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## Exploring Explicit Fanfiction as a Vehicle for Sex Education among Adolescents and Young Adults

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Exploring Explicit Fanfiction as a Vehicle for Sex Education among Adolescents and Young  
Adults

by

Donna Jeanne Barth

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
with a concentration in Biocultural Medical Anthropology  
Department of Anthropology  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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## Glossary of Terms

*Archive*- In this work, an archive specifically refers to a place where fanfiction is stored and shared on the internet. See *Fanfiction*.

*Archive of Our Own* (abbreviated as AO3)- The Archive of Our Own is a specific archive on the internet where fanfiction is stored and shared. The Archive of Our Own was the primary site for part of this research project. See *Archive, Fanfiction*.

*Fandom*- A fandom is a network of fans who are active by “interacting in some way, whether through discussions or creative works” (Fanlore n.d.). Fandom can be used as a collective terms for active fans, or as a term for groups that are active about a particular movie, book, series, etc. (e.g., the *Supernatural* fandom).

*Fanfiction*- Fanfiction consists of written works created by fans, using existing characters or events. Fans may write fictional stories about published media, celebrities, etc., which are often shared for free online.

*Fanfiction.net*- Fanfiction.net is a specific archive on the internet where fanfiction is stored and shared. See *Archive, Fanfiction*

*M/M*- In fanfiction, an M/M relationship is one between two male characters. It is also referred to as a slash relationship. Comparatively, a F/F relationship is between two female characters, and is called a femslash relationship.

*Organization for Transformative Works* (abbreviated as OTW)- The Organization for Transformative Works is a nonprofit organization created in 2007 to preserve and protect fans, fanfiction, and other works created by fans. The OTW is also the parent organization of the Archive of Our Own. See *Archive of Our Own*

*Prosumer*- In this work, the term prosumer is used to describe people who read and/or write fanfiction. The word is a portmanteau of producer and consumer (Jenkins 2015). See *Fanfiction*

*Ship* (also: Shipping)- A ship refers to a romantic relationship between characters within a piece or media or fanfiction. Ship can also be used as a verb, for example: *I ship those two characters*.

*Tag*- In this work, a tag is a keyword or phrase attached to a work of fanfiction, and can be for sorting or searching works in an archive. See *Archive*

*Trope*- In professionally published media as well as fanfiction, a trope is an umbrella term for popular narrative conventions and plot devices

## **Abstract**

Fanfiction consists of works written by amateurs using pre-existing characters and plots, often shared online for free. Although fanfiction began long before the advent of the internet, the worldwide web has created a platform wherein fanfiction is allowed and encouraged to spread almost unconditionally, reaching new populations and rising slowly but surely into the public eye. As the internet has made fanfiction more accessible and public, it has also increased the number of children and young adults involved in the process. And in the unsupervised wilderness of the internet, sexual content is a common feature of fanfiction, with a varying degree of accuracy in said sexual content.

As the influence of fanfiction spreads, academic research into fanfiction has also spread. The purpose of this project is to better understand how fanfiction can impact what adolescents and young adults know about sex and how that information shapes their sexual attitudes. A secondary goal is to question fanfiction authors and readers about whether they are interested in the presentation of accurate sexual information in fanfiction. In order to answer these questions, this project included a review of several works of fanfiction, as well as a survey of 25 fanfiction readers and writers, and interviews with seven of the survey participants.

In general, the answer to whether fanfiction has impacted users has been a resounding yes. Prosumers (those who may produce and/or consumer fanfiction) reached through the survey and the interviews largely identified fanfiction as an important resource in their sexual education, with a mostly positive influence. Prosumers cited fanfiction as a source that broadened their



knowledge of the intricacies and variations of sex, as well as something that made them more understanding of their own desires and the desires of others. On the other hand, fanfiction prosumers did not necessarily cite fanfiction as being technically accurate. Instead, they valued fanfiction for the variety of viewpoints fanfiction brought them, and the chances it gave them to portray their own lives and issues through their favorite pieces of pop culture.

Because the information gathered through this project identifies fanfiction as a source of information about sex for prosumers, and the Archive of Our Own platform specifically, as a reasonable and useful place to embed health-based sex ed interventions. However, fanfiction prosumers mostly seem to know the limits of their creations already, and already have some types of intervention in place, such as the tradition of informational author notes. If future interventions were to be enacted, it would have to be carefully planned with the prosumers, and would likely be most efficacious if it were to utilize those existing prosumer interventions.

## CHAPTER 1:

### PROJECT OVERVIEW

#### Introduction

Simply put, “*Fan fiction* is fiction written by fans that uses established literary characters and settings. Many fan fiction writers are amateurs, and most fan fiction stories are published free online” (Zukauskas 2015, 1). Although the practice is much older, modern fanfiction is often dated back to the original Star Trek series in the 1960’s, when fans started writing and sharing their own missions for the crew of the Enterprise (Johnson 2016). With the advent of the internet, the accessibility of fanfiction exploded. Jenkins asserts that, “On a social level, fanfiction is attractive because it enables fans to engage in social networking and community building” (Jenkins 2015, 372), and that “On a more individualistic level, however, the impetus for writing fanfiction often stems from a more personalized identification with characters from a particular novel, film, cartoon, game, or comic — identification, which includes a strong emotional attachment and a desire for more of the character and the storyworld” (Jenkins 2015, 372). Fanfiction communities can sometimes be described as communities of practice, as Angela Thomas (2005) found when examining a *Lord of the Ring* roleplay and fanfiction forum. She describes a community where “they have joined together because of their love of the Tolkien mythology, and they have developed a community where they learn together and work together

for the common social goals valued by that community” (Thomas 2004, 27). Although not all fanfiction communities are as interactive as that one, this is broadly true of fanfiction as a whole.

However, an important characteristic of modern fanfiction is that it frequently involves explicit storylines. For example, the site Archive of Our Own (AO3) houses over four million works, over 600,000 of which are rated explicit on the author-ascribed rating system. On AO3, works are given a rating of General Audiences (G), Teen and Up Audiences (T), Mature (M), or Explicit (E) (Archive of Our Own n.d.). On this site, an explicit rating refers to something which is “only suitable for adults,” a deliberately nebulous rating which usually covers specific description of genitals and sexual activity. So, rather than a romantic encounter ending with waves crashing on a beach or a written fade to black, works rated as explicit detail sexual activity. Although the existence of explicit fanfiction is obvious, relatively little research has been done on explicit fanfiction, or on fanfiction in general (Thomas 2011). At this point in time, not even formal legislation has been able to address fanfiction with any breadth or depth, although major debates have attempted to declare whether fanfiction is an infringement on copyright laws and whether fanfiction should be utilized in educational settings (Berkowitz 2012; Black 2009; Lipton 2014).

Much of the research done on fanfiction in past years has focused on these debates while relatively little research has studied the link between fanfiction and sexual health and welfare. Commercialized pornography has been researched in some ways as a source of sexual knowledge and beliefs, such as a knowledge of what genitals look like or what specific activities like oral sex may entail, and the importance of condoms (Sevcikova and Daneback 2014; Tanton et al. 2015; Wright, Sun, and Steffen 2018), but fanfiction and other more informal works that have explicit elements are not frequently referenced. While commercial pornography may be a

more direct source of sexual information, fanfiction is important because of its strong appeal to teenagers and young adults. Moore says about fanfiction that “the genesis of the Internet diversified and shifted fanfiction’s demographics, particularly with the arrival of thousands of teenagers” (2005, 15). Because of that, fanfiction today may be a significant source of sexual knowledge and attitudes for adolescents and young adults in the United States.

The purpose of the research presented here is to study fanfiction as a potential source of sexual knowledge and attitudes, from the perspective of fanfiction readers. Specific research questions include,

- How does explicit fanfiction impact adolescents’ and young adults’ sexual health? Do prosumers believe that sexually explicit fanfiction has impacted their knowledge of and attitude towards basic sexual biology and safe sex?
- Is accurate sexual information a focus for fanfiction prosumers? Do they believe that fanfiction is generally accurate, and is accuracy something they seek from fanfiction?

In order to answer these research questions, this project consists of a review of the literature, as well as the collection of firsthand information from readers and writers of fanfiction through interviews and a survey. The main goal is to better understand how fanfiction can impact what adolescents and young adults know about sex and how that information shapes their sexual attitudes. A secondary goal is to question fanfiction authors and readers about whether they are interested in the presentation of accurate sexual information in fanfiction. It is important to emphasize that this research does not seek to demonize or belittle fanfiction. Different sources have characterized fanfiction as transcendently liberating, or mawkishly amateur (Berkowitz 2012; Flegel and Roth 2014; Tosenberger 2014; Tiven 2016). This research does not seek to

make judgments on the worthiness of fanfiction as literature, but only to explore the impact it may have on sex education among adolescents and young adults.

My interest on this topic stems from the fact that I come from south Florida an area of the United States where sex education is scattered at best, and nonexistent at worst. In order to understand themselves and others, people resort to collecting information from a wide variety of sources. Sources include parents and peers, certainly, but increasingly also the internet, whether through fact pages from the Centers for Disease Control or through online pornography. Personally, I came across fanfiction early in life through Harry Potter fan sites, although I sidelined this information until later in life. During my undergraduate studies, I was reintroduced to the idea of fandoms, a term defined by Fanlore, the wiki used to collect and disseminate information on fan culture, as “a community of fans, participating in fanac [fan activity] and interacting in some way, whether through discussions or creative works” (Fanlore n.d.). Fandom can be used as a collective terms for active fans, or as a term for groups that are active about a particular movie, book, series, etc. (e.g., the Supernatural fandom). At that time, I made the decision to explore fandom as a fascinating expression of internet-based social activity.

I have eight years of experience exploring the world of fanfiction on a variety of platforms, learning the terminology, the history, and the dynamics of fanfiction prosumers, a portmanteau used by Brett Jenkins to indicate both producers and consumers of fanfiction, which this thesis will continue to use to indicate people involved in writing and or reading fanfiction (Jenkins 2015). I have also conducted academic projects on related topics and platforms surrounding fandom, with a focus on the social aspects of the fan community. This prior experience gives me a foundation from which to work, an understanding of how to navigate online fan culture, and a greater ability to bridge the gap between prosumers and people who are

outside of fandom groups. While an unaffiliated researcher might bring different insights to this topic, I believe that a general background in fandom and fanfiction has proved useful in this project.

## **Literature Review**

In the study of fanfiction, there has been a focus on some subjects to the exclusion of others, with many researchers considering the effect of fanfiction on the writing abilities of children and young adults, the social groups that emerge from online fan activity, and the legal implications of millions of people borrowing pieces of established pieces of media and remixing them online. On the other hand, the existence and impact of sexually explicit material is less commonly discussed in detail. This literature review discusses the existence of explicit material in fanfiction and the academic writing that does cover the subject, contains a short section on the state of formal sex education in the United States, and covers to a small degree the study of pornographic materials in academia. Additionally, this review contains a section on some of the most common subjects that studies of fanfiction cover, and some of the considerations that online research requires. These topics provide foundational background on the nature of fanfiction, and give some context on how academic studies have traditionally handled fanfiction.

### ***Explicit material in fanfiction***

There is not much data regarding fanfiction as a source of health information. However, other forms of literature have been studied as pathways to health knowledge. Several studies have used written erotica to better understand the health priorities of the populations that create

them (Isola 2013; Niccolini 2013). In addition to identifying common health beliefs in a certain population, such studies can be used to change those beliefs. For example, Isola's 2013 study recorded the attempt to promote HIV/AIDS protection awareness through written erotica produced by and for the gay community. Isola studies the changes made to gay magazine-based erotica in the 80s, when the growing threat of HIV/AIDS prompted many erotica magazines to include condoms and other safe sex practices in their media, as well as the changes that time has wrought on erotic fiction involving MSM (men who have sex with men), including the rising amount of erotica about MSM created by and for women (2013). Niccolini, on the other hand, used popular written erotica to help teach sex education to students in high school (2013). Both of these studies utilize the public health principle of cultural synthesis, in which "the actors who come from "another world" do not come as invaders" (Green and Kreuter 2016, 39). This promotes an outsider's understanding of a cultural context, and helps to determine whether and how to approach creating an intervention. In both anthropology and public health, it is necessary to understand a phenomenon before recommendations for change can be made. Approaching fanfiction in an attempt to understand it from the perspective of an insider demonstrates respect and provides different information than if the researcher approached as an outsider. This is particularly important for a project like this one, which seeks to understand how fanfiction is perceived by insiders.

In the study of fanfiction itself, some authors do discuss the sexual nature of many pieces of fanfiction, with authors like Moore commenting that "overt sexuality pervades a huge portion of the genre, particularly slash (homosexual pairings of canonically straight characters)" (Moore 2005, 17). The reactions to this overt sexuality are often mixed. Some writers, like Moore, note that some people are likely to demonize this rampant sexuality, saying that "discovering how

young adults slake their voracious hungers might equally shock and disturb adults” (2005, 17). However, other researchers consider this open discussion of sexuality beneficial, having the possibility to encourage women to explore sexuality outside of male-dominated pornography (Gunderson 2017; Kukka 2018; Tiven 2016). In the bounds of fanfiction, sites and authors frequently include warnings or even password or age restriction, decreasing the odds of unwilling teenagers being exposed to sexuality, and preventing the indignation of some parents. Within fanfiction, sexual content is a variable quantity. In general, a work is considered explicit, and is rated as such, if it includes details about sexual activities or genitals, and these are the works that are restricted. However, because ratings are ascribed by the authors or individual works of fanfiction, the amount and intensity of sexually explicit material varies wildly within this rating, a phenomenon which will be described later in the review of fanfiction.

Despite this recognition of the sexuality of fanfiction, little information exists on the crux of fanfiction’s sexual content and the health of its prosumers. Tiven (2016) hints at the possibility that fanfiction is an empowering force for its prosumers. Following this, fanfiction represents an arena where teenagers and other prosumers are given the ability to explore sexuality in a myriad of forms without supervision. This is often particularly true in the way that fanfiction often highlights marginalized communities, using stories about homosexuality or the various practices of BDSM (bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and/or sadism and masochism) among many others (Moore 2005). On the other hand, explicit fanfiction may be seen as simply an extension of mainstream pornography, where reality is often skewed and stereotypes abound. The answer as to whether fanfiction is damaging or beneficial to teenagers may not be a simple one; this research aims to explore this through a public health lens.



### *Pornography and academic writing*

In academia, pornography is a delicate subject. Although a legitimate concern for public health and medical studies, it remains true that pornographic images and writing are not the first choice of most academic publishers. Katrien Jacobs, as a researcher of netporn, asks the question “Are academic publishers more or less uptight than the mainstream ones?” (2007, 126), finding that while academic publishers might be more open to the possibility of pornography as a legitimate research topic, they remain somewhat uncomfortable in covering the subject.

However, there are studies on how pornography has affected the sexual knowledge and attitudes of various populations. In the 1980’s, Tjaden found that over half of surveyed Americans viewed explicit materials, like movies, as sources of information on sex (1988). More recently, a study in Chile done by Macintyre, Montero Vega, and Sagbakken found that pornography could be a relevant source of information on sex and relationships, particularly for male adolescents (2015). The study also noted gaps in other sources of information, leading to limited information about relationships, boundaries, and other important topics. Additionally, Sevcikova and Daneback found that among Czech adolescents, “One-third of the respondents accessed online pornography in order to learn something about sex” (2014, 674). Considering this information, any source of explicit material should be considered a potential source of sexual information for teenagers, and should be studied to determine whether and if it impacts the knowledge and attitudes its users have about sex. This is especially true when dealing with media which is both heavily trafficked by adolescents, and has relatively little oversight. As fanfiction falls into both of these categories, it may be an important source of sex-related information for its users. This has certainly been the belief of various public health and legal organizations in the United States with regards to adult consumers of pornography (Birkhold 2012; Harkness et al. 2015; Langner 2014). For example,

in 2012 Los Angeles voted that actors in pornography must be required to use condoms. Though it has been debated as a violation of the first amendment, the law was designed to reduce the local rates of sexually transmitted diseases (Birkhold 2012). In their review of the literature, Harkness, Mullan, and Blaszczyński (2015) found associations between pornography and risky sexual practices. While fanfiction may not continue this trend, the possibility does warrant more attention from researchers. Harkness et al. made this finding by comparing seventeen recent studies that all “assessed the association between pornography use and indicators of sexual risk in an adult population” (2015, 59). Studies included in the review researched a variety of populations, such as MSM populations, college students, and local community samples, with all studies assessing either a mixed male/female population, or an exclusively male population. Most studies measured how often the study population viewed pornography, and related it to variables such as how many sexual partners individuals had and the frequency of unprotected sex within the population. One example of these studies is Nelson et al.’s 2014 study of MSM, which compared the amount of pornography the men viewed, focusing on pornography that depicted unprotected anal intercourse, with their participation in unprotected anal intercourse. Another example of the included studies is Peter and Valkenburg’s 2011 study comparing the frequency of internet porn use to the frequency of casual, unprotected sex within the last six months within a random sample of mostly heterosexual males and females. Both studies found that a higher frequency of pornography viewing, particularly pornography depicting risky sexual behaviors, was related to a higher frequency of risky sexual behaviors.

## *Sex education in the United States*

In the United States, there are several major sources of sex education for adolescents and young adults, including school, family, peers, and church- or community-based programs (Guttmacher Institute 2017). Research shows that formal sex education, whether through schools or community programs, is the primary source of information, with more than 80% of adolescents having received at least some information about STDs in formal situations (Guttmacher Institute 2017). In relation to formal sex education in school or community programs in the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published a list of nineteen sex education topics considered critical, a number which has increased over time (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2016). These topics include information about how to get and how to use condoms and other types of contraception, negotiation and decision-making skills, information about STDs, and information about sexual orientation and gender roles and expressions, among others (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2016). However, “fewer than half of high schools and only a fifth of middle schools” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2016) have been found to implement education that covers all these topics. In fact, only 24 states require schools to implement sex education, and only 18 states mandate information on contraception being included, although 34 states currently require education on HIV (Guttmacher Institute 2018). A common problem for school-based sex education in the United States, when it is implemented, is a tendency to use a heteronormative approach (McCarty-Caplan 2013; Pingel et al. 2013). Students who identify as non-heterosexual, and those who identify outside of the traditional gender binary are often ignored, or even actively marginalized by programs, with the Guttmacher Institute reporting that “as of 2015, fewer than six percent of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students aged 13-

21 reported that their health classes had included positive representation of LGBT-related topics” (2017).

Researchers have identified a number of factors that may impact the level of sex education offered by schools, including religion and politics. Although other factors, including geography and socioeconomic status also play a role, these two have been found to consistently impact sex education programs in the country (Bleakley et al. 2010; Charmaraman et al. 2012; Farkas et al. 2015). However, although religion is frequently cited as a factor that could or does impact sex education, how researchers define religion as a factor varies (Bleakley et al. 2010; Chappell et al. 2010). Rather than breaking down this variable by comparing different religions, several authors define religiosity by the frequency of religious attendance (Bleakley et al. 2010; Chappell et al. 2010; Heller and Johnson 2013). Using this definition, these authors found that more religious participants were likely to have more negative opinions of sex education, and therefore were more likely to advocate for more limited sex education in schools (Bleakley et al. 2010; Chappell et al. 2010; Heller and Johnson 2013). Although comparing religions was not the primary goal of these authors, Heller and Johnson (2013) also found similar opinions among other religious groups in the United States. Politics, as a variable, is also difficult to define. However, the United States is often divided into liberal and conservative ideologies. When this breakdown is used, some researchers have found that liberal participants are more likely than conservative participants to support more comprehensive sex education in schools (Bleakley et al. 2010; Millner, Mulekar, and Turrens 2015). In addition to politics and religion, both geography and socioeconomic status have been found to coincide with the level of sex education provided (Kohler et al. 2008; Walker 2001). Specifically, Kohler et al. (2008) found that children of lower-income families and rural homes were more likely to receive no sex education or

abstinence-based education, while children of higher-income, urban families were more likely to receive comprehensive sex education.

