

Queerness and Emotion in Fanfiction

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## I. Introduction

Fanworks differ from every other form of creativity mainly in the fact that they are a higher percentage of amazing. – earlgreytea68

This well-known fan writer's statement succinctly captures the heart of the world of fanfic. Fanworks do not just possess the usual heart-soaring wonder of the creative arts, no – they also have something else that makes fans return to them endlessly, spending significant amounts of time and effort in their fannish endeavors despite a complete lack of monetary recompense, or societal approval. In fact, "fan creators do it in a world that has already decided that [their] creation is worth less because it has 'fan' in front of it" (earlgreytea68 2016). So, where does fans' love come from? The answer to that is not clear, even to fans: "shipping<sup>1</sup> is literally so weird like we are in love with their love? i don't fucking know man but it keeps me up at night" (Kelsey 2016). Another fan excitedly notes, "IN ORIGINAL FICTION YOU HAVE TO MAKE THE READER CARE ABOUT THE PROTAGONIST, YOU HAVE TO WORK AT IT. IN FANFIC THEY COME IN CARING SO HARD THEY'RE PRACTICALLY ON THE VERGE OF ANEURYSM" (luna 2015). Fans love fic because it's an opportunity to play with their favorite fictional characters in their favorite fictional worlds, because of its intertextual pleasures, because it comes with a built-in community of people who also love what they love, because it's a creative and accessible format with infinite possibilities, and because they can write stories that the source show or movie wouldn't (dare to).

Thus, it is abundantly clear that, although we may not be able to determine all of or the extent of the reasons why, fans *do* love fic, and very much.

Fanfic is, in addition to being a labor of love, unrepentantly queer. To fans, the fact that the majority of fanworks focus on male/male couples is taken for granted, but to an outsider, it would surely seem odd (porluciernagas 2013). In response to vague societal distress about fans queering all the texts they can get their hands on, some fans counter with the joke that it's their "job" to "mak[e] everything gay" (Jem 2016). Indeed, the idea of consuming texts while wearing "Slash<sup>2</sup> goggles" is an old one, meaning that fans purposefully view texts with an eye towards spotting possible queer content and subtext ("Slash Goggles" 2016). One fan notes that they've "become so unintentionally heterophobic in terms of media, like when i'm watching a movie or reading a book as soon as I notice The Signs of a budding hetero romance every bone in my body will groan internally and second hand embarrassment will immobilize me at every trope" (Libby 2015). Fans tire of being fed the same dull, tired, heterosexual romances – as one fan said, "I love cliché love stories as long as they're gay" (Veronica 2016). We've seen "boy meets girl" a billion and one times, but we've hardly ever seen "boy meets boy" or "girl meets girl" on the big screen. And, we've virtually *never* seen those stories get to have a happy ending, or avoid the trap of being *The Gay Movie*, rather than just a good romcom that happens to star a same-sex couple (Notes Against Humanity 2015).

Fanfiction serves as a welcome archive of creation that allows for fans to write the stories they want to see come to life, unbound by the capitalist obsessions of studio execs who are too afraid (or bigoted) to

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<sup>1</sup> see glossary entry for "Ship"

<sup>2</sup> see glossary entry for "Slash/het/gen"

dare break with heteronormativity, except in small, societally accepted and box-office-proven ways. Thus, it becomes clear that fanfiction is beloved for its queerness, and whatever makes up that “higher percentage of amazing.” So, I wanted to strategically investigate the relationship between queerness and happiness, with the hopes of finding out if queerness is a part of that special something that gives fans so much joy.

## II. Literature Review

### A. Fans & Fanfiction

Before I dive into the emotion and queerness of fanfiction, however, I will first establish who it is that’s writing this fanfiction, and what fanfiction is. In the scope of this project, I use the term “fans” to describe media fans, specifically, transformative media fans. Media fans are people who are passionate about media products, and tend to use that passion to *transform* the media they love (Coppa 2006, 51). This transformation, of characters in a TV show into cosplay, of a scene in a movie into fanart, of a moment that never happened onscreen into fanfic, is what distinguishes the transformative media fan from other, more casual or differently focused fans. Not so incidentally, this distinction of transformative often falls along gendered lines, wherein women who transform media are ridiculed, while men who “affirm” media (imagine your typical, portrayed-on-*Big Bang Theory*, white nerd/geek collecting comic books and debating the esoteric plot details of original series *Star Trek*) are fawned over by corporations who seek their fannish dollars (Busse 2013, 75). Fans’ transformations of works can take many forms, but it generally involves a change in some element of the canon (the source material; the way the story was originally portrayed on TV or in the movie). For example, they may “gender swap” the characters by, for instance, imagining Sherlock Holmes and John Watson as women (or they may imagine them as transgender, or gender fluid). They may reimagine a cast of characters in a setting totally different from their original one (for example, writing a story where the *Star Trek* crew goes to Hogwarts.) And, of course, in a huge percentage of fics, fan writers transform the source text by freeing the characters from heteronormativity and assumed straight-hood.

These media fans are largely female, generally young, and overall tech-saavy, as their home on the Internet requires (Hellekson & Busse 2014; Karpovich 2006, 186; Coppa 2013, 303). They also appear to be pretty queer, on average. I will define my use of the term “queer” more broadly in the next section, but for now, I am using it as a general term indicating people who are not heterosexual (i.e. gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, pansexual, asexual, demisexual etc.) According to a survey of AO3<sup>3</sup> users, only 29% of respondents identified as heterosexual (Lulu 2013). 23% identified as bisexual, while 12% identified as pansexual, 9% as asexual, and so on. Although the administrator of the survey notes that this data has its limitations (it was largely advertised through the social media platform Tumblr, so Tumblr users may be over-represented, there may have been confusion about whether the term “Ao3 user” meant one had to have an account on the website, etc.) it still indicates some very interesting

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<sup>3</sup> See glossary entry for “AO3 & OTW”

demographic trends. These results are also supported by Busse's work in 2006, which indicated that the proportion of queer fans was higher than that of queer people in the general population.

However, it is important to remember when theorizing about fandom and fanfiction that nothing is universal or true for all authors or fanworks (Lackner et al. 2006, 195). Not all fans are straight, nor do they all identify as queer, and their works are similarly diverse. In Lothian, Busse, and Reid's 2007 analysis, they write "For us, slash fandom has become a place where a young urban dyke shares erotic space with a straight married mom in the American heartland, and where women whose identity markers suggest they would find few points of agreement have forged erotic, emotional, and political alliances" (104). Thus, there is great diversity in fandom, but also great unity spawned from a shared love. One does not want to overstate this utopian sort of diversity in fandom, because it is still to some extent "dominated by middle-class, educated, liberal, English-speaking, white North American women" (Lothian et al. 2007, 104). But every day, the Internet and the diversity of fandom grow as people from across the globe enter this huge and varied collection of online fannish spaces (Lackner et al. 2006, 196).

Now, onto the question: what is fanfiction? One very useful definition of fanfiction (which can be shortened to "fanfic" or just "fic") is "reworkings of currently copyrighted material" (Coppa 2014, 219). This emphasizes that fanfic is fundamentally intertwined with other, usually pop cultural, media works, and that it is transformative. Additionally, fanfiction is largely non-commercial (though that is something that is in flux and under discussion both within and outside fandom) and heavily intertextual (Riley 2015; Tosenberger 2014, 13). Finally, it can be seen as something else or more than just a literary form. It can be likened to theatrical performance, mythology, a palimpsest, and an archive – that is to say, relying on multiple interpretations which all build on each other and come together to form something larger than the whole (Riley 2015; Hellekson & Busse 2014; Stasi 2006; De Kosnik 2015; Derecho 2006).

Another important note about fanfiction is that it is overwhelmingly queer. This will be discussed at greater length in the next section "Queerness," but for now, it is important to note that the overwhelming majority of fic on AO3 is "slash," that is, fic written about the relationship between two men (destinationtoast 2013). The question of why slash dominates in fanfiction has been discussed widely by fans and scholars alike, to the point that it is sometimes shortened simply to "whyslash" ("Why Slash" 2016). Theories ranging from simple statistical fact (most popular and well-written TV characters are men, therefore male characters are the most popular in fic) to internalized misogyny (women hate themselves and their bodies, so they transpose their desires onto men) have been discussed, and there is not and likely will never be just one answer to that question, since every fan reads and writes fic for their own and often very personal reasons (Hellekson & Busse 2014; De Kosnik 2015; Prokopetz 2015).

In the context of this project especially, fanfic is a genre of pleasure. There is the obvious pleasure of its frequently explicit sexuality, and the less-obvious pleasure of hurt/comfort, where fans get to see emotionally constipated hyper-masculine characters finally open up to each other. And, there's a whole plethora of literary and personal pleasures ranging from getting to enjoy a well-written AU<sup>4</sup> about your

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<sup>4</sup> See glossary for "AU"

favorite couple, to reading (or writing!) an episode tag that fills in the blanks of what happened after the cameras were turned off. Overall, it is clear that fanfiction performs an important function in fans' emotional lives, because as one fan posted: "no matter what happens as long as AO3 exists i will be fine" (Lucy 2015).

## B. Queerness

My use of the word "queer" in this project stems primarily from the work of Alexander Doty and Eve Sedgwick.

