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Queer Subjectivity, Transmedia, and Embodiment in the Carmilla Fandom

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QUEER SUBJECTIVITY, TRANSMEDIA, AND EMBODIMENT
IN THE CARMILLA FANDOM

by

STEPHANIE SKINNER

Under the Direction of Cassandra White, PhD

ABSTRACT

This study examines the ways in which individuals mediate the institutionalization and embodiment of queer identities in the *Carmilla* fandom by manipulating transmedia networks. The research conducted expands upon Boellstorff's (2015) methodology for virtual communities and Spitulnik's (1993) theory of "media power". Data was collected using three strategies: 1) quantitative surveys of 436 individuals, 2) five interviews, and 3) participant observation in the *Carmilla* fandom through social media. While Marxist and critical theorists assert that mass media is contextualized as needing to fulfil the needs of the dominant class through institutional legitimation, I propose that an inverse can be recognized in GSRM online communities, whereby transmedia mediates identity production and reproduction and provides agency and legitimation

to GSRM representation. By examining *Carmilla: The Series*' unconventional mediums and queer-driven narrative, this study hopes to gain a perspective into the importance of queer-normative representation in mass media and acknowledge ways in which minority online communities manufacture and reinforce identity.

INDEX WORDS: embodiment, media power, GSRM, fandom, transmedia, Carmilla

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STEPHANIE SKINNER

An Undergraduate Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2016

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2016

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|------|--|
| AO3 | Archive of Our Own |
| CMC | Computer-mediated communication |
| F2F | Face-to-face |
| GPS | Global position systems |
| GSRM | Gender, sexuality, and romantic minorities |
| IRL | In-real-life |
| OTW | Organization for Transformative Work |
| P2P | Peer-to-peer |
| PCs | Personal computers |
| POV | Point-of-view |
| SL | Second Life |

Introduction

Despite the little recognition she received while pursuing anthropology under Franz Boas, Zora Neale Hurston became the foremost figure on native anthropology in her book *Mules and Men*. As a queer woman, I was ecstatic when I discovered a new web series airing on YouTube that acknowledged my identity through queer-normative narrative. *Carmilla*, a Canadian web series based off the novella of the same name by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, is a modern adaptation that uses transmedia storytelling through social media (e.g. Tumblr and Twitter) and additionally story content (i.e. “Silas Confidential” on Wattpad). I would hardly consider myself an active participant of the fandom—my routine mainly consists of reading others’ posts and reblogging content. However, the *Carmilla* fandom is close knit—there are individuals who essentially act as community leaders, the producers and actors engage with the community, and new members are welcomed in open arms as ‘creampuffs’.

“[T]here are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt” (Lorde 1977). One of my participants, Sarah (name changed to protect informant confidentiality), mentioned something very similar during our interview, and it occurred to me, the profoundness: because there is an assertion that individuals of my generation— the “millennials”— are entitled, sensitive, and self-absorbed (Wright 2013), and that the constant “connectivity” is somehow a detriment to our character (Eldeib 2010). What is often mischaracterized as narcissism or proliferate political correctness is instead the need for representation and community that is shaped through discussion and discourse conducted in online spaces through social media (Alexander 2002), especially for gender, sexuality, and romantic minority (GSRM) individuals who are ousted from mainstream culture.

"They're fans, but they're not silent, couchbound consumers of media. The culture talks to them, and they talk back to the culture in its own language" (Grossman 2011). Because *Carmilla* was uninhibited by the restraints of a mainstream network show, the producers were able to authenticate the facets of identity that are rarely afforded to queer characters in mainstream media. In addition, the *Carmilla* fandom has a large participatory network of social media role play, fan fiction, and fan art. The visual ways in which thoughts and ideas of queerness are dispersed through the fandom mean that even as a passive interactor, ideologies of identity are still produced and reproduced. Most important, the *Carmilla* fandom allows individuals the ability to mediate queer identity in a way that does not compromise their offline social life.

While geographic locality has been prudent to understanding the societal institutions of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and online communities, it is also important to recognize the internet as a transnational entity incorporating a locus of social, economic, and political identity that is in a constant state of flux. While early anthropological literature (Spitulnik 1993) focused on such Marxist and critical theorist approaches to explaining the socioeconomic culture of online communities, my research has adapted this model and applied an anthropological lens to literature in media and communication studies, and fandom studies. In addition to Marxist, critical, and social practice theory, queer theory is also discussed. The methods employed to collect data includes both qualitative interviews and participant observation in the *Carmilla* fandom, and quantitative interviews distributed on Tumblr and completed through Survey Gizmo.

In order to apply and analyze the research questions at hand, certain methodological measures must be taken. First, I will review the relevant literature used to guide the research. I will then proceed to discuss the data collected: who, what, when, where, why, and how? After

that, I will detail the methods I used to collect the data. Then, based on the literature and methods described, I will apply it to hypotheses and research questions that have guided the research. Next, I will detail the findings of the data observed and collected, and how this may or may not relate back to the literature and hypotheses. After which, I will return to the main research questions and interpret the findings of the research. Finally, the conclusion will ascertain the methodological limitations and bias of the study that could compromise the data, and the broader implications the data could have on future research.

Review of Related Literature

In order to adequately explore the discursive context of media, participatory culture, and queer subjectivity, the following literature was reviewed and organized into three distinctive sections: 1) Mass Media, Computer-Mediated Communication, and Online Communities, 2) Participatory Culture, Fandoms, and Transmedia Narratives, and 3) Queer Subjectivity and Representation in Online Spaces.

Mass Media, Computer-Mediated Communication, and Online Communities

As Debra Spitulnik notes in her *Annual Review of Anthropology* article, “Anthropology and Mass Media” (1993), anthropological discourse over mass media and communicative practices in online spaces is few and far between. While this is often convoluted by discussions of what constitutes tangible and imaginative domains of study, we must understand that mass media’s electronic medium “are at once artifacts, experiences, practices, and processes (1993:293). Therefore, mass media and its cultural products are inexplicably tied up in language and intertextuality— associations between literary, media, or cinematic texts (Haastrup 2014)— and the “construction of communities” (Spitulnik 1993:294). Because mass media and social media act as medium for the transmission of cultural products and ideology, there is also the

concern for “media power” which determines individual interpretation, participation, and representation of a collective community. Media power has been assessed from two schools of thought. The first, proposed by Bennett (1982, as referenced by Spitulnik 1993:295) involved theories of “mass society” and the effect mass media has on legitimizing hegemonic institutions, leading to cultural homogeneity, and denigration of “working class consciousness”. This is further exemplified by the use of quantitative data to support media ratings and commodify audiences and audience identity (Spitulnik 1993:299). The second school of thought elaborated on the role of media power in the production and reproduction of cultural attitudes and beliefs of media audiences, where individuals actively interpret media, but is independent of class (Bourdieu 1984, as referenced by Spitulnik 1993:297). I intend to provide an empirical praxis of Anderson’s (1983, as cited by Spitulnik 1993:295) theory of mass mediated collectivity, where individuals have a sense of community regardless of variegated interpersonal communication.

