

TO AFFINITY AND BEYOND: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF
FANDOM LEARNING, EMPATHY, AND REACTIONARY FANDOM CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Examining fandom—where fans are both consumers and producers of media—as a learning space is not new. Many studies have examined learning in terms of fandom being an affinity space. Affinity spaces are communities formed around a common object of interest that form irrespective of race, class, or gender. However, none of these studies have included Reactionary Fandom Culture (RFC) into the discussion. RFC is bullying disguised as political activism. To investigate the relationship between fandom, learning, and RFC, I gathered qualitative data by recruiting online fans inside and outside of my circle and supplemented that with a snowball sampling technique. Fans were given ten open-ended questions on an online anonymous survey. I used grounded theory and open coding to find recurring themes within the data and refined my results with focused coding. There were three major themes: due to fandom’s structure as an anonymous affinity space, fans learned (1) enriching life skills and (2) empathy for themselves and others, but their learning processes were impeded by (3) reactionary fandom culture. Fans learned media literacy, critical thinking, and social skills. They also learned how to empathize with social groups they didn’t encounter in “real life.” In some cases, this led to having empathy for their own unique situations. However, RFC was a looming threat. These results echo a trend of growing outrage in political conversations that extends beyond fandom. Thus, I argue that for fandom to be a progressive learning space, and in order to be responsible members of a media-saturated society, fans must be critically aware without sacrificing empathy and learning.

Introduction

When I was a kid—a really little kid—I had elaborate daydreams about the main cast of *Cyberchase*: a vast, dramatic story where Matt’s dad married Jackie’s mom, and the pair adopted Inez, who I decided was an orphan. Years later, I was shook to my core to find the strangest thing on a dilapidated *Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) fansite – fiction stories written before, during, and after the events of LOTR. I was confused and delighted. Unfortunately, no matter how I emailed the mods, it seemed the site was abandoned forever. I had a frankly embarrassing BBC *Sherlock* phase in high school, which first inoculated me to the idea of interacting with others on the basis of fandom. Ever since, I’ve been conscious of how important my media consumption is to my identity. I learned how to write creatively, how to write analytically, how to draw, how to make friends, and thanks in part to all of that, I was able to get started on figuring out who I am. College and the personal laptop it afforded me allowed me to go absolutely hog wild in pursuing any interest I fancied. And nothing has been hogger or wilder than my absolute hubris in pursuing an undergraduate thesis in fandom studies.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how connection, self-challenge to produce, and harassment trigger personal transformations through the learning in fandom spaces. Specifically, I want to investigate how fandom learning intersects with Reactionary Fandom Culture (RFC)—a term of my own making to describe the phenomenon of bullying disguised as political activism within fandom spaces.¹ My focus has changed drastically since I began my research, when I asked the powers that be whether I could write a thesis on fandom as something of a joke. Since then, friends, family, and faculty

¹ This definition will be unpacked in a later chapter.

have shown constant support, for reasons unknown. There exists an expanse of scholarship on fandom that already exists at a level high above what this thesis can achieve. Regardless, I am excited to share my results with the academic audience and the wider fandom community as well. All readers are welcome here to do some learning of their own.

Like any lived experience, fans' experiences with learning are complex. With any luck, everything so far is piquing curiosity in the complex world of fandoms and the processes that facilitate learning inside them. There's a lot to say on the subject. Academics have been observing fandom for decades. The need for ongoing fandom scholarship only increases as fandom meshes itself further into the wider public consciousness, as Linden and Linden observe:

We can all agree that fandom has changed over time—but perhaps not how it has changed, or why it has changed, or to what degree. Fans have become an integral part of artists' and organizations' marketing and business strategies, yet the perception of fans, and the representation of them, has largely remained a complex issue in mainstream culture. (15)

For the sake of myself and my community, in this thesis I ask:

1. What do fans learn, and how do they learn those things?
2. In light of #1, what is the danger of Reactionary Fandom Culture?

By exploring these questions, I seek to connect with and critically examine other fans' learning experiences and how fandom has become more reactionary in recent years. I am a researcher as well as a vessel for their stories as they synergize with my own. This thesis represents a co-creation of knowledge where an engaging and analytical writing

style will enhance understanding and accessibility. In this way, I strive to enrich myself, academia, and my community.

My strategy in approaching the topic has been horribly eclectic. I've been working on this for over a year, and I can't even begin to describe my development as a writer, student, and person in that time. Using qualitative data in the form of an open-ended questionnaire, I engaged members of my community to discuss my research questions in this thesis. I tied those findings into pre-existing literature, and other discussions within fandom research. In the pages that follow, I will review fandom literature relevant to this thesis, delineate the methods used in my research, and discuss the findings of my study. My argument is simple; fandom is a social place that makes learning possible—types of learning that are important. The discussions of this thesis contribute to ongoing dialogues about online fandom activism, which, in its uncompromising refusal to engage, actively impedes beneficial learning processes in fandom. This work contributes a synthesis of flow state and affinity space theories as applied to qualitative fandom research, and how all of that combines with RFC, a concept that ought to be further investigated due to its salience in our broader societal situation.

Literature Review

This literature review introduces some key concepts to help explain the way I chose to interpret my data. To start things off, I cover the way fandom is both born from and exploited by capitalism, and I'll define which type of fandom I'll be working with. I have also included a review of fandom activism, slacktivism, and online activism. Next, since there is more scholarship on fandom learning than I could ever hope to read, I focused on qualitative studies published within the last ten years. These studies were

sorted into discussions of fandom as an affinity space and flow state learning, with a heavy emphasis on media literacy.

Fandom Under Capitalism

Fandom is a means of adapting to the status quo. Within inescapable consumer culture, products are thrown at people so constantly that fans “seek actively to construct [their] own identities, partly because there seems no other space available” (Grossberg 63). This is why fandom is typically formed around commercial popular culture (Grossberg 63). On top of this, modern society is increasingly isolated to the point where people are suffering both psychologically and physically, creating a desperate need for social connection that is no longer available through low-level community involvement. Media consumption is necessary for one to participate in society. This creates a common experience with mass media across vast groups of people, and with it, a need for media literacy. It is to be expected that fandom should arise out of these conditions. It is a type of audience engagement that uses media consumption as a platform for forming communities and creating personal identity.

Though it may have taken some time for corporations to finally catch on, they have realized that fans are enthusiastic consumers that are easy to market towards, and “have become central in the making as well as the marketing of popular culture products” (Linden and Linden 10). As an example of the bizarre ways this can manifest, McDonalds has already tried to capitalize on this shiny new marketing strategy, inviting “the sauce fandom” to come and get limited edition sauce posters that “obsauced” consumers can proudly display in their homes (“McDonald’s Introduces New Buttermilk Crispy Tenders and Celebrates Sauce Fandom with Limited-Edition Collectible Posters”).

Fans and their interests, more than ever, are sought after as free labor and advertisement. Now that fandom is accepted into the mainstream, it is also exploited by corporations for profit. All of these conditions combined create a well-trodden path for vast numbers of individuals in today's society to become fans.

Mode of Engagement in Fandom

Fandom can get defined different ways by different ways by different people. In this thesis, I will focus on online creative communities formed around mass media properties, such as widely available books, television, movies, video games, podcasts, etc. To put it another way, the mode of engagement that fans use is an “affective sensibility” (Grossberg) wherein fans can engage with media critically on the basis of being emotionally invested. Fans, in being passionately engaged in the media they consume, become “key to the tactics of subcultural resistance engendered by all readers” (Booth 121). Basically, fans are good at analyzing media because they care about it. These communities can also manifest physically as meetups or fan conventions.² This definition of fandom is somewhat consistently reflected by the literature cited throughout. Finally, it should be noted that sometimes I will switch between discussing fandom as a whole and its individual communities; this is because there tends to be somewhat identifiable communities around any given property, the modern fan is nomadic, and will occupy several communities simultaneously and migrate between individual fandoms/communities over time (Jenkins). Thus, fandom is more of a vast deeply interconnected community rather than discrete pockets of people.