Doty writes: "I am using the term 'queer' to mark a flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non- (anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and reception. As such, this cultural 'queer space' recognizes the possibility that various and fluctuating queer positions might be occupied whenever *anyone* produces or responds to culture" (1993, 3).

According to Sedgwick, queerness "can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically" (1993, 8).

Thus, drawing from both of their definitions, we can see that queerness is fundamentally related to anti-normativity, openness, and the breaking of boundaries. Queerness is a response to culture, and as such, is not restricted to certain groups of strictly defined people and identities. Queerness is not a singular state or concept; it is innately mutable, unstable, unruly and defiant.

Chief to this use of the word queer is a focus on "same-sex sexual object choice", and it is important to keep this meaning central in the face of our culture's heteronormativity and homophobia (Sedgwick 1993, 8). But, queer can also be used to good effect in other, different and creative ways. Queerness can be about an individual's performance and identification (Sedgwick 1993, 9). Queerness can be ambiguous, in that it could "describe a wide range of impulses and cultural expressions, including space for describing and expressing bisexual, transsexual, and straight queerness" (Doty 1993, 2). Queerness can be a space all kinds of people share to differing degrees (Doty 1993, 2). Queerness can be found in being and thinking outside of boundaries and tradition (Halberstam 2011, 1).

Fan scholars have drawn on these and other ideas in queer theory to make use of "queer" in a similar manner in their discussion of fandom and fanfic. Fan scholar Reid (2006) cites Alexander Doty's understanding of queerness in her essay, stating that it is a "word that can be used to 'destabilize existing categories, while it is itself becoming a category--but a category that resists easy definition'" (Reid 2009, 472). Jung (2004), in her work discussing "Female Spectators and the Appeal of Writing Slash Fiction," describes "queering" as a verb, as an act, a performance; something that is frequently enacted by fans and fanfic writers and readers. Busse (2006) similarly points out the performative aspect of queerness, while Lothian et al. (2007, 108) points out how queerness can be about breaking boundaries and binaries.

Lackner et al. (2006, 201) brings up the fascinating idea that women writing for other women's (sexual) pleasure is queer in and of itself. In the world of fic writing, "even the 'straight' women are doing something that can arguably be seen as pretty 'queer' (producing writing designed to give sexual pleasure to other women...whether the texts are defined as het or queer or bi)" (Lackner et al. 2006, 201). So, slashing can be a queer practice even for those who may not concretely identify as such, in that it involves a "desire and libidinal investment which exceeds the strictures of dominant heterosexuality, and also exceeds the boundaries of how sexuality is generally defined" (Kustritz 2015, 103).

Additionally, queerness can be seen in fanfic in the space in which it is produced and disseminated, and in the way it breaks through binaries (of gender, of professional/amateur creation, etc.) (Hampton 2015, 1.1). Slash fic in particular is often "deeply embedded within a self-defined queer space" (Hellekson and Busse 2014, 81). In this queer space, fan writers and readers join together in what can be "a communal and grass roots critique not only of popular culture but also of heterosexual hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality" (Jung 2004, 5). Certainly, not all slash is political, but for those writers who use it as such, it can be thrillingly "transgressive," a "feminist act" and a place for the "insertion of queer content into popular culture" (Jung 2004, 24).

But beyond this political sense, it is important to recognize queerness here as something more – something that is generally anti-normative. Fans queer the source text by twisting and turning it away from strictly defined lines of conventional heterosexuality, in ways that are not always obvious but which run deep in the culture of fic writing (Hampton 2015, 2.9). Thus, we come full circle to the beginning of my discussion of queerness, which emphasized that an integral part of queerness is its resistance to easy definition and bounding. However, as an intelligible definition of terminology will be useful for communicating the findings of this project, I will define my use of the term "queerness" in this essay as meaning: involving same-sex desire, breaking binaries, a space of political transgression, and/or general anti-normativity towards hegemonic (pop) culture.

### C. Hostility of the Internet and "Outernet"

This boundary breaking, subversive queerness is very much not the norm in larger society or pop culture. Fundamental to the significance of this project is the fact that fandom and fan communities exist in stark contrast against a backdrop of hostility and violence; where fandom is open and accepting of queerness of all sorts, the world outside of fandom is decidedly not.

In a 2014 Pew Research Center survey of a nationally representative sample of adults, 62% said that homosexuality should be accepted, but 31% said it should be discouraged. This is better than it was in 2007, when Pew reported that only 50% of adults thought homosexuality should be accepted, while 40% thought it should be discouraged (Pew Research Center 2014). But despite this small statistical step forward, LGBT people are still "the most likely targets of hate crimes in America" according to a 2016 *New York Times* analysis of FBI data on the topic (Park and Mykhyalshyn). They outrank Jewish, Muslim, and Black people, respectively, in the number of hate crimes perpetuated against them. Smaller aggressions against LGBT people are also unfortunately common, as in the form of tweeted hate. The

website *nohomophobes.com* tracks in real time the usage on Twitter of such slurs as “faggot” and “dyke” as well as the phrases “no homo” and “so gay.” Just glancing at these numbers at 10:30 on a Wednesday morning, “faggot” has already been used almost 2000 times (and that’s just on one social media platform).

The homophobia of the physical and digital worlds is, unsurprisingly, reflected in our pop culture and media. According to an analysis by Vox, in the recent crop of TV deaths queer women accounted for a staggering 10% of onscreen deaths, which is highly significant when you consider that queer women only account for about 2% of all TV characters to begin with (VanDerWerff 2016; GLAAD 2015). And while straight cis white guys were certainly also killed onscreen, queer women’s deaths were more likely to feel strained and or meaningless, such as in the case of the fan uproar over the death of Lexa in *The 100*. Lexa’s death was so egregious it prompted the LGBT Fans Deserve Better pledge, which asks content creators to be more conscious and respectful of their actions when it comes to how they tell LGBT stories. In the aftermath of the horrific Orlando nightclub shooting, one fan posted online that they hoped “every media creator who has been killing us off onscreen for shock value and drama comes to terms with the fact that this shit isn’t fictional” (Ivory 2016).

Even when queer characters manage to break into mainstream media and stay alive, they are often only holding on by their fingertips, still relegated to the shadows and denied the kind of casual intimacy that onscreen heterosexual couples take for granted (Lee 2016). One fan notes how “Checking Netflix’s Gay and Lesbian section is like checking the fridge when you know damn well that there isn’t anything there” (Ashley 2016). This draws attention to the fact that although LGBT characters *are* making strides into media in comparison to the virtual dearth of any such characters in the past, they’re still few and far between. Thus, this is the kind of world that fans are born into, and which they take upon themselves to change.

With facts like these, it can sometimes seem trivial to focus on topics like media and fandom. The OTW<sup>5</sup> addressed this question in an article which asked why we should care about pop culture in a world where very real, very physical violence and terror and hatred against minorities (sexual, gender, racial, etc.) abounds. The answer to that is that “*Representation matters*” (Van Santen 2016). Media is how we learn to see ourselves and others and “we have the right—we have the *responsibility*—to mould it in return” (Van Santen 2016). That is what transformative fans do, they take overwhelmingly white, straight, cisgendered male media and turn it into something new and beautiful and recognizable to people who fall outside that dominant paradigm.

For the purposes of clarity and brevity in this paper, I will use the term “Internet” to refer to digital reality (the world wide web, social media and websites, etc.) and “Outernet” to refer to physical reality (the world outside the computer) respectively. The latter is a term used by people online to often humorous effect when discussing their lives (or lack thereof) outside of their screens (jfp 2007). Given the documented hate LGBT people are forced to endure from both the Outernet and Internet, a space

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<sup>5</sup> See glossary entry for “AO3 & OTW”



such as that of fanfic, which is unrepentantly queer, can serve as a much needed oasis of acceptance and joy.

### III. Research Question and Hypothesis

The three linked research questions which drove this project were:

- 1) How queer is the most popular fanfiction?
- 2) What are the most frequent emotional responses to those fics?
- 3) What relationships exist between these variables (queerness and emotional response)?

My respective hypotheses were that:

- 1) The most popular fanfiction is very queer.
- 2) Happiness is the most frequent emotional response to these fics.
- 3) The more queer these fics are, the happier the fan responses.

To test these hypotheses, I sampled ten fics each from three major fandoms on AO3, analyzed the queerness of each fic, and then compared the queerness to the emotional reactions found in the comments left by readers.

### IV. Methodology

#### A. Sample

##### 1. *Why AO3?*

The fanfics and the comments I worked with for this project all were sampled from the website Archive of Our Own (abbreviated AO3) which is run by the Organization for Transformative Works (abbreviated OTW). The OTW, and its subsidiary AO3, are run “by fans for fans,” i.e. the site was created and is maintained by fans themselves, volunteers who feel passionately about fanworks and want to protect them (“Annual Report 2015”). Additionally, it wasn’t created for the purpose of generating a profit, but rather to serve as a resource for fandom.

