

Fanfiction: Mode of Storytelling or Marketing Device, Analysed Through Uses and Gratifications Approach

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Abstract

Fanfiction is an evolving literary genre that happens in a fictional world, combining the elements of beloved characters and alternate scenarios. It is a technique of world-building with retellings of stories catered to the preferences of audience practiced in the contemporary world. In the recent times with the coming of the Marvel Comics adapting their stories on to the screen, the number of fan activities have involved a digital approach. It has taken the forms of writings and drawings on various online “notice boards” including Wattpad and Reddit. One of the earliest forms of fanfiction is oral retellings of stories which originated since the circulation of Homer’s writings. The alterations brought to the tales have been speculated to be the reason for the birth of fanfiction. These stories are circulated both online as well as in the real-world. Comic-cons and cosplays are huge part of promoting these stories as fans take the opportunity to teach and learn from each other in a community-like setup. With trending topics sensitised, fanfiction has expanded its horizons with the inclusion of people with different skin tones, sexualities and the differently abled. Fanfiction has helped connect users of media across the world due to its rather public nature. In applying Uses and Gratifications approach, the reactions of the users who in this context involves the audience/readers of the Marvel films/comics. With the release of these films, the multi-national corporations that own department stores by attracting consumers use strategic marketing techniques to boost their sales who are the unofficial marketing agents of this business.

Keywords: Canons, Fanons, Alternate Reality, *The Hex*, Fanfiction

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Introduction

Cultural transmission through storytelling is a global phenomenon. These stories are more often oral than written. Earlier, children were told stories by their grandparents, and these were a generational tradition, passed down by word-of-mouth. One of the oldest stories transmitted orally is the folktale of Beowulf in the Anglo-Saxon language. As language changed according to times, the mode of storytelling also took to other forms such as writing and painting. With the development of Internet over a significantly short amount of time, these have taken to other forms such as graphic novels, e-books, light novels etc. Along with these, a significantly emergent form of popular artistic talent was evident in the production of fanfiction. Fanfiction is a form of narration in which the audience decides when and where the plot should deviate from the original story. For instance, the films from the *Shrek* franchise of Universal Studios have a way of connecting with the audience by convincing the audience that Cinderella was manipulated to get married to Prince Charming by the Fairy Godmother, and not her good fortune. In a similar fashion, fanfiction and fanart have a way of convincing the audience that the films, by means of newer actors are an attempt at buying the “interest” of audience. A similar theory in the same franchise convinces the audience of yet another theory that the dragon that guards Fiona’s (Shrek’s wife’s) tower was also a princess cursed, but whose saviour turned out to be an animal and not a prince. Hence, her transformation remained incomplete.

Stories have a connecting with their audience. A lot of people connect with the same story because of their shared experiences. This is one of the strategies used by the Marvel pictures to attract their audience is to engage their emotions. They shed away all the protective layers of a superhuman from the character and portray them as mere mortals. For instance, in a scene from *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) Thor gets a chance to meet his mother due to time-travel and he tries to warn her about her forthcoming death. On seeing her, he loses the arrogance of being the “strongest avenger” and immediately turns into her son in a matter of seconds. This moves the audience’ heart and creates a sense of empathy in them. It is on this emotion of losing a parent at any age that the following events in Thor’s life is created. Similarly, when Iron Man dies, everyone is bawled over by the event because he is the one and true leader of the Avengers. People could not accept the new reality and vented their emotions through stories on Wattpad and online drawings. These were circulated among close members of the community via Pinterest, Tumblr, and other online arenas. Fan activities such as drawings, stories, comic book conventions, are a huge part of publicising the commercial product of making a film. It is a cyclical process with fanfiction being created off movies’ endings and moviemaking inspired by fanfiction. Bronwen Thomas in his work *Literature and Social Media*, brings out the distinguishing feature between a ‘canon’ and a ‘fanon’ with the former having fixed points of departure and variation, while the latter being the process by which certain tropes have been accepted by the majority due to widespread fan-following.

Literature Review

For this study, I have relied heavily on the content that is produced online on mediums such as “Reddit”, “Tumblr”, “Wattpad”, “ArchivesofOurOwn”, for the majority part. Since fanfiction is an output of the digital participation of the fans of the films and comics, it is not a product of an author or writer, but a reflection of a collective emotion. Previous studies in the topic relates itself to Boukra Roza’s analysis of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* to the *Twilight* collection in a toxic yet realistic sense. The former as mentioned above, is a series of books

