a simultaneous instructor and student. Each of these identities informed the work I did in this project, so it is only right that my implications consider what each of these roles can gain from this research.

In this chapter, I will more closely examine the entanglements of self, community, and social justice in the knowledge-making of fandom for its implications for (1) for fans seeking to better understand our fandom community and improve that community, (2) for fandom scholarship that collaborates with fans on critically engaging with the community, (3) for generalizing this research to other digital spaces, and (4) for taking these insights into pedagogical practice. I argue that examining fandom through the lens of knowledge-making and understanding the influences of community values and identity revealed through my communications with fans is a productive space for rethinking how we participate in online communities; exploring engaged research

methods; deepening our understanding of discussion, mediation, and participant agency online; and drawing digital literacies into the classroom.

FANDOM DISCUSSION AS KNOWLEDGE-MAKING

Throughout this dissertation, I have characterized fandom as a knowledge-making system built on the entanglement of self, community, and social justice. This characterization of knowledge-making in fandom can be reframed thus: knowledge in fandom is constituted by the community and knowledge in fandom is constituted by the individual and these knowledges may not agree. In this section, I explore how fandom discussion functions as a system of making knowledge about the self, the community, and the world.

Fandom discussion as a system of knowledge-making is particularly evident in the many and varied ways fans perceived those discussions as mediating their relationships with other fans, the community, canon materials, and their own identities. These mediating processes, examined in Chapter Three, represent the ways fandom discussion makes knowledge about the self, the community, and the world. The 671 survey responses I collected for this project offered a rich pool of perspectives, showcasing the diverse and often contradictory roles of fandom discussion in the community. Fans saw fandom discussion as building community and interpersonal relationships, offering space to educate and identify problems in fandom, and prompting critical self-reflection and identity development. Fans also saw these same discussions as breaking the very community they helped build, gatekeeping and policing fan engagement, and facilitating harassment of other fans. Take, for example, narratives like that of Karima, who narrated fandom discussion as a place where she could express her sexuality, or Johanna, who found fandom discussion a place where she could learn the language of social justice, or Marley, who narrated an experience of fandom discussion driving him away from a community when their own identity came into conflict with

community discourse. In each of these narratives, the mediations of fandom discussion were also knowledge-making, providing opportunities to learn even as they shaped fans' experiences of fandom. In positioning fandom discussion as knowledge-making, I also recognize fans' interventions within the mediating processes of fandom discussion.

It is also important to consider in greater detail how we might characterize the knowledge-making system of fandom. One set of descriptors is destabilized, distributed, and democratized, and these descriptors give us another way to consider the tensions and entanglements of self, community, and social justice. First, I argue that the knowledge-making system of fandom is **destabilized.** By "destabilized," I mean that knowledge in fandom is continuously evolving and that rather than centering hierarchies of power or consensus and "truth," knowledge-making in fandom centers ethics of self care and community. These ethics of care are particularly evident in Chapter Four where I examined fans' curation practices and the motivations that underlie those practices. Using Davis's model of productive, consumptive, and network curation, I show that fans' curatorial practices draw from an ethic of self care that centers fans' mental health, attention to self-image, and individualized desires for interacting with fandom discussion and an ethic of community care that is enacted through engagement with diverse perspectives and subverted by a prioritization of self care. Fandom discussion can be both a productive and disruptive force in our experiences of fandom, but by curating the kinds of discussion we see, fans can disrupt those mediating and knowledge-making processes, choosing which mediations we allow to be enacted on ourselves. Further, despite the changing affordances and constraints, fans' curatorial practices across platforms evidence the same impulses to control what discussion we interact with and how, and the motivations for that curation remain consistent. Contemporary curatorial practices in fandom, then, operate within the affordances and constraints of a platform but are also driven by

a system of knowledge-making that is characteristic of fandom and stretches back through fan history. Consequently, we can say that fandom's knowledge-making system also destabilize the system of interaction established by the functionality of the specific platforms on which it takes place. Knowledge-making in fandom is also a highly individual process with fans choosing to interact with or ignore knowledge, create their own arguments, and construct narratives of tension that refuse to allow knowledge to be stabilized.

Second, I argue that the knowledge-making system of fandom is **distributed** throughout the community and **democratized**. By "distributed," I mean that knowledge is constructed collaboratively throughout the community; it is not centralized in particular forums and is spread across the many diverse kinds of fandom discussion. By "democratized," I mean that fans come to knowledge-making as equals regardless of the educational or professional experience, age, level of fandom participation, or complexity of insights. Fandom does not operate on a hierarchical system. While some fandoms include so-called Big Name Fans (BNFs), whose work is well-recognized and whose opinions are highly valued, fandom does not have any authorities with the power to declare knowledge to the rest of the community. Instead, as the narratives in this dissertation highlight, knowledge about the community, about appropriate behavior, about fiction tropes and problems within them, about the norms of the community, and even about the role of fandom discussion itself is created collaboratively through hundreds of thousands of fans sharing their opinions, building on each other's arguments, and vehemently disagreeing. The act of knowledge-making is distributed throughout the community and lack of power hierarchies makes this knowledge-making democratized (for better or for worse). I say "for better or for worse" in recognition of the intense amount of conflict in fandom, conflict that often arises from tension between valuing knowledge as an individual experience and knowledge as a community

endeavour. This tension, and consequently knowledge-making as democratized, is particularly evident in Chapter Five where I more closely examined how fans processed the tension between the positive and negative potential of fandom discussion. Highlighted in that chapter are the ways fans constructed narratives of tension that simultaneously recognized fandom discussion's potential to be both a productive and disruptive force in fandom. Recognizing these tensions is, in part, a recognition of the community-constituted nature of knowledge in fandom. This democratization of knowledge-making by recognizing the equal rights of all fans to be part of the conversation is particularly evident in the ways fans also acknowledged the value of other fans they often-vehemently disagreed with. Many of the fans that I interviewed could condemn another fan for opinions they profoundly disagreed with and behavior they perceived as harassment while simultaneously recognizing that these fans could also be coming from a place of genuine care for the community, drive to make fandom better, and/or circumstances where fandom was their only voice for self-expression.

Just as this recognition of the shared drive to make fandom better connected fans with contrasting perspectives, so to do I hope it connects my disparate identities of fan, fandom scholar, and instructor. I seek to improve fandom, scholarship, and pedagogy through this shared impetus for self-reflection, connection, and change.

FOR FANS: IMPROVING FANDOM DISCUSSION AND FANDOM

I begin my consideration of the implications of this dissertation with the fans themselves. Fans and their voices are at the heart of this project and, while scholarly in nature, this work is also dedicated to helping fans understand our community and interactions. Fans therefore are the first audience I consider for this work and a key community to which I want to speak.

Fans are always trying to make their community better and fandom discussion is a tool we use to do it. As I have shown throughout the dissertation, key topics in fandom discussion include analyzing community behavior, defining norms for socially just and inclusive interaction, identifying and addressing content like racism in media and fan content, and reflecting on our own change as fans. In Chapter 3, I highlight educating other fans and challenging problematic content as purposes fans identify as important for fandom discussion. For fandom, continuous self-improvement is foundational to the community and fandom discussion, with its emphasis on critique, is the place where much of this work happens. The work of this dissertation, then, offers insight for fans into how fandom discussion operates in our community and, crucially, the *different* perceptions fans hold about this critical component of fan interaction. For fans, this dissertation offers the following key implications and insights:

1. Fandom discussion doesn't work for a lot of fans, and understanding why and how it doesn't work may help fans improve fandom discussion within and for the community.

2. Seeing the diversity of perspectives about fandom discussion and the ways community and identity underlie those perspectives may help fans navigate conflict and tension within the community.

3. Visualizing fandom discussion as a system of knowledge-making whose character as destabilized, democratized, and distributed may similarly help fans navigate the community and develop intervention strategies to manage the mediating processes of fandom discussion in their relationships with fandom.

4. This research is incomplete without critical engagement with fans about the findings I suggest in this project.

Problems in the Current System of Fandom Discussion: Fandom discussion does a lot of rhetorical and social work in fandom, but the way it currently operates doesn't *work* for many fans. While fans see the potential of fandom discussion of building social connections, educating other fans, and creating a more inclusive community through critique, fans are equally cognizant of the many ways fandom discussion can also break community bonds, alienate fans, and serve as a space of harassment. Many of the mediating processes of fandom discussion described in Chapter Three were characterized with both positive and negative potential in fandom. Over 60% of the fans who responded to my survey narrated fandom discussion as either a disruptive force in the community or a force where positive and negative potentials were in constant tension (see Chapter 4). These tensions suggest that there is room for fans to change how fandom discussion operates in our community. The primary aim of this dissertation was not to intervene in the way fandom discussion currently operates in fandom. My project was not designed for such an intervention and the knowledge-making system of fandom would not support such an intervention from a singular individual. Yet, in offering insights into the ways fandom discussion operates in the community, the ways fandom discussion interacts with fans' identities, and the ways fans experience fandom discussion so differently, I hope that the insights from this dissertation will serve as a source of knowledge for the community to collectively discuss and negotiate. These negotiations may, in turn, help fandom as a community to change fandom discussion and fans as individuals to manage their relationships with these mediating processes. Where one individual cannot change fandom, collaborative engagement might, as it has done in fandom's past, shift the character of fandom discussion and the way fans practice it.

Seeing Diversity to Navigate Conflict and Tension: As this dissertation highlights, there is a great deal of diversity in how fans theorize the role of fandom discussion and the ways they

perceive it operating in fandom. This diversity of perspectives is often rooted in the diversity of fans' identities; everything from race and sexuality to ideologies of censorship can influence how fans perceive fandom discussion. Fans like diversehighfantasy and Johanna, for example, narrate instances where their identities as Black and Jewish women respectively influenced their awareness of particular issues like racism in fandom. Marley similarly narrated an instance where his relationship outside of fandom made a discussion about the dynamics of a fandom ship feel more loaded than it might for other fans. The passion and tightly held values fans bring to these discussions can often result in intense conflict and lead to many of the negatively-perceived roles of discussion described in Chapter Three.

I don't believe that conflict is the goal of discussion for most fans, and fans' descriptions of fandom discussion support this belief. Even when talking about the parts of discussion they dislike and find disruptive, like harassment or the policing of participation, many fans still attribute positive motives to other fans. They suggest that many critiques come from a place of genuinely wanting fandom to be a better place, even if they disagree with the critique, the way the critique is presented, and/or its impacts on other fans. This attribution of positive, community-minded intentions even where conflict is occurring suggests that fans might find value in greater understanding and access to each other's perspectives.

