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From the Editor's Desk

It has been a remarkable year as we transition from a world grappling with COVID to a Post-COVID world. Proper transitions occur only in a vortex of fresh ideas: a reevaluation of concepts like misinformation and LGBTQ Depictions in media. It is my pleasure to present you with the 22nd edition of Gnovis: a digitally enhanced, reader-centered, mobile-friendly, online-only version of the Journal. In this edition of Gnovis, you will read several provocative works that employ qualitative and quantitative research to interrogate established societal narratives and examine how they continue to evolve.

This year we have two major themes – misinformation and LGBTQ+ depictions in media, segregated by a distinctive paper on Corporate Social Responsibility in the 21st Century. In “Sharing (Mis)information,” Fan Wang from the University of Texas explores how misinformation gets disseminated through a complicated network of websites via users’ sharing behaviors. Megan Hearst, a graduate student at Georgetown University, dwells on how panic functions in the public sphere and the varied ways in which media systems can generate, yet curiously also put a stop to mass panic. A collaborative paper, “Content Analysis of CSR themes,” by Aaron Gong, Boyu Wang, Hao Shen,

and Nicholas Budler looks at a comparative analysis of more than 300 "Fortune 500" companies in Europe and Asia to explain to us what Corporate Social Responsibility has come to mean and how profits relate to sustainability. In response to the scarcity of literature on transgender representation in popular media, "Screaming at the Television" by Robin Calleja presents a discourse analysis on representations of cross-gender relationships in television. It shows how how communities engage to create a shared space for discussions. Furthering an exploration of LGBTQ+ studies, focusing on Queer representation is Maj Hardikar's "Fake People Kissing." It exposes a curious phenomenon called "queer-baiting," a form of intentional homoerotic engagement that never actually reaches its climax as a means of beguiling queer audiences.

The Gnovis team has worked around the clock with fourteen peer reviewers, five Professors, CCT staff members, and students to put together this particular edition. I would especially like to thank Andrew Peacock for his hard work in the layout process for the articles and maintaining constant communication with the authors to see the Journal through to its completion. Erika Heeren has been relentless in her efforts to launch the colloquium and provide the authors of this journal a platform to discourse on their ideas. I also extend my gratitude to Huseyn Panahov, managing editor, whose efforts to rebuild and maintain the Gnovis podcast and Gnovis website have re-established its sphere of influence again.

I would also like to thank the CCT faculty and staff, particularly Gnovis faculty advisor Dr. Matthew

Tinkcom, who provided invaluable support and advice to reinforce the rigorous standards that Gnovis has historically adhered to. Professor Paul Wang from the SCS has been a great mentor in the design process of the Journal, overseeing everything from proofing to layout to design strategy. Lastly, thank you, dearest reader; we hope the works in this Journal will inspire your research and interest in communication, culture, and technology.

Rohan Somji '22

Editor-in-Chief

Sharing (Mis)information: A Social Network Analysis of Vaccine-related URLs on Twitter during COVID-19

Fan Wang



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Abstract

Collecting 4,435 tweets with the hashtag vaccine from December 11 to December 14, 2020, this study investigates the main web domains people share on Twitter when talking about the COVID19 vaccine. Drawing a bipartite network graph with NodeXL Pro, the researcher applied a social network analysis and identified 29 of the most shared websites. The study found two misinformation websites attracting more sharing behaviors than some news agencies, such as usatoday.com and vox.com, and explored how users used the contents from the websites within their tweets. The findings provide insights on misinformation identification and management during a public health crisis.

Fan Wang is a graduate from Georgetown University 2020. She studies communication technology, focusing specifically on information dissemination.

Keywords: misinformation, sharing behavior, social network analysis, Twitter, vaccine

In February 2020 WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus declared the COVID-19 epidemic as an "infodemic" enemy (Zarocostas 2020). An increasing number of worldwide scholars have focused on the evolving state of the COVID-19 misinformation and provide insights for decreasing the spread of harmful information (Apuke and Omar 2020; Islam et al. 2020; Krause et al. 2020; Pennycook et al. 2020; Singh et al. 2020). Scholars have provided several solutions to tackle misinformation, such as providing timely and credible corrections, especially from related official organizations (van der Meer and Jin 2020; Vraga and Bode 2020b). As misinformation is rampant, it is urgent to find an efficient way to detect misinformation and websites sharing false information online.

This study identifies primary sources of (mis)information and investigates the vaccine information transmitted on Twitter during COVID-19. On December 16, 2020, Twitter announced to remove COVID-19 vaccine misinformation from the social media platform starting from early 2021 (Twitter Safety 2020). By looking at the websites people refer to in their tweets, the researcher found a few primary sources that people love to rely on to support their worldviews. This social network analysis validates fact-checking agencies' efforts to verify misinformation sites ("Coronavirus Misinformation Tracking Center" n.d.), and it provides insights into how social media websites, such as YouTube and Twitter, maybe hazardous venues for people to get and share (mis)information.

Literature Review

Definition of Misinformation

These days, People often hear the terms' misinformation and disinformation appearing in the media. The difference between the two words can understandably be confusing. Used as synonyms, misinformation and disinformation are distinguished from the intention: if the person shares the misleading information deliberately, the message is disinformation; if they send it unintentionally, it belongs to misinformation (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019).

In this paper, the researcher focuses on the macro-level definition of misinformation, which means inaccurate information (Southwell et al. 2019). No matter whether people call a piece of information fake news, misinformation, disinformation, or a rumor, the core of it is the use of inaccurate content without valid experts' perspectives or concrete evidence (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019; Vraga and Bode 2020a).

Misinformation in a Public Health Crisis

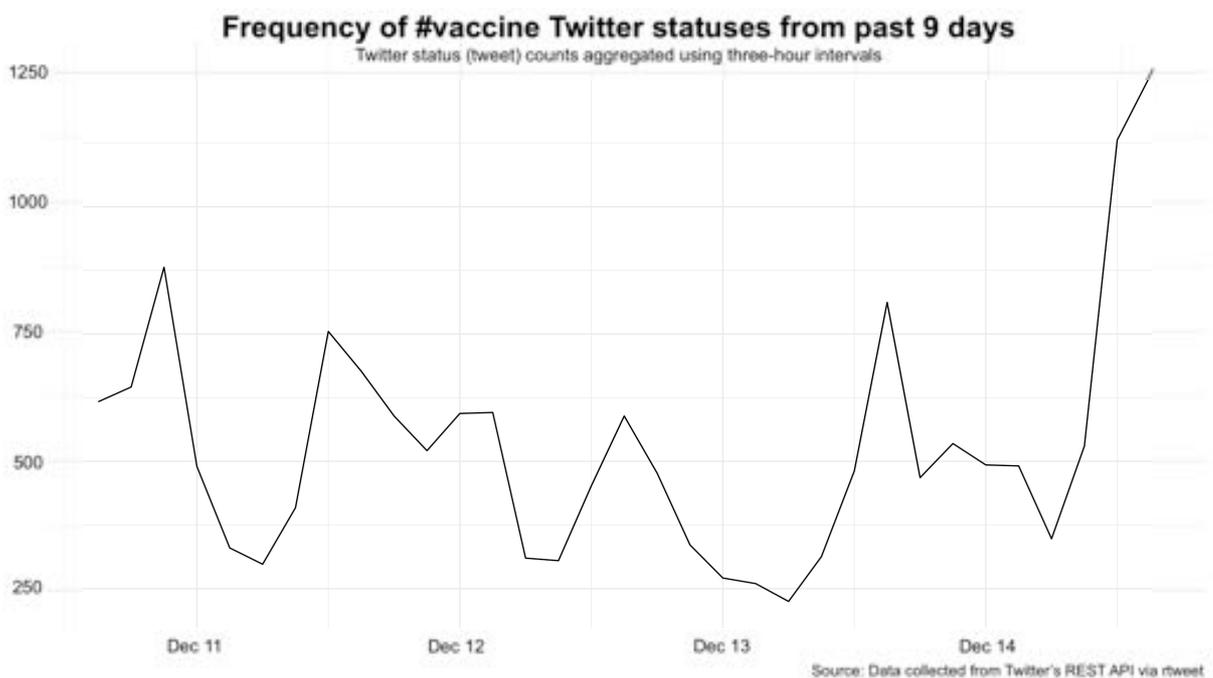
Scholars have already acknowledged that uncertainty in a crisis can create situations that lead to the spread misinformation (Liu et al. 2021). Health misinformation is ubiquitous on social media platforms (Nan, Wang, and Thier 2021; Tully, Bode, and Vraga 2020), and the damage could worsen during a public health crisis (Southwell et al. 2019). Take the context of this study, the COVID-19 vaccine misinformation, as an example. As one of the top hashtags in the coronavirus-related misinformation category (McGlashan et al. 2021), “#vaccine” has diminished the reliability of reasonable health care owing to conspiracy

theories (Sharma et al. 2020). Loomba et al. (2021) found that COVID-19 vaccine misinformation with science-like evidence can discourage the audience's vaccination intent. Populations with less knowledge of COVID-19 could be more vulnerable to relevant misinformation and more hesitant to consent to a potential vaccine (Dror et al. 2020).

Sharing Behavior and Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

People love to share views and information via social media. Scholars use the “Uses and Gratifications Theory” (UGT) to explain why people share certain information in computer-mediated communication (Ruggiero 2009). Looking at social media users' sharing behavior, scholars found that altruism was a strong motivation (Ma and Chan, 2014). To be entertained, pass the time, or control knowledge, people would like to share links to families, friends, and communities (Baek et al. 2011). Thompson, Wang, and

Figure 1.



Daya (2020) discovered that people seek gratification when sharing high-quality news. Sometimes, people just want to start a conversation or catch others' attention through sharing behaviors (Chen 2011; Chen et al. 2015).

However, not everyone is equipped with a good judgment to sift through misleading information. Pennycook et al. (2020) found that when people are reminded about the misinformation, their sharing behavior will decrease significantly, even if it is a tiny reminder. Therefore, social media platforms, organizations, and governments need to intervene in online misinformation sharing (Apuke and Omar, 2020).

Singh et al. (2020) used the Social Network Analysis to investigate the URLs related to COVID-19 on Twitter. They identified the connection between high-quality and low-quality sites in the media ecosystem. To provide more insights on vaccine-related topics on social media, the researcher asks the following research question:

RQ1: What primary sources would people like to share when talking about vaccines on Twitter?

RQ2: How do users apply the content in the shared links of misinformation with their own words on Twitter?

Methods

Data Collection

With Twitter API and the "retweet" package (Kearney 2019) in R language, this study collected 9,804 English tweets before cleaning the data, including the vaccine

hashtag (#vaccine) in a four-day frame, which covers from 00:00 December 11, 2020, EST to 23:59 December 14, 2020, EST. The reason for choosing this time frame

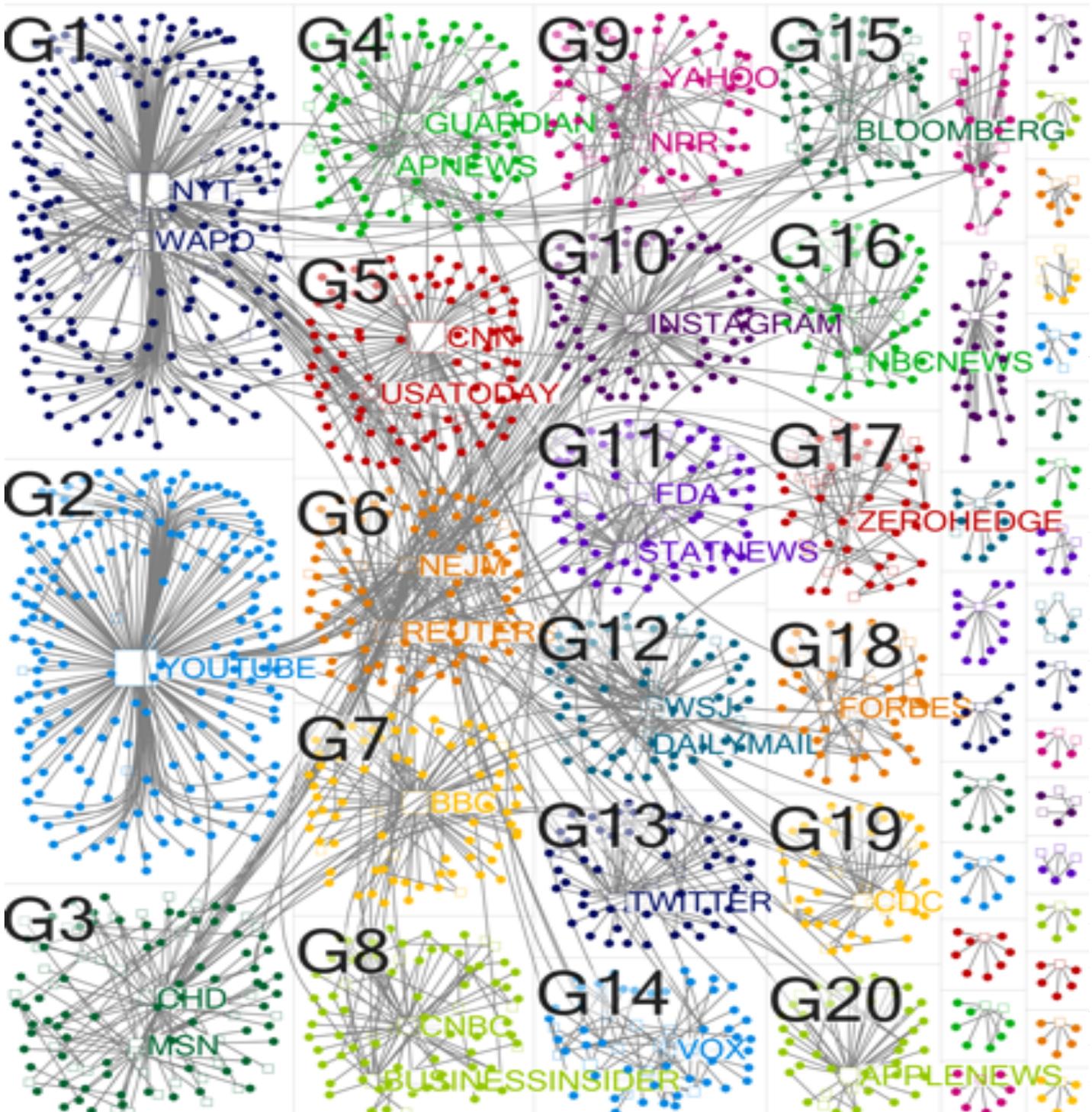
Expanded URL	Domain Name
https://www.washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/?next_url=https%3a%2f%2fwww.washingtonpost.com%2fworld%2f2020%2f12%2f10%2fvaccine-first-equally-netanyahu-keenan%2f%3futm_source%3drss%26utm_medium%3dreferral%26utm_campaign%3dwp_world&utm_source=rss&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=wp_world	washingtonpost.com
https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-12-10/australia-cancels-order-for-csl-vaccine-as-trial-stumbles	bloomberg.com
https://openthemagazine.com/essay/the-shape-of-covid/	openthemagazine.com
http://oxzgen.com/L372602	oxzgen.com
https://www.thekashmirmonitor.net/rich-countries-boarding-vaccines-india-can-only-cover-59-population-study/	thekashmirmonitor.net
http://Oigetit.com	orgetit.com
https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-12-11/U-S-FDA-panel-votes-in-favor-of-Pfizer-s-coronavirus-vaccine-W7NU089qso/index.html	news.cgtn.com
https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/refuse-this-vaccination-acclaimed-paris-doctor-unloads-on-covid-vaccine	lifesitenews.com

Table 1. Example Expanded URLs and Domain Names

is that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued emergency use authorization (EUA) for the first COVID-19 vaccine on December 11 (FDA 2020), and the CDC director signed the recommendation for the vaccine on December 13 (CDC 2020). The news could encourage people to comment more on the topic. A former study on the COVID-19 vaccine EUA showed that concerns about the rapid development of the vaccine could reduce people's willingness to get vaccinated (Guidry et al. 2021). Figure

1 above shows a peak on December 14, when people were using #vaccine on Twitter.

To figure out people's personal views on the topic, all the collected tweets are non-retweeted original messages and quote tweets that comment on others' tweets (Gadde and Beykpour 2020). To explore the URL sharing behavior in



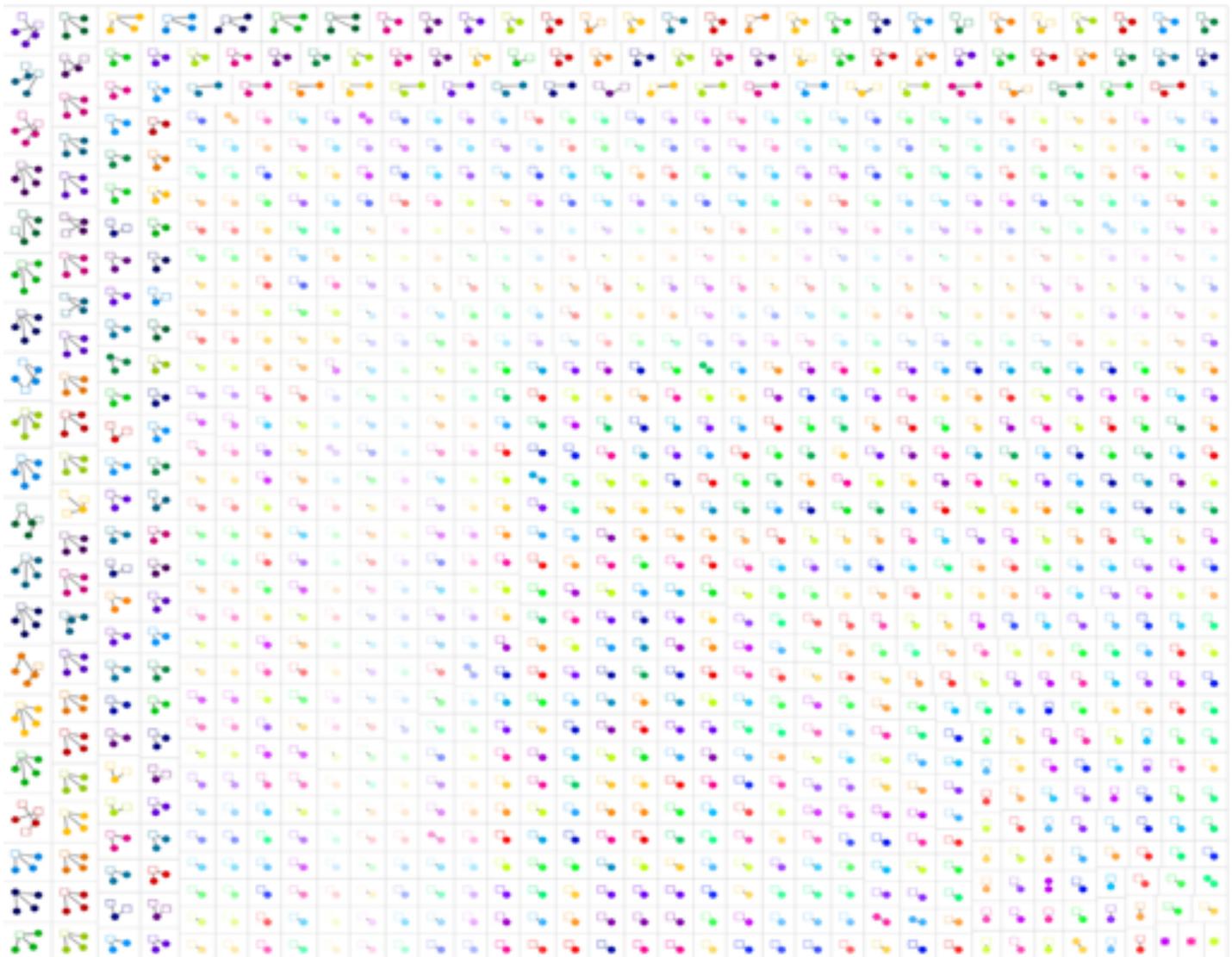
the tweets, the study deleted the tweets with no URLs. After the data cleaning process, the total amount of tweets used for this study is 4,435 messages.

Figure 2: Network Clusters; Legend:

Disk-Shape Node: Twitter User

Square-Shape Node: Website Domain Shared by the Twitter User

Edge (line between disks and squares): Sharing Behavior Linking the User and the Domain



The data variables are as follows: time, screen name, text, expanded URLs, and status URLs. The expanded URLs appearing in the tweets are the primary variable focused on in this study. To look at the URLs' primary sources, the researcher extracted the domain names from the links (See Table 1). For shortened URLs that used bit.ly and tinyurl.com, the researcher used a tool (Urlex.org) to expand the URLs and extract the domains from the original links.

Social Network Analysis (SNA)

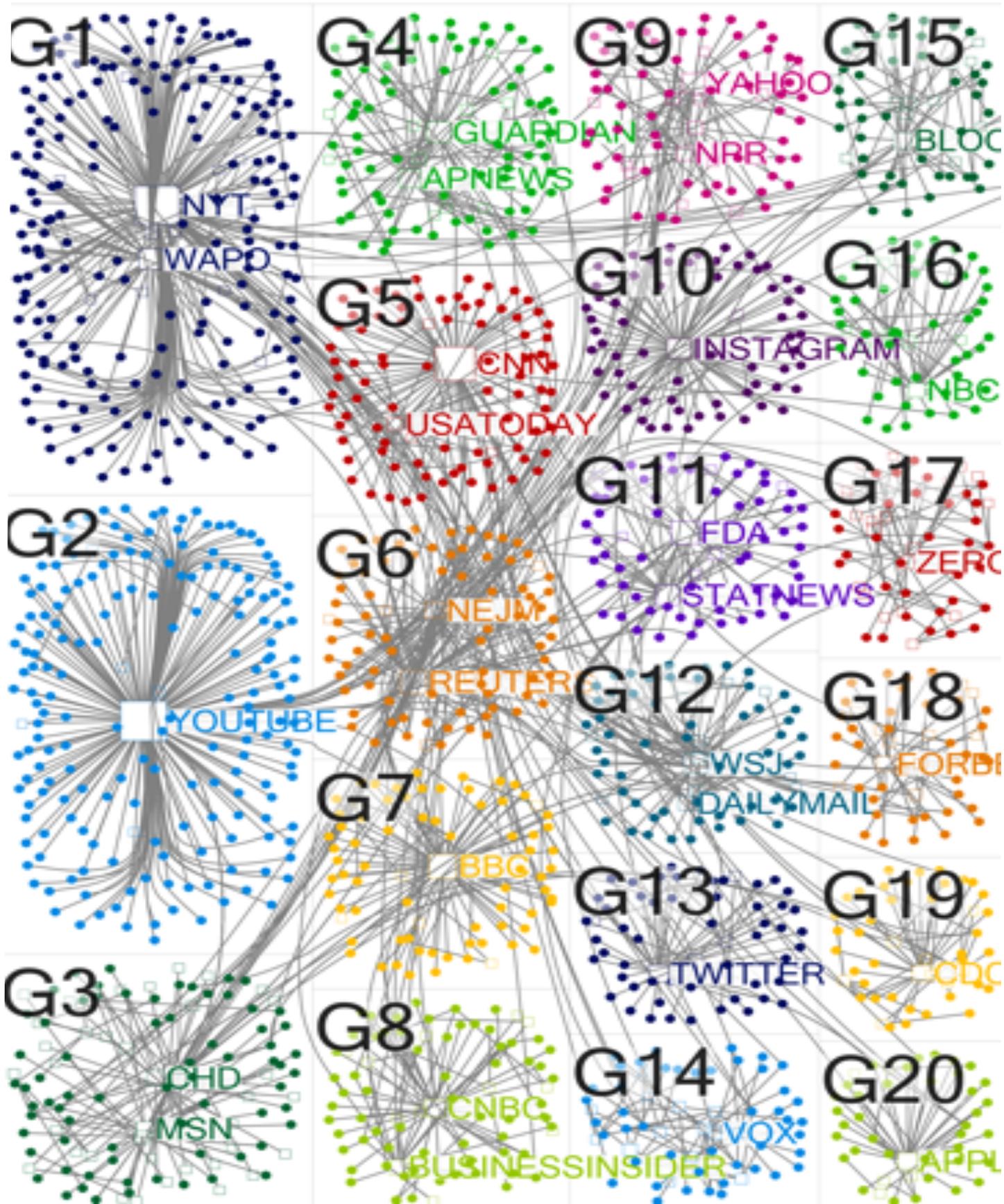
After cleaning the data, the researcher imported them and created a bipartite network with NodeXL Pro, an SNA tool to calculate and visualize data (Smith et al. 2010). In Figure 2, on the next page, you will see that the nodes in the disk shape are users, and the nodes in the square are the domains they share. The sharing behavior is the edge that links the users and the domains. With the Clauset–Newman–Moore algorithm (Clauset, Newman, and Moore 2004) in NodeXL Pro, the researcher identified the top 20 clusters around certain domains that more users on Twitter have shared. Himelboim et al. (2020) applied a similar method to the HPV vaccine and discovered communities divided by positive and negative Twitter messages' emotions.

