

## **‘You must be new here’: Reinforcing the good fan**

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### **Abstract:**

In this article, I argue for an approach to fan culture as communities based on ‘shared assumptions’ (Hills, 2005:79) about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ fan practice. For this, I will examine the concept of reinforcing and boundary establishing practices by both fans and academia in relation to two case studies: 4chan /co/ and an academic study of a *Supernatural* slash community conflict (Brennan, 2014). By focussing on intra-fandom tensions and the position of the individual fan (see Bury et al, 2013:304), I will consider how reinforcing practices emphasise a sense of togetherness, whilst also appearing to uphold ‘internalised’ definitions of ‘normal behaviour’ as defined by ‘outside’ (Busse, 2013:80; Stanfill, 2013:121). Through this, I aim to reveal the constructed nature of the ‘good’ fan and demonstrate that focussing on downplayed concepts in fan culture such as the marginalisation of others and policing of taste, can help the field work towards an approach to fan culture that acknowledges the constructed nature of communities, and the shared assumptions hidden in both academic and fan discourse.

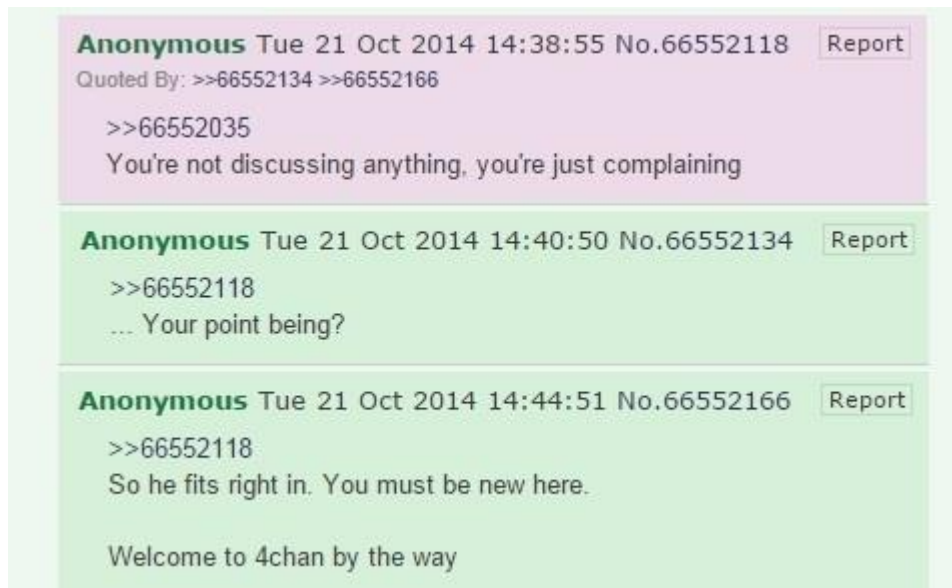
**Key Words:** fans, community, slash, participatory, policing, resistance, othering.

### **Welcome to 4chan, You Must Be New Here**

On the 21st of October 2014, a post on the 4chan Comics and Cartoons board (/co/) lamented: ‘you are not discussing anything, you are just complaining’. /co/ is one of many specific content image boards that make up 4chan.org.<sup>1</sup> Access to 4chan /co/ is public and no registration is needed for posting; users can post text and/or one picture per post anonymously, with the most active threads appearing at the top of the first page, while threads that have reached their set post-limit, or are no longer actively posted in, sag to the bottom and disappear. This particular complaint on /co/ yielded two anonymous responses, one of which included the phrase: ‘you must be new here’ (see **Figure 1**).<sup>2</sup> A quick search for

this phrase in the 4chan /co/ archives<sup>3</sup> reveals this to be an often-used reply to complaints or expressions on behaviour, taste, grammar, or unpopular opinions.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 1:** Establishing conventions of complaining



The phrase itself, whether serious or in jest, serves two functions: it reprimands the complainant for their improper behaviour, whilst simultaneously establishing the poster as a 'good' citizen of that particular community by demonstrating knowledge about /co/ board practice, culture and language. Knowledge of 'proper behaviour' is wielded by people, in this case by contributors on 4chan /co/, as 'a tool of social distinction', helping to distinguish those who belong in a community from those who do not (Kingsepp, 2006: 227). A fan community similarly operates within its own sets of rules and regulations (Thomas, 2007 online), which shift continually due to internal arguments over authenticity, taste, and displays of mastery (Jensen, 2014: 209). But they also appear rigid in their core as an 'overdrawn imitation of the dominant system' (Sandvoss, 2011: 57).

Knowledge of acceptable practice in a specific, digital community is in the first place structured by the technical and administrative rules and regulations of the website, which provide a relatively measurable way of maintaining order. For example, on /co/ there is a limit of one image upload per post, and discussing non-Western cartoons/comics is not allowed (a rule in place to bar Japanese comics and cartoons). Additionally, there are unwritten rules of conventional practice that help set and guard the imagined boundaries of a community, and help determine who belongs where. 'You must be new here' if you think it is acceptable to complain about complaining, or if you advocate behaviour that some feel doesn't fit that of the community, or if you make a statement that indicates insufficient factual knowledge of the place you are in, such as erroneously suggesting there are no 'girls on /co/' (see **Figures 2-3**).<sup>5</sup>

Underlying this structuring phenomenon are two entwined strands of thought I wish to explore in relation to present-day concepts of fan culture. Firstly, I want to consider what constitutes a fan community: how their boundaries are determined by internal and external discourses, and what the individual fan's place in this is. Secondly, I want to consider the problem of the construction of the 'good' fan through academic and fan discourses, which canonise certain fan practices and dismiss 'others'. In order to explore these two strands, I will focus on the homogenising practices within 4chan /co/, and on the othering of male slash fans in the female *Supernatural* slash fan community spannonhaven as discussed by Joseph Brennan (2014), but also on the 'moral dualism' (Hills, 2002: 144) present *within* Brennan's analysis, which labels the female slash fans as 'conservative' (Brennan, 2014: 364).