I used AO3 as the source for my data in my earlier project on the gift culture of fandom “because of its reputation for quality, its lack of censorship, and its non-commercial nature” and I use it in this project for similar reasons (Riley 2015). AO3 is fast-growing and popular among many fans, who see it as friendlier than more commercial sites such as Wattpad, and better formatted than other popular fansites such as LiveJournal, where a great deal of fanfic has been posted in the past (Riley 2015). Even non-fan outsiders recognize AO3’s quality, as when it was named one of *Time’s* 50 Best Websites of

2013, and called “the most carefully curated, sanely organized, easily browsable and searchable nonprofit collection of fan fiction on the Web” (Grossman 2013). AO3 is particularly well-suited to analysis because of its reliable and easy to use and understand system of tagging and categorization.

Naturally, these elements mean that AO3 is not perfectly representative of all fans or all fic. It may house “better” fic than other sites because of its reputation as a place to put your best written, completed fic (versus other sites, where fans may feel more comfortable posting unfinished, unedited bits of writing). But, its lack of censorship is useful in that it means that no element of fandom is purposefully hidden or removed, and its non-commercial nature is integral in that little to none of the work housed on the site was written explicitly for financial gain.

## 2. Why these fandoms and fics?

I chose the top three fandoms on AO3 by number of works, for use in my analysis: the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Supernatural, and Harry Potter.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (commonly abbreviated MCU; the umbrella term which includes all the Marvel superhero films) is the largest fandom on AO3 by number of works. (That is, when one takes into account such factors as overlapping works and tags, and “fandoms” such as Real Person Fiction which are actually sections of many fandoms all under one header.) The largest ships in the MCU are “Stucky” (Steve Rogers AKA Captain America and Bucky Barnes AKA the Winter Soldier) and “Stony” (Steve Rogers and Tony Stark AKA Iron Man).

The second largest fandom on AO3 is Supernatural (often abbreviated SPN), the fandom based around the sci-fi-horror TV show *Supernatural*. The largest ship in SPN is “Destiel” (the pairing of monster-hunter Dean Winchester and the angel Castiel).

Finally, the third largest is “Harry Potter – J.K. Rowling” which is the fandom around the seven book series *Harry Potter*, as well as the *Harry Potter* films to some extent (often abbreviated simply as “HP”). The largest ships in this fandom are “Drarry” (the hero Harry Potter and the antagonist Draco Malfoy) and “Wolfstar” (Sirius Black and Remus Lupin, two characters from Harry’s parent’s generation).

The cut-off I chose at three fandoms was somewhat arbitrary, but also logical. The next largest fandom on AO3 is “Sherlock Holmes & Related Fandoms,” which is a rather large and confused tag that can encompass everything from stories based directly on Conan Doyle, to the BBC TV show, to the Guy Ritchie films. This fandom is also somewhat smaller than the next biggest fandom, especially when one considers that it is really several disparate fandoms combined (only holding about 95,000 fics, while HP boasts about 100,000, and SPN and MCU both have about 140,000). Thus, those top three fandoms, MCU, SPN, and HP, can be safely assumed to be large and significant fandoms.

Next, from each of these fandoms I chose the top ten fics by number of kudos. Kudos are the AO3 equivalent of a Facebook like; it’s a button a person can click at the bottom of a fic (whether or not they’re signed in with an account) which indicates they enjoyed the fic. Although there are other measures that could be used to note the popularity of fics, such as the number of hits (times people

viewed the fic page), kudos are the easiest and most popular method of feedback, and seem to show relatively well which fics are more popular than others. From these top ten fics, I excluded incomplete fics, since as unfinished works it would be difficult to judge their content accurately and the comments on them would likely be categorically different than the comments on completed fics, and so they would be less useful in a comparative analysis. There was only one incomplete fic, and for that fandom, I simply skipped that fic and chose the next one.

## B. Queer Count

In order to quantitatively measure the queerness of fics, I developed what I called the “Queer Count,” a four-component scale which measured four possible criteria of anti-normativity: relationship, gender roles, sexual politics, and canon/fanon. Each component was measured on a scale from -1 to 3, which will be explained below.

1. The relationship category measured the most obvious type of queerness in fic, that of its main pairing: the characters whose relationship the story centered around, and was categorized by. For example, all of the Supernatural fics’ were categorized under the M/M (Male/Male) pairing “Destiel” (the name for the pairing of the characters Dean Winchester and Castiel). The relationship category measured how central the pairing was to a fic: was the relationship the focus of the story, or was an external plot more important? Was the relationship “pre-slash” (i.e. before the characters actually get together, but usually involving pining and supposedly unrequited desire/love) or explicit? For this category, a -1 score would be given if the characters in the pairing were involved in an explicitly heterosexual pairing (between male and female characters who did not identify as bisexual or gender fluid or in any way queer). The highest score, a 3, would be given to fics that focused heavily on a queer relationship and its progression, and included (semi-)explicit sexuality. Every fic measured was tagged as involving a queer relationship, and so no fic scored below a 1 in this component. (As a matter of interest: all the relationships were between two white men – this evokes questions about racial and gender issues with slash shipping, which are out of the scope of this essay, but which would provide very interesting fodder for further study).

2. The next criterion was gender roles, scaled from -1, indicating the fic was actively sexist, to 3, which involved significant and frequent discussion and/or subversion of gender norms. For example, in the Supernatural fic “Into Your Hideaway,” the (usually macho male) lead Dean Winchester overtly rails against the rigidity of gender roles as he discusses his (non-canonical) child (called a “pup” in this particular AU): “And what’s the deal with saying crap is for ‘girls’ or ‘boys,’ anyway? If my pup’s a little lady and she’s into robots and crap, then good. Little dude likes bunny rabbits? What the fuck ever, am I right?” Only one fic earned a negative score, a Harry Potter fic which included an element of unproblematized blatant sexism, although several fics earned zeroes for being generally gender normative. Some leeway was given for fics whose source material included characters who were canonically quite sexist, because then simply writing these people in-character could result in some measure of sexism. The key distinction here is whether or not it was unproblematized. If a Supernatural fic included Dean using a gendered insult, but then had Castiel comment on how Dean seemed unfortunately bound by gender roles, then that fic wouldn’t earn a negative score (it may even earn a

positive one if Castiel's gender-lessons stuck.) If that fic didn't make some effort to address Dean's sexism, however, it could have earned a zero or below.

3. The third component of the Queer Count was sexual politics. This measured the extent to which the fic was conscious of sexual politics, such as if it mentioned homophobia, same-sex marriage, workplace discrimination, gay or lesbian culture and history, etc. It also took into account whether these topics were dealt with respectfully. The score was determined primarily by the number of mentions of relevant topics; for example, the MCU fic "Mistake on the Part of Nature" included the line, "'Men can be with men now,' he says, a challenging tilt to his jaw," in which Bucky Barnes is pointing out that socially and legally, homosexuality is far more admissible now than it was when he and Steve Rogers AKA Captain America (his implied love interest in this fic) were growing up in the 1930s. As this was essentially the only mention, this fic earned a score of 1. The Supernatural fic "A Room Of One's Own," however, earned a score of a two for a scene where Dean has a vivid dream which educates him on such topics as the fluidity of sexuality and the invalidity of stereotypes.

4. The final criterion of the Queer Count was canon/fanon (see glossary for definitions of these terms). This component judged qualitatively how much the fic "queered" or subverted the canon, and/or made use of common fanon tropes. For example, the co-authored fic "United States v. Barnes, 617 F. Supp. 2d 143 (D.D.C. 2015)" was a "media fic," which is a fic that makes use of forms of storytelling other than traditional prose, such as using tweets, images, excerpts formatted to look like they're taken from formal news sources, etc. This fic included an fictional interview between a reporter and the author of a fake academic book *Captain America and Queer Theory: The Narratives of Heroism*, and discusses how what "some people are going to have to wrap their heads around is that Steve Rogers was always — well, we'll say queer, for now: it seems like the most appropriate blanket term.... It might even make some people in academia stop painting historical figures as straight by default unless proven otherwise." Thus, this fic clearly plays with the blurry lines between canon and fanon, and between fiction and reality: it queers the canon and the world not just by making it explicit that Steve Rogers is queer, but by daring to imply that perhaps he and other characters (or "historical figures") like him have never been straight, but have been assumed heterosexual "by default."

### C. Analysis of Fan Comments

#### *1. Emotion*

Integral to this project is the emotion of fans. It is commonly known among fans that emotion is the foundation of fandom. As one fan said when interviewed by Larsen and Zubernis "Fanfic is, at its purest, an expression of love" (2011, 97). Emotion, and the intensity of that emotion(al investment), is what differentiates a fan from a mere viewer, and it is what motivates fan creation (Jenkins 2012, 57-8, 66). One fan speculates that fanfiction is a unique genre because it is fundamentally categorized by the type of emotion it is meant to give you; for example, there's "fluff" which is meant to elicit positive and happy feelings, or "angst" which may move the reader to tears (Miguel 2015). They go on to note that professional media tends to focus heavily on plot, sometimes to the exclusion of three-dimensional

characters or emotional reality, which is “why fanfic can be so fulfilling and cathartic to [fans] in a way that canon<sup>6</sup> never can” (Miguel 2015).

However, academics have in the past had the tendency to remove the emotion from their fan studies, focusing on the rational and quantifiable (Larsen and Zubernis 2011, 85). In this study, I have performed an initial attempt at rationally quantifying the emotional reactions of fans. To do so, I analyzed the comments fans left as reactions on fics, categorizing the reactions by magnitude and type of emotion.