The factors described above are important because they can impact what type of sex education is implemented in schools. In the United States, the two main types of sex education are comprehensive programs as opposed to abstinence-based programs. Comprehensive programs advocate education on “not only about abstinence, but also contraception, including emergency contraception; reproductive choice; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT), and questioning issues; as well as, of course, anatomy; development; puberty; [and] relationships” (Malone and Rodriguez 2011, 6), all of which should be science-based. On the other hand, abstinence programs generally “strive to create an environment in which young people are prepared and able to remain abstinent because they believe that abstinence is the only completely effective form of birth control and the only way to completely avoid the risk of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)” (Malone and Rodriguez 2011, 6). Many studies have been published on the efficacy of abstinence programs, including a 2007 study conducted for the Department of Health and Human Services which found no evidence that the abstinence programs surveyed increased the rates of abstinence among students (Trenholm et al. 2007). Similar findings have been published by other researchers, with few health benefits, such as lowered teen birth rates or STD rates, being recorded (Carr and Packham 2017; Kirby 2007). Despite this, abstinence programs continue to be a primary type of sex education program in the United States (Clark and Stitzlein 2018).

Beyond the existence and type of sex education in the United States, schools also have to make a decision about how to implement the sex education they approve. Some programs have turned towards peer-led sex education as a means to bring sex education closer to its target

audience. This can be implemented several ways, but the central tenet is that some of the target population are trained, and then are turned out to teach their peers the information and skills that they have learned (Jennings et al. 2014). This type of sex education has produced varied results, although some researchers have found that at least the peer educators leave the programs better educated (Jennings et al. 2014). These programs have been marketed as accessible and reasonably efficient methods of sex education dissemination, in contrast to programs where a single counselor or teacher delivers the necessary information (Jennings et al. 2014; Paul et al. 2010).

### *Common fanfiction studies*

While the effect of fanfiction on sexual education and attitudes is not extensively researched, fanfiction has become an increasingly common topic in academic literature (Berkowitz 2012; Black 2009; Tiven 2016). The use of fanfiction in education, generally in writing, has been hotly debated (Berkowitz 2012; Chandler-Olcott and Mahar 2003; Magnifico et al. 2015). Fanfiction presents a peculiar problem for teachers, since it exists in a space between formal and informal writing. It has little to no oversight but it gives students easy access to feedback and criticism from peers (Berkowitz 2012; Tosenburger 2014). It uses established characters and events, but encourages personal viewpoints and imagination (Black 2009).

Particularly troubling for some educators is the fact that even though fanfiction often involves peer feedback through the social platforms of the internet, there is no way to control the quality of the feedback, and Magnifico, Curwood, and Lammers (2015) found that “the review comments that they leave generally do not offer specific feedback regarding the craft of writing.

For this reason, we argue that teachers' expertise is still needed in the difficult task of developing young adults' composition, peer review and critique skills" (Magnifico et al. 2015, 158). The other stumbling block for some educators is the idea that using established characters and plots constitutes a lack of creativity and vision on the part of prosumers, as well as "the fact that fanfiction is often so deeply embedded within a specific community that it is practically incomprehensible to those who don't share exactly the same set of references" (Tosenburger 2014, 5). However, some educators and researchers have refuted these claims. Although feedback and criticism for a work of fanfiction may not include a professional's eye towards fostering a better understanding of grammar and spelling, it may serve to encourage prosumers to keep writing, providing "the potential for a wider audience than intimate friends and family" (Chandler-Olcott and Mahar 2003, 560). Not to mention, within fanfiction prosumers, there is an entire industry of beta readers, fans who help authors write and edit their work, designed to provide peer review for writers (Magnifico et al. 2015). Additionally, while fanfiction focuses on using established characters and plots, the medium also encourages prosumers to think critically about established canon and explore alternative themes, and is "a powerful tool for media literacy" (Berkowitz 2012, 2016). For these reasons, fanfiction is a phenomenon that teachers have reached no consensus on whether or not to encourage or prune.

Perhaps most problematic in this grey area is whether or not fanfiction is considered an infringement of copyright. Among writers, it seems that professional and amateur writing should be easily distinguished (Jenkins 2015; Lipton 2014). However, the line is generally much less defined. Some professional authors publish fiction based on established characters and events, such as *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a prequel to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, and fanfiction writers are becoming famous for translating their works to professional publishing, like E. L. James' *50*

*Shades of Grey*, which was originally based on the previously published *Twilight* (Thomas 2011; Johnson 2016). Among professional writers, there is also no conclusive position. For example, among professional authors of fiction, George R. R. Martin dislikes the practice of fanfiction and bids his readers not to write it, while John Scalzi has stated no preference in either direction (Martin n.d.; Scalzi 2007). In terms of legality, “the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) gives websites incentives to remove work that someone has flagged as infringing by offering them a shield from liability” (Johnson 2016, 1646). On the other hand, groups like the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW), argues that fanfiction which is transformative, bringing new meaning to the original work, should be considered fair use and exempt from copyright infringement (Johnson 2016). In either case, the legal system is still catching up to the intricacies of fanfiction, which provides a fertile ground for academic research.

In simple terms, fanfiction is often seen as a breach of copyright because it takes the intellectual property of authors and other content creators, their characters and plots, and creates new, unsanctioned content with this property. Content owners, the authors and entities that own the rights to published materials, can and have chosen to direct their attention to fanfiction in the past, as in the case of Sherlock Holmes fans and the Conan Doyle Estate, Ltd (CDE). As recounted by Betsy Rosenblatt (2017), the CDE owned the rights to several Sherlock Holmes stories still under copyright, and targeted several fan organizations that produced fiction about the character. The fans responded by asking that all Sherlock Holmes stories from before 1923 be declared part of the public domain during a lawsuit (*Linger v. CDE*) that was eventually settled in their favor (Rosenblatt 2017). This is an unusual case, in that much of the Sherlock Holmes body of work is already considered part of the public domain. Often the only response is to pull work when a content owner asks, as seen with Fanfiction.net’s decision not to support



works based on content owned by those who have requested a ban, including Archie Comics and Robin Hobb (Fanfiction.net n.d.). Additionally, a common complaint of copyright infringement is that it entails a loss of money for the content owner (Cupitt 2008; Johnson 2016; Scalzi 2007). However, fanfiction creators are known for their self-policing on this front, with Cupitt describing them by saying that “fanfic culture has traditionally tried to fly under corporate radar and is resistant to being controlled; for these reasons, it is also strongly anticapitalist about making money from fan works” (Cupitt 2008, 1). By refusing to make money from their work and classifying the work as transformative, fan authors strive to remain neutral, but also refuse to abandon their hobby.

Besides consideration of the legality of fanfiction, researchers have mostly focused on the interaction of fanfiction and education. Drew Emanuel Berkowitz draws the conclusion with other authors that researchers often view fan communities as places for children and young adults to explore themselves and their media (2012, 198), but that such researchers often also degrade the quality and formality of the fiction, and dismiss it as a form of literature. Many educators treat fanfiction similarly, although there is a growing segment for whom fanfiction is a useful learning tool (Berkowitz 2012; Magnifico et al. 2015; Niccolini 2013). In the same way that Niccolini (2013) used professionally published erotica to help teach sex education in school, some teachers have begun to consider the possibilities of using fanfiction, a media that teenagers voluntarily use, in teaching how to write (Magnifico et al. 2015).

### *Online research*

Research conducted on online communities is still a relatively new, but booming, practice. Many authors have already begun exploring how to translate traditional face-to-face skills and theories to new platforms (Bengtsson 2014; Bouchard 2016; Mahon 2014; Shoveller et al. 2012). This has resulted in numerous articles on how anthropologists can work through the internet, and some of the new pitfalls the internet presents, mostly dealing with the anonymity the internet revolves around (Bengtsson 2014; Bouchard 2016). Public health has also made great strides in using the internet to conduct research on a variety of topics, including sexual health. These include researching internet-specific phenomena, and using internet-specific methods to conduct research. The former includes topics such as how adults and teens use the internet to meet sexual partners, which can be associated with increased sexual risks and the fluidity of gender and sexuality (Kubicek et al. 2010, Lewnard and Berrang-Ford 2014; Ogilvie et al. 2008). Additionally, some research has been conducted on how online health services and diagnostic websites contribute to sexual knowledge and provide new platforms for disseminating sexual information (Shoveller et al. 2012). As mentioned above, some studies have also looked at how online research methods, such as surveys, allow researchers to take advantage of the internet to reach a greater breadth of participants (Berg 2013, Doerfling et al. 2017).

As previously mentioned, online research also presents many new challenges. On the internet, ascertaining the truth about statements people make, or even their age and gender, can be nearly impossible (Bengtsson 2014; Mahon 2014). This muddies what information is learned through interviews, and also raises ethical questions about informed consent. Some researchers have rationalized the risk of participant falsehoods by bringing up the fact that people can and do provide incorrect information whether online or in person (Bouchard 2016; O'Connor et al.

2014). However, this does not mitigate the risk of involving underage participants, which is something that many researchers decide to risk after posting a waiver asking only participants of a certain age to continue (Bouchard 2016). While there are no easy answers here, risks can be lessened by collecting few or no personal identifiers, storing data safely, and using digital consent forms that explicitly ask for participants to be a certain age.

Additionally, the anonymity of the internet makes defining the demographics of fanfiction prosumers difficult. Several studies and surveys have been conducted by interested fans and specific sites (centrumlumina 2013, FFN Research 2010), but no information is available on prosumers in their entirety. A survey reaching over 10,000 Archive of our Own (AO3) users conducted by centrumlumina in 2013 found that about 90% of respondents identified as female and 4% as male, with a mean age of 25.1, although the mode age was 20 (centrumlumina 2013). Fanfiction.net, another popular fanfiction archive and community, conducted its own research of its members through their profile information. Although many members did not have their demographics listed, 78% of their sample reported being female and 22% identified as male, while the mean age was reported as 15.8, with a mode of 14 (FFN Research 2010).

Researchers must also deal with other problems surrounding anonymity. Researchers generally seek to provide anonymity for the people and places they discuss in the course of their research. However, researchers online also feel the need to give credit to people whom they may quote from online discussion boards, which creates friction between the need to protect participant identities and the need to credit their work (Kantanen and Manninen, 2016). This also brings up the question of how much control online writers have over their content, which exists in a community atmosphere on the internet (Bird 2011). In this case, the question becomes

whether to name fanfiction writers outright when discussing their works, or preserve their anonymity. Bruckman (2002) asserts that credit should always be given to online creators. An alternative, which will be used in this research project, is to ask each individual author whether they would prefer to have their name disclosed, or remain anonymous. Without direct confirmation, the default will be to anonymize these sources.

### ***Conclusion***

This literature review has covered a number of important and prominent discussions in the academic study of fanfiction. This includes the existence, treatment, and impact of explicit material in fanfiction and other materials, some of the common themes that arise in the study of fanfiction's legality and applicability in the outside world, and some of the pros and cons of online research. From this brief literature review, it appears that although some researchers have considered how explicit materials like pornography affect the sexual knowledge and behavior of adolescents and young adults, fanfiction has not been widely studied as a source of explicit material.

### **Research Purpose**

As previously mentioned, the purpose of this research is to explore whether and how sexually explicit material in fanfiction influences the knowledge and attitudes of young adults in regards to their sexual health. This research is primarily interested in the knowledge and attitude prosumers have about topics like basic biology (how bodies work, with an emphasis on how genitalia appears and functions) and safe sex (the use and limits of protection, and the emotional

aspects of healthy relationships and consent). As discussed above, fanfiction offers space for a variety of people, including adolescents, to explore sexual topics with little to no restriction. The impact of this space has not been fully explored, and this project seeks to do so using an increasingly incisive design, with each stage of the project building on the information uncovered by the previous stage. The project began with a review of fanfiction stories, before moving to survey fanfiction prosumers and eventually interviewing them as well. Above all, this project is designed to collect subjective information from prosumers about whether their beliefs and interests.

Specific research questions include the following:

- How does explicit fanfiction impact adolescents' and young adults' sexual health? Do prosumers believe that sexually explicit fanfiction has impacted their knowledge of and attitude towards basic sexual biology and safe sex?
- Is accurate sexual information a focus for fanfiction prosumers? Do they believe that fanfiction is generally accurate, and is accuracy something they seek from fanfiction?

## **Study Design**

### *Overview*

The first part of this project involves a literary analysis overview of explicit fanfiction on the Archive of Our Own (AO3), a popular online archive of fanfiction where new stories are posted and old ones are imported. This is heavily dependent on the structure of AO3, because of

its considerable tagging system. This system includes standardized tags that are meant to index works by their maturity level, basic warnings (such as whether the work includes a major character death or non-consensual sex), and what fandoms (source material) the work is based around. There are also free-form tags, which serve to allow the author latitude in further defining their work. This means that a researcher is able to determine how many works reflect a certain tag, such as the number and proportion of explicitly rated works in this particular archive. However, there are drawbacks to relying on the AO3 tagging system. Although the volunteers at the organization work to link tags within fandoms and other such work, the original tagging process is carried out by the authors, meaning that individual goals and interpretations orient the tags that are used (Archive of Our Own n.d.).

In addition, during this process I analyzed some of the works found in an overview of the tags to provide a demonstration of how tags indicate material within a work, and provide context for how explicit material is presented within a work of fanfiction. During this part of the project, I identified the top ten most popular work rated E for containing sexually explicit material. Popularity was determined by the number of kudos left on a work, a mark which can only be left once by a reader and indicates their approval of the work. In addition, I read twenty samples of new works rated E. This consisted of assessing the ten most recently posted works, rated E, twice over the data-gathering period. Lastly, I also read the top five most popular works rated E that were categorized with the tag *Safer Sex*, and the top five with the tag *Unsafe Sex*. Except for the random sample of new works, I used AO3's advanced search to find the works under a given tag with the highest number of kudos, as kudos are marks left by readers to express appreciation for a work. Permission was asked of authors of any quotes from these works for use in the final manuscript, as well as whether these authors preferred to have their online user names disclosed

with these quotes, or whether they would prefer to remain anonymous. If the authors do not respond the quotes were automatically anonymized.

### *Survey*

After examining the site and its works, a survey of fanfiction prosumers was conducted. The link and description of the survey were distributed through the weekly Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) newsletter. The survey was linked in two editions of the newsletter, about a month apart, and the survey was open for two weeks after each posting. Although I was unable to distribute the survey directly to AO3 prosumers, the OTW is the parent organization of AO3, and all of the respondents knew and used AO3 at least occasionally, with most using it for a majority of the fanfiction they consumed.

The survey targeted fanfiction prosumers ages 18 to 25. By targeting this demographic, the project hoped to survey prosumers that were young enough to remember their personal experience with sex education in school or at home, as well as old enough to have either started or considered being sexually active. Aside from the age limit, the only restriction placed on participants was that they must be familiar with fanfiction. Considering the small age range, it seemed best to focus on obtaining a relatively wide range of prosumers within that range, rather than restricting the participant pool any further. The survey contained 11 questions designed to collect basic information about gender, age, perception of how fanfiction has influenced survey takers, the depiction of safe sex in fanfiction, and the importance of depicting safe and empowering sex. The survey included multiple choice and free response answer sections and collected 25 responses. The goal of this portion of the study was to collect information on the age

and gender of fanfiction prosumers, and their perceptions of how fanfiction has changed their knowledge and attitudes about sexual matters.

### *Individual interviews*

The third phase of the study involved conducting individual semi-structured interviews with fanfiction prosumers. At the end of the survey, respondents were invited to contact me if they were interested in discussing these subjects further through an individual interview. Seven people responded to this invitation, and all were interviewed. Because the OTW is an internet-based international platform, interviews were conducted using Skype, and were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviews averaged about 40 minutes of recorded time and another 5 to 10 minutes of introductions and pleasantries. Questions asked during interviews mirrored many of those on the survey, in the hope of contextualizing those answers. Specifically, questions asked in the interviews focused on participants' introduction to and experiences with sexually explicit fanfiction, and whether they believe those experiences have impacted their knowledge of and attitude toward sex. The interviews also questioned participants about their opinions on the accuracy of sexually explicit material in fanfiction, and their opinions on whether accuracy is important. Using a semi-structured interview plan allowed me to ask certain questions of all individuals, but also preserved a flexible interview environment. While the survey gathered concise information on the views and lives of fanfiction prosumers, the interviews attempted to support this data with real-world experiences and understanding.



## *Analysis*

I used content analysis to personally code the data from the interviews and from the open-ended questions in the survey. Themes I focused on included references to safe sex practices, including consent and the use of condoms and also for references to the history respondents have with fanfiction and their opinions of it. During the literary analysis, focus was also placed on mentions of safe or unsafe sexual practices, like the use or non-use of condoms. In general, the project made use of the interpretive paradigm to present an emic perspective of fanfiction from the point of view of its prosumers, and also the critical paradigm to keep the research focused on how the use and production of fanfiction contributes to the larger structures of sex education and the political construction of sex (Čeplak 2013; LeCompte & Schensul 2010; Pingel et al. 2013). Descriptive statistics were used to tabulate and assess quantitative data, such as the age and gender information from the survey and the numbers and proportions of fanworks within various tags.

## **IRB Compliance**

This study was determined to be of minimal risk by the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board. This project asked about some sensitive topics, such as sexual history. However, participation was voluntary and participants were provided with an informed consent document before the survey and the interview, and were able to stop participating in the study at any time. In order to protect the anonymity of research participants, the review of literature and the survey collected only age and gender as personal information. The completed surveys and interview transcripts were stored on an external hard drive and analyzed on a

password-protected laptop not connected to the internet. No monetary compensation was offered to participants, and no other direct benefit was offered.

In order to protect study participants, informed consent forms were presented to participants. In the case of the survey, the informed consent form agreed upon by the IRB was posted before the questions. This allowed online participants time to read through the consent form at their leisure and email me with any questions they might have. In order to get to the questions themselves, participants were asked to confirm that they were between 18 and 25 and they still wished to continue with the survey. Interview participants were emailed the informed consent form when they first contacted me about being interviewed. They were all given a minimum of 5 days before an interview was conducted to consider the form, and the first 5-10 minutes of each interview was spent answering any questions about the informed consent, and discussing how I would protect participants' identities. Because this study was conducted via the internet and Skype, the IRB permitted an absence of signed consent, provided these other measures were taken. All interviewees were English speakers, and confirmed their understanding of the terms of this study. Each was asked for explicit verbal consent to turn on audio-recording during the interview. All names and specific personal information were removed from the transcripts made of the recordings, and from the survey responses.

## CHAPTER 2:

### ARCHIVE OF OUR OWN STRUCTURE AND TAG FINDINGS

#### Term Introduction

Some of the more important terms for this project, such as prosumer, have already been defined, and although some terms will need to be explained in context in the future, it is important to define a few terms commonly used for describing and categorizing fanfiction. These fall into two basic categories, those terms used to describe genres among fanfiction, and those used to describe and categorize relationships in fanfiction. As previously mentioned, fandom is defined as “a community of fans, participating in fanac [fan activity] and interacting in some way, whether through discussions or creative works” (Fanlore n.d.). Fandom can be used as a collective terms for active fans, or as a term for groups that are active about a particular movie, book, series, etc. (e.g., the *Supernatural* fandom).

