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The Taste of Toxic Rhetoric within TikTok's Cosplay Community

by

Amber Storm Murray

Under the Direction of Ashley Holmes, PhD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2021

## ABSTRACT

The following thesis aims to illustrate how Enlightenment-era conceptions of taste as discussed in the writings of David Hume and Hugh Blair appear in the toxic rhetoric espoused by some members of the cosplay community on the social media platform TikTok. Through an analysis of a representative comment section, this study identifies how Hume's idea of a "true judge" and Blair's belief in the improvable and "correct" qualities of taste are utilized in an attempt to justify one of the most distasteful behaviors within today's society – racism. In drawing these connections, this research illustrates a complex duality of taste and demonstrates how toxic comments use taste, albeit unintentionally, to support their arguments for why one thing is regarded as being better – or more tasteful – than another.

INDEX WORDS: Taste, Rhetoric, Fandom, Toxic discourse, Social media, Enlightenment

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2021

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by

Amber Storm Murray

Committee Chair: Ashley Holmes

Committee: Michael Harker

Ethan Tussey

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Services

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

August 2021

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is especially dedicated to the family, friends, professors, and peers who have supported me through all of the ups and downs I experienced while in my M.A. program. Their encouragement and their (sometimes feigned) interest in my research motivated me to become the best student and scholar that I could be and gave me the confidence to complete this project. Without them, I would not be where I am today.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ever since I was young, I have had an interest in and appreciation for fandom communities. From the Marvel superheroes my siblings and I were named after, to the anime I grew up watching with my dad, to the book franchises that I loved as a teenager, to the countless tv shows and movies I spend hours binge-watching whenever possible, popular culture, and as a result, fandom, has been an integral part of my life. I have spent many hours participating in online communities, attending popular culture conventions, and finding spaces both online and off where I could communicate with others who had similar interests. It is not surprising, then, that the amount of time that I spent in these spaces led to me noticing trends. Typically, these trends were meaningless; often, they were the use of certain community-specific terms or discussions of the hit new seasonal show that was really similar to the one the fandom was centered around. However, there were instances where the trends I noticed were not so harmless, and the most prolific of these harmful trends, which showed up no matter the community I was engaging with, was toxicity. This pattern of harassment which often included prejudiced beliefs against people of color, women, people with disabilities, and people with different body types – just to name a few – always seemed to appear at some point in every subcommunity I was a part of. This was always confusing to me because these spaces were created for sharing a love for a piece of entertainment, yet there were members who, instead, brought in negativity.

The interest I felt in understanding why toxicity appeared was only exacerbated as I began to study rhetoric. It was not long before I found myself applying the things I was learning in the classroom to the conversations I witnessed within the fan communities I occupied online. I became especially interested in writings that were toxic and did not align with the themes of support and camaraderie often perpetuated within these spaces. In other words, it was my

personal ties, coupled with my fascination with the ways in which people and groups communicate that led to my interest in studying the toxic rhetoric that frequently appears in fan spaces. However, it was not until I encountered Enlightenment-era rhetoric that I began to develop a clear understanding of how to integrate these ideas.

As I read excerpts from scholars such as David Hume and Hugh Blair and learned about the concept of rhetorical taste, I found myself considering the possibility of taste being manipulated into a justification for negative behavior. Additionally, I began to think about how justifying problematic behavior with taste could result in a duality between the intention of taste – i.e., to improve the faculties of the mind – and its use as a tool to justify some of the most distasteful activities and beliefs held by today’s society such as racism, homophobia, ableism, and gender discrimination. I began to contemplate about the ideologies of taste that Blair and other Enlightenment-era rhetoricians espoused and how potentially devalue the opinions of those whose “tastes” do not align with what the group designates to be correct. Thus, my research clicked; I wanted to explore how taste is used as a tool to enable toxic rhetoric within contemporary fandom communities.

The research questions that guided me in my exploration of this topic were as follows:

- To what extent do elements of rhetorical taste influence today’s reception of cosplay?
- How are alternate representations of characters received by fandom communities generally?
- What conversational trends emerge in the comment section of a post that went viral for its toxicity?
- Where can Hume and/or Blair’s conceptions of taste be identified in toxic fandom comments?

Using these questions as guides, I aimed to illustrate the relationship between taste as defined in the Enlightenment and the use of toxic rhetoric within the cosplay community on TikTok. In doing so, I aimed to assist in connecting the ideas of Enlightenment scholars to contemporary discourse, illustrate a complex duality of taste, and demonstrate how toxic comments use taste, albeit unintentionally, to support their arguments for why one thing is regarded as being better – or more tasteful – than another.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to trace the relationship between taste and the toxic rhetoric that appears in fandom spaces, it is first necessary to understand the nuances of these terms and how they have been discussed by other scholars.

### 2.1 What Exactly Does “Toxic” Mean?

First, for the definition of “toxic,” I borrow from Adrienne Massanari’s idea of “toxic technocultures” – a term she uses to “describe the toxic cultures that are enabled by and propagated through sociotechnical networks such as Reddit, 4chan, Twitter, and online gaming” (333). I use Massanari’s concept of toxic technocultures to define and situate my treatment of toxicity because it is used to discuss many of the problematic behaviors I am interested in identifying within fandom communities – i.e., those which “demonstrate retrograde ideas of gender, sexual identity, sexuality, and race and push against issues of diversity, multiculturalism, and progressivism... [This discourse also] often relies [on] an Othering of those perceived as outside the culture” (333). In other words, Massanari’s ideas ground my research and suggest that the pursuit of understanding how and why fandom communities enact prejudiced, discriminatory behaviors in their language practices is worthwhile.

### 2.2 Taste in the Enlightenment

The second major concept that must be identified in order to ground my research is taste. While Hugh Blair’s ideas are what led me to want to explore the relationship between taste and toxicity, it is also necessary to engage with other Enlightenment-era interpretations of taste in order to conduct a more comprehensive analysis of how this Enlightenment-era ideal has been adapted by contemporary subcommunities; however, representing all accounts of taste would go beyond the limitations of this project. Therefore, I have chosen to synthesize the ideas of

representative scholars who explored taste extensively in their writings in order to analyze how the idea of taste can be seen within the toxic discourse present in fandom spaces. These scholars are David Hume and Hugh Blair.

### ***2.2.1 Taste in David Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste"***

In David Hume's 1757 essay titled "Of the Standard of Taste," he attempts to craft a "Standard of Taste; a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision, afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another" (Hume 831). In other words, the purpose of this text was to move away from relative, individualistic ideas about what is beautiful and towards a more complete or universal understanding of taste.

To engage in this discussion, Hume first acknowledges that tastes differ from person to person, even amongst those who, "have been educated under the same government, and have early imbibed the same prejudices" (830). It is impossible, Hume suggests, to dictate the ways in which people perceive, for their interpretations are governed by sentiment as opposed to judgement (832). In discussing the differences between these two elements of philosophy, Hume claims that, "A thousand different sentiments, excited by the same object, are all right: Because no sentiment represents what is really in the object. It only marks a certain conformity or relation between the object and the organs or faculties of the mind" (832). This passage seems to argue that all tastes are equivalent in their validity on account of their originating in the interactions between the object itself and a person's mental faculties. A position such as this would mean that developing a standard of taste is impossible, for if all opinions are valid no matter their differences, there is no way to develop a set of expectations or guidelines.

Therefore, after this topic has been covered, Hume quickly turns away from this position and begins to discuss certain opinions of taste that are more correct than others. He does this by



presenting two authors, Ogilby and Milton, and discussing how the tastes of those who give preference to the prior are ignored and considered to be “absurd and ridiculous” (832). Thus, it is here where Hume begins to explore just what a “Standard of Taste” may look like.

Hume describes how “there are certain general principles of approbation and blame, whose influence a careful eye may trace in all operations of the mind” (833). It is these principles that dictate what is pleasing or displeasing; however, there are various circumstances that may cause the mind to fail in interpreting them. One such instance is in the case of a “defect or imperfection in the organ” (833). Conditions such as jaundice or a fever, Hume argues, affect people’s ability to accurately praise works that are tasteful or critique those that are not (833).

Yet another circumstance that results in the failure of taste is prejudice. In discussing this occurrence Hume states,

A person influenced by prejudice...obstinately maintains his natural position, without placing himself in that point of view, which the performance supposes. If the work be addressed to persons of a different age or nation, he makes no allowance for their peculiar views and prejudices; but, full of the manners of his own age and country, rashly condemns what seemed admirable in the eyes of those for whom alone the discourse was calculated. (836)

Here, Hume describes the negative influence that prejudice has on a person’s sense of taste. It results in the inability to account for others’ viewpoints and ignores nuances that give a work its meaning, thereby resulting in a distorted sense of taste and understanding about the work. In short, prejudice causes a person’s “natural sentiments [to be] perverted” (837) and their taste to depart from the “true standard,” a consequence of which is the loss of “all credit and authority” (836).