There is debate in the psychological community as to what our core emotions are, and indeed, what the nature of emotion is, including if it can even be defined as centering on a set of discrete, basic emotions. That debate is out of the scope of this paper, but suffice it to say that the use of the term “emotion” in this current project implies a “feeling state/process that motivates and organizes cognition and action,” and that there *are* several recognized categories of emotion (Izard 2010, 367). The classic argument for discrete basic emotion recognizes approximately six emotional categories or “families”: happiness, sadness, disgust, anger, fear, and surprise (Ekman 1992). In addition to these, my categories are heavily inspired by the reactions I observed in the content of fanfic comment sections; thus, they include a wider variety of specific emotional reactions (such as laughter and anticipation). Also, fan comments are overwhelmingly positive, so there are a greater number of categories breaking down the positive emotions, and a smaller number of more general categories for the negative emotions. The 14 emotional categories I used were: Happiness, Laughter, Surprise, Sadness, Anticipation, Bittersweet, Sexual Response, Empathy, Gratitude, Community, Frustration, Disgust, Anger, and Fear. (For specific definitions of each of these along with examples, see Appendix A.)

## *2. Which fan comments?*

I wanted to analyze the same number of comments for each story, so I chose them randomly on a percentile basis. I decided 20 comments per fic was a reasonable number given my time and resources for this project, so I then picked the comments that were at the 5<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>...100<sup>th</sup> percentiles. For example, if there were 600 comments on a fic, I would analyze every thirtieth comment. I skipped author’s comments because they are of a separate type than fan comments, in that they are almost always in response to another comment and are usually highly repetitious, almost always along the lines of “thank you for your feedback.” They don’t generally constitute a reaction to the fic itself, which is what I was analyzing, so I excluded them.

For each of the comments I analyzed, I categorized it based on its emotional content. I rated each comment on a three point scale (0 for no mentions, 1 for one mention, 2 for 2 mentions, 3 for 3 or more mentions) for the 14 pre-determined, pre-defined emotions I discussed above. For example, the comment, “This is so beautiful, it makes me really really happy...” would earn 1 point in the category of happiness. If it had included a “thank you,” then it would also have earned a point in gratitude, or if it had mentioned how the fic made them laugh, it could have gotten a point in laughter. If there was more than one expression of happiness, then it would have earned more than one point in that category, and so on. This task required a human eye to categorize, because fan emotions are often expressed in slang

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<sup>6</sup> See glossary entry for “Canon and Fanon”

terms, emoticons, or even gifs. They will use expressions such as “I hate this” to actually mean “I freaking love this”, which is clearly communicated among fangirls from context, but which a computer or someone unfamiliar with fandom would not be able to distinguish (Katharine 2016).

Although it is safe to say that a comment constitutes a reaction to a fic, it is problematic to assume that the sum of the comments on a fic represents the totality of emotional reactions to the fic. After all, a majority of the people who read a fic only leave kudos (or not even that), with only a self-selected minority choosing to leave comments (capsing 2016). Those who do take the time and effort to comment may be more educated, and so feel more comfortable expressing a reaction in words to a written piece of work. Or, they may be more socially comfortable, as an oft-cited reason for not commenting is social anxiety (capsing 2016). Thus, comments are an imperfect measure of response because the people who choose to comment may be an unusual population. Additionally, one can't assume perfect causality with the fic affecting the comments and *not* vice versa, because it is possible that fan comments left on one chapter of a fic may have affected what the author decided to write for the next chapter, if it was posted at a later date (as many of them were).

However, comments are still valuable insights because they are a part of a significant and long-standing fannish tradition of giving feedback as a form of reciprocation for the gift of fanworks (Hellekson 2009; Riley 2015). The community explicitly acknowledges the role feedback, and comments in particular, plays in giving fan authors the motivation to create (hkafterdark 2016, Iz 2016, Grant 2013). Fans have made guides on how to comment properly, addressing the various possible elements of a comment, and the reasons some fans may not feel comfortable commenting and how they can get past their discomfort (siawrites 2015, capping 2016, dirtybookshelves 2013, sekretomg 2015). So, since comments are a clear and concrete indication of fan's emotional reactions (though they may be incomplete) they are the best available source of data for measuring fan's reactions to fanfic.

## **V. Results**

In this section, I will discuss three main findings: A) the queerness of fanfiction, B) happiness as a response to fanfiction, and C) the relationship between the queerness of fic and the happiness of fan's responses.

### A. Results: Queerness of Fic

My first research question asked: how queer is the most popular fanfiction? My hypothesis that fanfic is very queer was supported: all thirty of the fics in my sample were unquestionably queer.

My sample is from the most respected and fastest growing fanfic site, AO3. The three fandoms were chosen because they're the top fandoms by number of fics on AO3, so it is relatively safe to assume that they're some of the most popular fandoms in the world of fic, generally. But, they also were appropriate choices because they represent some of the range of fandom: the MCU is a massive Hollywood film enterprise that consists of more than a dozen blockbuster movies and which is also supported by and

based on decades worth of comic canon, *Supernatural* is a cult scifi horror TV show on the CW, and *Harry Potter* is a British children’s book series turned movie epic whose popularity made it a household name across the world. These are all very different media ventures, with varying degrees of financial success and cultural longevity, but they’re all united by the fact that they spawned massive, passionate fandoms.

I analyzed fics from these fandoms according to my Queer Count criteria, and then, for the purposes of comparison between fandoms, added up the totals for each component and for the total Queer Count.

*Chart 1: Queer Count*

(The acronyms in the first column refer to the titles of the stories which can be found in Appendix C.)

<b>Fandom: MCU</b>	<b>Relationships</b>	<b>Gender roles</b>	<b>Sexual Politics</b>	<b>Canon / fanon</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>MotPoN</b>	1	1	1	1	4
<b>ywst</b>	3	2	1	1	7
<b>TTTT</b>	2	0	1	1	4
<b>Tmotb</b>	2	1	1	1	5
<b>tcbiah</b>	3	1	2	3	9
<b>yhoom</b>	3	1	1	1	6
<b>FoFRfKTS</b>	1	1	0	1	3
<b>USvB617</b>	1	0	3	1	5
<b>SR100</b>	1	3	3	2	5
<b>nl</b>	3	0	2	3	8
<b>Total</b>	20	10	15	15	56
<b>Fandom: SPN</b>	<b>Relationships</b>	<b>Gender roles</b>	<b>Sexual Politics</b>	<b>Canon / fanon</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>TaS</b>	3	2	3	3	11
<b>DDLtE</b>	3	0	0	1	4
<b>TGE</b>	3	-1	1	1	4
<b>AEIW</b>	3	0	0	2	5
<b>AW</b>	3	1	1	2	7
<b>ITH</b>	3	3	2	3	11
<b>H(ttG)DaC</b>	3	1	2	1	7
<b>R</b>	3	0	2	2	7
<b>OotD</b>	3	0	1	2	6
<b>AROOO</b>	3	1	2	1	7
<b>Total</b>	30	7	14	18	69

<b>Fandom:</b> <b>HP</b>	<b>Relationships</b>	<b>Gender roles</b>	<b>Sexual Politics</b>	<b>Canon / fanon</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>TCaMaaWR</b>	3	0	0	1	4
<b>SinT</b>	3	0	1	1	5
<b>TT</b>	3	0	3	2	8
<b>AloC</b>	3	0	1	1	5
<b>D</b>	3	0	0	1	4
<b>TEFPPoW</b>	2	-1	0	2	3
<b>A</b>	3	0	2	1	6
<b>TSYWP</b>	3	0	2	1	6
<b>TaNS</b>	3	0	3	2	8
<b>RHR</b>	3	1	2	1	7
<b>Total</b>	29	0	14	13	56

The areas of highest queerness for each fandom varied a little, for example, the MCU had 20 out of 30 possible points for relationships, while SPN had all 30, and HP earned 0 points in the category of gender roles, while the MCU earned 10. (This is another area where further research could be very interesting: to explore if different fandoms have different levels of queerness in terms of gender, explicit political content, etc.) But, with a sample this small, these differences turned out not to be significant. Although Supernatural’s total queer count (69 out of a possible 120) was higher than Harry Potter and the MCU’s (both with 56 out of 120), a t-Test revealed no statistically significant differences between these results. So, for the purposes of this study, the general queerness of these fandoms is approximately equal.

This is important to note because it shows that although all fandoms are diverse, and their queerness may come from different areas, overall, each one is still very queer, and to approximately the same degree.

It is worth repeating the fact that 100% of my sample is queer – this is simply amazing, especially in comparison to mainstream media. GLAAD’s 2015 report on queer characters on TV states that only 4% of the regular characters on primetime TV were LGBT (GLAAD 2015). So, this sample of fanfiction is about twenty times more queer than mainstream television. Fans know this and love this. As one fan says, “Fanfiction is literally all I read nowadays because I can’t find books that satisfy my needs. It’s the only form of literature that provides me with my daily dose of queer” (sapphiqueens 2015). According to a fan analysis of the top ships on AO3 in 2015, approximately 70% of the top ships on AO3 were same-sex ships (Lulu 2015). Thus, all of this suggests that the queerness of fic is significant, and of great importance to the readers.

