

# **Fifty Shades of Grey: Why Bad Fanfiction Shouldn't Become the Norm**

## **Introduction**

Basking in splashy headlines like, “*Fifty Shades of Grey* made moviegoers its slave over Presidents Day weekend, shattering records and heating up the box office with a staggering \$94.4 million debut over the four-day holiday” (Variety 2015), the *Fifty Shades of Grey* movie franchise on its debut weekend not only smashed box-office records but befuddled critics alike with its success. In part because of its humble origin story: a racy fanfiction in the image of popular Young Adult bestseller *Twilight*. In the preemptive and subsequent years of *Fifty Shades*’ box-office success, it became the star case study in fanfiction scholarship (Brennan, J, Large, D 2014; Kosnik, Abigail De 2015; Meikle, Kyle 2015). And for good reason as well, *Fifty Shades of Grey* is the prime example of not only of gender, sexuality and the like across several mediums, but of the genre limits of fanfictions. The work is a prime example of the worst of fanfictions stereotypical conventions; poorly written prose, dark interpretations of sex, and unimaginative characters. And there are literally thousands of fanfics like that on websites like fanfiction.com. Therefore *Fifty Shades* almost seems unremarkable, so the puzzle is this: how did *Fifty Shades of Grey* pull itself out of the slew of similar works to find mainstream success? Many researchers point to a cultural turning point in sexuality in mainstream media, or a wider acceptance of sexuality in society (Gay, Roxane 2012). However I’m interested in examining less of the external factors that pulled *Fifty Shades* to success, but more of the internal factors of the fanfic community that possibly influenced its success in the community first, that propelled it further. Beyond, *Fifty*

*Shades of Grey*, there's been a noticeable mainstream embrace of fanfiction--and almost laughably "bad" fanfiction-- in recent years that has spurred my interest in how this relationship has developed. Again, many would find the reasoning in mainstream interests, that drive this sudden interest of fanfiction as transferrable art. However, I think there is deeper meaning in understanding how fics are first interacted within communities, which are the catalysts for popularity. To understand this phenomena my question is this: do fanfiction communities interact with specific works in a way that support it being transferred to the mainstream media?

## Literature Review

Fandom Scholarship begins with the understanding that Fandom is a dialogue of action and response between producers and consumers of media. Early in fandom studies, fans were pathologized as fanatics--emanating an "us vs. them" mentality to define themselves (Jenson in *The Adoring Audience* 9-30). The negative connotation fandom was attached to was prominently countered by Henry Jenkins in his foundational work *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. Jenkins contradicts Jenson's view; casting fandom instead as communities that bridge and break down gender, sexuality, genre, and the consumer/ producer divides. Jenkins also notes that Fandom culture is, "resistant" to the dominant culture. The first wave of fandom theory scholarship echoes this notion, that fans-- as inherently weaker beings facing the dominant culture, "poach" from the original sources to be resistant to the dominating culture.

In Camille Bacon-Smith's work, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of the Popular Myth*, Smith primarily addresses the strongly women-dominated

aspects of fandom culture. Smith notes that women in fandoms are resistant to the dominant culture or the “mundane” world (175). Methods of resisting can be found in fanfiction where women, especially in the hurt/comfort genre write to find some sense of catharsis. “Pain was so pervasive in the lives of women that it lay like a wash beneath all the creative efforts of a community they had made for themselves.... fans wrote to work through their own problems of personal suffering.” Fanfiction is then a way to represent narratives and characters in a fashion that mirrors the relational longings of women. Often whom, are underrepresented in mainstream media and also in real life do not have the relationships represented in fanfic (ex. egalitarian, pleasurable, etc.). Therefore fanfiction is not only a source of catharsis, but it permits a voice for traditionally underrepresented voices to be heard. However, Bacon-Smith does not posit that these voices are strong enough to pose a threat to larger cultural authority. It’s not until Jenkins (2006) that the interaction between corporate media and the “grassroots” media forms is noted to have a relationship that is constantly in influx as information shifts between the two. Fannish media in the 2000’s continues to be “resistant” to hegemony, but it also has an impact on the fandom’s source material as well.