² Sometimes this mode of engagement can be expressed towards sports or celebrities, but not usually: that would be twitter stan culture and fantasy football, which I do not have enough courage to explore.

History of Fandom Studies

Fandom studies has had several distinct phases, the first occurring in 1992 with the foundational work *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* by Henry Jenkins. Even though humanity has had a vital connection with fiction for centuries, this was the moment that the particular personal relationship and broader communities that people, primarily women, formed with mass media became an area of study. This is known as the first wave of fandom studies. These early efforts were meant to remove the stigma around women's engagement with media and legitimize it, as is the case with many first waves of study in academia. Since its conception, "fan studies has moved away from ethnographic investigations of fans as the main object of study" (Booth 119). Paul Booth observes along with Jonathan Gray et al. (1-18) that second, third, and fourth waves have been more and more removed from the fan as an object of study, focusing instead on fandom "social dynamics" (Booth 122), fans becoming integrated into a broader media audience (Booth 122), and finally to the study of fandom studies itself (Booth 123). Due to this shift³, modern fans tend to have "critical awareness of fandom but a general ignorance of fan studies" (Booth 119). With the rise of technological engagement, new political environments, and increasing mainstream acceptance of fandom, in-depth study of fans becomes a rich, yet relatively untapped, vein.

Since Booth's article, the *Journal of Fandom Studies* has lacked in-depth studies on fans and their lived experiences. There have been repeated appeals for fandom studies to return to its source. In 2014, Francesca Coppa argued in her article "Fuck Yeah,

³ As well as some past hilariously unethical practices in using fan generated content without the creators' permission or even awareness...

Fandom is Beautiful” that due to changes in the way fans relate to media corporations as free advertising, enthusiastic fandom is now encouraged instead of stigmatized as it was in the early days (73-82). Now, fandom represents engagement in an active and political way since it naturally lends itself to criticism of the status quo, (Coppa 76) even though it is inherently shaped by it, and might even represent our collective futures in a world in which media has infiltrated every area of our lives (Coppa 79). Therefore, fandom studies in general are worth studying, and fan experiences in particular are ripe for analysis.

Fandom Activism/Slacktivism

Fandom is inherently a social and political issue. The founder of fandom studies himself, Henry Jenkins, has spent “[his] entire career in service of social justice through the means of media, storytelling, and communication” (Jenkins), which suggests the relationship between activism and fandom that I’m about to explain. Any piece of media has a political or social message, some more than others; fandom can expose the ways that these messages are received, such as the ways beliefs and behaviors are encouraged or discouraged. Thus, it is easy to go from talking about any given piece of media (say, Star Wars) to talking about real life social issues and politics (say, fascism). These reactions to media can sometimes directly relate to social or political action. Being passionate about popular culture often translates to politics easily because “it is often on the field of affective relations that political struggles intersect with popular concerns” (Grossberg 64). Fan studies consistently positions the fan as active and aware agents in their consumption of media rather than “cultural dopes” (Grossberg) mindlessly obsessed with corporate propaganda. The very thing that sets them apart from other audiences—

their open and unashamed passion—encourages a conscientious mode of consumption and can make cultural and political awareness possible.

Activism and slacktivism's roles in fandom are a little less talked about. As culture shifts and younger fans enter the public fandom sphere, they become more and more prominent parts of fandom as a whole. One of the troubles of investigating activism in fandom is wildly differing definitions of activism. In one study, fandom activism was described as “the intersection of cultural and political participation” and was linked to some actual social movement organizations such as the Harry Potter Organization. Fandom activism can also manifest in specific protests, such as the environmentally-minded Avatar protests in Bil'in (Brough and Shresthova) or the pro-democracy students in Hong Kong who used the three-finger salute from the Hunger Games movies as an expression of dissent (Sim). This is the kind of activism most people probably think of when hearing the word. This study also compared fan activism to neoliberalism, particularly in that it can use political behaviors for non-political ends (Brough and Shresthova). This is exemplified in other literature that defines activism as fans campaigning on Twitter to keep their show from being cancelled, as was the case with Fringe fans (Guerrero-Pico).

Another feature of fan activism in the literature is the distinction between top-down activism and grassroots activism. Fans can be mobilized by creators or objects of fan attention to take altruistic action, such as donating to charity causes or raising awareness regarding marginalized communities, which was observed in fans of Lady Gaga (Bennet). Fan activism can also begin as a grassroots movement with the intent of challenging authority – often for non-political ends. A common form of this grassroots

movement is using social media as a platform to petition for creators to listen to fans' opinions on what should happen with a media property – such as the Twitter campaign example (Guerrero-Pico). However, the distinctions between top-down and grassroots activism in fans is not always so clear. A great example of this is in the recent #ThanksGraham controversy (Stevens). Graham Linehan, a popular comedian with a large Twitter following, directed his fans to harass the administration running the UK charity lottery in order to suspend funding to Mermaids, a charity that supports transgender youth. British YouTube personality Harry Brewis (AKA hbombguy on YouTube), in response, did a charity stream of himself playing Donkey Kong 64 in order to raise funds for Mermaids. The stream went viral, and in addition to having speakers as prominent as US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, his followers raised over 300,000 dollars for the charity and helped ensure regular lottery funding would be reinstated. Thus, even though this can be viewed as two creators leveraging top-down mobilization to political ends, there was still grassroots activity after the stream went viral and more and more people joined the charity stream.

No discussion of fandom stands complete without addressing slacktivism. Slacktivism is “political activities that have no impact on real-life political outcomes, but only serve to increase the feel-good factor of the participants” (Christensen). A defining characteristic of slacktivism the way it focuses too much on “highlighting social wrongs and too little on critical self-examination” (Urrieta). In fandom, this leads to online harassment, sometimes on a huge scale.

So, within an increasingly interconnected internet culture where personalization and self-identity are more important than anonymity, the personal becomes

increasingly political even within fandom circles. Fandom disagreements, too, have shifted into a more political and academic tone. (Winterwood)

This mentality is expressed even in fans' everyday lives and vocabulary. As fandom, particularly Tumblr fandom, "became more and more political and critical of its consumption of media, its preferred terms to describe its engagement with the media have also shifted towards a more academic, professional lexicon" (Winterwood). As Winterwood observes, "Wank" used to refer to passionate/in-depth discussions that weren't especially meaningful. It has been discarded in favor of calling these conversations "discourse." Words like "squick," which fans used to refer to anything that made them uncomfortable for any reason, has largely been replaced by "trigger," which is a much more serious word used in diagnosis of mental disorders. On top of this, since the common structure of social media is now globally accessible to strangers who may not be in one's inner circle, it is much easier for fans to come across opinions they disagree with and start fights.