**Figure 2:** Establishing community through different displays of knowledge

**Anonymous** Thu 28 May 2015 11:23:12 No.72545212 [Report](#)  
Quoted By: >>72545973

The girl burps in the pilot.  
If she does it more often in the show, then it's a good show in my book.  
**Also by book I mean penis**

**Anonymous** Thu 28 May 2015 13:02:40 No.72545973 [Report](#)  
Quoted By: >>72546048 >>72546063 >>72546070

>>72545212  
Why is absolutely everything a sexual thing for /co/?

**Anonymous** Thu 28 May 2015 13:10:12 No.72546048 [Report](#)

>>72545973  
>for /co/

Hi friend, you must be new here.

**Anonymous** Thu 28 May 2015 13:12:44 No.72546063 [Report](#)

>>72545973

1. /co/ is not one person
2. people try to make up new fetishes all the time
3. people also like to pretend they are into weird thing just to shit up threads

**Anonymous** Thu 28 May 2015 13:13:08 No.72546070 [Report](#)  
Quoted By: >>72546154 >>72558498

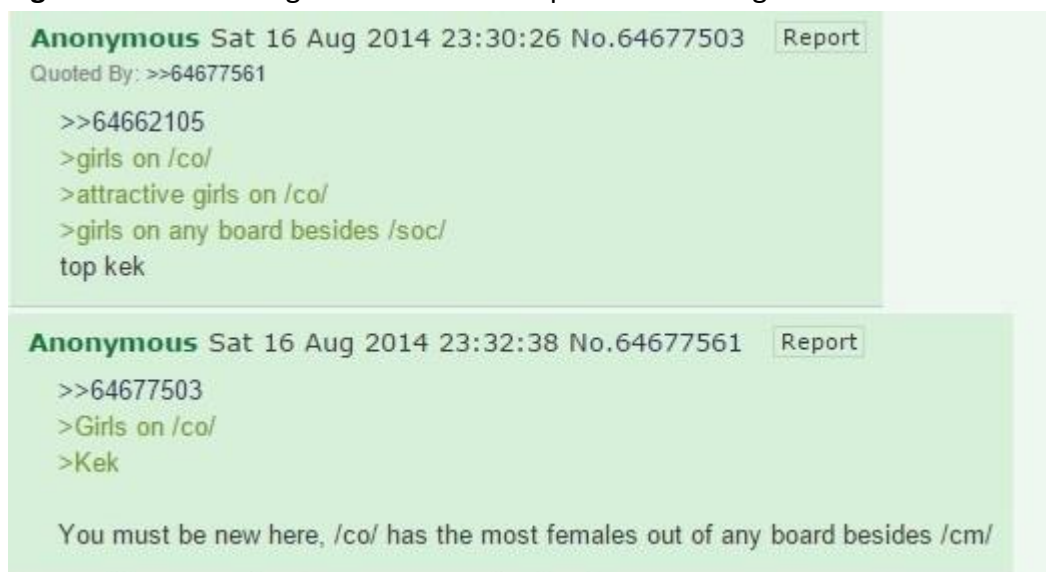
>>72545973

They are trying to be /a/ but with liberal vaules which is a very bad thing to do since those wee/a/boos are absolutely repulsive and they have no self awareness.

These two 'communities' are specifically chosen to demonstrate how the designation of a 'community', based on one fan object or space, considers fans or their communities as

‘already fully formed’ (Stanfill, 2013: 118), which can result in downplaying the fact that fan practice (or indeed the fan) is never locked within one particular community, but is always performed in relation to external and internal factors. The two communities are on different platforms (one a dedicated imageboard and one on Livejournal) based on different topics (one for Western cartoons/comics and one for *Supernatural* only), and favour different types of fan productivity (one prefers focussing on original texts, while one prefers focussing on fan-texts). However, both communities display similar admonishing and establishing practices.

**Figure 3:** Admonishing the lack of board-specific knowledge



I would like to emphasise that from this point on when I speak of a ‘(fan) community’ I consider it not just a community based around the affective relationship with a particular fan object, activity/productivity, or even a particular place (e.g. 4chan.org), but also a *community of practice* based on shared assumptions: a community constituted through an interaction of words, actions and ways of doing things, establishing a mutual relation and a ‘shared repertoire’ (Wenger, 1998: 82). A community where knowledge is ‘distributed’ between members of that community and where these codes of practice can only be ‘understood’ with the aid of this community (Jawitz, 2009: 603), but are decidedly linked to external discourses.

### **We are all individuals**

Media companies can no longer be meaningfully studied in the absence of an understanding of how they relate to their consumers. By the same token, consumers, audiences, fan communities, users, *call them what you wish*, can no longer be meaningfully understood without a better understanding of the

economic and technological contexts within which they operate (Henry Jenkins and Mark Deuze, 2008: 4 *emphasis mine*).

Presenting a broad, accurate definition of 'fan' is problematic at best, as attempts involve 'highly complex subjective' concepts of 'authenticity' and levels of engagement that vary across culture and time (Crawford, 2004: 20). The term has come to encompass something more indeterminate than the enthusiast, the audience or the user, and fan cultures are often viewed as 'instantiations of other forces', turning the fan into 'a cultural, social or political process' (Jensen, 2014: 211). As Henry Jenkins and Mark Deuze demonstrate, the line between media users, fans, or audiences is a fine one, and each individual continually exhibits a variety of levels of engagement with a media text or fan object, as well as with other individuals. These practices and preferences are not formed or performed in a vacuum, but rather through multiple discourses and (dedicated) communities.