Bessi et al. (2015) did an SNA on the narratives of misinformation on Facebook. They found that people who believe in conspiracies are more active in sharing and commenting on misinformation than those who read scientific news (Bessi et al. 2015). In light of the studies above, the researcher believes the SNA can help identify the communities that are most affected and the misinformation dissemination patterns

Sharing (Mis)information: A Social Network Analysis of Vaccine-related URLs
around them (Pierri, Piccardi, and Ceri 2020; Shao et al.

	<i>Vertex</i>	<i>Labels</i>	<i>Out-Degree</i>	<i>Betweenness Centrality</i>	<i>Vertex Group</i>
1	<i>youtube.com</i>	<i>YOUTUBE</i>	192	931450.318	2
2	<i>nytimes.com</i>	<i>NYTIMES</i>	154	876398.728	1
3	<i>cnn.com</i>	<i>CNN</i>	77	670820.743	5
4	<i>bbc.com</i>	<i>BBC</i>	65	301487.423	7
5	<i>fda.gov</i>	<i>FDA</i>	30	286871.802	11
6	<i>reuters.com</i>	<i>REUTERS</i>	52	276723.462	6
7	<i>instagram.com</i>	<i>INSTAGRAM</i>	64	209554	10
8	<i>washingtonpost.com</i>	<i>WaPo</i>	57	208698.717	1
9	<i>wsj.com</i>	<i>WSJ</i>	38	207420.405	12
10	<i>theguardian.com</i>	<i>GUARDIAN</i>	37	205244.641	4
11	<i>statnews.com</i>	<i>STATNEWS</i>	31	202132.981	11
12	<i>yahoo.com</i>	<i>YAHOO</i>	22	183044.636	9
13	<i>apnews.com</i>	<i>AP NEWS</i>	25	152858.471	4
14	<i>cnn.com</i>	<i>CNN</i>	38	151384.52	8
15	<i>twitter.com</i>	<i>TWITTER</i>	37	129085.775	13
16	<i>apple.news</i>	<i>APPLE NEWS</i>	35	123236.119	20
17	<i>cdc.gov</i>	<i>CDC</i>	22	117586.28	19
18	<i>bloomberg.com</i>	<i>BLOOMBERG</i>	21	112732.061	15
19	<i>nejm.org</i>	<i>NEJM</i>	33	112155.229	6
20	<i>forbes.com</i>	<i>FORBES</i>	18	95115.4775	18
21	<i>childrenshealthdefense.org</i>	<i>CHD</i>	13	87767.3629	3
22	<i>msn.com</i>	<i>MSN</i>	24	86673.3505	3
23	<i>businessinsider.com</i>	<i>BUSINESSINSIDER</i>	19	85923.9077	8
24	<i>nbcnews.com</i>	<i>NBCNEWS</i>	21	78613.3225	16
25	<i>dailymail.co.uk</i>	<i>DAILYMAIL</i>	14	77944.5192	12
26	<i>npr.org</i>	<i>NPR</i>	15	69667.4857	9
27	<i>zerohedge.com</i>	<i>ZEROHEDGE</i>	14	63141.9124	17
28	<i>usatoday.com</i>	<i>USA TODAY</i>	20	63138.4071	5
29	<i>vox.com</i>	<i>VOX</i>	6	56292.8117	14

Table 2. Most-Shared Domains



<i>Label</i>	<i>Graph Density</i>	<i>Betweenness Centrality</i>	<i>Labels</i>
<i>G1</i>	<i>0.00499761</i>	<i>876398.728</i>	<i>NYTIMES</i>
<i>G2</i>	<i>0.0052356</i>	<i>931450.318</i>	<i>YOUTUBE</i>
<i>G3</i>	<i>0.00942915</i>	<i>87767.3629</i>	<i>CHD</i>
<i>G4</i>	<i>0.01136364</i>	<i>205244.641</i>	<i>GUARDIAN</i>
<i>G5</i>	<i>0.01176471</i>	<i>670820.743</i>	<i>CNN</i>
<i>G6</i>	<i>0.01219512</i>	<i>276723.462</i>	<i>REUTERS</i>
<i>G7</i>	<i>0.01282051</i>	<i>301487.423</i>	<i>BBC</i>
<i>G8</i>	<i>0.01349966</i>	<i>151384.52</i>	<i>CNBC</i>
<i>G9</i>	<i>0.01333333</i>	<i>183044.636</i>	<i>YAHOO</i>
<i>G10</i>	<i>0.01449275</i>	<i>209554</i>	<i>INSTAGRAM</i>
<i>G11</i>	<i>0.01514486</i>	<i>286871.802</i>	<i>FDA</i>
<i>G12</i>	<i>0.01515152</i>	<i>207420.405</i>	<i>WSJ</i>
<i>G13</i>	<i>0.01666667</i>	<i>129085.775</i>	<i>TWITTER</i>
<i>G14</i>	<i>0.01724138</i>	<i>56292.8117</i>	<i>VOX</i>
<i>G15</i>	<i>0.01851852</i>	<i>112732.061</i>	<i>BLOOMBERG</i>
<i>G16</i>	<i>0.01851852</i>	<i>78613.3225</i>	<i>NBCNEWS</i>
<i>G17</i>	<i>0.01886792</i>	<i>63141.9124</i>	<i>ZEROHEDGE</i>
<i>G18</i>	<i>0.02040816</i>	<i>95115.4775</i>	<i>FORBES</i>
<i>G19</i>	<i>0.02173913</i>	<i>117586.28</i>	<i>CDC</i>
<i>G20</i>	<i>0.02325581</i>	<i>123236.119</i>	<i>APPLE NEWS</i>

Table 3. Statistics of the Network

3. Edge (line between disks and squares): Sharing Behavior Linking the User and the Domain

4. G1 to G20: Cluster

In order to analyze the relationship between the graph density of the clusters ($n = 20$, $M = .0147$, $SD = .005$) and the betweenness centrality of each domain ($n = 20$, $M = 258198.590$, $SD = 255155.099$), the researcher applied SPSS 27 to conduct statistical analysis. Twenty clusters (G1 to G20) are being identified by the Clauset–Newman–Moore algorithm (Clauset, Newman, and Moore 2004) (See Table 3). The top 29 domains are located in these communities (See Figure 3). The researcher deleted the domain with lower betweenness centrality whenever a group included more than one domain name. The t -value for the graph density is 13.434 ($p < 0.000$) and is 4.456 for the betweenness centrality. The graph density and the betweenness centrality are negatively correlated ($r = -.758$, $p < 0.000$).

Misinformation Websites

Among the top 29 domains, two are highlighted by the NewsGuard ("Coronavirus Misinformation Tracking Center" n.d.) with misinformation alert: childrenhealthdefense.org in Group 3 and zerohedge.com in Group 17.

Children's Health Defense (CHD) is an anti-vaccine community of practice founded by Robert F. Kennedy Jr. in 2016. Since its establishment, the organization has played an essential role in spreading misinformation about vaccination online (English, 2020; Meltzer, 2020). This

community's central practice is publishing and advertising articles relating children's chronic diseases such as diabetes and autism to vaccines and criticizing that the big vaccine companies are driven by profit.

The organization currently has 142,378 followers on Facebook, 54,300 followers on Twitter, 141,000 followers on Instagram, and 36,700 subscribers on YouTube. Users can also donate \$10 on its official website to become lifetime members of the organization, receiving member-only content such as Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s promotion video and slides on vaccine fraud.

Jamison et al. (2020) found that CHD was one of the primary buyers of anti-vaccine advertising on Facebook from December 2018 to February 2019. The advertisements contained newsletters, videos, and promotions for related products and books. Most of the advertisements had a link to the organization's official website (Jamison et al. 2020). Considering the vast influence of this community of practice and its potential to respond to the current pandemic, it is worth exploring the CHD's anti-vaccine promotions' messaging strategies and how people apply the content with their views on social media.

In this study's data, 14 messages (N = 4,435) shared links from the "childrenhealthdefense.org" domain. Here are some example tweets in this category.

1. "Investigation this week identified polyethylene glycol (PEG) as likely reason 2 people in U.K. suffered anaphylaxis after receiving # Pfizer's #vaccine. In Sept, I warned #FDA that PEG in #COVID vaccines could lead to severe allergic reactions. #TheDefender

<https://t.co/zJtM17aRGf>" (2020/12/11, retweet number = 2,448)

The user summarized the link's content and showed off that they had already warned about the side effects of the vaccine earlier. Because the person who sent this message is a public figure, this tweet got the highest retweet times among the four thousand messages collected for this study. The influence of the post is considerable. Here is another example:

2. "#FactCheck: #BillGates + his minions insist the billionaire never said we'd need digital #vaccine #passports. But in a 6/2020 TED Talk, he said exactly that. Someone edited out the statement, but CHD tracked down the original. @RobertKennedyJr #TheDefender <https://t.co/QBTqeeQnbn>" (2020/12/12, retweet times = 1,560)

This message was posted because it served as evidence for some information the person believed had been discovered. Announcing themselves to be the fact-checker, the user ironically contributed to spreading the misinformation. Another example:

3. "We were aware of the cells of aborted babies being used in the manufacture of vaccines, but now we discover that cancer cells are being used too! This is ABSOLUTELY SHOCKING... #COVID19 #vaccine <https://t.co/E98Hdv4MQg>" (2020/12/11, retweet times = 0)

This message shows how the person was shocked by the link's content. With such scientific-resembling information, misinformation can confuse people who have no medical education or background.

The financial blog, [zerohedge.com](https://www.zerohedge.com), is always related to conspiracy theories (McElhaney, 2020). Twenty out of 4,435 messages refer to the articles from these websites. For example: "Imagine that - a #COVID #Vaccine that causes folks to test positive for #HIV (false or not); sound like something you want to go through? Roll up those sleeves, boys: <https://t.co/UB2mjmanZ0>" (2020/12/11, retweet times = 0). This user seems to use the mysterious content of the link to draw attention without verifying the content material.

Conclusion

In the information age it is getting increasingly challenging to distinguish misinformation on first glance. Even though people get in touch with more information through various media (Gollust, Lantz, and Ubel 2009), they are becoming more polarized. Users are reading what they prefer to read with highly customized information channels and tools, not necessarily what they should be reading.

This study helps to confirm that the main domains shared in the messages of this study are credible websites. However, the strong influence of certain misinformation websites is still disturbing. Social media platforms such as YouTube and Twitter, where people can share their thoughts without any sort of information verification, can be great epicenters of misinformation. Realizing where it has fallen short, YouTube released specific regulations targeting misinformation during the 2020 election (The YouTube Team 2020). Though other platforms, such as Twitter and Instagram, also released similar policies at the end of 2020, a lot more work needs to be done.

Regarding the COVID-19 vaccine, promotion organizations should create various strategies targeting misinformation, such as providing sufficient evidence and encouraging dialogue (Steffens et al. 2019). Media platforms should take the responsibility for responding to misinformation (Brennen et al. 2020; Guidry et al. 2020). Scholars are already advocating for organizations to provide timely and credible corrections (van der Meer and Jin 2020; Vraga and Bode 2020b). Expert sources can help correct health misinformation (Vraga and Bode 2017). Finally, sharing high-quality content can help dilute the influence of misinformation on social media (Vraga and Bode 2021).

This study has one significant limitation: the dataset is comparatively small, and the time frame only covers four days. The limited number of messages influences the betweenness centrality of certain websites, which may cause information missing in the results. Future research can enlarge the dataset within a longer time frame. It is also interesting to develop surveys and interviews with the users sharing the misinformation to determine whether they know they are sharing misleading information and what are motivations behinds their social media sharing habits.

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QAnon and the Rebirth of the Satanic Panic in the Digital Age

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Abstract

The dramatic rise of the novel conspiracy theory known as QAnon had many observers wondering how a belief system so divorced from reality could gain traction in the modern networked era. This paper seeks to answer that question by comparing the QAnon movement with the Satanic Panic of the 1980s. Like QAnon, the Satanic Panic rallied its believers around baseless claims of cultic child abuse and murder. This paper argues that the recurrence of such a belief system is the byproduct of a profound shift in how citizens consume information, comparing the deregulation of television in the 1980s to the adoption of social media as a legitimate news source in the present day. In both cases, the

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entrance of novel forms of media, which lacked sufficient regulatory standards, allowed ideologically and monetarily motivated individuals to enter the public sphere and peddle dangerously false information, eventually fomenting widespread moral panic. Hopefully, by looking towards the past for answers, this paper can help us understand why such panics occur and how the same media systems that helped to generate these panics can also stop them.

In the 1980s, the United States was awash in a new sort of crime, Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA). Satanic cults were rising across the country, murdering and torturing thousands of children with impunity. Many Americans stood up to this threat, arresting the deviants, publishing the stories of their victims, and enacting new legislation. There was only one problem, SRA was not actually happening (Stidham et al., 2012). By the mid-1990s, after hundreds of lawsuits and dozens of overturned convictions, this movement would earn the ignominious title of the “Satanic Panic” (Hughes, 2017).

Four decades later, an unidentified individual began posting on the imageboard 4chan. This person, dubbed “QAnon” for their supposed Q clearance credentials, began to slowly unveil a vast conspiracy involving a cabal of Satanic pedophiles. QAnon claimed that these conspirators, many of whom were preeminent members of

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the Democratic Party, were asserting control of the U.S. government and the mainstream media to continue their nefarious crimes against children (Hannah, 2021). The “Q” worldview has expanded considerably since those first days in 2017, incorporating the core tenets of other conspiracies, including Covid-19 trutherism, anti-vaccine beliefs, and even alien “lizard people” stories into the canon (Hannah, 2021). This dramatic dilation of scope has led journalist Mike Rothchild (2021) to dub QAnon “the conspiracy theory of everything” (p. 10).

Regardless of which specific tenets of the theory QAnon believers adhere to, they are all united by a core belief in the existence of a vast network of child abusers hiding in plain sight (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2021). This belief forms the core of the Satanic Ritual Abuse theory (Gunn, 2005). Knowing this, it may benefit us to compare the two movements to determine what led to such strongly held beliefs in the absence of tangible evidence and investigate what forces may have driven the widespread adoption of such a worldview.

This paper examines the media which amplified these two movements, which bred a deregulated media environment. From 1974 to 1978, a series of regulatory decisions designed to promote the growth of cable television transformed the media landscape by vastly expanding the viewing options available to the average American consumer (Besen & Crandall, 1981). This pattern of deregulation gained speed during the Reagan administration when FCC chair, Mark Fowler, dismantled many of the remaining regulations governing cable licensing. As chair, Fowler enacted multiple liberalizations that allowed long blocks of non-informational content to be broadcast, paving the way

for new sensationalist genres such as “infotainment” and tabloid television. Local and national news networks were no longer restrained by FCC regulations, so they were now free to broadcast specials on topics with little to no factual basis, paving the way for the mass dissemination of the myth of Satanic Ritual Abuse (Hughes, 2017).

QAnon likewise grew and thrived in a permissive media habitat. QAnon initially took root in the dark corners of the social web, on chatrooms on 4chan, 8chan, and later 8kun, websites famed for their laissez-faire content moderation philosophies (Zeng & Schafer, 2021). As QAnon grew in popularity, the conspiracy theory migrated to more mainstream platforms, where they exploded into the public conscience (Bracewell, 2021). Under Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (1996), all such sites are protected from liability for any user-generated content (Napoli, 2021). This situation permitted social media companies to manage the content posted to their platforms as they see fit. And so, these companies frequently adopted relaxed content-moderation standards to maximize user engagement and increase advertising revenue (Guilbeault, 2018). With the threat of liability removed, social media platforms and content creators are free to create and promote whatever material engages their userbase, regardless of whether that material may be dangerously inflammatory and brazenly incorrect, like QAnon content.

This project examines predominant media in the US, comparing the Satanic Panic in the 1980s with the QAnon movement of the present day in order to trace commonalities that may shed light on why these panics occur and recur, and what may be done in the future to stop such a recurrence. This paper uses the sociological concept of *moral panic* as

a framing device for these events, focusing on the media's role as a moral panic amplifier, and examining how patrons of these ideas used deregulated media channels to spread their conspiratorial beliefs. This will be accomplished by comparing popular media content from both movements and their respective delivery mechanisms, namely the tabloid television of the 1980s and the online conspiracy influencers of the late 2010s and 2020s. This paper explores how one particular moral panic has metamorphosed over time and how morals manifest themselves in new ways in the networked era.

A Brief Introduction to Moral Panic Theory

The sociologist Jock Young first coined the term “Moral Panic” in 1971 when discussing public concern over statistics indicating a rise in drug use and the subsequent police crackdown. Young observed that during a period of moral panic, a spiraling effect is produced by interactions between the media, the public, various interest groups, and the legal system, where the furor cranks up over time (Thompson, 1998). Young's colleague, Stanley Cohen, is credited with systematizing moral panic and setting its essential traits. In his classic book, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Cohen (2002) declares:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person, or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion

by mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often resorted to); the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible (p. 1).

Cohen first used this framework to analyze the British public's reaction to a series of street brawls in the late 1960s. Cohen observed that the mass media used several isolated incidents of hooliganism to justify and generate fear around the novel subcultures known as the Mods and the Rockers, leading to a sustained moral crusade against their adherents (Cohen, 2002). Since the publication of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, the concept of moral panic has been used to explain many other instances of sustained public outrage (Thompson, 1998).

Sociologist Mary deYoung (1997) states: “the ritual abuse moral panic is a pristine example of a moral panic, if only because its putative threat to young children was wholly illusory and had to be discursively constructed out of strands of fundamentalist religious exhortations, popular culture representations, and therapeutic pseudoscience” (p. 124). QAnon is not quite so “pristine” as a moral panic, because while it constitutes a manufactured threat with explicit moral overtones, it differs in that for all its popularity, QAnon has yet to achieve true mainstream acceptance (Kaplan, 2021). This difference highlights the diffuse nature of contemporary media, for though belief in QAnon is relegated to a small portion of the population, it nonetheless represents an influential moral crusade with wide-ranging consequences for the rest of society

(Moskalenko & McCauley, 2021). This assertion reflects the thoughts of other contemporary moral panic scholars who argue that “since audiences are fragmented, disparate, and morally and ideologically scattered...moral panics burst forth over issues likely to enlist not the concerns of society at large, but those of smaller more specialized audiences” (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2012).

The Decline of Regulation and the Rise of Sensationalism

The breadth and duration of these panics would not have been possible without the emergence of media platforms that could sustain them. This does not mean that a rich media reaction is necessary to produce a moral panic. Most scholars of the phenomenon agree that episodes of moral panic occurred before the advent of mass media. One well-known example is the Salem Witch Trials, when accusations of witchcraft shook the small community of Salem, Massachusetts, in the late 1600s, leading to several executions (Reed, 2015). Rather, the media serves as an amplifier for moral panic rhetoric, enabling and accelerating their spread across disparate areas which may have otherwise been unaffected. Actors in the media lend their perceived legitimacy to the real-life events and outright fabrications make up a moral panic, intensifying pre-existing fear and resentment that members of their audience may already harbor towards certain people, practices, events, and other phenomena. Stanley Cohen (2002) remarked: “the media have long operated as agents of moral indignation in their own right: even if they are not self-consciously engaged in

crusading or muck-raking, their very reporting of certain 'facts' can be sufficient to generate concern, anxiety, indignation, or panic” (p. 7). The QAnon conspiracy theory and the theory of Satanic Ritual abuse both rose to prominence in the US when American media was undergoing a metamorphosis. The widespread adoption of novel technologies brought long-held beliefs about the media into question and allowed for the entry of new players onto the market, some of whom played a prominent role in fostering and sustaining these panics.

The Satanic Panic

The 1980s marks an inflection point in the history of American television. Before this moment, Americans were limited to the shows catered by the three national broadcast networks, which were only shown once at certain times of day at hour or half-hour intervals. Television viewing was a “shared cultural experience” predicated on the assumption that Americans were watching the same (or highly similar) content at the same time of day. As a result, all programming, including the news, was designed to appeal to the broadest possible audience (Lotz, 2009).

This status quo reflected the uniquely comfortable position broadcast providers were in throughout the fifties and sixties. They were shielded by strict FCC regulations installed in 1966, which only permitted the proliferation of cable television in rural areas where broadcast could not reach. In addition, the limited number of broadcasters allowed meant that the “Big Three” television networks, CBS, ABC, and NBC, were only subject to nominal competition (Besen & Crandall,

1981). This order of affairs started to change in the early 1970s with a series of FCC decisions that allowed for the spread of cable networks into new markets and into direct competition with broadcast channels, under the rationale that these channels were now well established enough to weather the competition from cable. The deregulation process intensified with the appointment of a new FCC chair, Mark S. Fowler, in 1981, by then-president Ronald Reagan. During Fowler's tenure, the FCC eliminated "must-carry" requirements for local cable shows and allowed cable franchises to air long-distance signals, freeing up valuable airtime for nationally syndicated programs. The FCC also started to allow corporations to buy up cable stations in bulk, further intensifying the corporatization of the medium (Geller, 1987). The drumbeat of liberalization was reified by the Cable Communications Policy Act of 1984, also known as the Cable Act, which codified much of this deregulation into federal law. The Cable Act made it easier for would-be cable franchisees to apply for licenses in local municipalities, bypassing the federal government. In turn, the Cable Act wrested editorial control from the cable operators and exempted them from liability, placing editorial control firmly in the hands of the media companies' hands. (Kelly & Ying, 2014). These developments made it easier for would-be television entrepreneurs to enter the field in direct competition with the major broadcast networks, greatly intensifying the battle for American eyeballs.

Once these changes to cable regulation were enacted, the dominant conservative wing of congress turned its attention toward broadcast news. All holders of broadcast licenses, including radio and television, were governed by the Fairness Doctrine. The Fairness Doctrine was a regulation enacted

in 1949, which required licensees to provide coverage of controversial issues of public importance” and to provide “a diversity of perspectives on these issues” (Napoli, 2021). At the time of its enactment, the broadcast was considered a “scarce public resource.” Hence, efforts had to be made to ensure fair distribution. In 1987 the FCC eliminated the Doctrine, arguing that this regulation “was no longer necessary given the growth in the number of media outlets available, thanks to increases in the number of broadcast stations and the rise of cable television” (Napoli, 2021). In the wake of the Fairness Doctrine’s repeal, there came a dramatic increase in News and Talk programs on radio and television, many of which catered to partisan politics (Napoli, 2021).