written by E.L. James which was later adapted onto screen due to a widespread interest and fan following, while the latter is a record of fanfiction written by Stephanie Meyers which has also become a successful film franchise over the period of time. While Roza maintains the more dominant side of the heroes Christian Grey and Edward Cullen respectively, she tries to focus her study on the similarities between the characters. Fanfiction has been known to have a compensating effect on its readers from the emotional journeys they undertake while watching the films. The development of fanfiction took place in three waves: the first, involving two parts of a Marxist perspective with one side exhibiting the power dynamics prevalent in society and the other, the participatory nature of the activity. Henry Jenkins and Cornel Sandvoss, two theorists whose observations on fanfiction as a form of rebellion against the “ruling class”/show creators create an interesting power dynamic. These dominant ideas, in other words, are what is referred to as ‘canon’. The participatory aspect of it highlighted by Jenkins, is what is referred to as ‘fanon’ which consisted of memes, photos, videos, gifs and fanfiction. The second wave of fanfiction was studied by Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. In Thomas’ words, fanfiction rose to the occasion as a “[response] to the emergence of new media forms that contributed to an explosion in fan activity and that facilitated all sorts of new possibilities and interactions between fans.” (Thomas, 4) The final wave of this theory, also the highlight in my study, is the contribution of fans. This includes cosplays, role-playing, conventions and meet-ups. Apart from these, it also includes two significant concepts termed “fan-tagonism” and “anti-fan” which will be discussed in the paper. Lauren Moore in her research article *Fanfiction Archive of Our Own* (published in December 2023), has focused on the content produced solely on Archive of Our Own and has in fact, laid the groundwork for conducting a study on the topic by defining the terms “fandom”, “fanfiction”, “gen”, which would be a part of my research as well. She has pointed out the importance of studying smaller and larger groups of fan communities and how it can provide varying insights, depending on the nature of study. The study is mostly focused on the Marvel Studio’s unique ability to trigger the emotions of their audience and hence, a vast majority of the supporting literature would be dependent on several websites that provide information related to their characters. For instance, “Marvel [database] Fandom20” and “Marvel Unlimited” are two databases that provide the contents of Marvel comics that has been used to support the research carried out in this paper. It provides a chronological account of the characters that is looked up online.

Methodology

Through snowball sampling, the reliability of the samples has been tested and ensured. Two separate sets of questionnaires were prepared and circulated among two batches. One set was circulated among academicians and people interested in the technical aspects of marketing and the other among a younger crowd who preferred to see the art form as a part of popular culture. By collecting the data from a diverse set of audience, the responses of a wider set of population were made a possibility. In order to circulate the questionnaire, the convenience sampling was applied for the questionnaire based on storytelling and purposive sampling on the questionnaire for marketing strategy. The theoretical framework applied in this case being the Uses and Gratifications Theory, the difference in the viewpoints of the two sets of responders to the questionnaire is based on their judgement and rationale. The responses to the questionnaires are recorded by means of graphs which will be analysed in the paper. These graphs are categorised by means of pie charts which will be analysed using data interpretation techniques. Following the graphical representations, the analysis will be supported by results on which the analysis will be validated. These statistics are used to determine the accuracy of the data collected. The graphs are given below.

Data Interpretation

Are you aware of fanfiction?

21 responses

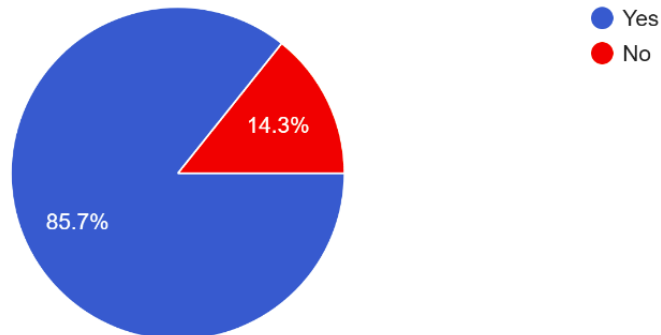


Figure 1: The Number of People Who Are Engaged in Successful Professional Practices

Are you aware of fanfiction?

23 responses

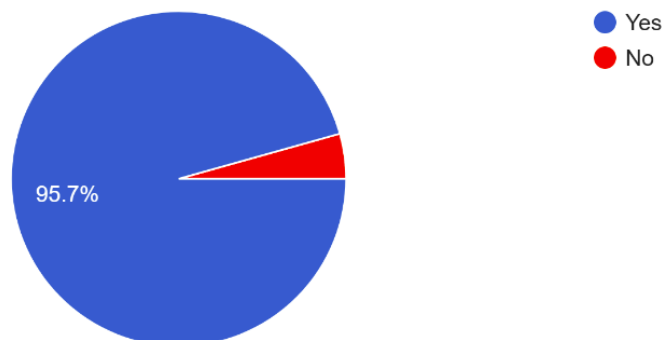


Figure 2: The Number of People Aware of Fanfiction Among the Younger Generation

As observed in the two graphs above, there is a very small percentage of people, accustomed to the digital world who are not familiar with the term “fanfiction”. However, analysis points out that those actively engage in the creation of fanfiction is a smaller number.

If yes, have you personally taken part in the online cultural phenomenon?

