The 'Fanfic Lens': Fan Writing's Impact on Media Consumption

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Abstract

Scholarship frames fanfiction authors as inhabiting a complex double role as 'prosumers', both consuming commercial entertainment products and critically reinterpreting them in their own creative output. What has been overlooked are the ways in which fanfiction changes consumer behaviour beyond the moment and the spaces of fan engagement. I argue that even when approaching a completely new piece of entertainment media, fanfiction authors exhibit specific patterns of consumption shaped by their experience of agency, and habitual resistance against source texts, in fan writing. I propose that by adopting an authorial role, fan writers develop a lasting fandom-sensitive attitude I term the 'Fanfic Lens', which can be understood as a specific set of literacy skills gained from socialisation into fan communities. Using empirical participant data generated through an online survey and semi-structured interviews with young adult fanfiction authors, I identify four ways in which fanfiction may shape its authors' experience of media consumption. Building on these, I investigate how the 'prosumer' role of fanfiction authors is actualised in practice, calling for increased attention to its complexity and variability.

Keywords: fanfiction authors, digital writing, prosumers, literacy, consumer behaviour

Introduction

The internet has facilitated a multitude of ways audiences can engage with popular culture, opening doors to new productive and networked literacy practices. Rather than being consumed passively, popular media serve as inspiration for creative co-production for their recipients. Online users frequently appropriate and remix entertainment media and circulate their works online, as theorised in the concept of *participatory culture* (Jenkins 1992, 2006, 2019). A salient example of such participatory engagement is fanfiction – user-generated narrative content based on entertainment media such as novels, games, films, or television series (e. g., Hellekson and Busse 2006, 2014; Coppa 2017; Black 2008; Pugh 2005; Aragon and Davis 2019). Its authors, a substantial subset of which are estimated to be children, adolescents and young adults,[1] transform narratives; for example, by omitting unloved plot points or expanding side-characters' backstories, and share their works online with a like-minded fan community in 'affinity spaces' (Gee 2004, 2018).

Fanfiction holds empowering potential to reflect one's own tastes and interpretations, and to disrupt normative ideologies by inscribing more diverse perspectives through what Ebony Elizabeth Thomas calls 'restorying' (2019: 10). This provides young fan authors with valuable identities as creators in their own right (Black 2005). Within the last two decades, fanfiction has entered the mainstream and online archives have become high-activity hubs of digital storytelling. One of the most popular fanfiction repositories, *Archive of Our Own* (commonly abbreviated to AO3), founded by the scholar and fan collaborative *Organisation for Transformative Works* (OTW), hosts over 10 million stories as of early 2023. The impact of digital technology on literacy practices is unprecedented (Coiro, Knobel et al. 2008: 2f) and difficult to estimate (see Rebora, Boot et al. 2021 for an overview). In reference to fanfiction, researchers have suggested superlatives such as the 'fastest-growing form of writing in the world' (Mirmohamadi 2014: 5), or 'probably one of the most widely read genres of fiction today' (Garcia 2016: 353). Literature has, in any case, never been produced or read more than it is in today's digital landscape (Kraxenberger and Lauer 2022: 463).

Reading and writing practices, too, have changed significantly under the influence of digitisation, opening up from a read-only to a read/write culture (Lessig 2008). Digital literacy practices such as fanfiction have been characterised as sharing a new 'ethos' that is 'more participatory, collaborative, and distributed, and less "published", less "author-centric", and

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[1] As most fanfiction hosting websites are not transparent about user statistics, no comprehensive data on demographics is available. Amateur statisticians determined the biggest age group on fanfiction.net to be between 12 and 18 years old, on archiveofourown.com between 16 and 29 (Sendlor 2010; Centreoftheselights 2013). This might prove especially true for source media in the Young Adult genre. These numbers are generally in agreement with survey-based studies such as Duggan 2020, which found that a majority of *Harry Potter* fanfiction authors are school-aged to university-aged. However, these can only be approximations, as the mentioned sources rely on self-reporting or evaluations of user's profiles, in which age can be omitted.

less "individual"' (Knobel and Lankshear 2014: 98). Importantly, fanfiction authors engage both with traditional and digital storytelling on a regular basis and are keenly aware of the differences; this raises the question whether online prosumer behaviour within this new ethos affects their engagement with the commercial entertainment industries. With regard to the focus of this study this means: Do fanfiction authors consume traditionally published media differently than other consumers?