One of the key debates in fan studies is whether the fan should be explored as an individual (Hills, 2002; Sandvoss, 2005) or as an organised community (Booth, 2010; Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992, 2006; Williamson, 2005). Paul Booth and Peter Kelly (2013) argue for fandom as 'an identity that transcends the text', which they explain as fans exhibiting the same behaviour regardless of the text they are fans of (58). It is here that we can distinguish a notion of 'collective' practice, and the focus on community as the extension and regulator of the individual fan. Following that they argue for a separation of the central text from fan identity (*ibid.*), which could risk further generalisation, and subsequent downplaying of the individual fan's negotiation of identity within the social structure of communities. However, when done carefully, and reflexively, this separation could aid scholarship in highlighting the constructed nature of fan identity and community. In order to do this, I would argue, the individual and the community should not be treated as opposites, but rather as reciprocal factors in a whole.

The obvious answer appears to lie in the middle, but may not be so straightforward. In the case and example of 4chan, online anonymous web culture is discussed predominantly in relation to 4chan's random board, /b/, or 4chan as one overall entity (see Knutilla, 2011; Whitehead & Wesch, 2012) and often in the aftermath of hacking scandals or improper behaviour (see Mendelsohn, 2014). These discussions erroneously treat 4chan as one monolithic entity representing one, generalised type of online culture. This makes sense up to a certain point: the physical platform 4chan.org operates under one set of technical rules that guide the physical means and modes of expression. These are then enforced and complemented by both administrative rules – in the form of 'Global Rules' – which apply to every 4chan board unless otherwise specified<sup>6</sup>, and by unwritten rules of convention and codes of conduct shaped by discourse.

The discourse of 4chan has a focus on the 'deviant behaviour' and 'distinctive uniform' of the subculture and on the moral panic of youth out of control (Hebdige, 2002: 93), whilst media, scholarship, and users try to define (and subsequently re-define) the cultural entity, breaking it into analytical categories of sameness/otherness that

enhance/diminish any perceived symbolic or resistive power by incorporating certain practices back into society (97)<sup>7</sup>. As with 4chan, each particular fan community consists of particular (fan) subcultures, and each has its own particular sets of rules (Jones, 2002: 21; Watson, 2002: 116-117; Booth & Kelly, 2013: 66) as well as its own particular jargon (Hellekson, 2009: 113) and its own shared rituals and traditions (Baym, 1997: 104-106; Pongsakornrunsilp & Schroeder, 2011: 308). Although these codes of conduct and values often overlap on core beliefs and practices, to equate the 'board-culture' of /b/, or /co/, with that of 4chan in general would be to equate the culture of a neighbourhood with that of an entire city.

Paul Booth (2015), in *Playing Fans*, argues convincingly that media discourse 'disciplines fans' into certain behaviours (101), which is also evident in the case of media discourse on 4chan, where users are often depicted as 'anonymous', a faceless male in a black suit and tie, with 'superior' IT-skills and an 'inferior' moral compass, thus generalising (and gendering) 4chan users into something between anti-social deviants and 'harmless monsters' (Phillips, 2014: 494-495), whilst simultaneously focussing on aspects of 'low-income youth' and 'boredom' that turn them into an (arguably) more socially acceptable, manageable issue (see Sauthoff, 2009; Olson, 2013). This dual discourse in turn informs inter-community discourse about, for example, the amount of female /co/ users, or the correct modes of expression (greentext, slang) and codes of behaviour (see **Figure 3**).

As Bronwen Thomas (2007) demonstrates, these codes of behaviour are repeated internally (and I'd add externally) until they are naturalised and gain their own authority (n.p.); they are a form of perpetual symbolic violence, a 'gentle violence' that imposes a system of meaning upon a group in a way that makes this enforcement seem legitimate and ultimately invisible to its 'victims' (see Jenkins, R., 1992: 104; Bourdieu, 2001: 1). In other words, aside from conscious adherence to the rules and regulations, individuals also unconsciously perpetuate the system of structures in place and reinforce notions of proper behaviour and practice (see Webster, 2014: 14, 2010: 611).

In this sense, 4chan can indeed be considered a singular entity based on similar practice – it can be a community of practice as well as a bounded place, and the comment 'welcome to 4chan' that accompanies the suggestion the poster 'must be new' (see **Figure 1** above) suggests that this perspective is partially accurate. However, there are approximately 60 different boards within 4chan.org, each with their own board-specific culture and subcultures and sets of rules and conventions that create a sense of 'togetherness' that help to establish individual fan identities (see Hill, 2014). And in this mode of reasoning, the identity of the 'comic and cartoon fan' on /co/ is separated from its individual historical past and becomes regulated by the technical, administrative and unwritten rules and part of the whole. The individual is lost, and with them our tether to non-normative practice and external discourse, thus increasing the risk of reaffirming traditional discourses.

The aforementioned middle-ground, then, lies in the recognition of individual identities, as well as in careful consideration of the constructed nature of the logical and

natural boundaries of any 'community' that is being mapped. The individual's place is not on the opposite side of the debate, but in the middle of the communities they construct and are constructed by. This is why I believe it is essential for fan studies to use an approach to fan culture where the fan is not locked inside their particular community (Stanfill, 2013), and where the concept of a 'community' includes a demonstrated awareness of the 'imaginary' sense of togetherness, which is essential for a community to operate (see Hill, 2014: 10).

### **An(other) sense of community**

Presenting a broad definition of a fan 'community' is equally problematic, as it involves a 'nexus of legal, political, cultural, spatial, and intimate and affective ties and boundaries' (Gatson & Zweerink, 2004: 180). 'Community' refers to a congregation at a designated place, based on shared observable practice, as suggested in the initial sociological concept given by Robin Hamman (1997). This definition appears appealing because it neatly sums up measurable and essential factors that denote a community as (1) a group of people (2) who share social interaction (3) and some common ties between themselves and the other members of the group (4) and who share an area for at least some of the time (n.p.). However, this concept does not account for the community as imagined and experienced by the individual. Because the focus predominantly lies on 'interaction, common ties, and place' (Bird, 2003: 32), it downplays how the term 'community' also evokes a sense of togetherness that makes individuals identify themselves as members of that particular community, regardless of where they are and who they interact with.