21 responses

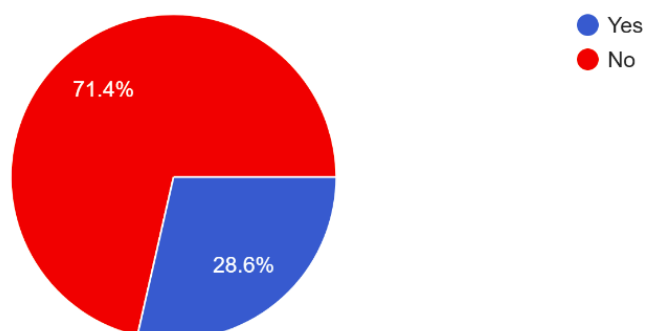


Figure 3: The Number of People Who Actively Engage in the Exchange of the Online Content

This implies that the active users of the internet, inclusive of social media might not be well acquainted with the different arenas of the internet that are used by a fairly large number of people.

Analysis

Both questionnaires were circulated around a varied age group. Five general questions were asked in both questionnaires while the remaining five were specific to the individual questionnaires. They were divided on the basis of people favouring fanfiction as a marketing strategy and as a device to communicate stories. While it was made clear that many people are aware of the online content, only a handful of them wants it to be included in the mainstream content for academia; the rest prefers it as a form of entertainment. The awareness surrounding the topic is minimum and maybe the reason for the large number of people participating in the activity. These participants mostly involve young people who prefer to fantasise their lives by combining their scenarios with that of the characters. Through fanfiction, audiences are able to connect with the stories and able to add their own flairs to the content. Marvel Studios derive their own content for their films by means of this method, combining the content of the comics as well as the reception of the audience. For instance, due to increased fan interest the universes of Deadpool and Wolverine have combined in the latest *Deadpool and Wolverine* movie. According to the comics, both characters are members of the Weapon X program, and trained mercenaries. Thus, a culmination of the two universes was welcomed by audience with the recent acquisition of Fox Studios by Disney.

Another moment that was of great importance in terms of fandom is when Disney+ released the weekly episodes of *WandaVision*, inspired by Marvel Comic in the early months of 2021, following the events of *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). Even though the series took two years to release due to the pandemic in the real-world, the time period between the events in the movie and the series span over six months. This makes it even more realistic as fans are able to transport themselves to the fictional world in a matter of seconds. While “Marvel [database] Fandom 20” gives a peek into the life of the character, the story that is portrayed on screen is often vastly different from the one depicted in the comics. This is due to the reception of the story by the viewers of the film who expect a certain catharsis and redemption for the character. In a much similar manner, *Supernatural* raised a poll on the music choice for their upcoming season before their twelfth instalment. This makes the fans feel acknowledged and the showrunners, a guarantee that “the show will go on”.

With a global audience, DC and Marvel, and even *Archies* and *Tintin* have become everyday across Southeast Asia. For instance, the *Archies* comics was written for the Indian audience, still set in the fictional location of “Riverdale”. This allowed the Indian audience to connect with the American teenager and his group of friends to the Indian subcontinent and to a majority of Asian audience, breaking the stereotype of the classical American teenager. These have given the audiences more opportunities to interact with the content creators through such fan conventions happening across different locations. Last year, ComiCon visited India with various events and opportunities for such interactions, proving it to be a grand success. With the release of each movie from the franchise, the aim to increase fan-building through stories is a major phenomenon. For instance, theme parks such as “Disneyland”, “Universal Studios” theme parks are major tourist destinations which attract people all over the world, over the holiday seasons. This along with the merchandise and fan content produced online raises a number of interesting questions regarding the nature of commercial films.

Conclusion

While the graphical representations indicate that the number of people engaging in the activity is comparatively less to the people who are aware of it. However, this paper might help people who are attempting to understand the phenomenon of fanfiction. In simple words, fanfiction is the literature in response to a particular situation that diverts from its canon journey. In such a situation, the outcry of the audience takes the form of fanfiction, usually a short content of one-shots where an alternate scenario providing a solution to the problem is posed, in the form of an “episode fix”. For instance, when Wanda Maximoff loses her loved ones, she creates an alternate reality called “The Hex” as a coping mechanism from her grief. Within the Hex, she creates a new Vision from her memories and gives birth to twins, Billy and Tommy. However, according to the comics Wanda’s powers exceed her control and ends up harming the Avengers, including the Hawkeye. Another form of fanfiction content is the romance relationships that are depicted in the comics and films. Due to the gender-fluid nature of today’s society, the audiences have expressed an interest in slash fanfiction where traditionally masculine heroes such as Captain America and Iron Man share a romantic relationship. Apart these, the traditional romances also form a part of fanfiction such as the widespread fan following of Captain America and Black Widow.

These are some of the major plot points found in the comics which are altered by the films. However, the acceptance of both as art forms results in the form of fanfiction, where an entirely different version of the stories is presented. Large-scale production houses employed by the Marvel comics assist in the marketing of their stories through goodies and easter eggs. This is their marketing strategy which is responsible for their relevance. The popularity of these films has also referenced in other shows such as “The Big Bang Theory” where they constantly engage in fun arguments on who is the strongest avenger, etc. Thus, the stories connect the audience with the content shown on screen and become a part of their personalities. This also builds in a sense of community across the diverse groups of people who view the content.

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