

Haley Rahey

Professor Neil Surkan

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“shout out to archiveofourown dot org”: An Analysis of Queer Identity Development
Online Through Fanfiction

In their article, “‘It's Like a Safe Haven Fantasy World’: Online Fandom Communities and the Identity Development Activities of Sexual and Gender Minority Youth,” Lauren B. McInroy and Shelly L. Craig study the impacts of online spaces for youth of sexual and gender minorities and observe that “[t]he substantial majority of participants identified ways they felt that online fandom contributed to their identity development” (239). That is, creating and consuming fanfiction helped youth of sexuality and gender minorities (SGMY) explore their identity and develop their own sense of self, especially through online platforms. McInroy and Craig usefully summarize and elaborate on current research regarding fandoms and fan-work consumption within minority groups, particularly youth identifying with sexuality and gender minority labels. In this essay, I intervene in this conversation by extending my focus towards fandom spaces through the use of fanfiction. Specifically, I conduct research on fandoms mainly through the social media platform *X* and through the fanfiction website *Archive of Our Own (AO3)*, choosing these sources particularly because they show a large and connected fandom presence. Given the current research on fandom spaces and identity development, I argue that online fandom spaces curate a safe and non-discriminatory space for SGMY, which allows them to experiment with and develop their identities on their own terms before presenting themselves as a specific sexual or gender identity in their “real” lives: fanfiction written on AO3, which is

then shared on *X* as a means to create fandom culture, is the greatest aid for SGMY looking to explore their own identity, as many creators write about specific LGBTQ experiences through common characters in a fandom. My essay first examines how other scholars view the relationship between fanfiction, community, and identity. Next, I present my own study of how SGM individuals explore identity labels by creating communities online using the social media platform *X*, which is done through sharing similar experiences as those depicted in fanfiction written on AO3. This acts as a precursor to applying identity labels to their real-world selves. Lastly, I discuss the impact fanfiction on AO3 has for youth exploring their sexuality and gender through fandom spaces on *X* and open this discussion for other scholars to participate in.

Contrary to McInroy and Craig, Diana Floegel argues that information communication technologies (ICTs) such as the internet “also include harmful attributes such as context collapse ... unequal access among individuals” and “harassment and bullying” (786). In other words, ITCs may result in harm to individuals, whether that is by exposure of private activities or through cyberbullying. However, this opinion is opposed by McInroy and Craig, who believe that fanfiction plays an important role in “identity development” (239). Specifically, they argue that “[o]nline fandom facilitated (1) discovery and realization, (2) exploration and experimentation, (3) safety and anonymity, (4) validation and normalization, (5) authenticity and self-acceptance, and (6) sharing identity” (239). Therefore, once an individual discovers or realizes an aspect of their identity, they move through a sequence of experimentation, finding safety within an online space, and validation. Through this process, they learn to accept their identity and eventually share their identity with people in their real lives, taking an aspect of themselves outside of a space that is strictly online. Identity development like this is important because it proves that online spaces are not only used as a safe space where individuals of certain

minorities feel welcome, but as a space that can be genuinely helpful when finding an identity label, which ultimately reduces stigma and prejudice offline as well. More specifically, Anna Llewellyn argues that in “the online world, fandoms and fanfictions can play a crucial role in the lives and well-being of [women loving women]” (2357). What Llewellyn means is not only do online communities help individuals in general to explore their identities, but these online communities are specifically important and supportive to women loving women (WLW.)

Although Craig and McInroy, Floegel, and Llewellyn largely agree that online spaces have produced a safe space for identity development, the aforementioned scholars have not focused their conversation on specific fanfiction on *AO3* and the correlating fandoms on the social media platform *X*, which is one of the largest fandom (and fanfiction) communities aside from those on *AO3*. The prevalence of this social media platform may be due to the fact that many individuals post their fanfiction on *X*, either exclusively or alongside their works on *AO3*. This is particularly important because many individuals, especially SGMY, discover aspects of their identities through interacting with other individuals in a community, which is exactly what *X* acts as. I will refocus this conversation by taking a more positive outlook on these social media platforms, and I will refocus the current scholarly conversation on *X*, a specific platform, while examining activities that contribute to SGMY individuals finding a community and therefore identity labels they can carry out to their offline lives. These scholars state that online communities “supported the initial phases of SGM identity development. Fandom ‘opened so many doors’ and helped participants ‘realize the limitless possibilities’ of SGM identities in a variety of ways” (McInroy and Craig 239). McInroy and Craig are stating that online communities are able to contribute to the identity development of youth who identify as sexual and gender minorities, which opens many avenues for an individual to explore one’s own

identity labels, regardless of the rarity of that label, in order to bring their identity past the online realm and into the real world.