## B. Results: Frequency of Emotional Responses



My second research question asked what the most frequent emotional responses to fic would be, and I hypothesized that happiness would be the most common response.

Thus, the second set of results I want to explore is the raw total numbers of emotional responses. The top three emotional responses (among the 14 possible emotional responses) in terms of sheer magnitude were:

1. Happiness (637 out of 1176 total recorded points: 54.2%)
2. Gratitude (142 out of 1176: 12.1%)
3. Laughter (100 out of 1176: 8.5%)

### *1. Happiness*

Thus, the reaction I predicted fans would have to the queerness of fic is indeed the most common. My second hypothesis that happiness would be the most frequent emotional response to fic was supported. And, as stated previously, the world of fanfic (especially compared to the more hostile, heteronormative areas of the Internet and Outernet) is very queer. My entire sample of stories was queer, with the total Queer Count for each story ranging from 3 – 11 on a possible scale of 0 – 12. Thus, every fic was queer, to some degree. Additionally, on almost every fic, happiness was far and away the most common response (the one outlier being the tragic Supernatural epic “Twist and Shout” which caused more tears, overall). So, fic is queer and people are happy, but a relationship between the two didn’t arise from this statistical analysis. While it is possible that there simply isn’t a significant relationship there, it is also possible that the relationship is hidden because of the nature of the data collection and analysis. For instance, since the entire sample turned out to be queer, there were no non-queer fics to test against. Additionally, the analysis of comments can give insight into what reactions people had to fic, but it can’t tell you *why* they went to the fic in the first place.

I would hypothesize that people seek out fic because of a queer sort of love. The fans are searching out a queer place, and queer stories. Readers *choose* this world because it allows them to leave behind the hostility of the larger world. Certainly, fandom is not a perfect or completely safe space, and there are unfortunately numerous instances of bullying, fan-shaming, flaming, ship wars, and other unpleasantness (Busse 2013). However, AO3 in particular has become, if not a “safe space,” a safely *queer* space.

The idea of the Internet, and fandom in particular, as a “safe space” where fans can explore their (gender, sexual, personal) identities online in a secure, anonymous place, has been discussed by scholars, journalists, and fans (Busse 2006; Kustritz 2015; Hu 2016; fandomisnotyoursafespace 2015). Some fans point out that a space cannot be truly “safe” without some form of censorship which removes non-safe elements, but that no space which censors its content could actually be safe. So, keeping this argument in mind, I would say that AO3 is a *queer* space: it is not safe, in the sense that explicit sexuality flourishes around every corner and kinks of every kind are explored, and so it is certain that there exists much

material which could be triggering or even traumatic. But, especially in comparison to the homophobic and heteronormative spaces of the wider Internet and Outernet, AO3 offers a sort of queer oasis.

To exemplify this: there was no disgust expressed in my sample of comments, not a single mention of anything of that sort. Take a moment to ponder the significance of that: hundreds of thousands of words of fic about queer love and thousands of comments about it, and not one in the sample expressed revulsion. Think of this especially in comparison to almost any other place on the Internet or in the media or in the physical world where queerness is so obviously present; take a glance at the comment section of any given article on the Internet and find vitriolic hate; look at a newspaper and see the most recent crop of horrifying crimes motivated by homophobia, as discussed above.

The sanctuary quality of AO3 is perhaps, oddly enough, best illustrated in those rare cases where the outside world of homophobia and heteronormativity *does* intrude on the queer space of AO3. Through my perusal of the comments generally, I only spotted one rude thread of comments, which did not make it in the sample, and which was clearly written by someone who was unaware of the practices of fanfic fans. He (I use this gendered term purposefully, since he opened his rant by addressing the authors as “you ladies,” and makes it clear that he identifies as an affirmative, not a transformative, fan) spends hundreds of words ranting about the authors’ “SJW [social justice warrior] policies” and non-compliance with the comic and movie canon (T.F.F 2015). (The fact alone that he detailed their canonical errors showed painfully clearly that he had no clue about the *entire point* of fanfiction.) Fans replied to his mind-boggling outburst with laughter and impolite suggestions that he leave the premises. It is clear from fan reactions to his unpleasant comments that he is an outsider, someone not welcome here, and fans quickly gathered to oust him and his homophobia – indeed, the author reached a point where she calmly told him that any further rude comments of his would be deleted, so that his negativity wouldn’t affect her and her fellow fans. Thus, it was clear from the comments and context that this was an unusual occurrence, and one that would not be tolerated – fans understand AO3 as a space where queerness and ships and stories can live and thrive in peace.

So, because of this understanding, it actually may remain *unsaid* in the comment sections on fics that much of the reader’s joy flows directly from the opportunity to read about a certain pairing – you don’t have to *say* that because it’s obvious. The reader already chose to read that particular fic when looking up stories in that fandom, or they were already searching AO3 for stories about that pairing. Once again, this can be seen in that inverse case where someone leaves a rude comment on a fic talking about how they dislike the central pairing, for one reason or another. Fans commonly respond with their old adage “don’t like, don’t read,” which is a long-used fan phrase which originated with disclaimers about how they don’t own the characters they use in their fic, and so if a person was offended by the (often very queer, and very explicit) content of the fic, they should take their opinions elsewhere (dorkery 2016; “Don’t Like, Don’t Read” 2016). Although the use of such disclaimers has decreased significantly in past years (in part because of the rise of fan-safe spaces like AO3) the general fan culture largely still takes this as a pillar of fannish interactions: if a ship or a fic is not your cup of tea, then just go away and leave it be, you don’t need to tell everyone else about how you don’t like it. So, when someone breaks this rule and writes a rude comment about a pairing or a story, the author and fellow fans will likely respond

with some variation on this, saying in no uncertain terms that if the reader's criticism is neither polite nor useful, then it is not welcome (dorkery 2016).

This is all meant to indicate how, if one abides by the "don't like, don't read" rule, then it logically follows that if you *do* read it, you *do* like it. If you've chosen to read a fic tagged as being about a certain pairing, it's *assumed* that you like that pairing, it's *taken for granted* that you get some sort of joy in seeing those people together. If you're reading a Destiel fic, it may be almost nonsensical, and possibly a fannish faux pas, to say, "I love Destiel!!" in the comments. So, it is possible that this underlying assumption of a fan's love for a certain (queer) pairing and (queer) form of storytelling obscures a causal link between queerness and joy. It could be that it *is* there, just hidden at the foundation of fanfic.

## 2. Gratitude

According to the correlational data (discussed in the next section), gratitude seems related to happiness, so it is likely that people feel gratitude for the positive emotions a fic gives them. But, they're also grateful for *specific* elements of fic which give them that joy, such as: intertextual references; clever plot twists; sweet, adorable, intimate, loving moments between the members of their favorite pairing; an interesting AU or take on the canon setting; exciting action sequences; titillating sex scenes; happy endings where there were none in the canon – the list goes on and on.

## 3. Laughter

The laughter is pretty clearly related to the humorous turns of phrase and situations presented in the fics, but it is also important to note that this humor also often comes from a place of comparison between the fic and the canon: it would be funny if any character had a dream about the (alas, fictional) Iowa Women's Knife-Fighting League breaking down their door to set them straight about gender and sexuality stereotypes, but it is twice as hilarious when it's *Supernatural's* hyper-masculine Dean Winchester having this particular dream (especially given the knowledge that it is massively unlikely that anything so queer or enlightened would ever happen on the show.)

Overall, it is clear that fanfic in general does produce happiness. So, what elements of fanfic lead to this happy response? As noted in my introduction, the reasons for fans' happiness are many, and often hard to describe or express. However, I would tentatively theorize that the main reasons for these feelings could be organized under the general categories of: literary pleasures and shipping pleasures. That is to say, fans love the writing, the setting, the plot, the intertextuality, etc. and/or they love the pairing, the sexuality, the romance, etc. These categories may have to be expanded or edited; perhaps another category of fannish pleasures that mixes these two is necessary, or there are other reasons altogether why fans love fic that aren't noted here. This is the question which was the foundation for my research questions in this project, and which would be fascinating to explore more: what is it exactly that fans love so much about fanfic?

## C. Results: Correlations

### 1. Correlations between Emotions and Queerness

I hypothesized that fanfiction is very queer, and that the most common emotional response to it would be happiness, therefore, given the perceived hostility of the Outernet and Internet, the anti-normativity of fic and its' environs would be a welcome respite for (queer, in a broad sense) fans; an oasis of sorts.

Essentially, I proposed that the queerness of fic elicited joy in its readers. To test this, I quantified the levels of queerness in the fics, and the emotional reactions to the fic. However, although the fics were indeed queer, and the emotion of happiness was easily the most *common* reaction to fic, happiness did not turn out to be significantly correlated with queerness of the fic.

For each emotion that showed up frequently as a response to the fics, I performed a regression to see how the 13 other possible emotions as well as the total Queer Count affected the emotion in question. (The emotions of disgust, surprise, anger, and fear, all had 15 or fewer responses, so I didn't perform regressions directly on them, since they were such comparatively small numbers.)