Like Spitulnik, Rheingold also asserts the complication of mass media commodification in the public sphere through computer-mediation communication (CMC) (1993). Nevertheless, while our perceptions of society are dependent on the internality and externality of mass media we consume, it is also affected by our CMC use. CMC also has the ability to create “many-to-many” communication, but Rheingold states that this can present as a challenge to community building. Ultimately, he believes that political change is only possible through CMC’s ability to challenge hegemonic institutions in communications media (1993). Rheingold also places concern on whether online spaces and groups (such as fandoms) could constitute a community. Rheingold cites Marc Smith’s concept of “collective goods” (1992), where a community consists of three social goods: social network capital, knowledge capital, and communion. Simply put, “social network capital” is an existing community in an online space where “knowledge

capital”— the communal knowledge shared by members in the community— is interpreted, produced, and reproduced through “communion”. Some individuals come to virtual communities for community, some for knowledge, and for others— both. And some individuals have a natural proclivity for online communities. These “symbolic analysts” as mentioned by Robert Reich (1992, as cited by Rheingold 1993) included: writers and journalists, freelance artists and designers, independent television producers, researchers, etc. Like myself, Rheingold asserts himself as both a native informant and as “[an] uncredentialed social scientist” (1993), and the views of both the observer and performer are key to understanding the cultural beliefs and products constructed in online spaces.

Similarly, Wilson & Peterson also argue that online communities vary in characteristics and purpose, but all are “linked by an interest in markets or exchange networks for goods and information” (2002:449). Like Spitulnik (although occurring almost a decade later), Wilson & Peterson contest the lack of anthropological research online communities and the Internet, stating that, “anthropologists have positioned media as peripheral to culture” (Dickey 1997 as stated by Wilson & Peterson 2002). While they cite Rheingold’s “revitalization of citizen-based democracy” through CMC, they also reference Castells (1996) who proposes that CMC and the Internet have brought about a new information age (Wilson & Peterson 2002:451). The lack of formal methodological approaches to research of media and the Internet has also made it difficult to discern what is ‘here to stay’ and what has become insignificant, especially when new users begin with the latest technology. Variable shelf lives of CMC technology also introduced problems with terminology phenomena. Here, Wilson & Peterson elaborate on the Internet as an all-encompassing infrastructure that includes the Web, email, social media, and mass media, referring to media as, “defined by what it is not: face-to-face [F2F] communication” (Spitulnik

2001:143 as cited by Wilson & Peterson 2002:452). Praxis involving power dichotomies and minority relations should be kept in mind as media processes and products continue to evolve (Spitulnik 1993, as referenced by Wilson & Peterson 2002:455). While some scholars contest the tangibility of CMC and online communities, Wilson & Peterson find this division unnecessary, but that issues of identity, communication, and power must be contextualized by offline sociocultural interactions (2002:457-60).

How then does a researcher approach ethnography in the context of online spaces? Anne Beaulieu opens the discussion on methodological approaches used by incorporating anthropological praxis to evolving technology (2004:139). New networked technology means the creation of new webpages and sites where scientific inquiry can take place. While most work asserts that CMC is incapable of producing community through a lack of face-to-face communication and physical locality, other scholars such as Wilson & Peterson (2002) cite the “over-invest[ment] in fetishized notions of community that are no longer considered valid in anthropology” (Beaulieu 2004:143). New demands may mean learning new methods of conducting ethnographic research, but may also provide advantages to issues of multi-sited ethnography or longevity of research—data can be collected from the ease of your office. Likewise, while traditional ethnography saw the intrusiveness of field notes and records (audio or visual), online ethnography “celebrates the position of the lurker” and affords the observer advantages as a future participant through a liminal period of prefatory performance (Beaulieu 2004:146). However, some ethnographic work (Hines 2000, as states by Beaulieu 2004:149) treats the Internet and its infrastructure—structurally and functionally— as fixed, and explores intersubjectivity through individually-produced webpages. This method of active interaction starkly contrasts that of lurking, as previously mentioned. However, given then textual nature of

the Internet and CMC in general, online ethnography is more often relegated to that of “cultural studies, literary studies and media studies” (Beaulieu 2004:159).

Providing a more modern approach to the study of online ethnography, Coleman starts by expressing variances in the production and reproductions of cultural products by individuals and groups (2010:488). Cell phones have now become a facet of everyday life, and thus, our daily life consists of interactions with digital media—whether it’s checking the weather or posting on Facebook— and the production of these “digital artifacts” create communities of collective identity that are shaped through evolving digital technology. Coleman breaks her exposition of ethnographic praxis into three categories: digital media and cultural politics, vernacular of digital media, and the dialectical relationship between digital media and social practices. (2010:488).

The replacement of landlines with cell phone usage has increased not only economic activity, but sociality as well (Coleman 2010:492). Not only are social networks of kinship and friendship reinforced, but it also provides a medium for the production and interpretation of GSRM identity. As previous scholars have mentioned, much ethnographic work has been subject to stringent dichotomous lines between online and offline spaces. While some spaces retain distinctive boundaries, others centralize groupings that would have been impossible before the Internet, and offer national and transnational support systems (Coleman 2010:493). Referencing Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia—where one perspective encompasses the ‘voices’ or perspectives of multiple entities— Coleman states that language and the artifacts produced through digital media are lived. The mediation of these products also shape: production and reproduction of media, communication, and social or ideological functions (Coleman 2010:495).