The positionality of participants in this practice, too, has been reconsidered. Adopting the term 'prosumer', first coined by Alvin Toffler (1980), a portmanteau of 'produce' and 'consume' alluding to the hybrid role of participatory media fans, Henry Jenkins (2006) describes such creative and collaborative interaction with popular media. Related concepts such as 'produser' (Bruns 2008) or 'wreader' (Landow 1997) similarly highlight a hybridity inherent in these roles. However, despite frequent references to the prosumer in scholarship, there is not much empirical data exploring how the concept relates to real-life matters. Fan studies specifically still lack research on authors' subjective experiences of their complicated part in culture production as fan-critics and consumer-producers. I therefore add a second question: What can be extrapolated from fanfiction authors' self-disclosed consumer behaviour regarding the concept of the prosumer?

Developing the 'Fanfic Lens'

This study is based on data collected within a larger PhD project exploring young fanfiction authors' experiences of cultural participation through fanfiction writing. It employed an open-response online survey and subsequent semi-structured interviews conducted between 2020 and 2021. The focus demographic was defined as young people aged 16 to 24, who actively write and post fanfiction online, but not specifying other demographic variables or fandoms, producing a diverse dataset with participants hailing from 36 different countries. The survey was posted on a number of online forums dedicated to fanfiction writing and was circulated on Tumblr and the AO3 newsletter with the OTW's assistance. The survey included an option to indicate interest in a follow-up interview with the researcher conducted through video call or email; interview participants were thus recruited from the same sample. After removal of incomplete responses, the final dataset comprised of 245 survey responses and 26 interviews. This study received approval from the Ethics Committee of University of Zurich's Faculty of Philosophy and all participant data is reproduced with their informed consent. All names are anonymised to female, male, gender-neutral or self-chosen pseudonyms according to participants' wishes.

Both survey and interview questions targeted a broad spectrum of ways in which writing fanfiction changed authors' perspective on the source materials on which participants based their storytelling. Many participants described instances where the fanfiction community had opened their minds to new layers of meaning, something they invariably appreciated. Often-mentioned examples are altered interpretations of

relationships between characters, and liking or disliking characters more after engaging with them in fanfiction. However, these changes in perception of the source material are explicitly excluded here. While analysing the data, I observed a recurring theme that intrigued me: most participants believed that engaging with fanfiction – both reading and writing – had indeed also changed their perception of any *new* narratives they encountered. In other words, it had made them into different media consumers.

This article seeks to construct a framework for this phenomenon. Specifically, it argues that fanfiction authors view the media they consume through a mental filter accrued from their collected experiences in fan writing, something I term the 'Fanfic Lens.' This lens I propose is a set of literacy competences informed by fanfiction that are carried over to commercial entertainment media as a distinct mode of consumption. I conceptualise it as a lasting effect that the engagement with fanfiction practices has on its users' consumption of any new work of popular fiction which they have not read or watched before, nor interacted with in fan spaces. This would hint at a transfer of knowledge – or literacy – from one media type to another. Without claim to completeness, I will identify four levels on which the lens may operate: (a) the level of the author's fan identity, (b) the level of community perception, (c) a formal level of text comprehension, and (d) a positional level regarding agency.

The framework of sociocultural *literacies* as sets of meaning-making abilities helps to understand my participants' statements about consuming differently as a fanfiction author. Socialisation and inculturation impacts how meaning is constructed, different communities may interpret the same text in divergent ways (e. g., Gee 1990). The rise of digital technologies allows youth more than ever to design identities and make meaning, using multiple modalities to navigate an increasingly connected and diverse world. This development has attracted an extensive body of literature, especially from an educational perspective (e. g., Alvermann 2008, Moje 2002), acknowledging that digital environments demand and promote new competencies and thinking patterns. One could therefore assume that writing and reading fan stories can alter one's perception of popular culture by fostering a mode of meaning-making that is relevant specifically to fanfiction.

In theories such as *New Literacies* (Knobel and Lankshear 2003, 2011; Coiro, Knobel et al. 2008; Street 1997), *Multiliteracies* (New London Group 1996; Cope and Kalantzis 2000; Chandler-Olcott and Mahar 2003) and similar cognates (see Gee 2015; Walsh 2017 for an overview), new ways of communication are subsumed in a dramatically expanded understanding of literacy. These theories render literacy in its plural form in order to account for its multiplicity, emphasising the idea that media 'do not have fixed and universal meanings or universal effects on people' (Gee 2011, 372). Meaning is made in connection to particular text types, contexts and communities, which all require different knowledge and skills to be made sense of and can be interpreted in different ways (Gee 2015). What these theories share is a distinctly sociocultural approach to literacy in order to grasp how a broad range of communicative acts are employed as part of specific life worlds. People learn the '"ways of speaking" within a domain of activity […] to participate more fully within it' (Knobel and Lankshear 2014: 100). Thus, there may be specific literacies tied to 'being a

fanfiction author'. To reformulate the initial research question: Does someone equipped with 'fanfiction literacy' consume traditionally published media differently than other consumers?