#### *Genre*

First in this group is the term trope. Existing outside of fanfiction, the traditional definition of a trope that applies here is “a common or overused theme or device” (Merriam-Webster n.d.). In fan culture, the meaning stays relatively the same, but the nuances change. TV Tropes, an open source collection and discussion of tropes in media, says that “Above all, a trope

is a convention. It can be a plot trick, a setup, a narrative structure, a character type, a linguistic idiom... you know it when you see it. Tropes are not inherently disruptive to a story; however, when the trope itself becomes intrusive, distracting the viewer rather than serving as shorthand, it has become a cliché” (TV Tropes n.d.). This highlights the idea in fan culture that tropes are not necessarily considered a sign of bad writing. Zeroing in even further, the Fanlore site says that “In fandom, the word trope is often used to describe common plot devices, such as Aliens Made Them Do It, Fuck or Die, sex pollen, etc. After the first fanwork is created in any fandom, traditional themes quickly follow. It takes no time at all for any fandom to develop its favorite tropes (often the same tropes, no matter what the fandom)” (Fanlore n.d.). In this project, the word trope is used to describe commonly occurring and well-known themes, plot devices, and other conventions seen in fanfiction.

AU is a fairly straightforward term which stands for Alternate Universe. It often acts as an umbrella term for any work where a change has been made to the canon, generally to the world of the canon (Fanlore n.d.). Popular AUs are high school AUs (where established characters are put into a high school setting), soul mate AUs (where every person in the world has a single specific soul mate recognized in a variety of ways), time change AUs (where canon characters and plots are moved out of their canon time period), AUs where one or more characters make a living as sex workers, and many others. Many AUs, particularly popular and recurring ones like those mentioned above, are considered tropes in their own right.

## *Relationships*

The most common and pervasive term in fan culture used to describe a relationship is ship, which is purely a shortening of the word relationship. However, fan culture is also known for using the word as a verb, shipping, which describes “the act of supporting or wishing for a particular romantic relationship” (Fanlore n.d.). This includes support for existing relationships in a particular show or book, or support for subtextual or possible relationships between various characters within a particular piece of media or even between multiple pieces of media.

Ships are most often characterized by the gender orientation of the participants, with three major categories. These categories are known as “het (different-sex), slash (male/male), [and] femslash (female/female)” (Fanlore n.d.), with ships that contain more than two partners generally referred to as poly, or as multi on Archive of Our Own. Different groups of fans may have different ideas of what types of ships are acceptable, although by and large all types are encouraged.

Somewhat less common is the term OTP, which is an acronym for One True Pairing, used to describe a particular fan’s favorite ship (Fanlore n.d.). The acronym has been expanded in a variety of directions in order to encompass the great variety of fanfiction. Common derivations include NOTP (a pairing one does not like), BrOTP (a favored non-romantic pairing), and OT3, OT4, etc. (terms for polyamorous pairings with more than two partners) (Fanlore n.d.).

## **Archive of Our Own and the Organization for Transformative Works**

Aside from basic terms, a basic understanding of the platform used in this research is important. In general terms, Archive of Our Own (AO3) is an online platform where users can store and read fanfiction. It is not the only platform, but it is a widely used one, as evidenced by the over one million users and four million works the site hosts (Archive of Our Own n.d.). On the archive, users can post their work for others to read and comment on. Although AO3 has some guidelines, much of the control is left in the hands of the fan authors who post the work. Most of the existing guidelines are designed to help prosumers categorize and search for works on AO3 through tags. When a prosumer posts a work on AO3, they are asked to tag the work with basic information like what material it is based on (the fandom), what relationships, if any, are depicted in the work, and what rating level the work deserves. As previously mentioned, works on AO3 are given a rating of General Audiences (G), Teen and Up Audiences (T), Mature (M), or Explicit (E) (Archive of Our Own n.d.), a system roughly analogous to American movie ratings G, PG-13, R, and NC-17. On this site, an explicit rating refers to something which is “only suitable for adults,” a deliberately nebulous rating which usually covers specific description of genitals and sexual activity.

Although many professional writers, actors, and celebrities are aware that fanfiction exists and may be based on them and their copyrighted work, they have no control over the fanfiction that is written or posted on AO3. Staff on AO3 have the ability to take down works that violate their rules, but otherwise all changes to works are the sole province of the user who posts the work, usually the author.

Additionally, AO3 is a subsidiary of the Organization for Transformative Works, or OTW, a nonprofit organization created in 2007 to protect the rights of fans and fanworks. In

addition to the AO3 fanfiction archive, the OTW has branches that include the Transformative Works and Cultures journal, a legal advocacy group, and the Fanlore wiki that specializes in collecting and preserving the history and culture of fans (Organization for Transformative Works n.d.).

## **Tag System**

In and of itself, the tagging system of the Archive of Our Own is fascinating. When works are published on AO3, they are given a set of markers by the author, which may be augmented by the tag wranglers and other AO3 support staff. Some of these tags are freeform, which may be tags used by multiple prosumers or may be specific to an author or a work. Other markers make up the searchable parameters that define the Archive, including a list of what, if any, romantic pairings are included, the pairing type, the rating of the work, and the warnings that the author chooses to list about the content of the work. Some of these parameters are relatively self-descriptive, but a few will be described further in the following text to enable a better understanding of this project.

As previously mentioned, pairing type is generally broken into various categories depending on the gender identity and number of participants in a relationship or sexual encounter. Because of the way the pairing tag system works on AO3, statistics based on pairing can be a little vague, particularly regarding the multi tag. I chose not to include the multi tag in the statistics that follow, because the multi tag is an inclusive one. For example, if a work includes an M/M relationship and an F/M relationship, it is listed as multi. However, it still is

ingrained with that specific information. While that work will show up in a search for M/M works and F/M works, it will not show up on a search for F/F works.

AO3 has a short list of major warnings that authors can use to describe their work, although this is not required. If authors choose to list one or more of these warnings they are included in bold at the beginning of the work description. The short list includes warnings for Graphic Descriptions of Violence, Major Character Death, Rape/Non-Con (short for non-consensual), and Underage (which warns for sex scenes that include one or more underage characters). Interestingly, in an advanced search of works on AO3, a user can choose to search for works with one or more of these major warnings, but I have not been able to intuit an easy way for a user to exclude works with a particular warning.

In addition, it should be remembered that all tags are assigned by the person who posts the work on AO3. This is part of AO3's more hands-off approach to management, which encourages author and user definition more than institutionalizing Archive-wide rules. Therefore, different authors may treat tags differently. Where one might only include the central pairing of a work, another might include all side relationships as well. Some authors also choose not to list anything for pairing type, just as some choose not to list an overall rating (like E or M). The influence of author control can be seen clearly in the fact that the work with the absolute highest number of kudos among works rated E is itself a joke. Titled "I Am Groot" and rated E, the work contains 1308 words, all of which are "I am Groot" (a play on the fact that the character Groot from the Marvel universe never says anything but "I am Groot" with a variety of inflections that the other characters treat as understandable comments) (sherlocksmyth 2014). Therefore, while this is a relatively elegant and useful system for the search engine of a user-defined archive, it does make statistics less straightforward.



## **M/M Preponderance**

An interesting thing happens when one looks at the proportions of pairing types on AO3. Taking into account all current works on the Archive of Our Own (AO3), about 50% are listed as M/M, 25% have an F/M listing, and about 8% have an F/F listing, with not quite 20% being tagged as Gen for having no romantic pairings. When narrowing a search to works rated E, it seems logical for M/M, F/M, and F/F works to rise as Gen works plummet (which they do, falling to 0.2%). However, in works rated E, it is instead found that 70% of works contain an M/M pairing, with about 25% have an F/M pairing, and only about 7% with F/F. Taking into account that 90% of the ten with the highest number of kudos revolve around an M/M pairing, with 20% also having a F/M pairing listed, it seems that authors, and particularly the readers who choose to leave kudos, have a focus on M/M relationships (Archive of Our Own n.d.).

## **Tag Cloud**

Freeform tags (i.e., those tags that are added to a work by the author at their discretion to convey information in addition to the major categories AO3 provides) can also tell an interesting story. While much more user-defined and infrequently used than the major AO3-defined work parameters, the freeform tags provide a window into the popular themes and tropes in the archive. The most useful tool in this type of analysis is the AO3 tag cloud. The AO3 tag cloud is a visual representation of the most popular freeform tags in use on the archive, with the more popular tags being larger, and the less common ones being smaller. The cloud does not track all of the seemingly innumerable freeform tags currently in use, but it does show almost 200 of the most popular ones (see Figure 1 for a picture of the cloud taken in July of 2018).

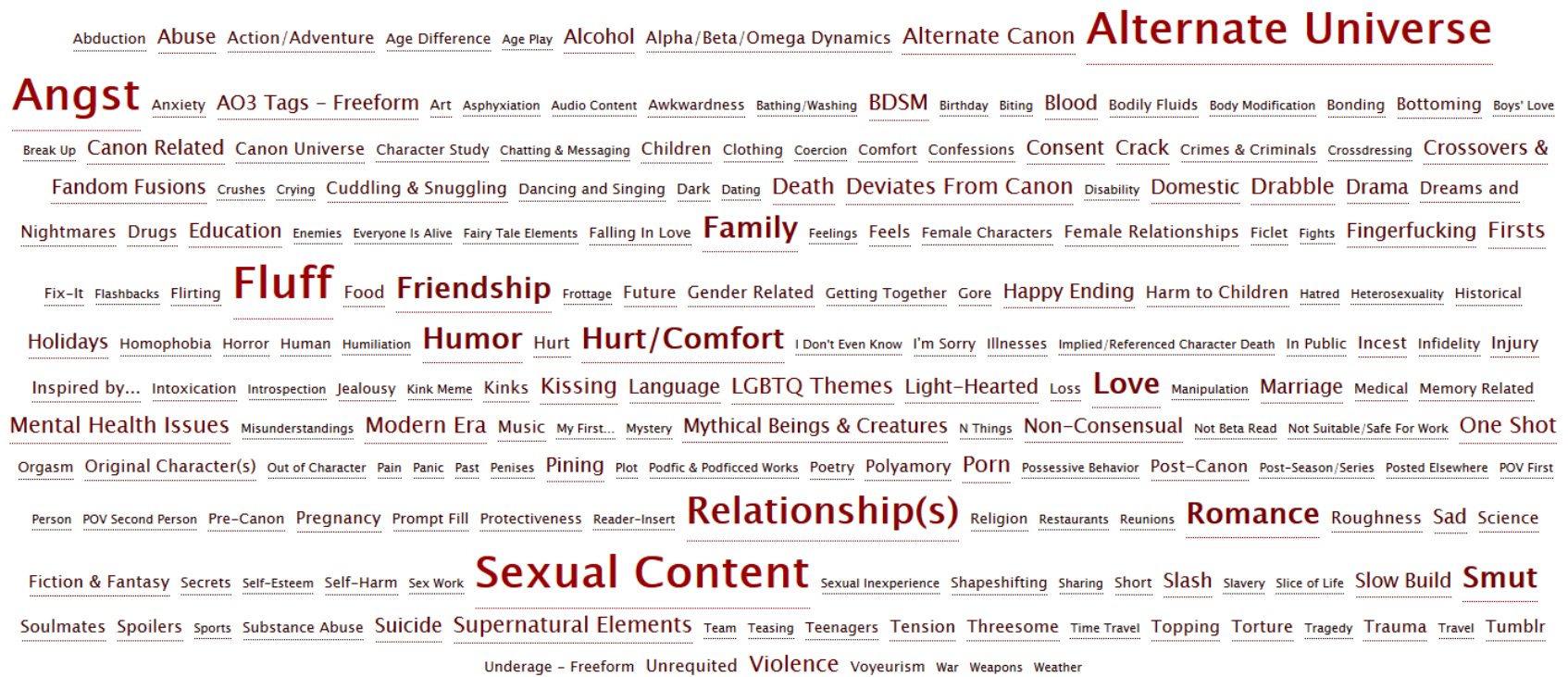


Figure 1: Archive of Our Own tag cloud circa July 2018

As a visual, the tag cloud demonstrates the vastness of fanfiction themes, with tags for *Alternate Universe*, *Angst*, *Mythical Beings & Creatures*, *Female Characters*, and *Torture*. In addition to those tags used to describe genres and plot devices (like *Angst* and *Alternate Universe*), many of the tags seem to focus on the relationships within a work, with tags like *Family*, *Friendship*, and *Relationship(s)* featuring prominently in the cloud. Most importantly for this project, however, are the wide variety of sex-related tags, including basic tags to let readers know that a work includes *Sexual Content*, *Romance*, *Smut*, or *Porn*. Beyond this, many tags are dedicated to letting a reader know what *Kinks* are in a work, including tags for *Age Play*, *BDSM*, *Bottoming* and *Topping*, *Frottage*, *Incest*, *Sexual Inexperience*, and the always important *Consent*, among many others.

## **Discussion**

Through the work of centrumlumina, there exists a general idea of the demographic make-up of the Archive of Our Own. In addition to the large predominance of women, which my survey data supports as well (reported in Chapter 4), centrumlumina's survey found that the majority of AO3 users also chose to identify as white (centrumlumina 2013). By looking at the tags, we can also see that a majority of works on the archive choose to focus on M/M relationships, a number that skyrockets when the search is narrowed to works rated as Explicit. Some academic writers, like Isola, label this as women writers and audiences appropriating the gay male experience and portraying a romanticized and hypersexualized version (Isola 2013). Others, like Popova and Gunderson, maintain that fanfiction represents a place where women

and LGBTQ people can redefine gender roles and objectification (Gunderson 2017, Popova 2018).

To add to this confusion, a search of the tags commonly used on AO3 reveals a vast variety of themes and topics, with many types of relationships and kinks represented in the whole of the archive. To me it does seem that fanfiction is a place for experimentation for women and LGBT people, considering the many kink tags represented in that tag cloud. Many of these tags touch on social taboos and non-mainstream subcultures, like the popularity of BDSM, incest, humiliation in sexual situations, and non-consensual sexual interactions. Whether or not this influences the in-person lives of prosumers in a positive or negative way will be discussed later, but the short answer is a qualified positive. In addition, it would seem willfully oblivious to ignore the large number of explicitly rated works and the variety of tags used to denote sexual content. However, the vast number of tags to denote sexual content at the least shows the interest of fanfiction authors (and the archive) in making sure that readers can make the choice as to whether they want to read sexual content.

## **CHAPTER 3:**

### **FANFICTION FINDINGS**

As previously mentioned, I identified the top ten most popular work rated E for containing sexually explicit material in January 2018. Although this list changes over time, most of the works used remained on the list through the duration of the project. In addition, I read twenty samples of new works rated E. This consisted of assessing the ten most recently posted works, rated E, once in January 2018, and once in February 2018. Lastly, I also read the top five most popular works rated E that were categorized with the tag *Safer Sex*, and the top five with the tag *Unsafe Sex*, in January 2018. In all, I read about 40 works as defined by these specific tags, along with a cadre of works read for background but not critically broken down.

#### **M/M Preponderance**

In the previous section discussing the tagging system of AO3, some of the statistics on pairing type were laid out (pairing type being the term used on AO3 to denote the gender orientation and/or number of participants in a relationship). Within the whole of the archive, about 48% of all works are slash-centric (works with an M/M relationship), a number that increases sharply to almost 70% when the looking only at works rated E for containing sexually explicit scenes. When narrowing the pool even further, the disparity continues. Among a random

sample of new works rated E (taken early 2018), seven of the ten works focused on an M/M relationship. Among those works with the highest number of kudos (also circa January 2018), nine of the ten works focused on an M/M relationship. While both show a majority, the near-complete dominance of slash fiction among the most popular works of the archive may show a disparity between the writers and readers of fanfiction. A second random sample of newest works taken a month later also found once again that only 70% included a M/M relationship. At that time, although the lineup of the top ten E-rated works with the highest number of kudos had changed slightly, 90% of the works still contained a M/M relationship. Because kudos are dispensed by readers, the greater preponderance of slash-centric works among the most popular works may indicate a trend among readers to favor stories with an M/M relationship, as opposed to the random samples, which are solely determined by interests of the writers. Although being a prosumer can encompass being both a reader and a writer, not all prosumers both read and write fanfiction, and this difference between popular and random samples may lead to differences within the prosumer population.

### **Romance vs. Hardcore**

Most of the works in the top ten most popular explicitly-rated works on AO3 seem to be heavily influenced by the romance genre, where characters meet, get to know one another, and incidentally have sex. The focus tends to be more on the emotional turbulence as characters change from independent parties to lovers. These works tend to be relatively vague about specific sexual acts, and contain less sex in general, averaging about 1.5 sex scenes. These usually include anal sex, and commonly also include oral sex or mutual masturbation. Perhaps

because these are more romantic and less erotic, the awareness and discussion of sex is far less (with fewer condoms, less negotiation, less explicit consent, and fewer health questions in general). Consent is often implicit, but there is usually at least a perfunctory rationalization of whether or not to use a condom, which is usually time spent to gloss over why a condom is not necessary. This is not good or bad, but it does demonstrate the priority of the authors on character and relationship development, rather than explicitly discussing the safe and consensual guidelines. Authors of this type sometimes show an overt awareness of their use of romantic clichés, as the fanfiction author zosofi points out in *Gravity's Got Nothing on You* when one character remarks,

"This is like the set-up to some Harlequin ultra-romance novel. All it needs is for you to be the billionaire playboy philanthropist, and me to be your virginal but hard-working personal assistant." Stiles pauses, contemplating something. "With glasses. And big boobs."

This is a useful joke, because it points out the roots many of these works have in the harlequin romance style, and also because it reveals the major difference between the mainstream harlequin novel and these works, the M/M relationship focus.

Most of these do not contain incorrect information so much as scant or missing information. This is in no way wrong, but if the sexual knowledge of readers is impacted by these works, that missing information may affect them as surely as incorrect information. Just as Disney movies have been chided as depicting oversimplifications of romantic relationships, these fanfictions may be seen as showing a more sanitized, overly simplistic version of sexual relations.

On the other hand, three of the ten works have a greater emphasis on the erotic nature of their stories. This includes tagging various sex acts and kinks (such as *Dominance* [which

involves a power imbalance between sexual partners], *Barebacking* [which refers to not using condoms during sex], and *Impregnation Kink* [where the possibility or act of being impregnated is considered specifically arousing]), and having a greater number of sex scenes. Perhaps owing to this greater focus on and range of sex scenes and acts, these works are more likely to have conversations about sexual health and the risk of disease, explicit consent, and negotiation of consent. The section below dives deeper into these categories and how they are expressed in both the romantic and the erotic works.

## **Health and Consent**

Many works on this list, both the more romantic and the more erotic, have some unrealistic or somewhat unsafe points in their sex scenes. This includes characters (specifically male characters) often having a higher number of orgasms in a set period of time than is biologically likely (Nolen 2014), with one character in “You Can’t Plan for Everything” remarking “Six [orgasms] within the first hour. Nowhere close to his record (RivDev).” While this is one of the most egregious examples, it is by no means the only example. Many works also ignore or quickly bypass a discussion about condoms on the way to not using condoms. In “Prince Among Wolves,” the following conversation takes place: “Dude, my best friend’s a werewolf, you don’t have to give me the big talk about condoms and super healing. I know already (Rawren),” and the even vaguer conversation in “Gravity’s Got Nothing On You” (between the same two characters, incidentally):

"Condom?" Derek asks, and Stiles can't stop from snorting, even if it does make Derek's expression look less... wrecked and more embarrassed.



"Dude," he says. "Usually I'm all for it, but uh..." He bares his teeth, makes his hands into claws, and growls by way of explanation. "Unless, I mean, if you're more comfortable with..."

"No," Derek chokes out, then shakes his head, clears his throat. "No," he says again, voice a bit calmer this time. "That... fuck, that sounds good."