To this end, Rosemary Hill (2014) speaks of an 'imaginary community', which allows for the fact that 'community' is not based on interaction, common ties and a space, but also is an imagined 'ideal' (13). Hill's term is based on Benedict Anderson's (1991) nation-building concept of the 'imagined community', where individuals 'imagine' togetherness, facilitated by mass media (see Baym, 1998: 38). Hill's concept, however, shifts this idea from nation to fandom by adding 'the sense of community that people have' without questioning 'whether this community "really" exists' (13). As such, it both does not have to refer to a physical space or place, and it accepts the individual feeling of community, even if it is 'in contradiction with the experiences of community members' (ibid.).

The sense of community as joined and together is strong, and becomes visible to media/scholars/fans through practice, specifically – as 'difference is often not tolerated' (Hill, 2014: 13) – when an individual's practice does not align with that of others, and is subsequently regulated. This can be seen in Joseph Brennan's (2014) discussion of shared assumptions in two assumedly predominantly female Livejournal communities on what constitutes proper written male/male gay sex scenes, as well as what constitutes being a 'good' fan (365). When the '*Supernatural* slash community' (depicted as a sense of togetherness based on the shared practice of male/male pairings based on characters from the television series *Supernatural*) was faced with 'difference' in the form of gay male tastes, such as Brennan's own written fan-work, as well as that of other male slash

producers, the subsequent conflict created a situation where the writing of male/male explicit sex by gay men was ridiculed by the (predominantly female) slash community as being unrealistic (364).

In this case, the 'knowledge' of what constitutes both 'good explicit slash' and 'good writing' is used to establish and declare difference. The non-conforming outsiders are identified, publicly ridiculed (see Brennan, 2014), and marked as 'other', as those 'who do not have the right to participate within fandom' (Hunt, 2003: 186). As with the simple rebuttal 'you must be new here' on 4chan /co/, this act of publicly denouncing difference, and subsequent 'othering', serves the dual function of admonishing the 'other' for non-conformity, whilst establishing the 'togetherness' of the persons performing this othering, and demonstrating to other how to be a 'good' fan.

**Figure 4:** Establishing proper responses

**SeraSera** Fri 17 Oct 2014 01:40:50 No.66431381 [Report](#)  
Quoted By: >>66431407 >>66431425 >>66431429 >>66431432 >>66431478  
It's just one fucking page guys.  
ONE. FUCKING. PAGE

**Anonymous** Fri 17 Oct 2014 01:41:30 No.66431407 [Report](#)  
>>66431381  
yup

**Anonymous** Fri 17 Oct 2014 01:42:03 No.66431425 [Report](#)  
>>66431381  
watch out  
the janitor might block you for having a negative opinion about this thread

**Anonymous** Fri 17 Oct 2014 01:42:06 No.66431429 [Report](#)  
>>66431381  
you must be new here

**horsie** Fri 17 Oct 2014 01:42:12 No.66431432 [Report](#)  
>>66431381  
Yeah, but it's a fucking great page.  
How to draw manga was one of his best recent gags.

[View Same](#) [Google](#) [iqdb](#) [SauceNAO](#) [↓](#) i come from a world you may not (...) .jpg, 86KiB, 726x771

**Anonymous** Fri 17 Oct 2014 01:43:36 No.66431478 [Report](#)  
>>66431381  
No you don't understand





This form of othering is not an isolated case. Lucy Bennett (2013) discusses this process in relation to a particular group of R.E.M fans who discuss their attraction to the band members, dubbed 'droolers', who are thought to be incapable of 'rational' and 'respectful' discussion (221-222). Additionally, this practice also resembles the behavioural adjustments that downplay 'emotional outbursts', which Bury (2005) discusses in *Cyberspaces of Their Own*, as well as the displays of emotion that are gendered and then dismissed in female *Twilight* fans (see Hills, 2012; Busse, 2013), as well as the all-caps complaint of a poster on /co/ during a frenzied outburst over a *Homestuck* update (see **Figure 4** above).

Brennan considers this extreme, regulative feedback in two ways: first, through Sharon Cumberland's (1999) concept of 'displacement of affection', he considers whether the fan commitment to the fan community is larger than the commitment to the original object of affection (*Supernatural* and/or slash) that led them to the community (Brennan, 2014: 367). Then, he returns to Camille Bacon-Smith's (1992) work on female science-fiction fan communities, to consider how specific fan works are meant to be circulated within certain communities instead of the mainstream (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 45), and that the tastes and practices of gay male slash fans are considered 'other', and thus are not accepted in the female 'mainstream' *Supernatural* slash communities.

Both these reasons resonate with Hill's concept of an imaginary community, highlighting that communities may appear to operate as a whole, and even strive to appear as a whole (seen in Brennan's referrals to a 'shared commitment', or /co/'s use of the phrase 'you must be new here'), but that meaning-creation is still a matter of individual disposition (Brennan's sense of community differs from that of others). It also highlights that these conflicts reveal a multitude of shared assumptions about what constitutes being a 'good' fan, and that the meaning of a post to an online community is (to a certain extent) a construct of pre-determined concepts of what constitutes correct/incorrect practice in this community.

### **Constructions instead of conservatism**

Fan activity and productivity in the form of text (fan work and discussion) are arguably the most examined aspect of fan culture, as they are the most visible, used and lasting form. This only increases as the Internet becomes more available across the world, and develops into a more end-user-friendly 'single global information space' (Berners-Lee, 2000: 4). This has allowed a different type of participatory culture to develop: a networked media culture, which is often seen as an empowering and intrinsically democratic force, or as a means for offsetting social inequities and making it possible for a diversity of voices to be heard (the Janissary Collective, 2011: 258; Mark Deuze and Henry Jenkins, 2008: 7; Hanmer, 2012: 611). However, I would emphasise that 'popular participative culture', or indeed fan communities, cannot be labelled as being either progressive or conservative, as this depends entirely on the relations of power inside a certain field (see Williamson, 2005: 94).