Resistance to survive against the mainstream media is just one reason why people write fanfiction. Many write to purposefully change the mainstream culture. As researcher April Gunn asks,

Where are all the queer people? Why are the ones who exist always sad, evil, dead by the end of the story, or all three? Why is everyone white? Why are all the women written as one-dimensional and nearly useless? Why do incompetent, inexperienced male characters end up heroes while the incredible, badass women who train them end up sidekicks? (Gunn 2017).

Moving away from early arguments made by Bacon-Smith-- that fanfiction was almost like a diary for hurt women to write out unfilled desires, and therefore fanfic as a relational, but ultimately introverted source of resistance against mainstream powers.

Another wave of fanfic theory built off of the Foucauldian approach to power, essentially as an “open and capillary network” (quoted in Fathallah 2017) and the relationship of technology to its participants in bringing them together, both concepts were originally applied to fiction, which *fic* can safely be labeled under. Later, Cheryl Harris (1998) and Mark Jancovich (2002) intensified the study of understanding how fan interacted within the confines of fandom, examining the uneven distributions of power within the hierarchies of fandom.

The last wave of theory is closely linked with the first; in that it is concerned with fan interactions, but instead of with each other it is more concerned with the contributions that fans make to the mainstream and they actively impact the mainstream. Gunn is a part of another wave of fanfiction that strives to be inclusive and to change the discourse of the canonical media, and that is how they relate and create a fandom identity. She echoes Fathallah’s concerns that if fanfic is not created to illuminate other perspectives then the straight, white, male perspective of the Canon is not questioned (199) and therefore cannot be changed.

Fanfiction is also an arena that gives space to explore darker themes and sexual possibilities/identities that are rarely examined in the larger media. That of incest, rape, BDSM, torture, sexual identities all along the spectrum, and pedophilia (Gunn 27-28; Bacon-Smith 270-279; Russ 82-96).

The motives behind fanfiction are central to understanding what I hope to contribute to fandom media studies. Thus far it’s been established that fanfic is a type of

resistance created by a subculture in its interaction with dominant media, and more closely with Canon media.

## Methodology

The primary research for this study was mainly composed of a survey given a little over two weeks, and distributed by word-of-mouth, various social media websites and LiveJournal. I also interviewed two experts and members of fandom communities. The first was Henry Jenkins, the media scholar who wrote the foundational work on fandom studies. The second was University of Denver Writing Center Assistant Director Juli Parrish, who wrote her dissertation on reading and writing fanfiction. I also explored statistical data that focused on fanfiction community members various reading habits, opinions of fanfiction and writing habits. The statistical data I gathered also largely had to do with the fanfiction communities perceptions of fanfiction i.e. what makes good fanfiction, what do they read/ write the most. Similar, to my survey question, but taken by larger researcher databases that provide clearer knowledge. I also watched an episode of a fic turned tv show called *Cupid's Match*, and I looked at reviews of the show.

To understand the fanfiction communities relationship with fanfiction and what they might considered “good” or “bad” fanfiction I operationalized my variable in a series of questions I asked the respondents that centered on what they liked or disliked about fanfiction. I also asked them what fanfiction they were most interested in reading and/or writing. To get a sense of the demographic parameters that took my survey I asked respondents their age and educational background. The questions I asked my interviewees also primarily focused on opinion and their perception of fanfiction.