Both these conversations make vague reference to the common trope in the Teen Wolf fandom, wherein the accelerated healing and general immunity to disease demonstrated by the werewolf characters of the show is extended to the idea that they cannot get or give a sexually transmitted disease.

Something that can also fall by the wayside is explicit consent. In general, this seems a product of the usual romantic plots, where characters may fall into a relationship more than sit down and discuss it. Consent is implicitly expected and given, and characters swept up in their passions rarely stop to talk. This is often the case for all stages of a given relationship, as theoyden's work jokingly demonstrates in the following passage:

"Oh my god," Stiles says, jaw dropping. "Oh my god, are we like — are we dating?"

Derek makes a low noise of complete, utter frustration.

"You haven't even kissed me!" Stiles protests in an urgent whisper.

Derek closes his eyes for a moment, and then says, "I'm going to take your statement, now. And when we're not in my place of employment, I'm going to fix that."

"Really?" Stiles marvels.

"I'm going to fix it a lot," Derek promises him, and the look Derek pins him with makes him swallow. "Now, start from the beginning."

However, some works have other views. A passage in Faith Wood's "There Comes a Mist and a Weeping Rain" reads:

Grinning, Draco reached back to pry Potter's fingers apart. "Let go."

"I'd rather not," Potter said, his voice hoarse[...]

"I mean it," Draco whispered.

Potter pulled back, frowning.

The passage makes an attempt to demonstrate the constant nature of consent. In the work, verbal consent was asked and given previous to this passage. However, in this exchange one character revokes consent and the other stops. And in "Prince Among Wolves," where the first kiss between the main pairing takes place while one is under the influence of alcohol, the scene goes something like this:

"You can't deny it" Derek said, one palm pressing against Stiles' chest, adding pressure until Stiles was forced to hear the way his heart was rocketing against his ribs. "I smell it on you every time I touch you--" ducking down, Derek mouthed sloppily at Stiles' throat, wet, sucking kisses that made so much noise that Stiles was terrified it would wake the kids up more than the yelling, "--know you want this."

"Stop," Stiles breathed, even when Derek dragged his mouth up, pressed it to the corner of Stiles' lips and then leaned in to kiss him.

It was everything Stiles wanted and hated all at once and it *hurt*. It hurt more than anything Stiles had ever experienced in his entire life. Derek's mouth against his, wet and open and tasting of liquor was like someone had injected poison into Stiles' heart and let each pump spread the toxins through him until he was left shaking against the door.

He couldn't do this--couldn't let Derek poison him from the inside out. It was like he was rotting away with each misunderstanding and fleeting moment between them that really meant nothing at all. It took less than a second for Stiles to realize he was better than this--was stronger than the part of him that wanted so badly to let Derek keep kissing him.

"Stop!" Stiles gasped, twisting his head to the side and trying to push at Derek's chest. He curled his fingers into the lapel of Derek's suit, using it to fortify himself as he clenched his eyes shut. "Stop it," he said, more firmly this time, "don't fucking--"

“All you ever do is make me listen to you,” Derek said hoarsely, “make me do the shit you want, make me change for you--and the one time I do what you want without you asking, you tell me to stop?”

The resulting scene is quite disturbing, and the author demonstrates some of the issues involved when one party is incapable of legally giving consent because of a loss of judgment and inhibitions. On the other hand, “You Can’t Plan for Everything” tackles the issue of consent head on, having the main characters have a series of explicit conversations regarding consent for sexual contact, including what kinds of sexual contact. Because this particular work has some other complications, however, it will be discussed in a separate section to follow.

### **“You Can’t Plan for Everything” and the ABO Trope**

“You Can’t Plan for Everything” has many interesting facets, all of which are heavily entangled in the fact that it is an ABO work. As such, it seems apropos to give a short explanation of what that means, both because understanding enhances the analysis of that work in this context, and because ABO is a fascinating niche in fan culture. An ABO setting, sometimes referred to as A/B/O or Omegaverse, is a particular setting where characters are assigned another biological status, similar to a secondary biological sex. Loosely based (very loosely) on certain wolf traits, characters in an ABO universe may be Alphas, Betas, or Omegas. Betas are generally unchanged from people in the external world. Alphas are stereotypically alpha, shown as more aggressive, dominant, and possessive, while Omegas generally occupy a more stereotypically feminine role, being more submissive and capable of bearing children (whether male or female).

Because of the animalistic undertones in the ABO setting, consent becomes a fickle thing. Interestingly, the ABO work “You Can’t Plan for Everything” tackles this head on, demonstrating the importance of explicit consent not only within the personal domain, but also in the worldbuilding of the work. During a scene where two characters plan to share a heat (in ABO works, a heat is a period of fertility associated with an overwhelming urge for sexual contact), one character considers that

Although heat contracts shouldn’t really be necessary between friends or monogamous couples seeing as it’s unlikely and highly unusual for any legal actions to be taken, the incidence rate of non-consensual heats has decreased significantly since they were introduced as a mandatory part of Omega heat health. The form Yuuri is printing was made as a template by the World Health Organization. There’s a lot they’ll need to fill out, and even more to discuss. Furthermore, it all needs to be signed before he goes off his suppressants.

This contract is a major point of the work, and many conversations follow about health, boundaries for sex acts, and other topics. As such, RivDeV proves the ability of fanfiction in general, and erotic fanfiction in particular, to show safe and consensual sexual practices.

### **Popular Works vs. New Works**

There was a significant difference between the most popular works and the newest works on AO3. Many of those differences seemed to be related to the newness of those particular works. The most popular works were generally long pieces with one or more sexually explicit scenes, and they were relatively well-written. Although well-written is a subjective term, in this instance I choose to use it because these popular works had limited spelling or grammatical errors, had easily understandable plots and organization, and displayed at least a basic working knowledge of sex. Most of these works were 10,000 words or above, with several reaching

100,000 words or more. On the other hand, newer works were shorter, (see Figures 2 and 3), although this is partially explained by the fact that many works on AO3 are written in chapters, with installments sometimes added and sometimes abandoned depending on the whims of the author. Additionally, although I filtered the works so that all of them had been given an E rating for adult content, four works of the ten had no sexually explicit material, or only had extremely oblique references to sex. This was most likely the work of authors attempting to hedge their bets because they either planned to add sexually explicit material in future installments, or because they did not want to surprise readers with any questionable content, even if it was not overly explicit in nature. The latter was best illustrated in a work rated E but tagged as “no sex just a laugh.” The writing quality varied quite a bit more, with some pieces being on par with the popular works, and with some that seemed less edited and more likely to have spelling and grammatical errors.

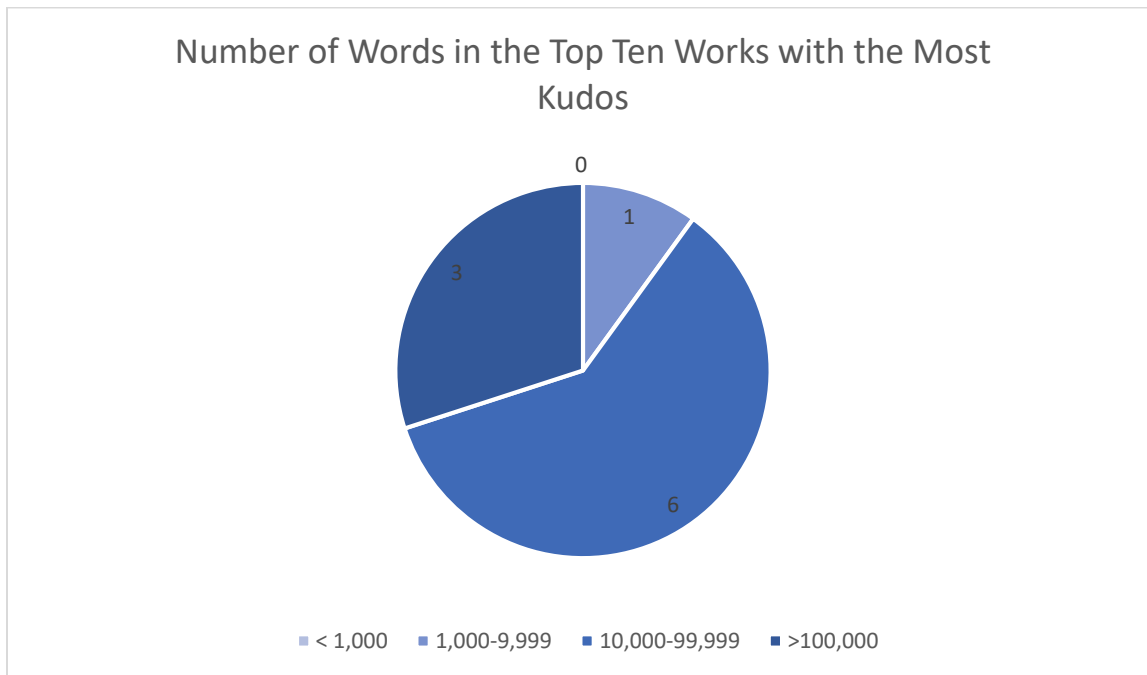


Figure 2: Number of words in the top ten works with the most kudos rated E

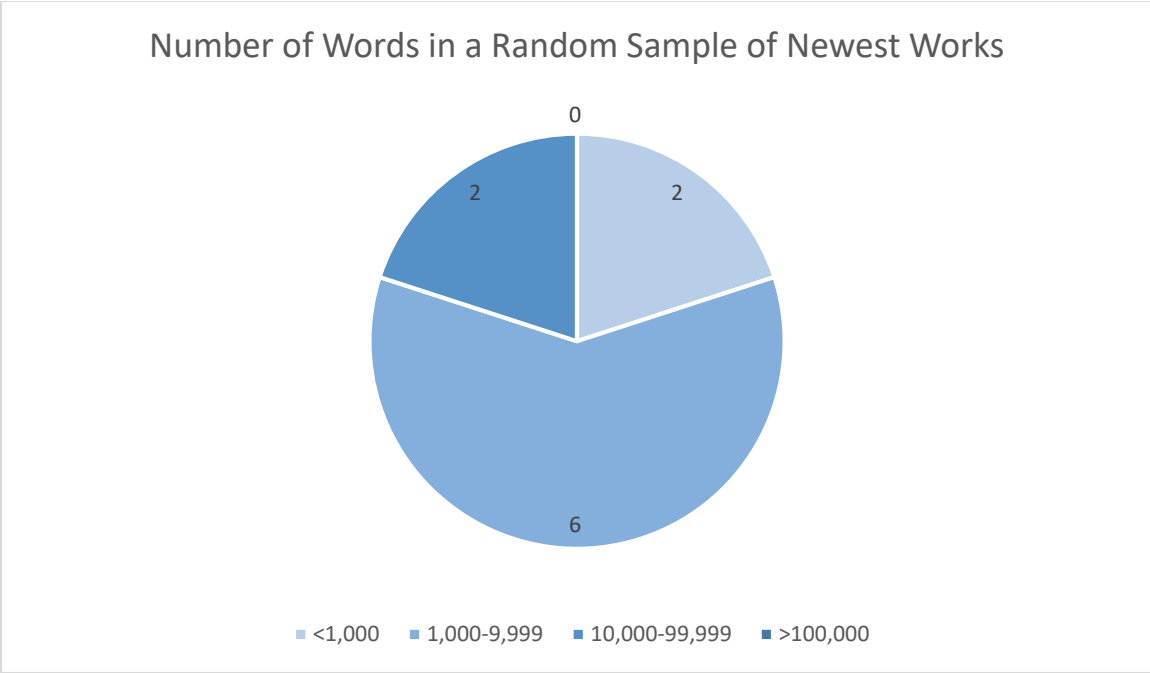


Figure 3: Number of words in a random sample of newest works rated E

Other major differences included a greater variation of relationship type, and a greater variation in the fandom upon which the work was based. The most popular works, as mentioned above, were almost exclusively focused on M/M relationships. In the random sample of new works, M/M works were still overwhelming, with seven of the ten works being based around a slash pair. However, other relationships were not so clear cut. One pairing was both slash and het because one of the characters was reincarnated in a differently sexed body. One pairing was a poly M/M/M between one character and two versions of a different character. Two pairings were listed as M/M/F, with one of those involving two canon male characters and the reader (who is written as female and inserted into the canon world). The fandoms from which these works are drawn are similarly varied. While the popular works are based around a couple of currently

popular series, the random new works almost all came from completely different fandoms, with only two sharing a fandom. While the popular ones came mostly from American television and movies, with some popular anime shows (a traditionally Japanese form of media using animation) included, the new ones included different American and British television, Japanese anime, and video games. Even further afield, this random sample also included two works based on RPF, and one original work. For reference, RPF stands for Real Person Fiction, where an author ships two real people, generally the actors of particular characters, celebrities, television or social media personalities, or even historical figures. The original fiction piece is interesting because it is not drawn from any fandom, and is therefore not fanfiction. While some archives have banned original fiction, AO3 once again chooses not to police the type of fiction posted to its archive.

### ***Safer Sex vs. Unsafe Sex***

As a matter of comparison, I also chose to look at some of the most popular works with the tag *Safer Sex* and those with the tag *Unsafe Sex*. Neither of these tags were hugely popular, with each being used to tag between 1000 and 4000 works. However, they represent some of the many ways that people have chosen to tag their works to reflect how they reflect safe sex and consent practices. Many of these types of tags exist outside the major warning AO3 provides for Rape/Non-con. Prosumers seem aware that the relative safeness of sex can be affected in many ways, and have made many tags to reflect that. In terms of the romantic vs. hardcore comparison made earlier, nearly all of these works, under both tags, were in the hardcore category. Most involved a wide variety of kinks, often including some BDSM, sex toys, etc. Interestingly, all of these works once again focused on a slash pairing, and frequently were within the same fandoms

talked about in the most popular explicitly-rated works, namely *Teen Wolf* and *Yuri!!! On Ice*. Those fandoms that are popular remain popular throughout the archive.

Normally it would seem that *Safer Sex* and *Unsafe Sex* would represent the opposite ends of the spectrum of work. In reality, they had much in common. As mentioned above, both tags showed a wide range of sex-based tags, including *Exhibitionism*, *Consent Issues*, *Overstimulation*, and *Feminization*. Perhaps most interesting is the fact that the most popular work in both categories is the same, which also boasts a tag for *Dubious Consent*, among other things. The author's note for the work reads as follows:

anyway, check the tags. holla at ur gurl if u think i should add any.(btw there are all sorts of isms and phobias, but it's of the non-violent, non-slur kind. bc microaggressions are unfortunately v v real.) [...] ALSO, FULL DISCLAIMER: the views and decisions of the characters contained herein do NOT reflect the views of the author. i think sometimes we forget this? but it's the trutru

This is a fascinating blend of very informal language and a commendable respect for readers, reminding them that more specific warnings are contained in the tags, and making the distinction between what exists in the body of a work and what is accepted by the author in real life.

## **Discussion**

In reading the fanfiction on Archive of Our Own, the use of specific world-building tropes to sidestep reality became quite evident. Some of these tropes were contingent on the actual canon material (such as the use of the existence of werewolves and other supernatural characters in *Teen Wolf* fanfiction), some were created through common fanfiction AUs (such as



the ABO or Omegaverse trope), and some are strange hybridizations of both (such as a Teen Wolf work where human and/or werewolf characters are also assigned typical ABO statuses). One thing that all of these tropes do is introduce atypical sexual traits, like non-binary sexes, into a work. These fantasy elements often allow a writer and a reader to dismiss the more banal side of sexual relations, including condoms, STIs, and other complications.

Although ABO stories are common and widespread throughout fanfiction, I have never seen anything quite like it on the outside. Both academic and fan-based writings agree that the ABO setting originated solely within fanfiction as a strange synthesis of popular tropes like male pregnancy and power imbalances during sex (Gunderson 2017; netweight 2013). Academic writers like Marianne Gunderson have analyzed the ABO trope as an expression of changing gender expectations, with Gunderson writing that “the figure of the omega is made to signify female-coded otherness, a personification of the multiple discourses by which women have been (and still are) constructed as other. By writing a male character as an omega, experiences of being treated as other in female-coded ways are imagined to be experienced by a character who represents the male norm” (2017, 5). Although the current project is not focused solely on the ABO convention, Gunderson’s points provide a fascinating insight into the trope, and one which lines up with the ABO work reviewed in this project. Both the ABO and the werewolf scenarios have dichotomous uses. Although the setting is commonly used to play up animalistic passions, playing on biological urges, it can also be used by authors to discuss and rewrite current social ills like sexism and heteronormativity. As previously noted, “You Can’t Plan for Everything,” one of the most popular works on the archive, chooses to approach a notably fantasy-driven trope with real world pragmatism. Fanfiction may be a playground for prosumers to write anything and

everything, but anything and everything must by definition include measured, pragmatic responses to all the fantasy-driven works as well.

## **CHAPTER 4:**

### **SURVEY FINDINGS**

Beyond my personal exploration and analysis of fanfiction works, I also partnered with the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) to distribute a survey using their weekly social media news posts. The survey was designed as short and relatively unobtrusive, as a way of gathering basic demographic data, and information on whether prosumers perceived fanfiction as an important influence in their understanding of and attitude towards sex. Within the AO3's news burst, they provided a short description of this research along with a link to the first page of the survey and contact information for the researcher. This first page showcased the informed consent form, which gave more information on the research and asked participants to confirm their consent and their age before passing through to the survey questions. The project was promoted in two editions of the news over the course of May 2018, and the survey was open for two weeks after each news post.

The survey was not as widely taken as I had hoped, with 25 responses being recorded. However, despite the relatively small survey group, the open answer responses looked relatively thoughtful. For example, all but one respondent chose to answer the question of how fanfiction had impacted their knowledge of sex, and the answers averaged about 35 words each. Respondents in general seemed engaged and willing to spend a few minutes answering questions, as opposed to glossing through the survey and answering the way they thought I

wanted them to. I would posit this as being a benefit of the online survey style, where respondents have the time and anonymity to answer questions when and how they want to, without feeling pressured by the survey creator's presence or any perceived time constrictions.

## **Demographics**

In the survey, I only requested the gender and age of the participants for demographic purposes. Interestingly, although I stipulated that people should proceed with the survey only if they were between 18-25 years old, there were four responses outside of that range. However, since they were on the older side rather than the younger side, and were all less than 5 years outside of the range, I believe this does not skew the desired demographic too much.

Additionally, since the survey was anonymous and done through Google Forms, there is no way for me to edit these outliers' responses from the other questions. In her previous census of AO3 users, centrumlumina found that a vast majority identified as female, approximately 4% as male, and a larger percentage replying with some version of genderqueer, agender, trans, etc.

(centrumlumina 2013). This trend was continued in the smaller group of the respondents to this survey, where 21 respondents chose to respond with female or woman, none as cisgender men, and four choosing outside the binary as non-binary, non-binary woman, trans man, and agender respectively.

As a side note, it was interesting to see how people chose to answer about their gender identity. I had worried about the phrasing of this question in the construction of the survey, starting out with a simplistic choice set. However, my contact at the Organization for Transformative Works pointed out the problems associated with applying a simple gender

question (man, woman, other-please specify) to fanfiction prosumers. Instead, they recommended that I make the question open-ended for people to answer as they chose. I gratefully accepted this suggestion, and so respondents were able to respond in any way they wanted to the question “What gender do you most identify with?” Although the new question also explicitly stated that respondents could choose not to answer, everyone did put something down. Additionally, the advantage of an open answer meant that I did not have to dither about what type of man/woman, female/male, and nonbinary gender terminology to use. Although sex and gender are certainly different, the modern vernacular is still somewhat awkward around such questions, and I had no wish to pigeon-hole any respondents. I felt quietly vindicated in my worry when several people chose to answer “female” and several chose to answer “woman,” without my hand to encourage either choice. While this aside plays no major part in the project in general, I feel that it adequately describes my approach to the research. I have attempted to create a project which relies on the subjective perceptions of fanfiction prosumers, and when in doubt I have tried to let participants interpret my questions and aims in their own way. Although the project also rests on my analysis of fanfiction as a source of sex education, this still represents a subjective view trying very hard to provide objective observations.

