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THE INFLUENCE OF FANDOM ON THE CREATIVE PRODUCERS

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Abstract: What's mine is yours and what's yours is mine, this is the world of fandom. Looking at the ways in which fandoms have had an influence on storytelling; do stories really belong to the original content producer once they have developed a big enough fandom or, are they trying to fulfil the needs of the consumers? Once a fandom has become large enough there is a possibility of malcontent within audience members that can eventually lead to the rise of toxic fandom. The aim of this research is to look at the ways in which creators have tailored and filtered their own original ideas to please audiences, specifically toxic fans and how they have potentially compromised authenticity so that they could franchise a certain story and its respective universe. This paper will investigate the following televisual/ filmic icons of popular culture: *Harry Potter (2001-2011), Game of Thrones (2011-2019)* and finally *Rick and Morty (2013-present)*. They will be analysed to determine the ways in which fandoms possibly become toxic and lose the ownership of the creative producers/authors/show runners/directors. By analysing these three case studies and their respective fandoms the research will attempt to verify whether a story still belongs to the creative producers or whether they have been appropriated by fans, by forcibly adapting the core story to fit the consumers' needs. All three fandoms will be looked at by taking different approaches, as they could be said to have very different fanbases and therefore it will give this research a better understanding as to how these fandoms work and the ways in which they adapt a story to make it popular or in turn change the story to create shock value. This research will approach a six-phase framework of fan appropriation which will attempt to prove the thesis statement. These phases were created in order to look at and therefore demonstrate how once a story has a big enough fandom, they no longer belong to the original producer but are rather made in the form of participatory culture, as theorised by Henry Jenkins.

Keywords: Fandoms, toxic fandoms, false ownership, participatory culture, fan appropriation, textual poachers, fantagonism, fan theories, Easter eggs, fan service.

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Contents

1. Introduction 7
Preface 7
Background and Context 7
Aim 10
Objectives 10
Research Question 10
Rationale 11
Proposed six-phase theory 13
Phase 1: The Original story 13
Phase 2: The story starts to gain an audience. 14
Phase 3: A fandom is established. 15
Phase 4: Fan theories. 15
Phase 5: Author gives in. 16
Phase 6: The author no longer owns their story 17
Ethical Considerations 17
2. Literature Review 18
Theoretical Framework 18
2.1) What are Fandoms? 19
2.2) What is Toxic Fandom? 20
2.3) Textual Poachers 26
2.4) Conspiracy Theories. 26
2.5) Conspiracy Fiction 27
2.6) Fan Theories. 28
2.7) Fan Practices. 29
2.8) Easter Eggs. 29
2.9) Fan Service 29
2.10) Fantagonism. 30
Literature Review 30
2.12) False ownership among Fans 30
2.13) Canon VS Fanon 31
2.14) Fanfiction 33
2.15) “How it Should have Ended.” 35

2.16) Conspiracy Theories 39
2.17) Fan Activities. 44
2.18) Geek Culture 46
2.19) Fan Hierarchy 46
2.20) Fair Use laws and Fanfiction 51
2.21) #GamerGate 52
2.22) Fantagonism 54
Summary of Findings 55
3.) Methodology 56
Approach 57
4.) Data Analysis 61
Analysing *Game of Thrones, Harry Potter,* and *Rick and Morty* according to the six-phase theory. . 61
Game of Thrones 61
Harry Potter 73
Rick and Morty 81
Analysis of Survey Data 93
Data Synthesis 126
Systematic Review 126
Narrative/Descriptive Synthesis 126
Findings 127
Discussion 129
Limitations 131
5.Conclusion 132
Appendix A 137
Further Reading 137
Fandoms and Shipping 137
Easter Eggs 137
Fan Service 138
Fan Authorship 140
Conspiracy Theories in Disney 142
Appendix B 143
Consent Form 143
Participant Information Sheet 144
Questionnaire/ Survey 146
Survey answers 148
6. References 180

Reference List for Figures/Images ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Endnotes 195