Although societies all over the world have become increasingly connected, ‘this convergence is not [automatically] replicated culturally or ideologically’ (Herbert, 2005: 132), which is at least partially evident when visiting any online platform and reading through the disputes over quality, authenticity, or knowledge. As demonstrated, grouping individuals together under a single communal denominator (slash fans, comic books fans, *Doctor Who* fans, etc.) can easily lead to that community turning into an analytical representative of all individuals in there, making the diversity of fan identity or practice harder to acknowledge. This practice, as demonstrated, is not just prevalent in academia or the media, but also in the communities themselves, as members seek to strengthen their individual sense of community and togetherness.

For example, the use of the phrase ‘you must be new here’ on /co/ in reply to the complaint: ‘It’s just one fucking page guys’<sup>8</sup> (see **Figure 4**) neatly establishes that (on this specific /co/ thread) an over-a-year-awaited ‘one page’ addition to the webcomic *Homestuck* is significant, and warrants the response the /co/ *Homestuck* fans and anti-fans produce. The other responses run along similarly (mild) admonishing lines of ‘no you don’t understand’ and ‘yeah but it’s a fucking great page.’ Another example is the responses to the lament ‘why is absolutely everything a sexual thing for /co/?’ (see **Figure 2**). The response once again suggests the complainant ‘must be new’, but this is crafted so it specifically relates to the wider ‘community of 4chan’ as established in external and internal discourses (see **Figure 2**): the fragment ‘for /co/’ is singled out from the complainant’s text as the faulty factor, and the (greentext) implication is made that everything is always sexual for all of 4chan through ‘proper’ practice.

A second response takes a more explicatory approach, pointing out that ‘/co/ is not one person’ and that a lot of the practices involving sexualisation are merely performative. This sense of reality of community-related behaviour also appears in a third response that suggests /co/’s performative sexualising of everything is an attempt to mimic practice from /a/, 4chan’s Japanese cartoons and comics board. The third poster considers this trend a bad development, drawing a clear sense of difference between /co/ and the ‘other’ /a/ by alluding to /co/’s ‘liberal values’ and suggesting that posters from the community of /a/ ‘are absolutely repulsive and ... have no self awareness [sic]’.

These discussions demonstrate that the actions of an individual operating within a community are determined by regulation and convention, but also that there is a distinct level of knowledge and awareness of this regulation of practice, and a subsequent choice to favour the sense of togetherness. It is important to note that regulation in and of itself does not have a particular moral value, even if the individuals who exercise it do. The distinction between /co/ and /a/ depicts /co/ as better (more self-aware and liberal), but the distinction itself it is not inherently moral. As such, denoting fan community practices as either progressive or conservative, thus assigning moral values to them, is risky, as it masks the value systems used to construct the concept of that community in the first place.

This can be seen in Brennan’s (2014) second *Supernatural* slash fan case study, where he aims to reveal ‘decidedly dystopic and conservative pockets of online fandom’ (2).

This case study involved negative feedback on an article in a magazine aimed at gay men (*DNA*) which intended to celebrate slash, featuring a slash-manip of a gay, male slash fan, mythagowood, but was anonymously criticised as being ‘improper’ fan behaviour. Slash-manips are digital photo-manipulations, which for slash fan culture often means pasting the head of a character/actor on the body of porn actors, or people performing sexual acts. The oeuvre of manip by mythagowood depicts male/male gay sex in a variety of extremity, including, but not exclusive to, genital and bodily contortion, or implied sexual violence or punishment with the explicit aim to purposefully skirt ‘parameters of taste and acceptability’ (Brennan, 2014: 365).

Finding resistance – in the form of negative, anonymous fan discourse on spannonhaven – Brennan perceives a culture of oppression within the slash community as a whole. He explains this as a signifier of a force that homogenises slash, compelling works to adhere to the slash community’s dominant tastes, suggesting that ‘the slash community’ actively attempts to suppress depictions of genuine homosexual acts (Brennan, 2014: 376). Although Brennan (2014) uses a journal that exists specifically to ridicule other people’s work anonymously as an example, he fails to consider that (although maybe not representative of ‘general’ netiquette), journals like these are arguably representative of *another* form of fan culture, possibly a subset of anonymous web culture, which is both an active and unconscious way of circulating communal tastes through a form that is active critique. Instead, Brennan links the types of slash productivity under discussion to the ‘often overlooked influence of gay pornography on slash and its creators’ and speaks in particular of gay male slashers for whom gay pornography ‘often plays an important role in the construction of gay male identity’ (365).

His argument is built through Elizabeth Woledge’s (2006: 103) statement that slash texts typically don’t refer to modern day homosexual identities or politics, and explains that he has observed male slashers being frustrated by this (Brennan, 2014: 375). When Woledge says this, however, she is explicitly looking at her concept of ‘intimatopia’, which explores concepts of intimacy in fantasy and sci-fi slash fanfiction that parallel those in published sci-fi and fantasy stories i.e. she examines slash as a literary genre. Busse (2001) too mentions that the ‘homosexual relationship signals a displaced idealized homosexual one’ in favour of true love or emotional connection over sexual objectification (211). This is the crux of Brennan’s argument: male (gay) slashers seek to relate their identity in slash works and slash communities, whereas female fans seek intimacy and homosocial settings, which Brennan labels ‘conservative’, arguing that women ‘would prefer gay men and their slash practice continue to go unnoticed’ (Brennan, 2014: 376).

It is noticeably resonant in Brennan’s arguments that to him slash fans are either (conservative) women who treasure the ‘fantasy’ of homosexuality, or men who (liberally) prefer more accurate homosexual acts (even if the slash manip aren’t particularly ‘realistic’). In creating this moral (and gendered) dualism, he effectively dismisses how these ‘othering’ practices relate to the sense of community felt by fans and his own sense of community. He admonishes others for not being ‘good’ fans, while they do the same to him.