Chart 2: Emotion Totals

Emotion	# Responses
Happiness	637
Laughter	100
Surprise	3
Sadness	53
Anticipation	51
Bittersweet	53
Sexual Response	51
Empathy	22
Gratitude	142
Community	20
Frustration	25
Disgust	0
Anger	13
Fear	6
Total	1176

So, for example, I was able to see how sadness, laughter, surprise etc. and the Queer Count total affected happiness. This allowed for relationships among the variables to come to light, including but not limited to the specific relationships between individual emotions and the Queer Count. As it turned out, happiness did not have a statistically significant relationship with the Queer Count. In other words, queerer fics did not elicit more happiness responses. So, the next step was to perform regressions with the *components* of the queer count, to see if any other relationships emerged. For example, sexual response is not correlated with the total Queer count, but it is with the component of relationships.

So, for happiness, laughter, sadness, gratitude, sexual response, bittersweet, anticipation, empathy, frustration, and community, I performed 5 regressions each: one with the total queer count, and four with its constituent components. (See Appendix D for regression data on these variables.)

Happiness was not correlated significantly with the Queer Count, or any of its components. There is, however, a relationship between sadness and the Queer Count, especially with the relationships component. On average, for every point that the Queer Count goes up, sadness goes up by about .6 points. In relationships component of the Queer Count, for every point that it goes up, sadness goes up by 1.7 points. Thus, there is a significant relationship between sadness and queerness, especially in terms of the criterion of relationships. It seems likely that the sadness measured is related to that certain type of emotional depth that fangirls seek. An example of the relationship between sadness and slash can be seen in the comment on the MCU fic "Four or Five Reasons for Kidnapping Tony Stark": "I was fucking crying in the fucking laundry room. And it is YOUR FAULT. YOU. YOU HAVE TURNED ME INTO A SLASH SHIPPER." Here, although there are multiple expressions of negativity (crying, fault) it is still clear to a trained fan's eye that this comment is not expressing sadness but gratitude for the emotions they experienced.

I tried to differentiate between "literal" sadness and the feeling of "bittersweet," that is to say, when a fan feels a generally negatively connotated emotion, but the intensity or depth of that emotional experience gives them some sort pleasure. Sometimes it was easy, as when a fan said something like, "I'm crying so much, thank you for this!" which is clear evidence of enjoyment of the emotion they're feeling, despite it being apparently negative. But at other times it was impossible to tell these reactions apart, because even within the context of the fic I couldn't conclusively determine the layered nature of a reaction, in which case, I generally would categorize it under the most explicitly expressed emotion. Thus, many comments were categorized under sadness when they may indeed have been expressions of more complex emotions.

These results, which indicate that a higher Queer Count causes higher counts of sadness, are fascinating, if somewhat unexpected. I say somewhat, because it *is* known among fans that sadness is integral to the fannish experience. There's the sadness of a favorite show being cancelled, of a beloved character dying, and of course, of a tragic fic that moves you to genuine tears. One fan notes that "[o]ne of my favourite things is finding a fanfic, and getting so invested in the characters. I feel so *much* for them, their anger, and sadness and fear, and it **destroys** me. I'll cry, and laugh, and yell, and hide behind my hands. But I LOVE that feeling of finding an author who can make me feel like I'm right there with them..." (lilragekitten 2015). Thus, the pleasure fans find in sharing the sadness and reveling in the intensity of the emotion is significant, and worthy of further study.

I would caution that, despite these results, it is not clear that queerer fics make fans sadder; I would argue that a more complex relationship exists there. Considering how much fans dislike common TV and movie tropes of relegating LGBT characters to storylines of death and suffering without the hope of a happy ending, it seems questionable that fans would willingly replicate these tropes in their fic (Amy 2016; Ainara 2016). It is possible that fans have unconsciously internalized these tropes to some extent, and they've surfaced in their fics. Or, my own measurements could have been similarly biased, for

example, I included in the Queer Count under sexual politics such things as the characters struggling to overcome homophobia. Thus, there would result a correlation between higher levels of queerness and sadness, because they were both measuring the same thing: the homophobia (which generally resulted in sadness.) It is also possible that the sample size of my fics was too small, as only thirty stories were used. One of the those stories was the famous Supernatural epic “Twist and Shout” which is widely known in fandom, and acknowledged to be a complete heart-breaker of a story (it is the only story analyzed which makes use of the standard AO3 warning for “Major Character Death.”) It is possible that this story, which supplied almost half of the responses for sadness, skewed these relationships. All of these caveats and possibilities are not meant to discount these results entirely, but merely to point out that the nature of the relationship between sadness and queerness in fic requires further study.

The only other reaction which was significantly correlated with the queer count is sexual response, which is specifically correlated with “relationships.” For every point relationships goes up, sexual response increases by about 2.36 points. This correlation is also likely due to measuring the same aspect of a fic: the relationships component was partially determined by the level of explicitness of the fic, and sexual response is fans remarking on their arousal from the fic’s sexual content. Thus, they’re both reactions to the same elements, so their correlation is to be expected. But, it is also worthwhile to note that there is a societal issue in which queer relationships are considered more “adult” than heterosexual relationships; and, there’s the issue of accusations of “straight” female fans supposedly fetishizing gay men. So, it is possible that the queerer the fics are, the more there was a sexual response, because of these unfortunate reasons.

Overall, the relationships component of the Queer Count accounted for most of the correlative strength between variables, as the components of gender roles, sexual politics, and canon/fanon had no significant correlations. I would theorize that these categories were perhaps either too infrequently occurring or too loosely defined to elicit significant results.

Thus, my final hypothesis was not supported by my data, as happiness was not significantly related to the Queer Count or any of its components. It appears that, within this already *very* innately queer world, being a bit less or a bit more queer isn’t significant in terms of joy, or most emotions.

In addition to this data’s insight into relationships between queerness levels and emotion, it also begins to sketch out some of the relationships *between* the emotions expressed in a reaction to a fic.

## 2. *Correlations among Emotions*

The benefit of performing these regressions while including all of the emotional categories is that correlations between the emotional reactions could begin to emerge.

Happiness is significantly correlated with both gratitude and sadness. For every point gratitude goes up, happiness increases by more than one and a half points. This is seen in four of the five regressions performed on happiness. Thus, there is a significant relationship between how happy a fic made a fan,

and how much gratitude they expressed. Additionally, happiness had a fairly significant negative correlation to sadness. For every point sadness went up, happiness went down about a point. (This makes a sort of basic sense considering that these emotions are usually considered to be inverses of one another, and so it is logical that an increase in one would mean a decrease in the other.)

Laughter was correlated with empathy in one regression: for every point that empathy went up, laughter increased by 2.6 points. However, empathy had a very small number of data points to begin with, so the relationship should be considered with a grain of salt.

Sadness was, as mentioned before, correlated with the queer count and happiness. Additionally, it is related to bittersweet, with a point increase in bittersweet leading to about a .7 point increase in sadness. The existence of this relationship is likely related to the fact that sadness and bittersweet were difficult to distinguish from each other in my analysis of the comments, since they were both related to expressing sadness, but with bittersweet having the caveat of an explicit notation of enjoying the feeling.

As previously noted, sexual response is correlated with relationships. It is also negatively correlated with gratitude, so that for every point sexual response goes up, gratitude goes down .8 points. Does this mean fic readers are less grateful for sexually explicit fics? Or, do fans experience social anxiety commenting on fics which elicit a sexual response, and so leave fewer thanks? Or, if they express a sexual response, do they consider that a substitute for gratitude? There are many possibilities to explain this rather unexpected correlation.

In all five regressions on anticipation, it is correlated with surprise and frustration. However, as there were only three instances of surprise in all 600 comments analyzed, it is not clear that this relationship is truly significant. Frustration had 25 instances, so its correlation is perhaps more reliable. The linkage of anticipation and frustration follows logically, as both frequently have to do with an element of waiting, whether its eager anticipation for or being frustrated with the wait for a chapter.

Overall, the sample size wasn't large enough to draw concrete conclusions, but this data shows some interesting patterns, for example, the relationship between gratitude and happiness. These two were the most common responses overall, *and* they're correlated with each other. When fics make fans happy, they express their thanks at higher rates. Does this mean that overall, fans enjoy the fics that make them happy more than fics that, say, make them sad, or make them laugh? It is possible, but to make such a statement, one would have to tease out the *reasons* for this happiness, of which there are many possibilities: taking pleasure in intertextuality, enjoying spending more time in a favorite fictional universe, happiness at well-written prose, happiness resulting from a different emotion such as laughter or sexual response, etc.

## **VI. Conclusion**

That special something that makes fans love fic so very much is still elusive, largely because it is not just one thing, for any one fan. However, this data offered some intriguing ideas to consider, especially in

terms of the feeling of “bittersweet,” or sadness that gives the reader pleasure, which seems to be related to queerness. And although queerness may not have been statistically related to fans’ happiness responses to fic in this data, it is still a significant aspect of the world of fanfiction.

In continuing this study of the queerness of fics and the emotional content of comments, I would fine-tune and adjust several of my measurements. For example, I would work to clarify some of the different forms of happiness: perhaps separating love for a fic from praise for a fic, or not counting some of these responses as happiness reactions at all. Similarly, the queer count definitions should be more rigorously defined, and adjusted. For example, the “canon/fanon” category, while valuable for noting subversion of normativity between the texts, may not be specifically queer enough to be included in the count.