1. Introduction

Preface

Fandom studies have been explored by scholars and academics thoroughly in terms of the way they work, especially in terms of participatory cultures and their embedded sense of community. However, past research studies have not specifically looked at the way in which fandoms affect the creative producer and how the wants and needs of fans meta-influence the creative's work as a whole. In this thesis I hypothesize that fans hold a certain amount of power when it comes to the creative work that they have found a connection with and potentially engenders a need to control it, lest the product no longer fulfils their particular preferences[1]. This research aims to investigate the possibility of fandoms subsuming a creative producer's work and how the creative producer then loses creative freedom because of this. This section of the research paper will introduce the study by first discussing the background and context, followed by a research problem, the research aims, objectives and questions, the significance of the study and limitations.

Background and Context

Participatory culture for the most part and quite frequently is not actually determined by industry (Arouh, 2020, p.68). For John Fiske, "there is a constant struggle between fans and the industry, in which the industry attempts to incorporate the tastes of the fans, and the fans to 'excorporate' the products of the industry" (Fiske, 1992, p.32). Excorporation is the process through which products of popular culture are modified or recreated for use in a particular society. Sociologist John Fiske popularized the thesis of excorporation to explain the constant conflict in popular culture between the dominant and inferior groups (Fiske,1992,p.32).It is important to note here that although some people may argue that once a work is released to the public it is no longer owned by the creative producer and is now public domain, I am looking at ownership in a sense of creativity and how the creative producer loses a sense of authority as they feel the need to fulfil the fans wants in their future works by giving into fan theories and so on. This research will therefore cover the ways in which a fandom can influence the fictional world that it follows and how the creative producers can feel obligated to fulfil fan theories and give into something that they might not necessarily have wanted to do in their original storyline. This research explores a six-phase theory which a fandom

[1] It should be noted, however, that this research is not about the meta of fan practice in the form of production (such as fanfiction, fan art, etc.), but is rather concerned about the external influence fan communities hold over their respective fandoms.

follows to lead to the producer losing ownership by looking at three specific case studies as well as the analysis of surveys by fans of these three case studies. Ownership in this instance can be seen as the complete creative control that a creative producer has when their story is initially established and created.

This research is based on the idea that fans identify with the content of a creative producer and therefore they decide to take "false" ownership of this said content. For the purpose of this research paper the term "false ownership "will be used as the creative work does not technically belong to the fans in the instance of creative freedom, but yet they feel the need to control it, I therefore believe that this in itself stems from toxic fan practice as looked at by Henry Jenkins(Proctor, W., Kies, B., Chin, B., Larsen, K., McCulloch, R., Pande, R. and Stanfill, M., 2018, p.24). The intention of this research is to investigate how this false ownership takes place and in turn determine the ways in which a creative producer starts to lose ownership and a right to creative freedom over their own work. The importance of this research is to give creators a better understanding of the influence a fandom may have over their work and therefore these findings can be used by creative producers in future when creating a fictional world.

It is important to note the term creative producer will be used to refer to the author/directors/show runners collectively. These are all different roles and I do not wish to conflate the terms author and producer; however, in the context of this research, they will be looked at together as each case study has an original owner that may have had different roles and titles. For example, J.K Rowling who is the author of *Harry Potter,* while Dan Harmon and Justin Roiland are the show runners of *Rick and Morty*. In both cases they are the original creators of these fictive universes and therefore will be referred to as creative producers throughout this research.

In regard to the fandom studies, the scholar Henry Jenkins is well known for exploring the topic of fandoms in his works, he has written multiple books of fandoms such as: *Textual Poachers* (1992), *Fan ,Bloggers and Gamers* (2006), *Confronting the challenges of Participatory Culture* (2006), *Convergence Culture* (2006), *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era: A Conversation on Youth, Learning, Commerce, and Politics* (2013) and more recently *Comics and Stuff* (2019). Henry Jenkins also has a website where he discusses his thoughts on Fandoms and Participatory Culture. It can therefore be understood that there has been extensive research into what a fandom is by Henry Jenkins as well as other authors, how it is formed and how it works. In this research paper however I will be looking specifically at the ways in which the participants of these said fandoms influence the ways in which the content is created and their influence over the storytelling itself. I will look at toxic fan practises as discussed, Henry Jenkins quite closely throughout this research paper as for the

purpose of this study, I will relate the actions of these fans to being toxic due to the idea that they have claimed something that does not truly belong to them. In terms of research there aren't many resources that discuss the fans influence over a creative work itself but there have been instances whereby the creative producers have spoken about the influence of the fans in their work.