Following Hume's discussion of the aspects that can disturb one's sense of taste is the part of his essay that has led many scholars to doubt the credibility of his definition of taste – i.e., the concept of the true judge. While Hume does argue that the principles of taste are universal, he does not believe that the everyday person possesses the necessary qualities to be able to “give judgment on any work of art, or establish their own sentiment as the standard of beauty” (837). There exist too many factors which may influence the mind and pervert a person's judgement. Therefore, he posits that the “true standard” of taste should come from the “joint verdict” of true judges – critics who possess “strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice” (837). The conclusions that these critics draw are untainted by such things as physical illness, limited practice in examining art, or personal preference which makes their judgements, Hume argues, the most accurate representation of a true standard of taste. It is this near-impossible ideal combined with Hume's failure to address pertinent questions relating to the identification of these critics – such as where they are located or how to discern if someone truly exhibits all of the necessary characteristics described – which has led scholars such as James Shelley to critique Hume's treatment of taste.

Despite Hume's somewhat vague description of the formation of a standard of taste, his work on this topic is still of value for my research. As I explored the relationship between toxic fandom discourse and taste, I relied on Hume's discussion of prejudice and his concept of a true judge. I argued that Hume's discussion of prejudice can be applied to the critiques of toxic commenters, for while they are attempting to act as a true judge and demonstrate what is tasteful, they will never be able to do so. Instead, their behaviors only serve to skew the “standard” that Hume attempted to establish in his writing.

### 2.2.2 *Taste in Hugh Blair's Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*

In his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, published in 1783, Hugh Blair defines the elements of his theory of taste. Blair's theory, as Bizzell and Herzberg argue, "aims ultimately at a rather classical goal, to produce good men who will speak and write well in the service of the community" (947). This goal comes out of Blair's views on delivery and epistemology and is a combination of eloquence and criticism. Bizzell and Herzberg describe the relationship between rhetoric and criticism in their introduction to the excerpt of Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*. They write, "Rhetoric seeks to persuade through appeals to reason and the passions; criticism, in turn, evaluates aesthetic objects on the basis of their appeals to the same faculties. Good taste is thus at the root of both, and human nature is the foundation of taste" (947). It is this model and the development of one's taste that leads "to the higher intellectual pleasures, including the pleasure of virtuous behavior" (947). As is described here, Blair is concerned with the improvable qualities of taste and how they are related to moral behaviors.

Blair's discussion of taste begins in tandem with his treatment of criticism. He states that "True criticism...is the offspring of good sense and refined taste...[and] teaches us, in a word, to admire and to blame with judgement, and not to follow the crowd blindly" (952-53). For Blair, criticism and taste are means through which one is better able to understand the beauty of various works and are an avenue for participating in society. True criticism is how individuals are able to form their own ideas and opinions. Therefore, it is not surprising that the exercise of these qualities is regarded by Blair to be "one of the most improving employments of understanding" (953). One must be able to improve their understanding of taste in order to be able to think independently and discern their own judgements from those of the masses.

It is important to note that Blair does include a stipulation about the extent to which taste can help one achieve virtuosity. He states, “I will not go so far as to say that the improvement of taste and of virtue is the same; or that they may always be expected to coexist in an equal degree. More powerful correctives than taste can apply, are necessary for reforming the corrupt propensity's which too frequently prevail among mankind” (954). This acknowledgement is important because it situates taste as something that can help improve a person’s morality, but not as something that can correct it.

After providing this general information about taste in the first of his Lectures, Blair begins Lecture II wherein he turns a more focused lens on the concept of taste. He begins this section by presenting his definition of taste: “The power of receiving pleasure from the beauties of nature and of art” (955). After defining taste in this way, Blair addresses a question that he anticipates his readers may raise concerning the relationship between taste and reason. He definitively states that “taste is not resolvable into any such operation of reason;” however, he does acknowledge that reason “assists taste in many of its operations, and serves to enlarge its power” (955). In other words, taste is not a part of reason because it is an intuitive response to beauty; however, training in elements of reason such as understanding or deduction can help in bolstering one’s knowledge of what is tasteful.

Because taste is an intuitive response, Blair posits that it is something that all men possess. Taste can be found in all populations from children to peasants and even appears, Blair says, “in the deserts of America, where human nature shows itself in its most uncultivated state” (955). In other words, taste is a universal characteristic which all people are born with at least to some capacity.

The phrase “to some capacity” is of significance because Blair is quick to note that, “although none be wholly devoid of this faculty, . . . the degrees in which it is possessed are widely different” (955). This “inequality” is what leads Blair to his discussion of the improvability of taste. He begins by identifying the causes behind the different tastes that men hold. He writes, “This inequality of taste among men is owing, without a doubt, in part, to the different frame of their natures; to nicer organs, and finer internal powers, with which some are endowed beyond others” (956). This is to say, some people are just born with a better sense of what is beautiful than others. However, inherent ability is not the only thing that influences one’s sense of taste.

Even more than by nature, taste is affected by “education and culture” (956). The ways in which a person is raised, argues Blair, has a significant impact on the development of their sense about what is tasteful. This means that if a person did not have access to education and/or was not financially stable, they most likely did not have a well-developed sense of taste. However, the circumstances of one’s birth did not inherently mean that they could not improve their ideas about what is tasteful. In fact, Blair believed that continuous exercises such as “attention to the most approved models, study of the best authors, [and] comparisons of lower and higher degrees of the same beauties” could be used to help improve a person’s judgement (956).

Blair believed that by learning about reason, taste could be improved. People are pleased by what they intuitively consider to be beautiful; however, Blair argues, “reason shows us why and upon what grounds we are pleased” (957). Unlike taste, an understanding of the nuances of reason is not an inherent part of the human condition, so in order to answer the question of why something is considered beautiful, a person must be educated on the subject.

An improved sense of taste that is brought about through education and exercise, Blair says, can be reduced into two categories – delicacy and correctness (957). Delicacy is defined as

the part of taste which, “respects principally the perfection of that natural sensibility on which taste is founded” (957). This element of taste is inherent and intuitive. It is the judgement with which all people are born. In contrast, the second characteristic of taste that Blair describes is the correctness of taste. Correctness is defined as the part of taste which, “respects chiefly the improvement which that faculty receives through its connexion with the understanding” (958). This element of taste is not intuitive, but rather, is developed from extensive exercise. It is the part of taste that is trained, not that which is innate. Blair defines the relationship between these two qualities in the following excerpt: “The power of delicacy is chiefly seen in discerning the true merit of a work; the power of correctness, in rejecting false pretensions to merit. Delicacy leans more to feeling; correctness more to reason and judgment” (958). This explanation illustrates the balance that is struck between inherent feelings and the learned appreciation that comes from improving one’s sense of taste.

Blair begins the conclusion of his Lecture on taste with a summary of the most important aspects of his treatment. He writes:

Taste is far from being an arbitrary principle...Its foundation is the same in all human minds. It is built upon sentiments and perceptions which belong to our nature; and which, in general, operate with the same uniformity as our other intellectual principles. When these sentiments are perverted by ignorance or prejudice, they are capable of being rectified by reason. Their sound and natural state is ultimately determined, by comparing them with the general taste of mankind. (961)

The last of the points made here is perhaps where Hume and Blair differ the most in their definitions of taste. While Hume argued for a standard of taste that comes from the agreement of a very few who were extensively trained in taste, Blair posits that there should be no standard

and that, instead, there should be only a “general taste of mankind” (961). Blair does not believe that there should be an authority that decides what is considered to be tasteful, but rather that this determination should be carried out by those who have been trained to understand exactly what taste is.

Blair’s ideas are what sparked my interest in exploring the relationship between taste and toxicity in fandom spaces, and his ideas are an essential part of the analysis I engaged in. Of particular interest to me were Blair’s beliefs about the improvable quality of taste and his discussion of the correctness of taste. Similar to my treatment of Hume’s true judge, these concepts serve as a representation for what commenters are attempting to do when they engage in toxicity – i.e., improve and correct the creator’s and viewer’s concept taste by identifying where the representation of the character is “inaccurate.”

### **2.3 Taste and Toxicity**

It is important to note, as Bizzell and Herzberg do in their preface about Hume, that, “Taste, for Hume and many of his contemporaries, is no mere matter of preference concerning purely personal matters. Rather, taste is the basis of judgments not only about what is beautiful (or personally pleasing) but also about what is virtuous” (829). It is this element of taste which I argue has been skewed by those who are involuntarily using this ideology in contemporary fandom spaces. Although it is unlikely that users in these communities have the background knowledge necessary to purposefully utilize Enlightenment-era standards of taste, the language they use to critique the embodiment of fictional characters is reminiscent of this aspect of rhetoric. What is different and somewhat contradictory about the use of taste in contemporary fandom spaces as opposed to during the Enlightenment, though, is that fans’ usage manipulates taste to fit an individual’s personal ideas of what is beautiful or pleasing – a practice that is in

direct opposition to Enlightenment scholars' treatment of taste – while simultaneously situating themselves as virtuously protecting the purity of the media that is being represented.

