

Fandom:

A Study of the Fan Community Through the  
Subcultures of Fan Fiction, Fan Art, & Cosplay

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### Abstract

The fandom community is a multifaceted global community that is brought together by fans shared interests in books, television shows, Japanese cartoons (anime) and comics (manga), and films. The purpose of this paper is to discuss three different subcultures within the fandom community: fan fiction (stories written about pre-existing characters by fans. See also: fan fic or fic), fan art (art that displays characters from pre-existing media such as books, films, and television shows), and cosplay (a hybridization of the terms “costume” and “play” where people dress up as their favorite characters from pre-existing media). The paper discusses how these three subcultures communicate, collaborate, and share thoughts, ideas, and opinions within their communities. This paper explores how people in the fandom community find out more information to create their stories, art, and costumes and what kinds of technology they use to access this information. Though fandom is a global community that has no set age, gender, ethnicity, location, time zone, or socioeconomic background there are relatively few research-based sources of information that fans can use to learn more about their community or subculture. This paper illustrates the kinds of research-based information available to the fandom community and will also compare what community-based resources are available to give a scope for what possible ways academics could evaluate and study in the fandom community.

*Keywords:* fandom, community, information community, subculture, fan fiction, fan fic, fic, fan art, cosplay, costume play, information seeking behavior, research-based, community-based, emerging technologies, social media, collaboration, sharing, communication, global, anime, manga, fans

## Introduction

The term, “fandom” as described in the Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication is, “an interpretive community consisting of dedicated followers of any cultural phenomenon, such as a television series or serial or a particular film genre or film star.” and as, “an interconnected social network of such subcultural communities” (2014). Fandom had begun its life as a small and tight-knit community but now includes people from all parts of the world, of all ethnicities, genders, education levels, and socioeconomic backgrounds can connect with one another through the use of online spaces, emerging technologies, and at conventions to share thoughts, ideas, and collaborate with one another about specific characters, television shows, films, books, and more (Napier, 2006). Despite the global reach of this community, there is surprisingly little academic information about the fandom community. Many of the information that can be found about fandom and its various subcultures come from fan-based information sources rather than from research-based sources.

Fandom is far from a new concept so it is surprising that there is such a lack of research on fandom and many of its subcultures, especially since it appears that fandom is a global phenomenon many people participate in to some degree. Whether you’re a casual fan, someone that just observes the fandom community by reading fan fiction, appreciating fan art, or looks at images of cosplayers or you see yourself as a more advanced fan that must express themselves through the creation of new fan fiction, fan art, or cosplays it is important to quickly and efficiently find relevant information. Because fandom has many subcultures it becomes imperative to learn exactly what motivates fans that participate in different subcultures so

information professionals can better assist with finding relevant information for these community members. This paper will discuss how the fandom community collaborates, shares, and connects with other members in the community as well as how this global diversity can affect the community atmosphere through the lens of fan fiction, fan art, and cosplay subcultures.

### Literature Review

While researching information about the topic of fandom and how members of this community seek out information that best suits their needs it was discovered that there was a distinct difference in research depending upon where the resource came from. For example, in many of the scholarly articles on the topics of fan fiction, fan art, and cosplay, many of the authors focus their work on *how* fans seek out information and community from a larger group of people with similar interests. Manifold (2012) suggests fans may experience situations in life which resemble those situations faced by fictional characters. The fans' identification with characters then is expressed through art and mixed media.

Manifold discusses her findings based on research she has conducted over the years through interviews with adolescents (a majority of female subjects ranging anywhere from 12-18 years old) in classrooms, at conventions (comic book and anime-themed gatherings), and from observing behavior of adolescents. Much of Manifold's work explores how fans start creating fan art that is copied from an original work and explores how the fan artist's style begins to develop and evolve from just copying another's work to becoming the fan artist's stylized creation (Manifold, 2009).

Also related to the subculture of fan art is a study by a group of scholarly authors that explore how people come together to form what they refer to as, “visual culture learning communities” that allow people with varying degrees of artistic skill to communicate, collaborate, and offer feedback to help each other improve their craft and help each other to develop a social identity through meaningful personal expression (Freedman, Heijnen, Kallio-Tavin, Kárpáti, & Papp, 2013).