It is therefore important to understand the influence that the fans have in creative works as it seems to be a problem that the creative producers deal with, in terms of pressure and trying to please their audience without being true to themselves. This research will hence help future creative producers when creating a story which may develop into a bigger fandom. By researching this topic creative producers will be able to understand the ways in which fans can influence their works and it can create awareness to fans themselves about the negative impacts they can have on the creative producer. It will also provide a basis for later creative producers to establish how they would want fandoms to approach their works and the way in which they interact to fandoms specifically looking at the power leeway they award fans.

Jenkins' work remains relevant for its ongoing commitment to fandom as a social identity and as a network; these contrast sharply with the work of later scholars who see fandom as a matter of enthusiastic but individual engagement (Coppa, 2014, p.1). In 1992 Henry Jenkins' influential work, *Textual Poachers*, was published, which contributed towards igniting the establishment of the fan studies field of research and recreating previous restrictive depictions of media fans (Bennett, 2014, p.1).

This research will bring forward a new insight for future creatives to have a better hold on their work as fans will be held accountable for the impact that they have had over someone else's brainchild.

I feel that I will have an interesting perspective since I have played both roles of a creative producer as well as a fan. I have also found myself questioning the choices of other creative producers. I have also wanted to go on twitter rants and participate in discussions where I argue that my ideas and concepts would have been better than the producer themselves. Therefore, I feel like I can relate from a non-bias perspective in terms of this research paper.

In order to investigate whether once a storyline or fictional universe develops a big enough fandom it no longer belongs to the author due to six specific phases that will be proposed as a delineation of the process of appropriation and subsequent forced remediation of the original story content by a show's fanbase.

Once a fandom is established, and it holds a big enough influence over the fictional world, the creative producers will now try to please the fandom by changing the fictional world that once

belonged solely to them. I will also look specifically at the process of how a fandom potentially becomes toxic as it grows and therefore how the toxic behaviours of fans cause the creative producer to lose ownership. One must still take into consideration that a toxic fan is not necessarily someone who is a passionate or obsessive fan but rather someone that inflicts toxic behaviour onto their chosen fandom. As such, I do not seek to conflate agency with negative behaviour – fans, by their very nature will always want to build upon the stories and worlds that they love; as such, only the most extreme incidents of perverse fandom will be analysed.

Aim

The research will investigate how creative producers can perceptibly lose a sense ownership/ reputation because toxic fans have taken over their authorship.

Objectives

To achieve the proposed aim, the following will need to be done.

- A six-phase procession of 'fan-expropriation' will be used to demonstrate how this phenomenon may occur by discussing the delineation of story content and eventual remediation into fan context.
- A series of three case-studies will be consulted with to demonstrate different varieties of so called 'toxic-fandom' in order to identify commonalities in fan expropriation.
- Surveys will be distributed to a selection of fans from each case study and will be ascertained in order to contextualise sentiments towards the sense of ownership that occurs in the properties.

Research Question

Does Fandom have the potential to exert and influence over a narrative beyond its original context and platform: A critical engagement with fan theory using the case study approach.

Rationale

Fandom is something that most people are a part of. Whether you consider yourself a 'superfan' or casual fan, one would be hard-pressed to find anyone that can say they are not a fan of to some extent. Being a fan entails many things and with being a fan of something one tends to resonate with the specific fictional content that they enjoy. This may be through a sense of community as theorised by Henry Jenkins that fandom is a 'Participatory Culture' (Jenkins, 1992). This research, while acknowledging the precedents established by scholars such as Jenkins, focuses upon the ways in which a fandom can influence the story itself, rather than the act of simply being a fan of something. Instead of looking at the ways at the ways in which fans participate within fandoms I will look solely at the toxic behaviours of fans that in turn may lead them into trying to take over a story that does not actually belong to them.