Some of the primary beneficiaries of this newly deregulated media environment were religious broadcasters, specifically the increasingly powerful Evangelical bloc. At the time of these reforms, evangelical Protestants already had established a thriving alternative media system reinforced by privately-owned radio stations, newspapers, and magazines (Douglas, 2018). These media assets served the dual purpose of spreading God’s word and creating an alternate information ecosystem where their fundamentalist worldview would go unquestioned (Horsfield, 2015). Evangelicals had been making inroads on television since the establishment of the Christian Broadcasting Network by famed Baptist Minister Pat Robertson in 1961, but their efforts were hampered by existing regulations (Douglas, 2018). The reforms of the 1970s and 1980s allowed Evangelical entrepreneurs to expand their cable holdings across the United States vastly. This development gave rise to a new generation of influential “televangelists,” who were now given greater leeway to air political and opinion

programming and a profitable infomercial and fundraising segments, with far less oversight. At the same time, the increased availability of these programs as a regular part of cable packages led to a boom in their viewership. By 1985, 13 million Americans were regularly watching religious programming on television, most of it of the Evangelical variety (Hughes, 2017). The 1980s would later be considered a sort of golden age for televangelism, a moment when a friendly political and regulatory environment granted these Christian media entrepreneurs unprecedented political and socio-cultural power (Horsfield, 2015).

This incremental chipping away of norms and regulations birthed a novel news system. Once a staid affair that Americans watched on a once-nightly basis in proscribed hourly allotments, news became yet another commodity that media companies could leverage. The “Big Three” broadcasters still held the dominant position in the media landscape, commanding 70 percent of all television viewership. Still, this dominance was being seriously challenged by cable networks and newer broadcast options (Webster, 2014). New formats like talk shows, documentary specials, televangelist programs, and partisan opinion shows fell into a grey area between news and entertainment. These programs still possessed a patina of legitimacy in the eyes of their viewers, which were still used to a television system that adhered to strict legal standards and journalistic norms (Hughes, 2017). They looked like traditional news programming on similar sets, with similar graphics and journalistic language. Still, unbeknownst to their viewers, these programs were subject to far more lax entertainment provisions (Gunn, 2005). This sort of media would later be known as “infotainment” due to its hybrid nature. These infotainment programs, imbued with the moral authority

of traditional news providers, but freed from their legal and ethical obligations, would become the primary media propagators of the Satanic Panic (Hughes, 2017).

Before the panic took hold, lurid stories of sexual exploitation made for popular tabloid fare (Hughes, 2017). These stories were both salacious and emotionally stirring, making for a perfect talk show fare. These tales of sexual abuse and depravity were regarded as a clear manifestation of American society's moral decline and corruption, which originated in the moral anarchy of the 1960s (Victor, 1998). By the time these shows were airing, conservative voices were making a concerted effort to reassert their version of moral order. This helped set the stage for a moral panic, fomenting “a conflict between two or more competing moral universes ...articulated by moral entrepreneurs who have been busy creating a public perception of the particular problem” (Klocke and Muschert, 2010). These efforts were aided by the novel therapeutic discovery of “recovered memories,” which made for popular talk show fare (Stidham et al., 2012). The concept of recovered memories became popular in 1980 with the publication of the bestselling memoir, *Michelle Remembers*, coauthored by Michelle Smith and her psychiatrist, Lawrence Pazder, who would later become her husband (Victor, 1998). The book details how Pazder helped Smith, a distraught patient of his, slowly uncover the horrific abuse that Smith endured as a child, eventually discovering that Smith was raised in a Satan-worshipping, child-sacrificing cult. The book became a best-seller and was received with credulity for the most part during the first decade after its publication (Stidham et al., 2012). Pazder and other experts in memory recovery would become prominent figures on the talk show circuit (deYoung, 1996). Joshua Gunn (2005) suggests that “the

relative absence of documented cases of Satanic ritual abuse prior to 1980, and their subsequent appearance after the publication of *Michelle Remembers* and related television programs, marks the Satanic aspect of ritual abuse as a recent embellishment" (p. 174). The widespread acceptance of the elaborate Satanic rituals described in the book and subsequently recovered memory memoirs and television specials helped pave the way for the Satanic Ritual Abuse Panic.

What would come to be considered the most consequential case in the history of the panic, the McMartin Preschool case, started its life as yet another of these sensational news segments. In the summer of 1983, one mother had begun to suspect something was wrong with her son, a recent enrollee in a highly respected family-run daycare center, the McMartin Preschool, which had been operating in Manhattan Beach, California for almost thirty years (Beck, 2015). The woman eventually took her son to a doctor's office to be examined for signs of abuse. This exam yielded inconclusive results, so she consulted another physician, who stated that her son showed signs of sexual abuse (deYoung, 1997). After a police report detailing the allegations went public, a local news reporter, Wayne Satz, broke the story on K-ABC TV, a local ABC affiliate, early in 1984, supplementing the unsubstantiated allegations with unnerving b-roll footage and emotional parent testimonials (Beck, 2015). In a lawsuit filed years later by Peggy McMartin Buckey, one of the accused stated that "Capital Cities/ABC wanted to sell a sensational story and was willing to go beyond the bounds of reasonable journalism to do so" (Hughes, 2017). Regardless of their original intent, this local news coverage served to legitimize the claims being made against the McMartins and their

business and spread these rumors to new audiences who were unfamiliar with the case and its context, setting the stage for a nation-wide, and later world-wide, panic (deYoung, 1997).

After this television debut, the story exploded. A year after the first report, the original accusation at McMartin Preschool had snowballed into a case that charged seven preschool teachers with 321 counts of child abuse against 48 of the children in their care (Stidham et al., 2017). On May 16th of that same year, the case received national television coverage for the first time on the popular news magazine program 20/20, in a segment titled “The Devil Worshipers” (Hughes, 2017). Jeffrey Victor (1990) remarks upon the critical role this show played in the history of the panic, stating that:

The central importance of this television program was that it lent credibility to what had previously been merely local rumors, by its presentation of supposed authorities on national television. The television program implied to skeptical viewers that this television news magazine was exposing some newly discovered, sinister influence at work in our society. It is frequently cited in newspaper reports about satanic cults, as being the first national “expose” of the satanic cult problem (p. 70).

This segment took a news story of local interest and transformed it into a nationwide issue, granting license for moral crusaders in disparate parts of the United States to persecute the perceived deviants in their communities. This meant that unlike moral panics of the past, this moral panic, based on the spurious evidence shown on television and deep-seated cultural anxieties, could quickly spread to

numerous communities in rapid succession (Gunn, 2005). Reports of Satanic Cults started to crop up across the United States before spreading into Canada and the U.K., ensnaring hundreds of potential offenders (Victor, 1990).

After the *20/20* televised special other players in the media followed suit and began to produce their coverage of the Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA) crisis. What resulted was a media “feeding frenzy” whereby rival talk shows and news shows competed for more in-depth coverage of the alleged crimes (deYoung, 1996). These shows invited a mélange of guests, including self-proclaimed SRA survivors, law enforcement professionals, and professional SRA experts like Dr. Lawrence Pazder, to substantiate these claims (Victor, 1998). Many of these guests cycled through the talk show circuit, appearing on popular programs such as *Larry King Live!*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and *Sally Jesse Raphael*, drawing high ratings and new believers with each appearance (deYoung, 1996).

Geraldo Rivera, a popular media figure whose coverage often straddled the line between news and tabloid television, would become one of the most prominent media boosters of SRA theories. Rivera featured many of the panic’s proponents on his popular syndicated CBS talk show, *Geraldo*, and would go on to air two documentary specials on NBC about Satanic Ritual Abuse (deYoung, 1996). The second special, which aired in 1988, entitled “Devil Worship: Exposing Satan's Underground,” earned NBC its highest ratings ever, reaching almost 20 million viewers, one-third of the viewers in its timeslot (Hughes, 2017).

The success of this program also revealed the growing schism in the media industry itself, exposing a divide between

traditional television journalists and this new breed of soft-news peddlers. Many journalists disliked the exceedingly credulous coverage of these incidences, especially the wilder allegations involving supernatural events (Gunn, 2005). Tom Brokaw, the lead anchor on NBC, said the decision to air the specials “troubled him greatly.” other colleagues at *The Today Show* and *NBS Nightly News* refused to allow Rivera to promote his special on their shows. By the second special aired, advertisers took heed and abandoned the timeslot, leaving only 14 commercials of the 36 slots filled (Hughes, 2017). After the special, explicit discussion about Satanic Ritual Abuse would be relegated to the daytime hours where they aired to a smaller audience, with fewer advertising dollars at stake (deYoung, 1996).

These decisions reflected a growing wariness in the media around the SRA issue and an increasing awareness that many so-called crimes may have been outright fabrications. By the early nineties, many of the legal cases against these so-called Satanists were falling apart at the seams, none more publicly than the McMartin Preschool case. After years of law enforcement and civilian excavations of the school grounds, the prosecution had yet to find substantive physical evidence of abuse or occult activity (Beck, 2015). The case depended on the coerced testimony of the “victims,” preschool-aged children with little awareness of the events unfolding in the courtroom (deYoung, 1997). The resulting legal saga lasted seven years and cost the state of California 15 million dollars. It is the longest and most expensive trial in U.S. history (Hughes, 2017). In the end, much of the case seemed to hinge on whether one “believed the children,” despite all the contradictory evidence (Beck, 2015). Ultimately, belief alone proved insufficient as only one of the accused, Ray Buckey (notably, the only male

defendant in the case), was convicted, and a resulting trial in 1990 led to the charges being dismissed. It is important to note that by this time Buckey had already spent five years in prison (deYoung, 1997).

By this point, most mainstream media organizations had soured on the story. Several high-profile exposes of what was now being called a “Satanic Panic” was published in major newspapers. A journalist and critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, David Shaw criticized his employer for abdicating its duty to thoroughly investigate the McMartin allegations in a series of acclaimed columns that would go on to win the Pulitzer Prize. Television shows like *60 Minutes* and *Larry King Live!*, which once gave airtime to SRA experts, now played host to their victims, including Ray Buckey. By 1995, even the once strident Geraldo Rivera had backed away from SRA coverage, going so far as to issue an apology for his uncritical coverage of the panic (Beck, 2015).

Through the 1990s and early 2000s, mainstream media continued to turn against the original narrative put forth during the peak of the panic. The push against what was termed the “Satanic Panic,” intensified as several more high-profile “Satanic” crime cases were found to be egregious miscarriages of justice. The most notable case was the West Memphis Three, where three innocent teenage boys ultimately served 18 years for the murder of three children. During the trial, the boys’ supposed “Satanic” leanings, expressed through their taste in metal music, goth attire, and horror novels, were used by the prosecution to prop up their dubious claims. Though this strategy succeeded in clinching the convictions and garnering praise from the local media, the response from national news sources was one of shock and disbelief. In a stark reversal of the pattern

seen in the McMartin case, the national media exposed the panic for what it was rather than amplifying it. The HBO 1996 documentary, *Paradise Lost*, drew mainstream attention to the case for the first time, leading to widespread condemnation of the prejudicial treatment the teenagers received. The case would go on to generate numerous articles, books, movies, and even a tribute album featuring popular musicians such as Iggy Pop and Ice-T. Though the outrage failed to free the boys for several more years, it nevertheless served as a crucial turning point regarding how such cases were covered by the media (Stidham et al., 2012).

Despite the profound shift in how the mainstream media regarded Satanic Ritual Abuse, many members of the public continued to stand by their initial assertions. Even in 1994, when the panic was in steep decline, a Redbook survey still found that 70 percent of Americans believed that “at least some people who claim that satanic cults abused them as children...are telling the truth” (Victor, 1998). The major difference was that the panic could never quite reach fruition without the imprimatur of the mainstream media system and the judicial system. The idea of a serious Satanic threat would instead be sustained by the alternative media ecosystem that had grown and flourished during the deregulation era, especially those affiliated with Evangelical Christianity (Hughes, 2017). The existence of Satanic cults eventually became an accepted part of conservative Christian discourse, incorporated into an Evangelical worldview that viewed any deviation from strict fundamentalist practice as “of the devil” (Jenkins & Maier-Katkin, 2006). Many SRA experts simply migrated from the talk show circuit to the church circuit, where they peddled the same panic ideology, albeit to smaller

audiences (Victor, 1990). There, insulated from the prying eye of the secular press, this “good versus evil” worldview would continue to circulate, largely unquestioned by its audience (Jenkins & Maier Katkin, 2006). It wouldn’t be until the late 2010s, with the development of new media vector, that this ideology would blossom into a full-blown moral panic once more.

QAnon

By the time QAnon made its first post in 2017, the innovations which had transformed the cultural and political landscape of the 1980s had become just another component of the media establishment. The concept of a great American consensus had dissipated almost entirely, already thrown into question by the developments detailed above. During the forty years between the two panics, “increasing concentration of media ownership by corporations trying to increase their profits, and the development of a competitive 24-hour news cycle has made sensationalism more prominent” (Klocke & Muschert, 2010). Cable, the technology which revolutionized news in the 1980s, has had its heyday come and gone. Both broadcast and cable television have fared poorly since the advent of digital media. From 2015 to 2021, the percentage of households who subscribe to cable or satellite services has dropped from 76 percent to 56 percent, and the majority of those who do not use these services cite the availability of online content as the primary factor (Rainie, 2021). According to Pew Research, over half of all Americans name digital platforms as their preferred mode of news consumption (Matsa & Naseer, 2021).

The widespread adoption of social media as a legitimate news source has meant that any interest group can mount its own awareness campaign without submitting to the scrutiny of traditional media figures. The social media companies have taken up this gatekeeping role, which typically use proprietary algorithms to determine newsworthiness (Mihailidis & Foster, 2021). The increasing importance of social media platforms in the news sphere has meant that even traditional news sources, such as newspapers and broadcast affiliates, have shifted their editorial practices to accommodate an algorithmic selection process that prioritizes the most sensational content (Mihailidis & Foster, 2021). This practice “pressures journalists to adjust and frame their coverage in ways designed to promote user sharing and engagement...[creating] a rush to report, which further increases the risk of sensationalism, exaggeration, and decontextualization” (Peck, 2020). Spectacular events, real or imagined, are picked up by small news organizations or interest groups, gaining traction in the community; this then piques the interest of larger media conglomerates and other prominent figures. Folklore scholar Andrew Peck (2020) argues that what is new about this sort of “fake news” is “how the affordances built into social media change how news informally circulates, gains visibility and becomes legitimated through widespread or mainstream acknowledgment” (p. 330). Social media allows everyday users to directly interact with media gatekeepers and moral entrepreneurs, blurring the roles of newsmaker and news consumer, fundamentally changing the news-making process.

In many ways, these social media platforms are granted even more editorial discretion than their television counterparts. This is due to the unique privileges afforded

to social media companies under Section 230, a vital tenet of the Communications Decency Act (CDA) passed in 1996. This legislation grants “interactive computer service providers,” a legal definition that covers any website that publishes third-party content without carrying out editorial or publishing duties and certain legal protections. The first protection, which US Senator Ron Wyden, one of the co-authors of the original bill, likened to “a shield,” protects these services from being held liable for any third-party content; the second protection, which Wyden called “the sword” allows these same providers to moderate and censor any third-party content they view as violating their terms of service (Goodman & Whittington, 2019). Section 230 was included in the CDA with the idea that allowing the nascent technology industry to carry out content moderation on websites without government oversight or fear of legal retribution would foster a free and open internet and allow for untrammled expansion in this sector (Heldt & Dreyer, 2021). Section 230 has succeeded mightily, paving the way for social media enterprises and other businesses such as review sites and online marketplaces, which derive their business from third-party generated content. Because social media companies cannot face legal consequences for content their users' post, these websites have become welcoming environments for new media entrepreneurs (Goodman & Whittington, 2019).

This permissive environment has led to a significant proliferation of new alternative news sources, many of which possess an anti-mainstream and anti-authority worldview, positioning themselves in direct opposition to older and more established forms of media, which they deem as suspect (Douglas, 2018). Evidence suggests that social media companies like YouTube and Facebook

have algorithmically prioritized this sort of potentially inflammatory content because it “circulates much faster and for much longer, thereby increasing user activity” (Guilbeault, 2018). Controversial views, which were once a liability, have now become one of the best ways to build and sustain an audience online.

The affordances provided by platforms such as Facebook and YouTube make these enterprises possible and potentially highly profitable. These miniature media empires would never have been possible in the mass media era, “where modes for the creation and distribution of information carried significant transaction costs” (Mihailidis & Foster, 2021). Alex Jones, a famed alternative media proprietor whose byzantine conspiracy theories prefigured QAnon’s, made millions of dollars through his online media empire before he was deplatformed in 2018 (Rogers, 2020). At his height, Jones “attracted two million weekly listeners to his syndicated and streamed radio show, up to 1.3 billion views to his YouTube channels, and 20 million monthly visits to Infowars.com” (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2021). The success of figures like Jones convinced other conspiracy-minded individuals to found their own media empires. This dream could only have been made possible through the affordances of these platforms (Mihailidis & Foster, 2021). These media properties reflect the dynamic appeal of the venues which host them, creating an environment the viewers can directly interact with these claims makers, actively participating in the research and production of the stories. This interactive form of storytelling arguably reaches its apotheosis in the condition of QAnon.

From the earliest days, QAnon has depended on media-savvy conduits to spread its message (Reinhard et al., 2021).

The entity known as QAnon has been hosted by a variety of imageboards, beginning with 4chan before migrating to 8chan and later 8kun. Such imageboards are famously inhospitable to new users due to their anarchic moderation practices and counterintuitive interfaces (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2021). This means that for QAnon and its associated posts to achieve meaningful reach, true believers had to bring the message to mainstream platforms.

One such early proponent was Tracy Diaz, a 4chan board moderator who became one of the first people to post about QAnon on YouTube. Diaz's early adoption of the movement paid off as her channel garnered over eight million views before it was purged as a part of YouTube's efforts to get QAnon off their site. Her videos decoding cryptic Q posts and explaining their hidden significance would become a blueprint for propagating the movement (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019). Like Satanic Ritual Abuse experts of the past, these QAnon influencers brand themselves as keepers of esoteric knowledge, possessed of an ability to see patterns where others could not. QAnon followers brand themselves as "bakers," tasked with baking the inchoate "breadcrumbs" Q leaves them into decipherable messages. Q frequently encouraged their followers to "do [their] own research," reminding them that "our ability to spread information across the digital battlefield and bypass their control is what they fear" (Hannah, 2021). In this way, the aspect that may baffle outsiders the most about QAnon, its everchanging, ever-expanding lore, may serve as its greatest strength, allowing the movement to change and grow even as its prophecies fail.

Unsubstantiated stories about child trafficking rings had long been a part of internet lore before QAnon's arrival

in the late 2010s. Like the tabloid stories of the 1980s, such tales of sordid deeds were an intoxicating mix of lurid speculation and righteous indignation. The most popular of these stories was Pizzagate, a labyrinthine conspiracy theory built around the idea that Comet Ping Pong, a popular pizzeria in Washington, DC, was a hub of sex trafficking and abuse catering to the Democratic elite (Bleakley, 2021). The legend of Pizzagate would later become an official part of QAnon lore, forming the backbone of its mythology (Kaplan, 2021). This component of the QAnon would gain serious traction after it was seemingly vindicated by the revelations brought out by the arrest of a well-connected financier and serial sexual predator, Jeffrey Epstein. This was because “the crimes Epstein was accused of were generally comparable to those at the core of the Pizzagate theory: while there was none of the more fantastical elements of Satanism...there was nevertheless claims that Epstein procured underage girls for sex on behalf of prominent, wealthy men” (Bleakley, 2021). Like the old story about Satanism proffered in the 1980s, the idea of a cabal provides a neat black-and-white explanation for egregious abuses of power.

Like the movement against Satanic Ritual Abuse, QAnon appeals to individuals concerned for the safety of children and eager to take concrete actions to protect them. As a member of the online Q-community, every new post and share is part of a valiant effort to defeat an unspeakable evil. Most individuals who join QAnon do so with the promise that their affiliation will help bring about the fall of the cabal, an event that would save the lives of thousands, if not millions of children (Bracewell, 2021). This reflects a long-standing pattern present in moral panics wherein moral crusaders and entrepreneurs, “benefit from their

involvement in moral panics involving children because, since so many social problems seem intimately related to the question of children's safety, they can then gather support for their campaigns" (Krinsky, 2012). This desire to protect the young and vulnerable is a near-universal creed, which QAnon evangelists are happy to exploit. In the words of Marc-Andre Argentino, a foremost QAnon scholar, "everyone agrees that child trafficking is evil very bad, and the argument QAnon makes is, 'If you're against us talking about this, you're in favor of child trafficking'" (Roose, 2020). This state of affairs became readily apparent when Donald Trump, the supposed savior of the United States according to QAnon, refused to denounce the movement in a live press conference, instead blithely replying, "is [QAnon] supposed to be a bad thing...If I can help save the world from problems, I'm willing to do it, and I'm willing to put myself out there" (Pettypiece, 2020). By portraying themselves as "digital soldiers" on the frontline of the war against child abuse, QAnon paints the world in Manichean terms of light and dark forces in a particularly stark display of the moralizing tactics at play during moral panics (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019).

The majority of QAnon followers who adopted the belief system in recent years likely never encountered its seedier incarnation as an imageboard thread (Reinhard et al., 2021). Instead, they encountered heaping servings of seemingly benign and aesthetically pleasing content about the threat posed by child traffickers posted to mainstream social media sites like Instagram (Bracewell, 2021). Marc-Andre Argentino coined the term "Pastel QAnon" to describe the distinct aesthetic features of this content (2021). This term has also been widely adopted by scholars studying QAnon to represent a demographic shift among QAnon believers.

Armed with well-designed content and well-honed rhetoric, QAnon spread into more “respectable” circles of society, gaining political and cultural capital along the way (Bracewell, 2021).

“Pastel QAnon” content was particularly appealing to the conservative Christians who would go on to make up Q’s powerbase. The idea of a pro-Trump prophet held a particularly strong appeal for them as they attempted to make sense of Trump’s various moral failings (Crossley, 2021). QAnon granted them a living text to study, not unlike the Bible, which allowed them to ground these conspiratorial beliefs and relate them to their faith, further strengthening their resolve (Hannah, 2021). QAnon is also radically empowering for these Christians as “they see themselves as taking up the fight against a ‘Luciferian’ media and blend QAnon’s apocalyptic desire to destroy society ‘controlled’ by the deep state with the need for the Kingdom of God on Earth” (Crossley, 2021). As we have already discussed, belief in the existence of Satanically aligned cults was already prevalent in Evangelical circles, so even the more radical aspects of Q’s prophecy did not seem quite so far-fetched (Jenkins & Maier-Katkin, 2006). It is unsurprising that the faithful once again took up the frontline in the fight against the Satanic cabal.

In another echo of the SRA movement, QAnon attempts to legitimize itself by styling itself as a movement for the protection of children. QAnon followers often post official-sounding statistics to their feeds, lending an air of scholarship to their accusations. One popular post circulating on Q boards, boldly proclaimed that “916 children go missing per hour in the United States, a total of eight million per year,” a figure that if true would mean the annual loss of

ten percent of the entire United States juvenile population (Lavin, 2021). These statistical fabrications mirror those made by SRA proponents, who claimed tens of thousands of persons per year were being murdered by Satanists (Stidham et al., 2012). These incidences illustrate that this sort of hard data, even if it is fake, serves as a potent means of legitimation (Hannah, 2021). This statistical inflation also reflects the out-of-proportion media coverage crimes such as child abduction and murder receive, further bolstering the truth of such statements in the readers' minds (Moscowitz & Duvall, 2011).

Much of QAnon's success has come from latching on to the genuine issue of child exploitation and using it as a Trojan Horse to ferry in the more unsavory tenants of their philosophy (Bracewell, 2021). QAnon took this to a new level in 2020 by adopting the hashtag of an established children's charity, "#SaveTheChildren" as their own, leading to their propaganda being distributed under the banner of a well-known and well-respected nonprofit. In addition to hijacking hashtags, QAnon followers have flooded the tip lines of anti-trafficking organizations with false information about the cabal and their nefarious activities. This situation has become so severe that some organizations, including the aforementioned Save the Children organization and the Polaris Project, have felt the need to issue pamphlets and posts denouncing QAnon and their efforts to "help" their cause (Roose, 2020).