As such, he fails to recognise that his disillusionment with slash fans' resistance to 'other' tastes comes from the fact that the ideal of slash fandom as a community, liberally opposing mainstream heteronormative ideology, is constructed in the first place.

### **The enemy of my enemy is not my friend**

The concept of fans resisting mainstream culture can be traced back to earlier fan studies where Henry Jenkins (1992) refers to Bourdieu's (1984) socio-economic model of 'taste' and cultural capital in his discussion of fan culture as a 'scandalous category' of individuals, to legitimise fan practice as well as popular media as a form of academic study (see Gray et al., 2007: 3). Jenkins suggested that fans are placed in that deviant category for not displaying 'proper taste' (1992: 14-15), suggesting that the deviation from 'proper taste' found in the active re-working of texts without proper 'cultural status' (52) constituted a form of (popular) resistance against dominant cultural norms and hierarchies (18).

Although justifying fandom as a legitimate topic of study is no longer required (mostly), as fan culture has become more visible and certain aspects more acceptable, the notion that particular fan practices and works that are not deemed 'acceptable' by wider society are subversive has lingered in accounts explaining fan culture up to today. For example, Mathijs and Sexton (2011), when talking about slash fanfiction, mention its 'subversive' character (58) as a whole, and point out it 'challenges taste norms and industry practices' (222). Similarly, 4chan is discussed as a whole in relation to anonymity and online web culture and is described as a 'culture of dissent' with the potential to subvert (Knutilla, 2011: n.p.).

Not all scholarship embraces this concept of resistance: Milly Williamson (2005) argues against the idea of fandom working contra mainstream, comparing academic and fannish readings to highlight the fact that discrepancies don't necessarily imply one side to be 'wrong' or 'right' (68). Rather, she suggests that fans respond to 'subtext' inherent in the source text, i.e. the fannish reading is actively encouraged by the producers (ibid.). Regardless of whether this 'subtext' was purposely put there to reach a particular group of fans or not, the notion of subtext overturns the 'rebellious fan'.

Williamson also offers the idea that subtext may be a possible explanation for the large parts of participatory fandom that do not 'rest on "conversion" or "compulsive identification"', instead offering a clever, meta-savvy fan (2005: 69) who constructs a 'virtual star' (see Gwenllian Jones, 2000), a character that has more meaning than the flesh and blood actor playing its part (Williamson, 2005: 69). In other words, Williamson's fan reacts to (perceived) parts they like, keeping those close, whilst discarding parts they do not care for. This opens up the concept of a fan community to the notion of an individual fan's sense of community based on shared assumption, but both accounts still consider fan culture an ongoing battle with external forces, whether in the form of resisting dominant hierarchical narrative structures or unmasking subtextual codes inherent in the source text.

Paul Booth and Peter Kelly try to integrate the fan within dominant culture, suggesting that the increased visibility of fan culture causes a certain ‘mainstreaming’ of fans and particular fan identities, and even into a ‘more acceptable cultural identity’ for fans (Booth & Kelly, 2013: 69). This resonates with Paul Booth’s (2010) earlier work on fandom, which also focuses on fans as a community, suggesting that ‘being a fan means identifying with a media text’, arguing that ‘chances are good that everyone is a fan of *something*’, and that ‘the boundaries between cult and mass cultures have blurred’ (20, emphasis in original).

Generally speaking this appears the case: ‘fan culture’ as a marketable concept has become increasingly visible and popular (see Sullivan, 2012: 195; Recuero et al., 2012: 3; Wiltse, 2004: 3; Russo, 2013: 451), and certain aspects of fandom have become more visible thanks to technological developments. Media companies even encourage self-identification as a ‘fan’ (Morrissey, 2013: 3.3), resulting in individual identities becoming increasingly tied-up with specific types of media products, social networks and ways of consumption and expression. In other words, more people have become aware of others being fans and of fan cultures. But there are still two problems with this: one, the ‘blurring boundaries’ may be true for some fan objects, fan identities, or some particular fan practices – often the ones associated with males – but this is certainly not true for all types, as Kristina Busse convincingly argues (see Busse, 2013: 75).

Similarly, some original ‘cult’ niches may have been assimilated, appropriated or incorporated into popular culture, but there are still spaces out there inaccessible to media users without specific knowledge, or without a different Information Technology skill-set – just as there are media users with tastes or behaviours that are not ‘mainstreamed’ and therefore not acceptable, such as mythagowood’s slash-manips. For example, the HBO television series *Game of Thrones* has mass mainstream appeal, with many people who watch and enjoy it posting *Game of Thrones* memes on Facebook and Instagram, or posting YouTube videos and maybe even looking up theories about what will happen next. They can be open and unashamed about their casual fandom because this is the kind of ‘fan’ who has become normalised in the mainstream. But is this is not the same kind of fan who has 10,000 posts on westeros.org.

Another example would be being a *Captain America* fan, which no longer holds ‘basement-dwelling’, ‘anti-social’ (Jenkins, 1992: 10) connotations now that the Captain has been re-imagined in mainstream sci-fi/action movies featuring popular mainstream actors. Admitting to being a *Homestuck* fan will probably be met with less recognition. Admitting to being a *One Direction* fan will probably be met with less understanding – all depending on age, gender or even which ‘pairing’ you support (or considering that at the time of writing one member left the band, whether you still are a *One Direction* fan at all). These differences suggest individual identities and fan-object relationships cannot be dismissed for the social or political processes of the whole (or vice versa).