Bullying in fan spaces is often politically motivated, or at least in theory. One extreme example of this is the case of the fanartist Zamii, who was deemed "problematic" for the way she drew characters who were fat or non-white (Romero). Angry fans dogpiled her, creating 40 separate accounts dedicated to criticizing her for over a year. After several ineffective apologies, she attempted suicide. Many fans were unapologetic in the aftermath, one fan saying, "Me not being a pushover for oppression makes ME toxic?? Fuck that" (Romero). Fan culture journalist Elizabeth Minkel, in a recent roundtable discussion about Tumblr fandom, discusses this misguided attempt at activism:

[There are] people who want to fight racism, who want to critique media, who want to fight for queer representation, but who lack any—[sic] obviously, there are people who have been working on this stuff for decades. So, you see people throwing around terms, you see people with different amounts of knowledge, but you don't see a lot of listening. (Morimoto)

Fan activism does not necessarily come from a bad place – often, it can be people genuinely wanting to make a positive difference. Unfortunately, they tend to become mean-spirited, short sighted, and too focused on punishing individuals instead of making positive impacts or changing oppressive systems. They don't act—they react. Basically, the growing trend in fandom is toward ignorant bullying that wears a social justice hat.

Fandom as a Learning Space

Perhaps above all else, fandom is a social space that encourages fans to learn. This concept has been explored in different ways by different researchers, usually through the lens of media literacy, and particularly how this learning impacts identity.

Fandom has been explored as an *affinity space*, which is “a place or set of places where people affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals, not shared race, class culture, ethnicity, or gender” (Gee 67). This affinity space is linked to language acquisition as well as mastery of other skills. A qualitative study of one Catalan gamer indicated that being part of an online gaming fandom based around fan translation and hacks of retro games led to language skills, technical skills (notably hacking), and sociocultural skills, which consisted of interacting with a community of fans and incorporating their criticisms (Vasquez-Calvo). Another study published on three above-average Emirati high schoolers found that both online and offline affinity

spaces had a massive effect on the participants' literacy in both their native tongue as well as in English. The three learning areas identified were participation, leadership and mastery, and content production; two of the three participants' affinity spaces were fan-ish in nature – one online, one offline (Aljanahi). Thus, by allowing people to interact based on an object of shared interest, usual barriers to interaction are removed. This allows people to make new friends. On top of that, in order to interact within that space, fans are encouraged to learn skills in order to gain more interaction within the affinity space.

Media literacy in particular is linked to the way that identity work happens in fandom communities. Of course, while literacy is most often linked with a traditional idea of reading words on a page or screen, fandom necessarily involves literacy with diverse media. Media literacy, defined as “not only the abilities to analyze and evaluate media messages, or *decode*, but also the abilities to create media, or *encode*” (Redmond 212), is something of a foregone conclusion in a community such as fandom, made up of “consumers who also produce, readers who also write, spectators who also participate” (Jenkins 208). Recent qualitative studies on fanfiction writers have investigated the ways that writing fic affects identity (Lammers and Marsh, Korobkova and Black). Common themes in this study positioned the fans' identities as writers in opposition to both personal relationships such as parents as well as school environments. The writing still affected these areas of their lives. Writers mentioned their parents being supportive of their writing even if the parents weren't aware their kids were writing fanfiction. Often, writers mentioned that writing fic made them more adept at school writing and reading assignments, even though they consistently viewed the spheres as separate or

impermeable. These studies also stressed the importance of community in motivating writing. The latter of these studies, which followed a single fic writer over the course of four years, found that she was not truly comfortable in her identity as a writer until she found community in her school theater program, leading her to become a playwright (Lammers and Marsh). Thus, fandom is a place for literacy of many types, and this literacy spills out into other areas of the fans' lives and identities, sometimes in dramatic ways.

Fandom's learning potential has also been explored in terms of "flow," a concept developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi to describe activities that are "the perfect blend of challenge and skill level" which "creates a setting for personal growth and fosters ever-increasing cognitive complexity because the individual is in constant pursuit of the flow state" (Little, Csikszentmihalyi). In other words, flow describes the sweet spot of leisure activities—the never-ending thrill of the chase. A qualitative study performed on ten adult fans of science fiction indicated that the flow the participants experienced in learning about or mastering their object of interest made learning in other areas easier. For example, mastery over cosplay led to confidence in home renovations, parsing scientific jargon in science fiction helped to facilitate understanding of actual scientific concepts in a classroom setting, and abstract thinking skills developed by consuming fiction sparked an interest in philosophy (Little 127).

Methodology

The goal of this thesis is to explore how fans learn in online fandom and what they learn and how Reactionary Fandom Culture (RFC) affects learning in fandom spaces. My guiding goal was to gain a perspective on fans or creators as potential study

participants. In the first stage of the data collection process, I started the recruitment of potential participants via the Internet and from friend circles, using the public social networking accounts of the participants in the case of strangers. I recruited further participants through a snowball sampling procedure. The target population was intended to be two groups of participants: fans, and "creators." Creators refers to the persons who have written a work of fiction (game, book, or various other mediums) that has an active fan community around it. Fans, of course, are the consumers of such material whom participate in communities around the work.

The respondents that I contacted directly were either through or involved on websites where users are generally expected to remain anonymous, such as Tumblr and FFnet, to support my analysis about anonymous affinity spaces. I explained the purpose of the study via a recruitment email, including how I would handle issues of confidentiality, and asked the fans and creators to participate in the study. After contacting potential participants and confirming their interest in the study and that they were over 18 years of age, I sent them an email from my official Texas State email account. The e-mail read as follows:

You are invited to participate in a research study about fan cultures. The purpose of this study is to learn more about the lived experiences of fans and content creators, and how they view "fandom" including, but not limited to, the effects fandom has had on their individual thought process and personal growth; the ways in which members of fandom communities have observed fandom change; and general beliefs and attitudes towards fan creations. This research is being conducted by Jen Cardenas under the supervision of Dr. Rachel Romero. You may contact either Jen Cardenas at j_c719@txstate.edu or Dr. Romero at rromero.txstate.edu. This study is not a funded research project. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are over the age of 18 and have an experience either being a member of a fan community, or you created a text that has a fan community. You were identified through your public social media profile. You also may have been recommended by someone you know. If you choose to participate, you will take an anonymous open-ended

questionnaire that will take no more than thirty minutes, and you can opt out of any question or back out of the study entirely. My goal with this study is to have an up-to-date and in-depth understanding of fan communities, and to apply the gathered data to multiple critical lenses, and publish the findings and analysis as my undergraduate honors thesis in the form of a comic.

Attached to the recruitment email was an official consent form with all the information about the study, the contact information for myself and my supervisor, issues of confidentiality, my signature, and a place for their own signature. The email also included a link to the survey form for fans and creators accordingly. After receiving a reply email with a signed consent form, I saved the form to an encrypted folder. Using a snowball procedure, I asked these participants if they knew anyone in their circle that might want to participate.

The questionnaire contained 10 open ended questions, and it was intended to take no more than 30 minutes to complete. The answer boxes allowed participants to type as much or as little as they wanted. The open-ended questionnaire was hosted through surveymonkey, and only my faculty supervisor and I had access to the results. The questions for fans were as follows:

1. What is your background with fan communities? When did you start getting involved with fandom, and why? What is your level of involvement now?
2. Which fandom(s) have you been deeply involved with, and what drew you to them?
3. Do you create fan generated content, such as fanfiction, fanart, cosplay, etc.? If so, what motivates you to create these things, and what effect has making them had on you?
4. How would you compare fanart and fanfiction to legitimate forms of art?
5. In your opinion, what is the appeal of fandom?
6. Describe some of the ways in which fandom has affected your identity and personal growth.
7. How do you think fandom serves as an avenue for healing, or exploration of difficult and private subjects for individuals and communities?
8. What do you think of Big Name Fans, AKA highly influential fans that have their own dedicated following?