The damage wrought by QAnon extends far beyond the online realm. QAnon has served as a motivating factor in multiple violent acts, including cases of assault, kidnapping, and even murder (Dugan, 2021). In January of 2017, a man armed with several rifles entered Comet Ping Pong, the

restaurant at the center of the Pizzagate conspiracy, intending to investigate the ritualistic child abuse occurring in the establishment's basement. Comet Ping Pong didn't even have a basement, illustrating just how divorced from reality the movement was (Bleakley, 2021). This episode heralded a spate of QAnon-influenced vigilantism which saw QAnon adherents often armed, threatening, or physically harming social service agents, politicians, and even family members, for supposed cabal affiliations (Rothschild, 2021). These high-profile events are the most dramatic manifestation of the profound alienation experienced by QAnon followers, who, siloed into insular QAnon communities online, find themselves increasingly disconnected from and hostile to the outside world (Klepper, 2021).

If one looks beyond the disastrous effects the QAnon movement has had on so many lives, one can clearly see the despair underpinning these actions. Prior experience has taught us that moral panics can serve as an appealing coping mechanism during times of widespread social turmoil (Hier, 2021). Membership in 10 of the largest QAnon groups grew 600% from March to July of 2020, the first months of the Covid-19 Pandemic, reflecting a certain cathartic appeal (Kaplan, 2021). Lorna Bracewell (2021) writes, "the QAnon movement ministers to the anxiety [of its followers] ...by providing them entrée into an alternative reality in which the Coronavirus is a hoax and the real threat to their children's health and safety, the deep-state cabal, is something they can do about" (p. 2). QAnon grants followers a semblance of control, something which they are severely lacking in their day-to-day lives.

Discussion

This is not the first piece to take note of the striking resemblance QAnon and the Satanic Panic bear to one another (Lavin, 2020). This is due to the fact that both panics are arguably just the newest manifestation a dark myth which has hovered at the edge of European and American culture for centuries (Frankfurter, 2011). The myth bears many names but is most frequently known as “ritual sacrifice” or “blood libel” (Victor, 1990). The basic premise is that some “other” in society (a role played by Pagans, Jews, Catholics, and sundry other deviants throughout history) are kidnapping your children and performing bizarre ritual crimes with them, only to murder them to complete their rites (Frankfurter, 2011). These types of stories “usually arise at times when a society is undergoing a deep cultural crisis of values, after a period of very rapid social change has caused much disorganization and widespread social stress” (Victor, 1990). The myth endures because of the succor it provides its believers in times of strife. For all its visceral horror, this idea is easier to come to terms with than the profound uncertainty which afflicts those who are prone to buy into it. Doing so validates the believer’s prejudices, recasting them as sound judgments of a dangerous out-group (Stidham et al., 2012). In the world this story posits, the issue of morality is stark and straightforward, with clearly a defined good and a clearly defined evil, and one can align themselves on the side of the good just by spreading the word.

People keep falling for this myth because of an abiding desire to keep their children safe and their society intact. Still, every time they do, they wind up sowing even more pain and confusion, harming the very groups and institutions

they claim to defend (Victor, 1990). The media can keep us from falling for our baser instincts by interrogating and critiquing them, or it can choose to feed them and, by doing so, sustain our rapt attention. In the age of waning newspaper readership, declining TV news viewership, and growing social media use, many media outlets and new media entrepreneurs choose to do the latter (Mihailidis & Foster, 2021).

In recent years, American legislators and the American public have begun to reexamine the current state of affairs in media, turning their attention towards the major social media companies and the lax regulatory standards that protect them. Section 230 is under attack from both sides of the American political spectrum, with all parties conceding that the legislation has granted social media companies too much legal latitude in the content moderation process (Napoli, 2021). On October 1st of 2020, congressional members voted unanimously to subpoena the heads of three top technology firms, Facebook (now known as Meta), Alphabet (Google), and Twitter, with the goal of getting their CEOs to testify about Section 230 immunity (Starinsky, 2021). Both former President Trump and current President Biden have made statements disparaging the current state of regulation. President Trump went so far as to issue an executive order demanding that legal protections for such platforms be rolled back on account of their bias, leading the National Telecommunications and Information Agency to file a petition with the Federal Communications Commission seeking to “clarify certain provisions” of Section 230 protection. Ultimately the effort to repeal these protections ran aground during the chaotic transition period from the Trump administration to the Biden administration. (Napoli, 2021).

These demands reached a fever pitch in 2021 when Americans and the world at large were faced with an unparalleled assault on the US Capitol. The insurrection made what was unfolding in YouTube comment sections and Facebook timelines viscerally and undeniably real in the eyes of many Americans. Jacob Chansley, the self-appointed, “QAnon Shaman,” arguably became the face of the day’s events as his image, shirtless and bedecked in fur, marauding through the halls of the Capitol Building was splashed across front pages, news broadcasts, and Facebook feeds (Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2021). Chansley, once a minor Q influencer, now stood at the Senate dais, where he denounced the “deep-state cabal” and told reporters that, “in order to beat this evil occultic force you need a light occultic force ... [you need] a force that is of the side of God, of love ... almost like on the side of the angels ... as opposed to the demons,” a statement which is a perfect distillation of QAnon rhetoric (Crossley, 2021). Examinations into the social media feeds of these insurrectionists allowed the public to see the radicalization unfolding in real time. In a stark illustration of just how fragmented our media system has become, many Americans first encountered QAnon ideology as they watched the chaos unfold (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2021).

Ultimately it only took a few days after this initial shock for the QAnon movement and other radical groups to be purged from all the major social media sites (Kaplan, 2021). In the subsequent months the US Congress, unsatisfied with the sites’ limited response, would summon the same three major technology CEOs to face questions about the role their technologies played in perpetuating this violence (Napoli, 2021). Then, just when the public regard for social media companies seemed as if it couldn’t get any

lower, a high-profile Facebook whistleblower went public. Frances Haugen carefully parceled a trove of internal data to trusted traditional news sources before testifying before Congress in early October of 2021 (Smith, 2021). These documents revealed widespread misconduct and violation of the company's policies, including in-depth knowledge of how QAnon was spreading on the platform (Zadrozny, 2021).

A backlash against social media companies is underway, but it's difficult to see how this process will play out in the current political environment. The two major parties agree that something is broken, but not on much else (Napoli, 2021). In the meantime, ordinary citizens, sickened by the events of January 6th and saddened by the loss of loved ones to the lure of the QAnon have banded together against the conspiracy, often appropriating the same social media methods once used by Q adherents. "Anti-Q," "Q-Anon Survivor," and "QAnon Casualty" groups have taken the place of QAnon fan groups on major social media platforms (Klepper, 2021). Some prominent Evangelical Christian pastors have likewise bucked the trend to stand against the threat of QAnon, circulating a letter explicitly denouncing the movement and the "rise of violent acts by radicalized extremists using the name of Christ" (Kaleem, 2021). Yet more followers have effectively deprogrammed themselves after witnessing the brutal acts committed by their fellow believers and coming to terms with the failure of Q's prophecies, most importantly Q's assurance that Trump would win the 2020 election (Klepper, 2021). The movement endures, but it has been deeply fractured by this defeat. This is doubtlessly due, at least in part, to the radio silence of Q himself, who has not made any posts since December 8th of 2020. Various contingents of the QAnon

community are vying for the position of authority once held by Q, leading to a great deal of intracommunity strife (Alba, 2021). For now, it seems that the wave of QAnon has crested, but this doesn't mean that the movement behind it or the rhetoric surrounding it doesn't pose a severe threat to society at large. As we have seen, these sorts of blood-libel-influenced rumors have extraordinary staying power in the Western imagination, and these and other forms of moral panic have been an enduring feature of human society (Victor 1990; Cohen, 2002). Knowing this, it would greatly benefit us to prepare for the next cycle of moral outrage before it escalates to the point of becoming a moral panic.

Conclusion

The example of the Satanic Panic illustrates how the media can choose to act as a mitigator rather than as an amplifier. The SRA panic only began to subside after powerful figures in the television industry started to push back against some of the more extreme coverage which had been pushed by their colleagues. When denied airtime and ad revenue, such stories began to dry up (Hughes, 2017). The effort to quash inaccurate and unsavory SRA coverage was complemented by an attempt to increase coverage focused on the stories of the real victims of Satanic Ritual Abuse: the individuals who had been falsely accused of these heinous crimes. This counterprogramming made the same appeals to pathos as the original SRA coverage, making it a potent weapon in the fight against misinformation (Beck, 2015). Efforts to counter QAnon programming similarly are less efficacious in the 2020s than they were in the 1980s due to the sheer number of media sources available to the average American

(Hyzen & Van den Bulck, 2021). Nevertheless, efforts to ban QAnon-related content on major social media platforms have succeeded in significantly reducing QAnon related traffic online (Alba, 2021). Old-fashioned appeals to common decency and common sense also have their place in the fight against misinformation, as illustrated by the many QAnon adherents who left the group after being exposed to “QAnon Casualty” and “QAnon Survivor” groups (Klepper, 2021).

These efforts alone will not be enough to remedy this situation, as much of the power now lies with social media companies. They are the ones who design the algorithms and develop the moderation protocols that dictate the content their audience is exposed to. The Satanic Panic illustrates that while de-platforming and disincentivizing harmful information does not entirely solve the problem, it does help limit the spread and influence these dangerous ideologies have (Jhaver et al., 2021). It is too early to predict how these companies will respond to the immense challenge which lies ahead of them. Still, some form of regulation is in order, whether it is internally adopted because of mounting pressure or externally imposed through Section 230 reform. If this does not occur QAnon and other toxic ideologies will endure on these platforms. History has shown us that as long as the pursuit of power and profit takes priority over the pursuit of the truth, panic will reign.

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A Content Analysis of CSR Themes on Major Corporations' Websites

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Abstract

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become a crucial business practice worldwide. This paper analyzes CSR themes collected from the official websites of the Asian and European corporations on the Fortune 500 list. While there is existing research comparing the CSR themes from different companies, no comparative analysis of the top companies from Europe and Asia, which has adopted content analysis focusing on company website, is publicly available as of Spring 2022. The aim of this research is to discover the popular themes among the top companies, interpret how they define CSR, and pinpoint meaningful connections between location, profits, size, and

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CSR themes. Analyses of 179 Asian and 159 European companies from the CNN Fortune Global list show that most companies call their CSR efforts *sustainability*. In addition, European companies have more CSR themes than Asian companies and are more likely to prioritize themes related to diversity and the environment. As the company's size increases, the number of CSR themes decreases. As a company's profit range increases, the number of CSR themes on its website decreases, though it is not a strong relationship.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR), through which companies go beyond regulatory terms and requirements in their practice to benefit society, has become crucial business practice around the world. According to Jason Fernando, CSR "is a self-regulating business model that helps a company be socially accountable to itself, its stakeholders, and the public" (Fernando, 2022), which includes "enhancing society" and contributing to environmental protection. Companies often list programs they have in place to show their values and principles. Some argue that CSR is a practice for companies to increase profits and ultimately undermine the free market (Friedman, 1970). On the other hand, some companies contribute to solving social and environmental issues, such as sustainability and human rights (Gunther, 2013). Ultimately, companies have the autonomy to decide what social responsibility means to them in today's business world.

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This paper collects CSR themes from the official websites of the Asian and European companies on the Fortune 500 list for analysis and explores the connections between the location of the companies and the CSR themes they pursue. While there is existing research comparing the CSR themes from different companies, no study has focused on or compared top companies from Asia and Europe. This paper aims to discover the popular themes among the top companies, how companies define CSR, and the connections between locations, profits, size, and CSR themes.

Literature Review & Research Questions

Many studies in CSR have utilized the content analysis method to study how companies talk about CSR on websites. For instance, Campopiano and De Massis (2015) aimed to determine whether family and non-family firms have different CSR foci. While the business type may differ, their process is helpful to understand for a few key reasons. First, as we do, the authors collected thematic data directly from corporate websites. Second, they conducted research into which CSR themes were the most prominent. Third, they categorized keywords and topics into codes related to CSR and used multiple human coders to categorize the content. Fourth and finally, the findings underwent a Chi-Square analysis, which was chosen because of the data types in the study. This research provides a guide for us to conduct and design the research. Previous studies in CSR have used the content analysis method to examine how businesses communicate about CSR. On the one hand, some provide

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insight into how businesses present CSR content across multiple media. While some focus on the companies' annual reports, others examine how they deliver CSR content via social media. For example, Sina and Trang's (2014) research gathered CSR practices and data from a sample of 20 of Vietnam's most significant financial companies by analyzing their 2010-2012 annual reports. Additionally, Kwon and Lee (2021) examine CSR on the Instagram pages of fashion industry companies. Given that this research will examine the CSR content on companies' websites, we will first examine the content companies tend to showcase via the website in general. As a result, our first research question would be as follows:

RQ1: What are the main CSR themes companies have?

Previous research has shed light on the factors influencing the CSR content showcase. First, many studies have examined the differences in CSR content displayed on companies' websites across industries or different business types. Some of the previous studies dug deeper into one particular industry. For example, Eray (2020) analyzed how Amazon and Walmart balanced different dimensions through their CSR efforts and concluded that multinational retailers such as Walmart and Amazon place a higher premium on “home country and specific themes” (Eray, 2020). Pulker et al. (2018) discovered that supermarket chains emphasize specific objectives, and larger companies can support public health issues using their influence and power. Kwon and Lee (2021)

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examined CSR on Instagram pages of companies in the fashion industry and found that fashion brands focus on sustainability by highlighting "greenness and environmentally friendly messages" (Kwon and Lee, 2021). Aksak and Duman (2016) discuss how the business type, industry, and geographic concentration affect the adoption of CSR and found a disparity in the emphasis placed on CSR activities by business-to-business and business-to-consumer businesses (Aksak and Duman, 2016). These studies demonstrate significant differences in the emphasis placed on CSR across industries.

Additionally, studies have focused on the difference in CSR content between companies in different regions and countries. As an illustration, Liao et al (2017) compared the CSR communication of international contractors in Asia, the EU, North America, and China. The results showed the key themes across all regions were community involvement and development; the EU contractors showed the highest levels of CSR communications while Chinese companies showed the lowest (Liao et al., 2017). Another study, *Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in Asia: A Seven-Country Study of CSR Web Site Reporting*, also has similarities to the CSR study that we are conducting. The study investigated and compared the CSR of 50 companies in seven Asian countries through corporate CSR websites. While previous studies compare different countries, others compare a broader range of regions. Asia and European companies will be the foci of this research project. We propose our second research question:

RQ2: Do the CSR themes from websites of Asian and European companies differ?

Some studies also discovered that companies' financial performance and size could influence their CSR activities. Sina and Trang's (2014) research focused on the impact of CSR on the Corporate Financial Performance (CFP) of listed companies. Their research indicated that financial performance was positively correlated with corporate involvement in CSR activities, but there was no vital relationship between a company's CSR and its size (Gray et al., 1995). Atli et al. (2018) examined the websites of 100 corporations in India and found that companies of such size needed ways to meet greater pressure to take on CSR projects (Atli, Vidović, and Omazić, 2018). In order to provide a comprehensive idea of the factors that would impact companies' CSR content, this research will also consider the company's size and profitability. As a result, we propose two additional research questions here:

RQ3: Is the number of themes from websites connected to the company's size?

RQ4: Is the number of themes companies have connected to the profit range of the company?

These examples of CSR-related content analysis help set the stage for more in-depth analysis that dive deeper into the landscape of big questions regarding CSR and show that content analyses of CSR themes are helpful. They have provided valuable insights into various factors influencing companies' CSR programs or activities, and it shows that differences by location, topic, industry, size, or revenue are possible. Therefore, this study will focus on the differences between Asian and European companies regarding CSR themes displayed on the companies' websites, providing insights into how locations, industries, size, and profits

would influence companies in defining and showcasing CSR.

Methods & Data

Data Collection

This study analyzes texts related to CSR from the main page on the official websites of the 179 Asian companies and 159 European companies from the CNN Fortune Global 500 ranking (CNNMoney, 2012). The companies were categorized according to the location of their headquarters. According to the website, all companies should have made their annual financial reports public so CNN could compile the data for the list. The companies were ranked by their combined revenue for fiscal years ending on or before March 31, 2012. The companies represent a set of common industries found on CNNMoney. A complete list of industries can be found in the codebook in Appendix 1.

CSR-related information on company websites comes in many forms. Many companies publish CSR reports as PDF documents, while others present their CSR programs in videos and graphics. This study aims to examine the overarching themes of CSRs. Therefore, coders only collected the text of the CSR main themes from the homepages of the official websites. The coder leaves the section blank if a company does not have CSR-related content on the main page. All collected data is publicly available. Coders did not collect texts beyond the main pages, nor did the coders collect pictures, animations, or videos.

First, coders collected the titles of the CSR sections from the official websites. If a company did not have a section

for CSR, the coders left the corresponding section blank. Additionally, an individual CSR section was only coded as one category. The following section will demonstrate how to code the CSR themes in detail.

Then, the industry of each company is collected from its Wikipedia profile page. Moreover, the size, profit range, and location would be collected from CNN Money, which could be found on the website of CNN Fortune Global 500 ranking. The size of a company was measured by the number of employees. Size and profit were all coded as ranges, which were measured as ordinal level data. These ranges were selected as they encompassed all available options on the top 500 list. The location was coded either as Asia or Europe. The number of employees and profit range was published on July 23, 2012. In terms of profit, data from 32 companies were removed because the information was unavailable. These cases were defined as missing data by the coders. Coders collected the themes of CSR-related content (see below for details). Coding took place between October and November 2021. The content was taken from the websites as-is.

Coding CSR Themes

Previous research has utilized various coding rules for CSR content, which provides insight for this research. To begin with, the research *Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in Asia: A Seven-Country Study of CSR Web Site Reporting* followed Moon's (2002) framework and divided it into three waves: community involvement, socially responsible production processes, and socially responsible employee relations. This coding framework provides us with a structured way to categorize corporate CSR. However, due

to the structure and scope of the study, it is a less effective method to study 338 CSR website themes.

Researchers framed their coding scheme based on CSR concepts and explanations developed by industry research groups. In *Corporate Social Responsibility and Firm Financial Performance: Comparison Analyses Across Industries and CSR Categories*, the researchers used the seven dimensions of CSR developed by KLD Research & Analytics, Inc., which include “corporate governance, community relations, diversity, employee relations, environment, human rights, and product” (Feng, Wang, & Kreuze, 2017). Lu, Wang, and Lee also incorporated these categories into their article, *The Relationship between Corporate Social Responsibility and Corporate Performance: Evidence from the US Semiconductor Industry*, which focused on the firm's performance in the semiconductor industry and their CSR activities. The coding scheme of this project is developed based on the one written by Lu, Wang, and Lee (2017).

In *Corporate Social Responsibility Communication Through Corporate Websites*, the authors used a codebook written by Carroll (1979) and the codebooks used by Chapple and Moon (2005) and Maignan and Ralston (2002). Tang and Bie (2015) utilized previous studies in CSR communications in writing the codebook, which includes the following parts: rationales, themes, and practices (Tang and Bie, 2015). Since this project will solely focus on the themes, the rationales and practices of Tang and Bie's study will not be included (Tang and Bie, 2015).

According to Eray (2020), three main categories of CSR are generally recognized when indexing CSR themes and content: economic, environmental, and social. Under "social," there are labor-management issues, human rights,

and social issues (Eray, 2020). On the other hand, Feng, Wang, and Kreuze (2017) use a different framework by categorizing CSRs based on the audiences and stakeholders. Therefore, the authors have the following themes: market-oriented CSR, society-oriented CSR, environmental-orientated, and employee-oriented CSR (Feng, Wang, and Kreuze, 2017).

While this project employs Eray (2020)'s categorization framework, the themes of Eray's (2020) and Feng, Wang, and Kreuze's (2017) articles were combined. The following themes were included: Environment, Community Relations & Development, Diversity & Equity, Product Responsibility, and Other (themes that do not fit in other categories). A comprehensive list of sub-themes and descriptions can be found in the appendix section.

Reliability Test

A reliability test for coding was conducted (*See table on Page 81*). Coders collected information from 40 randomly selected companies. As indicated in the chart above, the reliabilities for themes 1, 2, 3, and 4 were all greater than 0.5. However, the reliability of theme 5 was low, primarily due to its infrequent occurrence, when the pairwise agreements between each pair of coders were high.

Analysis and Results

Naming Conventions and Results from CSR Section Headers

To begin to answer our first research question, we saw a need to look at naming conventions behind the CSR sections on each website. We examined how companies named CSR on their main website of the portion of our sample that had

a CSR section on their website (338 companies). Thirty-three companies (accounting for 9.8% of the total) in the study did not have a CSR section on their main page of official websites.

The data (*see word cloud on pg 82*) showed that *sustainability* (164 occurrences; 39%) was the most common term, then *responsibility* (50 occurrences; 11%), and then CSR and *social* (both 32 occurrences; 8%). This analysis improves our understanding of how large corporations think about their CSR efforts and helps show how large companies are structuring the global conversation about CSR. The results improves our understanding of how large corporations think about their CSR efforts and helps show how large companies are structuring the global conversation about CSR. The results were largely as expected, considering the widespread push for companies to become more sustainable (i.e., social, environmental, etc.) in ways that fit their values (Moon, 2002).

Statistical Analysis

To continue answering our first research question, we consider the distribution of different CSR themes on these websites. (*See Figure 2 on pg 82*)

Two-hundred-sixty companies (76.92%) have an “environment” category on their main page, which makes it the most popular theme. Two-hundred-four companies (60.36%) have themes under the “community development,” category on their page. “Diversity and equity” were included on the main pages of hundred-eighty companies (53.23%). When it comes to “product responsibility,” hundred-fifty-eight companies (46.75%) supported this theme. There are twenty-six companies (7.69%) with CSR themes under

Table 1

Reliability Test

Variable Name	Krippendorff's alpha (nominal)	Average Pairwise Cohen's Kappa
Theme 1 Environment	0.758	0.764
Theme 2 Community	0.591	0.59
Theme 3 Diversity	0.651	0.656
Theme 4 Product	0.627	0.626
Theme 5 Others	0.151	0.099

Table 2

Pairwise Percent Agreement of Theme 5

Average Pariwise Percent agr.	95.83%
Pairwise pct. agr. cols 1&4	97.5%
Pairwise pct. agr. cols 1&3	97.5%
Pairwise pct. agr. cols 1&2	95%
Pairwise pct. agr. cols 2&4	92.5%
Pairwise pct. agr. cols 2&3	97.5%
Pairwise pct. agr. cols 3&4	95%

"other," which is not included in any of the four themes above. Thirty-three companies (9.8%) do not have any CSR themes or sections on their main page of official websites.

Thirty-two percent of the companies (N=108) have three themes on their websites, while 45% of them have with either two or four themes (see Table 3).

In order to test our second research question, we examined the relationship between the location of the company and the number of CSR themes they have. The relationship is statistically significant (sig. 2-tailed=0.001 at a degree of freedom of 336), and European companies tend to have more themes than Asian companies. The mean for European companies is 2.69, and the mean for Asian companies is 2.24.

We then considered whether Asian and European countries differed in terms of which themes they featured in their CSR sections. A cross tab was conducted to test the relationship between the location of the company and the inclusion of the theme environment. The relationship

Table 3
Number of Themes on Company Website

Number of Theme	N	%
0	33	9.8%
1	48	14.2%
2	70	20.7%
3	108	32.0%
4	79	23.4%

Table 4
Profit Range (Millions of USD)

Profit Range	N	%
1 - 100	73	21.6%
101 - 200	26	7.7%
201 - 300	9	2.7%
301 - 400	8	2.4%
401 - 500	6	1.8%
> 500	184	54.4%
Unavailable	32	9.5%

is statistically significant (significance is less than 0.001 at a degree of freedom of 1), and Pearson's Chi-Square value is 19.258. A larger percentage of European companies (87.9%) have this theme than Asian companies (67.8%).