The expectations of fans are an important aspect to this research as it shows how disappointed and angry fans have an influence over the way in which a story is written. Therefore, this research will give new insight into the ways in which a fandom can be looked at in terms of how they influence the actual fictional world. In this research a new perspective is taken as the hierarchy of creative producer and consumer is switched in importance and therefore a new outlook on the influence of fandom can be critically looked at and analysed.

It should be noted here that there are times when the creative producers have obligations to the show runners or vice versa; for example, when HBO, the production studio of the *Game of Thrones* television series mandated the last season to have more than six episodes which the creative producers disagreed to. Therefore, it can be seen that some things may be out of the creative producer's control (Tassi,2019).

In an interview with Entertainment weekly in 2015 this was stated by the HBO programming president (Hibbard,2015): '"This is the hard part of what we do," sighs HBO programming president Michael Lombardo. "We started this journey with David and Dan. It's their vision. Would I love the show to go 10 years as both a fan and a network executive? Absolutely." 'Here is an example of fans or in this case the HBO president, stating that although he would have wanted more seasons of *Game of Thrones*, it belongs to Dan and David: 'it's their vison' he says. We can see here an instance

where people do not believe that the choices of the creative producers are the right ones for the show. This brings me to my next point which is the fans false sense of ownership.

False ownership will be analysed in terms of how fandoms can be seen as becoming toxic. Therefore, I will not be looking at the positive impact that fans have had in terms of community due to the scope of this work, but rather how they have negatively impacted the fandom itself and how fans have forcibly taken away creative freedom from the creative producers. This is not to say that fans have only had negative impacts on the creative producer in terms of further expanding on their worlds with things such as fanfiction. For the context of this research however, I will be looking at the behavioural pattern's fans have acquired and how that has impacted the creative producer.

By looking at these three specific case studies through a six-phase theoretical lens, it will be clearer to readers and give them a better understanding of the impact that a fandom can have over a show and will therefore give more insight to the creative producers on how much they really do have a say in their own work once they have established a big enough fandom. This will be interesting to take into consideration for upcoming creative producers and I therefore believe that by doing this research they will have a better idea as to how to have a relationship with their fans and to understand the amount of control fandoms of their own work have.

I will take on a Case Study Analysis approach while looking at qualitative data that will be collected through surveys of fans of the *Harry Potter, Game of Thrones*, and *Rick and Morty* fandoms. The reason I have chosen these three case studies specifically is because there are different ways that fans have been able to take over the story of each fandom respectively and I will therefore be able to showcase a variety of ways that fans take ownership of something that does not belong to them. In the case *Game of Thrones* there have been instances where fans have went out of their way to get the show rewritten because they did not agree with the producers. In the case of *Harry Potter* fanfiction has led to the ideas of the fans becoming canon without the permission of the creative producers. In the case of *Rick and Morty* fans pressured the producers into not necessarily giving into fan theories but still having to show them in episodes to make the fans happy. These are just some instances where fans have taken over and there are many more instances within these case studies where fans have taken over and these will be looked at further throughout this research paper. After the case studies have been analysed according to the six-phase theory, data was collected from fans and participants asking them questions on how they feel towards having a say in the way in which their show is created. This gave valuable insight in real-time as to how fans felt towards their own rights towards the creative product, that they were fan of.

Proposed six-phase theory

Phase 1: The Original story

According to Orson Scott Card who is best known for his science fiction novel *Ender's Game* and including its many sequels. He states that the performance, or the portion of your labour that earns you the term "writer," is the actual writing of the story, as well as the construction of the text, the choice of words, the dialogue, the style, the tone, and the point of view (Card, 2010, p15). The composition, or the part of our labour that earns us the term "storyteller," is the creation of people, circumstances, and events, as well as the construction of plot and scene, the ordering of events, the complications and twists, the setting, and historical background (ibid)

According to Robert Dickman, in his 2003 book entitled *The Four Elements of Every Successful Story*, the mnemonic device PHAT can be used to theorize the four elements that are used to make a successful story. The mnemonic stands or: Passion, Hero, Antagonist and Transformation (Dickman,2003, p.2)). According to Dickman:

> These components lie within any story, whether a movie, a business presentation, or a political debate. When these components are understood and used effectively, stories speak to our basic human condition and needs. Because these narrative needs are hard-wired into us almost from birth, stories written 5,000 years ago in languages long dead can still speak to us. (p.2).