The relationship between conventional and digital media is often framed in terms of a shift from the former to the latter. When, vice versa, the impact of digital on traditional media spheres is explored, this occurs most commonly with regard to technical aspects (such as attention span or device selection) or to classroom performance. This empirical study focuses on possible interferences between these two domains with separate sets of literacies, whereby literacies associated with digital storytelling are applied to traditionally published media. Ultimately, I argue that the experience of being a fan writer with its associated literacy skills encourages a fandom-sensitive mindset, which shapes the experience and habits of media consumption beyond online affinity spaces. By extension, this allows inferences on how the prosumer role is construed in fanfiction authors' self-narratives. While this term suggests a hybrid role created through the combination of its components, a closer inspection of fanfiction authors' experiences reveals that their interplay is highly complex. Fanfiction authors appear to perceive themselves as inhabiting multiple roles, sometimes simultaneously, other times moving between them.

Fan Identity: Consuming as a Potential Future Fan

Perhaps the most apparent effect engaging with fanfiction can have on media consumption is its encouragement to consider potential future fan engagement with the story, while it is being consumed. For fanfiction authors who have been active contributors in fandoms, approaching any new piece of entertainment media holds the possibility of becoming a fan. Thinking about such future fandom can manifest in several ways. Consider this example from my interview with Tara, an 18-year-old from Botswana:[2]

> I think - fandom as a whole has, like, greatly impacted the way that I consume media. So, before fandom culture, I don't want to say I consumed things passively, but I kind of just, I didn't really think deeper about, like, storytelling potentials when it comes to, like, reading books. Like, I would read a book and it would kind of just leave me. Not to say there weren't books I liked and disliked, and characters I liked and disliked, but I think ever since coming into fandom, […] when I'm reading a book, I'm looking to see if there's things I would grab on to, to explore in a transformative way, in a way that I wouldn't before I was actively writing fanfiction.

In this excerpt, Tara mentions two aspects in which fanfiction has impacted her consumer behaviour: Firstly, she states that books previously used to 'just leave' her after finishing them, limiting affective responses to the moment of reading, whereas now she engages with

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[2] Transcription key for interview quotes: Dashes indicate pauses, underlined words indicate emphasis made in speech, brackets contain nonverbal actions.

fanfiction, she feels that some texts linger beyond the initial reading situation. Secondly, and connected to this, Tara suggests that she now consumes new media with an additional filter to determine their 'storytelling potentials', which she explains as an examination of whether it is suitable material for her to 'grab on to' in a fannish manner, and to 'explore in a transformative way', that is, to re-work in fanfiction.

Tara's statements raise the question of what constitutes the 'potential' she describes looking for. One possible answer may be found in a recurrent theme in my survey data. Asked about which aspects of a story motivates them most to write fanfiction, participants most often mention its characters. This confirms what other scholars have noticed: fanfiction is predominantly focused on characters and their relationships and inner lives, rather than plot alone (Jenkins 1992: 23; Barnes 2015: 75; Coppa 2017: 12). While formulaic scenarios and tropes are an integral feature of fanfiction, they are frequently more instrumental in order to bring out and explore characters' reactions and emotions in response. As Sara Gwenllian Jones writes: 'What is of primary importance to fans is not how characters move along a narrative, but rather what narrative events can reveal about characters' (2002: 86).

Another question in my survey investigated participants' favourite characters to write about and reasons for their choice. More than any other reason, favourite characters to write about were chosen on the basis of whether they offered scope for creative adaptation and development. Rather than protagonists, these are often less fleshed-out characters who offer a degree of malleability to new contexts and storylines without resulting in substantial contradictions to the source text. A recent quantitative study similarly found that fanfiction authors overall prefer side characters over main characters (Milli and Bamman 2016). The function of 'filling in the gaps' often attributed to fanfiction, Jennifer Barnes infers, pertains in large part to gaps in the characters' storylines, backgrounds and minds (2015: 76), rather than plot action. Accordingly, my survey revealed that many participants have an interest in unpacking complex personalities and character dynamics, dramatic backstories, and moral ambiguity, some even favouring malevolent or generally unliked characters for the opportunity they provide to write in-depth character studies.

With that in mind, Tara's mention of narrative openings as 'storytelling potentials' demonstrates she is attuned to inviting lacunae for her own writing efforts. What is more, reading and writing fan works seems to help Tara sharpen this specific literacy skill to elements she likes:

> Interacting with fandom gives me more ideas for what to write, because it's like, you become fond of certain tropes, or […] the process of your thought patterns, kind of, or the way you engage with media kind of existing in a very transformative way. So you just have much more of an instinct to, like, think about ideas and think about fanfiction, the more you engage with it and the more you interact with the community.