On the other hand, the cross-tab test for the location of the company and the theme community result shows no meaningful relationship between these two factors (Pearson's Chi-Square = 0.658; Sig.=0.43 at the degree of freedom of 1).

When it comes to the relationship between the location of the company and the diversity, the result shows a meaningful relationship between these two variables (Pearson's Chi-Square = 6.731; sig.=0.12 at the degree of freedom of 1). 60.8% of the European companies have diversity-themed

Table 5*Size (Numbers of Employees)*

Numbers of Employees	N	%
< 10,000	16	4.7%
10,000 ≤ < 50,000	92	27.2%
50,000 ≤ < 100,000	82	24.3%
100,000 ≤ < 200,000	90	26.6%
≥ 20,000	58	17.2%

topics on their sites, but only 46.7% of the Asian companies have this theme.

Finally, there is no meaningful relationship between the location of the company and the inclusion of the theme of product responsibility (Pearson's Chi-Square = 2.154; sig.=0.155 at the degree of freedom of 1). No meaningful relationship exists between either the location of the company or the inclusion of the "other" (sig=0.687 at the degree of freedom of 1, with the Pearson's Chi-Square value being 0.223).

Our third research question considers whether CSR themes vary by company size. Company size was measured by the number of employees.

First, we calculated the frequency distribution as shown in Table 5. There were no missing values for the variable size of the company, and all 338 cases were valid. Those with more than 10,000 but less than 50,000 employees accounted

for the largest proportion (27.2%) of the total, followed by those with more than 100,000 but less than 200,000 employees (26.6%) and those with more than 50,000 but less than 100,000 employees (24.3%).

To assess whether there was a correlation between the size of a company and how many CSR themes they would disclose on their website, a Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between these two variables. There was a weak negative relationship between the two variables, $r(336) = -.18, p < .001$, suggesting that the bigger the company's size is, the fewer CSR themes would be displayed on its website.

To answer our fourth research question, we consider the relationship between profit and the number of CSR themes. Profits greater than 500 million dollars accounted for a significant 60.1% percent of the total, followed by profits less than 100 million dollars (23.9%) and profits between 101 to 200 million dollars (8.5%). There was a high proportion of companies with revenues greater than 500 million USD, which resulted in a huge proportion of cases falling into one category, indicating the need for a more precise range in the codebook.

To determine if there was a correlation between a company's profit and the number of CSR themes disclosed on its website, a Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to determine the linear relationship between these two variables. There was a weak negative correlation between the two variables, $r(304) = -.13, p = .03$, indicating that the greater a company's profit range is, the fewer CSR themes would be displayed on its website.

Conclusion

Based on the data analysis, we draw the following conclusions:

1. Companies most commonly call their CSR efforts *Sustainability*.
2. European companies displayed more CSR themes than Asian companies and were more likely to display themes related to diversity and the environment.
3. When the company's size increased, the number of CSR themes decreased. *Note: the relationship between these variables was not particularly strong.*
4. As a company's profit range increased, the number of CSR themes on its website decreased. *Note: the relationship between these variables was not particularly strong.*
5. Most companies have three different themes when it comes to the number of CSR themes.

These results reveal valuable insights about corporate accountability practices around the world. They show that most large-scale companies are likely to have CSR-related content on their websites, which usually prioritize *sustainability*. It also demonstrated that companies in Europe and Asia have different preferences for CSR themes.

CSR themes change by location. Size, profits, and industries are all connected to the themes that Fortune 500 companies include. The Fortune 500 companies are the key players who set CSR efforts' agenda. The results should interest governments, companies, lobbyists, and consumers, as all

parties could use this information to benefit themselves. Governments and lobbyists can know where legislation and advocacy are needed based on the CSR companies are – or are not – implementing. Companies can either follow these influential players by modeling their own CSR after the curve noted here or strike a new path by focusing on new areas or changing the number of CSR initiatives they invest in. Consumers can use these results to understand which large companies are investing – or not – in their preferred social issues when deciding whether to purchase their products.

However, we would like to recognize certain limitations of this study, which include the scale and scope of the project given the timeframe and potential biases held while coding. For example, in order to obtain a complete list of companies from Asia and Europe with comprehensive information on numbers of employees and profits, a dated dataset was selected when performing data analysis. Therefore, the information on the profit and number of employees – including our sample – is older than the information related to CSR from the companies' sites. Still, these limitations do not diminish the overall quality of the results.

Future research could fall into several categories regarding CSR, companies, and themes. Primarily, further research should test the connection between profit, size, and industry, all against the CSR themes we identified. This will give a more complete picture of the connections between companies and the CSR they implement. Another perspective to CSR study could be country-level analyses of CSR themes, which can expand the scope of our research.

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Appendix One: Codebook

Unit of analysis: The main CSR themes identified in the literature reviews will be coded for and recorded as they appear on each website.

Coder ID: Indicate the number of the individual who coded that sheet, according to the Coder

ID list:

- Coder A: 1
- Coder B: 2
- Coder C: 3
- Coder D: 4

Date of Coding: Indicate the date of collection coding, using the convention mm/dd/yy

Date of Publication: indicate the date the information was made available.

Website ID: Give each website a unique 3-digit number, beginning with 001 and proceeding upward without duplication across the content being coded.

- Top 500 list: [Here](#)
- Methodology: [The list is ranked](#) by total revenues for their respective fiscal years ended on/before March 31, 2013. [According to the site](#): “All companies on the list must publish financial data and report part or all of their figures to a government agency.”
 - 179 Asian Companies
 - 159 European Companies
- Sample company page: [Here](#)

- Sample Wikipedia page: [Here](#)

Note: Whatever bias may be introduced by labeling sequentially is too small to address in the course of the study. The coders are working in sequence and dividing the companies up, thus ensuring companies are not all done in order.

CSR Section Title: Indicate the title of the section on the company's website that presents their CSR content.

Theme: These themes were chosen because they were the most prominent in the literature reviews we conducted. We combined the code themes of Eray's article *Addressing corporate social responsibility in corporations: a content analysis of Amazon's and Walmart's websites* and Feng, Wang and Kreuze's article *Corporate social responsibility and firm financial performance: Comparison analyses across industries and CSR categories*, based on our focus and our hypothesis.

The coder should code them based on the description provided:

1. **Environment**, commonly seen as: Biodiversity, Energy, Water, Effluents and waste, Emission, carbon footprint, global warming, climate change, sustainable development
2. **Community relations & development:** scholarships, education, community service, social benefit or progress, country or party contributions
3. **Diversity & Equity**, commonly seen as: equal opportunity, equal wages, inclusion, and social justice, labor rights, Investment, Non-discrimination, Indigenous Right, racial equity and justice, corporate governance, human rights, employees
4. **Product Responsibility**, commonly seen as: Customer health and safety, Product and service labeling, ethical marketing communications, Customer Privacy, ethics & compliance, Supplier responsibility/responsible sourcing, technological development and innovation
5. **Other:** Themes that do not fit in other categories

If the company does not have a section for CSR, leave the theme section blank.

Location:

1. Europe
2. Asia

Industry: These themes were identified based on an article introducing the primary categories of industries ([link](#)). We selected the most prominent ones by an overview study of the companies through a brief data analysis.

1. Energy
2. Financial Services
3. Food & Beverages
4. Healthcare & Pharmaceuticals
5. Manufacturing
6. Media & Entertainment
7. Real Estate & Construction
8. Technology (IT)
9. Telecommunication
10. Transportation
11. Other
12. N/A: Unavailable

Profit Range (millions of USD): After a review of the companies and their profits, these ranges were selected as they encompassed all available options on the top 500 list.

1. 1 – 100
2. 101 – 200
3. 201 – 300
4. 301 – 400
5. 401 – 500
6. 501+
7. Unavailable

Size (numbers of employees)

1. < 10,000 people
2. $10,000 \leq < 50,000$ people
3. $50,000 \leq < 100,000$ people
4. $100,000 \leq < 200,000$ people
5. $\geq 200,000$ people
6. Unavailable

Coding Scheme:

1. Coder begins by filling out coder ID, website ID, and date coding occurs.
2. Coder refers to the top 500 list and begins at the next unrecorded company.
3. Coder goes to the company profile and, from there, the company website. If no official website is available from the list, the coder should go to the Wikipedia page of the company and find the link to the website there.

4. Should the company be in a language other than English, the coder should translate the website into English via Google's auto translate feature, which pops up on the webpage, before coding.

5. Should the company have multiple websites for different regions, the coder should go to the website of the company's headquarter country and choose English language or use Google Translation when necessary.

0. The company's home country is determined by the Headquarters section on each company profile page accessed through the top 500 list.

1. If unavailable, the coder will then go to the global official corporate page of the company, usually referred to as "XXX global" to determine whether the country is in Asia or Europe.

2. Coder navigates to the CSR menu/section of the company website by identifying the CSR page, searching in the search bar, or clicking through the pages available.

0. The coder should not click into sub-pages but pull only from the main menus.

2. Coder records which CSR themes are on the website according to the codebook rules

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Fake People Kissing: Queerbaiting and Fan Agency

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Abstract

In the early 2010s, the term “queerbaiting” emerged in fan communities to describe the phenomenon of films and TV shows including intentionally homoerotic moments in order to ensnare a queer audience, but without the intention of ever following through and confirming the characters to be in any way “canonically” queer. In recent years, the term has spread from fandom to academia as a way of criticizing the state of queer representation in pop culture. While “queerbaiting” is almost always seen as an action on the part of producers that harms fans, I argue that these accusations of queerbaiting create more interesting, dynamic

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relationships between creators and audiences. In this paper, I will be exploring the fan reaction to queerbaiting, and how it allows fans to be more empowered in their readings of the text, creates a more active and engaged fanbase, and allows fans to hold the creators accountable for their promises.

On YouTube, there is a series of 49 videos, each ranging from ten minutes to two hours long, where a smiling graduate student enthusiastically reassures fans that the characters John Watson and Sherlock Holmes were going to become a romantic couple in the upcoming fourth season of the BBC's *Sherlock* adaptation. In each video, the host painstakingly breaks down different aspects of the show, from the largest overarching plotlines to the most minute set dressing details, using in-depth literary analysis to "prove" that the creators were, without a doubt, setting up a big, romantic ending for the show's two male protagonists, dubbing it "TJLC", or, "The Johnlock Conspiracy".

In the last video, titled simply "Get Ready", posted the night before season four was set to premiere, the host is close to bursting with excitement and states that "as amazing as it's been to know the truth before the rest of the world, it's going to be even more rewarding to see everyone realize what story they've actually been watching."

But then season four aired, and there was no kiss. No confession. No grand, romantic ending. The host, like the thousands of people who watched the videos, and the thousands more gathered in other fan communities on the internet was hurt, disappointed, and betrayed. It's easy

to paint these fans as delusional, easy for mean spirited people to laugh at just how quickly these confident hopes were shut down, but when you look into the show, and the instances that TJLC Explained points out, it becomes easy to understand how people reached that conclusion. The show constantly made jokes about Holmes and Watson's friendship, characters would assume they were in a relationship, villains would use one of them as bait for the other, and in one particularly painful instance, Holmes stands in front of Watson, moments before his impending death, and tearfully tells him that there's something he's always meant to say to him, and because this may be his last time to say it... "Sherlock is a girl's name."

If you were expecting a love confession, congratulations. You have just been queerbaited.

The term "queerbaiting" has caught on in recent years, with media outlets like Rolling Stone and even the BBC publishing news stories on the term and its harmful side effects. It's a relatively new area of academic study, with the earliest instance being an article published by Judith Fathallah in 2015. While the origins of the term are unclear, academics like Emma Nordin have credited its inception and spread to the microblogging platform Tumblr and other, smaller fan forums of the early 2010s, where the most popular media properties of the time were similar to Sherlock: shows that focused on the dynamic between two male protagonists, a dynamic many fans interpreted as romantic.

Fans of these pairings exist on a spectrum: some content to enjoy fan content of the characters without the expectation that the pairing would ever "go canon," or become an established romantic relationship within the source

material, others waiting with bated breath every episode in the hope that this would be the episode when they finally admit their feelings.

The accusation of “queerbaiting” exists somewhere between these two extremes. Queerbaiting acknowledges that the creators and showrunners have no intention of confirming these characters as queer, but also acknowledges that many times queer coding is included intentionally for the purpose of “baiting” gay viewers. Fans who level accusations of queerbaiting recognize that the likelihood of a pairing getting together is slim to none, but these accusations are usually done with the hope of changing this outcome.

A friend once likened queerbaiting to the old joke about porn: “I can’t define it, but I know it when I see it.” In *Queerbaiting and Fandom: Teasing Fans Through Homoerotic Possibilities*, Joseph Brennan defines queerbaiting as “an industry tactic where “those officially associated with a media text court viewers interested in LGBT narratives...without the text ever definitely confirming the nonheterosexuality of the relevant characters” (Brennan, 2019, pp.2). It's often a point of contention, in and out of fandom communities, what is an example of queerbaiting and what isn't. If a character comes out as gay but dies immediately after, is that still queerbaiting? If the creators imply in an interview that characters have romantic feelings for each other, even though it's not confirmed in the canon, is that still queerbaiting? If actors backtrack on a love confession, claiming that it's “up for interpretation,” is that still queerbaiting? Even with a seemingly catch-all definition like Brennan's, the place where the line is drawn is still unclear, and a lot of it hinges on attempting to judge the creators' intentions and the viewers' own perceptions. For the purpose of this paper, I

will be working with my own definition of queerbait as “the intentional queer coding of a character or characters to gain or maintain a queer audience without the intention of ever explicitly addressing the subtext.”

However, like the old adage about porn, sometimes, you really do know it when you see it. I was an avid Tumblr user, spending my teenage years on the website during what I refer to as “the Golden Age of Queerbait”, where “queerbait” mostly referred to broadcast television and movie franchises queer coded their protagonists and made winking jokes and heartfelt exchanges between the intimate same-sex friendships of their cast. Light enough to be plausibly played off as a “bromance”, but serious enough to give their audience the impression that they had to be leading up to a romance. I observed, in others and in myself, that this form of queerbaiting frustrated and insulted viewers, but it also led to a more robust fandom and devoted fans. As a fan and as an academic, I became fascinated with why that was and became interested in studying the potential upsides to queerbaiting.

Literature Review/What is Queerbaiting?

As most of my previous research has shown, the line between “queerbait” and “subtext” is very blurry and difficult to define, the difference seems to lie in the intentions of the creators. In order to gain a better understanding of queerbait, I believe that it is necessary to have a basic understanding of what constitutes homoerotic subtext, how and why it comes to be, and how audiences receive it. Vito Russo’s book *The Celluloid Closet* is an in-depth examination of the way homosexuality has been portrayed

(or obscured) in Hollywood during the 20th century, and the chapter I chose delves into the way homosexuality is hinted at, while Hollywood was under the Hays Code, a set of guidelines for films from 1934 to 1968 aimed at prohibiting “immoral” content, which included depictions of homosexuality. Despite the code, “while on the lookout for overt references to stereotypical homosexuality, censors missed the ephemeral emotional commitments to the kind of male bonding that had characterized couples since *Wings*” (Russo, 1987, pp.92). This era of subtext and homoeroticism in the film allowed the heroes to be queer coded or have intimate same-sex friendships, as long as homosexuality was never explicitly mentioned.

Russo’s examination of homoerotic subtext in the buddy genre is particularly interesting and very relevant, as many of the high-profile cases of queerbait take place in TV shows with a similar conceit - centering around an unlikely friendship between two men with very different personalities. Russo writes that the buddy films of the 50s and 60s were mostly about “a group of men going off to fight a war or to conquer a wilderness - men’s work, in which a female presence is superfluous but tolerated” (1987, pp.71), not too far off from today’s superhero films and action shows, where female characters may be present, but “the primary buddy relationships in films are those men who despise homosexuality yet find that their truest and most notable feelings are for each other” (Russo, 1987 pp. 70). Russo cites Joan Mellon’s study of masculinity in film in stating that “the less violent men were in their film personas, the more likely they were to be in heterosexual love” (1987, pp.72), and goes on to infer that “the opposite has been true for homoeroticism. The perception of homosexual feelings as a brutal furtive and dangerous force saw it flourish in

films of male bonding and violence” (1987, pp.72). This again holds true for modern-day instances of queerbaiting and homoeroticism, including in the case of queerbaiting that I’m planning on covering in my paper, *Supernatural*, where the male characters would routinely beat each other up in routinely violent ways while the female characters were only there to represent a safe, nonviolent life that they would never end up choosing.

The treatment and portrayal of women in these genres also feed into the homoerotic readings, but oftentimes, “homosexuals - invisible in fact but not in theory - take the rap for the heterosexist woman-hating attitudes that permeate buddy films and characterize the attitudes of heterosexuals toward both gays and women, whom they consider indistinguishable” (Russo, 86). Russo cites the film newspaper *Jump Cut’s* review of the buddy film *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*, stating that the review’s author’s homophobia caused him to “attribute the misogynist attitudes in *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* not to the tiresome conventions of a misogynist genre but to the latent homosexual sensibility of the film” (Russo, 1987, pp.85), the same way that the fans of the homoerotic relationship in *Supernatural* are often blamed for the way women are often sidelined and killed off on the show. Oftentimes, the homoerotic subtext that emerges in male-led media like *Supernatural* is an accidental result of misogyny. In specific genres, such as the action-adventure genre or the buddy film, the focus of these films and movies is on the male characters and their deep, manly bond (Klink and Minkel, 2020). Female characters are often scarce, underwritten, and just exist as a way for the male protagonists to prove their heterosexuality. In the absence of well-written female characters (or any female characters), it’s natural that

audiences (particularly queer audiences) read deeper into the more fleshed-out relationships between the presumably straight male protagonists.

Russo writes that these buddy films justified the heterosexuality of male protagonists and their intimate relationships through bringing in “actual” gay characters in order to contrast their affectations and behavior to that of the heroes, with the protagonist often reacting negatively or violently towards these homosexuals. “The presence onscreen of homosexual characters was a perfect way of saying, oh no, this isn’t what we mean at all. Homosexuals draw suspicion away from the buddies” (Russo, 1978, pp. 80). These representations were often comical caricatures, as “comedy has been able to comment on sexual roles more readily than drama could do only because people may dismiss it as impossible farce” (Russo, 1987, pp.74). In contemporary instances of queerbaiting, however, the homosexual characters included may not be portrayed as comical, pitiful, evil creatures (or not *always* portrayed like that), but serve as a way of both proving that the characters in question are not gay *and* that the creators are not homophobic or afraid of including gay characters. For example, many fans of the newest *Star Wars* movies were interested in the close relationship between the characters Finn and Poe, and wondered if there was a possibility of the two getting together, especially as director J.J. Abrams hinted in an interview that the last installment of the trilogy would have the franchise’s first openly LGBT characters. However, when the movie was released, the highly anticipated LGBT characters ended up being a pair of extras, kissing in the background of a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it shot that was cut from many international releases, including Singapore and Dubai. Having these background

characters be confirmed as “the” gay characters implies that Finn and Poe can’t be gay, while also having the added bonus of appearing progressive. This is an example of what Russo calls “the yardstick sissy,” which plays off the assumption that homosexuality is uncommon and alien. If there is one homosexual character or gay couple in a film or TV show, there couldn’t possibly be *two*, that would challenge the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm.

Interestingly, Russo writes that “the suppression of homosexuality, or the incorporation of it as something alien and sinister, plus the emotional tension created by the all-male dynamic in buddy films influenced homoerotic ideas and longings that achieved expression on the screen” (Russo, 1987, pp.97), because “the secret signals and hidden signs of homosexuality in Hollywood features were the only frames of reference for most gays, who learned about themselves chiefly from movies that said that the whole world was heterosexual” (Russo, 1987, pp. 98). “Subtext” is both informed by the identities and desires of the audience and informs the identities and desires of the audience.

Queerbaiting has been criticized for being “misattributed to texts that are in fact employing subtext” (Brennan, 2019, p.10). Historically, the homoerotic subtext being intentionally included but also intentionally ambiguous was due to laws and censorship surrounding homosexuality and depictions of it onscreen, such as the Hays Code. However, unlike the writers including subtext under the Hays Code, “those who queerbait only offer a facsimile of the real thing.” (Brennan, 2019, p.12). Instances of homoerotic subtext are no longer the valiant attempts of filmmakers to smuggle in as much queerness as they can pass the censors. While homophobia still exists, there is no

longer the same oppressive censorship in the United States preventing queerness to be shown onscreen.

This is where, according to Brennan, “queerbaiting” diverges from “subtext”. As he states in his definition, Brennan believes that queerbaiting is “a concept and a condition of its historical moment” (Brennan, 2019, p.2), we’re at a cultural moment where conversations about pop culture and mainstream film and TV center around concepts of representation and visibility for marginalized communities who rarely get to see themselves reflected on screen, but many media producers are still reluctant to actually take that step. Brennan writes that “a culture of *keeping it vague* also encourages a public refusal of queer fan interpretations, fans of which frequently find themselves met with “denial and mockery” that functions to “reinstate a heteronormative narrative that poses no danger of offending mainstream viewers at the expense of queer eyes” (Brennan, 2019, p.16) and that:

Fans often face ridicule and censoring from authors and gatekeepers, who continue to police and assert ownership over meaning in line with a more homogeneous or safe interpretation of their texts. Such efforts are likely in service of protecting the broadest possible appeal of a product, while also keeping open parts of the text that might inspire more subversive interpretations and thus continue to capture niche followings (Brennan, 2019, p.13).

This is where queerbaiting becomes a form of fan activism. "The emergence of queerbaiting in the present decade has come to represent such a future, and with it an audience-driven call for media producers (cast, writers, showrunners, executives, and marketers) to deal with the intricacies

of queer identities and own up to the strategies they employ to court such followings. In short, those who have 'communicated covertly to gays or implied gayness with a wink' must now declare their intentions to these audiences" (Brennan, 2019, p.18).

While "queerbaiting" may at first seem similar to older fandom terms describing same-sex relationships, such as "slash" or "HoYay" (short for "Homoeroticism, Yay!"), it plays a very different role in fan discussions. As previously mentioned, queerbaiting is generally understood as a criticism of the media and the creators, while "slash" and "HoYay" were coined to celebrate homoerotic tension between straight characters in TV shows (Nordin, 2019). "Slash" differs from "queerbait" because the focus is on queer relationships, the term itself coming from the practice of *Star Trek* fans denoting a romantic relationship between Kirk and Spock as Kirk/Spock, or K/S. The term has been used as a way to describe same-sex relationships in fandom and fan works since the 1980s, alongside the "character A/character B" naming convention for ships, but both have fallen out of use in recent years. Fans now prefer a naming convention of mashing the two characters' names together (Kirk/Spock becomes "Spirk" for example). The term "HoYay", on the other hand, is specific to instances of homoerotic subtext within a piece of media, and doesn't typically extend to fanworks, nor does it explicitly apply to wanting a romantic relationship between two characters.

While there were still some voices of criticism in fandoms regarding slash and HoYay, namely how "long looks and lingering touches did not get the same recognition did not get the same recognition or conclusion when they occurred between a male and a female character" (Nordin, 2019,

p.29), the tone still was overwhelmingly positive. This view of queerness and homoeroticism in media, however, is based on an older era of fandom. In the early 2000s, people had lower expectations for LGBT representation in mainstream media and were generally more content to have their own queer readings of a text knowing that they were unlikely (or impossible) to happen in canon. However, the 2010s were a decade of changing attitudes in regard to the gay rights movements for the American public and media, and it's no coincidence that this is around the time when the concept of "queerbaiting" began to catch on in fandom spaces. The aim of holding creators accountable and negotiating for better and more interesting queer representation onscreen is one that is unique to accusations of queerbaiting.