I believe that understanding where other fans are coming from—where their identities, ideologies, and experiences drive their perspectives—might facilitate more productive conversations in fandom by helping to minimize conflict. As an example, I have never liked the ship of Kylo Ren and Rey from *Star Wars*, particularly when it was based only in the portrayals of the characters from the first of the sequel trilogy, *The Force Awakens*. I believed that shipping these two characters problematically minimized the ways Kylo Ren stalked, harassed, imprisoned,

and tried to torture Rey in the movie. I couldn't see how other fans saw chemistry between these two characters in any way that wasn't deeply problematic. Many stories that shipped these characters also villainized Finn, the black former stormtrooper who was the co-protagonist of the story and set up with a close friendship with Rey in *The Force Awakens*. I had a viscerally negative reaction to any mention of this ship, refused to engage with work that contained it because of how strongly I felt, and felt a distinct separation and disidentification with other fans who supported this ship to the point where I questioned how we could be part of the same community. The conversations I've had with fans the last few years about their perspectives on fandom discussion and the different places their views come from have helped change the way I look at things like ships and their fans that I dislike. In the case of Rey and Kylo Ren, I've read posts discussing how villain redemption arcs can be valuable for fans who feel it empowers them to be in control of the fate of the antagonist of a story, or how it helps them to explore how someone from a good home and family could become such a villain, or how they can create hope by exploring how even villainous characters can return to the "good side."

Of course, none of this erases the critique of the ship, and I still firmly believe there are *a lot* of problems with it, but understanding the reasons some fans value this relationship has helped me develop a more productive response to it. It's easier for me to say, now, "I don't like this, but I don't dislike you because you do like it." I think it can lead to more productive conversations for fans if we can better understand where their perspectives are coming from. We might, for example, be able to talk about what's racist in narrative tropes contained in Kylo Ren/Rey stories that villainize Finn, while still recognizing that these stories do something valuable for the writers and readers who create and consume them. Fans, I believe, can only benefit from better understanding their fellow fans and from having access to the diversity of perspectives in the community.

Developing Strategies of Interaction and Intervention: In addition to giving fans access to the diversity of perspectives on fandom discussion, this dissertation may also benefit fans by offering knowledge-making as a new way of framing their interactions with fandom discussion. First, thinking about fandom discussion as a space of knowledge-making could help place some emotional distance between ourselves and the mediations of that discussion. Because fandom discussion often centers around worlds, characters, and stories we love, we bring a lot of emotion into our conversations. This passion is part of what makes fandom the beautiful thing that it is, but it can also mean that conflicts are more likely. We are more likely to respond passionately to critique of something we love or things we see as harmful in issues we care about than we are to respond passionately to something we don't care about. Thinking about fandom discussion as a knowledge-making system may help us step back from our passionate responses and more critically examine other fans' perspectives with an open mind. Second, rethinking fandom discussion as a knowledge-making system that is destabilized, democratized, and distributed could help other fans grapple with the tensions of community and identity that define much of how discussion in fandom occurs. As I have argued, ethics of self care and community care underlie fandom's aspirations and the way discussion functions in our fan spaces, but while these themes productively help us improve fandom discussion, they can also be sources of tension in our discussions. Understanding this complex system could help other fans re-theorize it in ways thatenable them to more productively grapple with tension in the community and the way that discussion is both community focused and individually constructed.

Having access to narratives about how other fans interact with fandom as a knowledge-making system may also give fans strategies for changing their own interactions with fandom discussion. For example, I had always known that curation tools existed on Tumblr but had, prior

to working on this project, used them only sparingly to block posts about soccer from an account whose *Star Wars* content I otherwise greatly enjoyed. Talking with fans and reading their strategies for curating the kinds of fandom discussion they see has helped me reframe my relationship with these discussions and how I interact with it. In my early days on Tumblr, I had internalized a belief that if I followed another fan or a tag, I was accepting that I had to look at *all* their content, whether I wanted to see it or not. But hearing other fans talk about valuing their mental health by choosing to engage only deliberately with certain content or to engage with it only on their own terms helped me reframe fandom discussion as not just something I had to do to be part of the community but something I could control. It helped me put what I wanted out of fandom discussion into words. It made me more comfortable with exercising the controls Tumblr had given me. It helped me separate engaging with fandom discussion for entertainment and engaging with it for learning. I felt more comfortable doing the critical self-reflective work that fandom discussion sometimes prompts when I could do it on my own terms. I hope this dissertation will offer similar support for other fans, giving them another option for the way they theorize fandom discussion and practical solutions for interacting with these discussions and intervening in the mediations these discussions undertake.

Further Fan Engagement Required: The potential benefits of my dissertation to fandom are, at the moment, theoretical. While my own experience with examining fandom discussion as part of this dissertation suggests that other fans may similarly benefit, I will need to make the findings of this dissertation publicly accessible to fans. Engaging directly with fans is necessary for two reasons. First, as I have argued, I believe the findings of this dissertation will help fans understand and navigate fandom discussion, and this can only happen if the findings and research of the dissertation are publicly accessible to fans. Second, I consider the insights of this dissertation

266

still a work-in-progress until they have been fully shared, dissected, and argued by the community at large. Ideas in fandom undergo constant iterations of sharing, critique, and commentary that add nuance, depth, and complexity, as well as identify gaps. Sharing my research for fans' review will help refine my insights. My future research for this project will thus move the insights of the dissertation from an academic context to a public-facing one in which my participants and fandom broadly can help me refine, nuance, and rethink my findings. I propose to share both my raw data and my findings with fans through my Tumblr blog fans-on-fandom and by constructing a web text and database for the project, with space for discussion and commentary from fans. This dissertation is thus only a first step in examining and understanding fandom discussion as a mediating process in fandom and in conceptualizing fans' theorizing of and interventions in that process.

FOR FANDOM SCHOLARS: UNDERSTANDING FANDOM AND IMPROVING RESEARCH

The findings of this dissertation draw from a wealth of work in fan studies on the role of fans' identities in their fanworks and fans' writing practices, on fandom as a community, and on the ethics and ideologies that underlie and drive the fandom community. My dissertation extends this existing foundation to the comparatively less-considered practices of fandom discussion. Fandom studies has already created a strong foundation of work that seeks to understand fandom communities and practices; in this section, I offer implications that seek to build on this existing foundation. In the spirit of the destabilized, democratized, distributed knowledge-making system of fandom, my dissertation also opens space for fandom scholars to think through destabilizing the ways we make academic knowledge about fandom. My dissertation offers the following insights about fandom discussion specifically and the ways fandom scholarship is undertaken and theorizes fandom generally:

1. Fandom studies can use these insights as a framework to understand discussion across fandoms and further interrogate both the interconnectedness of fandom and the distinctions between individual fan subcommunities.

2. Research on fandom could be extended by recognizing and incorporating the critical self-reflective work already done through fandom discussion.

3. Qualitative research through surveys of and interviews with fans are valuable resources for enhancing our understandings of fandom, and fan studies research would benefit from greater use of these methods. How could our existing scholarship about fandom be enhanced if we talked to fans more and ourselves less?

4. Fandom scholars would benefit from more thinking through and connecting our work to broader conversations about life and literacy online in other scholarly fields.

Contributions to Fan Studies Scholarship: Fandom scholarship has long been able to productively explain *what* is happening in fandom and *how* those practices are enacted, but we have yet to as deeply engage with *why* specific practices and patterns become common. We understand why fandom exists and the value that fans get from transformative activity, but more discussion is needed about the underlying values of fandom and how those values influence fans' practices, are visible in conflict within the community, and define and are defined by fans' identities. My dissertation adds to fan studies as a field by helping us to better understand (1) the complexity of discussion's role in fandom, (2) fans' practices of intervening in our relationship with that discussion and the ways other fans might be similarly engaged in curating their relationships, and (3) the ways in which "knowledge" in fandom is less universally understood than we might have anticipated. Fandom studies has investigated these questions through studies that consider fandom discussion within a particular fandom or smaller-scale context. I build on

this work by seeking to understand how patterns of behavior and perception might extend across fandom. In seeking these large-scale patterns, my dissertation highlights the varied and significant ways that discussion is shaping and changing fans' experiences in fandom and the ways in which fans navigate this constant change by intervening through narratives of tension and curation practices that center personal constructions of knowledge. Further, my dissertation highlights how discussion mediates every aspect of fandom, from fans' social justice orientations to shared appreciation for canon objects, and how this mediation is highly dynamic. Discussion posts are anything but static objects in fandom, being circulated, recirculated, contradicted, and expanded on. My dissertation emphasizes this dynamism by considering the interconnections across fandom and the ways every aspect of fandom can reshape fans' realities. My study offers fandom studies scholars a framework for interrogating discussion across fandom. From this work, scholars might continue to explore patterns that unite fandom and/or use these patterns to more closely examine discussion within their particular communities of interest. Questions for future research might include: How does a community as diverse, divided, and far flung as fandom develop shared values that can so profoundly shape practices across the community? How do values within particular fandoms reflect the values of fandom more broadly, and how might those similarities and differences account for differing discussion practices? How might rethinking knowledge and knowledge-making in fandom as both distributed across fandom and destabilized in favor of personal and evolving knowledges help us better understand the negotiated tension between individual fans and community practice?

This attention to tension is also a place where I see my dissertation facilitating future research. Throughout my interviews and surveys, fans shared many narratives about conflict in fandom and perspectives on this conflict, from disagreements about shipping to abuse and racism.

This conflict is implicated throughout my dissertation in the tensions between positive and negative mediating processes, the grappling with these tensions in fans' theorizations of fandom discussion, and the way curation practices are often tied to avoiding conflict. In this dissertation, I have attended primarily to ways that fans negotiate and grapple with these conflicts and proposed that conflict is often born of contradictions in fandom's underlying values of community care and personal care. But I think the nature of conflict in fandom itself deserves considerably more attention, particularly as fandom scholars have called for greater attention to questions of, for example, how race and experiences of alienation structure fandom (Jenkins and Proctor 2018a, 2018b). As fan studies does more research on the place of discussion in fandom, I argue that we must also more explicitly engage with the nature of conflict, the ideologies that motivate it; and the ways fans negotiate it.

Attending to and Incorporating Fans' Critical Work in Scholarship: As I have highlighted in my dissertation, fans are already doing significant critical work in examining how fandom functions, how identity and community are constructed in fandom spaces, and how fans negotiate conflict and social justice. Fandom discussion is a place of critical conversation where knowledge about fandom is constructed collaboratively as a community purpose. When scholars do work in fandom, we tend to look first to other scholarship then second to our own analysis. I argue that there is a field of theory we are missing: fans' own theorizations about fandom published in the critical conversations within the community. These theorizations are much less accessible than academic scholarship: they are not collected in easily searchable and indexed databases; there is no definitive list of key conversations; there is no genealogy of evolving theory (and making such a genealogy would likely prove impossible); and there is such a vast quantity of conversation that reading even of tiny fraction of it would be beyond most people. Yet these conversations

include deep analysis of fandom culture and practices, fan identities, and issues of justice and representation. Theories are reviewed, critiqued, expanded on, and contradicted by a vast network of peer theorists. Fandom discussion is fandom's version of academic journals and by neglecting to include these perspectives in our work, we are ignoring a vast and well-developed set of critical conversations about our field of study. I argue that fandom studies would benefit from closer and more in-depth engagement with fandom discussion as a set of theories about fandom and from incorporating those theories into our scholarship.