### **Prosumer Perceptions of Fanfiction’s Influence**

The question “Did fanfiction influence you”? was posed to all participants. In the interest of answering this question, and making survey participants think about the question, I chose to split this concept in two. First, I asked participants whether fanfiction had influenced their knowledge of sex, and then I asked whether it had influenced their attitude about sex. Each question was followed by an open answer exhortation to expand on how fanfiction had

specifically influenced them. In doing this, I attempted to give participants time to consider their answers, and their experiences, more carefully.

Both questions were answered with a resounding yes, with 76% of participants saying that fanfiction had influenced their attitude toward sex, and an incredible 96% saying that it had influenced their knowledge of sex in some way. In terms of knowledge, participants commonly referenced a greater awareness of sexual realities like kinks, positions, and partners, as well as a better understanding of non-heterosexual relationships. For example, one 22 year-old woman responded that

I discovered fanfiction at a fairly early age, so my only knowledge of sex was typical heterosexual penis in vagina sex most commonly represented in media. Fanfiction was the first place I ever encountered not only other types of acts that can constitute heterosexual sex like cunnilingus, but it also introduced me to the intricacies of lesbian and gay sex. Fanfiction was also where I first learned about masturbation and that female masturbation wasn't dirty or wrong.

Five respondents also mentioned that fanfiction had impacted or expanded their knowledge of consent, with another 22 year-old woman asserting that her knowledge about sex had increased in general, “particularly in regards to really in-depth, continuous discussions of consent in intimate scenarios,” and another 21 year-old woman saying that “I have a better understanding for how different people approach sex and the importance of consent at all times.” The response was in general either neutral or positive, with only one response, a 24 year-old woman, containing some negative opinions:

To be honest, I kind of go out of my way to avoid depictions of sex in most media. I'm asexual and not at all interested in trying it out for myself. Fanfiction is different because apparently it's impossible to have fanfiction without it developing into sex at some point, and I just can't avoid it. So basically everything I've ever learned about sex beyond the basic health class 'this is how the reproductive system physically works' is stuff I read about on fanfiction. And yes, I know most of it is made up by thirteen year-olds that have never had sex, and

therefore it's unrealistic and anatomically incorrect. I don't really believe any of it but I also don't care enough about sex to pursue the subject.

As an interesting side note, two different people also mentioned that fanfiction gave them a better understanding of how lube (personal lubricants) worked, and what not to use as lube.

When asked how fanfiction impacted participants' attitudes toward sex, many responses turned more personal. Seven respondents mentioned that fanfiction had helped them come to grips with their own sexual desires, and the understanding of other people's desires as well, increasing their ease with sex as a concept. Even more personally, some replies mention that fanfiction was helpful to them in accepting and affirming their own gender and/or sexual orientation, outside the cis-gendered and heterosexual confines, with one 23 year-old trans man saying that "It's given me an outlet to explore parts of my sexuality without doing so physically, which helped me realize my own sexuality and gender." Although most focused on the internal revelations that fanfiction had inspired in them, a female respondent who declined to share her age replied "I put what I learned into practice with enthusiastic and willing partners. My sexual encounters have decreased in number but skyrocketed in quality." Similar to the previous question, all of the open-ended responses to this question were either positive or neutral, although skewed towards positive responses, such as one 19 year-old non-binary woman's comment that "Fanfic was how I shook off a lot of homophobia/stigma around sexuality I'd somehow inherited." Indeed, several respondents mentioned that in addition to fanfiction helping them understand and accept their own sexuality, it also encouraged an understanding of others. One 23 year-old female respondent said that "It was kind of affirming, that the things that I thought sometimes weren't limited to me, that other people were like me too," while another 24

year-old woman said “Sometimes I still can't believe how many people actually want sex, and how many different ways there are to have and to write about sex.”

In the interest of closing this line of questioning out and transitioning to the idea of accuracy in fanfiction, I also chose to ask participants, “Overall, how much would you say that fanfiction of any type [implying either explicit or not explicit fanfiction] has impacted your knowledge and attitude toward sex?” Given the option to select Not at all, Somewhat, or Greatly, almost 44% chose Somewhat, over 56% chose Greatly, and no participants picked Not at all. Considering this series of questions on how fanfiction has impacted participants, the overall conclusion must be that survey participants in general do view fanfiction as an important part of their knowledge of, and often their attitude toward sex.

## **Accuracy**

On the question of accuracy, I chose to ask two basic questions. Both were based solely on the perceptions of the respondents, although the consensus was checked by my own perusal of fanfiction and a more thorough exploration of the subject with the interviewees. The first question was: “Do you think fanfiction generally depicts accurate sexual information?” The question mentioned some salient areas of accuracy the respondents should consider when answering, including consent and biology. Given the option to answer Yes, No, or Sometimes, about 84% chose to answer Sometimes, with 8% answering Yes and 8% answering No (see Figure for a graphical depiction of this). This is not by itself a condemnation of fanfiction’s accuracy, but probably more likely displays the incredible breadth of fanfiction, particularly with relation to its sexual accuracy and author knowledge.



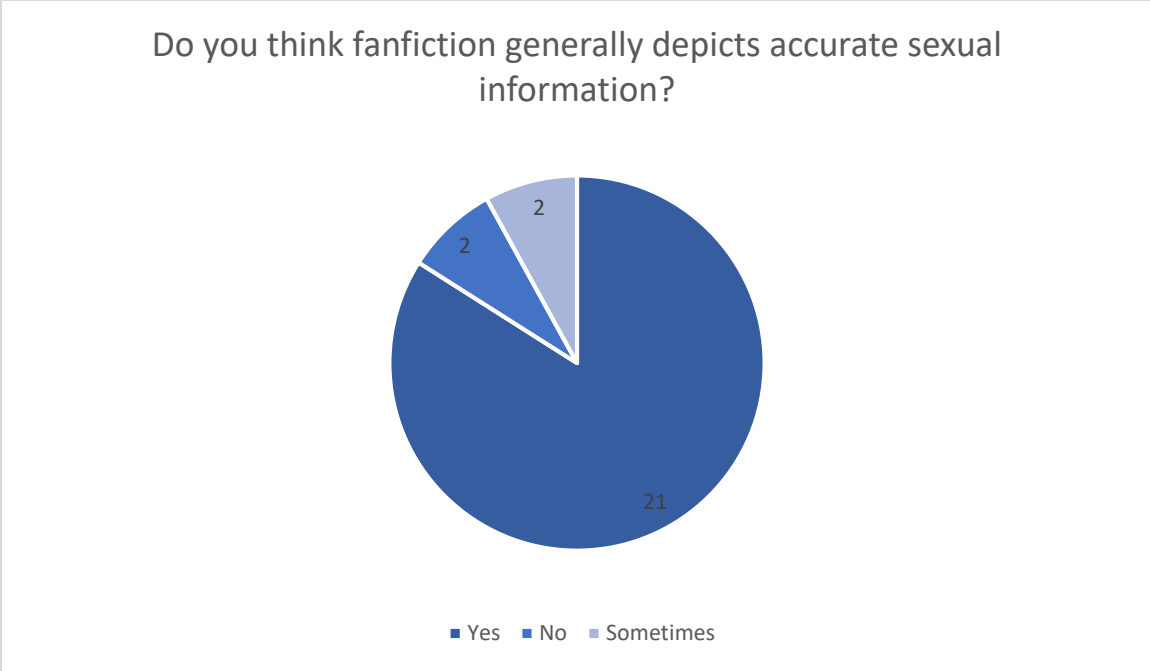


Figure 4: Survey response to “Do you think fanfiction generally depicts accurate sexual information?”

I also decided to open the subject slightly by asking: “Is it important to you that fanfiction depicts accurate sexual information?” Respondents were given the answer choices of Yes, No, and I don’t know, which produced a larger range of response than the previous question’s overwhelming Sometimes response. About 52% of respondents answered Yes to this second question, with 28% answering No, and about 20% answering I don’t know (see Figure 5 for a graphical depiction of this). It is intriguing that so many people did answer yes to this question, and it is encouraging that prosumers are aware of the limitations of fanfiction. However, the relatively high number of both No and I don’t know responses reinforce the idea that any future intervention would need to be carefully introduced to prosumers, rather than expecting them to welcome intrusion for the greater good.

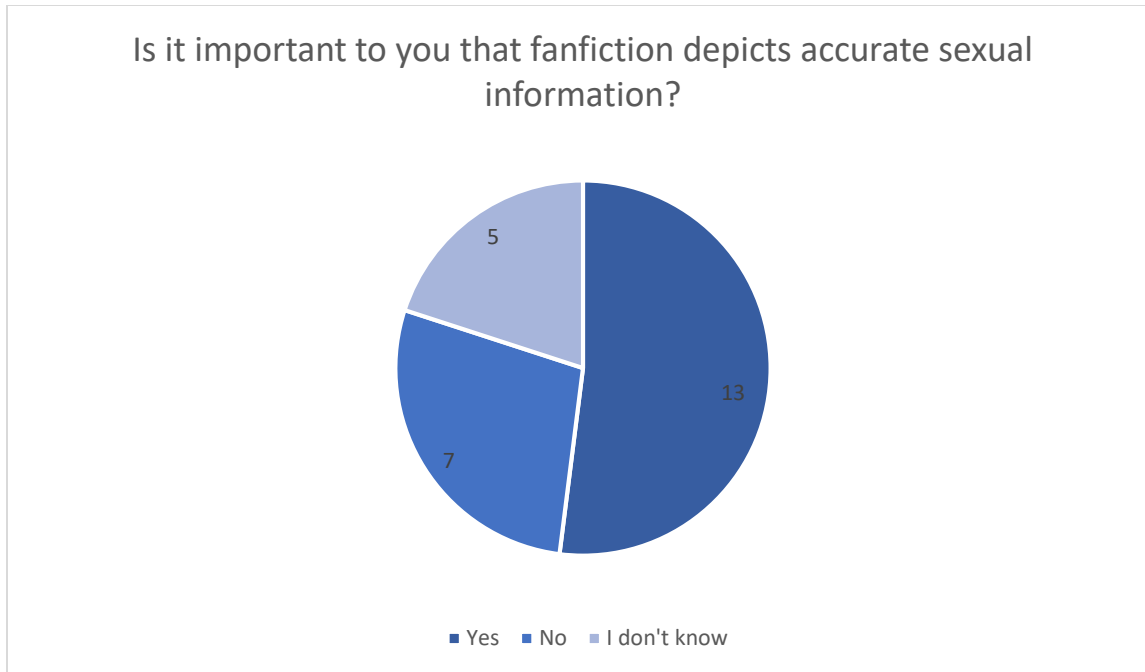


Figure 5: Survey response to “Is it important to you that fanfiction depicts accurate sexual information?”

## Discussion

In reading about fanfiction, much of the focus of the field is on young prosumers. Both academic and popular writers talk about how fanfiction impacts young people, how children get into fanfiction, and similar topics (Chandler-Olcott and Mahar 2003, Tiven 2016). However, this focus can be slightly misleading, because it frequently fails to mention that once one has become a fanfiction prosumer, one does not necessarily cease to be a prosumer as they age. While it would be foolish to say once a prosumer, always a prosumer, it does not follow that fanfiction is a phase that everyone grows out of as they grow out of their adolescence.

This project was designed to survey and interview people between the ages of 18 and 25. This was done for two reasons. Reason one was because previous records, specifically the survey

done by centrumlumina in 2013, indicated that AO3 catered to an older demographic than some of the fanfiction archives (centrumlumina 2013). Second, because that age range was designed to target prosumers who were old enough to likely either be sexually active, or at least to seriously consider sexual activity for one reason or another (Finer and Philbin 2014). It was also hoped that this age range would be old enough to look back and think about if and how fanfiction impacted them, but still young enough for there to have been a fairly recent transition into adulthood. In fact, respondents were an average of 24 years old, with several respondents being actually older than the stated age limit. AO3 is certainly not a domain dominated by teenagers first learning about sex, but instead is a place where people have already begun or finished that process, and they are more than capable of reflecting on that fact.

What those respondents said they learned from fanfiction was a gamut of odds and ends about the messy truths of life and sex, a common interest in communication and consent, and in general a greater degree of tolerance towards the many different interests and experiences of other people. Some of learning tolerance is likely to occur through the simple expedient of growing older and meeting more people. But that can be a slow process, especially if life in the physical world exposes you to relatively similar people, from similar places, with similar upbringings, which is what many people have. Fanfiction, and the diversity of its prosumers, can introduce a cultural shock of different ideas and expectations from the world. This could be considered either positive or negative, depending on the knowledge and attitudes that prosumers get from each other. If “Fanfic was how I shook off a lot of homophobia/stigma around sexuality I'd somehow inherited” is representative of the changes, and from the responses to this survey it seems to be fairly representative, perhaps the positive outweighs the negative after all.

Accuracy is not necessarily the goal of fanfiction, and the survey respondents realize that. It is not always accurate, and it can be flagrantly unrealistic. Despite this, 52% of the survey takers said that accuracy in fanfiction was important to them. From this evidence, I would say that fanfiction is not a great substitute for institutionalized sex education, or even a particularly good one. It is an excellent source of information, though, and a useful supplement to institutionalized sex education. It provides information that can slip through the cracks in current school- and home-based sex education, providing more information about the many ways that people can have sex, and the many reasons that they might choose to do so. For example, as mentioned in the literature review, school-based sex education in the United States often contains limited consideration for non-heterosexual students, whereas fanfiction wholeheartedly embraces non-heterosexual possibilities, as seen by the preponderance of M/M works in the fanfiction review. On the other hand, 52% is a considerable number, and may indicate that fanfiction prosumers would not be entirely opposed to interventions designed to increase or monitor sexual accuracy in fanfiction.

## **CHAPTER 5:**

### **INTERVIEW FINDINGS**

The process of advertising for interviews was embedded in the survey. When survey participants submitted the survey, a farewell page appeared, thanking them for their contribution and informing them that I was also recruiting for interviews about the same subject. The page contained information about how long the interviews would last (30 minutes to an hour), the need for audio recording during the interview, and an email address that they could contact to discuss the project or schedule an interview. The second news post through AO3 also specifically mentioned the need for interviewees. When prospective interviewees did make contact, they were presented with a copy of the informed consent. After a period of 5-10 days after initial contact, during which they were encouraged to contact me if they had any questions, the interviews were conducted. After advertising for interviewees, I managed to gather seven total interviews. All of the interviews were between 30 minutes and an hour, as I specified they would be in the advertisement, with the interviews averaging about 40 minutes of recorded time and another 5-10 minutes of introductions and pleasantries. This period also covered basic questions about the project, the informed consent process, and the need for audio recording. As such, audio recording was not started until after this fact was discussed and participants were asked for their explicit spoken consent to be recorded. After conference with the USF IRB, neither the survey nor the interviews obtained written consent, instead presenting the informed

consent form and encouraging participants to ask for clarification or elaboration. All interviews ended up being conducted through Skype. Two interviewees requested voice-only contact, and the others were conducted with video and audio, although only audio was recorded. Both voice-only and video calls participants were friendly and open, willing to speak about their opinions and experiences. Although I did not ask for their age, from discussing the timeline of their involvement with fanfiction I would theorize that most of the interviewees were in their early to mid-twenties. All of them requested she/her pronouns except Taylor, who asked for they/them pronouns. All of the participants were also given pseudonyms for this research. Of the group, five called in from somewhere in the United States, and two called from the United Kingdom. Although most of the preparatory research for this project dealt with the United States, the inclusion of participants from the United Kingdom provided an interesting contrast, with fewer differences between the participants than might have been expected. All of the interviewees seemed interested in the project and willing to speak on the subject.

### **Basic Questions**

The first part of the interview was designed to ease participants into the experience by asking more basic questions. First of all, I asked the participants how they had gotten into fanfiction. Most mentioned having been fans of something, usually a series aimed at children like *Harry Potter*, *Pokémon*, or Enid Blyton's *Malory Towers* series, and stumbling into fanfiction through other fan-based sites online. On the other hand, both Lauren and Peggy were older when they started reading fanfiction. Lauren had a similar story of accidental fanfiction, just happening around age 17 instead of 11 or 12, while Peggy stated that she actively started searching out fanfiction around age 18, although before actively participating in fandom Peggy said, "I knew it

existed, I just didn't know where to find it." All but Peggy mentioned a certain amount of surprise in finding fanfiction. All of the participants reported using other sites before finding the Archive of Our Own, which was only founded in 2009. Five specifically mentioned using fanfiction.net, while others mentioned Dreamwidth, various LiveJournal communities, and other platforms. Fanfiction.net and AO3 are both fanfiction archives, whereas Dreamwidth, LiveJournal are platforms for individual or community blogs, where particular people can upload the works they author, or particular fandom groups can archive works pertaining to their fandom. For example, while Say mostly uses AO3 at this time to find and read fanfiction, for Lord of the Rings fanfiction she uses "a few sort of independent Lord of the Rings archives, or like old LiveJournal pages, because a lot of Lord of the Rings fanfiction is quite old." Only Peggy reported still using fanfiction.net on a regular basis, but other participants also stated that they are currently using Tumblr and Pillowfort to search for or create fanfiction. Two of the interviewees reported being active writers of fanfiction, with several others either posting more sporadically or writing fanfiction without publishing it. Emma is also active as a tag wrangler for AO3, while Lauren referred to herself firstly as a lurker (a common term for those on the internet who enter into social communities online, but who rarely interact with other users). In her words, "I tend to identify more with the part of fandom that doesn't seem to have the skills or the motivation to actually, you know, create things" but she still felt that "I am part of fandom, I like being part of fandom, I just cheerlead more than I make actual things."

When asked why they read fanfiction, everyone had a slightly different reason. Lauren and some of the others focused on the ability to read new and sometimes better stories about their favorite characters, while others liked the sense of community they got from participating in fanfiction groups. Say's response was particularly poignant, "I am queer and brown, I don't find

much mainstream representation in most places. So lately most of it has been because I'm slightly disillusioned with mainstream media," and that sense of disillusionment and being sidelined was common throughout the replies. For example, when asked why they read fanfiction, Taylor replied that

"Like, socially, I have to know what's going on in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Just, like, you know with my friends, with my coworkers, we just like, it's a thing that everyone talks about, so I have to follow it to some degree. But a lot of that isn't interesting to me, in the way that the stories being told in fanfiction about those same characters are. And I think that's because those fanfiction are coming a lot of times from queer audiences specifically, or from queer authors specifically, who have a very different way of looking at the same stories. I think that's really interesting, and a lot more intellectually engaging."

### **Impacts on Sex Education**

Interestingly, almost all the interviewees mentioned religion as an important factor that impacted their sex education on one way or another. This topic was raised when participants were asked about other impacts on their personal education about sex (such as family or school), although three of the interviewees brought up the topic on their own. For example, in commenting on her being raised Christian, Emma stated that

I come from a religious household, and I'm religious as well, Christian. But, so my parents always kind of said [sex] was like something that was very intimate, so you should only give it to people who you really want to be intimate with.

Although Leigh did not mention whether her family was religiously inclined, she did mention some influence through her time in a religiously-sponsored school. Although her impression of her time there seemed relatively secular, they also had an interesting tradition of "religion and ethics lessons," which were used to discuss topics like how different religions could influence personal values, specifically relating to contraception in this case. Peggy also mentioned being



raised in a loosely religious household, which shaped some of her views, but did not think that her ideas and opinions deviated from that of her family.