Furthermore, the behaviors that are used to appeal to other community members' sense of virtuosity oftentimes do so by using justifications that are inherently non-virtuous. This duality has yet to have been extensively explored and as such provides a unique opportunity to understand the applications of taste as they appear in contemporary spaces.

## 2.4 Conceptualizing Fandom

In addition to the primary terms “toxicity” and “taste,” there are some subsequent terms that must be explained before an analysis of the discourse used within these fandom spaces can be conducted; one of these is “fandom.” Rukmini Pande, author of *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race*, brings together ideas from various prior scholars to define fandom as, “loosely interlinked interpretive communities, mainly comprising women and spanning a wide range of demographics in terms of age, sexuality, economic status, and, national, cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, formed around various popular cultural texts... Further, these communities are marked by a high degree of interactivity and intertextuality among participants” (11). As this passage illustrates, a major aspect of fandom is a shared ideology of camaraderie between members of the community. These groups provide spaces where fans can create new compositions – such as fan art or fan fiction – that allow them to engage with a type of media in new ways, talk with others about their favorite things, brainstorm potential storylines, mourn and celebrate character loss or success, and generally celebrate a piece of media that they find important or meaningful with others who share their sentiments. However, these groups are not always as ideal as they are intended to be. In fact, oftentimes these groups contain members who try to restrict participation for those who believe differently from themselves. Members of the



community who embody these behaviors are unintentionally manipulating the Enlightenment-era rhetorical idea of taste by arguing that the different stance is bad or distasteful.

Understanding how these groups operate and the values and beliefs that are considered correct is essential for drawing connections between taste and contemporary fandom communities. Therefore, before researching the communicative practices that are enacted by members of fandom communities online, it is essential to have an understanding of the history and affordances that online spaces have created for fandoms. Thus, the following subsections will explore facets of fandom which will be used to ground my exploration of how the Enlightenment ideal of taste is manifested and skewed in these contemporary spaces.

#### ***2.4.1 Fandom and Technology***

Fandom communities are a prevalent part of contemporary society, and the interactions between members of these groups have been bolstered by the advent of technology. Online spaces have provided an opportunity for those with common interests to connect, no matter the physical distance that separates them from one another. Peebles and his collaborators address this phenomenon in their article, “Geeks, Fandoms, and Social Engagement.” They argue, “With one click of the mouse, introductions could be made and conversations started without ever meeting someone face-to-face” (251). In other words, as long as a fan has access to a computer or other web-connected device and has the means to connect to the internet, they can engage with like-minded individuals from across the globe without ever communicating in a face-to-face manner.

By eliminating this barrier, the internet had facilitated relationships that avoid complex socio-cultural barriers such as race, gender identity, sex, age, nationality, or economic status. Peebles and his collaborators continue, “As in real life, individuals with shared similarities began gathering in virtual meeting spaces to socialize... [On the internet] one can share as little or as

much as one wishes without the fear of discrimination” (251). Examples of these meeting spaces are such sites as Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Reddit, amongst others. The explanation that Carolyn Miller gives of social media spaces can be used to explain why fandom communities congregate on these sites. She argues that social media allows people, “[to go] beyond the purposive and rational, beyond the informative and directive, [to] seek out and create social relationships” (268). These social relationships form, at least in part, because, as Zappen argues, electronic new media have created a seemingly utopian space where interaction has become, “encourag[ing of] self-expression, participation, and creative collaboration” (Zappen 321).

In addition to allowing fandom communities a place to gather together to share ideas and opinions, social media’s positive characteristics of inclusivity, expressionism, participation, and collaboration also provide a way for community members to engage with media creators. Jay Lemke addresses this element of social media in his article “Multimodality, Identity, and Time.” He writes, “fan-produced and fan-maintained online communities... lobby the producers for the desires of the community, and they produce collateral media in the world of the franchise mythos” (Lemke 148-9). In other words, yet another aspect of online platforms that can be seen as almost utopian is their ability to afford fans opportunities to personally engage with content and creators in ways that allow them to advocate for themselves and their communities. This idea is echoed by other research that has addressed the relationship between audiences and online spaces such as Andrejevic’s “Watching Television Without Pity: The Productivity of Online Fans” and Booth’s “Rereading Fandom: MySpace Character Personas and Narrative Identification.”

Both of these sources demonstrate the important role that online spaces play in facilitating fandom interactions. Andrejevic's article discusses how fans use the website TelevisionWithoutPity.com to enhance their experiences with media. He argues, "Part of the entertainment value of a site such as TWoP is the implicit promise to erode the boundaries between the sites of ostensibly passive consumption and those of the sequestered power of media producers" (26). In other words, the pleasure of posting on the website is inherently tied to feelings of power and influence. Through their interaction on the TWoP website, fans claim both the online space and the media content for themselves. Similarly, in his article, Booth describes how the affordances of MySpace allow fans to interact with media content and members of their communities in unique ways. He describes how, "Fans use MySpace to create personas of fictional television characters, and through role-play with these characters, identify with, and insert themselves into, the narrative of that show. In doing so, fans integrate themselves not only into the text itself, but also into a community of other fans" (517). Here again, fans are described as creating a space for themselves where they are able to make decisions without fear of retaliation. As these articles demonstrate, online spaces provide fans with a sense of control over themselves and the media they consume as well as the opportunity to engage in identity formation, community building, and advocacy. Through these activities, fans claim both the online space and the media content for themselves and create communal norms regarding taste.

It is important to note, however, that online space was crafted for a specific population; and therefore, is perhaps not as utopian as the aforementioned characteristics would suggest. As Mel Stanfill argues in her article "The Interface as Discourse: The Production of Norms Through Web Design," "A site's design makes a normative claim about its purpose and appropriate use that both demonstrates an understanding of users and builds a set of possibilities into the object"

(1060). In other words, an online platform itself constructs norms that are oftentimes more restrictive than inclusive despite this being in opposition to the possibilities of the internet that are described above.

Although social media is far from being an all-inclusive space that is devoid of prejudice, these spaces do, to some extent, bridge traditional boundaries established by place, time, appearance, and consumer positionality. This characteristic of online space is exacerbated by multimodal compositions. Fans in online spaces have, for years, created remixed or reimagined versions of their favorite movies, shows, books, games, etc. through art, stories, and videos. Lemke describes the prevalence of these compositions when he states, “There are more than a quarter-million fan-authored short stories and novels set in the Harry Potter mythos available online. There are at least dozens if not hundreds of Star Wars fan-produced videos, one a fully acted 45-minute additional episode to the canonical film sequence, complete with special effects” (Lemke 149). As is evidenced through Lemke’s discussion, fan-created works that engage with various aspects of popular culture are an inherent part of fandom today and have only become more creative with social media’s ability to synthesize various modes of composition.

An example can be found in the app TikTok. In its description on the app store, TikTok is described as, “THE destination for mobile videos. On TikTok, short-form videos are exciting, spontaneous, and genuine. Whether you’re a sports fanatic, a pet enthusiast, or just looking for a laugh, there’s something for everyone on TikTok...From your morning coffee to your afternoon errands, TikTok has the videos that are guaranteed to make your day” (“TikTok”). As is illustrated in the description, this app prioritizes the use of video, a form of media that is inherently multimodal. Users will combine videos of themselves or another person or thing with

music or other sound effects to construe a particular message to other app members. This is then coupled with text that is incorporated into the video itself or which appears in the bottom of the frame via caption, the sound title, or through comments from viewers.

The content created by fandom communities on TikTok is reminiscent of one type of fan creation that Lemke describes: “[One] popular genre is simply to set a video montage to unrelated popular music, synchronizing image content and lyrics, as well as the timing of musical rhythms/phrases and visual cuts (149). These compositions are interesting because they use multimodal techniques to craft arguments about the media they are interacting with. As Lemke continues, “These ‘music videos...recontextualize interpretations and identifications with the primary franchise content through the powerful effects, ... of popular music, which already has indexical and emotional meanings for many in the user community” (149). In other words, arguments are crafted by using the pathos evoked through popular music and specifically chosen scenes from a piece of media.

The lip-syncing videos that are prevalent in the cosplay community on TikTok are yet another form of this video remixing. Cosplayers will don the costume of a character they like and then lip sync to audio from a source that they feel is representative of their reading of the character. The audio comes from a variety of sources including but not limited to popular music, excerpts from the show the cosplayed character is from, or unrelated movies or television shows. These videos are a fun and unique way for fans to remix media that they enjoy; however, this practice, like many other elements of fandom, is rife with toxicity.

#### ***2.4.2 Toxicity in Fandom***

Many fan spaces are created with the intention of building a community and collaborating with people who share similar interests. However, at times these groups become

skewed by members who believe that other community members should enact certain, “good” behaviors. These opinions are often toxic in nature and exhibit prejudices such as racism, gender discrimination, or body shaming. Rachael Lefler, a writer for the website *Reel Rundown* addresses this trend in the following excerpt:

Good fandom is healthy and appreciative. Good fans support each other in a collaborative community. They work to build each other up. Toxic fandom is the opposite. It is when fans attack other fans with purity tests. It’s when their criticism of some aspect of the show is framed in exaggerated emotional terms...Toxic fans can also be abusive to other fans. This tends to happen when they feel like only they are “true” fans, and other people are fake, poseurs, or casual fans...They can get extremely vicious with their bullying. This makes them not just assholes, but dangerous. (Lefler)

As Lefler describes, toxic fandom behaviors espouse narratives that are the opposite of what fan spaces are created for. Rather than an inviting and open forum where people are able to gather and share their interests and passions, toxic fandom incites divisiveness and prejudice based on their opinion of what is “right” or “good.”