Of course, I recognize that there are significant challenges in drawing this work into our scholarship. Beyond the difficulty of drawing out specific threads and identifying common theories from the vastness of the conversations, there remains the ethical challenge of taking discussion out of its fandom contexts. In including these discussions in scholarship, we might be dragging them into contexts their authors did not intend, for audiences whose critique these authors don't welcome. Yet, I believe, as a field, that we need to grapple with the work represented in these discussions and that our understandings of fandom will forever be incomplete if we do not. So, how can we explicitly acknowledge the theorizations of fan authors without further straining the relationship between fandom and fan studies scholarship? How do we weight fan theories against academic ones? How do we take a vast and disorganized conversation like fandom discussion and surface the ideas, patterns, and discourses that will help fan studies scholars better understand fandom and how fans conceptualize it? I do not yet have the answers to these questions, but I believe that they are ones our field should be grappling with.

Greater Engagement with Fans as a Research Method: As the conversations with fans throughout my dissertation highlight, fans' perceptions and narratives can add deep nuance to our understandings of fandom. This nuance and depth of understanding are not always available when

conducting analysis that focuses on close reading of fan texts or ethnographic observation of fan behaviors. For example, Chapter Five of my dissertation examines fans' curation practices; I had long been aware that fans could leverage platform capabilities to block other users, blacklist tags, etc., but through fans' survey responses and interviews, I was able to access the deeper underlying motivations of fans' practices and see how those practices intersected with knowledge-construction. The analysis I did in Chapter Five was where I first developed the idea of fandom discussion as a knowledge-making space—an idea that came to fundamentally inform the rest of my dissertation. This idea was only accessible to me because of my conversations with fans, which both complicated and explained patterns I had observed through participation in fandom. Interaction with fans is already a part of fan studies research, but I argue that our field should explore greater engagement with fans as a research practice and extension of existing close reading and ethnographic observation scholarship. Productive and powerful insights emerge from research that does not engage directly with fans, and I argue that these insights could be enhanced by turning to engagement with fans as a next step in the research process.

As I argue above in my plans for future work on this project, building a more collaborative relationship between fandom discussion and fan studies scholarship may prove highly productive for fan studies as a field. I argue that fan studies scholars should be publishing their work in both academic and fan contexts, ensuring that the research we do on fandom is communicated back to the community. Further, I believe that our scholarly theories would benefit significantly from soliciting fan commentary on those theories. I have seen, again and again, that an excellent theory or piece of analysis offered by one fan is enhanced by the thoughtful responses of other fans who add new dimensions, highlight gaps and oversights, and carry theories into new spaces. Fans are well-positioned to offer the same kind of critique to fandom scholars; they can help us test our

theories against the perceptions of the community, answer questions arising from our data, challenge our biases, and, ultimately, build a more collaborative understanding of fandom.

Connecting Fandom Studies to Broader Digital Studies Conversations: Fandom scholars would also benefit from thinking about the place of fandom studies—and fandom—in broader conversations about life and literacy online. Fandom studies is a robust and growing field, yet it remains a relatively isolated one. Fandom scholarship tends to be located in journals devoted to the field, appearing with much less frequently in journals with a more general focus on digital communities, online life, consumer culture, and media studies. While there is great value and need for the field to have its own spaces and recognition as a distinct area of study, there is a distinct separation from scholarship on transformative fandom and scholarship on other digital spaces and practices. Perhaps this separation comes in part from fandom studies' focus on the transformative and creative works of fandom. Perhaps it is rooted in early resistance to the value of fandom as both a practice for fans and a space of research. Regardless, as fandom studies turns towards greater consideration of fandom's intersections with activism, identity and community development, commodification of creative expression, social justice, and education, it also opens space for greater conversation with the broader interests of digital studies. It would be of benefit to fandom scholars, then, to think about the place of our field in the broader tapestry of digital studies and to consider the ways our work might speak to diverse conversations in other digital-focused fields. How can we, as scholars, bring both our work and the critical work of fans into this broader context? In the next section, I will discuss the potential insights that this dissertation, and other such work on fandom, might bring to broader digital studies scholarship on identity, interaction, and literacy online.

FOR DIGITAL SCHOLARS: GENERALIZING INSIGHTS FOR OTHER SPACES

While my dissertation focuses on fans' experiences and the work of discussion exclusively in fandom communities, my findings have implications for the work of digital studies scholars in spaces beyond fandom. Other digital communities also share a lot of characteristics with fandom and are often also similar subcommunities and intimate spaces. Fandom is not the only community on Tumblr, for example. Digital studies scholars have also recognized communities on Tumblr including LGBTQ communities, abuse survivor groups, political groups, and interest communities. Communities outside of fandom and/or on other platforms may share similarities with fandom as intimate subcultures. For example, communities like gaming forums or YouTube communities (e.g., beauty vloggers or booktubers) can have community-specific dialects, a sense of cohesion and shared purpose, close relationships with other members of the community, and a sense of being distinct and separate from participants in these spaces. Based on these similarities, I argue that my dissertation has the following implications for digital studies scholars beyond fandom:

1. Similarities between fandom and other spaces suggest that some insights about discussion in fandom can be generalized to discussion in other digital spaces and communities.

2. Fans' identifications of the unique aspects of discussion in fandom suggest that discussion is not universally similar, and they highlight the need to consider links between discussion practices and community composition, values, and purpose.

Generalizing to Other Digital Spaces: As I note above, digital platforms like Tumblr are home to many communities and there are often similarities between these communities and fandom. It is reasonable to suggest, then, that insights about discussion in fandom might apply to

discussion in other online spaces. Fans themselves also see a lot of similarity between how discussion happens in fan spaces and the ways they see discussion happening in other online spaces. In my interviews, several fans reported that they see similar topics being discussed in other digital spaces, including discussions of racism, politics, and ethical behavior in digital communication. When asked about whether she saw similarities between discussion in fandom and discussion in other spaces, Jae offered the following comparison:

> I think there's a lot of the same kind of stuff going on, the same kind of discussions happening in political more spaces and radical political spaces. On the left, there's so much questioning over motives and the best way to do things and practice and so on. I found it really [similar to] fandom in that particular way because, especially on the left, especially in the U.K., there's so much… Like if you are also a Marxist, but you do this one thing differently to me then you are awful and I will never associate with you ever again, which really narrows what can happen in fandom a lot. So yes. Absolutely, I think so.

Jae explicitly notes that the same kind of discussions that happen in fandom happen in other spaces, both in specific content (e.g., political discourse) and in general kinds of discussion (e.g., community practices. Considering fandom's attention to and ethic of social justice, it is hardly surprising that spaces like political discourse would similarly surface topics of ideology. This similarity does, though, offer a point of connection between discussion in fandom and discussion in fans' lives beyond fandom. As Johanna highlights in Chapter 3, the discussions that fans have in fan spaces can be deployed for political purpose outside fandom, as she did in educating her local city council about Islamophobia. While Jae does not reference deploying the social justice conversations of fandom in other spaces, their response suggests that discussions in fandom can mirror discussions in other spaces.

Discussion in fandom also mirrors discussion in other spaces in the ways both these discussions engage with topics of community and community practice. Jae notes that discussions in political discourse spaces often include "questioning over motives and the best way to do things and practice and so on"—in essence, conversation about the nature of the community, community

values and culture, and best practices for community interaction and participant behavior. These are all topics that fans raise in fandom discussion as we negotiate what it means to be a fan, our approaches to interacting with each other, and the ways fandom's ideologies influence our behavior. This similarity suggests, then, that insights about how fans negotiate identity and community through discussion might help digital studies scholars understand this negotiation more broadly.

Jae's comment also raises another similarity between discussion in fandom and discussion in other digital spaces: the existence of contention in these discussions. In particular, Jae highlights how discussion in digital spaces can become particularly contentious over very specific points. Jae highlights how those who share a political ideology, in this case Marxism, might become divided by disagreement over one aspect of this ideology. Their comment also suggests a deeper similarity in not just the existence of contention but in the way this contention is enacted in digital spaces. Jae frames this enactment as one person doing something different than another, which results in a complete division of the individuals and a refusal to further associate. redeyedwrath, an 18-year-old, white, male, Dutch fan of *Merlin*, *James Bond*, and *Dishonored* offers a similar perspective:

> My access programs on the internet is pretty much limited to fandom. I'm not a very social media like person. But when I do go on Twitter or Facebook or YouTube, I do see the same sort of rhetoric happen more and more. As an example, I was watching a YouTube video by a YouTuber and his girlfriend is I think five years older than he is. He's like 25 and she's 30 so who cares. But in the comments I literally saw someone say that's pedophilia. And I was like oh no, it's spreading to YouTube. So I do see that same sort of rhetoric and the reactionary aspect, jumping on top of things without evaluating the situation.

redeyedwrath emphasizes a similarity in behavior. Specifically, he highlights a trend in fandom wherein some fans critique relationships involving age differences as pedophilia regardless of the age difference or the actual ages of the characters involved. But more than the similarity in the topics, redeyedwrath's comment highlights a sense that there is a similarity in the *way* these

conversations are conducted (e.g., a discussion about age differences becoming accusations of pedophilia) and in the way community participants respond to these discussions. Like in fandom, these kinds of conversations in other spaces can produce a distaste in community members and a sense that the conversations are "reactionary" or for the purpose of causing drama. I am reminded, when I see other fans make these connections and highlight these rhetorical approaches, of recent controversy in the beauty vlogger community where accusations of predatory behavior were levelled against a popular YouTuber and intense conversation ensued about whether the way he conducted his relationships made him, as another YouTuber accused him, a danger to society. Like redeyedwrath, I see the sample topics and approach to these topics surfacing in other digital communities. Consequently, I argue that understanding how fandom's ideologies influence community practice and are implicated in these kinds of conflicts may help other digital scholars conceptualize conflict and controversy in other digital communities.