On the opposite side of the spectrum, articles that came from professional writing sources rather than scholarly ones focused mainly on *why* people within the fandom community come together and interact with one another. Most of the research for these articles are done during interviews at conventions and they focus on giving their readers a brief overview of the convention, maybe giving a definition of cosplay or fan art, and then dive right into what fans are doing and why. Myles (2014) interviewed several young men and women (ages 18+) at a local comic and entertainment expo about the characters they decided to cosplay and why they chose their specific characters. Many of the responses Myles received were about being able to immerse oneself into the character’s personality and being able to participate in a very open and welcoming community. During the article Myles even recognizes a subculture within the subculture of cosplay, but only mentions it for a brief moment and does not go into further detail about it. If this information was something discovered by one of the scholarly authors mentioned above there would be further studies conducted about this new subculture within a subculture.

The fandom community is still a relatively new community to be explored in academic circles which can make it difficult to find pertinent information concerning specific subcultures within the fandom community. Although there are many professional articles related to fandom,

many of them are still lacking an in-depth discussion of fandom and its subcultures. Many of these articles have conducted their research through online discussions and forums, in-person interviews during conventions, and through surveys of community members. However, it is important to note that many of the authors writing about this community are either members of the community themselves or they know someone personally that is part of the fandom community and so their views/findings may be biased. As more information is gathered about this community and more studies are performed by non-biased parties we will be able to gain better insight into the information seeking behavior and needs within the fandom community and its various subcultures.

### Methodology

Initially when I had set out to study an information community I was going to focus exclusively on the cosplay subculture. After trying to search through several databases to find scholarly articles about cosplay I quickly learned that I needed to broaden my focus to incorporate a wider audience, which lead me to begin searching for articles related to the fandom community. During this search I found some articles that focused on specific subcultures within the community such as: fan fiction, fan art, and cosplay. This initial search also helped me to understand some of the bigger themes academics are discussing such as participatory culture, global community, collaboration, and cultural diversity. Many of the academic articles were focused on how fans connected with one another (both in person at conventions and virtually through online spaces), shared their work, ideas, and opinions, and collaborated with one another despite time zones and cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

As I started to notice these themes of sharing, collaborating, and connecting in the academic articles about the fandom community I began to narrow my focus down to three different subcultures in the fandom community that I wanted to highlight here in my paper: fan fiction, fan art, and cosplay. These three subcultures are what many people would consider to be the big topics within fandom as a whole. Once I had narrowed my focus from fandom down to fan fiction, fan art, and cosplay I also began searching terms like, “adolescents”, “youth”, “fan culture”, “fan”, and “collaboration”. Being able to search for these terms individually or several at a time helped to weed out articles that were unrelated to the community topic but also helped to show a recurrent theme that many researchers are studying the way fandom can impact young people, most especially in how they identify themselves and interact with other people socially in virtual and real-life environments. Many of the scholarly and professional articles were found through Google Scholar and ProQuest databases.

In addition to finding scholarly and professional writings on the community, I also interviewed two young women about their experiences both participating and being members of fandom. One woman is an avid fan fiction reader and writer (Grimm) and has been participating in the fandom community for a number of years. The other woman is a spectacular cosplayer (Verse) that designs, creates, and models her own costumes based off of characters she loves or identifies with in some way. Through these interviews I was also able to discover some community-generated resources that both women use to connect, share, and collaborate with their fandom subcultures. These interviews were extremely helpful as they helped to confirm some of the themes discussed in the scholarly and professional articles concerning fandom collaboration, connection, and sharing.

## Discussion

## Fan Fiction

Fan fiction is the creation of stories by fans for fans that continue the adventures of characters that the fan loves. Typically, these stories are then uploaded to a website (such as fanfiction.net) where other fans from around the world can search through an extensive database on any type of story: romance, adventure, drama, etc. Other fans can also narrow their search for fan fiction by determining what characters, or even pairings of characters, they want to read about. It appears that a common trait in all three of these fandom subcultures is *repetition*. In the fan fiction community it presents itself most prominently in the form of *repetitive searching*.