Second, if everyone is a fan of something, then age, gender, race, language, IT-skills, socio-economic origin, all the factors contributing to an individual’s identity before they

even participate in a community, are incredibly diverse – suggesting an even more pressing need to consider marginalisation and ‘othering’ within fan communities. Even if many of these qualities cannot be mirrored as readily, and in the same fashion, due to the ‘invisibility’ of the body, this does not mean we cannot see them online in practice (Bury, 2003: 271). The body still signifies these things, but uses other means, such as linguistics, to express them (ibid.). When it comes to admonishing fans for their behaviour, as seen in Brennan’s experiences in the *Supernatural* slash communities, this practice partially comes from a degree of awareness of what fan behaviour looks like and *should* look like, following their own sense of community, and their own sense of what this should be (even when faced with evidence to the contrary). This sense of the ‘good’ fan, I argue, is as much a social construct as the image of the ‘bad’ fan that Henry Jenkins sought to dispel, and is just as much a threat to individual fan identities and acknowledgement of diversity in fan culture theory.

### **The good fan**

Both the meta-savvy fan and the resistant fan are still relatively faceless parts of a community that is constructed through academic discourse, while the existence of disciplining commentary such as ‘you must be new here’ suggests that these communities consist of individuals constantly working to uphold their sense of status quo to each other and to outsiders. Online media coverage has not only given the fan a more explicit identity, but has also more rigidly categorised fans, which has a ‘disciplining effect... forcing fans to perform in particular styles, and deepening their sense of shame when they don’t ‘fit in’ (Booth & Kelly, 2013: 66). Contributions that match the consensus are allowed, while ones that critique are not: which is a result (and cause) of the ‘sense’ of community as structured through internal and external discourse. For online, text-based, (semi)anonymous communities – such as 4chan /co/, slash fanfiction communities, YouTube channels etc. – this translates into the following: texts that reflect the narrative, artistic or behavioural style dominant in that community (or setting, issues and characterisation) are more popular, while texts that deviate from that are effectively ‘othered’ through a variety of (self)regulations.

An example of this problem can be found in Booth and Kelly’s (2013) discussion about younger and older fans in *Doctor Who* fandom. Their research into the *Doctor Who* fan-world found them often ‘welcoming to new voices, new experiences, and new perspectives’ (62). This may certainly be true for the mainstreamed aspects of fandom, i.e. acceptable conference talk, visiting the *Doctor Who* set, etc., but I believe that this only holds true as long these new voices and perspectives remain *within the boundaries of ‘acceptable’ practice*. Considering Booth and Kelly’s earlier statements about fan-behaviour transcending (fan) text, it is important to realise this works both ways, i.e. to what extent is the *Doctor Who* fandom happy and open about things that are not more of the same? In

communities dedicated to *Doctor Who* slash, how accepting would they be if mythagowood expanded his work to include the actors that play the Doctor?

As certain aspects of fan identity are becoming more acceptable or even 'actively invoked' (Busse, 2013: 77), it raises an issue of how much freedom there is (and we allow) to be 'different' inside this regulated fan culture, as well as an issue of how boundaries are policed in relation to individual degrees of fannish practice. Members of pre-existing *Game of Thrones* fan communities tightened their rules and regulations to set themselves apart from this casual, acceptable mainstream fan. Equally, since the popularity of the *Avengers* film franchise and mass production of (mostly) DC-related superhero series, /co/ is regularly filled with disputes about fans who have not read any comics (nor want to) coming on /co/ wishing to discuss the films/series. The word 'casual' is used as a common derogatory term on /co/ to describe 'bad' fans and suggests that the definition of a 'good' /co/ fan involves at least having read some American superhero comics.

Of course, the definition of the 'good' fan in fan studies is equally as complex as that of 'the fan' and depends entirely on which particular fan (community) one encounters. The danger lies in both academic and fan discourses canonising the 'good' fan as someone who holds all the positive qualities of being a fan, such as desirable levels of affect and 'sustained viewer interest and commercial viability', whilst downplaying undesirable, disturbing, or problematising aspects, such as infighting, marginalisation, or improper tastes. Additionally, by dismissing how the 'organised active fan' or the 'mainstreamed fan' is partially an artificial construct, fan studies theory risks ignoring a wide variety of fan activity and practice. This can be seen in the perpetuation of the concept of slash as being just Western fanfiction (e.g. Jenkins, 1992; Brooker, 2002; Bury, 2004; Sandvoss, 2005; Lothian et al., 2007; Tosenberger, 2008; Scodari, 2012), the concept of undesirable fan behaviour being gendered as feminine (see Hills, 2012; Busse, 2013; Hill, 2014) and the structuring of communities through these discourses (see Booth, 2015).

The affective relationship to the fan-object may be positive or negative (Gray, 2005: 841), and often is merely a temporal node on a vast spectrum. As such, there are fan communities that exist purely to point out 'bad' work and display 'no scruples about hunting down and exposing' what they deem to be poor quality (Thomas, 2011: 14-15). The dedicated Livejournal community, weepingcock, which Joseph Brennan encountered, is one of those. Their sense of togetherness comes from a strong assumption of what (their) fandom should look like, and their reinforcing practices fuel academic and fan discourses, which in turn shape fan communities (practices and identities) into a form of canonisation, or 'ritualisation' (Booth, 2015: 124).

Communities such as 4chan /co/ both revel in their zero tolerance attitude towards difference, while simultaneously shifting their notions of what is 'good' or 'bad' constantly and seemingly without discernible reason. This practice is not new, for example, Will Brooker notes the pleasures of the *Mystery Science Theatre 3000* principle of watching a favourite text together whilst being sarcastic about it (Brooker, 2002: 35). As I have argued throughout this article, these communities are also not limited to one specific space: Sarah

Harman and Bethan Jones (2014) demonstrate this when they discuss the concept of ‘an ironic, even guilty, fandom’ (952) in their critical study of *50 Shades of Grey* anti-fans who take pleasure in the ‘bad’ quality of the text and expressing this on social media such as Twitter and Tumblr.