Interestingly, Tara is suggesting that this mode of consumption is somewhat unconscious, calling it an 'instinct' to view fiction as an invitation for transformation, stemming from the habit of extending a piece of fiction's scope to alternate interpretations. A similar thought is shared by 21-year-old Canadian Theo, for whom consuming entertainment media entails concurrent thinking of ways to potentially appropriate the narrative. Theo reports approaching new media 'with this mindset of, like, how am I going to write this?', giving special attention to characters: 'Sometimes when I consume a canon, whether it be a TV show or a book, I go into it with kind of a fandom mindset, like, […] okay, which of these characters will be <u>my</u> character? (laughs).' Theo explained that the fan works they read and write tend to be character-centric and they think about the characters out of their original context when they read, probing for interesting alternative scenarios they could be written into. What Theo calls 'fandom mindset' therefore seems to be a mode of consuming which takes into account the potential of a future prosumer relationship with the text and involves collecting preliminary ideas about writing transformative stories. The prosodic emphasis on 'my' suggests that Theo is expecting or hoping to find a character they will relate or feel attached to the most.

For some fan authors, the possibility of future writing includes not just thinking about content, but form as well. This is especially the case when the original story is not told in prose text, as most fanfiction stories are, requiring the fan author to reflect on aspect of transmediality in their adaptation. While research often frames fan works in terms of users' keen aptitude in transforming media in multimodal ways, this aspect offers an intriguing glimpse into some of the struggles it may entail. Participant Laura, a 17-year-old American, spoke about her experiences of finding fanfiction based on a manga series for the first time. Discovering other fans converting a story told through manga into prose fanfiction, which she refers to as 'translation', initially felt 'insane' to her. After becoming more familiar with this cognitive task, she developed a habit of interpreting between both media types during consumption:

> With TV shows, or anime, or manga, or whatever, it's, it's taking what you see and putting it into words, and it's, it's not easy every time. […] What I'll do, occasionally, is I'll watch a show, and while I'm watching it, I'll write it in my head. And it's, it's made things a bit easier, but it's still just, like, transferring mediums is hard sometimes.

This complex prosumer stance, however, appears not to be present at all times. Later in the interview, Theo explains that not all media are subjected to such scrutiny:

> There are also books that I read that I don't interact that way with, where I'm not thinking about, like, how could I transform these characters? I'm just taking the canon as is, like, reading the words rather than reading what I want to into the words.

The distinction Theo makes here is between a set of literacies utilised as a simple consumer, and one as a prosumer or potential future appropriator. While most participants describe the stance of a prospective fan in neutral or positive terms, there are also reasons for viewing this aspect of applying a Fanfic Lens as undesirable. Quoting from Theo again, it seems to have become an engrained habit in their interaction with specific media types that requires self-restriction:

> This past year, I've kind of been struggling with it, because I find it kind of annoying sometimes to be constantly in this fandom lens. […] It's also nice to just appreciate works for their, for their own merit, rather than what I can create out of them. And I've gotten into, like, this, this, this, not cycle, but, like, this kind of spiral of only being able to <u>read fanfiction</u> of the things, or at least to read the canon and find fanfiction of it, which is kind of frustrating. So I made an effort this past, like, semester […], I was like, you know what, I'm gonna consume some stuff that I just <u>can't</u> write about, and it worked for a little while. And then I watched a couple of anime TV shows and now I'm like (laughs). Just to take a break though, just to take a break, try to turn off the fandom brain.

What Theo terms 'fandom brain' could be described as a constant meta-evaluation of what could be written about the consumed media. The quoted excerpt suggests that this can feel burdensome. Notably, Theo's proposed way of escaping it seems to be engaging with media which do not invite immediate fan engagement, rather than attempting to change the mode of consumption. When Theo expresses his wish to appreciate works as a non-participatory consumer instead of as a fan writer, this hints at the complexity of balancing opposing aspects of the prosumer role, whereby the producer perspective is actively thinking about potential future transformation of the text, but can diminish the enjoyment of consumption.

To sum up, these quotes reveal how in practice, both consumer and producer roles are inhabited in parallel, but with multiple interferences. What Tara and Theo describe is a consumer stance which considers a potential producer identity that may be assumed in the future, and involves perusing the story for appealing elements, while Laura considers future fan activity on a formal level. All three quoted participants suggest that the role of the fanfiction author influences and informs their consumer behaviour: With the option of fanfiction in mind, they reformulate, scan for interesting aspects, take mental notes, and map out story ideas while consuming.