On the other hand, religion had a more direct impact on Taylor and Say's sex education. Both remember being raised in more religiously strict households. Taylor specifically mentioned being raised in a Mormon family, and talked a little bit about how that affected their sex education

The culture in Mormonism isn't like, to specifically talk about sex being bad, it's just to not talk about sex at all. So, those sort of discussions happening in fandom spaces weren't like met with any opposing messages for a really long time.

Say had a similar experience, with religious and societal pressures curtailing her access to sexual information. In both cases, lack of sex education at home meant that fanfiction was an important source of information. For example, Taylor mentions that the information about sex that was conveyed through fanfiction "wasn't like met with any opposing messages for a really long time. They were sort of filling a void on their own. So, like in that vein I found them extremely helpful." This is perhaps an extreme case, but it certainly is not an isolated case.

Two interviewees, Lauren and Brianne, did not mention religion as a significant impact on their education at all, although I did not specifically ask this question. As previously described, I asked interviewees about what sources had impacted their sex education outside of fanfiction, which prompted several interviewees to bring up their religious backgrounds. Other common sources to learn about sex were from parents and at school. Taylor, Lauren, and Say also mentioned using online resources like Scarleteen, which they used to build on or fact check information from fanfiction. Taylor's experience was interesting in that, after having a relatively restricted home life and stumbling into fanfiction at an early age, they joined a local GSA in

college and went to several seminars on sex. When directly asked, all but two interviewees said that fanfiction had certainly impacted their knowledge of sex in some way. When asked, Leigh said, “For me personally, no, apart from maybe knowing more about the mechanics of everything, and sort of kind of exploring things that obviously aren’t talked about in sex education, like kinks and BDSM and those sorts of things and elements of it that go beyond a very heteronormative education,” which sounds like an impressive list of exceptions. On the other hand, Lauren said that “yeah, fanfiction taught me a lot about, about the variety of ways that people can relate to each other. Physically and on an emotional level,” a sentiment echoed by most of the other interviewees. While fanfiction may not have been the sole influence on their education about sex, most participants did believe that fanfiction had played a role in broadening their understanding of sex and impacting their personal identities.

Although all of these other sources of sex education existed, three of the interviewees mention how fanfiction impacted their sex education in a way that was hidden from their families. As Taylor related,

If I had been like, watching pornography, my parents would have been able to find that in my computer history, and would have known, and would have you know, stopped me from doing that and spoken to me about like the dangers of sexuality and things like that, but because all of the websites just had like bug Harry Potter headings on them, they were like “oh this is fine, this is about a children’s book, this isn’t something we need to worry about, we won’t read through whatever she’s reading through.

Brianne also mentioned a similar revelation, realizing that through fanfiction, she could look up anything without facing remonstrance from her parents or facing a more socially reinforced distaste of more traditional visual pornography. As mentioned above, fanfiction inspired several of the interviewees to search out other online and in-person sources of information on sex.

However, like Brianne, most interviewees also express a certain distaste for more mainstream

visual pornography. This is perhaps best illustrated by Lauren's assertion that "I'm sure there's [visual] porn out there that's aimed at me, but pretty much everything I've seen has just made me uncomfortable."

### **Comparing Fanfiction to Mainstream Pornography**

This leads to a common theme among the interviewees comparing fanfiction to traditional pornography in a way that highlighted the benefits of fanfiction. While both traditional visual pornography and fanfiction can be ways for young adults to learn about sex in a fictionalized setting, the interviewees were adamantly in favor of fanfiction as a better option. Leigh said that "I think in some ways that way that sex is and can be dealt with in fanfiction is, in some ways almost healthier than what you might see in pornography," a sentiment she repeated often throughout the interview. When asked why this might be the case, Leigh mentioned that in her opinion, fanfiction is generally more likely to involve explicit consent and may be more likely to have realistic "bodies." Say also mentioned some disenchantment with visual pornography, saying that "You know how if you look at porn that's got two women in it, you can tell it was made by a man [...] you can sort of feel the male gaze in it." On the other hand, fanfiction was a place where interviewees felt more personally represented, and more emotionally secure. When asked, Brianne said that she continues to read fanfiction because "even the characters that seem least, like, relatable. You know, straight white guys who are also mutants and superheroes. Even they get thrown through the fangirl lens and come out the other side with some of our views and problems and opinions." In essence, fanfiction makes media, even that which is not originally aimed at women, LGBT+ people, or people of color, more accessible to those populations.

## **Is Fanfiction Accurate?**

Following the trend of the surveys, the response to whether fanfiction was accurate about sex was decidedly lukewarm. Most agreed that fanfiction could be accurate, but that accuracy was not generally the point of fanfiction. Both Brianne and Leigh responded by saying, in almost exactly the same words, “well, yes and no,” going on to discuss how fanfiction was more based in fantasy than in reality. Participants still preferred fanfiction to visual pornography for the reasons discussed above, in that it seemed more representative for fanfiction consumers, and that it had more of a focus on emotional, as well as physical connections. Brianne stated that fanfiction “is about the things that matter to me, in a fictional setting. It’s more about how people fit together than how they just have sex,” while Emma’s opinion was that “I would not say it’s accurate, but it’s sexual fantasy, so I don’t really consider it needing to be accurate.” In general, the response from the interviews corresponded with the response from the survey, in that fanfiction is sometimes accurate, sometimes inaccurate, but that occasional inaccuracy is to be expected from an open-access archive of amateur writing.

## **What Should Be Done?**

When asked the question “Would you be interested in any health-based interventions in the fanfiction community, or would that constitute the destruction of the, kind of the free space that fanfiction represents,” most of the interviewees were uncertain whether any interventions could or should take place. During this line of questioning, I deliberately left the idea of an intervention vague, in order to survey what these interviewees thought about that term and its implications. Both Taylor and Peggy asked what I meant by an intervention before answering,

whereupon I defined an intervention loosely as anything that might be done to improve the information about sex that prosumers obtain through fanfiction. I explained that this did not have to include changing the independent nature of fanfiction, although it could. I also mentioned that an intervention did not necessarily have to be imposed on fanfiction from the outside, but could also be composed of fanfiction authors and readers organizing safe sex awareness campaigns or other prosumer-controlled changes. Six of the seven interviewees did agree that fanfiction had been influential in their education about sex, could be influential in other people's education, and might give some people the wrong ideas, especially if they did not have any other sources of sex education. However, the idea of an intervention, even one controlled by the authors of the works, still seemed intrusive to most interviewees. In speaking about whether authors should put disclaimers before their work, Leigh responded that "I get why people think that detracts from it, we're all kind of mature enough to read and know that this is fiction." However, she continued by saying, "but some people aren't able to kind of make that connection that this is fiction and not necessarily an accurate representation of real life. So I don't know, I really don't know."

Despite that, I continued to ask about possible sites and types of interventions. Many already exist, in one form or another. For example, the LiveJournal Dean/Castiel community called Groped by an Angel includes a number of writer resources, including external links for a *Grammar & Writing Guide*, *Gun Mistakes by Authors*, and more importantly, *How to Write Slash Sex* and a *Gay Sex Guide* (Groped by an Angel n.d.). This indicates that the prosumers who govern this archive saw a need or an interest among contributing authors for more information on writing skills and factual information about their writing topics, and the governing individuals decided to collect and make available those resources. Gathering resources and making them

accessible is one of the most basic forms of an intervention, and can be put into practice quickly and unobtrusively.

Interview participants had varying reactions to these types of interventions. In general, they were considered acceptable because they did not necessitate a change to the works themselves, and they were at the discretion of the author. However, respondents were skeptical of widespread writing challenges and safe-sex-promoting works, mostly because the sheer volume of fanfiction would overwhelm them. Both Leigh and Emma mentioned this, with Emma saying, “I’ve seen that stuff in fanfiction before, it’s just, you know, if you don’t search that out, and you kind of only come across it in a really genuine shipping fics, it’s like not exactly when you’re looking for the sex fics.” However, several of the interviewees also mentioned the usefulness of author notes, either in response to my questions or on their own. Author notes provide the author a chance to mention trigger warnings, unrealistic or unsafe sexual situations, or even links to external sources. An example of the simplest way to do this is just “warnings for some really dumb choices by some really dumb boys, with alcohol involved. No one is drunk. But alcohol is involved and probably played a role in this dumbness.” This does not require much effort, and variations on this theme are common on AO3. A more complicated version of an author note warning was proposed by Emma, who believed that authors notes could be used to carry warnings that the work includes unhealthy depictions of relationships, among other things, and should perhaps also contain reference information for readers who want more information on unhealthy relationships, and contact information for experts and help lines for readers who may be in unhealthy relationships. In the end, although the interview participants were cautious about the idea of interventions, they agreed that not all interventions required the destruction of the free space fanfiction represents to prosumers.

## Discussion

After speaking with this group of seven fanfiction prosumers, it seems inaccurate to label these prosumers, and by extension prosumers in general, as childish, naïve, or any of the other terms that are commonly applied to fanfiction writers and readers. All of the interviewees were articulate and considerate in their answers, and willing to explore the questions I put forth. As mentioned in the discussion of the survey results, many of the respondents were adults over the age of 21, and it seems likely that if the age range of the survey was expanded, even more of the respondents would have been older. Fanfiction, particularly on AO3, is not necessarily a hobby for children alone. Most of the interviewees mentioned getting into fanfiction at least five years prior, often more like ten years prior, winding their way through a variety of different platforms that eventually led to the Archive of Our Own. When asked why she reads fanfiction, Emma pointed out, among many other reasons, that

“I’ve already read fanfiction, so I read more fanfiction. By which I mean, it’s kind of like, you know when you’re really good at a thing? When you’re really good at like navigating a website or like, you know, doing a thing you have a lot of experience with it [...] and it becomes more fun and more soothing because you just feel like you’re like the master of the universe or something.”

Fanfiction, at least for these interviewees, is less a short-term phase and more a long-term hobby, and that time has allowed them to consider their choices and their hobby in a critical manner.

Interventions are still a sticky idea to these interviewees. Most do recognize that fanfiction has the potential to give some prosumers the wrong idea about sex, because in some cases people do not have any other type of sex education as a foundation from which they can sort truth from fantasy. However, the fact remains that fanfiction is based on the idea of free access and free publication. Plenty of places exist where rules are imposed on fanfiction authors, from Fanfiction.net’s ban on sexually explicit material, to bans on non-heterosexual pairings in

some smaller archives. In the long-standing tradition of the internet, however, people have a tendency to either ignore those rules or move on to greener pastures and other sites. Part of the popularity of the Archive of Our Own is likely because it deliberately creates an environment with few limitations, where any and all types of works are accepted.

For that reason, the idea of intervention is met with caution. The very word intervention implies a certain amount of forceful change, and to the interviewees this was tantamount to destroying fanfiction. Brianne summed it up by saying “If you make people change what they write, or what they wrote already, that’s not going to go down well.” However, intervention is not always a blunt instrument, and the interviewees did understand that, mentioning ways that interventions could be done, and how they were even now being done. It may not improve the accuracy of fanfiction to put a disclaimer on a work denoting its inaccuracy, but it certainly might help readers learn to discern between what is accurate and what is inaccurate. In addition, interventions in fanfiction have the opportunity to operate from many different angles.

Expanding author-based fanfiction disclaimers would require a collaboration of fanfiction authors and fanfiction archives like Archive of Our Own. Creating a resource guide for prosumers looking for accredited information about sex might be something created by an outside researcher or by a prosumer. An intervention could even establish a partnership between a fanfiction archive and a sex education discussion group like Planned Parenthood’s Teen Talk, establishing a structure to help prosumers express any questions or concerns brought up by fanfiction.

Multiple interviewees agreed that author disclaimers were an acceptable way to help readers navigate the archive. However, it is likely that many interventions will be opposed. Fanfiction is by design an open space, and any overt attempts to change fanfiction would be met



with scorn. This seems unnecessary as well, considering that interventions, even if they are individual, independent things, *already exist*. Many authors do put up notices, either in the tags that they use or in author's notes. These notices may be used to give trigger warnings, reassure readers that everyone is going to be okay in the end, or provide other information. There is nothing standardized about these notes in their content or even whether they are used, but fanfiction prosumers already have a vested interest in providing information to readers.

## CHAPTER 6:

### OVERARCHING THEMES

#### **Fantasy vs. Reality**

##### *Accuracy*

Based on the interviews conducted with prosumers, fanfiction is often quoted as a space where fantasy and reality can become blurred. This is an important point, and seems to live at the heart of the interviews in this project. Fanfiction revolves around fantasy, and it does not necessarily include accurate information about sex. I found this statement to be reflected in all the layers of this project. In the review of fanfiction I did personally, I found that sex sometimes was portrayed realistically, and sometimes was not. However, a common theme seemed to be the introduction of reasons to subvert or rationalize realistic, rather than blatantly ignoring biological accuracy without any explanation. Two common tropes used to shunt health and safety concerns to the background were worlds that included werewolf characters (common to the Teen Wolf fandom, where werewolves are canon, but also found in many unrelated fandoms), and in fanfictions set in an ABO universe. Both of these types of fanfiction backdrops can muddle or ignore sexual health safety concerns like STIs, emotional aspects like consent, and the biological reality of how sex works.

Additionally, in the survey, 84% of participants said that fanfiction generally included accurate depictions of sex “sometimes.” While not a condemnation of fanfiction, this response does indicate that fanfiction is in general not predicated on being accurate, and also that fanfiction prosumers are aware of this point. This is not a new idea, which is why I decided to include questions about whether prosumers believe fanfiction generally includes accurate depictions of sex, as well as whether it mattered to them that depictions of sex in fanfiction were accurate. The interviews fleshed out this response somewhat, with most interviewees responding to the question of accuracy with some version of “no, not really, *but...*” All the interviewees mentioned reading at least some fanfiction that was designed to be realistic, although this did not seem to be the majority of fanfiction.

### ***Pride in independence and variety***

Before doing any kind of intervention, the most important question is always whether the population itself sees a problem that needs to be fixed or changed. If prosumers do not see a problem, an intervention may still be attempted, but it is far less likely to have an efficacious effect. In fanfiction, the prosumers who participated in this project generally did not see a problem with their hobby. I specifically asked during the interviews, “Would you be interested in any health-based interventions in the fanfiction community, or would that constitute the destruction of the, kind of the free space that fanfiction represents?” The answer was almost always caution in how an intervention might be used to infringe on the freedom fanfiction currently provides. I also asked several of them whether accuracy in fanfiction was more important than variety and independence. Most replied that variety and independence was more important to them. The prosumers involved with this project are proud of what fanfiction has

become, and what they have helped to build as both authors and audience. Anything that challenges that structure is likely to be rejected.

### *Fanfiction as a place for exploration*

Most of the interviewees also seem to view fanfiction as a place where teens and young adults can choose to safely explore sexuality. As mentioned in the section describing the interviews, most of the interviewees mentioned getting more traditional sex education from home, school, or other internet-based sources. According to them, the real strength of fanfiction is in providing a greater breadth of information. Trying to break the impact of fanfiction into informational and attitudinal shifts is therefore misleading. Fanfiction provides some of both, in a wider knowledge of sex acts and kinks and what seems to be a more tolerant view of sex. For example, despite the messages that Emma received about sex being a deeply intimate act that should not be given away freely, she also states that “fanfiction does not hold that opinion necessarily.” As prosumers are collecting information on sex, they are also collecting new opinions about sex from other fanfiction writers and readers, a combination which may come to change how those prosumers personally feel about sex.

In the section devoted to the tagging system of AO3, I mentioned that the proliferation of tags denoting sexual content within a work means to me that the system of writers and archive regulators of AO3 is designed to make sure that readers have a choice about what type of content they read. This plays into the history of fanfiction. Before large archives like AO3, smaller communities and individual fanfiction accounts often went undercover with their categorization. As Taylor mentioned,

a lot of fanfiction wasn't marked like that [using AO3's rating system], it was marked like, as a "lemon" or you know, other weird fanfiction phrases that did not significantly warn me away from it. And so I clicked through and read a lot of those and learned, and was exposed to a lot of things that I would not otherwise have been exposed to.

The organization and community shown by the Archive of Our Own shows the changes that have been wrought in internet-based fanfiction over a relatively short amount of time. For the purposes of this project, it shows that prosumers are being given more and more agency through the internet. Prosumers are being encouraged to make an informed decision about when and how they explore sexuality. While this may not solve the accuracy of fanfiction, it shows how teens and young adults involved with fanfiction are being encouraged to make informed decisions about what they read and when.

### *Fanfiction is for fantasy*

What many interviewees mentioned at some point was that fanfiction is mostly for fantasy. It may not always be accurate, but accuracy is not the goal of fanfiction. Lauren mentions, in defense of fanfiction, that "for me, it's okay that fanfiction involves, you know, tentacles and magical sex and soul mates, because I don't go to fanfiction for realism, and I know that, about myself." More to the point, Emma had some fairly specific things to say about fantasy and how it has been treated in the media.

I feel like there's a lot of people who are really, really critical of fantasies and like, are concerned about the way fantasies affect people in reality, and like their attitudes in reality. And I just don't, I mean I understand where they're coming from, but I feel like, a) you're never going to get rid of fantasies, they're probably just going to go to a different place and, a place where you don't have as much say. And b) like, it's a fantasy. You can be concerned about like what ideas these people are exposed to, but I think that at the end of the day most everybody can like, understand the difference between a fantasy and, and how things are applied in real life. And that you know, it's important, I think that maybe if they want to

push for more... more explicitly like disclaiming that this is like a fantasy thing, I mean that's fine. But, like, I don't know, I feel like people are being way too critical about the way things are portrayed in fanfiction lately, and I just not really there for that

It does not necessarily follow that all fanfiction is written to deliberately or accidentally subvert, and Taylor pointed out that some fanfiction seems deliberately written to give readers a crash course in gender and/or sexual identities, but in general fanfiction is not designed to convey entirely accurate portrayals of sex.

### **Romance vs. Hardcore Continued**

Previously I wrote about the difference between works written around sex and works that happen to include sex. Those works that are written about sex are often called tagged as PWP, which most commonly stands for "plot, what plot?" or "porn without plot." On the other hand, works tagged as romance are also common, and more likely to focus on the traditional courtship rituals and complex plots than on the existing sex scenes. This is certainly not a perfect split, and plenty of works combine elements of both types of works. However, there does seem to be a difference between focused and incidental sex in fanfiction. This divide may coincide with a difference between readers searching for ship- or fandom-specific works which may have sex, and specifically searching for works with sex in them. When I mentioned previous safe sex awareness campaigns on other fanfiction archives and platforms, Leigh replied:

I've seen that stuff in fanfiction before, it's just, you know, if you don't search that out, and you kind of only come across it in a really genuine shipping fics, it's like not exactly when you're looking for the sex fics.

While this seems like a relatively minor, and obvious, note to make, it reappeared in other parts of the project. Most notably, interviewees tended to focus on the sex-based works when I asked them about sexually explicit fanfiction. For example, when I asked Taylor about what sexually explicit works stuck out in their mind, for one reason or another, they focused on the more heavily sexualized works, often seeming surprised when I brought up romance stories that also contained sexually explicit material. This could be a product of my lines of questioning and their expectations for what I would be interested in. But it still seems to be true that, on a platform where all types of sexual activity are depicted, the more basic romantic stories are overlooked. I would speculate that exposure to so many different types of sexually explicit material and even hypersexuality that prosumers become relatively blasé towards more run-of-the-mill encounters.