Some critics in academia, such as Nordin, claim that "it is not that fans accusing producers of queerbaiting are unaware of a pleasurable queer reading, but that they do not trust that such a reading will make a difference" (Nordin, 2019, p.29), but these I think these criticisms fail to consider that we do still live in an age where queer characters are underrepresented in mainstream media. It's not a hollow, insecure pursuit for people to expect better queer representation, especially when this representation is dangled in front of them in the form of queerbaiting.

Thesis Statement

The act of queerbaiting is almost always framed as an exploitation of the fans at the hands of the creators. However, I argue that this view of queerbaiting fails to take into account the interesting interactions at play between

fans and creators, and the ownership that fans claim over the text when discussions of queerbaiting are taking place.

The relationship between fan and creator has always been an interesting one within the field of fan studies, but Brennan writes that with queerbaiting, “what is unfolding here is the power struggle over meaning between author and text, text and reader. Such power struggles are not new, but they have become more pronounced with the rise of the audience as a visible entity” (Brennan, 2019, p.9). Discussions of queerbait exist somewhere between “the Death of the Author” and taking authorial intent as the word of god, respecting the content of the text while also understanding “the potential benefits of alternative forms of interpretation and consumption” (Jenkins, 1992, p.26). Nordin describes this as a case where “the author was dead, but fans had now revived the author, an author they held responsible for intentionally hinting at and alluding to queerness without ever delivering on this promise” (Nordin, 2019, p.28). And while some critics view this as simply wishful thinking or fan entitlement, many times queerbait accusations are a direct response to the content and promises that creators are already putting in the show. It’s a way of taking the authors to court, exerting control over the text, and trying to affect the outcome. Fans have significantly less power than creators, and are “peasants, not proprietors” within the media landscape (Jenkins, 1992), but are still able to assert their power over media through their engagement with the text and through the organization of fan groups. Prior to the rise of the internet, fan communities were limited to in-person meetups for specific fandoms, and even in the early 2000s, fan sites online were still fairly isolated (Klink and Minkel, 2020). The shift to larger social media platforms, such as Tumblr and Twitter, allows for more crossover

between fanbases, which helps fans recognize patterns of queerbaiting as a larger issue and not just specific to a singular show.

Fans' attempts to influence text are not new. There are records dating back to the 1960s of fan-run campaigns to keep certain shows on the air, campaigns that are often appreciated by creators and networks as ways of attracting higher ratings (Jenkins, 1992). Fandom's move to social media allows for fans to be able to connect with each other across the world, while also making these discussions easier and more public. While creators, actors, and producers similarly gaining more of a social media presence means that they become more aware of fan expectations, theories, and complaints, and are sometimes even swayed by them; as was the case with the *Westworld* creators scrapping a major plot point of the 2nd season when fans on Reddit already "figured it out" (McCreesh, 2017). The relationship between reader and writer, audience and actor, or fan and creator - a relationship that has rarely been comfortable (Jenkins, 1992) - is becoming more blurred and more participatory with the rise of social media, which fosters more direct interactions between celebrity and fan. Because of this, I would argue that queerbaiting is not always a one-sided exploitation of the fans, but can be a conversation or a game of tug of war between fan and creator.

In this paper, I will be exploring the fan reaction to queerbaiting, and how it allows fans to be empowered in their readings of the text, which creates a more active and engaged fanbase and allows fans to hold the creators accountable for their promises. Because it's difficult to prove the intentions of creators (Nordin, 2019), this paper focuses primarily on the fan and media response to queerbaiting. I

analyze one of the most infamous cases of queerbaiting, one that is practically undisputed, for content, media coverage, and fan response.

The Last Great American Queerbait

It's difficult to discuss queerbait in any setting, fan or academic, online or offline, without mentioning *Supernatural*. It's listed in the limited selection of examples on the Wikipedia page for Queerbaiting, and news outlets such as TVGuide and Insider have written articles about *Supernatural's* queerbaiting problem (Gennis, 2017; Tenbarge, 2020).

Supernatural was a fantasy/adventure show that ran on the CW for 15 seasons between 2005 and 2020. It initially took the form of a monster-of-the-week, horror-themed show about two brothers hunting various horror movie monsters while searching for their missing father, it later grew infamous for its increasingly convoluted plotlines and attempts to find bigger, scarier antagonists as the show increased in popularity and kept being renewed far beyond creator Eric Kripke's initial plans.

The show began to shift away from its monster-of-the-week format in the fourth season, with the introduction of the angels - and more specifically, Castiel. The character Castiel (played by Misha Collins) was introduced in the first episode of season 4, as the mysterious inhuman entity that rescued Dean Winchester (the elder of the two protagonist brothers, played by Jensen Ackles) from Hell for unknown purposes. Despite only being introduced in the last five minutes of the episode, the very first Dean/

Castiel fanfiction community appeared on LiveJournal that same night. A lot of this early excitement about the Dean/Castiel pairing [hereafter referred to as “Destiel”] was standard for slash shippers and communities, many of whom were excited for the potential of a slash pairing in *Supernatural*, where previously the only recurring male characters were the two brothers and their father (not that that stopped some fans), but as their relationship was developed on the show, it started attracting different fans. Namely, young queer teenagers, who saw themselves in these characters.

What stands out about Destiel is that the queer coding of these characters is not limited to their relationship dynamic, and is therefore different from cases of “Homoeroticism, Yay!” or Slash, which would often present the characters' attraction to each other as a new, one-time case, with fanworks often depicting the complex emotions of this sort of discovery (Jenkins, 1992). It was more typical for queer readings to involve presumed heterosexual male characters realizing they're bisexual through their attraction to the character they're paired with. Fans accusing *Supernatural* of queerbaiting assert that on top of homoerotic subtext between Dean and Castiel, the two are queer coded independently through aspects of their characterization.

There have been plenty of queer readings of Dean Winchester since before Castiel was even on the show. He has plenty of flings and flirtations in the early seasons, but despite his ladies' man persona, he just can't seem to settle down or have any fulfilling relationships with women. His longest-lasting and most impactful relationship with a woman was with a woman named Lisa, who represents a “white picket fence” life: a normal, heterosexual lifestyle

that Dean felt was something he could never had and was, therefore, something that he always wanted. The show was supposed to end in season 5, with Dean returning to live with Lisa and her son, heterosexually ever after. However, because the show was renewed, season 6 opened with Dean finding himself restless and unhappy in his new heterosexual life and missing the dangerous monster-hunting lifestyle. A lifestyle which, in the show, has very few women and holds intimate male friendships in high regard. Later that season, he leaves her and all her memories of him are erased, and she's never mentioned again.

While much of Dean Winchester's queer coding feels accidental, or a result of the treatment of female characters on the show, the queer coding of Castiel feels much more intentional, and at times malicious. When Castiel was introduced, he was a very serious, powerful, and mysterious character. However, as he became more and more of a fan favorite, Castiel would frequently become the butt of gay jokes, both on and offscreen. In almost every episode, the Winchester brothers would go undercover as FBI agents, and use the names of classic rock stars and traditionally macho action movie stars as aliases, but *Supernatural* developed a running joke of Castiel using the names of female pop stars instead. While Dean and Sam were Agents Eastwood and Willis, Castiel would be Agent Beyonce or Agent Lizzo. In a moment from the season 5 gag reel, Ackles can be heard saying "we're missing the gay angel", and Collins responds "you mean gay as in happy, right?",¹ and at a convention in 2016, Ackles read part of a script using "the way the dialogue sounds in his head", and Castiel's voice is a high-pitched, stereotypically fey lisp. Another convention appearance alluded to a deleted scene

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Ih8swamYZI>

where Castiel is trying to find a way to get into heaven and finds his own “personal heaven” which is plastered with pictures of shirtless men with Dean’s face glued onto it. Even when he’s not being the butt of the show’s gay jokes, Castiel’s storylines are often ones that queer people can relate to.

Castiel is an angel and is therefore supposed to be incapable of emotion and above humanity, but as the show states over and over again, Castiel is *different* from all his celestial siblings. The ugly duckling/fish out of water narrative is one that can often be read as queer-coded, as it hits upon the themes of exclusion, isolation, and a desire for community and understanding that many queer people, especially young and/or closeted queer people have faced in their lives. The other angels are equally hostile to Castiel, responding with everything from pity (a sister telling him that it gets worse) to heartbreak and outright hostility (a sister telling him that he has “fallen in every way imaginable” (Kripke et al., 2005-2020)), and even in one case, sending him to the angelic equivalent of conversion therapy, with another angel performing lobotomies on him in order to make him behave like a proper angel again, and free him of his attachment to Dean Winchester.

It is hard to discuss Castiel’s queer coding without bringing in the relationship between him and Dean Winchester, because, for most of the show, Castiel is relegated to the role of love interest for Dean. Almost immediately, Castiel is set up as an important relationship for Dean, when Dean emerges from hell, it’s with Castiel’s handprint burned into his shoulder. Through the entirety of seasons 4 and 5, whenever Castiel appears, it’s to interact with Dean, who slowly sways him into rebelling against heaven and

joining Dean on Earth. Other characters frequently make reference to their relationship. Meg, the character who was the closest thing Castiel had to a female romantic interest (like most of Dean's female love interests, died far away from Castiel and was never mentioned again), tells Dean that he "was his [Castiel's] boyfriend first",¹ another character calls Cas the "[angel] in a ratty trenchcoat who is in love with [Dean]",² and in later seasons, another angel directly compares Castiel's relationship with Dean to his own romantic relationship with a human woman.³ I mentioned previously that the loss of Dean's female romantic interests fails to impact him emotionally in long term arcs, which stands out in a show that centers so much around themes of male grief and vengeance, however, Castiel "died" several times throughout the show, and each one of his deaths *has* profoundly affected Dean, turning him into a dark, vengeful, grief-driven antihero for long stretches of episodes until Castiel has been written back onto the show and brought back to life once again. This happens multiple times, in seasons 7, 8, and 13. Season 13 is by far the most powerful of these moments, as Castiel dies leaving behind a newly born adopted son, and Dean's rage and grief at losing Castiel and the way he takes it out on Jack (the son) is a direct parallel of Dean's own childhood, with his father mistreating him after being driven to grief following the loss of his wife.

Between these two characters, there is significantly more pushback against queer readings of Dean than of Castiel. Debates over whether Dean Winchester is straight or not

1 Season 7, Episode 21: "Reading is Fundamental"

2 Season 6, Episode 17: "My Heart Will Go On"

3 Season 12, Episode 10: "Lily Sunder Has Some Regrets"

rage across *Supernatural* fan communities online. This is in part due to the fact that throughout the show Dean *does* show romantic and sexual attraction to women, something that has never stuck with Castiel. Another reason is that Dean is a much more traditionally masculine character than Castiel, leading fans to believe that means he couldn't possibly be queer. As one Reddit commenter put it, "Dean is the textbook case of a stereotypical late 70s early 80s born heterosexual male" (LittleMissFirebright, 2021). However, both of these things have led some fans to argue even harder for a queer reading. Samantha Pajour writes for Mic that "Dean Winchester, a masculine guy in his mid-30s who loves whiskey, classic rock, and his '67 Chevy Impala; who was raised by an abusive father; who has been hunting since he could hold a shotgun; and who is a lead character on an urban fantasy drama popular with a male audience would be such an important and groundbreaking representation of bisexuality on TV" (2013).

The introduction of Castiel and the Dean/Castiel dynamic brought in a brand new type of fan to *Supernatural's* audience, fans who were tuning in specifically because of the relationship between Dean and Castiel. While there has always been a subculture of shipping and slash within the *Supernatural* audience (as expected for any show with two conventionally attractive male leads), many Dean/Castiel fans brought a different set of expectations with them. In "Supernatural Has a Queerbaiting Problem that Needs to Stop", Sadie Gennis writes that early slash fans would ship the brothers, and while the show would throw in the occasional joke about hotel clerks assuming they were a couple, these fans understood that this relationship was completely out of the realm of possibility within the show. But when these same jokes were made about Dean

and Castiel, many fans thought that a romantic relationship between the two was something that could really happen (2014), and seeing posts and clips of these jokes and exchanges on social media brought in new fans interested in their dynamic.

Despite *Supernatural* having a sizable fanbase that crosses many demographics, the "Tumblr Fangirl" types were not an invisible minority, and in fact were even acknowledged in the show, where the story of *Supernatural* exists in a series of in-universe books, complete with fandom. *Supernatural's* first fan insert character was a mean-spirited caricature of a fangirl named Becky, a socially inept shut-in who wrote incest fanfiction and spent her time onscreen hysterically drooling over Sam's muscles. Everything she did was to make her the butt of the joke, a clear indication of how the writers of *Supernatural* saw their fans in 2009. However, as the show went on and as its popularity grew among young, mostly queer women, they grew slightly more generous with their fan inserts. In the special 200th episode, titled Fan Fiction, we meet Marie, a high schooler at an all-girls school who is writing and directing a musical based on the in-universe *Supernatural* books. Unlike Becky, Marie is confident and proud of her interpretation, calmly explaining the queer subtext to Dean, a far cry from the hysterical fangirl persona they previously ascribed to their young, female audience. The episode plays out as a proxy dialogue between the creators and the fans, as the Winchester brothers (insiders who know the *real* story, a stand-in for the writers) and the high schoolers (young female *Supernatural* fans, an obvious stand-in for real-life young female *Supernatural* fans) clash over their different interpretations of the text. At first, Dean is defensive, offended that Marie is changing the plot of his real life, but

eventually concedes that he can't stop the girls from having their own interpretation of the show, finally telling Marie that even if he doesn't like her story, "I have my version, and you have yours" (Kripke et al., 2005-2020).

One of the most glaring interpretations that Dean takes issue with is the acknowledgment of the show's queerbaiting and homoerotic subtext. When Dean sees the two actresses playing himself and Castiel hugging and holding hands, Marie tells Dean that "it's just subtext, but we do explore the nature of Destiel in act two" (Kripke et al., 2005-2020), after which Dean stares directly into the camera, letting us know that they know all about the shipping that goes on online. This sort of wink-nudge that the show would use is one of the core components of queerbaiting. While it can be hard to discern creator intention with in-canon homoerotic subtext, the intention becomes very obvious when they acknowledge the fandom, and especially the fandom's complaints.

Despite the popularity of the show, *Supernatural's* reputation began to decline as conversations about queerbaiting became more and more prevalent. In November of 2014, as a response to the special 200th episode, TVGuide published an article titled "Supernatural Has a Queerbaiting Problem That Needs to Stop", where reporter Sadie Gennis states that the episode "put the final nail in the coffin of the great queerbaiting debate" (Gennis, 2014). Despite the relatively generous portrayal of fangirls, Gennis writes that the episode's overall message is that it was fine for fans to have their own interpretations, but they would never be the creators' intended message (as Dean puts it "I have my version, and you have yours, and that's OK" (Kripke et al. 2005-2020)) cannot hold up if

the creators are actively benefiting and profiting from fans' interpretations. *Supernatural*'s reputation for queerbaiting and casual homophobia was only exacerbated by the cast's interviews and behavior at fan conventions. At one particularly infamous convention in 2013, a young fan asks Jensen Ackles a question about queer coding and Dean's evolving sexuality, clarifying that she herself is a bisexual person. To which Ackles replies that he was going to pretend he hadn't heard the question at all, before telling the fan "don't ruin it for everybody now." This incident caused outrage, and while it was framed at the time as a crazy fangirl meltdown, media outlets and outsiders to the fandom have been reconsidering the incident in recent years and recognizing it as a pattern of homophobic behavior (Micarelli, 2021). Fans having their own queer interpretations of the show were perfectly fine, as long as they kept it to themselves. According to those involved with the show, queer interpretations were seen as something that could "ruin" the show for a straight audience. While it was perfectly fine for the creators to tease fans with homoerotic subtext and gay jokes, it was seen as crossing a line for fans to respond to it directly. Many creators give their blessing to fans writing fan fiction and having their own versions of the story (the *Supernatural* crew included, as seen through their *Fan Fiction* episode),¹ but take issue with it when discussions of these interpretations leave fan spaces and are brought to their attention.

With instances like these, as well as factors such as the teenage fanbase growing older and general waning enthusiasm, a significant portion of the *Supernatural* fan base faded away during the mid-2010s. Rotten Tomatoes

1 With notable exceptions. Diana Gabaldon, author of the *Outlander* series, once likened fanfiction of her works to "white slavery".

audience scores dropped 10% between season 10 and season 11, and Google Trends shows a steady decline in search activity since October 2014, only exceeding that peak in November 2020. Fan communities on social media sites such as Tumblr started to shrink as former fans began moving on to other interests and only remembering *Supernatural* as a cringe-worthy phase of their high school past.

And then, in the third to last *Supernatural* episode ever, the unthinkable happened, and Castiel confessed his love to Dean. *Supernatural* continued to play up the homoerotic subtext between Dean and Castiel in later seasons, going as far as to give the two of them an adopted child, and an arc commonly referred to in the fandom as “the divorce arc”, but it was still generally assumed by most of the fanbase that the best Destiel could hope for was a still ambiguous, still homoerotic friendship. The episode in question, “Despair” opened with one of the supporting characters losing her girlfriend, and at the midpoint, Dean’s brother Sam lost his girlfriend. And following the formula, at the end of the episode, in a scene described by Castiel’s actor, Misha Collins, as a “homosexual declaration of love”,¹ Castiel sacrifices himself to save Dean, but not before confiding in him that Dean changed him, ever since they met, and delivers the long-awaited “I love you” right before dying.

The internet subsequently lost their minds. Fans of the ship watching the episode live took to social media to air their shock and disbelief. Some were celebratory over the love

1 https://twitter.com/i/broadcasts/1kvJporDONPGE?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Cwterm%5E1325627381063639040%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.pride.com%2F-geek%2F2020%2F11%2F10%2Fmisha-collins-confirms-castiels-homosexual-declaration-love

confession, some upset over the way the scene played into the “bury your gays” trope. In their 2020 year in review, Tumblr reported an overall 5,065% increase in engagements around the hashtag, “#destiel” (with a 2,083% increase in original posts and an 11,042% increase in reblogs), during the week following the episode’s airdate.¹ The night the episode aired, “Destiel” was trending on Twitter (above the US election, which was on its 2nd day of vote counting).

It wasn’t only these fans, who reacted, though. People who had been *Supernatural* fans in the past turned to social media platforms to revel in what they all assumed was the unthinkable. A tweet from @AlannaBennett read “Destiel is apparently canon now and my 2011 personality just stirred in her grave” (Bennet, 2020). Fans of *Supernatural* who weren’t necessarily fans of Dean/Castiel or queer readings in general argued that the confession could be read as platonic, with one Reddit user writing that “can we all agree that when one man says I love you to another ma[n], insisting that it’s gay is a pretty clear example of toxic masculinity” (JuniorInPink, 2020). However, the majority of viewers did interpret this confession as explicitly queer and romantic, even if they didn’t view the confession as a positive thing. Some fans argued that the writers were pandering to “stop the destiel girls throwing...tantrums” (ronon-dex, 2020). Even people who disliked *Supernatural* weighed in, with memes making fun of the confession scene circulating on different social media platforms. One meme, using close-up shots of Dean and Castiel’s faces during the confession scene to deliver unexpected or surprising news, is still in use on tumblr.²

1 <https://fandom.tumblr.com/post/636605729704411136/destiel-is-canon>

2 <https://transmascwalker.tumblr.com/post/673924209531125760/i-couldnt-help-myself>

The Destiel event was covered by media outlets like BuzzFeed and Vox, YouTubers made video essay retrospectives about Destiel, and *Supernatural* was seeing a new influx in popularity the likes of which it hadn't seen since the early 2010s. Tumblr, in particular, came together in a way the site, which has become extremely fractured and user-unfriendly in recent years, hasn't since around the same time. Because *Supernatural*, and more specifically Destiel, were such a large part of Tumblr's history as a website, the majority of its users had some sort of strong reaction to it, the official staff-run Tumblr account even made a post asking "hey @cwspn fandom, how y'all doing?".¹ One blog, started in 2016 dedicated to posting and answering "Is Destiel Canon Yet?" after every episode, finally got to answer their post with "Yes".² As Tumblr user @thexfiles put it, it was a "big day online for everyone who is using the same blog they made in 2011".³

The renewed interest in *Supernatural* and Destiel didn't fade away after the one eventful night, either. In the year since November 5th, Destiel has become the first ship to reach 100,000 works on the fanfiction hosting site Archive of Our Own, *Supernatural*, and Destiel were Tumblr's most reblogged and referenced TV show and ship of the year, respectively.⁴ As I previously mentioned, the fandom started to decline around 2014, around the same time that people started to gain a deeper understanding of what

1 <https://fandom.tumblr.com/post/634001385606807552/hey-the-cwspn-fandom-how-yall-doing>

2 <https://is-destiel-canon-yet.tumblr.com/post/633999455027429376/is-destiel-canon-yet-1152020-yes>

3 <https://moopet.tumblr.com/post/669141959832748032/byzantine-the-best-part-of-experiencing-november>

4 <https://fandom.tumblr.com/post/669320356627202048/2021-tv-shows> <https://fandom.tumblr.com/post/669380161647591424/2021-ships>

queerbaiting was. While fans still frequently expressed anger and disappointment in *Supernatural*'s treatment of LGBT themes and queerbaiting, fans returning in 2020 started to make jokes about the concept, and even embrace the queerbaiting that led to the confession. Tumblr user @lesbianboboberens writes that "the conditions that created Destiel can never be replicated" and credits queer fans' response to queerbait with "setting the stage" for canon gay representation.¹ Instead of viewing *Supernatural*'s queerbaiting as an exploitation, it's viewed as a victory that the fans have had over the creators. As user @steveyockey says (about the love confession), "outside the story it is the most plotted-towards and hard-won narrative development in all of *supernatural* but more so within the story it turns everything on its head!"² While these gay jokes and moments of homoerotic tension might have been included as a way of ensnaring or maintaining a queer audience, assuming that the interaction stops there is underestimating the agency of the fans; it paints fans as helpless victims of queerbaiting who are unable to react to queerbaiting in a way that puts any pressure on the creators. When fans respond to these moments, creating fan communities and boosting ratings, showrunners are likely to respond in kind and keep inserting these moments. A Tumblr post by user @badcode states "it demands something from the audience, demands care and attention and a sharing of a part of themselves, and in return transforms what could otherwise be a process of passive consumption into a mutual and reciprocal act of co-creation".³ These moments of queerbaiting are included by the creators because they know it's what the

1 <https://lesbianboboberens.tumblr.com/post/634883752434270208/thinking-about-how-the-conditions-that-created>

2 <https://steveyockey.tumblr.com/post/647759920013459456/the-confession-will-never-not-stop-in-my-tracks>

3 <https://stonerfag.tumblr.com/post/668311512415371264>

audience wants, and even though they may never explicitly confirm the characters as gay, if they explicitly confirmed the characters as straight, they know they would lose their audience. Castiel was initially supposed to be a one-off character who died after a few episodes, but after seeing how popular he was, they decided to keep him around. He was supposed to die again for good in season 6, but when the ratings started to scrape rock bottom after he left, he was brought back again.