Many times when starting out to write a fan fiction story fans will first locate a copy of the primary source (book, film, episode of television show, etc.) and will review that source over and over to get a better understanding of the characters and their motivations, as well as to remember key plot points or major moments for those characters so they can work those moments/events into a story the fan wants to create. In an article by Gutiérrez he talks about how fans will make “text-to-text connections” and “frequently display encyclopedic knowledge” (p. 230) of the primary source which can be seen in comments they make on blogs, discussion boards, and forums as well as in the stories they write. Gutiérrez goes on to say that, “an integral part of being a fan is finding out what the other fans think; at times, it’s as if the act of reading itself is not complete until one’s thoughts and questions can be aired, replied to, filtered, and probed by another fan” (p. 230). This act of sharing and communicating with a wider community is a common theme in much of the research on fandom.



In many cases for fan fiction writers the ability to share their work with others is one of the biggest motivators for why they create and publish their stories. Most fan fiction writers started off as readers of fan fiction first; as their needs for stories about their favorite characters or pairings grew it developed into a motivation for them to create their own work. Curwood explored this phenomenon by studying a group of fans on a variety of websites that are all about *The Hunger Games* series. Curwood learned that many fans were utilizing online spaces to communicate with one another and have in-depth discussions about *The Hunger Games* (2013). Curwood (2013) also explored how participating in these online communities helped the fans (mostly adolescents) build skills that they could use in the classroom such as: critical thinking/reading, analysis of text, and the ability to draw parallels between the source text and other texts. These “paratexts”, as Curwood calls them, are much like the text-to-text connections that Gutiérrez talks about as well. These text-to-text and paratexts connections can consist of constructing a story that utilizes information garnered from multiple media such as books, television shows, history, fan-constructed websites, Japanese manga and anime, and much more (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003). Many of these same points are brought up in my interview with a young woman who is also a fan fiction writer.

During my interview with Grimm I had asked her about how she starts to prepare to write a fan fic; specifically asking how she seeks out information about the characters she’s going to write about and perhaps where she gets her information about different settings or time periods. Grimm said that most of her inspiration will come from the primary source; she spoke about a *Robin Hood* television show that had aired on NBC a number of years ago and told me that after she bought the first season on DVD she was able to re-watch episodes as often and as many

times as she needed to in order to study the content. This repetitive watching helped to inspire her to write a fic about several characters and their adventures in Sherwood Forest. In addition to the primary source she also mentioned that she would watch documentaries about the legend of Robin Hood on the History channel as well as study books that examined the time period in which *Robin Hood* takes place (personal communication, April 2015).

All of these resources: primary source, secondary sources (documentaries, history books, websites, etc.) all helped to give Grimm enough material to develop and write her story which she then would publish online for the rest of the world to read and enjoy. One of the things Grimm mentioned during her interview was the need to hear back from other fans that read her work and enjoyed it or had feedback for. If any fans had ever contacted her regarding a story she had written, whether it was a comment left with the story or they had sought her out through social media like Twitter or her blog on Tumblr, she always made a point to reach out to the fan and thank them for their comments and support (personal communication, April 2015).

After a while the act of fan fiction writing became more about creating stories that others could enjoy and not just something that she could enjoy exclusively on her own. As more and more people began to notice her work, Grimm quickly began to make friends with fans who shared similar interests with her. This ability to connect and share with others is also noted in Curwood's work on online affinity spaces where she mentions that, "discussion boards offer an opportunity to build online friendships and social capital through off-topic exchanges" (p. 422). Creating and sharing fan fiction becomes a gateway to open one's self up to people from around the world who share similar interests and can help the individual grow both as a reader and a

writer through the sharing of other topics that may be of interest and also with the giving of feedback for something that a person has published online.

In addition, because of the global reach of the Internet it also helps to bring fandom to non-native English speakers and in turn can help them to not only participate from an entertainment standpoint, but can also help English language learners engage in peer review, collaborative writing, and discussion of composition & theme (Black, 2009), which can, in turn, help English language learners become better at learning and understanding the English language. This same need to comment, collaborate, and share creative works with other fans is also present in the fan art subculture of the fandom community.

### Fan Art

Like with fan fiction readers and writers, repetition also comes into play with fan artists. The most obvious way this presents itself is through the artists' method of drawing characters over and over again, usually copying directly from a primary source, until they feel they are familiar enough with drawing the character to start drawing their own stylized versions. Manifold has written several articles concerning fan art and how fan artists learn skills such as proportion, foreshortening, and shading when copying directly from the primary source. In an article Manifold wrote comparing amateur artists to artists with a studio-background she noted that "practice through repetitively copying source material...was described...as a fundamental way of understanding the basic composition and the conventions required of particular graphic narrative genres, styles of illustration, or characters from specific story phenomenon" (p. 42).