Through empirical and self-reflexive application, Boellstorff examines the virtual world of Second Life (SL). While some scholars believe in firm divisions of online and offline spaces,

Boellstorff explains that observing virtual communities in situ is the only sensible methodological approach that can evolve with technology and CMC (2015:4). While individuals that may engage in online practices are influenced by offline sociocultural mores, “the forms of social action and meaning-making that take place do so with the virtual world, and there is a dire need for methods and theories that take this into account” (2015:5). We must maintain, however, that a dialectical relationship exists between meaning-making in virtual worlds and social life. Subjectivity and community is mediated through production and reproduction of consciousness surrounding these spheres. Like previous scholars, the question of Second Life as a relevant digital technology becomes problematic when we assume the speed at which these technologies evolve (2015:xv). However, for posterity’s sake the implication of such ethnographic fieldwork will maintain even after the posit of the “hype cycle”, in which primacy is given to the newest trend. Contrary to the way in which Google deleted accounts that were not linked to a user’s real name (Lothian 2013), your identity in Second Life was deliberately discrete from your physical identity. The most interesting assertion of this literature, is the differentiation between pseudonymity and anonymity. As Lothian (2013) explains with the need for author legitimacy and protection, so too does Boellstorff acknowledge the interdependence of individual and collective identity: “As we move into a future of potentially ubiquitous tracking and surveillance, Second Life reminds us of the possibility for forms of digital collectivity and selfhood that use pseudonymity in creative and community enhancing ways” (Boellstorff 2015:xvii).

Participatory Culture, Fandoms, and Transmedia Narratives

While previously literature has focused on methodological approaches to mass media and online communities, I begin this section with DiMaggio et al.’s article on “the Internet’s implications for social change” (2001:308). Similar to Wilson & Peterson, DiMaggio uses the

term Internet to refer to both the structural and functional uses of infrastructure. Internet technologies are rapidly evolving, and this offers two important research points: testing of “technology diffusion and media effects”, and “modalities of communication and different kinds of content” (DiMaggio et al. 2001). Here, modalities of communication refer to the various ways in which we communicate: peer-to-peer interaction (P2P), group discussion, or more recently vlogging, while content refers to text, audio, or video. In addition, the complex semiotic modalities of online communities will spark new discourse on identity, inequality, social organization (Castells, referenced by DiMaggio et al. 2001:309). Although this is a worthy area of research, DiMaggio et al. also conclude that differentiating between forms of Internet use would be useful in analyzing behaviors of social and institutional nature (2001:329). What has appeared most is varying degrees of how the Internet would impact new technology. While previous literature such as *Neuromancer* have become the preeminent example of dystopic reactions to technological diffusion, this is typically in response to utopic hopes and high expectations. In reality, the Internet’s impact has been more limited than originally anticipated, and has varied socioeconomic and political constraints.

One such technological innovation that has arisen from the Internet and CMC has been mobile Internet (Rheingold 2002). Just as personal computers (PCs) evolved to encompass telecommunications networks to form the beginnings of the Internet, Rheingold hypothesized that mobile phones would evolve to incorporate the Internet, at which point “[i]t will be a way to do things that couldn’t be done before” (2002:xiv). Each of the features proposed: screen color, screen size, multimedia, and global position systems (GPS) exponentially increase the others’ functionality. Three laws are pivotal in technological evolution: Moore’s Law, Metcalfe’s Law, and Reed’s Law. The first two concern the rise of CMC and Internet: Moore’s Law asserts that as

computer processors become more efficient (and thus smaller), they will become cheaper. Likewise, Metcalfe's Law states that as the number of connection points— also known as nodes— grows, the power of a network will multiply. The last, Reed's Law expresses that as more variegated groups access networks especially those of social networks, it increases the power said network. Thus, Reed's Law will result in a mobile phone and Internet boom and provide connectivity that was previously unforeseen (Rheingold 2002:xv). Rheingold mentions his previous work *The Virtual Community* (1993) which has been previously reviewed, and begins to describe the early signs of technological shifts stemming from mobile telecommunications: websites allowing fans to engage with celebrity information leading to communities of interests; dating services; and navigation. Most importantly, however, is that these features “enables people to act together in new ways and in situations where collective action was not possible before” (Rheingold 2002:xviii).

In addition to his previous book, *Smart Mobs*, I also analyze a chapter Rheingold has written in the *Handbook of Mobile Communication Studies* (2008). I ended my last paragraph discussing the implications of collective action and community organization. Rheingold expands upon this by stating that despite being on the precipice (as of 2008) of its potential, it is expected to “enable people to effect significant political changes” (2008:225). While communicative practices— and literacy by extension— have gone hand-in-hand with political institutions for much of written history, future communication technologies have “the potential to amplify, leverage, transform, and shift political power by enabling people to persuade and inform the thoughts and beliefs of others” (Rheingold 2008:225). And although the potential for positive political change is evident, it can also be argued that the same technology can prove disruptive to individuals involved in organized communities. Although Rheingold cites several localities

where mobilization has occurred, he establishes that in no way does it ensure that smart mobs will be peaceful or that collective action organized through this means will result in more unified democracies. He does, however, suggest several reasons including empowerment and “the power to disseminate information that is suppressed by authoritarian regimes and controlled mass media” as ways to create strong, unified democracies through smart mobs (Rheingold 2008:236).

Due to the widespread and evolving nature of the Internet and the rise of media-rich smartphones, Evans asserts that a “new model of understanding audience engagement” is needed. Audio-visual narratives are no longer restricted to television mediums, and instead are coalescing with transmedia—emergent technology that extends traditional narratives across multi-media platforms of community engagement (Evans 2007). Through her analysis of *Spooks*, a BBC television program, Evans explains that transmedia text of online games is created in a way that mimics the style of the program itself; edited screenshots, music, symbolism, and a first point-of-view (POV) “places the user in the diegesis of the series” (2007). Diegesis here represents the recounting of a story from the narrator’s perspective. While there is some debate on the use of the term “interactive” or “interactivity” to describe the way in which the audience communicates with a medium, this does not explicitly constitute a clear boundary; no interactive process is entirely passive—interpretive processes and paralinguistic markers (e.g. nonverbal facial expressions) are consciously or unconsciously enacted. Instead, interactivity should be viewed on a spectrum, including not only “different media forms but also different forms of interactivity itself” (2007). Of the most importance, however, is the centrality of characters to audiences. While narratives wane over time, characters generally stay consistent, and aid audience engagement with the narrative.