9. How have you observed fandom changing, and how do you think fandom would change if it became completely “mainstream”?
10. What is your age, gender, and race?

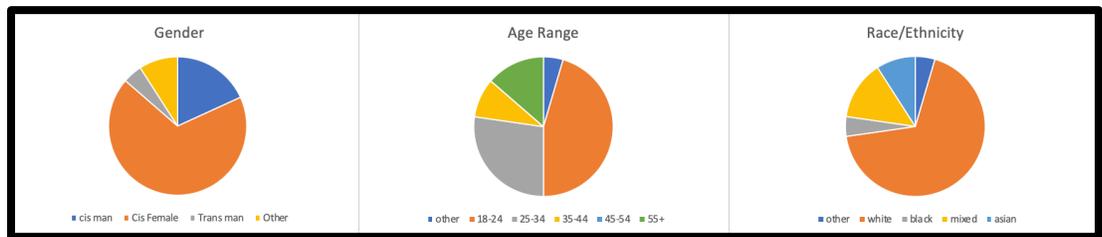
The questions for creators were as follows:

1. Tell me about your background. When did you gain a fan following, and for what creation? How would you describe your level of involvement with your fans?
2. Tell me about some of the things that make fandom communities unique.
3. How would you compare fanart and fanfiction to legitimate forms of art?
4. How would you say fandom has affected your ongoing career?
5. Describe some of the ways in which having a fan following has affected your identity and personal growth.
6. How would you describe the environment of your fan following, and how do you feel about the ways your fans interact with the work you created?
7. In your opinion, what is the appeal of fandom?
8. How have you observed fandom changing, and how do you think fandom would change if it became completely “mainstream”?
9. What do you think of Big Name Fans, AKA highly influential fans that have their own dedicated following within your fan base?
10. What is your age, gender, and race?

The data gathered from the survey was be stored on surveymonkey, which is a secure network, for 2 years on an account that only I had access to. Any other data files related to the study were stored on my password protected computer in an encrypted file. At the end of the two-year period, all data will be deleted. I did not attempt to view personal records of any kind that may contain sensitive and personal information about the participants or their families. All the data from the survey, including the consent form, will be kept in surveymonkey's secure server for 2 years, after which the data will be destroyed.

After contacting all potential participants, I ended up getting responses from a total of 23 respondents. All the respondents were fans, though I did manage to snag some BNFs. The majority of the respondents were white females from 18-34 years of age. There was a liberal sprinkling of other demographics as well, as shown in the graph

below. I only got three white men, and of those, one self-identified as gay, and one as trans, leaving only one respondent with the possibility of being the quadruple threat: white, cis, straight, man. This may be reflective only of my sampling practices in drawing from my circle and from platforms I spent time on.⁴ Since I went out of my way to reach out to people in other circles, the fandoms they were in were all over the place. It was hard to keep track since one person might say “anime” where another said *Fullmetal Alchemist*, but the number clocked in well over 50.⁵



Using grounded theory and an open coding approach, I analyzed the replies by first reading them in detail and highlighting any key phrases. After this, I went back through all the responses, looking for recurring themes. Consequently, using a focused coding approach I was interested in themes about the process of learning in fandom activities, how that learning affects fans’ outside lives, and how the learning process is affected by RFC. I made a list of these themes and attempted to incorporate all of them into a broader pattern, especially in light of preexisting study. In the sections to follow, I discuss the findings of my research in more detail.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Being only one person working for free, I didn’t have time to analyze the responses to the depths that a full team otherwise might have. I also didn’t have the

⁴ Maybe if I went to reddit, I could get some more of this demographic.

⁵ This makes sense, since Jenkins pointed out that fans aren’t so much into one thing as they adopt fandom as a lifestyle, moving from property to property like nomads (Jenkins).

manpower to gather more raw data—23 responses are a hell of a lot to pick apart. I wanted to get thirty, but I saw the workload and cut it off at 23. This means that the sample size was smaller than I would call ideal. Future studies should consider getting upwards of 50 respondents, especially if they intend to investigate fandom as a whole like I did in this study, as opposed to studying a specific subset of fandom around a particular property (like a lot of the studies I cited in my literature review did).

English may be the global language, but there's a lot that goes unaccounted for when a study can only operate in English with English participants. Future examinations of fans ought to account for the possible differences between English and non-English speaking audiences.

One obvious place this study design did not go according to *keikaku*⁶ was in trying to get responses from creators that have a fandom following. None of the creators responded to my emails.⁷ A future study should look at the patterns for those who have fan followings of their original work – whether they themselves are fans, how they interact with their fans, and what their experiences with fandom are overall.

Also worthy of further study is the way that fandom is a means of adapting to social isolation. A sizeable chunk of respondents mentioned that fandom was a way of dealing with a growing problem of social isolation. Having such a prevalent theme among respondents merits further investigation.

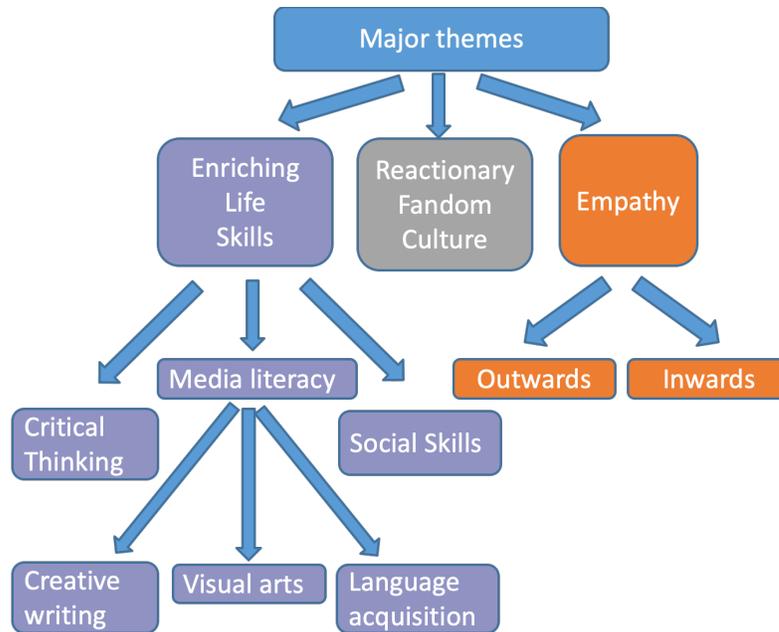
⁶ Translation from Japanese: “plan.”

⁷ To be fair, I sent less than ten creators because I became very anxious whenever I tried to send something. It might have been unrealistic for me to expect replies from people who are essentially, or literally, celebrities, as well as thinking that I could accommodate the nuances of that data into my research without being overwhelmed by the workload.

Studies in the fandom field that specifically investigate reactionary activism and negotiating LGBT+ identities would be well worth the trouble. While there are a couple of articles on the changes in fandom towards purity policing, it doesn't mirror the amount of discussion and concern about the topic I've observed among actual fans. As far as the LGBT+ themes, I was not surprised by how many people's orientation and identity was affected by fandom spaces, but I was surprised by how many people had their first introduction to these concepts through fandom. Of course, the reactionary version of fandom and the version of fandom that is a place to explore gender and sexuality likely have some overlap. Both subjects have a heavy effect on fans, particularly younger fans, and thus, someone who isn't me should look into that.