### ***Fanfiction as better than porn***

As previously discussed, there seems to be an idea among fanfiction prosumers that, while fanfiction may not be unerringly accurate in its depictions of sex, it still represents a step up from mainstream visual pornography. Leigh mentioned this idea multiple times, providing several reasons for why this was, focusing on a better representation of people. However, she was not the only one who voiced this opinion. In favor of fanfiction, Emma also mentioned that “it’s not just a very much wham-bam-thank-you-ma’am, and it’s over. They’re much, you know, different, even in sort of plot what plot type fics [plot what plot being a term used to describe works written mainly around sexual interactions, rather than plot] there really is an element of connection between people having sex.” This is another common theme from the interviews, the opinion that fanfiction, for all its sexual variety, has a focus on emotional connections.

This theme transcends any single level of data, however, and can be related back to both the review of tags on AO3 and the literary review of fanfiction. As I mentioned in reviewing the tag system of AO3, the archive provides a cloud representation of the most popular freeform tags, or those tags which provide information in addition to major parameters like pairing type and rating. Within that tag cloud (see Figure 1), are a number of words referring to emotional connections of many kinds, including *Family*, *Friendship*, and *Relationship(s)*. More abstractly, the tag cloud also shows commonly used tags like *Female Relationships*, *Bonding*, *Domestic*, *Marriage*, *Protectiveness*, *Love*, both *Feelings* and *Feels*, and many more. To keep this in perspective, these are some of the most popular tags on the archive, out of millions of tags. Even one of the smallest (i.e., least common) tags, like *Feelings*, is used to describe over 20,000 works on the archive.

In addition, a review of some of the fanfiction on AO3 also supports the idea that fanfiction has a focus on emotional connection in addition to physical connection. As mentioned in the section devoted to an analysis of fanfiction on AO3, almost all of the most popular works rated E for explicit sexual content had a heavy emphasis on romance and emotional connection. The exception was, of course, the incredibly popular “I am Groot” work, which continues to glory in bucking the trend of this demographic. However, all of the other works, whether they were more specifically a romance work or a more pornographic work, spent serious time introducing a romantic relationship. Even “You Can’t Plan for Everything,” which was designed around the idea that the protagonist was biologically mandated to have sex, spent thousands and thousands of words developing an emotional bond of trust and intimacy between the main pairing.



An intriguing contrast to this can also be seen in the interviews and surveys. Although almost all of the interviewees mentioned in some way the prevalence of romantic interactions in fanfiction, some participants also brought up the idea that fanfiction had taken away the taboo associated with multiple sexual partners and sex outside of marriage. For example, one 21 year-old female from the survey said that “Fan fiction doesn’t make sex seem like a chore or as this holy act that only occurs between two super committed individuals. Fan fiction allows sex to just be something that happens between people.” Several responses also contained explicit or tangential mentions of fanfiction increasing one’s sex positivity, like one 23 year-old female who said that “[my attitude toward sex is] much more positive. I used to see sex as something dirty and worthy of my disdain. Bit by bit, I got to understand how good sex could be for people.” Even though an emotional connection is commonplace in fanfiction, and apparently prized by the prosumers, this does not necessarily play into the social construction of monogamy and the deeper issue of slut-shaming. Those things can be seen in abundance in fanfiction (for example, soul bond AUs where characters are marked from birth in some manner and spend their lives searching for their one true match, are common in most fandoms and can be found in many thousands of works), but they are not the only message that fanfiction has for readers.

### **M/M Preponderance**

Throughout the various levels of data collection in this project, it had been pointed out repeatedly that fanfiction has a focus on M/M relationships. Why this is so is unclear, with many possibilities existing. Regardless, the fact remains that prosumers, who at least according to this project as well as previous surveys of AO3 appear to be largely women, write a lot of slash sex

scenes. While the mechanics of many sex practices between any combination of parties have similarities, the concentration of predominantly female readers and writers on men having sex with men shows an interesting disconnect between writer and subject. This is particularly true considering that, as discussed in the literature review, school-based sex education systems still rarely contain LGBTQ+ sections, leading to a dearth of structured information on male/male relations in the United States and many other countries (Bertrand-Shelton 2017; Hauswirth 2008).

As discussed in the section on tags, and touched on again briefly in the literature section, there is a possible disparity between writers and readers of fanfiction. M/M works maintain a controlling share of the works on the Archive of Our Own at most levels. However, it is fascinating that the controlling interest jumps from about 50% in overall works on AO3 to 70% of all works rated E for explicit sexual content. Additionally, there is a slight disparity between the most popular E-rated works and a random sample of new works rated E, in that 90% of the former and only 70% percent of the latter have an M/M rating. This may mean that readers of M/M works are more numerous than fans of other pairing types, or that M/M fans are simply more likely to show their appreciation with kudos.

The disparity between the popular and new works reinforces the possibility of differences between readers and writers of fanfiction. Superficially, it seems that in fanfiction of all places, disparities between producers and consumers of content should exist. Fanfiction is a place that specifically lets the line between those categories blur, encouraging patrons of fanfiction to both produce and consume fan content. However, that is not necessarily how all fans react to an open access space. Previous work has examined the differences between active and passive fans online, with differing views on whether this affects the community as a whole (Merry and Simon

2012, Nonnecke et al. 2006). In this case, lurkers who choose not to engage by publishing fanfiction of their own may still have an effect on the popularity of works on the archive in general. For example, a disparity on AO3 has previously been identified by centrumlumina's survey, which found that "the most popular rating for creators was Teen and Up, but readers preferred Mature" (centrumlumina 2013). As such, it may be true that AO3 prosumers are at least somewhat more interested in reading about M/M relationships than they are in writing about them.

The differences in M/M proportion of most popular and newest works may also be exacerbated by the differences in the fandoms represented by each. While both included many fandoms where the canon material is dominated by male characters, it is worth pointing out that in the rarified air of popular works, a much smaller pool is represented. The big three on this list are *Teen Wolf* (the television series, rather than the original movie), *Yuri on Ice* (an anime about male ice skaters), and *Supernatural* (another television series). All three of these shows revolve largely around male characters, a fact which is reflected in the fanfiction written about them. Given that *Supernatural's* three main characters are men, it has a long history of slash fans (a term used to denote fans of relationships between the male characters of a show), a history acknowledged and joked about on the show itself (Gray 2010). While including a slightly more diverse cast, *Teen Wolf* also features male protagonists, and was developed by an openly gay man who has frequently discussed an interest in working outside the heteronormative box in media (Bricker 2012; Cardillo 2014). And finally, *Yuri on Ice* revolves around the sort-of relationship between two male figure skaters (a relationship accepted by critics and fans, but left deliberately ambiguous to avoid public censure) (Velocci 2016; Wilson 2016). Among the random sample of new works, a far greater variety of fandoms is represented. Many of those

fandoms are still male-dominated in terms of characters, but more opportunities for female characters are still shown. Although I cannot say whether the M/M focus comes from the popularity and preponderance of male-centered media, or whether an interest in M/M relationships leads to fans searching for that connection in media, it is an interesting connection.

Many possible reasons exist for why M/M works exist in the numbers that they do. These hypotheses are conjectural at best, but the fact that a predominantly female population, with a large minority of non-binary and non-heterosexual prosumers, writes so much about male homosexual relationships cannot be ignored. One possible reason for the slash preponderance is an interest that prosumers have in queering mainstream media in order to change it to better reflect themselves. In Chapter 3, I talked about the ABO trope, which authors like Marianne Gunderson have discussed as a way for female writers and audiences to impose traditionally female issues and experiences on normative male characters (Gunderson 2017). Creating M/M pairings may be a similar, though less extreme, way for prosumers to do something similar. Making M/M pairings out of straight white male characters gives prosumers an opportunity to discuss their own experiences with being othered in some way.

Fanfiction prosumers also have a long history with changing one aspect of a character to other them, changing them to better represent prosumers, or at least introduce new opportunities for those characters to experience being a minority. For example, racebending (changing a character's race) or genderbending (changing a character's gender or sex) are also present in fanfiction, although they are perhaps not as persistent as M/M works. For example, racebending is particularly well-known among fanfiction writers, and fan artists, of the *Harry Potter* books and movies (Blay 2015; Seymour 2018). By envisioning the protagonists of this franchise as being of African or Indian descent, fans are able to “create a space for more racially diverse

characters and explore cultural expectations and misconceptions” (Seymour 2018). Considering the intersectional nature of oppression based on race, sex, sexual orientation, and other factors, fanfiction that changes a key facet of canon characters can generate appeal for many different demographics of prosumers.

However, although these types of changes to canon are common, fanfiction prosumers are generally careful not to change their characters beyond recognition. Fanfiction, at its heart, is still contingent on creating works based on intimate details of a given piece of media. This is what gives it an instant appeal for other fans of that media. One change too many can end up alienating readers and isolating the writer, which destroys the delicate interconnected nature of the fanfiction community. It is unlikely that this section can truly explain why M/M work is so common, and popular, in fanfiction, but it highlights this feature of fanfiction for future research.

### **Queer History and Experience**

In the literature surrounding erotica, some authors have tackled the idea of erotica written by and for female audiences about men who have sex with men. In particular, Isola has chastised this type of work for ignoring condoms and therefore misunderstanding or ignoring queer history, particularly the movement against AIDS in the 1980s (2013). Isola writes that “These genres [female-written romance novels, *yaoi* materials, slash fiction] are most typically produced by women, for women, but they are about males who prefer the company of other males. These narratives center highly romanticized or hyper sexualized depictions of “gay” men, where things like condoms are most often omitted due to the aesthetic needs of the narrative, if not also because of limited authorial purview and cultural investment” (Isola 2013, 1214).

This is not necessarily incorrect. Most of the prosumers involved in this project are ones born after the 1980s, and most are not specifically gay men. However, I think these prosumers do connect with the queer community and queer history very strongly in their own way. But instead of feeling personally connected to the struggle against AIDS, these prosumers are more likely to connect to current struggles with genderfluidity and sexual identity. Speaking with Say, she brought up the fact that to this day, in traditional visual pornography featuring two women, “you can sort of feel the male gaze in it,” and that finding a fanfiction about two women written by and for women was a surreal experience. Fanfiction does not just represent a population of heterosexual cis-gendered women focusing on a romanticized depiction of gay male relationships. It also represents a place for non-cis, non-heterosexual, and other non-traditional people to gather and try to avoid the conformist media views of sex and relationships.

The question of cultural appropriation remains, but it coexists with the way that fanfiction prosumers often apply their own social ills and personal experiences into an M/M context. This cohabitation actually brings up a common legal question posed of fanfiction as well. The law asks whether these works need to be censured for plagiarism, or whether they need protection because of their transformative nature. This project questions whether M/M fiction written primarily by and for women and femme audiences is an appropriation of gay men’s history, or whether it deserves to exist because its authors and fans use it in new, culture-specific ways. It is impossible for me to say which one is truer at this juncture, and I will be unlikely to do so in the future. In the end, both are true, but it is important to understand how queer culture exists in fanfiction. Fanfiction prosumers do not seek to denigrate or ignore the painful realities of queer history, but all fictional groups represent a spectrum of individual intents and

knowledge. I will close this section with a quote from Taylor, who responded to my query for favorite works by discussing how queer history features in some fanfiction:

Oh, it's called *Known Associates*, and it's a Captain America fic that explores the possibility of him being an out gay man in New York in the 1940s, and what that community was like, and what that experience was like. And because a lot of like the records that we have historically from that period do engage you know, with very specific, specific and explicit and sexual behaviors, and they worked that in in a way that was really interesting, and that I'd never like... I feel like I keep coming back to this, but like the queer element of, queer history has a very different way of interacting with sexually explicit materials, and the way that it like deals with them very straightforwardly in, in, in a way that like... Or I guess it refuses to deny the history of sexuality in the way that it was being enacted by queer people.

### **Fanfiction as Critical**

Fanfiction and fandom that exist to critique and expand on existing tropes are an interesting contrast to some of the other examples of fandom today. In particular, there is now, and of course always has been, a movement which glories specifically in the static details of its idol. Recent examples of this can be found in the novel *Ready Player One*. While a fun and engaging novel, it was pointed out by Constance Grady of *Vox* that the text focuses on memorization of pop trivia rather than interacting with the many social problems of the fictional or real world (Grady 2018). The article also points out the parallels between this type of fandom and the Gamergate movement, which may indicate a darker side of fandom and isolationist media consumption.

There is nothing inherently wrong with a movie/book/etc. in isolation. That viewpoint is an important part of understanding a thing. However, it is also necessary to know that fandom is much larger than this single group, and that the reductive view of fans and prosumers of fanfiction as static and uncaring of the world around them is utterly wrong. Fanfiction in

particular represents a place where and women and LGBTQ+ people can process mainstream media, loving and changing it to reflect their own lives and social problems. From a practical perspective, this can work in favor of sex education, as fanfiction is then a place where limited or heteronormative sex education can be expanded to include complex meditations on being LGBTQ+, the importance of consent, and the many reasons that sex might be engaged in outside the procreative desire.

As Leigh lamented when I asked her why she reads fanfiction, “it’s just sometimes I find, you know, the works that are out there are just so incredibly good. Whereas sometimes when you read the books it’s, you think “I know I’ve read something a lot better,” online for free.” Which encapsulates much of the reason that research like this needs to continue. For people who do not fit into the mainstream media focus, whether because of their race, gender, sexual orientation, or other reason, fanfiction is a place to retreat and rewrite that mainstream media. And the only key required to enter this realm is a link to the internet and the knowledge that fanfiction exists. It is free to read, free to publish, and it encourages free interaction with like-minded others, interactions often based around how something in a piece of media could be better for these fans.

### **Fanfiction as Self-Critical**

Plenty of academic and non-academic sources exist to critique fanfiction as not being critical of itself. Particularly, instructors of writing have a longstanding debate as to whether fanfiction generates enough internal critique for it to be useful as a tool for young writers, with reasonable arguments on both sides (Black 2009; Chandler-Olcott and Mahar 2003). On the one hand, fanfiction often represents a place that is open and accessible to everyone, and it can be a



step towards helping students “understand the social construction of knowledge and can be used to foster a willingness to critically engage with information presented not only in media and classroom texts, but also in broader social and civic contexts” (Black 2009, 79). On the other hand, while open publishing and reading means that anyone can express an opinion of these amateur works, it cannot guarantee that these opinions are helpful, useful, or appropriate. As Chandler-Olcott and Mahar (2003) also pointed out when studying middle school fanfiction prosumers, “at times, [they] could have benefited from the assistance that contact with their teachers or classmates might have provided. Their compositions were sometimes limited by the tools that were available to them and by their skill with those tools” (561). This is the nature of the beast, and changing that would likely change the landscape of fanfiction to the point that it is no longer the open, anonymous space it currently represents. However, it is also unfair to think that fanfiction prosumers are unaware of this paradox. In speaking with Emma, she mentioned a particular fanfiction prosumer known for critiquing fanfiction and fandom

And she had a fake account on there that she used to... I mean, she didn't call it a social experiment I think, but, she's kind of critical of how people aren't very critical in their fanfiction reviews, and that doesn't really help the authors to grow or write better fanfiction or anything [...] So she wrote an intentionally mediocre fanfiction with flaws and waited to see if anybody would point them out, and they didn't, and then she revealed what the whole thing was at the very end of it.

It may be true that publishing fanfiction and learning from the reviews such publishing garners cannot replace the concentrated and considered professionalism of a writing class or academic peer review, but plenty of resources do exist in fanfiction to help promote writing, including dedicated prosumers and communities willing to provide links to better writing websites, tutorials, and advisors. For an example of this, view the side bar of *Groped by an Angel*, a LiveJournal fanfiction community for the show *Supernatural* that has links to grammar guides,

beta readers (other prosumers who often work as another pair of eyes on a work to point out grammatical, plot, or character errors), and the Supernatural Wiki (Groped by an Angel n.d.) This cannot replace learning to write in an academic setting, but it does create opportunities for extracurricular study.

In relation to this project, fans can also be critical of how sex is portrayed in fanfiction. As Emma mentioned in her interview, “I feel like people are being way too critical about the way things are portrayed in fanfiction lately, and I’m just not really there for that.” Most of the interviewees agreed that fandom could, in fact, be too critical of current fanfiction. However, everyone also has their personal lines, whether or not they would choose to impose them on the archive at large. Emma was not a fan of vore (short for vorarephilia, a paraphilia “characterized by the erotic desire to consume or be consumed by another person or creature” (Lykins and Cantor 2014, 181)), and Say disliked stories that had relationships involving underage characters. However, how personal or societal taboos are regulated differs across the internet from fan community to community. The Archive of Our Own allows readers to avoid major taboos, such as underage relationships or non-consensual sex, fairly easily. On the other hand, Say mentioned that some smaller archives and communities chose to ban works with homosexual pairings. Fandom does not lack members willing to criticize and put limitations on itself, but the difference exists in how the policing is done.

Beside the variety of ways that fanfiction prosumers can and have chosen to control their surroundings, the survey also shows a critical population. As previously mentioned, upwards of 80% of survey participants felt that fanfiction was only sometimes accurate in its portrayal of sex, and over 50% felt that accuracy was important to them in fanfiction. These are people who

recognize the disparities in fanfiction, not people who turn their back on any flaws that may exist in the works they read.

## **CHAPTER 7:**

### **LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

#### **Limitations**

There are, of course, several limitations and cautions that need to be attached to this study. Most of these limitations revolve in some way around the range of the project.

Firstly, the number of participants in the study was limited. Only 25 people completed the survey, and only seven interviews were recorded. Because of this limited participation, no male-identifying participants were able to be interviewed, and only one was included in the survey. There are a number of reasons this may have come to pass. The notification for the project was put out in two separate editions of the Organization for Transformative Works' weekly newsletter "This Week in Fandom," which was linked to in the various social media platforms that the OTW maintains a presence on, like Twitter. However, I did not have access to the readership numbers of this newsletter, so it is possible that the initial reach was more limited than initially expected. On a more unexpected note, the age cap that I requested for study participation may have been too limited. I asked for participants between the ages of 18-25, believing this to be both the most important age group for the project, and that this might be a plentiful part of AO3's membership. However, what I found from the demographics of the survey was that the population was skewed to a slightly higher age group, with the mode age of survey participants

being 24, with four participants between 26 and 28 as well. This may indicate that others approached the survey, but were turned away by the 18-25 limitation.

Aside from the age limit issues and limited survey and interview participation, this project was also limited by the amount of demographic data collected. I chose to only collect information on the age and gender of survey participants, and only preferred pronouns from interview participants. This was done in an effort to make the survey less intrusive for participants who might be wary of this project. However, it did result in the omission of data that could have been of interest in the analysis phase. Future projects would benefit from more information about the participants, such as education level, sexual activity, sexual orientation, religious background, and place of residence. The last is somewhat unusual, but considering that two of the interview participants were revealed to be from the United Kingdom, it would have been useful to have country of origin information about survey participants as well. In addition, this and future research deals with how information from fanfiction compares with institutionalized sex education. Therefore, geographic information might be useful to obtain as part of understanding how different areas and the sex education they offer are impacted by fanfiction as a secondary source of information about sex. For example, Emma was raised in an urban area and reported that she received sex education information through her schools, and was therefore able to compare the information she received in school to that which was in fanfiction. However, although the survey and interview participation were limited in number, the quality of participation was subjectively high. As previously mentioned, the free response questions in the survey were well-represented, with most people choosing to spend at least some time writing out several concrete points or personal experiences, with very few respondents leaving simple responses like "fanfiction expanded my knowledge." Similarly, although there

were relatively few interviews conducted for this project, all of the participants seemed excited to talk, and willing to discuss contradictory ideas and very personal experiences. Most also asked whether they could read the finished project paper, showing a degree of investment and interest in the outcome. In addition, because I knew that predicting the participant turnout would be difficult, I did try to create a more vertically integrated project. The levels of data collection from AO3's tagging system and works were added to the survey and interview portions of the project so that I as a researcher could compare and contrast information from any given layer to data in the others. This provides a way for me to double-check or reinforce my findings, as well as a way to create more realistic analyses.