As fans become more comfortable with recreating their favorite characters they begin to explore ways of remixing the original work into something that is exclusively their own (Manifold, 2013). Fan artists will even begin to publish their work online on image sharing sites like deviantART.com; a quick search of the #anime (n.d.) tag pulls up over 1,000 different fan created images from different films, books, and television shows from people all over the world. Fans can even critique artwork by leaving comments on these different pieces of art. Just as fan fiction writers felt the need to share their work with others and gain feedback that could help them improve their skills fan artists want that same feedback.

These discussions amongst fans about artistic skill becomes a way for fans to gain “an informal type of education” (Freedman et. al., 2013, p. 104) where fans can mentor one another to help improve their artistic abilities. These mentorships can also lead to further friendships and relationships outside of the confines of the fan art subculture. As Brenner (2013) points out in her article on *Teen Literature and Fan Culture*, “fans learn to view what they love critically” (p. 36) which, in turn, assists both artist and critic in becoming better at their craft.

## Cosplay

Just as we saw in the fan fiction and fan art subcultures, cosplayers also have to have a lot of information available to them about the character(s) they plan on cosplaying. Hale defines cosplay as:

a portmanteau that joins the words ‘costume’ and ‘play’. The term describes a performative action in which one dons a costume and/or accessories and manipulates his or her posture, gesture, and language in order to generate meaningful correspondences

and contrasts between a given body and a set of texts from which it is modeled and made to relate (2014, p. 8)

Like fan fiction writers and fan artists, when cosplayers find a character that they love or can relate to they begin searching for any and all information about that character. Many times fans will re-watch episodes that show the character they intend to play (much like Grimm mentioned she had done when researching for her fan fiction stories), look at images of the character on the Internet from the original artist, look at fan art of that character, and will also examine the character's mannerisms to better understand and replicate that character later. In order for cosplayers to be successful they must have a keen eye for detail and be willing to spend an immeasurable amount of time (and money) researching their character and then creating the costume and props (Winge, 2006).

Once a fan has spent some time learning about their character and sketching up some designs for the costume and props their next step is usually to go online and start communicating with the cosplay community through forums and discussion boards (such as [cosplay.com](http://cosplay.com)) to talk about what materials might be suited for a particular character's costume. There are hundreds of tutorials online from everything to makeup and special effects, learning how to sew, and working with materials like latex and worbla to create props. The online cosplay community is "crucial... to the development of costuming skills" (Lamerichs, 2011, para. 2.2). Without the help of the online cosplay community it would become more difficult for fans to research their characters and learn skills they would need to bring those characters to life. Being a member of the cosplay community is to be a part of something that is bigger than oneself (Bartholemew, 2014), and that is clearly illustrated in my interview with a young woman cosplayer named Verse.

Verse has been cosplaying for a number of years now and has gone to a variety of comic and anime conventions in Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and New York. When asked what some of the steps she takes when in the research stage she listed off some of her “best practices”; such as re-watching episodes that feature the character she is going to cosplay, taking screenshots while she watches to try and capture views of the character from as many angles as possible, look up additional references on the Internet through various fandom subcultures, and posting on fan art websites and cosplay discussion boards (personal communication, April 2015). In some cases there can even be some online databases that render the character in three-dimensions where she can then manipulate the character (“sprite”) in any direction and at any angle.

Once she gets a good understanding of the character as a three-dimensional object she will begin to sketch out main components of the character (props, accessories, effects, etc.) to focus her creation on specific aspects of the costume. This repetition of character references and sketching out parts of the costume help Verse to figure out which parts of the costume are going to be more challenging to put together than others. Once all of her preliminary research is done then she will start to search online in cosplay discussion boards, forums, or even reach out to friends she has made through the cosplay community on social media to get tips, tricks, and even just brainstorm ways to find materials, build things, and put everything together in a way that best suits the character, but also makes it easier for the cosplayer to travel with the costume and props. Without the community aspect of cosplay it would have been a bit more challenging to find information for Verse to learn to sew, paint, work with prop-building materials, and connect with others to get some insight into what kind of skills would be best suited for specific cosplays.