Results

This study is meant to investigate what fans learn in anonymous affinity spaces and how they learn those things. Additionally, this study investigates how RFC can affect that learning process. Since the respondents to this study were primarily active through sites where anonymity is the default, such as Tumblr and FFnet, the results are about how learning happens in anonymous affinity spaces. In order to interpret the data, I used grounded theory and open coding. After I had a list of emergent themes, I solidified my results and used vocabulary from the literature to help organize my thoughts. My findings are simple: thanks to the way fandom is structured as an anonymous affinity space, fans learn (1) enriching life skills and (2) empathy, but (3) those learning processes are impeded by Reactionary Fandom Culture. I broke down these three overarching themes into subthemes as I felt appropriate, as shown in the flowchart below.



Enriching Life Skills

Fandom, as an anonymous affinity space, enables fans to acquire enriching life skills. Every single respondent mentioned learning some kind of skill that improved their quality of life, whether that skill is creative, academic/professional, or social in nature. Fans were motivated to learn skills consciously so that they could interact with other fans (affinity space motivation) and because they enjoyed the challenge (flow state motivation). Fans also passively pick up social skills and critical thinking as a by-product of participating in fandom culture. It is also worth noting that several fans mentioned involvement at an early age, and often performing fan behaviors before being aware of fandom as a concept. For example, earnest discussions with friends and family or even writing improvements on the source material on paper were stand-ins for what is standard fan behavior online. As the participants aged and gained internet access, they latched onto fandom as an evolution of their behaviors in real life. Thanks to the way fandom works, drawing people together around a common object of interest, people teach

themselves how to move smoothly through the space—how to consume and produce the object of interest and how to interact with others’ ideas. I have broken this category into three subcategories: media literacy, critical thinking, and social skills.

Media Literacy

Participants talked at length about how fandom taught them various forms of media literacy, both as consumers and producers. Fans tended to describe these skills as necessary to interact with others within the anonymous affinity space. Other respondents were thrilled that within fandom, they were able to refine media literacy skills at their own pace – calling to mind the flow state. Most participants create fic or art of some kind, often both (only two respondents did not mention partaking in some kind of creative activity). Of those who created, many of them spoke at length about interaction, or the affinity space, being the main drive for creating, just as many talked about the joy of creating for its own sake. For example, one participant said,

I consider fanart/fanfiction to be excellent and relatively safe outlets to get constructive feedback in real-time, and gain experience in storycrafting without getting bogged down in worldbuilding details. Also it’s just fun to get reactions from people. Write something fluffy or scary or angsty, and the reaction is reward in and of itself, because it means you’re doing your job well.

Since fandom is a production space as much as it is a consumer space, some fans went so far as to say that not having any content to contribute to an individual fandom made them feel “unworthy.” This suggests a consumption culture where a consumer’s legitimacy is in part determined by their production for the community—a culture where media literacy is a prerequisite. To explore this theme further, I have broken down fans’ media literacy skills into three sub-categories: creative writing, visual arts, and language acquisition.

Creative Writing

Perhaps the most common form of media literacy that respondents mentioned was creative writing, generally in the form of writing fic. Fic writers mentioned both the affinity space and flow state motivations, and they tended to lean towards flow state motivations. This was usually through the lens of wanting to master the story world and the characters, or “play in the sandbox,” though they were motivated by the desire to write for writing’s sake as well. One respondent described their experience:

[Writing fic] helped me get a better grasp on the characters and allows me a greater understanding of the decisions they make in their canon that wouldn’t make sense to someone else. It also allowed me to expand my technique as a writer and grow more confident in my own work.

Fic writers usually described getting feedback on writing as a supplemental but significant source of motivation. To use one participant’s words,

I derive enjoyment from thinking of storylines for my fanfictions, and find the process of writing them to be satisfying (if often frustrating as well!). ...I’m also proud to share my fanfiction with the fandom and enjoy the feedback I have received (mostly positive, thankfully). There is a lot of satisfaction to be had in sharing something you have enjoyed with people who will enjoy it as well.

Drawing this into focus, one participant said that they would be more motivated if they got more interaction: “I like to write, so that’s one motivation, but it doesn’t always actually get me writing. I’d probably be working on it a lot more if it actually attracted any comments.” Some participants described fanfiction as a secondary outlet for their writing, since they also wrote in other parts of their life. One participant described how fic interacted with their real-life writing career and their motivation for writing fic:

When I was growing up (long before the internet was invented and during the time computers took up entire buildings), I fell in love with Star Trek (the original series) and frequently made up my own stories about that universe.... I never shared these

stories with anyone and it never occurred to me that others might also be making up their own stories about my favorite show. It never occurred to me to write my fanfiction of my own until 2013 [when I was 52], when I became a fan of BBC's Sherlock... I originally began writing for this fandom because I grew up absolutely loving the character of Mary Morstan Watson and was terrified the writers of the show would not do her justice.... Yes, I write fanfiction. I love to write, but in 'real life,' I write and publish only elementary and high school curriculum. Writing fiction is an enjoyable hobby which allows me to use my talents in an entirely different way.

In a similar vein, another fan describes her feelings on how writing fic interacts with her other writing projects:

I wanted to write stories from a very early age...Then [I] wrote lit fiction for decades, classes, did the pilgrimage to Iowa a couple summers, was part of (and still am) a real-life writers' group (28 years). But, oh the joy—the almost instant gratification of ffnet. ...Really, I called it my apprenticeship—I learned so much from the people I worked with, and I taught myself as well—different techniques for plotting longer genre-type stories: mysteries, horror stories, types I hadn't tried before. ...But the frosting on the cupcake is hearing from anyone who's taken the time to read what you've written and then taken even more time to tell what they thought about it. It's such a responsive sort of work and in the right fandoms the readers are so nice. My relationship to this particular fandom [Hardcastle and McCormick] was quite proprietary at times—I felt as though it was a long-abandoned property with a small group of us tending it, garden-like, and growing something.

These participants' long-standing careers with fic and original writing showcase the complex relationship between writing and motivation that occur over a fans' life.

Other fic writers named escapism and/or relaxation as another motivation to write in addition to their desire to improve their skills and their desire to interact with others. This motivation is neither predicated on fandom as an affinity space nor learning as a flow state, but often mixes with them into a more isolated experience. As one fic writer put it,

Exploring other worlds and characters is an exploration of the self in one way or another but also provides a form of escapism. I do it often when I am stressed and want to still feel productive. It keeps my mind active in thinking of minutia for creating characters and entire alien species, culture and all. This is what led me to anthropology [my graduate field of study] in the first place.

Another participant described a similar experience: “Nowadays, I write for my own enjoyment; it’s a type of therapy for me. If someone else enjoys reading it then that makes me happy as well, but it’s not why I write.” These writers are not expressing an interest in other fans or in their own skills. However, they were still active enough in fan communities for me to come into contact with them, suggesting that there is at least some affinity motivation.

One participant named not craft, nor interaction, nor personal enjoyment as her motivation for writing, but empathy. “My motivation [to write fanfiction] comes from an intense love and empathy for fictional characters that are well-constructed, and that love and empathy has helped me empathize better with real-life people.” This connection between emotional engagement and empathy calls back to Grossberg’s definition of fandom as an affective sensibility that easily dovetails into real life attitudes and actions. This theme of empathy will be unpacked further later in this chapter.

Visual Arts

Several respondents credited fandom for their proficiency in the visual arts. The motivation for learning and improving these skills was either driven by desire for interactivity or recognition (affinity space), the joy of self-challenge and improvement (flow state), or both. The visual artists were more balanced between flow state learning and creation for the purpose of interacting. One respondent exemplifies this pattern in describing their experience in creating fanart:

I almost exclusively draw fanart. ...I'm not even particularly motivated by obsession or simply gushing about something I like, although I'm totally a fan. Everytime it's more of a private challenge, I ask myself if I can draw something, and do what I can to prove to myself that I can. That or I just think it would be fun to try to draw. Or both. By extension, to be perfectly honest, making them had the pleasant effect of improving my skills and self esteem, while also choosing a subject I was passionate about enough to keep my interest up all the way until the end, all in a convenient tandem. ... Sharing everything I do also makes things much more fun.