Community Perception: Predicting the Fandom's Nature

Recognising elements for potential fan engagement is not limited to oneself and one's own tastes. Participants also name a range of ways in which being familiar with the larger fanfiction community shapes their consumption of any new media. When consuming

popular media, some fanfiction authors consider the story in terms of possible reception by the fandom. They report developing a sense for ways in which fans might engage with it, such as specific characters' level of popularity, or their romantic relationships or 'ships' (which may or may not be insinuated by the original story), the genres and tropes dominating a particular fandom, as well as the amount of fandom activity it inspires. In addition to preferences for specific characters discussed in the previous section, another major reason such predictions are possible lies in fanfiction's idiosyncratic literary patterns and conventions diverging from traditionally published literature (Lammers and Marsh 2015: 281; Coppa 2017: 9). The fanfiction community has developed a large range of fanfiction-specific tropes and genres, usually indicated through a meticulous tagging system on AO3. Often, they focus on character dynamics or on delivering a specific emotional experience at high concentration, intensifying aspects of the original text (Barnes 2015: 75f). Popular examples for the former would be *enemies-to-lovers*, *found family*, or *established relationship*, and for the latter *angst*, *fluff*, or *hurt/comfort*. By predicting what elements of a text will inspire fans to apply such a pattern to a specific character, fanfiction authors avail themselves of their familiarity with the structures of fanfiction as a particular form of storytelling.

Alice, an 18-year-old from Cuba, uses a term very similar to Tara's 'storytelling potentials' mentioned in the previous section: 'I also tend to notice plot points or characters that would have good "fanfic potential" while I'm consuming media, and I think it's fun to figure out what ships will be the most popular when I look up the fandom on AO3.' It is noteworthy that Alice describes this specific lens of viewing media, informed by her years of engagement with fanfiction as both a reader and a writer, as a puzzle or game, as suggested by her calling it 'fun to figure out'. In contrast, Tara frames this way of viewing media as a competence rather than a puzzle, grown out of continued exposure to the peculiarities of fanfiction:

> One of the weirdest special skills I've gotten from reading a bunch of fanfiction is, after watching the movie, knowing exactly what the popular fanfiction on Archive of Our Own will be about for this movie, […] and what the most popular kinds of fanfiction are in a fandom, immediately after watching something or reading something, because I participate in the spaces so much that it influences the way I see media. And that includes the community, because I know what's popular, because I've engaged with other fanfictions, and I write, occasionally, I write what's popular, because I know what other people want to read, and, yeah, that kind of communal aspect impacts just how I see media and how I engage with fanfiction as well.

The communal aspect of fanfiction, which Tara remarks on, is often characterised as an integral part of fanfiction writing in scholarship. At the same time, a majority of participants report writing what they personally find meaningful or interesting, rather than what they believe other fans may want to read, characterising themselves as their primary

audience. Nevertheless, community conventions shape how members of fan communities participate in fandom spaces, including writing within the lines of established fanfiction tropes and genres. Like Tara, some participants admit they occasionally write stories in line with popular preferences in fan spaces, hoping to attract more readers and receive higher reader engagement in the form of appraisal, such as likes and comments. Doing so reveals a circularity within fanfiction communities: Over time, members develop an understanding – or literacy – for the patterns, reproducing them in their own writing in order to cater to reader expectations. In that sense, popular fanfiction genres and tropes have a self-perpetuating nature.

Applying such fandom knowledge may assist fans in assessing the fandom. Renee, an 18-year-old from the United States, believes she can not only predict a fandom's size, but also the type of content:

> I'd say that, well, some pieces of media, some games, books, movies, are, like, more naturally predisposed to have big communities. I can kind of tell. If I'm watching something new, I feel like, oh, okay, this is going to have a lot of fanfiction. Like, for example, those new Resident Evil games with the very tall vampire lady. I mean, […] I don't even need to look more than two seconds to know there are going to be a lot of fanfictions about that woman. Probably quite explicit ones at that, but (laughs), like, you can kind of, you can tell, sometimes. If you spend enough time in fandom reading and writing, you can tell what people […] are most likely to write, and sometimes it'll surprise you, and sometimes it won't. That's kind of the beauty of fanfiction, it is predictable to an extent, but it always will do its own thing, somehow, and that's always pretty cool.

Renee, who identifies as lesbian, also reflects fan communities in terms of whether she would feel comfortable in them. According to her, fandoms mirror in certain ways their source texts, which allows her to predict the atmosphere and culture within the fandom. To illustrate this point, she compared the fandoms of two videogame franchises she believes to generate different kinds of interest and content from fans. In her opinion, the fan community around the game *Ace Attorney* is:

> … definitely a lot more openly supportive of various marginalised identities, simply because there's so much of that in canon. […] People in that fandom are going to be more supportive of queer people, and in general, than, say, the Resident Evil fandom, which mostly consists of a lot of, which has a lot of guys in the basement being horny over the tall vampire lady.