In light of these similarities in the content and practices of discussions, digital studies scholars can use my research to think about discussion in spaces beyond fandom. My research offers space to think about discussion online as a space of knowledge-making that is driven by the values of the community. As I argue throughout this dissertation, fandom discussion is a space where fans make and take in knowledge about themselves, their communities, and the world around them. As I argue earlier in this chapter, my research highlights that, online, this knowledge-making is much less stable, centralized, or hierarchical than in many traditional knowledge-making spaces like academia, workplaces, or politics. As digital studies scholars, we often think of knowledge-making in those contexts; my dissertation suggests that we would also find value in applying this framework to spaces of entertainment and social connection. In these contexts, we might think of "knowledge" more expansively, as fans in my study demonstrate when they

reference learning about their identities or how to interact with their digital communities. Further research on this topic in spaces beyond fandom might ask questions such as: How does discussion function in these communities to build knowledge? What kinds of knowledge are built? How do community participants take in this knowledge? Do they recognize these spaces as sites of knowledge-making? My research might also offer digital studies scholars space to think about the ways in which community values and practices can shape the structures of knowledge-making in digital communities.

Texts mediate the realities of their consumers, and this idea is one well-recognized by digital studies scholars. In addition to offer insight into the particular mediations of discussion texts in fandom, my research also offers insight into participants' interventions within this mediating process. The narratives in this dissertation show that in addition to recognizing how discussion shapes their experiences of fandom, fans actively shape those mediating processes by grappling with tensions in the positive and negative potential of fandom discussion and by curating their interaction with these texts. These interventions and fans' narratives throughout my dissertation highlight significant self-reflexivity and active negotiation of the influence of digital content, insights at odds with perceptions of digital participants as passive consumers. Digital scholars, especially those studying conflict, polarization, and alienation in online communities, could benefit from further exploring the negotiation and active grappling of participants in those spaces. My research suggests that there is space for the field to ask further questions such as: Why do people participate in contentious online spaces? How do participants perceive the impacts of this conflict on their sense of connection to others and to community online? How do participants manage their interactions with these contentious spaces? My dissertation shows that there is community building potential even in highly contentious discussion, and digital studies scholars

can use my work as a foundation for asking question about mediation, intervention, and self-reflexivity online.

Where We Can't Generalize and Values in Acknowledging Differences: It is important to acknowledge, though, that while there are similarities between fandom and other digital spaces that enable these extensions and generalizations, fandom remains a distinct subcommunity. As we take this notion of discussion online as knowledge-making and knowledge online as destabilized and individually- and community-constituted, we must also take into consideration the key differences between fandom spaces and other online spaces. Though some fans in my study saw similarities between discussion in fandom and discussion in other online spaces, others argued that there was something unique about discussion in fandom. These fans suggested differences between fandom and other digital spaces including that the issues raised in fandom discussion such as racism or sexism were not as explicitly discussed outside of fandom; that, for some, fandom took a more black and white perspective on these issues; and that fandom was unique for its foundation in creative output and emphasis on interaction with creators. While most fans that I spoke to about this question of similarity argued that fandom bore significant similarity to other digital spaces, it is important to acknowledge the potential for differences between these spaces. Communities online have distinct and different cultures, values, and practices, and what is true in one community might not be true in another. These insights from my research thus represent starting points for research in other spaces. Digital studies scholars can use this research as a source from which to develop questions for studies into community values, knowledge-making, and discussion practices in digital communities across online spaces.

It is also important to note that the insights in my dissertation apply primarily to Tumblr and English-speaking/Westernized fandom and can thus not be generalized to all fandom spaces

or to other digital communities worldwide. Fan studies has long recognized distinct threads of inquiry in western versus transnational fandom, and fans who participate in both spaces agree with these distinctions. Shuang, a Chinese woman from Singapore who participates in Western fandom on sites like Tumblr and Chinese fandom on sites like Lofter, offered this comparison of Western and Chinese fandom:

> A disclaimer that this is just my own opinion, - I could be completely wrong. I'm also going to generalize a lot: Western fandom (tumblr especially) has become more social-justice oriented. People have started to look at fandom through a social justice lens, so there are now progressive/good ships (Finnrey = interracial, good) and regressive/bad ships (Reylo = white, racist, abusive and sexist = bad). This aspect is basically nonexistent in Chinese fandom, so there's just much less shipping discourse.

Later in our interview, she also compares the Tumblr and Chinese *Black Panther* fandoms, saying "tumblr BP fandom does have more policing of fics/art (fanworks generally). Chinese fandom just doesn't do it at all." Her response highlights one of the key values of fandom that I've discussed throughout the dissertation—social justice—and she argues that the different ways this value is taken up in Western and Chinese fandom create distinctly different fan experiences. These distinctions seem to particularly apply to fandom discussion where conversation about topics like the morality of various character relationships are prominent. Shuang's response suggests that this kind of "shipping discourse" would function very differently in non-Western fandom spaces, if it happens at all.

These distinctions are important to note, especially when I think about the potential to generalize insights from my research. While the data for this dissertation was drawn from fans around the world, I nevertheless recognize that the narratives I draw on for this project do not represent every fan's experiences in fandom. In particular, because I focused on Tumblr and English-speaking fans, my dissertation does not necessarily represent the experiences of fans where the fandom is primarily not English-speaking and not on Tumblr. Further research would

be required to see how the perceptions and patterns I identify in my research do and do not map onto the experiences of fans in other spaces. This research would also be necessary when thinking through how generalizable these insights might be to digital communities in general. Shuang's response highlights how, despite the similarities fans see between fandom and other digital spaces, there are still distinct differences in community cultures and values that might arise from different languages and a different socio-cultural demographic. Consequently, while I argue that my research can help digital studies scholars ask questions about the underlying values of digital communities and the influence of those values on knowledge-making practices and participant perceptions, I also argue that researchers should be attentive to the differences inherent in each community and hold the distinct culture of the community as a key point of investigation.

FOR THE CLASSROOM: POSSIBLE PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

My dissertation project was not intended as a study of classroom practice or designed primarily to provide pedagogical suggestions. Yet, as an instructor, I am keen to think about how understanding the writing and knowledge-making practices of our students may help us in the classroom. In Chapter Two, I showed that most fans who participated in my study were between 20 and 30 years old; most of these fans have been in fandom for 5 to 15 years and, as the biographies of my interview participants suggest, most fans join fandom in their teens. These demographics suggest that the students in our classrooms are at a prime age to be participants in fandom. While many of our students won't be fans, I have yet to teach a class that didn't contain at least one student who either currently or in the past was a part of fandom. And if the insights of fandom are applicable to other online community spaces, it is possible that many of the students in our classrooms will have had similar experiences with knowledge-making in digital communities. For instructors, then, my dissertation offers insight into the experiences of our

students outside our classrooms and their writing lives in their online contexts. The more hierarchical, structured, and stable knowledge-making of our classrooms is often at odds with the experiences of our students in their heavily negotiated and individualized experiences online. I argue that my dissertation offers the following potential insights for instructors:

1. By understanding online community interaction, we can help students recognize their digital literacies and leverage them in the classroom.

2. By thinking about the different knowledge-making model that exists online, we can develop knowledge-making practices for the classroom that model destabilized, distributed, and democratized knowledge-making in digital spaces.

Leveraging Students' Digital Literacies: By better understanding our students' online communities and the practices in those communities, we can help students leverage the knowledge they learn in these spaces for their academic and professional futures. Online communities are places where students can develop both content knowledge and skills with self-reflection and discourse. For example, in Chapter Three fans like Johanna and Karima narrated experiences of learning about Islamophobia and broader definitions of sexuality respectively, highlighting the ways fans can develop knowledge about the world through the critical conversations, literary analysis, and dissection of creative tropes that are the staple of fandom discussions. Fans' narratives about their interactions with these discussions throughout my dissertation demonstrate extensive self-reflection and critical, metacognitive engagement with the literacy practices of these communities. Both of these areas are things we as instructors strive to bring into our classrooms; we want to teach our students metacognitive thinking and critical reflection of their writing, and we often want our classrooms to be spaces of social justice and commentary on the world we live in. Exploring our students' digital literacies, then, will help us understand the kinds of knowledge

they bring into our classrooms and the kinds of self-reflective and metacognitive skills they already have. We can then actively work to leverage those knowledges and skills through the classroom experiences that we design.

New Knowledge-Making Practices for the Classroom: Examining knowledge-making in these spaces may also help instructors develop new models for knowledge-making in the classroom that incorporate the destabilized, distributed, and democratized knowledge-making practices of online communities. Classrooms are traditionally spaces of structured, hierarchical, stable knowledge transfer from instructors to students. Conversation in pedagogical circles has, though, increasingly emphasized ways to de-center the instructor and emphasize student agency, experience, and self-direction in the learning process. The knowledge-making systems of fandom that position understandings of culture, identity, and practices of interaction as negotiated, collaboratively constituted, and individually curated seem well-suited for this kind of student-centered learning. As instructors, we can take our knowledge of students' familiarity with these knowledge-making systems as an opportunity to try different approaches to knowledge-making in the classroom. What would learning look like if we encouraged students to make arguments collaboratively rather than write individual papers? Or when an individual paper was only the starting point from which the class would debate, critique, expand, and re-develop arguments? How might it help students to teach them to participate in knowledge-making as a community while developing thoughtful curation practices that promoted an ethic of self-care? How might fans' insights into knowledge-curation as a function of self-image and a communication to indirect audiences help our students understand ethos and rhetorical awareness of audience in their other work?

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have separated my implications for four distinct audiences: fans, fandom scholars, digital studies scholars, and instructors. This division helped me communicate the distinct and different implications and future directions of this research. However, these divisions also hide the ways potential readers of this dissertation might belong to multiple of these audiences and elide the value of speaking across these communities. I am a perfect example of this; I am a fan, a fandom scholar who is part of the larger digital studies field, and an instructor. The implications in this chapter come, in part, from my participation in each of these groups. In closing this chapter and this dissertation, I return here to the multiplicity of identity and community that drove the construction of this project. Like me, readers of this dissertation might belong to many of the groups I speak to in this final chapter. Fandom scholars are often also fans. Digital scholars are often also instructors. Instructors may also be fans. While the structure of this chapter suggests four distinct audiences, in reality these audiences are intermingled in a complex Venn diagram of membership in multiple communities and communication within and across each of those spaces. In recognizing these multiple audiences, I recognize the way each role might inform how a person takes up the insights of this dissertation and the productive potential of taking up multiple insights simultaneously. For example, as a fan and an instructor of digital culture, I might take up this dissertation's insights about facilitating understanding and improving fandom discussion and bring them into classroom discussion that engages students' in self-reflection about the online communities that they belong to. In recognizing these multiple audiences, I also recognize the value of communication between them and potential of different fields engaging collaboratively with the findings of this project. This is the heart of fandom practice: fans from different countries, backgrounds, professions, and interests coming together to share and build knowledge. What value

would there be for scholarship, pedagogy, and community participation to come together in similar

dialogue?

Works Cited

"About." *Tumblr*, www.tumblr.com/about. Accessed 17 July 2019.

Alexander, Jonathan. "'Straightboyz4Nsync': Queer Theory and the Composition of
Heterosexuality." *JAC*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2005, pp. 371-395.