Another respondent also is able to identify both flow state and affinity as a motivation for mastering the visual arts:

I create fanart, cosplay, graphics, gifs, and more! I'm motivated by my interest in graphic design and art in general. I've always been an artsy person and this is a great way to get involved with a fandom. ...Getting recognized by people that build the content for which the fandom is created is amazing. ... All these forms of positive feedback push me to get better and better at what I do and they just add a little spark of happiness to my day when I look and see my notifications filled with notice that my work is being shared and enjoyed.

One respondent mentioned that he was motivated to learn digital art on the basis of community interaction. This combination drove him to improve on his art skills to the point that he is a fanartist by career:

Even if my previous attempts at fan creation were motivated by self-challenge, I am not afraid to admit that the beginning of my path as a fan illustrator, starting with my involvement with the brony fan community, was motivated by my desire for acceptance and differentiation within the crowd that made up my community. This motivation was what drove me along all these years to develop my illustration skills to a point where I've been told many times that I have what it takes to make it as a freelance illustrator within the furry fandom, and right now my main drive is not only to earn the respect and acceptance of my fan artist peers, but also to prove to myself that I can build a career on it.

All of these fan experiences have an emphasis on flow state motivation over affinity space motivation, though affinity space motivation is certainly still present.

Language Acquisition

A plethora of fans talked about how being in fandom pushed them to develop their grasp of English as a second language. English being the global language, most popular fandom spaces are conducted almost entirely in English, meaning that if fans wanted to access most of the content and other fans, they would have to learn that language. One participant describes the desire to make friends who were into the same things as the motivation for learning English:

So, I wanted to compensate the lack of content [of my obscure fandom] throughout the internet... by doing more fanart of it! And maybe getting to know more people into it that didn't talk my language. I started to get a vague grasp of how to actually interact with others in English because of this.

Desire to participate in the English-dominated affinity space led this respondent to acquire language skills that they would not have required otherwise. Another participant goes so far as to identify fandom as the catalyst that drove her to learn English so well that it impacted her academics in both her mother tongue and in English:

The starting stone was my lack of language skills as I was not good at either my mother tongue or English. My tutor made me start writing small stories/one shots to learn and left the topic up to me which ended up in them having to suffer through my amateur full metal alchemist fanfictions. It helped me improve my grade greatly from getting on a scale from 1-6 with 1 as the best a 5 on a constant level to later be able to get a 1.

Language acquisition is perhaps the most basic form of media literacy, and fandom facilitated these fans to master a foreign language outside of formal instruction. These fans did not particularly mention flow state motivation—instead, they almost exclusively described affinity motivation.

Critical Thinking

Other respondents named critical thinking as a skill that participating in fandom spaces taught them, just by nature of interacting and talking with other fans about the object of interest. As one respondent puts it, “Fandoms and fan content have helped me grow in the sense that my thoughts and ideas can be put into a more organized fashion.” Another fan goes more into depth about this topic: “Fandom made me better at analyzing things and questioning my personal taste in things. I can figure out why I like certain aspects and even defend myself better in arguments about nonfandom things.” Thus, fandom’s nature as an affinity space can also make people better equipped to know their own thoughts and communicate them to others, as well as decode the thoughts of others.

Social Skills

Fans were able to use fandom as a place to learn social skills that apply both inside and outside of fandom. This is one of the most obvious functions of fandom, since it is an interactive space. One respondent describes this succinctly: “[Fandom] lets me feel and share and develop a sense of what is acceptable of both those things in society.” Another respondent says something similar: “Being in fandoms helped me grow my communication skills and break out of my shy shell.” Basically, the by-product of someone talking with others about an object of interest is that they will get better at talking with others.

Even for those that did not specifically acknowledge learning social skills, many of them mentioned gained close, long-lasting friends or romantic partners from fandom. It can be concluded that these individuals at the very least learned a social structure and means of interacting that reaped benefits within the community.

Empathy Outwards and Inwards

Fandom, as an anonymous affinity space, enables fans to learn empathy for others and themselves. First, fandom draws fans into a space that not only allows them to interact with people regardless of usual separating lines such as race, class, or gender, but it allows them to interact without being aware of how others might be different. One respondent describes this phenomenon:

In a world where, despite the myriad of ways we're able to communicate with others, it feels increasingly difficult to truly connect with them, it provides many people (and particularly introverts) with a starting point for engaging with new people, motivation for getting to know them, develop relationships and deepen shared experiences.

The respondent above identifies isolation as a structural/societal issue and posits fandom as a means of connection. Most respondents identified fandom as a place to meet people that they otherwise would never meet thanks to the anonymous social exposure afforded by most online fan spaces. I have broken down this theme into two sections: empathy for others, and self-empathy.

Empathy for Others

Thanks to the way affinity spaces work online, where users are usually obscured behind a screen name, participants pointed out that being in fandom helped them learn empathy. Getting to know people in of all different walks of life helped these fans to develop their skills for empathy as well as their political awareness of issues that affected social groups other than their own. Others described how interacting with new groups of people helped them to become socially aware and gain empathy for those outside their usual peer groups. One respondent describes their theory on this phenomenon:

Having at least one thing that everyone in the community has in common allows for a blank slate of sorts. ...This allows people to interact with those they might never have met otherwise. Exposing yourself to a large variety of perspectives has a positive relationship for open-mindedness and self-healing.

Another respondent openly admits that without fandom, she might have been someone completely different without fandom: “I’m sure I would have been a completely different person, has I stopped enjoying fandoms too soon. Where would I be now? I don’t know, but not here. ...I would have been a much more intolerant and sad person.”

Another fan goes into depth about his experience and how affinity spaces encourage learning empathy for others:

Most fandoms I’ve been part of are relatively agnostic of aspects such as race, gender, sexual orientation or nationality – at least in regards to the circles I joined. This has allowed me to be in contact and befriend a great diversity of people, enabling the broadening of horizons, my awareness of their respective realities, and my understanding of human nature in general.

By putting people in direct contact with people who are normally outside of their spheres, they adjust their worldview in order to accommodate these new people. They make friends, they interact, and they learn. This is how empathy is learned by these fans: by exposure and forming habits around interactions with others.

Self-Empathy

By interaction in an anonymous affinity space, fans that were exposed to new social groups and ideas found kindred spirits and acceptance, which helped them learn empathy for themselves. Essentially, having empathy for others looped back around so that fans could direct that empathy inwards. Some fans described this in a general sense: “Being in fandoms has taught me to embrace those things within me that are not typical of others in society.” Another fan put things in a more colloquial way: “[The appeal of

fandom is] the knowledge that you are **not** the only ‘weird one’ in the world... And there’s no shame in [what you love].” These fans learned through exposure to others to give themselves empathy in a broad sense of self-acceptance. There was an emergent theme in the kind of self-acceptance, though.