There are many examples of toxic fandom that can be used to illustrate this trend. One example which made headlines in 2018 is the reaction to actress Kelly Marie Tran’s character Rose in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. Although the film received critical success, audiences reacted negatively to both the story and the characters that were depicted. Tran’s character, Rose, was written as a secondary love interest for one of the main characters and received an especially poor reception from fans of the franchise. This resulted in the manifestation of toxic behaviors within the fandom, such as hate-filled attacks on the actress’s various social media channels. The abuse that Tran received eventually led to the actress deleting her social media channels. Some

of the behaviors enacted by toxic fans are described in the following passage from the article “Star Wars Actress Kelly Marie Tran Deletes Instagram Posts After Abuse,” “Rose Tico’s character page on Wookieepedia, an online Star Wars encyclopedia, was changed so that she was renamed using a slur used to mock the East Asian accent...Others took aim at her ethnicity and appearance - with numerous comments that were critical of her weight.” The fans who targeted and attacked Tran when they were unhappy with the role her character played in their beloved franchise illustrate how the rhetorical theory of taste has been unintentionally used to justify inherently distasteful actions. Members of the fan community who did not think that Tran’s performance or appearance aligned with their idea of what was tasteful within the Star Wars universe led them to unintentionally draw upon the virtuosity of taste to “improve” the intellectual properties of their fellow group members and to illustrate how purist casting choices – in this case, male-centric and white – are more accurate and tasteful. This is but one example of how taste has been grossly misinterpreted today, albeit unbeknownst to its practitioners.

Other scholars have similarly explored the ways in which taste has been manifested in contemporary popular culture. In the article “Why Not to Blair: The Taste of Hugh Blair and TLC’s *What Not to Wear*,” Robert McDonald applies Hugh Blair’s discussion of taste to the arguments that the judges make on the reality television show *What Not to Wear*. McDonald argues that Hugh Blair’s definition of taste can be seen as a, “set of exclusions – nature versus culture, democratic yet exclusive, intuitive while improvable, [and] universal but particular” (7). Toxicity in fandom communities can be regarded in a similar way. Just as Blair argued that everyone is able to appreciate beauty, so too are people able to engage with media. However, toxic fandom governs, as taste does, that only those of a particular “culture” are able to see the

true value of the work; those who are not educated in certain areas are unable to hold meaningful opinions.

In summary, a fandom is a group of people who gather based on a shared interest, who often utilize online spaces and multimodal technologies, and who sometimes engage in toxic behaviors that exhibit Enlightenment-era ideals of taste. These unique and engaging communities offer an exciting opportunity for scholars to draw connections between the Enlightenment-era and today as well as the chance to study how certain rhetorical ideals are employed by contemporary actors.

## **2.5 The Rhetoric of Cosplay**

In order to map the similarities between the Enlightenment-era ideal of taste and toxic fan discourse as it occurs in practice, it is first necessary to provide basic information about the population this study aims to analyze. The fandom population that my research focuses on is cosplayers. Suzanne Scott, in the article “‘Cosplay Is Serious Business’: Gendering Material Fan Labor on *Heroes of Cosplay*” defines “cosplay, or costume play” as “the practice of constructing costumes and props inspired by fictional characters and embodying those characters in real-world spaces” (146). This activity engages with a variety of fan communities; however, members of this community stand apart in the way that they engage with their fandom – i.e., through embodying the characters they love. This embodiment can be viewed as a rhetorical act in and of itself, for whenever a cosplayer dons the outfit of a specific character, they can be seen as perpetuating the ideals and beliefs of that character. In other words, the cosplayer no longer exists as a person; rather, they are the living representation of the character. Lemke describes this idea as “identification.” He says, “We adopt identities, or the elements of performing them, from the common culture... We mobilize these identifications to perform the identities we wish to



project and have recognized or ratified by others” (Lemke 147). The act of “identification” that Lemke describes is at the essence of toxicity in the cosplay fandom, for it invites other members of the community to discriminate based on the “likeness” the cosplayer has to the character. For example, if a person of color chose to cosplay a character such as Tinkerbell from the classic Disney film *Peter Pan*, their representation could be depicted as inaccurate and cause for toxic behaviors rooted in racial discrimination. This extends to other types of discrimination as well such as ableism, weight shaming, and gender discrimination.

Arguments regarding how “well” a cosplayer embodies a character unintentionally tap into beliefs that are reminiscent of Enlightenment-era concepts of taste. For example, just as Blair argued that people who held differing beliefs or resided outside of his sphere as an upper class, educated, white man, members of fandom communities at times hold purist beliefs about what it means to be a fan and the appropriate ways that a person can express their love of a particular media. As Lefler writes, “Toxic fans...aren’t just there to celebrate [media], but to control it” (Lefler). By illustrating the similarities between taste and toxic discourse used by fan communities, the connection between Enlightenment-era ideals of taste and gatekeeping tools that are meant to prevent “others” from participating in fandom become evident.

In this section, I have presented an overview and contextualization of the aspects of taste employed throughout my study, defined the historic and cultural frameworks of fandom, and illustrated how relationships and hierarchies are both established and perpetrated within virtual spaces. These steps were taken in order to establish the logic and credibility of my argument, situate readers’ understanding of the seemingly disparate components of my study, and justify the research methods described in the following section.

### 3. METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

In order to map the relationship between taste and the toxicity that appears within fandom spaces online, I chose to conduct a qualitative analysis of a comment section on the video-sharing social media site, TikTok. I selected this platform for study because of the content's multimodal emphasis and because of the prevalence of fandom-specific content that is generated on the app. Additionally, as a participant within some fandom communities on TikTok myself, I have practice locating and navigating the fandom communities I wished to research. This familiarity is what helped me determine that the cosplay community best represented the kinds of toxic discourse my research focused on due to the diverse range of fandoms to which members of this group belong and because of cosplay's intrinsic ties to physical embodiment.

#### 3.1 Implementing Initial Limiters

Beyond the selection of the platform and group to analyze, I set parameters in order to limit the scope of the research to assist in managing the overwhelmingly large and ever-growing number of posts and comments that are created every day within the cosplay community on TikTok. Moreover, these limiters assisted in representing the trends that hateful comments follow which enact elements of taste. The steps taken to limit the research study are detailed below.

##### 3.1.1 *Selecting a Post*

The first way that the data was limited was by choosing one post's comment section to serve as the representative sample. This post needed to be recent (defined as having been created in the year 2021) and publicly accessible – i.e., not posted on a private page. I used these selection criteria in part to avoid any ethical concerns that would arise from studying and presenting information posted on a private or otherwise restricted site.

In order to locate the post that was chosen, I used TikTok's search feature to look up posts that used the term #cosplay. It was this search combined with my observation of ongoing conversations being held by fandom content creators I follow which led me to find the cosplayer electricbum – a black, female, 20-year-old cosplayer who has been the victim of the toxic discourse my study is analyzing. Both the cosplay and anime fandoms on TikTok were avidly discussing this creator at the time of my search because of the harassment she had received after posting a video of herself cosplaying the character Hinata from *Naruto*, a well-known manga and anime franchise about ninjas, on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021. This video – as well as others on her page – received numerous hate comments that targeted her race such as “Hinata wasn't a monkey” and “You can't cosplay Hinata because you are black” (electricbum). These comments became so pervasive that the creator had to deactivate her account for a short amount of time.

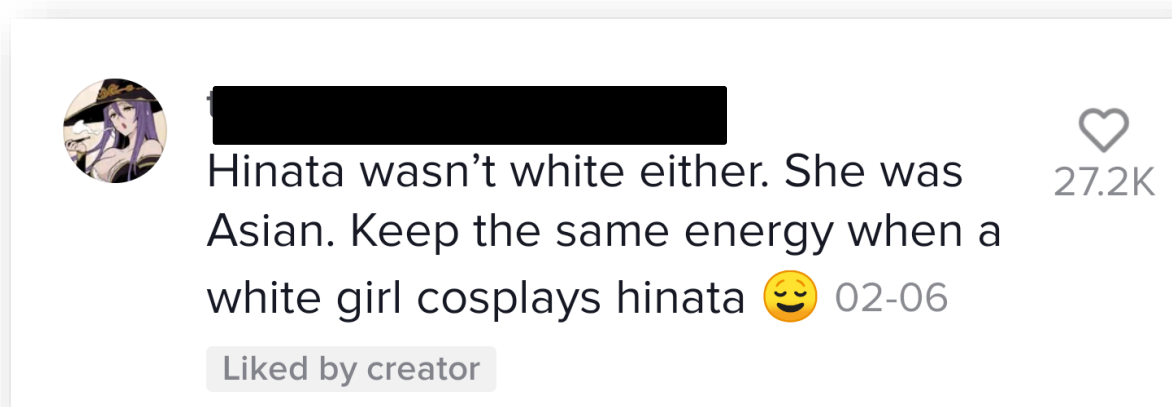
The prevalence of toxic discourse that appears under the post from February 6<sup>th</sup> coupled with the attention that the post garnered from both supporters and dissenters made its comment section ideal for the analysis I aimed to conduct. Thus, my data pool was reduced to only this set of comments.