## Relationship to Class Materials

Repetition has been a major factor in the gathering and seeking of information within the fandom community. In all three subcultures fans will seek out and find information about characters, settings, time periods, as well as find information about how to gain or enhance skills they may need in order to fully realize their passion for a particular character or series. In an article by Kulthau (1991) about information users and their information seeking behavior she mentions that the act of seeking out information is a way for a user to actively find meaning from information about his or her topic of choice. In all three subcultures of fandom there is a need to be able to find information through trusted primary and secondary sources in order to gain a better understanding of characters, settings, time periods, and what motivates different characters. All of these things, regardless of the subculture the user identifies with, are important when writing a story, creating art, and even making a costume.

All of this time and effort is spent in order for the user to gain skills that can be transferable in other parts of their life. The communities that people build in the fandom community, especially those in adolescence, help them to give feedback, foster mentorships between novices and experienced fans, and create a space that accepts the user for who he or she is. This participation in community leads to practices like observation, commentary, interaction, and creation (Harlan, Bruce, & Lupton, 2012), skills that are valued in life outside of the fandom community such as school, work, and our personal lives. As fans come together through discussion boards, forums, social media, and at live events like conventions they begin to build rapport with one another based off their similar interests. As discussions related to fandom

deepen and expand it begins to open the floor to discussion on topics unrelated to fandom like cultural interests, education, etc.

All three subcultures of fandom used the Internet to communicate and collaborate with other fans from around the world, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, educational level, and socioeconomic background. Especially with the graduation of the Internet from Web 1.0 (a much less interactive version of it's current state) to Web 2.0 there has been an explosion of collaboration amongst people from around the world, especially with the use of social media websites like Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook. Stephens (2006) defines Web 2.0 as "tools [that] offer a way to be open, share content...and engage others in building resources" (p. 12). Now the internet is all about sharing content, ideas, thoughts, opinions, with one another from the comfort of our own homes.

For the fandom community this ability to share and collaborate with others is key to the community's ability to grow, learn, and create content for others to admire, discuss, and learn from. In articles by Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, Brenner, and Black adolescents appear to be learning many of these skills outside of the classroom through the use of the fandom community, which is echoed in an article about creation culture by Chaplin (2012) where she states, "youth are best engaged when they're following their passions" (para. 1). For many students learning in the classroom environment is far different than what they learn while outside of school. These extracurricular activities of participating in the fandom community appear to be making a much bigger impact on the education of young people than what they get in the classroom. While this excellent news, some people argue that it is still important for educators to be able to direct students through the use of a set curriculum.



The fandom community has great merit for helping students that may not be as vocal in the classroom take a stand and have active online discussions, but in an article by Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel (n.d.) about teaching and learning they make the point that, “educators must work together to ensure that every American young person has access to the skills and experiences need to become a full participant” (p. 3). It is still important for students to be able to learn these skills in a classroom setting where they can be directed and guided by a teacher. Giving people (especially adolescents) the ability to learn and focus on things at their own pace is a wonderful way to participate in the online fandom community; however if the user has no other direction from an outside force it can be harder to draw parallels between things a user is learning for fun and things learned for school or work.

### Conclusion

In many ways the fandom community reflects much of what was read about in class concerning information communities and their information seeking behaviors and needs. Through my research it appears that many of the information needs fans have are met through the use of community-generated resources such as forums, discussion boards, and social media. There is still much work to be done in terms of academic resources available for fans to utilize. Though I did find some interesting research on the psychology of cosplay, it might be interesting to read some information on the history of fan fiction or fan art. There should be more studies done on the effects of fandom and participatory culture on students to discover if there is another way we could be utilizing fandom and popular culture in classrooms.

Many of the articles about this topic only focus on some specific fandom subcultures (like fan art and fan fiction) but it would be interesting to see some studies done over a period of

years and with a broader look at different fandom subcultures and how students participated both in the classroom and in an online environment with people both inside and outside of the classroom. I believe that as time goes on and as the Internet progresses in becoming a creation/collaboration/sharing space the skills users learn by participating in the fandom culture will assist them with skills they will need in their everyday lives. The ability to determine if a fan-created information source is reliable will be a major skill that can aid someone in having a more critical eye when reading or watching material released by the media. As more academic studies are created for the community of fandom I believe there will be a better understanding of the motivations, needs, and skills that can benefit both fans and non-fans alike.

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