Amit, Vered, and Nigel Rapport. *The Trouble with Community: Anthropological Reflections on
Movement, Identity and Collectivity*. Pluto Pres, 2002.

Anderson, Amy. "Exploring the Multimodal Gutter: What Dissociation Can Teach Us About
Multimodality." *enculturation: a journal of rhetoric, writing, and culture*, 2017,
enculturation.net/exploring_the_multimodal_gutter. Accessed 15 December 2018.

Androutsopoulos, Jannis. "Potentials and Limitations of Discourse-Centred Online
Ethnography." *Language @ Internet*, vol. 5, 2008,
languageatinternet.org/articles/2008/1610. Accessed 2 March 2019.

Bacon-Smith. *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*.
University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.

Bargh, John A., et al. "Can You See the Real Me? Activation and Expressions of the 'True Self'
on the Internet." *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 58, no. 1, 2002, pp. 33-48.

Bassilakis, Andrew, et al. "Converging Media versus Diverging Politics – The Brexit Twitter on
Debate." *CESifo Forum*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2018, pp. 29-35.

Bawarshi, Anis S., and Mary Jo Reiff. *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and
Pedagogy*. Parlor Press, 2010.

Baym, Nancy K. *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*. Sage Publications, 2000.

Bell, Linda. *Rethinking Ethics in the Midst of Violence: A Feminist Approach to Freedom*. Rowman and Littlefield, 1993.

Bivens, Rena. "Under the Hood: The Software in Your Feminist Approach." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2015, pp. 714-717.

Black, Rebecca. *Adolescents and Online Fan Fiction*. Peter Lang, 2008.

Bolter, Jay David, and Richard Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. The MIT Press, 2000.

Booth, Paul. *Digital Fandom: New Media Studies*. Peter Lang, 2010.

---. "Tumbling or Stumbling? Misadventures with Tumblr in the Fan Studies Classroom." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 27, 2018. doi:10.3983/twc.2018.1252.

Bourdaa, Mélanie. "Tumblr as a Methodological Tool for Data Archiving: The Case of a Calzona Tumblr." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 27, 2018. doi: 10.3983/twc.2018.1261.

Bourlai, Elli E. "'Comments in Tags, Please!': Tagging Practices on Tumblr." *Discourse, Context & Media*, vol. 22, 2018, pp. 46-56.

boyd, danah. "Making Sense of Teen Life: Strategies for Capturing Ethnographic Data in a Networked Era." *Digital Research Confidential: The Secrets of Studying Behavior Online*, edited by E. Hargittai and C. Sandvig, MIT Press, 2015, pp. 79-102.

Boyd, Paula, et al. "Privileging—or Not—the Literacies of Technology." *Literate Lives in the Information Age: Narratives of Literacy from the United States*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2004

Brandt, Deborah. *The Rise of Writing: Redefining Mass Literacy*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Bury, Rhiannon. "Technology, Fandom and Community in the Second Media Age." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, vol. 23, no. 6, 2016, pp. 627-642.

Card, Claudia. "Review: Caring and Evil." *Hypatia*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1990, pp. 101–108.

"Carol Gilligan." *Ethics of Care*, 16 July 2011, https://ethicsofcare.org/carol-gilligan/. Accessed 4 July 2020.

Chadborn, Daniel, et al. "Reexamining Differences Between Fandom and Local Sense of Community." *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 30 June 2016. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000125.

Charmaz, Kathy. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. Sage Publications, 2006.

Chess, Shire, and Adrienne Shaw. "A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 59, 2015, pp. 208-220. https://doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1080/08838151.2014.999917

Chew, Natalie. "Tumblr as Counterpublic Space for Fan Mobilization." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 27, 2018. doi:10.3983/twc.2018.1186.

Christensen, Bo Allesøe, and Thessa Jensen. "The JohnLock Conspiracy, Fandom Eschatology, and Longing to Belong." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 27, 2018. doi:10.3983/twc.2018.1222.

Clement, J. "Combined desktop and mobile visits to Tumblr.com from February 2018 to April

    2019 (in millions)." *Statista*, 23 May 2019, www.statista.com/statistics/261925/unique-

    visitors-to-tumblrcom/. Accessed 17 July 2019.

Coe, Richard M. "Eco-Logic for the Composition Classroom." *CCC*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1975, pp.

    232-237.

Collier, Kevin M., et al. "Does Parental Mediation of Media Influence Child Outcomes? A Meta-

    Analysis on Media Time, Aggression, Substance Use, and Sexual Behavior."

    Developmental Psychology, vol 52, no. 5, 2016, pp. 798-812. doi:10.1037/dev0000108.

Cooper, Marilyn. "The Ecology of Writing." *College English*, vol. 48, no. 4, 1986, pp. 364-375.

Coppa, Franscesca. "Writing Bodies in Space: Media Fan Fiction as Theatrical Performance."

    Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet, edited by Karen Hellekson

    and Kristina Busse, McFarland & Company, 2006, pp. 225-244.

Corner, John. "'Mediatization': Media Theory's Word of the Decade." *Media Theory*, vol. 2, no.

    2, 2018, http://mediatheoryjournal.org/john-corner-mediatization/. Accessed 2 Mar. 2019.

Couldry, Nick, and Andreas Hepp. "Conceptualizing Mediatization: Contexts, Traditions,

    Arguments." *Communication Theory*, vol. 23, 2013, pp. 191-202.

Dadas, Caroline. "Messy Methods: Queer Methodological Approaches to Researching Social

    Media." *Computers and Composition,* vol. 40, no. 1, 2016, pp. 60-72.

Daneels, Rowan, and Hadewijch Vanwynsberghe. "Mediating Social Media Use: Connecting

    Parents' Mediation Strategies and Social Media Literacy." *Cyberphsychology: Journal of*

    Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace, vol. 11, no. 3, 2017.

    https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2017-3-5.

Daniels, Jessie. "Race and Racism in Internet Studies: A Review and Critique." *new media & society*, vol. 15, no. 5, 2012, pp. 695-719.

Davis, Jenny L. "Curation: A Theoretical Treatment." *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 20, no. 5, 2017, pp. 770-783.

de Montes, L.E. Sujo, et al. "Power, Language, and Identity: Voices from an Online Course." *Computers and Composition*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2002, pp. 251-271.

Deller, Ruth Anna. "Simblr famous and SimSecret infamous: Performance, community norms, and shaming among fans of *The Sims*." *Performance and Performativity in Fandom,* special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 18. https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0615.

diversehighfantasy. *Full-Color Fantasy*. diversehighfantasy.tumblr.com.

Dobrin, Sidney I. "Introduction: Ecology and a Future of Writing Studies." *Ecology, Writing Theory, and New Media*, edited by Sidney I. Dobrin. New York, Routledge, 2012, pp. 1-23.

Downey, Elizabeth M, et al. "A 'Glee'-ful Collaboration: Academic Networking in the Tumblr World." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 27, 2018. doi:10.3983/twc.2018.1243.

"Editorial Policies." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/about/editorialPolicies. Accessed 28 March 2017.

Engebretsen, Martin. "Balancing cohesion and tension in multimodal rhetoric. An interdisciplinary approach to the study of semiotic complexity." *Learning, Media and Technology*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2012, pp. 145-162.

Erll, Astrid, and Ann Rigney. "Introduction: Cultural Memory and its Dynamics." *Mediation,*

    Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory, edited by Astrid Erll and Ann

    Rigney, Walter de Gruyter, 2009, pp. 1-14.

Fanlore. "FanLib." *Fanlore*, 18 April 2020, https://fanlore.org/wiki/FanLib. Accessed 13 May

    2020.

---. "RaceFail '09." *Fanlore.* 20 March 2019. https://fanlore.org/wiki/RaceFail_%2709.

    Accessed 31 August 2019.

---. "Strikethrough and Boldthrough." *Fanlore*, 11 May 2020,

    https://fanlore.org/wiki/Strikethrough_and_Boldthrough. Accessed 13 May 2020.

---. "SurveyFail." *Fanlore,* July 13, 2018. https://fanlore.org/wiki/SurveyFail.

---. "TheoryofFicGate." *Fanlore,* July 28, 2018. https://fanlore.org/wiki/TheoryofFicGate.

Fathallah, Judith May. "Polyphony on Tumblr: Reading the Hat Blog as Pastiche."

    Transformative Works and Cultures, vol. 27, 2018. doi:10.3983/twc.2018.1210.

"Feminist Ethics." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 27 May 2019,

    https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-ethics/#EthiCareFemiGendApprMora.

    Accessed 4 July 2020.

Fiesler, Casey, and Brianna Dym. "Generations, Migrations, and the Future of Fandom's Private

    Spaces." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 28, 2018. doi: 10.3983/twc.2018.1583.

Flew, Terry. "The 'Theory' in Media Theory: The 'Media-Centrism' Debate." *Media Theory*,

    vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 43-56.

Fox, Jesse, and Rachel Ralston. "Queer Identity Online: Informal Learning and Teaching

    Experiences of LGBTQ Individuals on Social Media." *Computers in Human Behavior*,

    vol. 65, 2016, pp. 635-642. doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1016/j.chb.2016.06.009.

Freadman, Anne. "Uptake." *The Rhetoric and Ideology of Genre: Strategies for Stability and Change*, edited by Richard M. Coe, et al, Hampton Press, 2002, pp. 39-53.

Fredman, Steffany J., et al. "Parents' PTSD symptoms and child abuse potential during the perinatal period: Direct associations and mediation via relationship conflict." *Child Abuse & Neglect*, vol. 90, 2019, pp. 66-75.

Gladwell, Malcolm. "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not be Tweeted." *The New Yorker*, 2010 Sept. 27, newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-malcolm-gladwell. Accessed 7 Feb. 2020.

Gledhill, Evan Hayles. "Bricolage and the Culture of the Margins in the Romantic Era and the Digital Age." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 27, 2018. doi: 10.3983/twc.2018.1213.

Grace-Farfaglia, Patricia, et al. "Multinational Web Uses and Gratifications: Measuring the Social Impact of Online Community Participation Across National Boundaries." *Electronic Commerce Research*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2006, pp. 75-101. doi:10.1007/s10660-006-5989-6.

Gray, Jonathan, et al, editors. *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*. New York University Press, 2007.

Gray, Mary L. *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*. New York University Press, 2009.

Hellekson, Karen, and Kristina Busse, editors. *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*. McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006.

Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*. Routledge, 2002.

Hoagland, Sarah L. "Review: Somes Concerns about Nel Noddings' 'Caring'." *Hypatia*, vol 5, no. 1, 1990, pp. 109-114.

Homer, Robyn Leigh. *In the (Radical) Pursuit of Self-Care: Feminist Participatory Action Research with Victim Advocates*. 2014. University of South Florida, PhD Dissertation.