Like *Spooks*, BBC's modern retelling of *Sherlock* has attracted the attention of social media the participatory culture of fan fiction and role playing. Through the creation of 'fake' character accounts on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr, fans act out celebrity behavior. Although McClellan begins by differentiating between fan fiction and role playing, she later targets attributes that correlate between social media narratives and role play interactivity (2013). As with fan fiction, authors are able to add additional content that reflects their personal, as well as the collective interpretation of events and identity in the same way that actor of social media role playing give additional content; however, that is not to say that additional content is canonized—rather that it is also limited by the authentic narrative material. In order for the presence on social media to become imbricated with the celebrity figure, online role play characters must be exactly that—in character. Any facet of interaction including responding textually must be done precisely as the “source character” (2013). Through the observation of BBC's *Sherlock* and the interactivity audiences and social media, conventional fandom practices are reevaluated.

Distributed by the same network as *Sherlock*, Hill's case study of *Torchwood* media tie-ins is more similar than dissimilar to Jenkin's (2006) description of transmedia storytelling. Although these novels, broadcasts, and interactive games constitute separate storylines, it nevertheless expands the narrative world of *Torchwood* (Hill 2012:409). In addition, Hill also asserts that these media tie-ins are direct responses to fan criticisms of “developing narratives, [and an attempt] to quell and deactivate negative fan commentary”. In this way, the discursive commodification of fan collectivity and identity represents not only the acquiescence of the audience, but also as a way to handle the TV series brand—the process of “fanagement” (Hill 2012:410). Because narratives are imbricated through transmedia, interactivity such as fan

engagement and world-building become paramount to the act of storytelling (2012:411). This is best accomplished through hyperdiegetic responses that reward the passive interactivity of audiences by fulfilling the needs of a consumer group. Although Jenkins readily attests that modern transmedia storytelling fulfill the needs of the audience expectations, Hill states that this is presumptuous due to the importance of continuity to fan cultures. For example, if continuity errors are detected, they are “retconned” whereby fan fiction “rework[s] the canonical text so that contradictions are retroactively ironed out (Hill 2012:412).

Similarly, Wood & Baughman’s (2012) study of *Glee* fan practices on Twitter has “implications for both producers and consumers” (328), especially when citing Jenkins’ (2006) theory of “convergence culture”— “defin[ing] the relationship between media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence” (Wood & Baughman 2012:331). Convergence is best described as the “osmosis of participatory media”. Content travels between media platforms and industries while media audiences—especially fan cultures—search for variegated entertainment experiences (2012:331). Participatory culture relies on the consumer’s participation in reciprocal social interactions that “contributes to a capital of collective intelligence”. As with *Sherlock* character role play on social media sites, *Glee* fans on Twitter maintain role play accounts and were connected through a world outside of the narrative, but consistently informed by the narrative. Overall, changes in televisual media through convergence and embodiment of fan communities online are providing the basis for a new categorization of audience (2012:332).

Queer Subjectivity and Representation in Online Spaces

Where does transmedia and newer technological media fall in providing community and representation to individuals who are GSRM? Fink & Miller offer ethnographic discourse on the

online environment of Tumblr and the networks of “digital self-representation” of queer and gender nonconforming individuals (2014:611). The evolution of CMC and digital technologies has improved the ways in which we communicate textually and visually. Blogs typically consist of embedded multimedia, descriptions of content, source information, and an archival record of everyone who ‘reblogs’, ‘likes’, or ‘comments’ on the post. Like Second Life and the #nymwars controversy, users are considered pseudonymous. The “disidentificatory” nature of Tumblr has enabled a community discourse where queer individuals are able to mediate identity free of heteronormative and “mass-consumption paradigm” (Fink & Miller 2014:612). Fink asserts that unlike offline communities, online communities like those of Tumblr are more accessible and provide a unique “digital forum for the disseminating self-representations of trans experience beyond local contexts and spatial boundaries” (2014:613). Tumblr’s microblogging platform contrasts the prose-style blogging of websites like WordPress or Reddit, and because of this provides contextualization of intersectionality and intertextuality, where content is dependent on visual media (2014:614), and erasure or misrepresentation of GSRM identity in social life is explored across temporal and spatial boundaries (2014:615).

As I said at the beginning of my paper, millennials are often associated with increased need for connectivity, somehow making up lazier and more disconnected from our social lives. The growth of mobile Internet and social media technologies was predicted by Reed’s law, and as such have allowed social networks and diversification to prosper. As Yourd notes, communities based in intertextuality allow “individuals to understand complex social issues, such as queer issues, and the Internet is rich in fictional queer narrative that queer and non-queer audiences worldwide have latched on to in lieu of mainstream fiction” (2014:1). As we have already discussed, fan art and fan fiction are ways in which minority groups mediate identity

stemming from lack of representation. Such work is authored for the sake of the work itself, not for profit, and through non-tropic representation allows realistic experiences and inclusion (2014:2). This contrasts heteronormative practices in mainstream media, where limited queer identities are explored, are depicted stereotypically or one-dimensionally, and are only “understood by their queerness” (2014:6).

When queer identities are portrayed in mainstream media, more often than not these roles are filled by stereotypical characters like the gay best friend. Queer-identified women in media are few and far between, especially for identities that are considered ‘less conventional’ than others. As such, Lothian, Busse, & Reid explore the online spaces of queer women, specifically femslash fandoms (2007:103). Femslash is fan fiction that involves female relationships of a romantic or sexual nature, however, the authors present such discourse in way that opposes the geophysicality of Judith Halberstam’s “metronormativity”, and places an emphasis on the practices of queer women in online spaces (Lothian, Busse, & Reid 2007:5). The self-reflexive nature of work reflects issues of “queerness, feminism, identity, and political agency” that stem from a lack of mainstream media representation and opens discourse on queer identity and queerness (2007:106-7). Slash fandoms offer safe spaces to women who are embody their identity, as well as those who explore queerness in a space without “potential effects on real lives”.

Similar to Lothian, Busse, & Reid (2007), Vivienne & Burgess explore “how queer storytellers balance privacy with the desire to have a voice to be heard in public debates” (2012:362). For queer individual’s daily interactions can be can become examples of “everyday activism”, born from early performativity and mediation of queerness in a heteronormative social reality (2012:363). Therefore, online spaces become a dedicated medium for storytellers to

contest stereotypes of representation rather than confining discourse to an exclusive group. Vivienne & Burgess define a three-stage typology of digital storytelling (2012:364): ‘pre-production’ and ‘production’ involve active identity mediation between “intimate” publics. Through this discursive practices, the collectivity determines what aspects of identity should be hidden and what can be lauded to unknown audiences (2012:365-7). This constant mediation stems from societal stereotypes and taboos of what it means to be queer. Through “networked identity work” these storytellers define how they are viewed by “intimate and unknown publics” (2012:375).