### ***3.1.2 Selecting Comments***

It became quickly apparent, however, that the limiter I had chosen alone was not enough. While the attention the post received was helpful in that it allowed me to locate an extensive dataset that met the parameters of my research perfectly, it was also unhelpful in that it exploded the typical number of comments that electricbum received on her videos. She is well-known for her content in the anime and cosplay TikTok spheres with over 827,000 followers. Each of her videos regularly receives over 1,000 comments; however, this number is minuscule compared to the number of comments the viral video received. As of this writing, the video has over 31,700

comments and the number continues to rise as the video remains in circulation. Trying to code and identify themes across nearly 32,000 comments and 3 months is beyond the scope of this project; therefore, I had to implement another limiter.

I first thought that I would be able to identify trends within the comment section by following a thread, a sequence of responses to a particular comment which may or may not discuss the original video content. I located a comment which had over 27,000 likes and over 300 responses (see Figure 3.1) and began to transcribe each of them into a Google Sheet spreadsheet.



*Figure 3.1: Beginning of Comment Thread*

I had hoped that following a thread of comments that received so many responses would allow me to identify trends that illustrated the use of taste; however, in the process of mapping the data, it became clear that the limiter of a thread was not effective for my research.

Therefore, I had to pursue a new method for understanding how users engage in the comment section of fandom posts. I struggled to identify a strategy because I wanted to make sure that the dataset remained manageable and maintained its ability to represent what happens in the comments of fandom spaces. I decided that the best approach for achieving both of these

outcomes was to create a dataset that used a selection of comments that were gathered across 15 weeks. Coding comments collected from across this length of time allowed me to select only the most relevant content from each week, thereby further limiting the data. Through this broad dataset, I was able to not only understand how the discussions happening within the comments evolved, but also to see, through the use of similar language across time, how taste is utilized in contemporary spaces.

In summary, two initial limiters were implemented which assisted in generating a dataset that was both somewhat representative and manageable within the constraints of this project. A representative post was selected so that I would be able to look closely at how toxic trends emerge within fandom spaces and understand how those trends utilize aspects of the Enlightenment idea of taste. Additionally, the decision to look only at comments within a particular timeframe demonstrated how conversations within fandom spaces evolve over time and illustrated how taste is implemented through the use of similar diction. It is necessary to note here that these restrictors were unable to reduce the data to a workable size alone. Their function, therefore, was to condense some aspects of the data while still gathering a significant number of comments. This process is detailed in the following sections.

### **3.2 Data Collection**

After condensing the dataset using the aforementioned limiters, the next step of the research project began – the collection of the data. The original post was uploaded by electricbum on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021; thus, this served as the starting date for my data collection process. I collected all of the comments across 15 weeks and then reduced the number included in the study by analyzing only those that were relevant to my research or that were considered important for other reasons. The weeks ran from Saturday to the following Friday; for example,

Week 1 ran from Saturday, February 6<sup>th</sup>, to Friday, February 12<sup>th</sup>. This weekly pattern continued until May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2021 – 15 weeks after electricbum first uploaded her TikTok online.

I took screenshots of the comments to ensure that the data was not deleted or lost before the research project was completed. Initially, these screenshots were being used to transcribe the comments onto a Google Sheet which documented information such as the commenter's name, the comment text itself, the date the comment was posted, how many likes the comment received, and whether the comment was liked by the creator. However, it quickly became apparent that this strategy for mining the data was not sustainable. The large number of comments coupled with the time needed to input each piece of data would have made further limiting the data difficult and would have taken too much time. Therefore, a new strategy was enacted.

I located a resource online called *ExportComments.com* which allowed me to extract the comments of nearly any social media resource into a spreadsheet. Using this website saved the time it would have taken to input all of the information into a spreadsheet manually. Moreover, the website not only exported the comments, it also provided additional information such as the commenter's unique id (username), name, a link to view the commenter's profile, the date and time the comment was posted, and how many likes the comment received. In other words, this software presented all of the information that I needed to move forward with my analysis. An image of one section of the spreadsheet<sup>1</sup> generated by *ExportComments.com* can be seen in Figure 3.2 below.

---

<sup>1</sup> To eliminate any potential harm that could befall people who commented on the post, usernames have been excluded.

D	E	F	G
Name (click to view profile)	Date	Likes	Comment
Derreon's gf 🥰❤	Feb 6, 2021 at 8:14:15 PM	37	THE CONTACTS 🤔
adore	Feb 6, 2021 at 8:30:02 PM	3	earlyyy ❤️❤️
Timedontstop37	Feb 6, 2021 at 8:39:10 PM	5	you know Budda was originally black
Cat	Feb 6, 2021 at 9:04:30 PM	5	Omg this is my fav
Anime live backgrounds	Feb 6, 2021 at 9:58:13 PM	4	Naruto kun
Gray	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:01:09 PM	240	Don't listen to the other person who commented that Hinatas white, your cosplay is amazing
sevvene	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:10:57 PM	80	THE PURPLE HAIR SUITS YOU SO WELL
Isaa!	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:17:05 PM	3	YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL !!
SoccerMan	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:20:46 PM	17	Awesome Hinata cosplay 🥰
Kram	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:21:57 PM	5	I'd let her hit me with the 64 palms
mikee	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:28:39 PM	0	UR SO CUTE
Romina	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:30:29 PM	0	Ur cosplay is so cute ahhhh
---◆---	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:33:14 PM	156	This is just 🌟Amazing🌟
Sisinnyc	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:35:26 PM	3	How's my new video???
golden_ros3s1	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:35:52 PM	565	Pretttyyy
うずまぎヒナタ	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:36:51 PM	446	Your cosplay is amazing!! i'm sorry for all the haters in the comments.
buttered bananas	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:37:43 PM	0	these racist people need to stfu, you look great 🥰
iiChildishSK	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:38:03 PM	17	This is such a cute cosplay! I love it!
Jay	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:41:09 PM	3	So goood 🥰
Tik Toker	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:41:44 PM	164	You look amazing!
Blaire 🥰🐱	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:45:32 PM	3	Your cosplay is amazing. 💜
assira	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:45:49 PM	25	Great cosplay!
Kaneki_chan	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:46:16 PM	903	YO WE FINALLY GOT BLACK HINATA 🤔🤔🤔
NO ONE OMGnnsnal!!!	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:47:27 PM	8	"Really?? You're cosplaying as hinata?? you can't because-" no. You have every right to. Ur beautiful
Saechi	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:47:27 PM	2	Adorable (σ≧▽≦)σ
Ur_naruto 🍷	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:47:31 PM	1	🥰🥰🥰
Maple	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:47:35 PM	5	THE PURPLE HAIR FITS YOU SO WELL!!! ignore all the comments you rock the purple hair queen
Insect pillar supremacy	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:51:06 PM	2	Naruto-kun 🥰
🥰🌿	Feb 6, 2021 at 10:51:43 PM	5	your literally so pretty

Figure 3.2: Screenshot of Spreadsheet with Exported Comments

The ExportComments.com software assisted in collecting all of the data I planned to analyze into one place and made the process quicker and easier.

Once the data was gathered into one spreadsheet, I next began separating the information by the week that it was posted (Figure 3.3). I created a new tab for each week and used the copy and paste functions to move the information into the separate sheet.

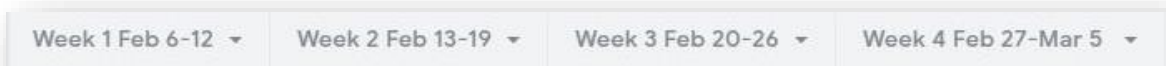


Figure 3.3: Example of Spreadsheet Tabs

I separated the information like this for two reasons. First, breaking down the dataset into weeks made it easier to identify the conversational themes and trends within the comment section.

Second, dividing the information into smaller pieces helped reveal the most pertinent information – i.e., the toxic comments.

It is necessary to note here that I did not include comments that were 0-2 words because the goal of this research was to identify how taste appears in toxic fandom comments. To employ taste, comments must have some form of justification – at times signaled by the word “because.” Short responses do not often include this element; and therefore, did not meet the criteria of my research. While the information that appears in these shorter comments could be integral to another type of research study, they were not useful for my project and as such were omitted during the process of collecting and organizing the data.