Many anecdotes about developing identity through fanfiction are found on *X*. In an article published in *Vice* in September 2020, the author Satviki Sanjay discusses how *X* kickstarted her journey to reading fanfiction, which helped her discover her own sexuality. This is a prime example of how participating in fandoms helps individuals discover, experiment with, and come to terms with their own identities. In a discussion involving how she found out about *AO3*, Sanjay states that the platform helped her come to terms with accepting her own identity because “as the discovery of [her] own sexuality crept in, relationships in fanfictions kept showing [her] the light and letting [her] know that the things that went through [her] mind also went through the minds of [her] favourite characters in some other dimension.” Therefore, Sanjay was able to live vicariously through the fictional characters in the fanfiction she read about, which made her feel empowered to discover her own sexuality. These experiences may be unique to a given character, but many experiences are similar enough between Queer individuals that it is easy to seek validation through projecting onto these fictional characters within fictional works. Satviki also discusses how the fanfiction community “gave [her] a sense of community, for everyone who read the stories [she] did could relate to what [she] was going through.” Through the fanfiction community, Sanjay was able to find other real-world humans with similar experiences to hers, which allowed her to be reliant on many individuals in these communities and not only on the fictional characters found in fanfiction. She also discusses how other people are affected by communities founded upon fanfiction. During a discussion of the impacts of other individuals and the discoveries of their sexualities, Sanjay quotes an individual whom she calls Blue. Blue questions if they would have discovered their own asexuality sooner if they had discovered

fanfiction in which asexuality was portrayed. Blue also is a fanfiction creator, and states that they “hope that [their] stories will help other people sort out their own identities.” According to Blue, seeing instances of sexuality and gender minorities in fanfiction creates a sense of belonging, which helps individuals label and identify with certain sexual identities and gender labels. This has inspired Blue (and probably many other fanfiction creators) to write fanfiction that touches on sexualities portrayed less by mainstream media and many popular fanworks. In turn, these creators aim to help individuals questioning their identity to find a label, no matter how much popularity the label has in the media or inside of fandom communities.

Individuals also sometimes take to the social media platform *X* to discuss their identities, many of whom started questioning through fanfiction platforms such as *AO3*. An instance of this happening is when *X* user @angerrcat, who goes by the name of Dwake online, posted in September 2022, “shout out to archiveofourown dot org for once again making me have an ‘oh’ moment about my identity out of the fucking blue yet again” (@angerrcat 2022). In other words, Dwake was coming to the platform and to their community in order to express their identity after finding a fanfiction on *AO3* that matches how they feel about their identity. Dwake states also in an additional thread under the original post, “the classic looking-up-a-tag moment and finding a website talking about You.” Thus, as such, Dwake’s experience with this is not unique, and this particular instance is seen as an event that happens to many people inside of a fandom. This goes to show how many individuals come to find online communities through fanfiction, both of which can help in the identity development of SGM individuals.

Despite the work offered by McInroy and Craig, Floegel, and through anecdotes of instances where fanfiction was able to create online spaces on social media like *X*, scholars are still exploring the connection between fanfiction and identity development using social media

platforms and fanfiction archives. This is mainly due to the fact that fanfiction is not especially prevalent in cultures outside of fandom communities. Scholars also have yet to address the role fanfiction can play in terms of real-world identity acceptance in what feels like a less-welcoming world, especially in terms of welcoming and accepting communities surrounding individuals who identify as sexual and gender minorities, and particularly SGMY. Specifically, the world is particularly scary for gender and sexuality minority youth, who are outright discriminated against around the world. For instance, Alberta Premier Danielle Smith recently put forth new policies restricting gender-affirming care for transgender youth, one of which resulted in making the notification of guardians mandatory if a child chooses to change their name or pronouns in a school setting. The United States has faced similar challenges after the inauguration of Donald Trump in January 2025, which have also brought many similar policy changes for SGMY and their safety, such as attempts to block funding for institutions that provide gender-affirming care, and banning any form of gender-affirming care to those who are 19 years of age or younger, such as hormone replacement therapy, which is still available to cisgender youth. Scholars are able to expand upon how online communities shaped by fanfiction provide a safe space for youth during scary policy changes by thoroughly exploring research particular to specific fandoms and researching how a specific fandom works in correlation to other fandoms or the online norm.

While I have intervened in current discussions of how fanfiction can influence identity by focusing on fanfiction on *AO3* and its correspondence to the online fandoms on *X*, more work remains to be done regarding specific fandoms and identity labels in regard to the importance of fanfiction within these specific communities. Some might say that fandoms, and therefore fanfiction, can create harmful environments and encourage the use of stereotypes. However, anecdotes suggest that being in online communities centered around fanfiction was able to help

in the identity development of SGMY to a greater extent than any harassment or bullying which took place in these communities. Overall, online communities facilitate safe spaces for Queer-identifying and questioning individuals, and fanfiction aids these individuals as well by allowing them to engage with media that expresses identities that may be foreign to them, and which they may later choose to identify with. These labels are later shared through *X*, which helps to create safe spaces online by forming community through the acknowledgement of labels of sexuality and gender minorities. Fanfiction helps SGM individuals to realize their identity and further express their identity outside of online spaces.

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