The largest slice of data I was able to gain of course was the survey that I had first sent out on Twitter, only with my writing class' hashtag attached. That day I also asked a small friend group to take the survey and to share it over their various media platforms. However, after a few days the survey was not yielding a large number of respondents. Therefore I then decided to share the survey on Tumblr, curating specific group of hashtags that correlated with what I saw as the most popular and relevant Tumblr fandoms, along with Fandoms I considered myself a part of. For example, the first post had tags like, “#GoT (Game of Thrones), #hp (harry potter), #supercorp, #percyjackson, and #doctorwho.” Just to name a few. This method of capturing responses led the survey being seen by fandoms with a large number of adherents like *Game of Thrones* or *Harry Potter* the chances of the survey being seen, taken, and shared went up. Also mixing a set of fandom specific hashtags like #supercorp or #bughead, which are two fandom ship names<sup>1</sup>.

Thereby, targeting subsets of large and active fandoms that were most likely to participate in fanfiction because of the wish-fulfilling nature of, “shipping.” In the subsequent days the same method was applied, however I added more tags that I knew were connected with a fandom and was on the Trending page of Tumblr. For example on the week ending on May 21st, 2018 some of the fandom related topics that were trending was the tv show, *13 Reasons Why*, *Once Upon a Time*, and the popular

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<sup>1</sup> A ship can be defined as, “Two or more people or fictional characters who are (either in fact or in fantasy) paired (or grouped) intimately, sexually and/or romantically; often referred to with the two names on either side of a virgule (e.g. Harry/Hermione), by a portmanteau name (e.g. Olicity), or by another widely accepted name (e.g. Stark Spangled Banner for Tony Stark/Steve Rogers/Bruce Banner). Also sometimes known as a “pairing,” even (confusingly) when it includes more than two people.” (Klink “To Ship or To Not Ship”)

singing group *BTS*. On the last day of my research, I decided to try the same method on Twitter by adding hashtags that I saw were relevant on that day.

For my study I also analyzed and compared comments and reactions to a fanfic called *Cupid's Match*, that was later adapted into a CW Seed show. The CW Seed shows differ from the TV companies broadcasted shows by being offered exclusively online. Most of the shows are series that only got one to two seasons, however *Cupid's Match* seems to be an experiment for feeding off of fandom content in a new way for the company. To produce the work, CW opened up a contest that let production companies send in trailers.

The top three were picked by the CW, which then let the public vote to decide which company should produce the show. Not only is the show's origins of interest-- a good example of the mainstream multimedia approach to capitalizing on fannish fixation. What the CW is starting to investigate for themselves is if there is a profitable market in attempting to transfer the power that readers and fans have under a fannish work to a tv or movie adaption. The reason the CW puts *Cupid's Match* though on a smaller platform is because the move is still a risk; although fanfiction can be overnight success, the works are often riddled with mistakes that officially published works aren't. Like many fanfics, *Cupid's Match* is not exceptionally well written, however because of it's impressive numbers on wattpad, it's caught the mainstreams eye. So, to understand the transfer of fans from one medium to the other, I analyzed the comments on the original *Cupid's Match* story on Wattpad (which surprisingly has not been pulled to publish) and the reactionary comments of viewers after the first pilot of the show went up. I also examined the reviews of Goodreads users on the book's page.

Synthesizing data from the survey involved a coding scheme that reduced the free-response answers to a one word category. This method served the purpose of understanding the frequency behind respondents likes and dislikes over reading and writing fanfiction. In total I had ten categories that I deemed captured the essence of respondents perceptions of fanfiction.

## Results

Synthesizing one survey, two interviews, and a slew of online commentary based on *Cupid's Match*, the results were wide-ranging and surprising. And understandably, it's difficult to draw conclusions from data pulled from a sliver of the fanfiction and

fandom communities,

however it still is

worthwhile to analyze

the data I did pull.