For a sizeable chunk of respondents, fandom was a major source of support for their identities as part of the LGBT+ community. One fan describes her experience: “Fandom has also helped me become more secure in my identity as a bisexual female, because I know that in these [fan] stories and even in canon there are people struggling with the same issues I am.” This goes beyond just support. Fandom, for several fans, was their introduction to the concept of being transgender or same-sex attraction at all. This eventually led to realizing that they themselves were in the LGBT+ community, and it led them to come out and live comfortably with their new identity. One respondent describes this idea of finding oneself by knowing others:

From fandoms, I’ve learned a lot about myself... fandoms have helped me on my journey of self discovery. Fandoms are filled with a diverse group of people and it’s how I was exposed to the LGBT community. After discovering the community and finding out that I happen to be part of that community was life changing. I am both bisexual and a transgender man and had I not known about the LGBT community sooner, these parts of my identity might have gone unknown for much longer.

Another respondent points out that not only were they helped by fandom, but it equipped them to help themselves and others in terms of LGBT identity: “Fandom has helped me come to terms with my identity as a queer person a lot, and also in consequence it made me help other people in the same way.” There were also two respondents who describe a similar experience with growing up religiously, and fandom being an eye-opening

connection to a world outside their closed-off upbringing. The first describes this cause and effect:

Being the child of two religious or “spiritual” individuals, fandom culture actually introduced me to the idea of sexuality. Before my first fanfiction, I was not even aware that homosexuality was possible, let alone common and perfectly acceptable. To that point in my life, I barely even thought of myself as straight because I didn’t believe I had to as there were no other ways to be. Since, I have come out as bisexual and met numerous others like me to share that experience with.

The other respondent had this experience was on a community-wide level, and describes the process of self-acceptance that she underwent thanks to fandom:

Interacting with strangers outside my religious community taught me that women could love and marry other women and men could love other men and marry other men. Fandom, embarrassingly, first introduced me to that concept. After I accepted that it was okay for fictional characters, I came to accept that it was okay for other people, and eventually I accepted that it was okay for myself.

Thus, these fans learned in a sense more personally transformative than perhaps any other group of respondents—they learned about an entire group of people that they had no idea existed, and then learned that they themselves were part of that group, and that was okay.

Reactionary Fandom Culture

Reactionary Fandom Culture (RFC) makes it difficult for fans to learn life skills and empathy skills. I define this term as bullying disguised as political activism within fandom spaces. I’d like to outline a few specific situations this term can apply to. This can refer to cases such as the fanartist Zamii, or, to summarize, (1) incidents where people, including fans or the creators of the object of interest, get dogpiled or harassed because they’ve been deemed problematic. It is also a description of (2) the “holier-than-thou” attitude that pushes fans to be the most woke or progressive as a sort of battle

royale. Finally, this can also refer to (3) the act of labeling fictional properties or the people who make them as racist, homophobic, transphobic, etc. with no nuance or proper context. In short, it is a type of slacktivism: politically motivated reactions to problematic behavior that are harmful to others and do not accomplish much towards the issues that purportedly motivate the behaviors. It is not just a single act of bullying, but an entire culture that exists on the internet, and it overlaps with fandom significantly.

A repeated theme among the responses were observations on how fandom has changed to an increasingly reactionary space. From descriptions of “purity police” to “call-out culture” to flat-out bullying, fans identified growing problems in fandom as a community in recent years. One fan described this pattern in broad strokes:

Lately, I have noticed an unfortunate trend in fandom where fans of a certain work/character/pairing/etc. will attack those with differing opinions as being “bad people”. This... has destroyed a bit of what the fandom culture represented to me in the first place. Rather than being an open, understanding, free environment, it has become toxic and bitter, spawning rivalries and “antis” and hatred. I fear that as fandom slips further and further into the mainstream, this trend will continue to worsen.

One fan even went so far as to say that fan culture is inherently reactionary, and that she was aware of the effect that RFC had on her:

Fandom communities are highly reactionary. This has enabled my own reactionary tendencies. When fandom becomes your life, fiction and reality become harder to differentiate between. The older I get, the more frighteningly aware of this I become.

RFC is a real, growing problem that fans experience. It is a result of anonymous affinity spaces, after all. RFC happens in an anonymous affinity space because the other side of the coin of being anonymous is that it’s easy to avoid having empathy and you end up interacting with strangers whose worldviews and opinions are likely different from yours.

This growing community-wide obsession with the moral high ground was identified by participants as the cause for bullying incidents they had experienced, making them afraid to interact with the community in the first place, or driving them away from a previously high level of engagement with the community. One fan mentioned that this culture is responsible for her isolation: “I’m a reclusive type. Fan communities scare me.” Another respondent went further into detail on how toxic fan behaviors have driven her away from fandoms:

Oy. I’ve left fandoms... recently solely because of fandom changing, and not for the better. Once fans start veering from the realm of fantasy into my-fantasy-should-be-reality-or-else and becoming creepers in real life to the actors, and hateful, spiteful little monsters online to each other over things that literally have no place in the fandom except in their own heads? Adios. No thank you.

The toxic harassment culture that is increasingly dominant in fandoms drives people away from the space, limiting their access to the unique learning opportunities it offers. Thus, RFC actively interferes with the learning processes that happen in fandom, which has multiple negative impacts on fans.

A couple of fans viewed RFC as the result of a previous trend where fandom was too unregulated, which drove fans to self-regulate. One respondent gives their version of this history:

Back then I started fandom was more raw. We did not have tags or much else. Fandom was a niche with little nooks of its own and kind of a “safe” place for the more unconventional. In recent years fandom became more of a call-out culture and I think the trend will amplify if it becomes more mainstream as there will also be more people that want to police things.

This respondent was not alone in sketching out this general timeline of events. Two fans made similar observations about fandom tolerance doing an-about face:

I have mostly seen fandoms change through Tumblr, where it went from a very, maybe TOO tolerant place to a community obsessed by purity, questioning creators and fans' motives and creations and sometimes condemning things that used to be accepted without question. Some of them worth questioning, some of them less so. To me it went from an extreme to another. As of now and to me, fandom has yet to find a middle ground between tolerant without questions or policing with very little freedom.

To go along with this respondent's metaphor of finding a middle ground, another respondent used a similar metaphor to describe this phenomenon:

I think there's been a pretty crucial shift in mentality in the latest years. Where there used to be a widely accepted consensus that fiction and reality are to be distinct, but also excessive freedom and lack of awareness, I feel like we've shifted too deep towards the opposite side of the spectrum, which understandably condemns certain things, but also takes them at face value even when they should not. Hopefully, we'll reach some sort of balance one day (I'm looking at you, actually properly used tagging system).

These fans imply that RFC was born from fans' desire to be more critically aware, but the fans have failed in achieving anything. They both describe RFC as unlistening, unquestioning, and uninterested in actual debate. This is not the kind of mindset that facilitates learning or empathy.

However, it is not so cut-and-dried. The recent attempts to be more critically aware can have positive effects on fans as well. One participant, even as she pointed out how harmful reactionary culture can be, also pointed out that it makes it possible for people like her (respondent disclosed being other-abled and Asian) to create connections to mass media in a way that was not previously possible:

I've seen a lot more purity contests, but I'm not sure it's just because I'm in bigger fandoms than before. There's the "the closer you get to canon or canonlike storytelling, the better you are" crap that I hate, and the "if you do/don't ship X, Y, or Z characters with A, B, or C" that veers into accusations of criminal activity. On the bright side there's also the "why do these stories only have white characters or

straight characters or able-bodied characters” debate that I love, because half of the reason I started writing fanfiction in the first place is so I could write characters who looked like me and were limited like I was, and I look forward to seeing more of them.

The critical engagements of fandom aren’t completely pointless, in other words. Some fans are able to benefit from the constant questioning. However, this respondent was the outlier. Most fans had intense negative experiences with RFC.