Part of predicting what sparks fans' engagement seems to be a deeper understanding of a particular fandom's conventions. The sociocultural approach views possessing literacy as enabling one to be 'a member of a social practice wherein people not only read texts of this

type in this way, but also talk about such texts in certain ways, hold certain attitudes and values about them, and socially interact over them in certain ways.' (Gee 2011, 373) Gee's notion of 'big "D" Discourse' as the sociocultural dimension of deciphering a particular group's ways of interacting with the world including, but not limited to language, behaviour, values, and identities (1989, 2001), is helpful in understanding the way Alice, Tara and Renee describe their capacity to predict the intensity and type of fan engagement. Possessing literacy in such a Discourse denotes the fluency to make meaning effectively in a community, resulting from enculturation into its social norms by partaking in it. In that sense, experienced members of affinity spaces could be argued to be 'fandom literate', helping them assess during consumption whether they would enjoy becoming producers in that community.

In sum, by engaging with online fandom as a whole – but also with individual fandoms of specific media texts – in sanctioned ways, fans construct meaning and project a certain identity within the community. When Renee characterises the video game *Resident Evil* as featuring a sexualised male gaze on its female protagonist, which, according to her, attracts fan behaviour of a similar nature, she positions herself in the margins of the fandom, expressing discomfort with engaging in what she expects to be the accepted Discourse of that particular fandom. Notably, however, both Alice and Renee suggest that predictions are reliable only to an extent: While Alice describes it as something to be 'figured out', Renee concedes that there is an element of uncertainty and surprise, even to a long-term fanfiction participant like her.

Text Comprehension: Evaluating Narrative Structures

For researchers concerned with youth literacy practices, fanfiction is an intriguing phenomenon as it presupposes engagement with the mechanics of storytelling. By assuming an author's role, fan writers require a minimum knowledge about genre conventions, character conception and narrative strategies. While fanfiction overall varies in length and complexity – a common narrative in my interviews is that participants find their first fan stories embarrassingly bad – most participants are adamant they have read fanfiction stories more elaborate and enjoyable than the source material they are based on. Recent scholarship, too, has started to approach fanfiction with attention to its complexity and aesthetic value (Thomas 2011; Tosenberger 2014). As much as it is a training ground for writing compelling plots and characters, fanfiction is also a site of learning about formal structures of narratives. However, as suggested above, fanfiction tropes and genres do not map neatly onto categorisations used in media scholarship or commercial marketing. The genre and trope tags are shown in fanfiction stories' paratexts along with a summary and further information such as the chapter count, and are therefore on readers' minds before they start reading.

Many of my participants' first experience of producing longer pieces of fiction or considering themselves as storytellers took place in fanfiction spaces. Consequently, many mention learning about storytelling techniques from fanfiction. It is therefore not surprising that fanfiction authors apply their knowledge gained from fanfiction to narratives beyond that sphere. Tara, for example, mentions first coming into contact with the concept of narrative tropes in fanfiction:

> When I read a book now, I think I'm much more trope-aware, because before I read fanfiction, I don't even think I fully understood what tropes were. So now I see, like, when a book has enemies-to-lovers, I <u>see</u> it, and I'm like, oh-oh. Because fanfiction spaces are very much, do speak in terms of tropes, that's how you describe stories.

While any exposure to fiction doubtlessly supports young people in understanding narrative conventions, what Tara describes has a distinct fanfiction-specific inflection: She mentions *enemies-to-lovers*, a plot trope in which two characters start out opposing each other, but fall in love as the story unfolds. While undoubtedly a trope many traditionally published stories employ, it is not commonly used as a genre descriptor outside of online fandom. Meanwhile, AO3 currently has over 100,000 posted stories with this tag (not including a large number of similar, slightly divergent tags), the most popular of which have each accumulated several hundred thousand hits. Tara therefore transfers a highly popular term she is familiar with from fanfiction to commercial media in order to name a narrative trope she frequently encounters.

In an email interview, Sam, another 18-year-old American, wrote about learning to recognise archetypal characters from fanfiction, which they then use to better comprehend the logic creators of commercial media employ to construct characters:

> I think reading fanfiction did influence how I see and understand characters, especially those that fit into standard writing stereotypes or "characterisations", things like "the hunk", "the twink", "the airhead/the idiot", "the girly girl", etc. After reading some fic including that, it's way easier to read something and think, "Okay, so they're going to make X's only personality trait the fact he can't do math, huh?"

In this quote, Sam acknowledges that fanfiction often operates with character templates, possibly due to many young writers gaining first composition experience in a formulaic environment. In addition to the ability to recognise stereotypical characters, Sam also mentions learning from fanfiction how to avoid reducing characters' personalities to a single dimension in their own writing. This way, Sam believes they improved their writing skills by identifying the features they do not like and want to avoid themselves in other people's writing. Tara's quote above suggests a similar sentiment in response to recognising certain tropes she may be wary of ('I'm like, oh-oh').