One of the first

important

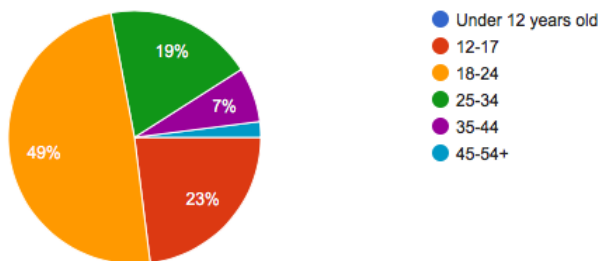
commonalities between

the data sets, but not

necessarily a theme is the factor of age and fanfiction. After sixteen days of my survey being published first on Twitter then on various other platforms, (Tumblr, LiveJournal and Facebook), I had received 102 results, with varying degrees of response for each question. None surprisingly, the largest age group represented to have either read or written fanfiction was the 18-24 age group, with 49% out of 100 respondents. In comparison to a fandom census survey completed in early October 2013 by user

### Age

100 responses





centrulimina which compiled data on AO3 and Tumblr users. At the end of the study, which gathered around 10,005 responses, found that the median age for people who were taking the survey--respondents who participated in fandom in some way was 25 years-old. Obviously, this is an imperfect comparison to my data, especially because it assumes that in-order to be comparable to my data that anyone who participates in fandom must also write fanfiction.

Though, it is clear that from looking at both data sets that there might be something about youth in fandom that explains the loyalty they may have for a fanfic, which may carry over into closely following new works inspired by the original work. For both Jenkins and Parrish, their initial introduction to the world of fanfiction at a young age led them to fandom scholarship. So it may be far to suggest that the fascination that led both Jenkins and Parrish to study fandom and fanfiction, might be the incentive for fans to seek out adaptations of some fanfic works that they love.

To understand why people are loyal initially to fanfiction, even when it may not be as objectively good as published works I looked at the internal attitudes of what makes people like fanfiction the most. The data trend here implies that fans have a visceral emotional response to fanfiction, subsequently following supporting the fanfic so much so that it's pushed into the limelight. Taking responses from my open survey question, "why do you like fanfiction?" I deduced each response to one one according to the coding system previously described. Then I made it into a word cloud to visually depict what people like most about fanfiction. In both spectrums of reading and writing fanfiction. As you can see the words that are most apparent are, "continuity, expression, and well-written." What this data suggest is that what people most like about fanfiction is

that they like continuing the story after it has stopped. This makes sense, as fanfiction is really just a continuation of the story that they were originally drawn to.

The data then may suggest that readers like specific fanfic stories because

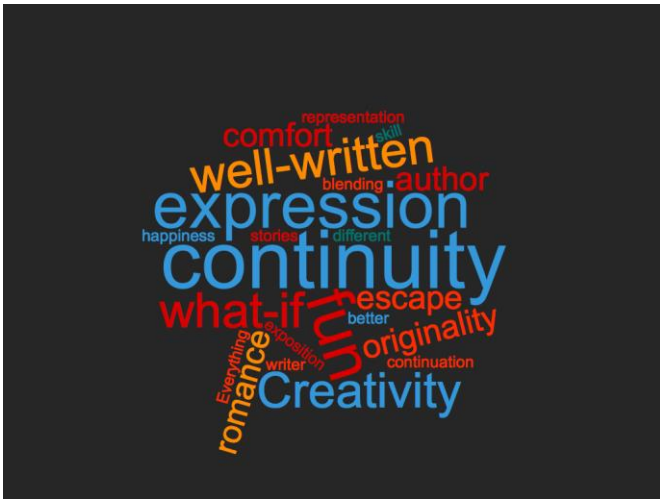
they're, "fun," a break if you will from normal fiction that is more tightly engineered, and perhaps doesn't so easily provide the intense emotional characteristics that fanfiction quickly and easily provides. In a study done by ToastyStats.tumblr in 2017, presented at the GeekGirlCon, the types of of fanfiction that AO3 users wrote the most was

presented. As ToastyStats points out, the

mood descriptors are most prominent on the graph. In comparison to my graph, which shows what people like most about fanfiction, I think both graphs may suggest that certain fanfics may become popular because they are more expressive or cater to specific emotions that the reader wants to feel