Lothian begins their discussion with the #nymwars controversy where in 2011, Google deleted accounts that were not indexed with user’s real names (2013: 541). While this can lead to disruptive or harassing behavior by anonymous users, this also risks the identity and well-being of individuals who have “political, sexual, or subcultural online practices” that differ from that in the offline world (Lothian 2013:542). Most of the proponents arguing for a third term alternative— pseudonymity— were involved in fan cultures that exchanged fan art and fan fiction. Such websites where pseudonymity is permissible allowed creators an “accountable, archivable, and socially positive way of separating online activities from a physical sphere that may not approve them” (Lothian 2013:542). The Organization for Transformative Works (OTW), is “a fan advocacy organization that works to preserve and defend the legitimacy of fans’ creative works”, underwrites the journal of *Transformative Works and Cultures*, and operates Archive of Our Own (AO3) a website where more than 380,000 fan fiction stories are created, saved, shared, and discussed (Lothian 2013:543). While fandom has a vast definition of communities, Lothian uses the term ‘subcultural fandom’ when discussing fans that produce or discuss fan fiction, fan art, and fan videos (Lothian 2013:545). Derecho (2003, as cited by Lothian

2013:545) described fan fiction as ‘archontic literature’ where “authors build on existing media and literature and add a diversity of perspectives” and for minority groups and women to incorporate sociocultural criticism. While fan productions are not always created in a way that preserves the canon—content created by authors that is deemed authentic—it still expands the content retention (Lothian 2013:546).

As previously discussed, Lothian establishes that online fandoms provide a means for a diversity of perspectives and for inclusion of minority groups and women. This is further corroborated by scholars describing CMC as a means for disadvantaged groups to regain a sense of community (Mele 1999; Smith & Kollock 1999). Alexander asks how other CMC and online communities enable GSRM individuals to create a sense of community (2002:77). As more and more online queer communities begin to appear, GSRM organizations are able to reach out to the community and provide support, and as Egan (2000, as cited by Alexander 2002:78) states GSRM teens are “coming out at younger and younger ages—perhaps due to the availability of information, and interactivity, offered by the Internet.” It also provides young GSRM individuals with a way to establish networks of connectivity with peers and role models, and if desired potential significant others. How then do Internet technologies influence the embodiment of self and society? Alexander claims that questions of this sort are important since queer identities are contested and threatened in offline spaces (2002:79). Tsang (1996:311 as cited by Alexander 2002:79) states that in online communities, “For once, you are in total control of your sexual identity, or identities, or at least what you decide to show the outside world”. Online spaces allow the mediation of identities and subjectivity that would or could be prohibited in-real-life (IRL) and across geographic and national polities. The varying degree of representation online has exponentially increased as forms of social media have expanded, and continually introduce

GSRM individuals to identity performance and community (Alexander 2002:81). Nina Wakeford (1997:31 as referenced by Alexander 2002:81) states, “The construction of identity is the key thematic which unites almost all cyberqueer studies”. The perception of community and identity will continue to change as communication mediums adapt to Internet and social trends.

Data

As a preface to the data that will be explained below, I want to address stylistic choices that will appear throughout the continuation of the paper. When referencing Tumblr, I will use the capitalized form (“Tumblr”) to refer to it as a technological medium or infrastructure, while the lower case (“tumblr”) will refer to its personal usage as a microblog. In addition, any informant names referenced throughout the continuation of this paper will be pseudonyms to protect participant confidentiality.

So, Who’s Carmilla?

At its surface, *Carmilla* is just another vampire show: Disdain for sunlight? Check. Drinks blood? Check. Brooding lady vampire? Check. Naïve-girl love interest? Check. Oh, I’m sorry— did I lose you? Let me clarify; *Carmilla* is the modern retelling of the Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s novella of the same name, except with queer characters and a queer-normative narrative. Created by Jordan Hall and Ellen Simpson, it stars Elise Bauman as ‘Laura’, and Natasha Negovanlis and ‘Carmilla’. The Canadian web series premiered on Vervegirl’s (now KindaTV) YouTube channel in 2014. The series has three seasons and a Christmas special, with fans anticipating the fourth and final season this summer, and the average length of an episode is between three to seven minutes. Co-creator Ellen Simpson created additional story content through canon character Twitter accounts between season one and season two. Due to the less restricted nature of YouTube’s medium, *Carmilla* is able to include realistic depictions of queer

identity and life—minus the vampire issues—and include actors and crew that are a part of the GSRM community. In addition, most of the actors are women, and empowerment is a common theme of the series.

Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis

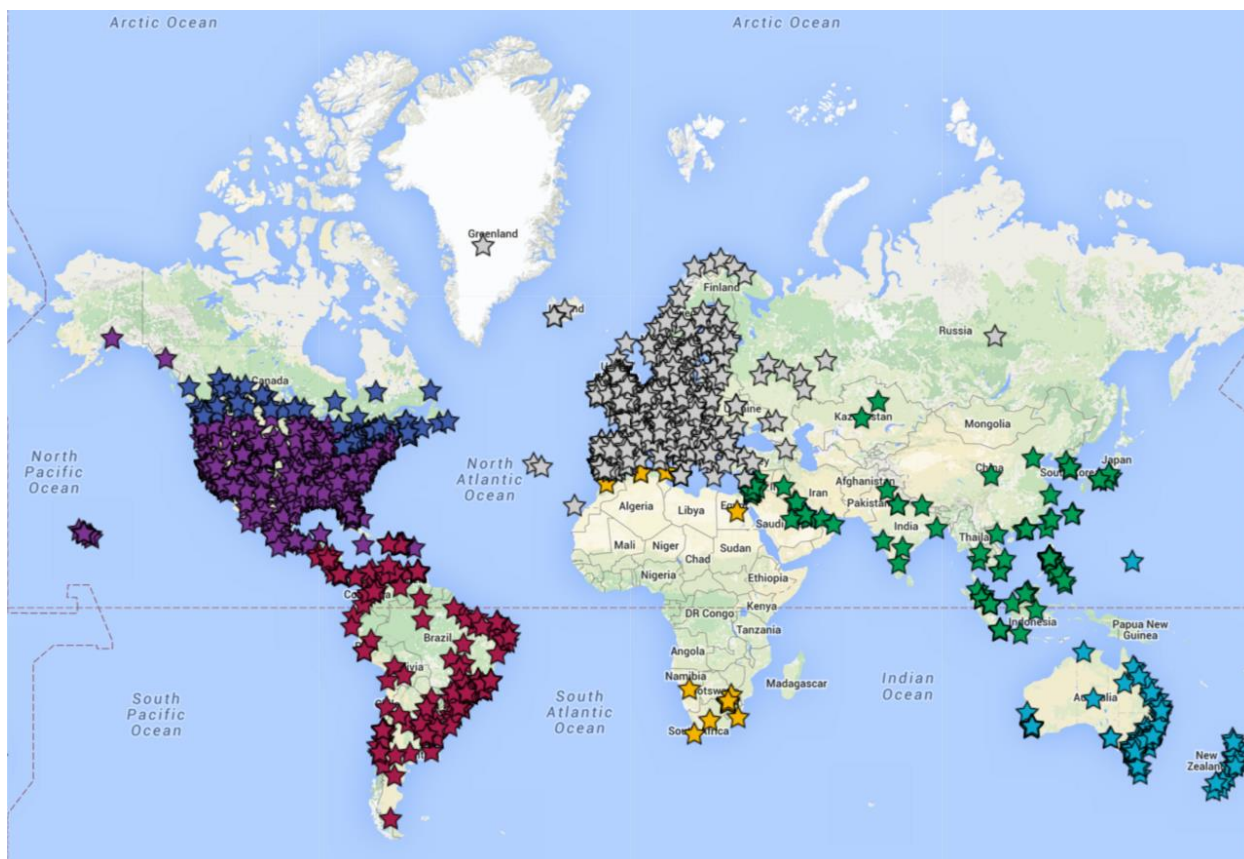


Figure 1 "Creampuff World Domination" completed in Google Maps by @Carmilla-Feels-HQ (Tumblr Handle)

When conducting research, we like to have tangible evidence of the phenomena we are investigating. In the case of physical fandoms, one can simply attend a comic-con and see droves of individuals amassing into their respective collectives. How then does this translate to fandoms in online spaces? Figure 1, created by the unofficial *Carmilla* fandom tumblr Carmilla-Feels-HQ, shows a 'registry' of individuals that engage in the *Carmilla* fandom. Principal groupings of individuals are found in North America and Europe, while the smallest groupings of individuals

are found in Russia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Despite how centralized the fandom appears, I was able to attain transnational data from 35 countries and 339 cities.

Table 1 Gender Demographics in the Carmilla Fandom

| | | Gender | | | |
|----------------|----------------|---------------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
| Valid | 1 ^a | 327 | 74.7 | 75.0 | 75.0 |
| | 2 ^b | 106 | 24.2 | 24.3 | 99.3 |
| | 3 ^c | 3 | .7 | .7 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 436 | 99.5 | 100.0 | |
| Missing System | | 2 | .5 | | |
| Total | | 438 | 100.0 | | |

Table 1.1 Gender Demographics

- a. 1- Cisgender women and men
- b. 2- Gender nonconforming individuals
- c. 3- Other (Write-in responses)

Over the course of four months, from early January to mid-April, I conducted qualitative and quantitative research of the *Carmilla* fandom on Tumblr—and through extension YouTube, Twitter, and AO3. Following traditional anthropological methods, I conducted participant observation of the online spaces through which the *Carmilla* fandom interacted, and interviewed

Table 2 Sexuality Demographics in the Carmilla Fandom

| | | Sexuality | | | |
|----------------|----------------|------------------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
| Valid | 1 ^a | 418 | 95.4 | 95.9 | 95.9 |
| | 2 ^b | 13 | 3.0 | 3.0 | 98.9 |
| | 3 ^c | 5 | 1.1 | 1.1 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 436 | 99.5 | 100.0 | |
| Missing System | | 2 | .5 | | |
| Total | | 438 | 100.0 | | |

Table 1.2 Sexuality Demographics

- a. 1- "Queer" sexualities
- b. 2- Heterosexuals
- c. 3- Other (Write-in responses)

individuals with varying degrees of participation. Simple quantitative surveys were distributed during this time in order to assess demographic make-up of the community.

While the producers of *Carmilla* encourage everyone to watch the web series, from a consumer based perspective *Carmilla* was created to provide legitimation and agency to queer individuals and women. As *Table 1* shows, almost 327 of individuals surveyed were cisgender women or men, while 106 identified as gender non-conforming. Of the 327 cisgender individuals, only 11 were cisgender men. Likewise, *Table 2* shows that 418 individuals identified as a queer sexuality, while only 13 identified as heterosexual. Lastly, *Table 3* shows that 407 individuals identified with a queer romantic identity, and only 20 individuals identified as heteromantic. Overall, the majority of individuals in the *Carmilla* fandom are queer, cisgender women.

Table 3 Romantic Identities in the Carmilla Fandom

| | | Romantic Identity | | | Cumulative |
|----------------|----------------|-------------------|---------|---------------|------------|
| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Percent |
| Valid | 1 ^a | 407 | 92.9 | 93.3 | 93.3 |
| | 2 ^b | 20 | 4.6 | 4.6 | 97.9 |
| | 3 ^c | 9 | 2.1 | 2.1 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 436 | 99.5 | 100.0 | |
| Missing System | | 2 | .5 | | |
| Total | | 438 | 100.0 | | |

Table 1.3 Romantic Identity Demographics

- a. 1- "Queer" romantic identities
- b. 2- Heteromantic
- c. 3- Other (Write-in responses)

Of the quantitative data, daily internet usage, fandom participation, and influences surrounding initial interest in *Carmilla* have been the most conducive to explaining the participatory nature of individuals in the community. I myself spend *more than* 6 hours online a day, a practice that was unchanged during my observation of the *Carmilla* fandom. Surveyed

| | No influence | Slightly influential | Moderately influential | Very influential | Most influential |
|---|--------------|----------------------|------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Queer-normative narrative | 11 2.5% | 16 3.7% | 59 13.5% | 178 40.6% | 174 39.7% |
| Queer female characters | 4 0.9% | 10 2.3% | 32 7.3% | 131 29.9% | 261 59.6% |
| Inclusive cast | 16 3.7% | 25 5.7% | 98 22.4% | 206 47.0% | 93 21.2% |
| Female writers and producers | 25 5.7% | 31 7.1% | 96 21.9% | 177 40.4% | 109 24.9% |
| Explores female sexuality and agency more than mainstream shows | 7 1.6% | 12 2.7% | 62 14.2% | 174 39.7% | 183 41.8% |
| Uninhibited by mainstream television constraints surrounding queer characters | 10 2.3% | 14 3.2% | 64 14.6% | 176 40.2% | 174 39.7% |
| Convenient to watch | 24 5.5% | 38 8.7% | 88 20.1% | 150 34.2% | 138 31.5% |
| Cast and crew are active in the fandom | 47 10.7% | 59 13.5% | 104 23.7% | 141 32.2% | 87 19.9% |