This element of the Fanfic Lens can hence be summarised as a heightened awareness of, and ease at identifying, narrative patterns, some of which are grasped in distinctly fandom-originated terminology. Prosumers familiar with fanfiction can avail themselves of experiences gained in fan engagement for a knowledge transfer. AO3's elaborate, rigorous tagging system, in combination with being an amateur writing space with many inexperienced writers using established tropes as scaffolding, might facilitate this process, possibly more so than exposure to professionally authored and edited fiction, where tropes are used more subtly and not labelled in the paratext.

Fan Positionality: Creating Distance Through Recognising Agency

Shifting authorship is a central theme both in how fanfiction is discussed in scholarship (Ashby 2008; Flegel and Roth 2016; Herzog 2012; Reissmann, Stock et al. 2017) and by the participants in my study, who report thinking more critically about ownership and authorship after engaging with fanfiction. Nadia, a 20-year-old from Greece, seems to have thoroughly reflected on the relationship professional authors entertain with their audiences and her own positionality as a fan writer, expressing deep frustration with the way these concepts were taught to her at school and are framed in society:

> It has been ingrained in us, taught to us in school, burned into our minds. The creator must always come above the recipient. Personally, I find the notion absurd. Because if there's something in that supposed, hypothetical masterpiece that you (the consumer/audience) think is an issue, what can you do about it when you're by definition inferior to the creator? […] I believe the audience should be allowed to "count". We may not always be experts in the theory and technical details of the arts, but I don't see why we can't – or shouldn't – have an opinion.

In her interview, Nadia explains in detail her desire to reject the original author's ultimate authority over a story, arguing that her interpretation – as anyone else's – should be regarded equal to the originator's. This must be understood in terms of fanfiction's logic of fragmented meaning: The multiplicity of retellings leads to a 'constant awareness that every reading is provisional and that every characterisation yields one variation among a nearly countless number of others' (Hellekson and Busse 2006: 8). Assuming an actively participating role can thus empower fanfiction authors to reflect the perceived shortcomings of popular media texts. Nadia sees a solution to her dissatisfaction in writing fanfiction, where she can reinterpret stories on her own terms – here, the producer role is directly reactive to affective reactions experienced as a consumer. Building on experiences with her most recent fandom, Nadia describes noticing an orientalist discourse in the source texts, of which, after extensive research on the topic, she disapproves. To her, finding morally objectionable elements and criticising them is a core feature of engaging in fanfiction: 'If we

can identify the issues and understand what makes them "issues", then that's a win. And, for me, that's what fanfiction does – it teaches you there's no single way of viewing the world and that other viewpoints matter.'

Since the turn of the millennium, fan studies have taken increasingly more complex approaches to issues of power in cultural production (Thomas 2011: 4). This shift was influenced, among others, by Michel Foucault's writings on discourse as language in action. His concept of the 'author-function' considers the idea of the author not just as a person, but in terms of the value given to authorship of a given text type and the way this may limit its interpretation (Fathallah 2017: 20f). This framing sheds light on the root of Nadia's concern: While school emphasised the relevance of the author, the fanfiction community has the opposite approach, often advancing the view that, as Renee, comments, 'once it's out there, it's fair game'. Therefore, what fanfiction provides young consumers with is the possibility of gaining a certain independence, if not distance, from the source text. Nadia champions the diversity of voices in fanfiction as a superior mode of media consumption, as it encourages a constant awareness that any interpretation is subjective – including the original author's.

Interestingly, when asked in the survey to give a definition of 'being a fan', a commonly mentioned feature was an openness to think about a story beyond its canonical form. This posits open-mindedness, diversity and tolerance towards transformation, rather than meticulous knowledge of the source text, as central values of online fan communities. Some fan writers take this approach a step further by refusing to see the source text as an equally valid version, feeling that the original author did not 'do justice' to a storyline or character (Zubernis and Larsen 2012: 181). This maxim of openness to transformation and alternate interpretations may affect how fans engage with entertainment media. To begin with, the prolonged period of engagement that fanfiction allows can simply mean a reassurance that the story does not have to follow the authorial intent regarding where it ends, as illustrated by Alice:

> Before I discovered fanfiction, I was often disappointed when I would finish reading or watching something because I didn't want the stories to end. When I found out about fanfic through a friend, I thought it was the most brilliant idea ever and I started reading it that very night. I feel that fanfiction has given me something to look forward to at the end of canon. When I finish reading something, I know that I have fanfiction to keep reading about the stories I love. I suppose fandom has changed how I read or watch media because I no longer feel disappointed when it ends.