Howell, Katherine Anderson. *Fandom as Classroom Practice*. University of Iowa Press, 2018.

Hunt, Kate. "Twitter, Social Movements, and Claiming Allies in Abortion Debates." *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, vol. 16, 2019, pp. 394-410. doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1080/19331681.2019.1659901.

"I like your shoelaces." *Urban Dictionary*, 16 Nov. 2012, urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=I%20like%20your%20shoelaces. Accessed 27 April 2020.

Jenkins, Henry and William Proctor. "The State of Fandom Studies 2018: Rukmini Pande and Rebecca Wanzo (Part 1)." *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, 6 Mar. 2018, henryjenkins.org/blog/2018/3/1/the-state-of-fandom-studies-2018-rukmini-pande-and-rebecca-wanzo-part-1. Accessed 10 April 2020.

Jenkins, Henry and William Proctor. "The State of Fandom Studies 2018: Rukmini Pande and Rebecca Wanzo (Part 2)." *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, 7 Mar. 2018, henryjenkins.org/blog/2018/3/1/the-state-of-fandom-studies-2018-rukmini-pande-and-rebecca-wanzo-part-2. Accessed 10 April 2020.

Jenkins, Henry. "Alex Doty, Abigail De Kosnik, and Jason Mittell (Part One)." *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, 28 Sept. 2011, henryjenkins.org/2011/09/acafandom_and_beyond_alex_doty.html. Accessed 10 April 2017.

---. "Aca-Fandom and Beyond: Concluding Thoughts." *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, 22 Oct. 2011, http://henryjenkins.org/2011/10/acafandom_and_beyond_concludin.html. Accessed 19 April 2017.

---. "Aca-Fandom and Beyond: Rhianon Bury and Matt Yockey (Part One)." *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, 23 Sept. 2011, http://henryjenkins.org/2011/09/aca-fandom_and_beyond_rhianon.html. Accessed 10 April 2017.

---. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2012.

Iversen, Stefan. "Narratives and Online Decorum: The Rhetoric of Mark Zuckerberg's Personal Storytelling on Facebook." *Style*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2017, pp. 374-390.

Jiang, Shaohai. "The Role of Social Media Use in Improving Cancer Survivors' Emotional Well-Being: A Moderated Mediation Study." *Journal of Cancer Survivorship: Research and Practice*, vol 11, no. 3, 2017, pp. 386-392. doi:10.1007/s11764-017-0595-2.

Jiow, Hee Jhee, et al. "Level Up! Refreshing Parental Mediation Theory for Our Digital Media Landscape." *Communication Theory*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2017, pp. 309-328.

Jones, Sara Gwenllian. "The Sex Lives of Cult Television Characters." *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader,* edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, University of Iowa Press, 2014, pp. 116-130.

Jones, Rodney H. "C me Sk8: Discourse, Technology, and 'Bodies without Organs'." *Digital Discourse: Language in the New Media*, edited by Crispin Thurlow and Kristine Mroczek, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 321-339.

Kehus, Marcella, et al. "Definition and Genesis of an Online Discourse Community." *The International Journal of Learning*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2010, pp. 67–85.

Kelley, Brittany. "Toward a goodwill ethics of online research methods." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 22, 2016. http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2016.0891.

Kelly, Maura, and Gordon Gauchat. "Feminist Identity, Feminist Politics: U.S. Feminists' Attitudes toward Social Policies." *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 59, no. 4, 2015, pp. 855-872.

Khouri, Nina. "Mediation." *New Zealand Law Review*, vol. 1, 2018, pp. 101-129.

Lamb, Patricia Frazer, and Diana L. Veith. "Romantic Myth, Transcendence, and *Star Trek* Zines." *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader,* edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, University of Iowa Press, 2014, pp. 97-115.

Lancaster, Kurt. "Performing in Babylon—Performing in Everyday Life." *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, University of Iowa Press, 2014, pp. 198-217.

Leurs, Koen. "Feminist Data Studies: Using Digital Methods for Ethical, Reflexive and Situated Socio-Cultural Research." *feminist review*, vol. 115, no. 1, 2017, pp. 130-154.

Lloro-Bidart, and Keri Semenko. "Toward a Feminist Ethic of Self-Care for Environmental Educators." *The Journal of Environmental Education*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2017, pp. 18-25.

Luka, Mary Elizabeth, and Mélanie Millette. "(Re)framing Big Data: Activating Situated Knowledges and a Feminist Ethics of Care in Social Media Research." *Social Media + Society*, Jan.-Mar. 2018, pp. 1-10. doi:10.1177/2056305118768297.

MacKinnon, David P., et al. "Mediation Analysis." *Annual Review of Psychology*, vol. 58, no. 1, 2007, pp. 593-614.

Maeckelberghe, Els. "Feminist Ethic of Care: A Third Alternative Approach." *Human Care Analysis*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2004, pp. 317-327.

Malinen, Sanna. "Understanding User Participation in Online Communities: A Systematic Literature Review of Empirical Studies." *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 46, 2015, pp. 228-238.

Marwick, Alice E. and danah boyd. 2010. "I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience." *new media & society* 13 (1). doi: 10.1177/1461444810365313.

Massanari, Adrienne. "#Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit's algorithm, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures." *New Media & Society*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2017. https://doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1177/1461444815608807.

Mayer, Allana. "Crowdsourcing, Open Data and Precarious Labour." *Model View Culture*, vol. 33, 2016, https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/crowdsourcing-open-data-and-precarious-labour. Accessed 5 April 2018.

McKee, Heidi A., and James E. Porter. "The Ethics of Archival Research." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 64, no. 1, 2012, pp. 59-81.

McMahon, Richard, et al. "New Global Cybercrime Calls for High Tech Cyber-Cops." *Journal of Legal, Ethical and Regulatory Issues*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2016, pp. 26-37.

Mendes, Kaitlynn, and Cynthia Carter. "Feminist and Gender Media Studies: A Critical Overview." *Sociology Compass*, vol. 2, no. 6, 2008, pp. 1701-1718.

Mihailidis, Paul. "Digital Curation and Digital Literacy: Evaluating the Role of Curation in Developing Critical Literacies for Participation in Digital Culture." *E-Learning and Digital Media*, vol. 12, no. 5-6, 2015, pp. 443-458. DOI: 10.1177/2042753016631868.

Montfort, Nick, and Ian Bogost. *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System.* The MIT Press, 2009.

Morimoto, Lori, and Louisa Ellen Stein. "Tumblr and Fandom." *Transformative Workd and Cultures*, vol. 27, 2018, http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2018.1580.

Mortensen, Torill Elvira. "Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate." *Games and Culture*, vol. 13, no. 8, 2018. https://doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1177/1555412016640408.

Moss, Pamela A., and Edward H. Haertel. "Engaging Methodological Pluralism." *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, 5th ed., edited by D. Gitomer and C. Bell, AERA, 2016, pp. 127-247.

Nachowitz, Marc. "Scaffolding Progressive Online Discourse for Literary Knowledge Building." *Online Learning*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2018, pp. 133-156. doi:10.24059/olj.v22i3.1261.

Nakamura, Lisa, and Geert Lovink. "Talking Race and Cyberspace: An Interview with Lisa Nakamura." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 26 no. 1, 2005, p. 60-65. doi:10.1353/fro.2005.0014.

Nakamura, Lisa. "The Unwanted Labour of Social Media: Women of Color Call Out Culture as Venture Community Management." *New Formations: a journal of culture, theory, politics*, 2015, pp. 106-112.

Neill Hoch, Indira. "Content, Conduct, and Apologies in Tumblr Fandom Tags." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 27, 2018. https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2018.1198.

Newon, Lisa. "Multimodal Creativity and Identities of Expertise in the Digital Ecology of a World of Warcraft Guild." *Digital Discourse: Language in the New Media*, edited by Crispin Thurlow and Kristine Mroczek, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 131–153.

Oakley, Abigail. "Disturbing Hegemonic Discourse: Nonbinary Gender and Sexual Orientation

    Labeling on Tumblr." *Social Media + Society*, July-September 2016, pp. 1-12.

    doi:10.1177/2056305116664217.

Parikka, Jussi. *A Geology of Media*. University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

---. "Archival Media Theory: An Introduction to Wolfgang Ernst's Media Archeology." *Digital*

    Memory and the Archive, by Wolfgang Ernst, edited by Jussi Parikka, University of

    Minnesota Press, 2012, pp. 1-22.

Parks, Lisa, and Nicole Starosielski, editors. *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media*

    Infrastructures. Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2015.

Pearson, Roberta. "It's Always 1895: Sherlock Holmes in Cyberspace." *The Fan Fiction Studies*

    Reader, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, University of Iowa Press, 2014,

    pp. 44-60.

Pignetti, Daisy. "'remember a Week Ago When Tom Hiddleston Could Do No Wrong?' Tumblr

    Reactions to the Loss of an Internet Boyfriend." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol.

    27, 2018. doi:10.3983/twc.2018.1246.

Pittman, Jeffrey. "Privacy in the Age of Doxxing." *Southern Journal of Business and Ethics*, vol.

    10, 2018, pp. 53-58.

Prior, Paul, et al. "Re-Situating and Re-Mediating the Canons: A Cultural-Historical Remapping

    of Rhetorical Activity." *Kairos*, vol. 11, no. 3, May 2007,

    kairos.technorhetoric.net/11.3/binder.html?topoi/prior-et-al/mapping/index.html.

    Accessed 12 March 2019.

Rambe, Patient, and Mamello Moeti. "Disrupting and Democratising Higher Education

    Provision or Entrenching Academic Elitism: Towards a Model of MOOCs Adoption at

African Universities." *Educational Technology Research and Development*, vol. 65, 2017, pp. 631-651. doi:10.1007/s11423-016-9500-3.

Robinson, Laura. "The Identity Curation Game: Digital Inequality, Identity Work, and Emotion Management." *Communication, Information Technologies, and Media Sociology,* special issue of *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 21, no. 5, 2018, pp. 661-680. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1411521.

Romano, Aja. "Tumblr is banning adult content. It's about so much more than porn." *Vox*, 17 December 2018, www.vox.com/2018/12/4/18124120/tumblr-porn-adult-content-ban-user-backlash. Accessed 17 July 2019.

Roy, Jessica. "Tumblr is banning adult content, and it's already not going over well." *The Los Angeles Times*, 3 December 2018, www.latimes.com/business/technology/la-fi-tn-tumblr-adult-content-ban-20181203-story.html. Accessed 17 July 2019.

Ruberg, Bonnie, et al. "Toward a Queer Digital Humanities." *Intersectional Feminism and the Digital Humanities*, edited by Elizabeth Losh and Jacqueline Wernimont, University of Minnesota Press, 2018, pp. 198-127.