In addition to eliminating comments with fewer than 3 words, comments that were written in a foreign language or whose context could not be determined were also removed from the dataset. As English is the only language that I am proficient in and because I do not feel comfortable relying on computerized translations, I elected to remove comments that were written in other languages. I do think that it is worth noting; however, that there were a variety of languages that appeared in the comment section including but not limited to French, Arabic, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, and German.

Collecting and organizing the data and eliminating certain comments further limited the dataset and served as necessary preparation for the coding process that followed.

### **3.3 Coding**

Once the comments were organized on the Google Sheet, I began coding them based on their content. The coding strategy that I developed for this aspect of my study draws from the methods described by Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner in their study “The Power of Personal Connection for Undergraduate Student Writers.” Although the subject matter



of their study is wholly unrelated to that which I am analyzing, the authors' detailed description of their methods demonstrated invaluable tactics of codifying and analyzing data.

I initially began with 3 overarching categories – Toxic (TO), Supportive (SU), and Miscellaneous (MS). Within these, there were subcategories including Racially Motivated – Negative (RAN) under the Toxic group; Racially Motivated – Positive (RAP) under the Supportive group; and Question (QUE), Cosplay Discussion (COS), and Show/Character Discussion (SHO) under the Miscellaneous group. Figure 3.4 illustrates how the codes were abbreviated on the spreadsheet.

	A	B
1	<b>Type</b>	<b>Code</b>
2	<b>Toxic</b>	TO
3	Racially motivated - negative	RAN
4		
5		
6	<b>Supportive</b>	SU
7	Racially motivated - positive	
8		
9		
10	<b>Misc.</b>	MS
11	Question	QU
12	Talks about cosplay itself (contacts, wig, costume, etc	COS
13	Discusses show or character	SHO
14		

*Figure 3.4: Initial Codes*

These initial codes were devised before close inspection of the data occurred and were used primarily as a basis of understanding about themes that seemed to emerge at first glance.

While these categories and subcategories did clearly appear in the dataset; though, they were not as prevalent as anticipated. Throughout the coding process, it became clear that these initial categories were not thorough enough. This resulted in the addition of other, more nuanced classifications to the coding sheet. These included Words of Affirmation or Encouragement (WOA) under the Support category and Words of Spite (WOS) under the Toxic category. Additionally, as I began working with the data, I realized I needed a broad category for discussions of race (RAC) that were neither positive nor negative. The addition of this category assisted me in identifying all instances where the topic was discussed, not just those that were written with either a positive or negative context.

Once all of the comments were assigned a code, I began to limit the data yet again by removing comments that were not directly linked to my research. Since the purpose of my study is to demonstrate how toxic comments utilize elements of the Enlightenment ideal of taste, I needed to focus only on comments of that sort. In the chosen sample of comments, toxicity was manifested most frequently as racism. Therefore, the first limiter I implemented after coding the dataset was the removal of any comments that were not marked with the code for discussion of race (RAC). The removal of these comments reduced the dataset dramatically; however, because this video went viral for the racism that was exhibited in the comment section, the number of comments that remained after implementing this limiter was still large. Nevertheless, reducing the comments in this way allowed for a clear understanding of the trends that emerged.

After identifying the emerging themes, I implemented the final limiter – i.e., removing all comments that were not designated toxic (RAN). Any comments that remained were then quantitatively analyzed in order to draw connections between toxicity and taste.

### 3.4 Qualitative Analysis

While I did not explicitly replicate an existing method during my quantitative analysis, there were quite a few resources that shaped my process and colored my interpretations. First is Lauren Angelone's article "Virtual Ethnography: The Post Possibilities of Not Being There" wherein she, "situate[s] virtual ethnography in the greater field of qualitative research, [acknowledges] the historicity of this method and pay[s] particular attention to a paradigm that takes the crisis of representation into account" (278). It was this practice of "taking the crisis of representation into account" especially that drew me to Angelone's interpretation, for my research is inherently tied to conceptions of what constitutes "good" – i.e., tasteful – representation of fandom. Another source that influenced my quantitative analysis was John Fiske's method of audienceing. Like Fiske, my research was less concerned with the content that the audience members – in this case commenters – were reacting to than the behaviors that they were enacting within the space. The final source of inspiration for my quantitative analysis was Racquel Gate's discussion of the idea of respectability. Her argument that taste-based critique is often used to justify racist behaviors helped frame how I read and interpreted the comments I analyzed.

Using the aforementioned resources as guideposts, I conducted an informal ethnographic observation and analysis of the comments that had been selected as potential representations of taste. I individually considered whether each comment exhibited Hume's concept of a "true judge" and/or Blair's notion of the improvability or correctness of taste. The representative comments were then flagged so that they could be referenced as examples during my discussion of how taste appears in toxic comments in the following section.

## 4. FINDINGS

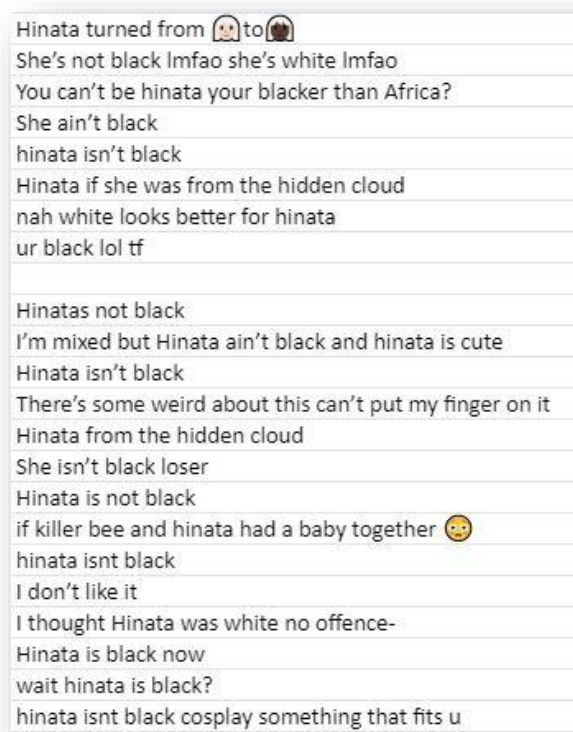
There were two types of findings that were uncovered throughout the research study. These were: 1) the general conversational trends that emerged, and 2) the examples of how taste appears in toxic comments.

### 4.1 Conversational Trends

As signaled by the various steps taken to limit the data, there were a large variety of comments posted beneath the electricbum's video. From racist slurs to paragraphs defending the creator and her right to cosplay, and from comments comprised of only emojis to comments written in foreign languages, this comment section was sprawling with activity and conversation. As has been mentioned, the sample post by electricbum went viral for the racist and toxic responses it garnered from some members of the cosplay community. Thus, it is unsurprising that the most blatant pattern to emerge was that which centered around the creator being a person of color. Comments of this type were so prevalent that identifying them often did not even require a code. Despite this, the RAC code – used for all comments that discussed race – was employed as a limiter to separate them from other comments. The result of removing all content that did not fit within the RAC category exacerbated the prevalence of the comments, for although the dataset was reduced, thousands of comments still remained.

Within these thousands of comments were trends of a smaller scale. As discussed in the coding section above, comments with the RAC code were oftentimes also paired with the codes for toxic or supportive comments that mentioned race – RAN and RAS, respectively – and it was these comments which were used to identify how the conversation about the creator's race changed over time.

The first noteworthy trend that was uncovered through the use of these secondary codes was that negatively coded racial comments were much more prevalent during the first week of analysis than during any other point across the 15 weeks. This pattern may be attributed to the level of circulation the post received after it became viral. It would make sense that with more viewers of the post come more interactions from those viewers. What is more noteworthy than even the increased number of negative comments that were left during this first week; though, is the blatant racism that many of the comments posted during this timeframe exhibited. While all toxic comments are problematic and perpetuate hateful ideas, most do not attack the creator herself – at least in the sample chosen for this project. However, this period featured several comments which included blatantly racist content about electricbum and her right to cosplay the character of Hinata. Some of these comments can be seen in Figure 4.1 below.



Hinata turned from 🍌 to 🍌  
She's not black lmfao she's white lmfao  
You can't be hinata your blacker than Africa?  
She ain't black  
hinata isn't black  
Hinata if she was from the hidden cloud  
nah white looks better for hinata  
ur black lol tf  
  
Hinatas not black  
I'm mixed but Hinata ain't black and hinata is cute  
Hinata isn't black  
There's some weird about this can't put my finger on it  
Hinata from the hidden cloud  
She isn't black loser  
Hinata is not black  
if killer bee and hinata had a baby together 😬  
hinata isnt black  
I don't like it  
I thought Hinata was white no offence-  
Hinata is black now  
wait hinata is black?  
hinata isnt black cosplay something that fits u

*Figure 4.1: Sample of Toxic Comments from Week 1 (February 6-12, 2021)*

Examples of the more targeted comments I am referring to are those such as “You can’t be hinata your blacker than Africa?” or “hinata isnt black cosplay something that fits you.” These comments are striking even among the other toxic comments included in the image due to the aggressive language they use in their critique. It is interesting that these more aggressive comments only appear only within the first few days after the video was posted. Because this trend tapered off quickly, it may be that commenters who engaged in this type of communication were doing so because they were encouraged by others who were posting hateful comments. Although not possible within the constraints of this research, it would be interesting to explore how much of their behavior was inspired by a sentiment of “well, if that person did it, why can’t I?” Understanding this sentiment offers another opportunity to discover how rhetorical moves are used in online fandom communities.