Destiel was never supposed to happen. If fans didn't get involved through fan works and engagement and, in the words of Jensen Ackles, "ruin it for everybody", and the creators had had their way, this queerbait wouldn't have existed, and the character of Castiel would have never come out as queer. The gay jokes and homoerotic plotlines included as ways to appeal to and maintain their queer audience built up over time. This combined with the pressure from their audience and from media outlets resulted in the show's outcome, one that would not have been possible if the show hadn't been attempting to appeal to this demographic of fans. As I previously mentioned, showrunner Eric Kripke intended for the show to end with Dean happily married to a woman, with Castiel far out of the picture. Instead, it ends with Castiel confessing his love to Dean, and Dean never loving again. The fans changed the trajectory of the show. Unlike other classic examples of queerbaiting (like the aforementioned *Sherlock*), *Supernatural* ran for an exceptionally long time; many fans who were already invested in the show learned what queerbaiting was during its 15-year run and were able to recognize it in the show. Fans' criticism of the show and the show's dependence on the fans eventually wore down the creators and caused them to end the queerbait game of cat-

and-mouse and finally confirm what they'd been hinting at the whole time. In recent years, since the term has gained popularity, it's much more common to see the accusation leveled against pieces of media, and creators are much more aware of it. Queerbaiting itself has even changed, with the most common instances of it going from homoerotic tension between protagonists to promising "a gay character" that ends up being a minor or one-dimensional character, a practice Disney is infamous for.

Conclusion

Brennan wrote that "queerbaiting is a movement to reclaim and hold to account the stories that matter to us most" (Brennan, 2019, p.22), which I think is the key idea at the very center of queerbaiting. Fans have these discussions and these strong reactions to queerbaiting because they *love* the thing that's baiting them, and they want better from it. Many times you'll see fans criticizing other fans complaining about queerbaiting, telling them to simply watch another show, suggesting pieces of media with explicit LGBT representation.

When asked a question about Castiel's confession at a convention in 2021, *Supernatural* star Jared Padalecki argued that Castiel's confession could have been platonic, and stated that *Supernatural* was "not a show about heterosexuality or non-binary — it's a show about, hey, you can choose to live your life with love, not, hey, this means they wanna make out,"¹ a sentiment echoed by many when fans attempt to hold pieces of media accountable for queerbaiting. The message seems to be that while heterosexual romance

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFzXsFbPPAc>

and characters are appropriate to show onscreen, LGBT themes are still too taboo to discuss outright. The female love interests and heterosexual sex scenes that characters have in *Supernatural* don't make the show "about sexuality", but a confession of love between two male characters is a step too far. There's a message that is sent to LGBT fans that being gay is something that is dirty and shameful.

However, as we start to see the concept of queerbaiting change from queer coded protagonists and unaddressed homoerotic subtext to creators' promises of representation (Nordin, 2019), only for that representation to be underwhelming to many queer viewers, I find that I'm a bit nostalgic for the "golden age" of queerbaiting. In *The Celluloid Closet*, Vito Russo (1987) wrote that "the secret signals and hidden signs of homosexuality in Hollywood were the only frame of reference for most gays, who learned about themselves chiefly from movies that said that the whole world was heterosexual" (98), and I think this is applicable to the era of queerbaiting. Many gay characters in mainstream media are often relegated to side characters who are either reduced to just their sexuality or completely stripped of it. Even the few canon LGBT characters in *Supernatural* (with the exception of Castiel) are given this role. When gay characters are in a relationship, or show any form of romantic connection, it's portrayed as a joke,¹ they can only stick around if they're completely stripped of any sort of romantic desire.² By engaging with queerbaiting,

1 Characters like the "Destiel" girls from Season 10 Episode 5: "Fan Fiction", the cosplayers from Season 5 Episode 9: "The Real Ghostbusters". In both of these cases, the couples appear only for the comedic value of Dean being visibly surprised at the existence of gay people.

2 Characters like Charlie Bradbury and Max Banes, who can off-handedly mention flirtations or past hookups, but not any serious relationships.

queer audiences are able to see themselves in the heroes and protagonists. The relationship between Dean/Castiel gave viewers the opportunity to create the nuanced representation they want to see by taking the instances of “queerbaiting” into their own hands. What queerbaiting offers is a chance for the fan to become the author. Every dropped plotline and every cheap gay joke is a different clue or building block for the fans to create their own story, but the way this diverges from fan fiction or ordinary shipping is the feeling that you’re in conversation with the creators. The queer references and moments of romantic tension are either clues or mockery, but anyway you look at it, it feels like the writers are speaking directly to *you*.

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Screaming at the Television: How Pose Fans Interrogate Cross-Gender Relationships Between Transgender- Cisgender Couples Through Networked Counterpublics

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the romantic story arc between a cisgender heterosexual man (Stan) and a transgender woman (Angel) in the first season of Ryan Murphy's groundbreaking television series, *Pose* (2018-2020). It also explores how fans have responded to its portrayal of a cross-gender relationship. I provide a descriptive summary of the #StanGel arc and conduct a discourse analysis within threads

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of the subreddit r/PoseFX on Reddit. In juxtaposition to Microsoft researcher danah boyd's networked publics and Sarah Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles' understanding of counterpublics, my discourse analysis of selected threads make three key findings: (1) new media can complement traditional media by extending the discussion beyond the screen and to a shared space; (2) LGBTQ+ fans want to see accurate portrayals of their experiences, especially its more lighthearted aspects; and (3) queer-dominated online communities like r/PoseFX serve as networked counterpublics that challenge the dominant cis-heterocentric narrative and ideologies of the mainstream society. This paper aims to contribute to both Media Studies and Queer Studies, with a greater aim of acknowledging the scarcity in academic literature on transgender representation in popular media, particularly cross-gender relationships between transgender women and cisgender men.

Ryan Murphy's *Pose* (2018-2020) garnered warranted praise for its groundbreaking representation of transgender (trans) creatives of color (Willis, 2018; Satterwhite, 2019; Turchiano, 2021). Set in the late 1980s and early 1990s New York City ballroom scene, the series does not merely offer trans representation on screen but also in its writing and production development. The inclusion of trans and nonbinary main actors, writers, and directors played an impactful role in the show's success in—as they say in the ballroom scene—“serving realness.” This goal is not just evident in how *Pose* tackles issues of race, class, gender, sexual expression, and survival, but also in the human desire to love and be loved by somebody. One of

its most compelling arcs is the first season's main romantic storyline. A clean-cut, middle-class, cis-heterosexual white man from the suburbs named Stan (played by Evan Peters) becomes infatuated with a trans woman of color, Angel (played by Indya Moore).

The cross-gender relationship between Angel as a trans woman and Stan as a cis man offers a narrative that is not often portrayed in media despite the recent increase in trans visibility within popular culture. *Refinery29's* health and living writer Sadhbh O'Sullivan (2021) argues that the lack of such media content has an impact on how trans people see themselves:

This lack of visibility makes it easy to draw the conclusion that trans women aren't lovable, which has an understandable effect on their self-esteem (especially early in their transition). It also helps stigmatise the cis men who desire trans women (para. 2).

Trans writer and director Janet Mock, who wrote all the sex scenes in *Pose*, said in an interview that Stan and Angel's relationship is a romantic relationship that she has been searching for. Her intention in writing was to "undo the link between [trans] bodies as being points targets [*sic*] of violence and ridicule" (Veneble, 2018, para. 3). In this sense, *Pose* is a groundbreaking show for trans visibility and representation because it breaks away from the stereotypical depictions involving violence and humiliation. As *TV Guide's* Malcolm Venable puts it colorfully, "If sex is a political act, so often informed by religious and cultural codes as well as baggage about power and who's giving it away, then *Pose's* sex scenes are a Molotov cocktail intended

to burn down the old system and start a revolution” (para. 4).

With the scarcity of healthy cross-gender relationships in media and Mock’s intentionality, it is essential to study how the audience receives and responds to Angel and Stan’s relationship (referenced throughout this article as “#StanGel”) and what this says about contemporary understandings of such relationships. Borrowing O’Meara’s definition of “cross-gender friendship” as “a non-romantic, non-familial, personal relationship between a man and a woman” (1989, p. 526), I use the term “cross-gender relationship” in this paper in reference to a romantic or sexual relationship between a cisgender person and a transgender person.

This paper aims to contribute to Media Studies and Queer Studies by discussing how fan communities on Reddit interrogate cross-gender relationships. Reddit makes for a more interesting platform than other social media sites, as subreddits cater to a specific niche communities that often share interests and identities. In the case of r/PoseFX, the subreddit has clearly defined boundaries where the online forum becomes a shared space for a fan community and where many members identify with the LGBTQ+ community. Moreover, as a discussion-based platform, r/PoseFX produces ample content on my topic of interest. My work analyzes both the portrayal of a cross-gender relationship in traditional media (television) and how this cross-gender relationship is critically discussed by fans in new media (Reddit). I argue that this interaction between traditional media and how fans use new media offers dialogue that challenges dominant discourse surrounding cross-gender relationships and cis-heteronormative

expectations regarding gender and sexuality, thereby elevating marginalized voices.

Literature Review

As a fan community dedicated to discussing Pose, r/PoseFX functions as what danah boyd (2008) calls a *networked public*. Much like Habermas' *public sphere* (1989), networked publics are spaces where people gather, discuss, and debate publicly relevant topics, which can influence their participants' worldview. However, boyd differentiates networked publics from the public sphere insofar as networked publics bind people together "through technological networks" rather than a shared physical space (2008, p. 125). Thus, r/PoseFX is a networked public where fans gather and discuss Pose, its themes, and social commentaries. As a discussion website, Reddit is divided into subpages called "subreddits" that focus on niche topics, including specific television shows. Similar to a café where a book club might meet, subreddits and the discussion threads they facilitate function as a digital metaphor for a public sphere.

The #StanGel discourse on r/PoseFX provides a topic-specific example of how the subreddit is a networked public that facilitates discussion and debate on a publicly relevant topic within the trans community: cross-gender romantic and sexual relationships between transwomen and cis men. Although this is not a common experience within mainstream culture, it is a salient issue that many trans people (and their cis partners) grapple with (Mock, 2013; Gamarel et al., 2019; Trepany, 2021).

As a show that centers on the narratives of queer and trans women of color, many Pose fans come from the LGBTQ+ community. Accordingly, many of their perspectives are often underrepresented in mainstream media and culture. Therefore, r/PoseFX is a queer-dominated space where queer Redditors can offer different perspectives to their cis and heterosexual counterparts. In this case, r/PoseFX can function as a networked public and as a *networked counterpublic*.

Jackson and Foucault Welles (2015) offer an example of how the hashtag #myNYPD has been used to facilitate a networked counterpublic. In their network analysis and qualitative discourse analysis, Jackson and Foucault Welles discuss how anti-police violence activists hijacked the hashtag to counter the dominant narrative that frames law enforcement in the image of heroism. The researchers draw from scholarships by Felski (1989), Squires (2001), and Asen and Brouwer (2001), extending the definition of counterpublics as publics that challenge the “dominant knowledge’ inherent to the mainstream public sphere” (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015, p. 934) to digital communications and technology. Thus, Jackson and Foucault Welles describe networked counterpublics as a type of public where people challenge the mainstream discourse and the ideologies it reproduces through counter-narratives, often from those who belong to marginalized communities. Jackson, Bailey, and Foucault Welles (2017) apply networked counterpublics to the trans community, particularly how trans women use the hashtag #GirlsLikeUs to challenge trans representation in mainstream media. In stark contrast to how film and television have portrayed trans people in the context of hypersexuality and the subject of physical and sexual violence, the researchers found that

#GirlsLikeUs offers a different narrative wherein trans women can be seen building community, advocating for and effecting positive change, and celebrating trans lives (p. 1876). I argue that the same can be said for online fan communities like r/PoseFX, as demonstrated by the discourse on historical and contemporary issues faced by the trans community.

Methodology

This paper aims to analyze how *Pose* fans interrogate cross-gender relationships through the media text they consume and the online community in which they participate. To analyze how fans engage with the text and its portrayal of a cross-gender relationship, it is important to offer a detailed summary and analysis of the #StanGel arc. The first part of my analysis summarizes and discusses Angel and Stan's relationship throughout *Pose*'s first season.

I conducted a discourse analysis of posts centered around #StanGel on r/PoseFX. This was done through keyword searches within the subreddit, including “Stan Angel,” “Stan + Angel,” and “#StanGel.” The investigation identified several threads, including “How do we feel about Stan?” “Is Stan Going To Kill Angel?” and “I’m Ignorant and Looking for Guidance on Transgender Sexuality Discussed in the Show” (referenced in the rest of this article as “Transgender Sexuality”).

Pose’s #StanGel: A Summary and Brief Textual Analysis

In the pilot episode of *Pose* (Murphy, Falchuk, & Canals, 2018a), Stan drives to the pier where Angel is searching

for clients as a sex worker. After months of cruising by and eyeing Angel, he finally works up the courage to engage her directly. He takes her to a hotel room—a completely new experience for him but an all-too-familiar one for her. All he wanted that night, however, was companionship. While lying in bed, Stan half-naked and Angel in her lingerie, he asks her to tell him about her dreams and aspirations, catching Angel off guard:

No one's ever asked me that before. I want a home of my own. I want a family. I want to take care of someone. And I want someone to take care of me. *I want to be treated like any other woman. That's my dream* [emphasis added] (40:30).

The scene captures that desire to love and be loved by somebody, offering a humanized depiction of Angel's drop-dead gorgeous trans sex worker. The audience is not presented with just another two-dimensional, hypersexualized trans sex worker. Rather, they see—and perhaps even relate to—a beautiful young woman who has the same human desire for another person's affection.

When Stan brings Angel back to the pier, he hands her \$60 for her companionship. Bashfully, he asks if he may kiss her. She obliges (42:00). Anecdotally speaking, it's not often that (cis) men are thoughtful enough to ask about a woman's boundaries, even more so for women like Angel. Thus, this leads the audience to infer that Stan might be sincere in his intentions with Angel. His marital status aside, maybe he is interested in something beyond just a sexual encounter with her. After all, he didn't have sex with Angel. It is a tempting fantasy to believe, especially when trans women are constantly told by society that they are an oddity—a “*developmental failure*” (Butler, 1990). But that's

all it is: a *fantasy*. The scene cuts to Stan in his bathroom, vigorously brushing his teeth, as if trying to get rid of Angel's kiss (43:25).

These contradictions between his charmingly boyish demeanor around Angel and the shame he carries play throughout their complicated relationship. There is this “will-they-won't-they” cliché as the show depicts the tension between Stan's infatuation and the stigma toward a straight, cisgender man being attracted to a trans woman. As queer theorist Judith Butler says of our society, “we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (1990, p. 190), and Stan is not doing his gender right—at least according to society's cis-heterocentric norms. In a society where trans women of color are at the very bottom of the social hierarchy, a person of Stan's gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic and racial identity isn't supposed to fall for a woman like Angel, especially in the politically conservative decade of the 1980s. This is depicted in the scene later in the pilot where Angel waits for Stan outside the Trump Tower, looking to be cheered up after being turned away from a job opportunity because she is trans. Stan responds coldly with embarrassment as he asks her to leave, only to drive back to the pier to see her again in the closing scene of the pilot.

There are aspects of Stan that lead the audience to think that perhaps he truly likes Angel. In the second episode, he takes Angel out for coffee at a nearby diner (Murphy, Falchuk, & Canals, 2018b). He confesses his jealousy—how he doesn't like that other men get to see Angel—and how he wants her to be his kept woman and provide for her. But his confession is coupled with a vocalization of his insecurities and his admiration for Angel's authenticity:

I want what I'm supposed to want, I wear what I'm supposed to wear, and I work where I'm supposed to work. I stand for nothing. I've never fought for a war, and I probably won't ever have to 'cause the next one's gonna kill us all. I can buy things I can't afford, which means they're never really mine. I don't live. I don't believe. I accumulate. I'm a brand—a middle-class white guy. *But you're who you are, even though the price you pay for it is being disinvited from the rest of the world. I'm the one playing dress-up* [emphasis added]. Is it wrong to want to be with one of the few



Season 1, Episode 7: "Pink Slip" (32:58)

people in the world who isn't—to have one person in my life who is real? (44:15)

Stan's monologue and his prior actions create tension between his shame of being attracted to a trans woman and his desire to care for her shamelessly.

Ultimately, Angel accepts Stan's offer to provide for her. But even as they play this little game of house, the complicated dynamic of Stan being married and hiding an affair with a trans woman gets in the way of what seemed to be a budding romance. This is evident in the third episode, when Stan stands Angel up after she eagerly gets ready for their Christmas night together, despite Stan promising Angel that he will spend at least an hour with her (Mock, Our Lady J, & Cragg, 2018, 50:00). Angel internalizes this sense of abandonment and becomes fixated on her dysphoria. Her reaction is underscored by how she began asking Stan if he likes curvy women and how she feels insecure about her body after Stan confesses to finding curves more attractive after his wife gave birth to their children (Mock & Horder-Payton, 2018).

After an argument over feeling like Stan is only using her to fulfill the exotic pornographic fantasy of having sex with a trans woman, they stop seeing each other (Canals & Howard, 2018). Stan, however, eventually crawls back to Angel after his wife finds out about their affair (Murphy & Mock, 2018). He asks Angel to take him to the ball with her to give him a glimpse of her world. When she tells him she has never brought a date, he responds, "Well, I'm not a date. I'm your boyfriend." (Canals, Our Lady J, & Mabry, 2018, 18:10). Angel looks visibly delighted. However, while in the ballroom, Stan looks extremely overwhelmed by the flamboyant queerness that envelops him. It is almost

as if this man might be different from all the other Prince Charming figures who have come and gone in her life. Thus, the audience is led to believe that maybe Stan is trying to overcome his shame and that this relationship might work out after all.

After the show, Stan confides to Angel about hating that he felt out of place in the ballroom. Angel tries to comfort him by reminding Stan that the balls are just a piece of her world and not its entirety. But he tells her that this scene is a huge aspect of her life, just like his office and his kids are a huge part of his life. Following this conversation, he leaves Angel's apartment empty with just a note and her belongings in a black trash bag. Devastated, Angel could cry, get back to working as a performer at a peepshow, and move back in with her ballroom family—the House of Evangelista.

In the season finale, Stan tries to get back with his wife (Murphy, Falchuk, Canals, & Horder-Payton, 2018). However, she tells him that - though she thinks he should still be in their kids' lives - they should not pretend that things are all right between them. Rather, they should be honest about their separation, but without the details of its nature. After this rejection from his wife, Stan makes his way back to the ballroom, waiting for Angel outside. He tells her that he's come to "rescue" her and that what they had was "real." He reminds her of what she told him in the hotel room—how all she wants in life is a home, a family, and someone to care for and be cared by. He tells her he is ready to give her that. But Angel is a smart woman. Although she still has affection for Stan, she also has enough self-respect to recognize that Stan has not treated her the way she deserves to be treated:

You're not my first Prince Charming. You're *not* real. We were just good ideas in each other's minds. And they turn into bad ones once they get out into the regular world, right? (49:12)

She tells him that what she wants has changed and that her friends are her family—people who care for her and vice versa. Though she admits still caring for him, she tells him to go home to his wife and kids (50:26).

Although Angel does not find a happy ending with Stan, she eventually finds comfort in her fellow Evangelista, Lil' Papi. Their relationship transforms from platonic to romantic in the second season, and they ultimately get married before the series finale in the third season.

Thread Analysis 1: “How do we feel about Stan?”

While *Pose's* #StanGel arc offers the on-screen representation of a cross-gender relationship and its complexities, the discussions on r/PoseFX complement the textual representation by allowing fans to talk about this arc, its social commentary, and what this type of media representation signifies to the audience. The exchange between fans on the thread “How do we feel about Stan?” captures this symbiotic relationship between *Pose* as a popular show on television (traditional media) and r/PoseFX as an online fan community (new media).

Stan and Angel's relationship is fascinating because it is ambiguous whether Stan is genuinely falling for Angel or merely fetishizing her. The original poster (or "OP") asks fans about their opinions of Stan and his cross-gender relationship with Angel. The OP expresses some degree of internal conflict about how they feel about #StanGel.

However, the OP appropriately points out the tension between feeling put off by the fact that Stan is cheating on his wife and touched by how he is “surprisingly thoughtful and open about what he values in Angel,” as depicted in the diner scene.

A salient sentiment among the fans in “How do we feel about Stan?”¹ is that Stan is not that bad, but he is not amazing either. One fan talks about how Stan is “[p]robably the most representative of the average middle-class population with access to social mobility who may not be outright hateful, but whose micro aggressions perpetuate ignorance.” This is supported by the notion that bigotry can come in less obvious forms. That is, transphobia does not necessarily come in blatantly odious ways. It does not always manifest in violence. Sometimes it comes in seemingly harmless comments, like “You’re so pretty *for a trans girl*” or “I couldn’t even tell.” Although they appear innocent or even flattering, these comments perpetuate the idea that trans women can never be as beautiful and worthy of a romantic interest as their cisgender sisters. This comment has 32 net points (as of December 16, 2021) and is the first one to come up when the responses are sorted according to the “Top” responses,² suggesting that it is a popular opinion.

Another Redditor points out, “For a cishet [cisgender, heterosexual] white dude in the 80s, he’s not horrible.” The 1980s setting of the show is a subject that comes up more than once, including in the OP’s original post under

1 To read the full thread, please see: https://www.reddit.com/r/PoseFX/comments/8uge67/how_do_we_feel_about_stan/?sort=top.

2 The “Top” comment on Reddit refers to the comment that has the comment that has the highest net points. This is determined by how the site calculates the upvotes and downvotes.

“How do we feel about Stan?” This comment stands out because it is a subtle acknowledgement by a fan that times have changed and that, while Stan may not be horrible in the conservative Reagan era, social norms and values have changed. If we consider him by today’s standards, many—especially trans women—would likely consider him an awful and unreliably inconsistent partner.

This same Redditor who briefly mentioned the 1980s setting also compares Stan to his more hypermasculine, “overbearing,” and “imposing” (as they phrase it) counterpart: Elektra’s (played by Dominique Jackson) sugar daddy, Dick, (played by Christopher Malone).¹ In this dynamic, Dick outright fetishizes Elektra as a trans woman, forbidding her from pursuing gender-affirming surgery and threatening to cut her off financially if she goes through with the procedure. This alludes to a concept that another fan more explicitly brings up: whether Stan is a “chaser.”

A “chaser,” more specifically a “trans chaser,” is someone who fetishizes trans people and chases after them specifically because their unique anatomy entices them as a woman with a penis (Milloy, 2014). As opposed to being attracted to trans women *regardless of* their anatomy, chasers are attracted to trans women *because of* their anatomy and *because of* the thrill that comes with it. As Dick articulates, “...maybe it’s because I like the feeling of knowing that I’m

1 Elektra is the main antagonist for the majority of Season 1. She is the mother of House of Abundance—Angel and the protagonist Blanca’s original house before Blanca broke away out of frustration with Elektra’s domineering personality and founded the House of Evangelista. She is portrayed as a cisgender-passing trans woman and well-kept by her sugar daddy, who pays for the House of Abundance’s rent, her private penthouse, and a town car to take her around the city.

getting away with something that no one else knows about (Mock & Horder-Payton, 2018, 17:50).” The Redditor who brought up chasers engages with Pose as a media text in a thoughtful and meaningful way, writing:

Like almost everyone else, I’m conflicted for sure. His past arousal at the porn magazines indicates possible fetishization, but I think Christopher Malone’s case is a cut-and-dry example of fetishization whereas Stan’s not so much. Being sexually attracted to a trans woman who hasn’t undergone GCS [gender confirmation surgery] doesn’t necessarily mean one is a chaser. When he described to her why he ‘picked her out’ and how he saw her as a woman, that had nothing to do with her genitals but more to do with her being a genuine and courageous person for not choosing to hide her truth in order to fit in with societal expectations. It seemed he was quite ambivalent about whether or not she got GCS, which further indicates more than pure preoccupation with what’s between her legs. He has some indication of true respect for her as a whole.

They further elaborate on this cross-gender relationship’s complexity, expressing that they are not rooting for #StanGel as a couple but rather for Angel as an individual.