A consequence of fanfiction authors having this safety net protecting them from the ephemerality of media products, as well as being more attentive to narrative elements they dislike, may be a distanced mode of consumption, described by several participants. For some, moving to fan works becomes an immediate reaction to any dissatisfaction felt with the source text. Since she engages with fanfiction, 21-year-old American Megan reports, what could be as little as a character's comment may prompt her to seek out online fan

spaces to look for an alternate version, or to write one herself. Talking about watching a controversial episode of the TV series *Supernatural*, she recounts:

> I immediately went online. I gave it, like, an hour and then I went to AO3. I was like, okay, like, newest fics, where are we at? What are people, like, saying? Like, how are we fixing this? And so, I definitely, I don't think I absorb canon as much, because I'm so prepared to read the fics, […] so prepared to go on Tumblr and, like, see the headcanons[3] and the edits.

Megan believes that, being open to and familiar with the option of reading a range of diverging interpretations, she is now less committed to following a particular book series or author, and feels that she does not 'absorb canon as much' anymore, spending less time deliberating the original version of a text. As a result, this may lead to approaching media products with less pressure to be satisfying in all aspects, but possibly also to less time reflecting the original story.

Similarly, Renee consumes media ready to supplement them with fan works:

> I found I just don't expect […] anything from canon, that way I can't be disappointed. And I <u>can</u> be pleasantly surprised if, say, the characters I was rooting for to get together <u>do</u> get together. […] The fans who write fanfiction love and hate the source material the most, too, because, like I said, they have loved some aspects of it, otherwise, they wouldn't have become quite so invested in it. But the people who write fanfiction are <u>the</u> most vocal about things that, like, are just not okay. Like, for, like, bad storytelling decisions, and they'll be like, okay, I'm gonna fix this, and then they do it (laughs).

Here, Renee mentions two ways in which distance is a feature of how she now consumes media. Reading with lower expectations from the start in order to not feel disappointment with a dissatisfying story, and a readiness to take matters into her own hands, something often described by fanfiction authors, as Renee does in this quote, as 'fixing'. Incidentally, *fix-it* is another frequently used fanfiction tag, and the wish to 'fix' a story that is perceived to be told incorrectly a prime example of fans becoming aware of their capacity to 'restory'. Fans becoming aware of their agency results in fanfiction functioning as a type of 'literature on demand' (Kraxenberger and Lauer: 486) for any specialised niche interest. This last aspect of the Fanfic Lens ties the previous three together. Consuming with the knowledge that the option of fanfiction exists invites considering future writing, possible fandom interactions, and narrative analysis during consumption.

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[3] 'Headcanon' denotes an aspect of a story not explicitly mentioned in the media product itself, but imagined and accepted by either a single consumer or a fandom more broadly.

Conclusion

In this article, I discussed ways in which the experience of being a fanfiction author impacts how young people consume popular media. Overall, the narrative created by my participants is that media are consumed more actively and attentively thanks to their engagement with fanfiction. I have suggested that fan authors demonstrate metacognitive awareness with which they actively monitor their media consumption and transfer insider knowledge gained in one storytelling sphere to another, a phenomenon I termed the Fanfic Lens. I discussed four core aspects of this proposed perceptive filter. During consumption, fan authors may consider (a) (how) will I interact with a story in fanfiction?, (b) what will the fan community be like?, (c) how does the story work (in fanfiction terms)?, as well as (d) the fact that the story is not constrained by its original text, allowing anyone to continue and transform it. I located these competences within a framework of literacy as sociocultural communication, which envelops ways of behaving and using language, but also attitudes and belief systems into the literacy metaphor. While most multiple literacies research is interested in skills relevant to the classroom, which not all of the elements of the Fanfic Lens necessarily are, I maintain that it presents an intriguing heuristic for assessing media, and merits academic attention for its impact on how young people who engage in fan practices encounter media.

I have also claimed that the concept of the Fanfic Lens contributes to the understanding of the prosumer role inhabited in participatory culture. The four components of the Fanfic Lens discussed here are by no means meant to be exhaustive, nor do I believe that they are shared by every fanfiction author, or applied at all times. However, what I have suggested is that my participants experience a spill-over effect of the producer role into the consumer role. The insight this offers to scholarship on prosumers is twofold: Firstly, fanfiction authors do not stop being prosumers, even beyond the actual participatory activities usually discussed in the context of prosumption: mental evaluations of entertainment media continue to take place. Secondly, rather than a thoroughly hybrid position in relation to popular media, the prosumer stance is perhaps best visualised as a spectrum between previously distinct roles, rather than located within an overlap of the two. Popular media can be approached in countless ways on this prosumer spectrum, from passive to highly participatory, varying between people, the media and fandoms involved, and the activities through which engagement takes place. Sometimes consuming and producing are temporally separate, thus only coinciding in the person that is doing them with a specific media product. Other times, they occur at the same time in the sense that a person may apply some of their fandom literacy to it in order to meaningfully – that is, conducive for later fan engagement – make sense of it. Considering these layers may help to better understand a generation's media engagement who has grown up with the digital means to move along this spectrum.

Biographical note

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