Trends surrounding toxic comments do not provide the only opportunity for further study, however. In fact, the consistency of comments coded with RAS – the code which accompanied comments that discussed race in a supportive way – revealed a pattern that could provide interesting insights into how fandom communities come together and protect one another. While negative comments were prevalent in the few days following the post’s creation, their frequency within the comment section quickly dwindled and became a rarity in the latter weeks of circulation. Despite this, interestingly, the reduction in toxic comments did not result in the decline of comments supporting the creator. In other words, although electricbum was no longer suffering harassment on a large scale as she was when supporters originally flocked to support her, the overwhelming outpouring of support remained consistent. This demonstrates that members of this community do not need to be reacting to an immediate outside threat to their community to maintain their support for each other.

While discussions relating to the cosplayer's race were by far the most prevalent of all the trends uncovered, it is still worthwhile to note some of the other patterns that emerged. First, like RAS-coded content, comments that were more generally supportive were prevalent across all weeks. An example of a comment which represented this trend of comments was “you don't have the right to be this pretty. love the cosplay keep killin it.” This content, like the supportive comments about race, is noteworthy for its role in helping community members establish a sense of security and safety.

I also observed a unique trend of comments that self-identified their purpose for commenting. An example of a comment within this category would be “POV:<sup>2</sup> you're looking for hate comments to deal with 🗑️👄🗑️👉” or another might be “Pov: your scrolling through the comments to make sure shes safe.” These comments were often written in response to the toxicity that electricbum was facing, but they did not directly address the issue of race. Instead, they often took on an air of protectiveness that expressed a desire to prevent the cosplayer from having to deal with the hateful speech herself. These comments expressed support and also signaled to the creator that she had people on her side who were functioning as bodyguards against negativity.

The patterns that were uncovered during my research process revealed some interesting things about the ways in which fandom communities communicate, especially after a fellow member has been targeted by harassment. Although these trends in and of themselves are not directly related to my thesis regarding the role of taste in these spaces, they are still worth noting

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<sup>2</sup> POV is a shorthand term for “point of view.” It is used here to describe the purpose for why someone may be reading the comment section. For example, “Pov: your scrolling through the comments to make sure shes safe” means that the reader's point of view when reading the comments is to make sure the creator is safe.

for their use in providing a broad look at the conversations that took place and their exemplification of the interactivity and camaraderie of fandom described in earlier in this paper.

## **4.2 Toxic Comments and Taste**

In the previous section, I discussed the trends that emerged upon looking at the data from a broad perspective, so here I will describe the connections that appear upon close inspection of individual comments. In taking this nuanced approach, I am able to identify specific instances where Hume and Blair's treatments of taste appear.

### ***4.2.1 The Role of the Commenter***

As was discussed early in the paper, I am arguing that commenters who engage in toxic behaviors do so because they see themselves being the authority responsible for maintaining the accuracy of the representations of their chosen media. In taking up this sentiment, these toxic commenters echo aspects of Hume's concept of the "true judge" who should be responsible for designating what is considered to be tasteful. While it is unlikely that these commenters are aware of this connection, their positioning themselves as critics who possess the sentiments and practice to understand what is tasteful nonetheless represents certain qualities of Hume's imagined character.

It is not only Hume's conceptions that are represented through toxic behaviors, however. Toxic commenters also embody Blair's notion that taste one can improve their sense of taste through understanding – the concept Blair refers to as one's correctness of taste. These user's comments suggest that they see themselves as being responsible for improving the cosplayer's sense of taste; although, it is unlikely that they would refer to their practice in this way. Rather, they are more likely to describe themselves as trying to uphold the accuracy of the media. Since accuracy is often the goal of a cosplay and what results in its being considered "good," for the



purpose of my analysis I read accuracy as a synonym for tasteful, and conversely, inaccuracy as distasteful. These readings were used in an attempt to apply the lens of taste to the contemporary discussions that were being held. For example, a comment such as “Hinata is not black,” while blatantly racist and responsible for perpetuating biases against people of color, is also read as an attempt to improve the creator’s sense of taste by educating her on the parts of her representation that were inaccurate.

This reading is not meant to say that these comments are valid or to forgive the problematic ideas construed in them. Rather, this interpretation is meant to illustrate that even in the most problematic critiques and judgements, taste can be identified. It should also be noted that not every comment coded as toxic is able to be interpreted this way. In order to apply the lens of taste to a comment, it had to have had some form of justification. In reference to the example of “Hinata is not black,” the phrase itself is the justification and the unspoken preface is the sentiment that the cosplay is wrong or inaccurate in some way. Another example would be in the case of the comment “hinata second hand.” In this example, the creator is saying the cosplay is not correct; it is a secondhand knockoff of what the character actually looks like. Additionally, although race is not explicitly designated as the reason why the commenter is under the impression that elecricbum’s representation is “second hand,” the absence of any other noticeable difference between her cosplay and the character suggests that race was what the commenter was referring to.

In both of these examples, we see users embodying the ideas about taste that were expressed by Hume and Blair during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Through their positioning themselves as authorities on the subject of what is accurate – i.e., tasteful – and through the language that forms

the purpose behind their comments, these users' comments demonstrate how taste can be applied in contemporary spaces.

#### ***4.2.2 Misinterpretation of Taste***

It must be said that the reading of taste offered above leaves out one of the most important features of taste in the Enlightenment – i.e., its relationship to the idea of a “good man.” As was described earlier, neither Hume nor his contemporaries viewed taste as frivolous or something that was based on personal preference. This is because they viewed taste as a measurement of a person’s virtuosity; according to Enlightenment belief, if someone appreciated something distasteful, then they must have been morally questionable. It is this direct relationship between taste and virtue which I argue has been the most distorted by toxic commenters, for although they enact certain aspects of Hume’s true judge character, they are unable to make their judgements without prejudice. In fact, they utilize prejudice to support their conceptions of what is tasteful – a practice that explicitly defies what Hume considers to be “good taste.”

Moreover, personal opinion of how a character should be represented takes priority over objective analysis and taints the toxic commenter’s ability to critique. Commenters’ reliance on their own personal views as evidence is signaled by the ratio of toxic to supportive content. The comment section was overwhelmingly in favor of creators cosplaying characters they love despite potential differences; one supportive commenter even wrote, “This actually is really inspiring, because I’ve been wanting to cosplay but I thought that it wasn’t gonna look like the person at all because my colo[r].” The majority of comments disagreeing with toxic commenters’ critiques suggests that these users were not concerned with whether other community members

viewed Electric Blue's cosplay as satisfactory; thus, identifying the groups' disregard for objective evidence.

Both Hume and Blair emphasize education as essential to developing a good sense of what is tasteful. This characteristic is yet another example of how taste has been misinterpreted; though, for the "education" that toxic commenters cite to justify their behavior is not the traditional, formal education that the Enlightenment-era scholars discussed. Rather, their "education" comes from being a member of the fandom community, presumably for a significant amount of time. In other words, the knowledge and opinions that they have formed about a particular media or show has taught them what is tasteful; and therefore, gives them the right to enact prejudiced behaviors. It is also worth mentioning that this opinion-based "education" is intrinsically tied to the idea of accuracy as a synonym for tasteful. The "education" that toxic commenters have received from their engagement with a media form generates, in the minds of these participants, an idea of how the piece of media should look. Whenever someone or something interferes with this interpretation, they are being distasteful because their engagement with the media is "inaccurate" – i.e., it does not align within the boundaries established by the toxic commenter's education.

The relationship between education, inaccuracy, and toxic discourse can be clearly seen in the aforementioned story about actress Kelly Marie Tran being harassed by members of the *Star Wars* fandom. An article published by *Esquire* illustrates how these toxic commenters position themselves as "educated" about their community:

Longtime *Star Wars* fans who may have seen themselves in the negative, anarchic recklessness of Luke Skywalker—or the smug, dickhead antics of Han Solo—felt the new franchise alienated white men from their new mission statement. And thus, they

sounded off, on every outlet available, saying the new films have a “racial agenda,” unleashing laughable Twitter campaigns such as #BoycottStarWarsVII, with now-suspended accounts like “@DarklyEnlighten” tweeting hateful messages such as “The new Star Wars movie...barely has any whites in it. It's all muds.” (Nero)

As Dom Nero writes here, *Star Wars* fans see themselves as embodiments of their favorite characters, and as such, as understanding of the nuances of the media. They feel that their knowledge of the franchise grants them the ability to determine what is accurate and what is not. In this case, their judgement came from a history of films led by a predominately white, male cast which they believed was the essence of the films. Therefore, when a female, woman of color who did not fit the stereotypical Hollywood body type became a major player in the franchise, these “critiques” felt they had to draw attention to what they saw as an inaccurate representation of *Star Wars* and teach fellow community members what would have been a more tasteful decision for the creators to make – i.e., maintaining the white, male hegemony of the franchise.