Discussion

Fandom’s affinity spaces facilitated massive benefits for respondents to this study thanks to the flow state encouraged by interactivity. They gained mastery over media literacy – in their abilities to watch, read, or listen to something, interpret meaning, and create their own texts. This learning is made possible by the interactivity of fandom. Though it is certainly possible to acquire media skills elsewhere, such as traditional classroom settings, the particular flow state made possible by fandom’s construction as an affinity space is not available anywhere else. Even without considering the growing problem of social isolation, it makes sense that people will be better at reaching a flow state when there is a community that is interested in their creative or technical output. Additionally, the way fans learn empathy in anonymous affinity spaces is something unique to fandom. The ability to meet strangers from all over the world or from completely different peer groups and have friendly interactions with them is not something replicable in traditional classroom settings or even much of social media. Thus, fandom creates a space where people can form meaningful relationships and hone their media literacy, something that is increasingly needed in a mediated and isolated world.

This learning is actively impeded by the reactionary mindset that has been encroaching in fandom spaces. When people refuse to listen to opposing arguments and scare others away from interacting at all, the benefits of fandom are obstructed. If you think about fandom as the sandbox metaphor again, RFC enables bullies to rule the sandbox and keep members from playing, preventing a flow state from occurring. Of course, it's not ideal for fans to be exposed to toxic behavior. On top of that, if a person is driven away from the anonymous affinity space, they can't take advantage of the learning processes in it—they lose that opportunity to refine their life skills and empathy skills.

RFC presumably mutates from the desire to consume media critically and be a responsible citizen. The stories that humans tell each other through media is a primary factor in socialization, shaping both individuals and communities in their perceptions of themselves and of others. If media cannot be escaped, then one should and must be conscious of both the manifest and latent messages in advertisements, fiction, and nonfiction. To want to learn to be critically aware is admirable. However, it seems that fans experienced plain old bullying rather than any kind of productive political discourse.

Being reactionary goes beyond fandom. This phenomenon has manifested in other parts society in recent years. The term “reactionary” is usually associated with the political right. I had a debate with myself whether I should call this phenomenon slacktivism, regressive leftism, or something else, since the fandom-related phenomenon I was describing had a distinct political left perspective. Trying to reclaim “regressive leftist” seemed too bold, and slacktivism is too general. But fans, when they decide to shoot on sight when something “problematic” has happened, are truly reacting, and not acting. They are aligning themselves with a mindset that does not allow for conversation

and progress. More than that, they often rely on dehumanizing the people they are attacking. Thus, their actions contradict the supposedly progressive mindset that they claim to uphold. In the words of Edward Wasserman, Knight Professor in Journalism Ethics at Washington and Lee University,

Public conversation exchanging ideas about what a community is and ought to be is something that has to be learned. Unfortunately, mainstream media have made a fortune teaching people the wrong ways to talk to each other, offering up Jerry Springer, Crossfire, Bill O'Reilly. People understandably conclude rage is the political vernacular, that this is how public ideas are talked about. It isn't.

(Wasserman)

Fandom learning is predicated on being able to interact with others. Fans have to want to be around each other in order to want to share their writing or art. Fans have to build positive relationships with each other in order to learn about the experiences of others, leading them to empathize with others and themselves better than before. This, in turn, further encourages producing content and enhancing media literacy skills. None of that can happen when fans are too busy sending anon hate or dogpiling someone on Twitter. Unfortunately, many fans get sucked into this trend or are victims of it.

Overall, fans described their experiences in fandom as positive. They learned, made friends, and got to enjoy more of their object of interest. Reactionary culture, while common among responses, wasn't focused on as much as these more enriching aspects. However, this thesis sought out people who are active fans. There may be untold numbers of people who no longer participate in fandom directly because of negative experiences with RFC.

Fan experiences, like any experiences, are multifaceted. One fan attempts to describe this complexity:

Fandom is a double edged sword. I feel like people getting into them too young and in too naïve of a mindstate and letting themselves be defined by it will definitely come out weaker than they entered. However, when used responsibly, the resources that provide for [healing or exploration of difficult and private subjects] are amazing. Fanfics and fanart can be great to cope with difficult feelings, to educate people on many matters, or even to just offer different points of views on things.

I don't think fandom has to be a place that is either too forgiving or too unforgiving. It's good that the new generation of fans wants to be critically aware—in fact, I would call this a strength. This is especially important because the corporations who produce and distribute fictional mass media have stopped seeing fans as parasites and started seeing them as commodities. Fans that are unaware of this commodification are in a position to be exploited (even more so than usual). Plus, being societally aware is obviously beneficial both to the individual and to their society. We can't escape media, so we must engage with it, and we should be aware of how we engage with it. Media literacy and criticism is non-negotiable if we want to be responsible citizens. Fandom is one possible way of adapting to the current societal structure, providing both media literacy and a path to media criticism. And fandom, like any other means of adaptation, has its upsides and downsides. Attempts at criticism can't come at the cost of empathy and the ability to have real, in-depth, charitable conversations. Subtracting learning and empathy from critical conversations about media is counterproductive, because to do so makes communication difficult. RFC is not just useless for actual political change—it's actively harmful. If fans want to engage critically with their objects of interest, they should be responsible and empathetic to others in the affinity space.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I explored what fans learn in anonymous affinity spaces and how they learn it; I also explored how reactionary mindsets impede that learning process. I set the stage by defining fandom and contextualizing it within a capitalistic society, and then I did a review of fandom studies history. I also included a discussion of fandom learning, flow state, and media literacy. I also briefly covered slacktivism and fandom activism. My methods in gathering data involved recruiting both strangers and those within my friend circle, and then utilizing a snowball sampling procedure. In interpreting the data, I used open coding and informed my analysis using the literature I reviewed. My results were that, thanks to the way affinity spaces work, fans are able to gain enriching life skills and empathy when they participate in online fandom, but RFC is a growing force that actively impedes their ability to learn. I posited that fandom has unique learning opportunities for fans, not only in the things they learn, but also the *way* that those things are learned. On top of that, I theorized that while being critically aware is the responsible choice, empathy and learning cannot be sacrificed as in RFC.

Viewing this study as an accurate cross section of fandom as a whole would be a mistake. Even so, I'm confident that the data is still accurate to at least a large portion of fans' lived experiences. I'm one of these fans, so I think I would know. My hopes for this study was to make the data available and accessible to everyone who participated as well as to fandom at large. Above all else, I wanted this project to matter and to help people. My hope is that at least one person read this and got something out of it.

Going into this project, I was ready to get into fisticuffs defending my field of study as legitimate and fans as rational actors. In the year or so that I spent working on the project, I found out that establishing the legitimacy of the fan has been done many times over and is unproductive in critiquing capitalism besides. I also grew jaded. Maybe it's growing up, or maybe it's being forced to analyze it on such a close level, but I had begun to view active fandom activity as a curse. In my own life, I focused on the negatives of fandom life – all the ways my choices had led to very real heartbreak, bullying, or straight-up wasted time. Even as I continue to grapple with that, seeing people from different walks of life reminding me of the upsides of fandom keeps me from drowning in my cynicism. Though it may be that I no longer feel safe stating some opinions online for fear of being attacked (and the day I get into a pointless argument online with strangers is the day I hope God finally kills me), there are still upsides. I have knowledge and skills thanks to this lifestyle that I wouldn't have otherwise. The experiences described in this project are all a part of me, and, of course, they're a part of all the fans who were kind enough to participate. They're complex, as all life experiences are, and I suppose I'll have to wait before I can say for sure whether the benefits outweigh the downsides.

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