However, when fanfiction is adapted into TV or movie, the "serial numbers are filed off," so to speak, the original characters names are changed, and other descriptors of the plot may be changed so the adaptation can be well distinguished from the original. So, the data cannot exactly suggest that people read and go see movies like *50 Shades of Grey* because they want a continuation of *Twilight*. As Parish puts it,

It leaves us [the readers of the original fanfiction] with every move away from the original you know from *Twilight* books some some nuances is lost. And I think sure it could be a good book and it could be a good TV show....but that is not fanfiction anymore it's something else. And I think that there's a loss there



Overall, there is little evidence to suggest that the popularity of fanfiction to reach mainstream heights is based on sheer fan want to see the original story to continue, after all the digital representation is made to look clearly different from the work it was based off of. *Cupid's Match* is an odd case of fanfiction because it is based off of Greek Mythology, so it doesn't have to change character names or descriptions because it's based off more of a body of storytelling oral and written than anything else. However, when analyzing the reviews of *Cupid's Match* on its Goodreads page, none of sixty-six reviews mention reading the work because they wanted a continuation of Cupid's story from mythology. Most readers like Jasmine Carlisle were attracted to, "quick read with romance, action, funny dialogue, loveable characters, and an amazing plot." This sentiment is echoed by the words, "fun" and "creativity" in the word cloud.

Another layer to data may suggest that while readers may be attracted to the intense emotional reactions that fanfiction creates, the way fanfiction finds its way into the mainstream has to do with how mainstream media caters to fanfiction works now. Jenkins describes this as just the evocation of a long-standing relationship between mainstream media and fanfiction,

truthfully a lot of tv starts in fanfiction in one sense and if your a script writer in hollywood then you have to write spec scripts..so you're writing scripts using other people's character that you know will never get produced so it's how you demonstrate that you're cable of creating an original story is by actually is what we would think of is actually by doing fanfiction.

Later Jenkins adds that *Fifty Shades of Grey* is a part of a new wave of mainstream media and fanfic interaction that sheds the taboo of producing fanfiction. So really, what media consumers have often seen on TV and movies has been fanfiction. Of course,

understanding that fanfiction can easily be subverted into an original text, the question is no longer, “why is bad fanfiction made into movies?” but a little more, “why do people enjoy movies and tv shows that are objectively considered to be bad?”

## Discussion

Attempting to answer such a normative question as, “why is bad fanfiction made into bestselling books and record-breaking movies?” was always going to be a challenge. Although perhaps the question my study could have answered better were the “hows” of fanfiction. How has media culture shifted in the past twenty years or so to accommodate and praise works of fanfiction? How do stories with authors that have little writing experience compared to experienced writers creating fanfiction get more attention for their work? Questions such as the last two might be worth investigating in the future. For now, I cannot confidently say that this research filled a gap of knowledge within fanfiction and fandom scholarship. Ostensibly, the reasons as to why people like a certain piece of literature is wide and varied, therefore the reasons of why a work can succeed is also diverse. By that line of thought, I cannot give a good answer to why writing that I may decide is bad succeeds, when so many others think it’s good.

## Limitations

The study went through many limitations and obstacles while obtaining data. From the beginning there was a clear lack of equal diffusion of the survey to all decided platforms by the researcher, which resulted in several following limitations. First, the survey was distributed to Twitter, only to the researcher’s Followers on Twitter. This limited diffusion. Then, several days later when the researcher shared the survey via Tumblr, again the survey had to rely on the diffusion of the researchers followers. This strategy

for diffusion was once again not the best, especially because the researcher was not active on Tumblr enough to have a wide enough base to distribute it. Also the researcher's followers were not the best audience to diffuse or take the survey because many of them were not interested in fanfiction. So, by the time the researcher had developed the strategy to add tags to the survey to diffuse it to larger audiences, already three days had elapsed, which put it on unequal footing with the first time it had been given out. Later the researcher had put the survey on Facebook, however because there were several events that took precedence over the survey on most people's home pages, ie. graduation, the Royal Wedding, and the survey was put up on Facebook last, which meant it had little time to be taken although it was shared by three people. Another limiting factor by diffusing the survey by social media was that the researcher had very little presence on these platforms, therefore the survey was simply not exposed enough to the target audience. Ideally, the researcher would've had a strong social media presence and would have been more active in the fandom community, so that the target audience would have been more willing to participate.