The questions asked here beget more questions, which could be addressed by making use of the massive amounts of metadata collected by AO3. For example, do people leave more comments or kudos on fics that are more queer? Are queerer fics longer or shorter than other fics? Do more queer fics have higher ratings (i.e. are they more explicit) than less queer fics? More generally, discussing the queerness of fics raises questions about the history of sexuality and fic. Has the queerness of fics changed over time, and how? Are fics today more politically aware, or less, or about the same, as those from five or ten years ago? Have gender and sexual roles expanded in the world of fic to escape gender binaries and misconceptions about what it means to be gay or bisexual?

The importance of the queerness of this community/culture/collection should not be understated. The world of fanfic is a world that cherishes rampant, unapologetic, kinky, loving, imaginative, subversive *queerness*. In an academic sense, fandom is a community which offers a case study of what happens when a largely female and very queer group of creative minds get together and set themselves loose in the playground of our popular culture. It is proof that audiences can be active, that the creators of content do not have the last word on what their media products can signify, and that there is more meaning in popular media texts than many want to credit them with. Fandom gives us a window into what is not a queer utopia (because fans are people, and people aren’t perfect) but a very real possibility of what a world that embraces the queerness in all of us could look like – and it looks like a pretty happy place.



## **Appendix A: Glossary**

**Canon and Fanon:** “To understand fanfiction, one must understand the canon and the fanon it’s built on. The *canon* of a fandom’s fanworks can be defined as ‘the events presented in the media source that provide the universe, settings, and characters’ (Hellekson & Busse 2006, 9). For example, part of the canon of *Star Trek: The Original Series* is that Captain James T. Kirk is captain of the starship Enterprise, with Spock as his first officer.

The *fanon* is ‘the events created by the fan community in a particular fandom and repeated pervasively throughout the fantext...particular details or character readings’ (Hellekson & Busse 2006, 9). Part of the fanon of the Star Trek slash fandom, for example, is that Kirk and Spock are, in one way or another, in love. For fans, the canon is always filtered through the fanon, and fanon is always a work in progress” (Riley 2015).

**AO3 & OTW:** The Organization for Transformative Works (abbreviated OTW) is the larger parent organization of Archive of Our Own (AO3), which “is an online archive for fanworks, where anyone can sign up and then post fanfic (and vids, and art, and virtually any other fanworks) for free. The site is a non-profit, created and run by fans, ‘dedicated to providing access to and preserving the history of fanworks and fan culture’ (Coppa 2013, 306)” (Riley 2015).

**Ship:** “A ‘ship,’ short for relationship, is a word indicating the emotional/romantic/sexual pairing of two characters; for example, the characters Dean Winchester and Castiel from the TV show *Supernatural* are often paired in the ship called ‘Destiel.’ These ships are very often not canon relationships, but fan constructions of what could be between two characters. In the Destiel example, the characters share a strong bond of friendship, and fans note a great deal of homosexual subtext to their interactions, but they are not a couple canonically. Ship can be a noun or a verb, as in ‘Destiel is my favorite ship’ or ‘I ship Destiel so much’” (Riley 2015).

**Slash/het/gen:** “These are some of the most common types of fanfic. ‘Slash’ fic means that the two characters paired in the fic are male, thus, it is male/male (ex. Dean/Castiel.) ‘Het,’ short for heterosexual, fic involves a heterosexual pairing (ex. Clint Barton/Natasha Romanov from the Marvel comic and movie universe). ‘Gen,’ short for general, fic doesn’t center on a romantic or sexual pairing. This type of fic may revolve around a mystery or case for the characters to solve, it could be a character study, or essentially any story where a ship isn’t the focus of it” (Riley 2015).

**AU:** “‘AU’ is short for ‘Alternate Universe.’ This is a kind of fic where the story doesn’t take place in the usually setting or canon, and/or the characters play different roles. For example, a *Sherlock* ‘cops and robbers’ AU could, instead of portraying Sherlock as a consulting detective and Watson as his trusty sidekick as the BBC TV show does, have Sherlock as a criminal mastermind and Watson as the police detective trying to hunt him down. Other AUs can be much more fantastic, such as a mermaid AU (i.e. all or some of the characters are mermaids), or take the characters down to a more ordinary level, like in the very common Coffee Shop AU (where much of the drama takes place in a coffee shop, centering on the central pairing’s chance encounter there, usually with one of the characters as a barista, and the other as a loyal customer.)” (Riley 2015).

## ***Appendix B: Emotional Response Definitions & Examples***

All of the following examples come from the sample of fic comments used in this project.

**Happiness:** joy, gladness, love, pleasure, “squee,” satisfaction, happy emoticons, praise or admiration

"I can barely remember the last time a fic had me speechless, gasping and making me squee in delight..."

**Laughter:** finding something funny, hilarious, evoking of laughter

"Legit laughed loudly at Steve fondling vegetables and fruit. Oh, god, such laughing. This should be a movie, I swear."

**Surprise:** expressing surprise or shock, often at a turn the story took, or at the way it ended

"Bucky playing the piano was such a surprise."

**Sadness:** feeling sorrow, loss, depression, heartbreak

"I've been crying for the past four hours this was the most beautiful and heart wrenching thing I have ever read."

**Anticipation:** excitement, eagerness, hope for more, looking forward to what may happen next and/or to updates

"Can't wait for more! :)"

**Bittersweet:** pleasure from sharing the sadness; usually involving an expression of sadness or hurt but with an explicit note that they enjoy or appreciate this feeling

"You are cruel and I love it. <3"

**Sexual Response:** noting a sexual response in the form of arousal or attraction

"And also this story is so fucking hot like \*shudders\* some of the best smutty stuff I've read."

**Empathy:** feeling a connection to or sympathy for the characters

"They both need hugs, but especially Harry...Poor Harry. Poor Draco."

**Gratitude:** feeling thankful for the story, for a certain line, etc.

"Thank you for sharing with all of us your incredible ability!"

**Community:** noting a feeling of connection to, or gratitude for, the fan community

"Thank you so much for giving fandom this."

**Frustration:** usually with the characters and their actions, or with having to wait for updates to the fic

"This was awesome, yet every Tuesday i wanna pull my hair out in frustration when it ends and I'm like "i have to wait another week!""

**Disgust:** revulsion, disapproval, dislike of something

No examples of this were found in the sample, but such a comment would likely include something along the lines of "this is gross" or "why would you bother writing this"

**Anger:** annoyed, hostile, expressions of non-slang, non-hyperbolic hatred; often directed at antagonistic characters, not the author

"hate Draco's father"

**Fear:** scared of what might happen next or what the characters will experience, or afraid that the author may never update the fic again

"But then I was afraid of the drama, of Tony not going back..."

### **Appendix C: Fic Sample**

The following is a list of the fics, by fandom, used in the sample, with author usernames and links to the works.

#### **Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU)**

1. "Mistake on the Part of Nature" by idiopathicsmile. <http://archiveofourown.org/works/1488142>
2. "you were standing there" by thebrotherswinchester. <http://archiveofourown.org/works/1665494>
3. "The Twice-Told Tale" by arysteia. <http://archiveofourown.org/works/411599>
4. "The man on the bridge" by boopboop. <http://archiveofourown.org/works/1434274>
5. "this city bleeds its aching heart" by Renne. <http://archiveofourown.org/works/835829>
6. "young hearts, out our minds" by junko (orphan\_account).  
<http://archiveofourown.org/works/1440232>
7. "Four (Or Five) Reasons for Kidnapping Tony Stark" by scifigr47.  
<http://archiveofourown.org/works/391599>
8. "United States v. Barnes, 617 F. Supp. 2d 143 (D.D.C. 2015)" by fallingvoices and radialarch.  
<http://archiveofourown.org/works/2304905>
9. "Steve Rogers at 100: Celebrating Captain America on Film" by eleveninches, Febricant, hellotailor, M\_Leigh, neenya, and tigrmilk. <http://archiveofourown.org/works/1599293>
10. "night light" by thebrotherswinchester. <http://archiveofourown.org/works/1803658>

#### **Supernatural (SPN)**

1. "Twist and Shout" by gabriel and standbyme. <http://archiveofourown.org/works/537876>
2. "Dean Doesn't Listen to Eurythmics" by Annie D (Scaramouche).  
<http://archiveofourown.org/works/74460>
3. "The Girlfriend Experience" by rageprufrock. <http://archiveofourown.org/works/91894>
4. "An Exercise In 'Worthless'" by beastofthesky. <http://archiveofourown.org/works/535676>
5. "Angel's Wild" by LimonadeGaby and riseofthefallenone. <http://archiveofourown.org/works/775515>
6. "Into Your Hideaway" by the pinupchemist. <http://archiveofourown.org/works/1069692>
7. "How (thanks to Gabriel) Dean and Castiel (accidentally) raised each other (and Sam)." by Vera (Vera\_DragonMuse). <http://archiveofourown.org/works/540915>
8. "Revealed" by Valinde (Valyria). <http://archiveofourown.org/works/1085028>

9. "Out of the Deep" by riseofthefallenone. <http://archiveofourown.org/works/548878>
10. "A Room Of One's Own" by NorthernSparrow. <http://archiveofourown.org/works/1417834>