In addition to the limited response there was to the survey and interview request, this project was limited in that it was only presented on one fanfiction platform. Other platforms do exist, including other archive sites and scads of individual journals and blogs. Unfortunately, fanfiction is still a relatively underground phenomenon. While it does not actively hide, it is not well known outside of fandom, and it still often considered too weird, too ridiculous, or too derivative by other fans (Grady 2016). Archives are becoming numerous, but the majority are still built around specific fandoms or specific tropes. I still believe that working with AO3 was a good choice in this case. An argument could have been made for approaching fanfiction.net instead (another pan-fandom work archive), because it is more active as a social platform. However, fanfiction.net technically bans sexually explicit work, and it caters to a younger age demographic, both of which would invalidate the specific parameters of this research.

Another limitation in the survey design is the fact that this research was specifically designed to collect subjective information from participants about their knowledge and experiences, as opposed to objective information. This project did not collect information about

the sexual experience of participants, and it did not specifically canvas the beliefs prosumers hold about sex. This research asked whether prosumers believed that fanfiction had impacted them, rather than measuring the effect it may have had.

The final major limitation of this project is that it was created, initiated, and analyzed by a single researcher. My background in fanfiction means that I did not have to learn the language of fanfiction, and that I know some of the history of fanfiction and sex personally. However, this also means that the coding and analysis of the surveys and interviews was undertaken by me alone. Additional coders may have lowered the chance of bias affecting the results of the analysis, but were not used during this project.

## **Answering the Study Questions**

### ***Does fanfiction influence prosumers?***

Throughout the information gathered in this research, if there has been one theme it has been that fanfiction prosumers do believe that fanfiction can and does influence them. While this was not entirely universal, almost all of the survey takers and interviewees agreed that fanfiction has impacted their knowledge and often their attitudes towards sex. Going all the way back to the tagging system of the Archive of Our Own, the freeform tag cloud shows a remarkable variety of themes, kinks, and relationships common to the archive. On this platform, anyone can learn about anything for the price of knowing how to ask. On the other hand, I would not jump to the conclusion that this means people are actually going out and trying out all of their new knowledge. There was at least one survey respondent who said “I put what I learned into practice

with enthusiastic and willing partners. My sexual encounters have decreased in number but skyrocketed in quality,” which is still a positive remark. However, most interviewees mentioned that fanfiction may have made them aware of new things, but it also prompted them to follow up with other online resources for sex education. Both types of responses indicate that rather than encouraging unsafe sexual behaviors, fanfiction instead made these prosumers more comfortable with who they were.

### ***Is fanfiction accurate?***

To quote several interviewees, “yes and no.” Prosumers who participated in either the survey or the interviews mostly agree on this point, and the evidence from the fanfiction samples would seem to support it as well. Fanfiction, because it is written by so many different people, cannot be expected to get everything right all the time. Fanfiction also often falls outside of institutionalized circles of criticism, which means that few people are invested in making fanfiction be always accurate. That is not its function. By reading fanfiction both popular and from a random sample, I would say that fanfiction, in the general sense, has a basic grasp of accurate sexual depictions, and chooses to frequently ignore or augment reality in the name of fantasy.

### ***Do prosumers think fanfiction is accurate?***

For a similar question, it turns out there is a similar answer. Sometimes people think that fanfiction is accurate, and some prosumers think that fanfiction is *more* accurate than other forms of sex-based entertainment, such as mainstream visual pornography. Prosumers also cite



fanfiction as having a better grasp on the concept of consent, and more interested in presenting varied emotional connections that might result in people having sex. The answer is therefore a qualified yes, in that prosumers, in general, think that fanfiction can be accurate, particularly in certain arenas that are more likely to deal with the emotional aspects of sex than the physical.

*Do prosumers care that fanfiction is accurate?*

I came into this project wondering whether there was going to be any truth behind the stereotype of uninformed teenage authors. It does not seem so much that this view of fanfiction prosumers was rejected, but that it was expanded to show a much more diverse crowd of people at varying stages of knowledge about sex. At least according to the survey and the interviews that were collected, an important marker of fanfiction prosumers is not their lack of knowledge about sex, but their awareness of fanfiction as a broad and not entirely accurate media, and their incisive understanding both of their personal interactions with fanfiction and the interaction between society and entertainment media in general. These prosumers seem as likely to use fanfiction as pure wish fulfillment and sexual fantasy as they are to use it to critique existing media and social norms.

## Future Research

### *Can it be done?*

Part of this project was an inquiry into whether or not fanfiction archive like the Archive of Our Own would be appropriate and useful platform for future interventions designed to spread sex education. In this case, an appropriate platform is one that does affect the information about and attitude towards sex that its users have. In addition, an appropriate setting for this type of intervention is one that is not always entirely accurate in its portrayal of sex, and so might benefit from some type of intervention. In terms of usefulness, the platform would have to have a broad enough reach to be an effective vehicle for sex education, and an area into which an intervention could possibly be inserted.

I believe that archives like AO3 might be an appropriate setting for future research and interventions, because this project has shown, across the board, that fanfiction does convey information about sex, that sometimes that information is inaccurate, and that many prosumers do believe that fanfiction has influenced them in some way. And while the response to the project was not overwhelming in terms of number of participants, this does not deny the popularity and wide reach that AO3 currently enjoys. Although the Archive of Our Own is not much of a social platform, given its lack of user fora and direct messaging outside of comments left on specific works, there are still places where interventions could theoretically be inserted.

Well I think, I'm actually in favor of or at least fine with like, you know, sometimes if an author is writing [...] the pre-notes or the end-notes, they'll include something like, this is intentionally written as an abusive relationship, it's in fiction, but if this is happening to you in real life please contact so-and-so or look at this website. Because like, these are some real warning signs of someone

gaslighting you or whatever. And I think that's really good because if you never talk about that stuff, if someone never comes across that fanfiction or whatever, and that's happening in real life, then they might not realize what's happening. But if they come across that and they're like, "Oh, this is similar to my relationship," and then they see what it's called, they see that someone's giving them more information about it, or someone they can talk to about it, I think that's good.

As demonstrated by the quote above, one way participants themselves suggested bettering fanfiction's accuracy was to continue and expand the tradition of warnings in the author's notes. This could be used to convey trigger warnings, to put general warnings that this is not meant to be reality, or even to have links to external resources. At the moment, most of these warnings are rather informal, but they can be useful. For example, as previously referenced, one author had warnings for alcohol use, as well as notes for each chapters that warned for instances of violence and other triggers, such as "Warnings for canon appropriate violence and some discussion (with a little foul language) of the sort of street level sexual harassment that tends to be aimed at women and LGBTQ people, while skipping the actual harassment" (scifigr147). Interventions could certainly be started in other places, but author's notes have the benefit of already existing, and are already being used to give additional warnings and reassurances to readers.

### ***Should it be done?***

Despite the fact that I believe future interventions could be done on archives like AO3, the question of whether they should be attempted remains. Although awareness of and interest in fanfiction has increased in recent years among both popular and academic circles, it still incurs a large amount of disdain from many people. Constance Grady, writing for Vox online, relates that "there's a special ire reserved for the particular corner of the web where people make

transformative works about the media they love — and given that this corner is primarily composed of young women, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that this ire is gendered” (Grady 2016). Grady makes a compelling argument around the reasons why fanfiction is frequently dismissed by outsiders, the reasons being various shades of sexism. However, whatever the reason may be, fanfiction prosumers are often ostracized by other fans, and that has made them somewhat defensive and protective of their work.

Any intrusions are likely to be taken badly by the prosumers, which can include both the users of the archive and the volunteers who help run the archives. Anything that limits the way people can publish or read on the archive will be rejected, and any kind of intervention that passes judgment on the content of fanfiction, or appears to, will be rejected. Fanfiction, in the opinion of the prosumers involved in this project, has mostly been a positive influence in their life. There does not, in the majority of their opinions, need to be any changes made. If changes are introduced that seek to change the way fanfiction operates, then fanfiction stops being the open-access platform that it is.

There do not need to be any changes made to fanfiction. It currently exists as a place that supplements other forms of sex education, and while it may not always be accurate, the prosumers generally understand this and react accordingly. However, if an unobtrusive intervention were designed and implemented with the help and approval of the prosumers, it could be an appropriate and useful place to help spread information about sex and safe sex.

### *How it could be done*

In particular, I would suggest future projects work from an insider's position. This can be accomplished several different ways. For example, future researchers could begin by joining or collaborating with a fanfiction-specific organization, such as the Organization for Transformative Works or Fanfiction.net, for a long term project. As these organization are created by and for fans, they represent a wealth of information about prosumers and connections to this population. This might allow researchers to create and propose a more elaborate system of author's notes, trigger warnings, and resources for prosumers about safe sex.

In addition, future researchers could potentially work with prosumers through the social media sites that also cater to them. While sites like AO3 and Fanfiction.net allow for some prosumer interaction, sites like Tumblr and Pillowfort can and do host works of fanfiction while also serving as open social arenas for prosumers to meet, discuss, and create fanfiction and fan art. Sites like these are intimidating for researchers because they exist on such a vast scale, with no guarantees that a researcher will reach a significant portion of the prosumers on the platform. However, by cultivating relationships with users who understand the territory and have significant contacts throughout the Tumblr or Pillowfort prosumer population, researchers might be able to take a more grass roots approach to a safe sex awareness campaign. Such an intervention could include items like resource lists including all the sites and resources that prosumers have used and would recommend to learn about or talk to experts about sexuality, safe sex, and other topics.

In addition to creating a more concise and standardized means of listing warnings in author notes, or organizing resources for prosumers on social media platforms, future research on this subject might benefit from cultivating partnerships between prosumers and peer-to-peer sex

education resources both online and in person. In this particular research, sites like Scarleteen.com and local Gay Straight Alliance chapters were revealed as resources used by participants. Websites like Scarleteen, Bedsider, and Planned Parenthood's Teen Talk (which can be viewed at <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/teens>), are excellent resources for prosumers to be directed to or partnered with because they specialize in making complex information about puberty, relationships, contraceptives, and consent accessible to lay populations, and because they all have discussion features where visitors are able to communicate with peers, educators, and experts in safe environments. In addition, creating and distributing lists of local in-person resources, such as local Gay Straight Alliance and Planned Parenthood chapters, might be a worthwhile intervention, giving prosumers options for online or in person research and help.

However, perhaps before interventions are planned and put into action to provide easier access to sex education resources to prosumers, more research on the nature of prosumers and fanfiction should also be done. As discussed in the section on limitations, this project collected only age and gender information. Collecting information on sexual orientation, as well as geographical and religious background, could provide a better understanding of prosumers. With a better understanding of prosumers as a population, future interventions could be better adapted to their specific needs. For example, this project and previous surveys of prosumers found that a significant minority of prosumers identify as non-heterosexual or with non-binary genders. As previously mentioned in the literature review of this project, sex education in the United States often spends little or no time on LGBTQ+ topics. However, fanfiction provides a space where prosumers are able to explore these topics, and could perhaps be expanded to include accredited resources on these topics as well.

As well as collecting more demographic information about prosumers, a better understanding of how and why they create fanfiction is also required. In addition to computer-based study, it may be efficacious for in-person research to be done with prosumers. Although surveys and technology-assisted interviews provide information, and I believe that the interviews collected in this project have provided open communication and rapport between the interviewer and interviewees, focus groups and in-person interviews might be better-equipped to encourage deeper bonds of trust between researchers and participants. This would be particularly helpful for research that includes a longer-term period of data-gathering. For example, a cohort study that followed participants as they were introduced to fanfiction or fanfiction-based interventions in order to assess changes in their knowledge of or attitudes toward sex might be easier to conduct through in-person meetings and focus groups where participants could directly compare their different experiences. In any form of future research, the key idea must be to include prosumers as a key part of every step. From deciding what issues to focus on, to what messages to disseminate, and how that dissemination should take place, without the input of prosumers the project is unlikely to succeed.

## **Conclusion**

This is, in essence, a pilot study, formative research done on a relatively small scale to shed light on a n up and coming area of research. By itself, this research is limited in many ways related to small sample size, limited questions, and limited time. However, as a springboard for future research, this project may hold value. It establishes that within this study, fanfiction prosumers believe their sexual knowledge and attitudes to be impacted by the fanfiction they create and use. It also establishes that they are hesitant to agree to future interventions designed

to change fanfiction in order to introduce more information about sexual health, both because they believe it is unnecessary for the medium, and because they dislike the idea of fanfiction's independence being curtailed. However, prosumers in this project are not entirely against the possibility of future research and interventions, and even have some ideas of their own as to how this could proceed. Therefore, this research exists as a preliminary investigation of how fanfiction can impact the sexual knowledge and attitudes of prosumers, and may serve as a guide for future research.



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## **APPENDICES**

## **Appendix 1: Informed consent form, combined survey and interview**



### **Informed Consent to Participate in Research**

Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study

**Pro # 00032871**

Researchers at the University of South Florida (USF) study many topics. To do this, we need the help of people who choose to take part in a research study. This document is called an informed consent form. Please read this information carefully and take your time making your decision. Ask the researcher to discuss this consent form with you, and please ask her to explain any words or information you do not clearly understand.

We are asking you to take part in a research study that is called Exploring Explicit Fanfiction as a Vehicle for Sex Education among Adolescents and Young Adults. The person in charge of this research study is Donna Barth. This person is called the Principal Investigator. However, other research staff may be involved and can act on behalf of the person in charge. She is being guided in this research by Dr. Nancy Romero-Daza.

The research will be conducted with an online survey. The second stage of the research involves conducting interviews through Skype. Filling out the survey does not mean that you are required to take part in an interview.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research is to explore whether and how explicit sexual material (graphic description of sex acts) in fanfiction influences the knowledge and attitude of young adults in regards to their sexual health. Fanfiction offers space for a variety of people, including adolescents, to explore sexual topics with little to no restriction. This project plans to survey and interview fanfiction readers and writers to ask their personal experiences with and perceptions of sexually explicit fanfiction.

### **Why are you being asked to take part?**

We are asking you to take part in this research study because you are between 18 and 25 years old, and you have at some time read or written fanfiction with explicit sexual material (i.e. graphic sex scenes).

### **Study Procedures**

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to:

- Complete a short online survey about your experience with and opinions about explicit sexual material in fanfiction
  - This survey should take 15-20 minutes. It will include multiple choice and open-ended questions.
  - The survey will be anonymous, and the only personal information requested for this research will be your age and gender.
  - Questions may include: How often do you read fanfiction with explicit sexual material? Do you think sexually explicit fanfiction has impacted you? and other similar questions.
- If you participate in the survey, you will also be eligible to participate in a one-time interview. This interview will last between 30 minutes and an hour. Participation is completely voluntary. This interview will expand on the questions in the survey.
  - The interview will be conducted through Skype.
  - The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed at a later date. This is done so that I can remember and present all relevant details of these interviews with as few mistakes as possible. Agreeing to participate in this research also means agreeing to audio-taping. I will inform you during the Skype call when I turn on the recording device, and you are free to withdraw consent at any time during the interview and request that the recording be destroyed.
  - Questions will include: How did you get into fanfiction, and explicit fanfiction specifically? How has explicit sexual material in fanfiction affected you? and other similar questions.
- I (Donna Barth) will be the only person involved in the interview process, but my advisor Dr. Nancy Romero-Daza may see the information from the interviews as well.
- Only I (Donna Barth), Dr. Nancy Romero-Daza, and The University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB) will have access to the audio files, transcripts, or surveys. The audio files may contain personal information that is presented in conversation. This information will be removed or changed in the transcripts and in the final thesis. The audio files and surveys may be held for up to 5 years after the Final Report is submitted to the IRB, according to the IRB's official policy. After this time, the files will be deleted from an external hard drive which will hold them in the interim.

### **Total Number of Participants**

40-50 individuals will take part in the overall study, with up to 20 people participating in interviews.

### **Alternatives / Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal**

You do not have to participate in this research study.

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to withdraw from this research at any time. There will be no penalty if you stop taking part in this study.

## **Benefits and Risks**

You will receive no benefit from this study.

This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face every day. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study.

## **Compensation**

We will not pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

## **Costs**

It will not cost you anything to take part in the study.

## **Privacy and Confidentiality**

We are required to keep your information as confidential as possible. Certain people may need to see your study records, but by law, anyone who looks at your records must keep them completely confidential. The only people who will be allowed to see these records are: Donna Barth (principal investigator), Dr. Nancy Romero-Daza (advising professor), and The University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB).

- It is possible, although unlikely, that unauthorized individuals could gain access to your responses. Confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. No guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data sent via the Internet. However, your participation in this online survey involves risks similar to a person's everyday use of the Internet. If you complete and submit an anonymous survey and later request your data be withdrawn, this may or may not be possible as the researcher may be unable to extract anonymous data from the database.
- A federal law called Title IX protects your right to be free from sexual discrimination, including sexual harassment and sexual violence. USF's Title IX policy requires certain USF employees to report sexual harassment or sexual violence against any USF employee, student or group, but does not require researchers to report sexual harassment or sexual violence when they learn about it as part of conducting an IRB-approved study. If, as part of this study, you tell us about any sexual harassment or sexual violence that has happened to you, including rape or sexual assault, we are not required to report it to the University. If you have questions about Title IX or USF's Title IX policy, please call USF's Office of Diversity, Inclusion & Equal Opportunity at (813) 974-4373.

## **Contact Information**

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, or experience an unanticipated problem, call Donna Barth at (941)567-8664, or contact by email at [dbarth@mail.usf.edu](mailto:dbarth@mail.usf.edu).

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact by email at [RSCH-IRB@usf.edu](mailto:RSCH-IRB@usf.edu).

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not let anyone know your name. We will not publish anything else that would let people know who you are. You can print a copy of this consent form for your records.

## Appendix 2: Survey questions

What is your age?

- (open answer)

What gender do you most identify with? Please write 'prefer not to answer' if you don't wish to provide this information.

- (open answer)

Did you read fanfiction between the ages of 12-18?

- Yes
- No

Did you read fanfiction with explicit sexual scenes (works rated 'E' on AO3, or sometimes 'M' or 'NC-17' in other places) between the ages of 12-18?

- Yes
- No

Has fanfiction impacted your knowledge of sex?

- Yes
- No

If so, how?

- (open answer)

Has fanfiction impacted your attitude toward sex?

- Yes
- No

If so, how?

- (open answer)

Overall, how much would you say that fanfiction of any type impacted your knowledge and attitude toward sex? (1- not at all, 2- somewhat, 3- greatly)

- 1
- 2
- 3

Do you think fanfiction generally depicts accurate sexual information (including but not limited to: discussions of consent and safety, accurate biological information, etc.)

- Yes

- No
- Sometimes

Is it important to you that fanfiction depicts accurate sexual information?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Post-Survey Page that was displayed after the survey has been submitted:

Thank you for taking the time to help further this research by taking this survey! If you would like to continue with this research, or have more to say about this subject, I am also recruiting people for interviews over Skype. Although participation in an interview is by no means required after taking this survey, I would like to talk to people about their experiences with and opinions about sexually explicit fanfiction.

If you would like to set up an interview, or have questions about this project, please contact me at [dbarth@mail.usf.edu](mailto:dbarth@mail.usf.edu) or by phone at (941)567-8664.

Interview information: Interviews will be audio-recorded for accuracy, but these files and their transcripts will only be accessible by me, my department advisor Dr. Nancy Romero-Daza, and the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (USF IRB, the organization that oversees research at the university). Interviews will be between 30-60 minutes. Names and other personal information will be changed or deleted in the final product.