This same line of thinking and reasoning can be identified in electricbum’s comment section as well. Just like the commenters who harassed Kelly Marie Tran because her role broke the rule of what *Star Wars* was supposed to look like, commenters on electricbum’s post engaged in toxic behavior because she did not fit their expectations of what an “accurate” depiction of the character Hinata should be. An example of how these “educated” fans who feel they have the authority to critique a form of media based on their personal experience can be found in comments such as, “Hinata from the land hidden in the clouds.” This commenter clearly demonstrates their familiarity with *Naruto* through their referencing of one of the prominent villages that appear in the anime and manga – the Hidden Cloud Village. However, they simultaneously use this familiarity to draw others’ attention to an inaccuracy of the

representation. They do this by associating the character with a village she was not from; the character of Hinata was from the Hidden Leaf Village, a separate prominent setting of the story. However, since the characters of the Hidden Cloud Village are all represented with darker skin colors, the commenter associates electricbum's cosplay with this village instead, thereby pointing out that her representation is inaccurate – i.e., distasteful – because she is black. This example demonstrates how “educated” fans use their knowledge of a media to perpetuate toxic behaviors like racism.

Despite this glaring inconsistency between taste as it was described in the Enlightenment and how it is described today, it is impossible to overlook those elements that do overlap across the two time periods. In other words, it is this incomplete treatment of taste that prompted a duality to appear between fans' usage and the traditional rhetorical definition. As mentioned above, fans manipulate taste to suit their own ideas of what is beautiful while simultaneously situating themselves as virtuously protecting the purity of the media that is being represented. Additionally, this duality is exacerbated when, contradictorily, whenever non-virtuous justifications are used to appeal to community members' sense of virtuosity. Analyzing this discrepancy provides an interesting opportunity for understanding how some aspects of traditional rhetorical beliefs are carried throughout time while others that are deemed unnecessary are left behind. This, then, begs the question of if this butchered version of taste could still even be considered as such. I argue that it can because even in the elements that are skewed – such as the prioritization of personal opinion and prejudice – they still play an important role in justifying why things are judged in particular ways.

As qualitative analyses are intrinsically tied to the researcher's own interpretations, I must acknowledge that the interpretations and analyses described here are intrinsically tied to my

own view of the world and are impossible to separate from my implicit biases. Therefore, it is important to articulate areas where these biases may have appeared. The first preconception which may have colored my interpretation of the data is my familiarity with how online fandom spaces operate. My prior knowledge of toxicity and the existing feelings of irritation that I held toward toxic comments may have affected how I judged the dataset. This is especially important to note in light of the second consideration – i.e., that I was the only person involved in this research. All data collection, selection, and interpretation was completed by me alone. This is problematic because it resulted in a very one-sided look at the connections between taste and toxicity in fandom spaces. In the future, it would be useful to have another researcher replicate my methods in order to have a different interpretation of the data available and to ensure that I minimized the projection of my own beliefs onto the project.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Although the world we live in today looks drastically different from the Enlightenment European societies of Hume and Blair, the rhetorical tools that are used to establish credibility and persuade others have remained constant. As demonstrated throughout this project by the analysis of conversational trends and justifications that accompany toxic discourse within a contemporary subcommunity online, taste is still an integral part of the process of critique and can be used as a lens to uncover why things are judged in a certain light.

It is important to note here that while the findings of this research study were valuable and revealed interesting connections between the traditional rhetorical aspect of taste and contemporary fandom culture, there were some elements of the project that could have been improved in order to draw more explicit connections. First, because of the policies against harassment included in the terms and conditions of TikTok, many of the most toxic and blatantly racist comments had already been removed by the time that I began my research on the chosen sample. Other users as well as electricbum herself had already reported the comments so that they would be removed from the post or the original commenter had removed their own comment to avoid receiving backlash from other members of the community who were defending electricbum's right to cosplay. I am aware of this missing information because electricbum created videos wherein she responded to some of the more problematic comments she received, but when I tried to click on the comment, I was met with the error message "comment is not available." Therefore, I could only utilize the comments that were still available for analysis when I began this project, and this missing data may have influenced the findings of this research study.

One aspect in particular that may have been affected by the absence of this data is toxic commentors' discussion of the cosplayer's virtuosity. Because many of the most prejudiced comments were no longer available, it was difficult to determine if there was a connection between their comments and their opinion of electricbum's morality. Discussion of the creator as a person outside of her characterization was limited in the dataset available to me, and did not seem to imply that electricbum's act of cosplaying a character that did not "look like" her made her immoral. Rather, the toxic comments were aimed to educate the creator – albeit problematically – about who she should and should not cosplay.

Another potential limitation to the research is the exclusion of the creator's own opinion about the toxic rhetoric that appeared in her comment section. By not contacting electricbum directly to ask for her perspective as the recipient of toxicity, one potentially valuable resource was excluded. However, because the research study I conducted was focused not on interpretation but rather on how the language itself used taste as justification, her ideas were not a necessary piece of data. Nevertheless, in a future study, it may be beneficial to craft a method that does leave room for the inclusion of first-person, primary data.

Despite these limitations, however, I believe my research into the application of traditional rhetorical concepts to contemporary spaces is valuable, especially for its potential role in pedagogy. In recent years, writing studies scholars have been engaging in conversations about how best to "teach for transfer," a practice that tries to enact the premise that writing knowledge can and should be carried into contexts beyond writing classrooms (Moore). There are a variety of methods and practices that have been put forward as researchers have wrestled with the



question of how to incorporate transfer into their pedagogy<sup>3</sup> one of which is Paula Rosinski's idea of the incorporation of students' self-sponsored writing. This concept, presented in Rosinski's chapter titled "Students' Perceptions of the Transfer of Rhetorical Knowledge Between Digital Self-Sponsored Writing and Academic Writing: The Importance of Authentic Contexts and Reflection," argues that the writing that students produce in online spaces outside of class can be used to facilitate discussions of transfer. Although her discussion focuses primarily on self-sponsored writing such as text messages and more common social media posts as opposed to fandom-centric writing, Rosinski's ideas can still be applied to these subcommunities and to teaching the rhetorical concept of taste. By demonstrating to students how taste is employed as a rhetorical device in the everyday, online spaces they are already participating in, teachers may be able to provide students a more comprehensive understanding of theories of transfer, grant them the ability to engage in this process in other contexts, and create a fun and productive learning environment classrooms which may result in students being more engaged with and enthusiastic about class material specifically and education generally.

In addition to the pedagogical implications of my research, I believe this study has the potential to offer some insight into Pierre Bourdieu's discussion of taste as something that exacerbates preexisting hegemonic powers. Although Bourdieu's ideas did not fit directly into my research due to my focusing on how taste was represented during the Enlightenment, we can see his ideas appearing in how certain user's voices were privileged in the comment section. Therefore, Bourdieu's ideas present an opportunity for future research into not only how taste is used to justify toxic behaviors, but also how this rhetorical device is used to maintain control

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<sup>3</sup> For examples of some work on transfer see Moore and Bass's *Understanding Writing Transfer*, Yancey et al.'s *Writing Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing*, and Anson and Moore's *Critical Transitions: Writing and the Question of Transfer*

over the “cultural capital” of fandom spaces. Research into this area has the potential to serve as a valuable lens for approaching and studying how both taste and TikTok as a platform privilege certain users.

In summary, the Enlightenment-era concept of rhetorical taste as conceptualized by David Hume and Hugh Blair can be traced in the everyday toxic language that appears within fandom communities on social media. Although this connection may seem far-fetched at first glance, this research reveals important themes regarding the consistency of rhetorical devices across time and the communication patterns and techniques employed by members of a sample subcommunity which can be used to frame how composition teachers facilitate transfer. Yet, this research is far from comprehensive or complete; there is still much to be explored at the intersection of rhetoric, composition, and fan studies in the future. Other social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook; web forums such as 4chan, Reddit, and Tumblr; and even offline spaces such as popular culture conventions are yet unexplored areas from which researchers can gather data and explore the everyday use of traditional rhetorical devices.

## APPENDIX

### **Appendix A: Master Spreadsheet Link**

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/116wfP21t9YTCCILz-IHl0sXnzYduphaDNyvzcO0O1ig/edit?usp=sharing>

### **Appendix B: Link to Sample TikTok Post**

[https://www.tiktok.com/@electricbum/video/6926246094317964549?comment\\_id=6926350618471170053&is\\_copy\\_url=0&is\\_from\\_webapp=v1&sender\\_device=pc&sender\\_web\\_id=6901388236947850757](https://www.tiktok.com/@electricbum/video/6926246094317964549?comment_id=6926350618471170053&is_copy_url=0&is_from_webapp=v1&sender_device=pc&sender_web_id=6901388236947850757)

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