In order for us to analyse the three case studies that are being used to show the stages a fandom goes through that lead the creative producers to lose ownership, I will be using the PHAT mnemonic theorized by Robert Dickman to analyse phase 1.

Furthering this, Dickman suggests that we should consider key questions when looking at a story with regards to these four elements, listed under thematic containers:

- Passion

Is there enough passion in the story to pique the interest of the target audience's emotions? Are the stakes sufficiently high? A story's emotions serve as its principal memory anchor and motivator to action.

- Hero

Is there a distinct point of view in the story? Is it possible to comprehend the facts that lie at its core? Is the target audience willing to embrace this point of view?

- Antagonist

Are the challenges that confront the story's hero (and, by implication, the viewer) stated clearly enough that the actions required to overcome them are understood and the task of doing so is completely accepted?

- Transformation

Is the story capable of transforming the audience's life in a meaningful way and is that transformation positive? (ibid).

Taking Dickman's thoughts into account, it should still however be noted that stories do not always need of be transformational but could rather have been created only for the sole purpose of entertainment. For this research I will still take the aspect of transformation into account as I believe that it brings an element into stories that draw on the emotions of fans amongst the fandom and draws them closer into the fictional world.

Phase 2: The story starts to gain an audience.

After the story has been put out into the public, it can either be well or poorly received or in some instances people just don't take to the creative content. For the purpose of this research, I will be looking at specifically if it is taken well or if it is not. If the story is fortunate enough to become a hit, it will start to establish a fan base and as the fan base grows it becomes a fandom. When looking at the example of *Harry Potter* J.K Rowling didn't have a publishing team for her first book, which would have including things such as promotional posters and advertisements, however without these instances a fan community was still formed. "Rowling's empire was built off of words, and not just

the words that she wrote, the word of mouth was her strongest ally and with her fanbase growing up with the internet and watching it change." (Kennedy, 2019).

In order to analyse this phase I previously looking at viewership and book sales in regard to the respective fandoms that are being used.

Phase 3: A fandom is established.

In fan cultures, these creations and artistic expressions take the form of fan fiction, fan art, fan videos, cosplay, folk songs, and other interactions with a person, group, or fictional universe. Fan videos, or fanvids, set clips of a movie or TV show to music and/or construct a narrative using clips from multiple source materials. Filk songs are a type of folk music, usually with science-fiction, fantasy, or other fictional universes as the subject. Cosplay is the practice of wearing costumes or other clothing and accessories to portray a fictional character. Fan fiction consists of stories written by fans of a particular work of fiction (rather than the original creator) about the fictional characters or universe. Fanfiction is what leads us to the next step (Fandom and Participatory Culture, 2021).

Productions use technology-especially the Internet in order to enhance their contents, TV series and movie franchises, basing their narratives on principles of narrative complexity as active audiences engage in the reception of cultural texts using spreading tactics (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). Indeed, fans share these complex contents as well as fan-made productions within their own fandom and in the public sphere via social networks in the likes of Facebook, Twitter, or Tumblr, hereby playing the role of advocates for the media contents (Kurtz, 2016).

In order to look at this phase I will be specifically looking at the participation and engagement of fans in regard to fanfiction as well as social media engagement on platforms such as twitter, Instagram etc and I will look at the fanfiction websites as well.

Phase 4: Fan theories.

Like fanfiction, fan theories start to emerge when the fans take the story as their own and start adapting it in a way that suits their wants and needs; even if it goes against the original story and what the writers have envisioned for it. Due to the fact that reading is seen as solitary, fans have

created spaces whereby members can share hobbies, objectives, and interests around books, authors, or themes (Gee and Hayes, 2011).