Russ, Joanna. "Pornography by Women for Women, with Love." *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader,* edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, University of Iowa Press, 2014, pp. 82-96.

Sandvoss, Cornel. "The Death of the Reader? Literary Theory and the Study of Texts in Popular Culture." *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, edited by Jonathan Gray, et al, New York University Press, 2007, pp. 19-32.

Sands, Mason. "Tumblocalypse: Where Tumblr And Its Users Are Headed After The Ban." *Forbes*, 20 December 2018,

www.forbes.com/sites/masonsands/2018/12/20/tumblocalypse-where-tumblr-and-its-

users-are-headed-after-the-ban/#50f73e9a7020. Accessed 17 July 2019.

Scheller, Samantha H. "A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words: The Legal Implications of

Revenge Porn." *North Carolina Law Review*, vol. 92, no. 2, 2015, pp. 551-595.

Schreyer, Christine. "The Digital Fandom of Na'vi Speakers." *Transformative Works and

Cultures*, vol. 18, 2015. https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0610.

Seko, Yukari, and Stephen P. Lewis. "The self—harmed, visualized, and reblogged: Remaking

of self-injury narratives on Tumblr." *new media & society*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2018, pp. 180-

98.

sealdorie. "Tumblr Code." *Captain of the PromNyx Ship*, n.d.,

seladorie.tumblr.com/post/49461298092/tumblr-code.

Selfe, Cynthia L. and Gail E. Hawisher. *Literate Lives in the Information Age*. Lawrence

Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2004.

Spelman, Elizabeth V. "The Virtue of Feeling and the Feeling of Virtue," *Feminist Ethics*,

edited by Claudia Card, University of Kansas Press, 1991, pp. 213–232.

Spilioti, Tereza. "Beyond Genre: Closings and Relational Work in Text Messaging." *Digital

Discourse: Language in the New Media*, edited by Crispin Thurlow and Kristine Mroczek,

Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 67-85.

Steiner, Linda. "Feminist Media Theory." *The Handbook of Media and Mass Communication

Theory*, edited by Robert S. Fortner and P. Mark Fackler, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2014,

pp. 359-379.

Stitch. *Stitch's Media Mix*. stitchmediamix.com.

Taylor, Tosha R. "Digital Space and 'Walking Dead' Fandom's Team Delusional."

    Transformative Works and Cultures, vol. 27, 2018. doi: 10.3983/twc.2018.1180.

Tessman, Lisa. *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles*. Oxford University

    Press, 2005.

Tharoor, Ishaan. "How Game of Thrones drew on the Wars of the Roses." *The Guardian*, 29

    May 2015, theguardian.com/books/2015/may/29/game-of-thrones-war-of-roses-hbo.

    Accessed 28 April 2020.

Tiidenberg, Katrin. "How does Online Experience Inform our Sense of Self? NSFW Blogger

    Identity Narratives." *Back in the West: Changing Lifestyles in Transforming Societies*,

    edited by A. A. Allaste. Peter Lang, 2013, pp. 177-202.

Trend, David, editor. *Reading Digital Culture*. Blackwell Publishers, 2001.

Tumblr Staff. "A better, more positive Tumblr," 3 December 2018,

    staff.tumblr.com/post/180758987165/a-better-more-positive-tumblr. Accessed 17 July

    2019.

Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. Simon & Schuster, 1995.

Wargo, Jon M. "'Every selfie tells a story…': LGBTQ youth lifestreams and new media

    narratives as connective identity texts." *New Media & Society*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2017, pp.

    560-578. DOI: 10.1177/1461444815612447.

Wargo, Jon M. "#donttagyourhate: Reading Collecting and Curating as Genres of Participation

    in LGBT Youth Activism on Tumblr." *Digital Culture & Education*, vol 9, no. 1, 2017,

    pp. 14-30.

Wark, McKenzie. "Worse Than Capitalism." *Ours to Hack and Own,* edited by Trebor Scholz

    and Nathan Schneider, OR Books, New York, 2016, pp. 43-47.

Warnick, Barbara, and David. S. Heineman. *Rhetoric Online: The Politics of New Media*. 2nd
ed., Peter Lang, 2012.

Weiss, Robert S. *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*.
New York, The Free Press, 1994.

Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New edition, Oxford
University Press, 2015.

Winland, Daphne. "Response to 'Community as "Good to Think With"'." *Anthropologica*, vol.
52, no. 2, 2010, pp. 372-375.

Winterwood, Lily. "Discourse is the New Wank: A Reflection on Linguistic Change in
Fandom." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 27, 2018.
http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2018.1276.

Yartey, Franklin Nii Amankwah. *Digitizing Third World Bodies: Communicating Race, Identity,
and Gender through Online Microfinance/A Visual Analysis.* Bowling Green State U,
PhD dissertation. *ProQuest,* search-proquest-
com./docview/1023101476?accountid=14667.

Yoon, Susan, et al. "Gender differences in caregiver–child relationship mediation of the
association between violence exposure severity and adolescent behavior problems." *Child
Abuse & Neglect*, vol. 50, 2015, pp. 104-115.

Zuberi, Nabeel. "Sound Exchange: Media and Music Cultures." *The SAGE Handbook of Media
Studies*, edited by John D. H. Downing, et al, SAGE Publications, Inc., 2004, pp. 429-446.

Appendix A:

Tumblr Recruitment Post

Want to Talk About Fandom Discourse?

Hello! My name is Adrienne Raw. I am a long-time fanfic reader and writer and currently a PhD student at the University of Michigan doing my dissertation on fandom.

In fandom, we spend time talking to each other *about* fandom — whether it's memes of fanfic tropes, debates about fandom etiquette, appreciation posts about what fandom has meant to us, or critiques about the parts of fandom or fannish behaviour we don't like. And I want to know what these conversations mean to us as fans and to our fan communities. I'm writing my dissertation about the role of fandom discourse/meta/wank and other conversation about our fandom spaces. I hope to understand how talking/reading about fandom shapes how we see it.

If you participate in online fandom in any way, I'd love to hear your thoughts about fandom discourse in my survey.

Take the survey here: https://umich.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_7ZGu6xS4TRdwSEZ

I'm looking for all kinds of people who participate in fandom, from fanfic readers/writers to Tumblr commenters to lurkers!

This project was deemed exempt by the University of Michigan's Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board (IRB-HSBS). Anyone 18 and older can participate. You may stop participating in the survey at any time.

The survey will ask you about your experiences with fandom discourse and what you think it does in fandom and for you. You will be asked basic demographic questions at the beginning of the survey.

Also, you'll be asked if you are interested in participating in a follow-up, paid interview study.

If you have any questions about my research, send me an ask or email me, Adrienne Raw, at araw@umich.edu.

Thank you for your participation and please reblog and share the link!

Appendix B:

Survey Protocol

In fandom, we spend time talking to each other ***about*** fandom — whether it's memes of fanfic tropes, debates about fandom etiquette, appreciation posts about what fandom has meant to us, or critiques about the parts of fandom or fannish behaviour we don't like. We might have different names for these conversations — discourse, meta, wank, critique — and see them in different forms and in different spaces. I want to know what these conversations mean to us as fans and to our fan communities.

Demographic Questions

Name:

(multiple choice) When my information is included in this study, I would like to...
- o   use my fan user name and have any survey/interview responses published under my fan user name
- o   be assigned a pseudonym

My fan user name is:

Age:

Gender:

Race/Ethnicity:

Nationality:

Your Thoughts on Fandom Discourse

When fans talk to each other about fandom, what do you call it (e.g. fandom discourse, fandom meta, fandom wank, fans talking about fandom, etc.)? Why?

Where would you expect to and/or have found fans talking about fandom? Why there?

What do you see other fans write about fandom?

(multiple choice) How would you categorize your relationship to fandom discourse, or fans talking about fandom? (Pick the most applicable.)
- o   I don't know what this is.
- o   I've never seen it.

- o   I actively avoid it.
- o   I'll read/watch it if it shows up on my Tumblr dash/Twitter feed/other fan space, but I don't go looking for it.
- o   I read/watch it, but only certain kinds.
- o   I actively look for it and read/watch it.
- o   I read/watch it and share/reblog it, but don't write/create it.
- o   I read/watch it and write/create it.
- o   I write/create it, but I don't read/watch it.
- o   Other:

What kinds of fandom discourse do you or would you read? Why?

What kinds of fandom discourse do you or would you write? Why?

Do you think discourse is important in fandom (i.e. for building relationships, making fandom better, calling out problems)? Why or why not?

What *should be* the role of fandom discourse?

About Your Fandom Participation

How many years have you been a part of fandom?

What fandoms do you lurk, follow, or participate (read, write, draw, make video, etc.) in?

(multiple choice) How do you participate in fandom?
I consume (read/watch/look at)… (check all that apply)
- o   fanfiction
- o   fan art
- o   fan video
- o   photosets/gifs
- o   metacommentary or other conversation
- o   fan wikis
- o   other:

(multiple choice) How do you participate in fandom?
I produce (write/draw/create/engage)… (check all that apply)
- o   fanfiction
- o   fan art
- o   fan video
- o   photosets/gifs
- o   metacommentary or other conversation
- o   fan wikis
- o   site management and/or backend work (e.g. tag wrangling, fan site admin, forum moderation)
- o   other:

(multiple choice) When I create/consume things or otherwise engage in fandom, I primarily

- create/consume written content (fic, meta, discussion)
- create/consume drawn or photo content (fan art, gifs, photosets)
- create/consume video/audio content (podfic, fanvids)
- do backend work
- other:

(multiple choice) How frequently do you participate in fandom activities (i.e. reading, writing, drawing, posting)?
- more than once a day
- once a day or almost every day
- once every couple days
- once or twice a week
- once or twice a month
- a few times a year

What fan spaces/platforms do you use (e.g. AO3, Fanfiction.net, Tumblr, Reddit, YouTube, Deviantart, Discord)?

Follow-up and Interview Study

In addition to this survey, I (the researcher) would also like to do more in-depth interviews with a number of people. This interview study would involve a set of follow-up interviews (two 1-hour interviews to be conducted via video/audio chat or phone call) about your experiences in fandom generally and your thoughts on fandom discourse/wank/meta/conversation more specifically. If you are interested and are selected for the interview, you will receive $20 per hour for your participation.
- I AM interested in participating in the interview study.
- I AM NOT interested in participating in the interview study, but the researcher can contact me if necessary to clarify my survey responses.
- I AM NOT interested in participating in the interview study, and do not want to be contacted about my survey responses.

Preferred Contact Information (phone number, Skype, email address, Tumblr/Twitter for DM):

Appendix C:

Interview Protocol

INTERVIEW #1

This first interview is meant to be a space where we can talk about your history in fandom, your identity as a fan, and how you define and think about fandom. I want to get a sense of who you are as a fan and what you think about fandom generally. I want to start by talking through key moments in your history in fandom.