This fan’s contribution to the discussion is particularly interesting because they do not merely just talk about and engage with what is happening on screen. Rather, they are drawing attention to the common dilemma that many trans women must confront while dating: the question of whether their partner is a genuine person or just another chaser. This discussion highlights the complexity in Stan and Angel’s dynamics and the nuances that come with balancing the seemingly genuine things he says to Angel (i.e., the diner

scene), the stigma attached to cis men dating trans women, and the familiar red flag he raises: masturbating to a trans porn magazine as a college student (Mock & Horder-Payton, 2018). Thus, fan communities like r/PoseFX facilitate as a platform where fans can delve deeper into what is shown on screen and draw explicit connections between what Stan and Angel experience as a cross-gender couple, particularly the dilemma and social pressures that many trans women and their cis male partners have to confront in real life. This gives fans the outlet to express this understanding of the text out loud in a way that allows peers to respond and engage in conversation, adding more substance and complexity to the topic and discussion. In a way, this is similar to when we are watching television and impulsively talk back or scream at it as though the characters can hear us. However, the audience is not screaming into a void. Reddit's technological affordances and structure allow viewers to give and receive feedback to fellow fans who are also screaming at the television through r/PoseFX.

Apart from interrogating Stan's motives and whether he is genuinely in love with Angel or just merely a chaser, fans also appear to interrogate their own response to this specific representation and how they perceive cross-gender relationships. The internal conflict that the OP expresses in "How do we feel about Stan?" is echoed by several of the Redditors who responded to the thread. One person points out how Stan is relatable "in the sense of sometimes the heart wants what it wants" regardless of the social repercussions that come with it (i.e., being a cis-heterosexual and white businessman attracted to a trans woman of color in the 1980s). At the same time, one cannot help becoming frustrated by his possessiveness while often choosing his

cis-heteronormative, white, middle-class suburban life over Angel.

Some fans appear to perceive their enjoyment of this cross-gender relationship as a guilty pleasure. One Redditor writes, “Someone tell me why I crave a relationship like Stan and Angel so much?? Like *I feel damaged for wanting it* lol [emphasis added],” to which the OP responds, “Hahaha meeee too *I know I’m not supposed to ship* [emphasis added] but lo and behold here I go.” This exchange demonstrates both an internal conflict and a subtle acknowledgement that Angel deserves better than Stan. It suggests a craving to see trans women as desirable, lovable, and worthy of admiration in a non-fetishizing way. This is articulated more explicitly by another fan on this thread who writes, “Regardless of what happens with [Stan], it’d be nice somewhere in [Pose] to see that trans women can have healthy relationships.” It is a sentiment expressed by several others on the thread. This contradiction between rooting for #StanGel while feeling “damaged” in doing so and the commentaries about wanting to see trans women in a happy, loving, and healthy romantic relationship reflects that tension O’Sullivan (2021) describes between an increase in trans visibility in mainstream media but a continued lack in the representation of cross-gender relationships. As O’Sullivan pointed out, this has impacts on trans people’s self-esteem. The lack of cross-gender relationships also correlates with people’s unwillingness to date trans people. That is, only 12% of people, regardless of gender and sexual identity, are willing to date a trans person (Blair & Hoskin, 2018). Considering how this lack of representation can affect trans people’s self-esteem and the stigma toward cis men being attracted to trans women, it is understandable why *Pose* fans, particularly queer and trans fans, might crave

for a cross-gender relationship portrayed in mainstream television and hope that a healthy relationship could come out of #StanGel.

The self-reflection that fans engage in does not just occur with the LGBTQ+ fans who draw connections between what is happening on-screen and in their own experiences. One straight, cisgender Redditor wrote:

Not trans or gay so maybe my perspective is that of an outsider looking in, but I like Stan. I think he's a complex character who makes questionable decisions, but his heart seems to be in the right place. I think he's genuinely a good person, but he needs to realize that his self-discovery is coming at a cost to those around him.

It took me by surprise that everyone seems to hate him so much, *but maybe that just says I've got some learning to do about the trans experience* [emphasis added].

Thus, r/PoseFX not only facilitates dialogue that allows LGBTQ+ folks to express their thoughts on representation and cross-gender relationships, but it also enables fans outside the LGBTQ+ community to learn more about trans issues.

Thread Analysis 2: "Is Stan Going To Kill Angel?"

Another salient theme that comes up in the discussions is the fan prediction that Stan will end up killing Angel. One person specifically highlighted the scene where Angel and Stan spend the night at the hotel, particularly the cut where Stan asks Angel to undress. They recall feeling "absolutely terrified" because they "feel [that] there's going to be a big

conflict there, and it could end so badly for Angel.” They further elaborate on the complexity of this possibility:

Obviously I’m tired of seeing queer people (of color) brutalized. I really wish a lot more media would show queer and trans people succeeding and being in love and happy. On the other hand, the reality is that being yourself really does take courage because it can be dangerous.

Several other fans shared this fear and what is at stake for both transgender representation and the portrayal of cross-gender relationships in media. Many of these fans do so through cross-textual analysis and commentaries on *Pose*, Ryan Murphy’s *American Horror Story* (in which Evan Peters often plays a dark, violent character), his reputation for preferring shock value, and how trans women and cross-gender relationships have been depicted historically. As another Redditor writes, “I am pretty convinced that Stan is going to end up murdering Angel. Trans women being murdered by horny men is such a common trope that I would be very surprised if the show didn’t bring that in.” This is supported by what many trans activists and trans folks in the media industry have pointed out in their criticism of mainstream media’s transgender representation. That is, trans women often end up getting violently assaulted or even murdered by the very same men who are attracted to them (Feder, 2020). Even Indya Moore shared this anxiety, telling *ET* that they were concerned that their character would be killed. As they share in an interview, “Just knowing I would be playing opposite of [Evan Peters], I had fears my character was going to be killed” (Lambe, 2018).

The OP in “Is Stan Going To Kill Angel” more explicitly connects their speculation to real life events, stating,

“Looking at how the show pushes the truth about justice, tragedy, and humanity for trans women of color, and it’s [*sic*] honesty on how sex workers are treated, it’s not unheard of for trans women of color to be murdered. That’s an unfortunate truth.”¹ Furthermore, an excerpt from the “Top” comment on this thread points out how “Pose is in that middle space between showing the vibrancy in the ballroom scene and optimism of its members and the realism of being a black femme/trans woman.” While a couple of Redditors in both subreddits, “Is Stan Going To Kill Angel?” and “How do we feel about Stan?,” draw

comparisons between the speculation of Stan murdering Angel and the murder of Venus Xtravaganza in real life (Livingston, 1990),² one fan interestingly makes a reference to a certain “Naomi.” After some background research on Google,³ I have found that this is likely a reference to Naomi Hersi, who was lured in by a man through a dating and hookup site called “Fabswingers.com” before she was murdered in a hotel. A news article published in *The Guardian* reports, “After days together, McDonald drugged and stabbed the hospitality worker to death with a knife and a broken bottle at a hotel near Heathrow airport, where

1 To read the full thread, please see: https://www.reddit.com/r/PoseFX/comments/8sem9f/is_stan_going_to_kill_angel/?sort=top.

2 Venus Xtravaganza is a transgender performer in the New York City ballroom scene from the late 1970s to the late 1980s. Her body was found dead on Christmas Day of 1988 at the Duchess Hotel (Butler, 1993). This was not the first time she experienced sexual violence. In **Paris is Burning**, she shares having narrowly escaped a violent assault by a man after he discovered that she was transgender (Livingston, 1990).

3 To conduct this background research, I searched “Naomi + Transgender + Pose + Indya Moore,” which brought me to the **People** article by Dana Rose Falcone (2018). After identifying Naomi Hersi’s full name, I searched her on Google. This led brought me to several news articles, including from **The Guardian** and the **BBC**.

he was staying” (Press Association, 2018). This is likely the same person that the Redditor is referring to, considering how Indya Moore dedicated their performance to Hersi, telling *Variety*, “My role of Angel in ‘Pose’ is dedicated to Naomi Hersi. She is a black trans woman of Somali origin who was murdered in her London hotel simply because of who she was” (Turchiano, 2018).

The speculation that Angel will end up getting murdered parallels with the paradox of transgender representation. The tail-end of the 2010s witnessed an increase in transgender representation and awareness, from fictional shows like *Pose* (2018-2020), *Orange Is the New Black* (2013-2019),

Senses8 (2015-2018), and *Euphoria* (2019-present), movies like *Tangerine* (2015), and reality TV shows like *I Am Jazz* (2015-present) and *I Am Cait* (2015-2016). Yet, the increase in visibility has been coupled with the spike in anti-trans violence (Feder, 2020). According to a study by the Human Rights Campaign (2020), over 200 transgender and gender non-conforming people have been killed between 2013 and 2020. At least 29 of them were in 2017 and at least 26 were in 2018 (Human Rights Campaign, 2018)—the year *Pose* aired. Thus, this speculation is not just prompted by Murphy and Peters’ past collaborations or how trans women and cross-gender relationships have been depicted in the past. Rather, this is simply based on the harsh reality that many trans women, particularly trans women of color, live through. As Indya Moore adds in their *ET* interview, “[Stan killing Angel] wouldn’t be far off at all. It would actually be *very parallel to the reality* of what life is like for Angel’ [emphasis added]” (Lambe, 2018).

What is intriguing about this fan speculation is the fact that there is nothing about Stan’s character that reasonably

suggests that he could potentially kill Angel. In fact, his character is rather docile, as depicted in the motel room scene. Yet, it is such a common fan prediction simply because of trans women of color's experiences in real life. Fans discuss #StanGel as an arc in a fictional television series against the backdrop of real life anti-trans violence. That is, fans acknowledge that this is the reality that many trans women live and we are constantly reminded of this by both historical portrayals of transgender women and cross-gender relationships as well as news reports of another trans person either being murdered or violently assaulted. But this acknowledgement of reality is also the source of craving for a happy ending, much like that craving for seeing trans women being depicted as lovable rather than exotic. There are enough stories about trans women getting murdered that, for once, people just want to see a trans woman achieve happiness in the end. As a fan writes, "I really wish a lot more media would show queer and trans people succeeding and being in love and happy."

Thread Analysis 3: "Transgender Sexuality"

r/PoseFX also provides a space for non-LGBTQ+ folks to learn more about the transgender community and trans experience beyond what is portrayed on screen. It is unquestionable how *Pose* has had an educational effect on non-LGBTQ+ viewers (Falcone, 2018) *ET Online* senior editor Stacy Lamb tells *Inside Edition* how *Pose* helped him "[learn] more about [his] brothers and sisters of the trans world that I wasn't as familiar with beforehand" (Bono, 2021, para. 32). For NBA superstar Dwayne Wade, "the show changed his life and the life of his wife, Gabrielle Union, as well as their family," because the show and its stars taught them so much about raising his transgender

daughter, Zaya (Bono, 2021, paras. 34-35). As a television series, many of the creatives working in the show consider its mainstream status as an opportunity to offer a more realistic representation of transgender women of color and the issues they face. At the same time, it provides a valuable opportunity to undo some of the influence of stereotypical trans representations in the past (Venable, 2018; Feder, 2020). This aspect of *Pose* as a media text on its own is complemented by how fans engage with it and how they discuss issues and topics that are either unique or more prominent within the trans community than in mainstream society.

The educational discussions that occur on r/PoseFX contribute to the way Redditors within this specific subreddit form an online community, particularly when it comes to two of the five characteristics that define an online community: (1) shared support and resources and (2) interpersonal relationships (Baym, 2010). Online communities provide shared support and resources to its members, whether it involves sharing content online or providing each other with emotional support. An online community is also built through the interpersonal relationships they form with other members on the platform. This is noticeable in r/PoseFX insofar as Redditors rely on their peers' feedback on their questions and, in some cases, disclose some aspects of their personal background (2010). In other words, Redditors in r/PoseFX share support and resources in the form of dialogue and, occasionally, the practice of sharing relevant magazine articles and TED Talks. These interactions, thus, foster an interpersonal relationship amongst the fans who engage with each other in r/PoseFX. The "Transgender Sexuality" thread offers a case study for how queer-dominated fan subreddits like r/

PoseFX facilitate discussions that can help bring awareness and educate the dominant, mainstream society.

The OP in “Transgender Sexuality” writes:

Disclaimer: I’m not very knowledgeable about the trans community. I love the show Pose and I’m catching up on season 2. I have a question about sexuality and I’m hoping someone can explain it to me like I’m five years old. In the first season, Angel and her ex-boyfriend got into a fight because he was aroused by her (assigned) genitals. In season 2, a photographer coerced Angel into taking full nudes, which she did not want. The show is saying that it is cruel for others to be aroused by Angel’s assigned genitals. Are there transgender women who would willing/happily consent to sexual relations involving their assigned genitals? Or is that less common? Are the sexual desires of men like Angel’s ex-boyfriend then automatically exploitative? I apologize if this post is offensive in any way. Thanks.¹

There are a few similarities between the OP and the straight, cisgender Redditor mentioned earlier in the “How do we feel about Stan?” thread. Both acknowledge their “outsider” status in the context of the trans community and the issues that many trans people face. At the same time, however, they both see discussions on r/PoseFX as a learning experience and express a genuine desire to educate themselves on the trans experience.

A particularly noteworthy part in the OP’s comment is the connection they make between what is portrayed on

¹ To read the full thread, please see: https://www.reddit.com/r/PoseFX/comments/h96fo9/im_ignorant_and_looking_for_guidance_on/?sort=top.

screen and the realities of transgender sexuality. That is, the OP describes Angel's unpleasant reactions to men being aroused by her assigned genitals and brings up the question of whether this is a common experience in real life. This is an interesting commentary in the sense that the OP is acknowledging that *Pose* is a fictional television show and, thus, there is a possibility that it might not as accurately capture real-life transgender sexuality. This is a reasonable skepticism, considering the stereotypical way that transgender sexuality has been portrayed in the mainstream (Feder, 2020). Thus, we are not only seeing an interaction amongst fans. Rather, like in "How do we feel about Stan?," there is also a symbiotic relationship and interaction between traditional media (i.e., television) and new media (i.e., Reddit), wherein new media complements traditional media in a way that facilitates discussion on whether a certain type of representation is accurate or merely stereotypical.

The consensus among the seven Redditors who responded to this thread is that it differs for every person. A few also pointed out the importance of boundaries. As one fan states, "Different people have different boundaries about bodies." Another fan adds to this in a separate response, pointing out how "[t]here's a lot more vocabulary out there now than there was" during the show's 1980s and 1990s setting. As the "Top" comment touches on, this is further complicated by the fact that sometimes anatomy and genitalia become the reason for why a trans woman is assaulted or even murdered. As such, what one trans woman might feel dysphoric about might not be the same with another trans woman.

The topics of surgery and genitalia are very personal. They are also delicate subjects that can be difficult to address between romantic or sexual partners. The “Top” comment points out that the dynamic in cross-gender relationships “can get tricky to navigate if the person is only attracted/aroused by [their trans partner] because they haven’t obtained bottom surgery. *It can easily come off as fetishistic* [emphasis added].” The Redditor adds that this is similar to when people say they are exclusively attracted to Black cisgender men “because of the stereotype of them being well endowed.” Thus, the possibility that Stan was aroused by Angel because there is a chance that he sees her as “a woman with a penis” (like the women he masturbated to in trans porno magazines as a college student) “comes off fetishistic and a little degrading.” This is echoed by another fan who brings up chasers and how they “like the taboo idea but do not see [trans women] as real women, just an in between person who they can fantasize about,” as was the case with Dick and Elektra.

While the “Top” comment focuses on the topic of fetishism, the Redditor who wrote this response also brings up the important fact that “Stan would still be a straight guy even if he was attracted to a trans woman.” Although they believe there is some degree of fetishism in Stan’s attraction to Angel, they highlight the belief that being attracted to a trans person does not make one’s sexuality any more or less valid. That is, a cisgender straight man’s attraction to a trans woman and a cisgender woman’s attraction to a trans man do not make them any less heterosexual. Accordingly, a cisgender lesbian’s attraction to a trans woman and a cisgender gay man’s attraction to a trans man do not make them any less homosexual.¹ Therefore, this thread facilitates

¹ The comments on r/PoseFX regarding gender and sexuality seem to suggest that this is the consensus among LGBTQ+ fans. At the

a discussion that pushes back against the cis-heterocentric narrative that perpetuates the idea that trans people threaten heterosexuality. It challenges the traditional understanding of how to “do” one’s gender properly (Butler, 1990).

Much like how the “Is Stan Going To Kill Angel?” thread facilitates dialogue regarding a trans-specific issue, “Transgender Sexuality” prompts a conversation on a topic

that many trans people have to confront when dating a cis person: whether their partner is attracted to them *regardless of* their anatomy or *because of* their anatomy. Likewise, it also touches on cisgender sexuality in the context of dating a trans person, which is often stigmatized (Mock, 2013; Gamarel et al., 2019; Trepany, 2021).

Although the thread received only seven responses, these comments were detailed and well-conceived. This is evident in how the fan responses address topics that academics, critics, and activists in significant depth (Mock, 2013; Gamarel, et al., 2019; Blair & Hoskin, 2018; Feder, 2020; Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2020; Trepany, 2021). The difference, however, is that these responses on Reddit are much more accessible to the average person than academic writings made inaccessible by the paywalls of scholarly journals and the academic jargon of the literature. As a result, non-LGBTQ+ fans who follow this thread are exposed to trans issues and are made aware of societal pressures that influence cross-gender relationships.

same time, however, there are also many within the LGBTQ+ community who have reservations when it comes to dating trans people (Blair & Hoskin, 2018). It is important to acknowledge the lack of academic literature on the relationship between sexuality and attraction to trans people.

Findings

Pose as a show on its own has made a significant impact on its fans, both those who are in the LGBTQ+ community and those outside. One fan interviewed by *Inside Edition* recalls resonating with the parental rejection that characters experienced (Bono, 2021, para. 15). This was also a learning experience for non-LGBTQ+ viewers. For NBA superstar Dwayne Wade, the show and its stars taught him and his wife so much about raising his transgender daughter, Zaya (paras. 34-35).

Beyond the on-screen representation, fans educate each other and continue to learn about the trans community through meaningful conversations about what is portrayed on television and its relationship with lived experiences. They extend the conversation from the screen to their shared virtual space, demonstrating the nonpassive way the audience consumes the media text. That is, they are not merely accepting what is shown on screen without question or personal reflections. Rather, they interrogate it and discuss the salience of fetishism, genital dysphoria, and stigma in real-life cross-gender relationships. New media like Reddit and fan communities within it, therefore, facilitate these discussions, and complement traditional media.

The analysis of #StanGel-related threads on r/PoseFX and the portrayal of cross-gender relationships in *Pose*, thus, offers a key finding that traditional media can be complemented by new media through how fans interact and critically consume media texts.

A second key finding in my research is that, although fans want an accurate representation of the transgender

community, society—especially trans people—does not need constant reminders of the violence and brutality the community faces. Many LGBTQ+ folks and allies want to break away from that mold of violence that trans people are too often portrayed in popular media. Many crave for representations that show trans people thriving and living ordinary lives, including seeing trans people in loving and healthy relationships. This is evident in both how some people were rooting for #StanGel and how some were sick and tired of Stan. Those who were rooting for #StanGel seem to read this arc as a portrayal in which a conventionally attractive and successful cis man can fall for a trans woman—a trope that we hardly see in fiction and in real life. At the same time, those who were happy to see Angel break up with Stan also express that desire to see a trans woman as worthy of love. That is, they believe that Stan is not giving Angel the love and commitment that she deserves.

Fans, especially trans people, want to see more cross-gender relationships. While we have had more trans representation and awareness in the past decade, the media industry has a long way to go in portraying trans people in healthy and fulfilling relationships. This lack of representation correlates with current research showing that very few people are willing to date a trans person (Blair & Hoskin, 2018). Considering the media's influence in reinforcing norms and desires, the lack of cross-gender relationships in media is contributing to the protracted normalization of such relationships in real life.

This sentiment regarding the balance between accuracy and a more lighthearted narrative touches on what Laverne Cox says about popular media's tendency to highlight anti-trans violence: "I hear people say, 'But it's based on a true

story.’ *But why is this the kind of story that gets told over and over again?* [emphasis added]” (Feder, 2020, 47:13). While accurate representations are important and highly valued by the trans people, there is no reason to fixate on tragedy. Trans joy and triumph are just as real as trans hardships.

A significant part of the discussions on the threads analyzed in this paper challenge the stigma attached to cross-gender relationships and how this stigma is portrayed through #StanGel and the mainstream dominant narrative regarding gender and sexuality. This is evident in fans’ nuanced reading of Stan and his relationship with Angel, as well as the discussion regarding chasers, fetishism, and the relationship between heterosexuality and dating trans people. Considering how many in society continue to see cisgender people dating trans people as inherently queer and perhaps even threatening to their sexuality (Mock, 2013; Gamarel, et al., 2019; Blair & Hoskin, 2018; Trepany, 2021), these discussions subvert the dominant narrative in a cis-heteronormative society. As such, I found that queer-dominated fan communities like r/PoseFX can function as *networked counterpublics* in the sense that they challenge cis-heteronormative understanding of gender expectations and sexuality.

The understanding of r/PoseFX as a networked counter public is significant, as it illustrates an online community’s ability to subvert the patriarchal ideologies reinforcing gender norms and expectations that dictate how one ought to perform gender (Butler, 1990). While there is power in breaking away from stereotypical and monolithic portrayals, online communities allow fans to take the conversation beyond the screen and discuss these media texts in relation to real-life experiences. When LGBTQ+ folks recognize



Season 1, Episode 8: "Mother of the Year" (50:26)



Season 1, Episode 1: "Pilot" (51:07)

and discuss these incongruities on screen and in their lives, they offer perspectives that challenge the dominant narrative perpetuating cis-heteronormative ideals that enable queerphobia.

Conclusion

Stan looks exactly like the very society that disinvites women like Angel from the rest of the world: cisgender, heterosexual, white, middle-class, male. To have a man like Stan express the same admiration he did to Angel at the diner is a powerful statement against the backdrop of trans women of color being murdered at alarming rates in a Trump-era 2018 (and queer people dying from the AIDS epidemic and the lack of support given to their community in this season's conservative Reagan-era setting), especially for trans women who followed this series. As uncomfortable as it is to admit, there is a level of validation when someone who looks like Stan tells a trans woman that she is someone he desires, not because of her hypersexuality, but because she is more real than anyone else in his world. But what *Pose* gives us in the end is a much more meaningful message: trans women deserve *exactly* the type of love and commitment that they want—nothing less. Imagine being a transgender teenager sitting in your living room couch watching a trans woman of color walk away from a financially stable and conventionally attractive straight, cisgender man because he has failed to love her the way she knows she deserves to be loved. Now *that* is powerful. The discussions in r/PoseFX shows exactly that.

The #StanGel-related discussions on r/PoseFX suggest that although many want to see trans women portrayed as worthy of romantic love, they want it done the right way. That is, trans women should not have to settle for men like Stan who will sleep with them in a cozy apartment but hide their romance from the rest of the world. And if fans cannot have a cis straight man give that to his trans partner, they would much rather see her walk away from him and be her own source of comfort and happiness.

Although this paper thoroughly addresses traditional media representations and new platforms as online communities, networked publics, and networked counterpublics, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. My analysis primarily focuses on Angel and Stan's

relationship, but there are several other cross-gender relationships in the show. In particular, Angel's relationship with Lil' Papi offers a different perspective on cross-gender relationships. It is in stark contrast to her relationship with Stan, considering how there was no question about Papi's love and respect for Angel. Future work on how cross-gender relationships are portrayed and interrogated by fans would benefit from an analysis of Angel and Papi's relationship and its audience reception, as it would offer a comparison to the cross-gender relationship between Angel and Stan and its audience reception. Considering its heartwarming outcome, an analysis of this positive cross-gender relationship could identify aspects of its representation that appealed to fans that could help provide a model for trans representation.

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