According to Urban Dictionary fan theory is defined as a form of contemporary critical theory, in which the audience analyses the text and creates a new interpretation that explains "what really happened," creating a separate narrative aside from or within the narrative. Fandoms are quite contemporary concepts and by using urban dictionary to define this concept we can see that it is an ever-evolving phrase. Fan theories are interpretative proposals made by readers which are discussed, contrasted, and shared within affinity spaces. (Amo and Garcia,2021)

After a fan theory is created, it can then be assumed that the author then feels the unwilling urge to fulfil the consumers' needs which leads to step 5. It is important to note here that some creative producers might actually welcome the participation of fans and may be glad about their willingness to give them ideas. For this research, I will not be looking at that however and will rather be assuming that this participation is unwanted.

In order to analyse the ways in which fans come up with fan theories I will specifically be looking at Manuel de Amo and Garcia-Roca's three types of fan theories and used their examples as a framework by which to analyse the three case studies in terms of fan theories.

I will provide examples of shipping that fans have theorised for the respective case studies as well discussing the ways in which transmedia storytelling as well as fan authorship take place in this phase of my theory.

Phase 5: Author gives in.

Many authors look into fan theories through things such as Reddit[2] and 9gag[3] (Social media platforms) to gather what the audience thinks about where their story is headed (Waugh, 2017). At this stage of the six-phase process I theorize that the creative producer has started to lean on fans, taking their already developed theories into consideration and providing them with fan services and Easter eggs They can either decide to go in a completely different direction or give the fans what they

[2] Reddit is a social news website and forum where content is socially curated and promoted by site members through voting (Law, 2021).

[3] 9gag is social media website, which allows its users to upload and share "user-generated content" or other content from external social media websites (Escher, 2017).

want. In some cases, they might even develop their plot around the fan fiction and theories or even gain new concepts from the audience themselves.

For this phase of the theory, I will give examples of Easter Eggs, Ascended Fanon and fan services provided by the creative producers in order to give the fans what they want.

Phase 6: The author no longer owns their story

Fan theories are not necessarily bad and if an author does look into them, however they in turn might develop a bigger fanbase. The question this research is looking to answer is whether a story still belongs to the producer once they have given into the needs of the consumer audience fan base.

George RR Martin once said in an interview "A writer's creations are his livelihood. Those of us, like Diana Galabdon and myself, who prefer not to allow fan fictioneers to use our worlds and characters are not doing it just to be mean. We are doing it to protect ourselves and our creations" (Jacobs, 2021). One should take into consideration that George RR Martin has an opinion here that may not necessarily be shared by other authors for example in this case J.K Rowling.

In this final phase I will look at the ways creative producers have lost ownership due to the fandoms becoming toxic. I will be referring to the terms #Gamergate toxic fandom and fantagonism to do so.[i]

Crowd theory, herd behaviour, mob mentality, contagion, collective conscience, and group think are some of the terms used to describe the various phenomena that occur when several individuals find themselves united with common interests at stake (Jenkins, 2006).

Ethical Considerations

In order to make sure that the following research was valid and uncompromised ethical consideration was taken into account. This in turn gave the information that was gathered more value as everything was done according to ethical standards. The surveys that were conducted are completely voluntary and are confidential as they were not published on any public platforms. For the purpose of this research ethical clearance was granted from the University of Witwatersrand due to the fact that human participants were involved. Participants needed to fill out a consent form so that they were aware of how the data gathered was being used in this research. In terms of public platforms like twitter, fanfiction.net, Reddit forums and Wattpad are all public domain and therefore

can be used for analysis purposes if they are cited accurately and participation from these sources is wholly voluntary.

This research respected the autonomy of the participant and therefore it respected the persons opinions and choices rather than constructing them for the participant. All participants in this research were treated equally when completing the surveys and in order to maintain justice throughout this research process. This was achieved by making sure that the participants remained anonymous and that they have completed the survey voluntarily.