The participation of who took the survey was also a limiting factor. On Tumblr, the notes (or how many times a post is likes or shared) was 23 by the end of the study. In comparison, on LiveJournal the post had received only 1 like, Facebook there were in total 4 shares, while on Twitter the tweet had been shared twice. And although the survey did not ask what had led respondents to the survey, it was clear that the majority of respondents had come from Tumblr. Which, as discussed above has a younger demographic of users, which subsequently skewed the data. In the future it would be

wiser to have clearer strategy for diffusing the survey that is clear and concise, and it better equipped to get respondents from fandom communities.

## Conclusion

Overall, the data collected was inconclusive. I suspect that's because it's not only difficult to quantify such a normative question, but because each work that finds success in mainstream culture has a set of unique reasons as to why it did find success. On the hand, looking at the data, I had previously hypothesized that the ties of fandom culture would be so strong that it would be the principal factor in mainstream success. However, there was little in the data to supports the notion. It seems on the other hand, after talking to Jenkins and Parrish that connection hat fans have to a piece of fanfiction is distorted in the least and removed more often, once the work finds mainstream success.

Yet, if I had to make a conclusion from the data I would assert that fanfictions that are considered, "bad" are made into TV and Movie productions because readers care less about the obvious markers of what makes a, "good" story to publish. One that is clear and concise, free of grammatical mistakes or other missteps. But instead consumers are more drawn to how a certain work makes them feel above anything else, which propels production companies to capitalize on that feeling.

## Appendix:

### Interview Questions

What was your initial interest in fanfic?

How much fanfiction do you read?

What type draws you the most?

Do you consider yourself a part of a fandom, and if so how active are you in that fandom?

What makes a good fanfic for you?

Do you have thoughts on fanfictions made into tv and film?

### Survey Questions

1. age: (1) under 12 years old (2) 12-17 (3) 18-24 (4) 25-34 (5) 35- 44 (6) 45-54+

2. Education: (1) no schooling completed (2) some high school no diploma (3) High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent (for example GED) (4) Associates degree (5)

Other-please specify. 3. if you write fanfiction, what type do you write in (multiple answers apply) (1) Canon fic, or in-universe fic (2) Alternate Universe (3) Cross-over fic

(4) Plot, What Plot? (5) Other, please specify. 4. What type of fanfiction do you read most? (1) Canon fic, or in-universe fic (2) Alternate Universe (3) Cross-over fic (4) Plot, What Plot? (5) Other, please specify.

### Coding Guidelines

Continuity- The respondent enjoyed the fanfic because it continued the original story,

Well-written- The respondent enjoyed the fanfic because it was a story that was well written (usually in combination with other factors).

Expression- Usually used in the context of the respondent writing fanfiction, in which they like to write it because it provides an outlet of expression.

Comfort/happiness/fun/escape- The respondent likes the fanfic because of the positive emotional response it brings to the respondent.

Romance- The respondent likes to read fanfic for the romance aspects that some fanfics are centered around.

Originality/What-if/ Creativity/Exposition- The respondent likes the fanfic because of its originality, usually deviating from the source work in a way that almost seems to be loosely inspired by the source work.

Representation- The respondent feels the fanfic is representative of them, (usually a marginalized group that is not well represented in the fandom or in larger mainstream media.)

Everything- This respondent reads fanfiction for apparently everything about it.



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