Figure 2 Influences Surrounding Initial Interest in Camilla

individuals, as documented in *Figure 2*, reported similar numbers; 39.3% spent roughly 4-5 hours online, while only 1.6% spent *less than* two hours online a day (Rheingold 2002). In addition, while the majority of respondents answered that they passively interacted with content online—from reblogging to watching new videos on Vervegirl sponsored by U by Kotex—almost 25% of the sample reported writing fan fiction, and 10% drew fan art. To 60% of participants, queer female characters were the most influential in their decision to watch *Carmilla*, while 47% stated that an inclusive cast was very influential. Three categories were equally regarded as very influential or most influential at 40%: queer-normative narrative, exploration of female sexuality, and uninhibited by mainstream television constraints (Lothian 2013; Lothian, Busse & Reid 2007).

Interviewed informants placed an emphasis on the flexibility afforded through social media and transmedia storytelling compared to that of mainstream television. First, storylines are less centered around one-dimensional “coming out stories”. As Sarah, one of my interviewees, described it:

I think one thing that sets it apart from mainstream series that pulled a lot of the fanbase (including me) in was that it was an LGBT representative series written by people in the community. It was normalized that these characters are yes-lesbians and a Non-Binary character (the first I had encountered)-but it wasn't a huge driving force behind the story. It was who they were and being able to see that on screen and without the heavy handedness of mainstream media was refreshing.

Secondly, one informant, Emma, stated that transmedia allowed for the short episodes of *Carmilla* to be elaborated upon in a way that is easily accessible (i.e. Twitter). Lastly, participants believed that although mainstream media handles queer characters and storylines in irrefutably harmful ways, online communities and transmedia narrative have collective power to make changes in offline spaces (Vivienne & Burgess 2012).

Methodologically, 481 surveys were initiated through Tumblr, and 436 were fully completed—a 91% completion rate. Surveys were created in Survey Gizmo, and consisted of 19 questions ranging from basic demographics, internet usage, participation, and expectations as previously discussed. The survey was completed—on average— in four minutes, and was available for one week to individuals in the community. While I originally only intended to have 42 surveys completed, a recruitment message I posted on my tumblr was reblogged by several ‘higher profile’ tumblrs, and resulted in 10x the responses. My normal Internet usage patterns and passive participation enabled to observe interactions and discussions between individuals without disrupting communicative and participatory practices (Beaulieu 2004).

Data involving online usage, community involvement, and conceptions of self and collectivity are imperative to understanding future implications in queer theory, representation, and activism in media. As Fink & Miller (2014) state, cases in which content in social media becomes dependent on visual mediums means that individuals that were already predisposed to online communities (Rheingold 1993) become increasingly interconnected. Considering the consumer based nature of the media and film production, certain aspects of Marxist theory can be applied in terms of the marketability of identity (Spitulnik 1993).

Methods

Interviews were conducted using Tumblr’s ‘Messaging’ feature. While interviews are normally completed through audio or visual recordings, it is a practice mediated through F2F. Therefore, in order to maintain participatory practices of informants online, I chose to use a communication system contextualized in its environment (Woods & Baughman). Likewise, participants were chosen based on their role in the community. Out of the five participants, four would be what I consider “community leaders”. This involves hosting unofficial fan blogs, being

authors and creators of fan art and fan fiction, and the general acquisition of clout that occurs from knowledge of queer and feminist ideology. The intertextual nature of online communities and visual mediums allows individuals to understand social issues (Spitulnik 1993; Fink & Miller 2014) and it also allows individuals to have a safe space to mediate identities that could engender harm in offline spaces (Alexander 2002). It is worth noting that the tables discussed in the previous section combined multiple genders, sexualities, and romantic identities into single groups of “queer identities” in order to show the dichotomy of queer and heteronormative identities endemic to the *Carmilla* fandom. Survey Gizmo allowed data to be exported into Excel files that could be read in Excel or IBM SPSS; however, only simple frequency tables were calculated based on gender, sexuality, and romantic identity as previously referenced. Other demographic data such as age, ethnicity, household income, and education were assessed through Survey Gizmo’s reporting function and involved visual aids such as pie charts and bar graphs, that were not included in this paper due to the limited scope of the topic.

Results

Who’s Who in the *Carmilla* Fandom?

Rheingold (1993) stated that “symbolic analysts” were individuals involved in activities such as computer programming, writing and journalism, art and design, research, and independent media broadcasting (in this case, web series and vlogs) that had a natural proclivity for online communities. Likewise, Rheingold later expanded upon this when he discussed Reed’s Law and the inevitable mobile interconnectivity that individuals would have to one another, regardless of spatial divides (2002). Where older generations see a socio-economy of ‘political correctness’, they neglect to acknowledge the interconnectedness that individuals from all over the world have come to know, and how this changes the perceptions of community, identity, and

representation (Alexander 2002). The community also encompasses individuals who are not “out” yet to friends and family in their social life. Depending on the social conditions in which individual’s offline lives occur, being queer can be dangerous, and therefore use fandoms in online communities like Tumblr to connect with people that hold similar beliefs (Lothian 2007).

As Sarah explains:

I've actually been very lucky with my interactions outside of the community concerning Carmilla-mainly because I'm still fairly private about how I identify. I'm in North Carolina and while my family would be understanding... I'm not sure about a lot of people in this state. NC just recently passed a terrible homophobic bill (that fortunately doesn't reflect the majority of the population's views), but it's still scary.

For individuals like Emma, the *Carmilla* fandom provided a support system and something that engages her:

Personally, I've met the most amazing people, I've found something that I'm really passionate about doing. Its weirdly given me some direction in terms of what I want to do in the future. And as someone who is out and has been for a long time its [sic] been lovely watching a story that wasnt [sic] a coming out story.