1. How did you first find fandom?
    a. *Probe:* When did it happen?
    b. *Probe:* What was your first impression of fandom?
2. What were the things that made you initially want to be part of fandom?
    a. What are the things that make you stay in fandom today?
3. Were you aware of discourse or other fan conversations when you first joined fandom?
    a. When and how did you become aware of them?
4. *[building on their survey responses]* In your survey, you wrote that you do _____
    in fandom. What do you spend the most time doing in fandom?
    a. Why do you enjoy doing _____ in fandom?
    b. What things about doing _____ don't you like?
5. You participate in _____ *[fandoms that they are involved in]*. Can you
    tell me about an experience in one of these fandoms that represents that fandom for you?
    a. *Probe:* Why you are in this fandom?
    b. *Probe:* What are the great things about being in this fandom?
    c. *Probe:* What are the things you don't like about being in this fandom?
6. Have you ever left a fandom or considered leaving a fandom? Tell me about that
    experience.
    a. *Probe:* What prompted you to leave or consider leaving?
    b. *Probe:* How did you feel about leaving or thinking about leaving?
7. When was the last time you saw a disagreement in fandom? Can you tell me about it?
    a. *Probe:* Where/how was the disagreement taking place?
    b. *Probe:* What was it about? What were people saying?
    c. *Probe:* How did seeing the disagreement make you feel?
8. Can you tell me about something positive you've seen in fandom?
9. How have your impressions of fandom changed since you first encountered it?

10. If you had to describe your identity as a fan (to other fans) or what it means to you to be a fan, what would you say?
   a. Can you tell me about a moment where your identity felt apparent?
      i. *Probe:* How did you think of fandom/your fan identity before?
      ii. *Probe:* How did you think of it after?

For the second part of our interview, I want to talk about how you see fandom and fan activity.
1. If you had to define fandom, what would you say?
   a. How do you think most fans would describe fandom?
   b. Why is your definition similar/different?
   c. What does fandom value most?
2. Do you think of fandom as a community? How is fandom like and unlike a community?
   a. *Probe:* What does it take to feel part of the community?
   b. **Can you tell me about a moment when you first felt connected to fandom or other fans? (possible probes to community)
   c. **Can you tell me about a moment when you felt disconnected from fandom or other fans?
3. How much do discussions between fans influence how you define fandom and how you think about it as a community?
   a. Do you think it influences how other fans define or see fandom?
   b. Do you think it changes the community at all?
   c. Do you think the community affects these discussions?
4. If something were going to change your feelings about fandom, what would that be? (bullying, discourse, positivity, critique, something offline)
5. What are things that are common between fandoms?
6. What are things that are different between the fandoms?
   a. Does the size of the fandom make a difference to how you feel about it? To a sense of community?
7. How is fandom similar and different between platforms like Tumblr or AO3?
8. Do you see the kind of discussion/discourse of fandom in any spaces that you're in outside of fandom?
   a. If so: What's similar and different?
   b. If not: Why don't you think we see discussion like this in other spaces?

Is there anything about your history in fandom or how you see fandom that we haven't discussed yet?

INTERVIEW #2

In this second interview, I want to talk more specifically about fandom discourse and your interactions with it.

1. Tell me about a recent conversation, discussion, or post about fandom that you saw that stood out to you. What was the conversation about?
    a. *Probe:* Where did you read it? How did you find it (e.g. actively looking for it? Passively encountered it?)?
    b. *Probe:* How did the piece of discourse make you feel?
2. What are the major conversations in the fandom that you spend the most time in?
    a. *Probe:* What are the conversations that critique fandom?
    b. *Probe:* What are the positive conversations about fandom?
    c. *Probe:* What is the most frequent kind of conversation in your fandoms?
    d. How do you know about these conversations?
    e. Do you engage in them? Which ones?
3. Can you give me an example of what you would consider "good" or productive discussion or discourse? The kind of discourse we *should have* in fandom?
    a. What makes it "good" discourse? Is it the content? Tone?
    b. Can/how can criticism be "good" discourse?
4. Can you give me an example of what you would consider "bad" or unproductive discussion or discourse? The kind of discussion we *ideally shouldn't have* in fandom?
    a. What makes it "bad" discourse? Is it the content? Tone?
    b. *(If they talk about "anti" or "purity culture" or "censorship")* – How do you define it? What does it look like? What is the difference between something critical and something "anti" (if there is a difference)?
    c. Is critical discussion always "bad"?
5. What is your opinion on calling out racism, pedophilia, sexism, homophobia, etc.?
    a. What about calling out specific people for racism, pedophilia, sexism, homophobia, etc.?
    b. Do you or have you ever done it?
        i. *If yes,* When you engage in critique of racism, sexism, pedophilia, what is the motive behind that?
    c. *Probe:* When you see fans making accusations of racism, sexism, pedophilia, what do you think is the motive behind that?
6. ***What is the relationship between critiques or other discussion and shipping? When are critiques part of ship wars? Are there instances when these critiques are not part of a ship war? (How do you define ship war?)
7. What is your reaction to seeing discussion or posts that critique something you enjoy?
8. Do you do anything to manage whether you see fandom discussions or discourse and what kinds? How?

a. Why do you manage your relationship (this way)? Was there something that prompted this approach to fandom discourse?

b. Did you always have this relationship with fandom discourse?

c. Are there ways that your identities, like gender, race, sexuality, profession, political views, influence how you interact with fandom discourse?

   i. *Probe:* Do you think this is true for other fans?

9. In your survey, you said _____ about how you read fandom discourse. *[Use this space to ask follow-up questions about their survey responses about fandom discourse reading practices.]*

10. What kind of fan reads fandom discussion or discourse?

   a. Who is fandom discussion written for?

11. What kind of fan writes fandom discourse?

   a. What do you think about fans who write discourse?

12. *(If they write discourse)* Tell me about a recent piece of discourse you wrote or other conversation about fandom that you participated in.

   a. *Probe:* What was it about?

   b. *Probe:* Why did you write it?

   c. *Probe:* Was it in conversation with anyone in particular?

   d. *Probe:* Where did you share it? Why there? When you posted it on _____ platform, what kinds of things did you do that were specific to that platform?

   e. *Probe:* How did people respond to it?

13. Has there been an instance where another fan's writing about fandom has changed how you think about fandom? Can you tell me about it? How did it change your opinion?

14. ***Should there be rules in fandom? Should there be rules about discussion in fandom? What should the rules be?

   a. Are rules specific to a single fandom? Are there any rules shared across fandoms?

   b. Are these rules something that fandom talks about?

15. In your survey, you described the role/importance of discourse as _____ *(their characterization of the role of discourse in fandom)*.

   a. What makes discourse the way it is?

   b. You suggest discussion should be _____. Does it have this role? Could it ever have this role?

16. Do you think discourse has changed fandom at all? How so? Can you give me an example? *(If not asked or unclear from interview #1)*

17. What would you say fandom values as a community? Do you think discussion in fandom reflects what the community values?

   a. Do the topics we discuss reflect community values?

   b. Do the ways we have discussion reflect community values?

    c. Do the ways we interact with or think about discussion in fandom reflect community values?

18. How would you describe the role fandom discourse or discussion has taken in your personal experiences in fandom?

19. ***If you could change the way fandom discourse worked in fandom, how would you change it? Why?
    a. Do you think fans can make these conversations more like your suggestion? How?

20. In your survey, you said that you normally encounter discourse on _____ (platform). Are there differences between the conversations you see on different platforms?
    a. Do you think there's something about the design of the platform that encourages particular kinds of conversation/behaviour?

21. ***In our discussion today, you talked about your relationship to fandom discourse being _____, and in our last interview you said _____ about discourse in other spaces you participate in. Do you feel like you have the same kind of relationship or interaction with discussion in these spaces? Can you give me an example?

What things about conversations about fandom or your interaction with those conversations haven't I asked about?

Appendix D:

Focused Codebook

curation: references to fandom as something that should be "curated"

getting into fandom: fans' narratives about their first encounters with fandom

identity and discussion: fans' references to their identities when talking about fandom discussion, particularly when identity inflects an experience with discussion

like/unlike other discussions: fans comparing fandom discussion to discussion in other spaces

mental health: references to the relationships between fandom discussion and fans' mental health

narrative structures

> narrative negative: narrative structure with negative affective tone and/or wholly negative judgement of fandom discussion

> narrative neutral: narrative that have no affective time and make no judgement, positive or negative, of fandom discussion, e.g., "It's necessary."

> narrative positive: narrative structure with positive affective tone and/or wholly positive judgement of fandom discussion

> narrative tension – but yes: narrative structure with both positive and negative affective tone and that grapples with tensions in valuing discussion; formatted in the structure of "Fandom discussion is negative because X, but yes it's important because Y"

> narrative tension – yes but: narrative structure with both positive and negative affective tone and that grapples with tensions in valuing discussion; formatted in the structure of "Yes, fandom discussion is important because Y, but there are problems like X"

platform: discussion of the role of the platform in a fan's experiences in fandom discussion

roles of fandom discussion

> community relationships: references to a sense of community in fandom and/or a relationship between discussion and community

>> breaking down community: references to fandom discussion disrupting a sense of community or a relationship to a community; reference to fans leaving a fandom

building community: references to fandom discussion creating a sense of community or a relationship to a community

gatekeeping: references to fandom discussion preventing access to a community

criticisms: references to criticisms of trends, behaviors, texts, people

harassment: references to fans being harassed through fandom discussion (e.g., receiving death threats, being called a pedophile)

identifying or challenging problems: references to discussion challenging perceived problems in fandom including commentary on racism, homophobia, etc. and direct "call outs" of perceived problematic fans or fan behavior

policing fan engagement: references to fans feeling like their freedom in fandom is being curtailed

positive motives for critique: fans attributing positive motives to those who engage in critique

resistance to critique: references to fans explaining why critique is not well-received in fandom

history: references to fandom's history; commentary on fandom practices in the past and on other platforms

interpersonal relationships: references to fandom discussion's impact on relationships between specific fans

breaking down relationships: references to fans' experiences of the breakdown of relationships with other fans; references to fans feeling that fandom discussion might break down their relationships

building relationships: references to fans' experiences of feeling connections with other specific fans because of fandom discussion

relationships to canon: references to fandom discussion and the fans' perceptions of and feelings towards canon materials

harassing canon creators: narratives about or perceptions towards harassment of canon creators (e.g., TV show producers/actors, book authors)

self reflection, self critique: references to fans engaging in self critique, particularly when prompted by interaction with fandom discussion

new perspectives and knowledge: references to fans engaging in sharing new perspectives with other fans; references to fans encountering new perspectives that made them rethink something (e.g., their identities, their biases)