### **Harry Potter (HP)**

1. "Then Comes a Mist and a Weeping Rain" by Faith Wood (faithwood).  
<http://archiveofourown.org/works/234222>
2. "Storm in a Teacup" by Faith Wood (faithwood). <http://archiveofourown.org/works/485218>
3. "Text Talk" by merlywhirls. <http://archiveofourown.org/works/1651109>
4. "An Issue of Consequence" by Faith Wood (faithwood). <http://archiveofourown.org/works/1439476>
5. "Dangerous" by Faith Wood (faithwood). <http://archiveofourown.org/works/1704125>
6. "The Electric Fizzing Prick Pistols, or Whatever" by whitmans\_kiss.  
<http://archiveofourown.org/works/1319809>
7. "Azoth" by zeitgeistic (faire\_weather). <http://archiveofourown.org/works/1049966>
8. "The Standard You Walk Past" by bafflinghaze. <http://archiveofourown.org/works/3101099>
9. "Tea and No Sympathy" by who\_la\_hoop. <http://archiveofourown.org/works/2734082>
10. "Right Hand Red" by lumosed\_quill. <http://archiveofourown.org/works/3178065/chapters/6903855>

### Appendix D: Regression Data

The leftmost column indicates the emotion (i.e. the dependent variable) that was regressed on the other emotions plus an aspect of or the total Queer Count. The abbreviation “E” is used to indicate the emotions other than the one currently under inspection, “QCT” stands for Queer Count Total, “rel” means relationships, “gender” means gender roles, “pol” means sexual politics, and “canon” means canon/fanon. So, for example, “Happiness + E + QCT” indicates that happiness was regressed on the other thirteen emotions plus the total Queer Count.

The significant variable column indicates which results were statistically significant (that is, variables which had a p-value of less than .05.) For example, “Laughter + E + gender” was significantly correlated with empathy. Also included are the coefficients and upper and lower confidence levels; for example, “Sadness + E + rel” was correlated with relationships, such that for every point relationships went up, sadness went up by 1.7 points, or it went up by at least .18 points and at most 3.3 points.

Regressed emotion	Significant variable	Coefficients	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%
Happiness + E + QCT	<b>Gratitude</b>	1.627200776	0.0341766	0.138695578	3.115705974
Happiness + E + rel	<b>Sadness</b>	-1.425438024	0.01394514	-2.517378458	-0.333497591
Happiness + E + gender	<b>Gratitude</b>	1.701745191	0.01661832	0.355945509	3.047544874
Happiness + E + pol	<b>Sadness</b>	-1.099181255	0.04253351	-2.156185998	-0.042176512
	<b>Gratitude</b>	1.741078017	0.01670378	0.362863972	3.119292063
Happiness + E + canon	<b>Gratitude</b>	1.687782578	0.01577799	0.36571187	3.009853286
Laughter + E + gender	<b>Empathy</b>	2.597783087	0.04851342	0.019293946	5.176272228
Sadness + E + QCT	<b>Bittersweet</b>	0.702524793	0.00071316	0.349353922	1.055695664
	<b>Queer count</b>	0.600961655	0.02256567	0.097001942	1.104921368
Sadness + E + rel	<b>Happiness</b>	-0.237740996	0.01315361	-0.417983271	-0.057498721
	<b>Bittersweet</b>	0.771533856	0.0003843	0.40999362	1.133074092
	<b>Relationships</b>	1.717343456	0.03094811	0.180036609	3.254650304
Sadness + E + gender	<b>Happiness</b>	-0.207487422	0.04813795	-0.413041378	-0.001933466
	<b>Bittersweet</b>	0.769487604	0.00119801	0.357795874	1.181179333
Sadness + E + pol	<b>Happiness</b>	-0.22445078	0.04077219	-0.438160312	-0.010741248
	<b>Bittersweet</b>	0.692181679	0.004138	0.255467634	1.128895724
Gratitude + E + QCT	<b>Happiness</b>	0.158732611	0.0315125	0.016085293	0.301379928
	<b>Anticipation</b>	0.796961099	0.03795951	0.050535575	1.543386624
Gratitude + E + rel	<b>Anticipation</b>	0.884132104	0.02607744	0.120707732	1.647556476
	<b>Sexual</b>	-0.311578043	0.02900092	-0.586650044	-0.036506042

	<b>Response</b>				
	<b>Happiness</b>	0.188838172	0.01033234	0.051495453	0.32618089
Gratitude + E + gender	<b>Happiness</b>	0.187150275	0.01459035	0.042619553	0.331680997
Gratitude + E + pol	<b>Happiness</b>	0.187150275	0.01459035	0.042619553	0.331680997
Gratitude + E + canon	<b>Happiness</b>	0.191374521	0.00836838	0.056939801	0.32580924
Sex resp + E + rel	<b>Gratitude</b>	-0.814554052	0.03920538	-1.583122238	-0.045985867
	<b>Relationships</b>	2.363504666	0.02488384	0.342154987	4.384854345
Bittersweet + E + QCT	<b>Sadness</b>	0.770671814	0.00051676	0.397354497	1.143989131
Bittersweet + E + rel	<b>Sadness</b>	0.742640318	0.00036527	0.396584576	1.088696061
Bittersweet + E + gender	<b>Sadness</b>	0.653227128	0.00117593	0.304537083	1.001917173
Bittersweet + E + pol	<b>Sadness</b>	0.617221847	0.00347919	0.237305525	0.99713817
Bittersweet + E + canon	<b>Sadness</b>	0.669654148	0.00116282	0.312688262	1.026620034
Anticipation + E + QCT	<b>Gratitude</b>	0.30462072	0.04445378	0.008600437	0.600641004
	<b>Surprise</b>	3.096728357	0.0002619	1.704921335	4.488535379
	<b>Frustration</b>	0.813310876	9.2268E-05	0.485072876	1.141548876
Anticipation + E + rel	<b>Gratitude</b>	0.296661371	0.03554569	0.022904108	0.570418634
	<b>Surprise</b>	3.100551248	0.00010465	1.83338424	4.367718257
	<b>Frustration</b>	0.792253295	6.6463E-05	0.482680666	1.101825924
Anticipation + E + gender	<b>Surprise</b>	2.804528779	0.00070862	1.395697398	4.21336016
	<b>Frustration</b>	0.801604685	0.00021548	0.448727603	1.154481767
Anticipation + E + pol	<b>Surprise</b>	2.777601216	0.00046469	1.448161401	4.107041031
	<b>Frustration</b>	0.770983985	0.00028994	0.420656454	1.121311516
Anticipation + E + canon	<b>Surprise</b>	3.199002239	0.00012936	1.8632863	4.534718178
	<b>Frustration</b>	0.859571982	4.4195E-05	0.536643509	1.182500455
Empathy + E + QCT	<b>Surprise</b>	1.466409038	0.04492515	0.037797151	2.895020925
	<b>Laughter</b>	0.090036005	0.04419378	0.002664532	0.177407477
	<b>Frustration</b>	0.401554064	0.02806286	0.049495476	0.753612651
Empathy + E + rel	<b>Laughter</b>	0.094899863	0.04432863	0.002741454	0.187058272
	<b>Frustration</b>	0.412043785	0.03222304	0.039958572	0.784128998
Empathy + E + gender	<b>Laughter</b>	0.090384878	0.03790711	0.00575799	0.175011765
	<b>Surprise</b>	1.333121474	0.03671515	0.093941402	2.572301546
	<b>Frustration</b>	0.373704317	0.02918159	0.043350875	0.704057758
Empathy + E + pol	<b>Frustration</b>	0.354064828	0.05375123	-0.006492363	0.714622019

Empathy + E + canon	<b>Surprise</b>	1.683226234	0.02957182	0.191056849	3.17539562
	<b>Frustration</b>	0.457259764	0.02143855	0.077665308	0.83685422
<hr/>					
Frustration + E + QCT	<b>Empathy</b>	0.597311524	0.02568478	0.083154265	1.111468783
	<b>Anticipation</b>	0.799449329	2.3893E-05	0.515921773	1.082976884
	<b>Surprise</b>	-2.791863523	0.00054587	-4.152711862	-1.431015183
Frustration + E + rel	<b>Empathy</b>	0.595578585	0.03768136	0.038699474	1.152457695
	<b>Anticipation</b>	0.839071503	4.8008E-05	0.521345201	1.156797805
	<b>Surprise</b>	-2.852637915	0.00090907	-4.328505075	-1.376770756
Frustration + E + gender	<b>Empathy</b>	0.685245513	0.02597919	0.094013735	1.276477291
	<b>Anticipation</b>	0.74643267	0.00012109	0.436849215	1.056016124
	<b>Surprise</b>	-2.553494275	0.00114695	-3.912363824	-1.194624725
Frustration + E + pol	<b>Empathy</b>	0.602202191	0.0459452	0.012342431	1.192061951
	<b>Anticipation</b>	0.771214801	0.00014039	0.446500134	1.095929468
	<b>Surprise</b>	-2.441989957	0.00211903	-3.846993742	-1.036986173
Frustration + E + canon	<b>Empathy</b>	0.641020057	0.01912017	0.120535211	1.161504904
	<b>Anticipation</b>	0.790416265	2.7381E-05	0.506536838	1.074295692
	<b>Surprise</b>	-2.887942708	0.00034809	-4.226562437	-1.549322979
<hr/>					
Community	No significant findings				



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