These types of communities demonstrate that homogenising practice is performative: ‘the online critique’ is not just there for ‘entertainment value’ and as active or unconscious policing, it is also significant for the recognition it receives by peers (see Andrejevic, 2008: 37-38). This critique establishes the poster as a ‘good’ fan. Regardless of what the concept of ‘good’ holds in a particular community, the good fan knows ‘what is expected of them’ and subsequently develops ‘habits or conventions of behaviour which fit these expectations’ (Livingstone, 2005: 19) and encourages others to do the same. They operate on an individual sense of community, on shared assumptions, and the ‘ritualisation’ of their own practice through internal and external discourses, meaning the ‘good’ fan requires constant validation and reinforcement to maintain its notion of legitimacy.

### **Good conceptualisation through horrible behaviour**

There is an opportunity here to draw a parallel to Suzanne Scott’s (2012) ‘fanboy auteur’. Scott (2012) draws on Geoffrey Long’s (2007) metaphor of a transmedia story being a communicative ‘*pas de deux* between storyteller and audience’ (Long, 2007: 56). She expands upon this concept by warning that the transmedia storyteller, or fanboy auteur is a (often male) figure in a ‘leading’ role, guiding the audience through the right steps of engaging with and consuming a particular media text. In other words, the fanboy auteur engages with the fans and establishes boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable practice and meaning. Scott also draws on Kristina Busse (2007) to warn us that we cannot simply accept the existence of one (fanboy) auteur leading us without questioning why a different reading or practice is not acceptable (Scott, 2012: 50). Although Scott’s warning relates specifically to fans of the transmedia parable and doesn’t actively consider the fact that there are also fans who ignore or deny elements (see Bennett, 2013) of the source text – and by transmedia extension that of the fanboy auteur – either through not engaging in transmedia practises or through ‘selecting’ bits (see Williamson, 2005: 70), it does carry weight when considering mainstreamed acceptable fan behaviour.

The parallel I wish to draw here is to the reinforcing practices within fan communities as led by dominant fans, admins, mods and anonymous comments. This type of ‘communal effort’ (Booth, 2010) does not limit itself to one fandom or one type of fan productivity, instead transcending fan-object-specific boundaries in order to establish others, such as mastery (in art or writing) or knowledge, morality, aesthetics etc. In *Digital Fandom* Booth (2010) argues the concept of ‘communal re-imagining’: producing texts that are unfinished networked works, which is ultimately the result of an intra-textual group-project (43). Communal re-imagining happens through the input and critique a work receives, which shapes future contributions and teaches fans to adhere to ‘good taste’. This



too is shown in, for example, Bury's (2005) work where she discusses the ways fans in the communities she examined display calm, rational behaviour to distinguish themselves with from 'undesired behaviour', such as (in her particular fandom's case) sexism, aggressive criticism or emotional outbursts (13). This way, boundaries are erected and a community is created not in terms of 'fan affect', but in terms of a 'policed set of beliefs' (Sandvoss, 2011: 60), i.e. shared assumptions visible through practice. Fans wield knowledge, based on disposition and on these shared assumptions, to show each other where texts, other fans and practices belong.

Knowledge in this context does not automatically equal 'truth' or indeed any moral value. There is an emphasis on the importance of the 'exchange of knowledge between different segments of the community' (Jenkins, 1992: 7) as it equals 'prestige, reputation, [and] power' (Jenkins, 2006: 125). The act of admonishing and critiquing 'those who claim mastery but don't really have it' (Jensen, 2014: 209) takes on a more complex meaning when considering that the ones 'correcting' behaviour are the fans who support the more 'dominant' views as ritualised through external/internal discourse. The fanboy auteur also lives in dominant fans, or fans who have established themselves as knowledgeable, respectable and altogether 'good' fans who reinforce the notions of 'proper' practice, and fans and scholars should be equally weary following their lead without critique.

Instead, by focusing on homogenising behaviour as expressed through the 'othering' of fans that do not conform to unwritten rules and codes of behaviour of communities they participate in, fan studies as a field can reveal regulation and practice that is perceived as natural not just in fandom, but within fan studies itself. The 'ideal' community and the sense of community play an important role in this, as demonstrated by both /co/'s use of the phrase 'you must be new here' and Brennan's negative experiences of particular slash fan communities, as well as his analysis of these experiences.

While the consideration of fan culture in terms of mainstreamed practice and fan identity acknowledges that some forms of fan culture have (been) moved into wider popular culture, fan studies still struggles to differentiate between the wide variety of activities and occupants. The fan is increasingly featured in both media and scholarship, as well as increasingly knowledgeable and 'aware' of their own representations, and fan studies as a field is already benefitting from a variety of studies that take this into account (see Bennett, 2013, 2014; Harman & Jones, 2013; Busse 2013; Chin & Morimoto, 2013). As such, I believe the field needs to move away from its own constructed concept of 'the fan community' and 'fan practice', and persist in working towards a framework that incorporates otherness (in practice *but also in language and culture*) without celebrating this otherness as automatically subversive. It is time to consider all aspects of fan culture, which includes both the 'good' and the 'bad', and consider moving towards a renewed awareness of the value systems scholars have in place when analysing fans and fan communities.

### **Bibliographical Note:**

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## Notes:

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- 1 <http://boards.4chan.org/co/>
- 2 <https://archive.moe/co/thread/66551417/#66552118>
- 3 archive.moe was the main source for /co/ related archival material. However, due to server error the archive was closed October 2015. Archival duties have been taken over by desustorage.org; at the time of this publication they are still working to import /co/ data from archive.moe.
- 4 <https://archive.moe/co/search/text/you%20must%20be%20new%20here/>
- 5 <https://archive.moe/co/thread/72535901/#72545212> +  
<https://archive.moe/co/thread/64660209/#64677561>
- 6 <http://www.4chan.org/rules>
- 7 Special thanks to Paul Booth for bringing this perspective to my attention.
- 8 <https://archive.moe/co/thread/66425159/#q66431381>