Participatory Culture and Embodiment

In the case of social media like Tumblr, where content is exclusively textual or visual in nature, individuals who participate in the production of digital artifacts like fan fiction and fan art are able to easily distribute and disseminate ideologies of queer identity and collectivity to audiences that acknowledge the fandom as a safe space. In this way, fan content allows individuals whose offline identity practices differ from their online personas a form of mediation, discussion, and knowledge acquisition of what it means to be queer (Yourd 2014). One participant, Sydney, responded with a statement in similar fashion:

Instead, I think, in showing an entirely coincidental appearance of queerness in women and afab people helps people to look at themselves. They can identify [sic] with the characters, and see aspects of the characters in themselves. I think fandom leads to a lot of self-examination. As viewers, we have this blank canvas upon which to see so much of ourselves. That's what media is, after all, ourselves project back to us in the form of

entertainment. Also, being on youtube [sic], a platform that most everyone has access too, we can provide a safe form of media for kids who are still trying to figure themselves out.

Data gathered from the surveys showed that 34% believed that the convenience and accessibility of *Carmilla* was very influential in their decision to watch, and 32% thought it was most influential. While there are mainstream representations of GSRM individuals, pitfalls do occur. As Emma previously mentioned, mainstream networks focus on “coming out” stories, or stereotypes when representing queer individuals. Queer characters can only be recognized for being queer—and thus creates a sense of “othering”. Heteronormative individuals come to only know these models, and when confronted with the possibility of varied identities—well, it makes consumer based media and mass-consumption more difficult (Fink & Miller 2014). Despite the issues of queer representation in mainstream media, one participant, Hannah, stated:

I think as our community continues to grow, particularly online, mainstream media will begin to understand the importance of it. It’s evident that we have a voice and we offer support to basically any queer positive show. I think a lot of mainstream media will begin catering more to that representation as our voice gets louder.

Discussion

My time in the *Carmilla* fandom allowed me understand what “everyday activists” (Vivienne & Burgess) in the community take issue with, as well as how they cope with these issues. Without the Internet and the evolution of social media, *Carmilla* would not exist. GSRM individuals would have less safe spaces to communicate with collectivities that identify and experience life in a similar way, and there would be less opportunities for ‘political mobilization’ of queer rights and representation in media.

1. *We Queer, and We’re Here to Stay*: GSRM representation in mainstream media is shallow and underdeveloped compared to the embodied and varied experiences of queer individuals. While *Carmilla* approaches queer characters and narratives in a

multidimensional way incorporating female agency, mainstream television shows fall back on stereotypes and tropes that prove to be detrimental to the queer community by a) delegitimizing variegated queer experiences, and b) show queer individuals as “other” to heteronormative audiences. This othering makes GSRM individuals appear unrelatable.

2. *Who Cares If We're Connected*: Without the evolution of CMC and mobile Internet, individuals and communities would have adapted more slowly to different cultures and ideologies of identity. Anthropological discourse on online communities and mass media should become less concerned with offline social politics and geographic divides, and more concerned with how the Internet constitutes its own culture of beliefs, practices, artifacts, and languages.
3. *Now Taking Fic Requests*: Transmedia storytelling allows for the fan engagement through social media role play and archontic narratives, where community fan fictions writers incorporate divergent perspectives to canon media and literature, where either a) storylines or character development was viewed negatively, or b) fans want more content that is not readily provided by the network (Lothian 2013).

It also sheds an academic light on the varying representation of queer characters and narratives in mainstream media. Recent examples include *The Legend of Korra* and *The 100*. Because mainstream television shows are streamed not only in the United States, but transnationally as well, queer identities are harder to portray due to the risk of losing viewer patronage (and thus, capital) from these polities. The successor to *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, *The Legend of Korra* ended its fourth season with a surprise twist—the two female leads, Korra

and Asami, entering a romantic relationship. For some this was legitimation seen on an unprecedented level. At first glance, some individuals would assume the relationship between the two evolved as a regular platonic friendship. However, queer individuals read these interactions between the characters in drastically different ways—they are implicitly queer. Although the characters were female, interactions and cues that were romantic in nature were viewed as exactly that, regardless of the gender and unexpressed sexuality of the characters.

Similarly, *The 100* is another recent example of queer representation in mainstream media, however, it doesn't end as happily. The introduction of the lesbian character Lexa in the second season also brought about the discussion of the female lead, Clarke's, sexuality and the romantic tropic discourse that occurs in media representation of queer characters. The relationship builds up in the third season, but after a romantic interaction between Lexa and Clarke, Lexa is killed by a stray bullet. To the average viewer, this was not overtly harmful, but to the queer viewers of the show this was just another example of the "bury your gays" trope. In media, when sexual or romantic interactions occur between two queer, female characters, the immediate result is typically a stray bullet killing the love interest of the main character (for whom the bullet was intended). Although bullets are not always the choice, this trope has occurred through television, including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The community outrage at this act of violence against a queer character prompted the creation of an online campaign "LGBT Fans Deserve Better" in which fans raised proceeded to raise close to \$30,000 in a few hours for the GSRM suicide prevention organization, the Trevor Project.

Conclusion

Limitations of These Studies

After completing the quantitative surveys, I realized that 1) they could have been constructed better, and 2) because of this, the ability to perform statistical analyses such as comparative tests and provide regression models was impossible. Questions that utilized the ‘Check all that apply’ function, such as those of *Figure 2*, created problems with variable groupings, and was the primary reason that statistical calculations apart from frequency tables were incapable of being created. In addition, demographic data including ethnicity and class were no included, and perhaps skew the findings of an intersectional topic and community.

As an individual that participates in the *Carmilla* fandom outside of the context of this research there is always the concern that certain aspects of interaction and participation may go unnoticed due to the habitual imbrication of participatory practices and technology usage in everyday life. Some interactions online are subtly enacted and engaged in, with or without explicit cues, and as such can be hard to qualitatively identify and analyze.

Implications for Future Research

Providing an anthropological lens to communities that are typically observed and studied through scholars in media and communications exemplifies how important online communities are to anthropological discourse. Online communities and the subcultures within it have their own beliefs, communicative practices and lexicons, and ways in which individuals and collectives mediate identity between each other and through unknown public audiences (Vivienne & Burgess 2012). The anthropological analysis of transformative works like fan art and fan fiction, and how these products are completed for the sake of providing retellings and

diverse representations of identity also provide a basis for future discourse surrounding media and queer representation.

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