The participants were also required informed consent before completing the surveys whereby they were informed fully as to what the survey seeks to answer questions about, and they were provided the option to deny the completion of the survey if they did not wish to participate or disagree with the content that was recorded in the survey. All data collected throughout this research process was also confidential and participants will remain anonymous. The information that is collected throughout this research process will be stored on a private, secure cloud server for the duration of the research and will be destroyed after a period of 3 years. Ethical considerations will be taken very seriously during the process of this research as it is making use of human participant's as well as their very own opinions

2.Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

To address the research hypothesis of whether creative producers lose ownership of their creative works to fans, I propose the following statement: Due to the often-extreme engagement of Fandoms, a sense of loss of proprietary has occurred when considering the creative control intellectual property owners once had over their own original works once they enter mainstream media. Subsequently, a sense that these owners have been forced to hand control of their fictional worlds over to the audience, or at least to follow the fans' dictates, has been evoked. This of course is under the assumption that the producer had complete authorial control at the beginning of their

creative process. To better understand the concept of fandom I will be referring to Henry Jenkins' work on fandoms and participatory culture throughout the Theoretical Framework as his work is arguably the most formative and simultaneously seminal around fan practice. By looking at the scholarly works of Jenkins, it will be easier to define and understand how toxic fandom has been referred to throughout this research paper. I will use the works of Jenkins to further establish my standpoint that creators lose some sense of ownership to their creative works once a fandom is established.

2.1) What are Fandoms?

In order to understand what toxicity in fandom consists of I will first look at what a fan is according to the scholar Henry Jenkins in his work of *Textual Poachers:Television, Fans and Participatory Culture*. As Henry Jenkins argues, these characterizations of a toxic fan are tied up to the very definition of the word since "fan" is short for "fanatic," initially, one who belongs to the temple, a devotee; and it is also a term linked to behaviour resulting from possession by a deity or a demon (Jenkins,1992,p.13). As such, even etymologically, the fan is understood as someone whose very nature may be deviant, or toxic, and according to Jenkins, it is this conception that is mostly used in the media: "building on the word's traditional links to madness and demonic possession, news reports frequently characterize fans as psychopaths whose frustrated fantasies of intimate relationships with stars or unsatisfied desires to achieve their own stardom take violent and antisocial forms"(Jenkins,1992,p.13). Because of the prominence acquired in online settings, this unfavourable portrayal of fans still exists in the minds of many academics such as William Proctor and Briget Kies in their work of *Editors' Introduction: On Toxic Fan Practices and the New Culture Wars." Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*. The "mainstreaming" of fan cultures since the turn of the millennium has, in the words of William Proctor and Bridget Kies , "granted new possibilities, affordances and greater popular press attention to broader discursive and ideological conflicts within audiences and fan communities, especially on social media"(Proctor and Kies,2018,p129). However, it should be emphasized that the use of the phrase "toxic" to describe fan online activity is consistent with how the media will cover all tumultuous online events.

To understand what is meant by 'toxic fandom', one must first understand what a fandom is and what it consists of. It is helpful to look here at one of Henry Jenkins more modern definitions used on his blog to further understand what toxic fandom is. According to Henry Jenkins in his blog article titled *Fandom, Participatory Culture and Web 2.0*, "fandom refers to the social structures and

cultural practices created by the most passionately engaged consumers of mass media properties" (Jenkins, 2019). This definition is appropriate for the context of this research as it refers to people that are deeply passionate about their respective fan properties. It does not however refer to fans that are seen as being obsessed, which is what will be looked at in more depth throughout this research paper because I have hypothesized that this sense of obsession that many fans have may lead to the toxicity that can be found in fandom societies today. It should be noted that as with all participatory cultures, people vary in degrees of consumption, from occasional through to extremes. While it is important to be cognizant of the spectrum, this paper situates itself in the upper extremes of fandoms in order to gauge the catalysing instances of obsession that can lead to, what I term, toxic behaviour.

I will specifically be defining toxic fandom as when fans either display toxic behaviours such as a superiority complex towards other fans, gatekeeping, verbal abuse online towards fans and/or creative producers and lastly public acts of indecency.

It is important to note that toxic behaviours amongst fans should not be mistaken for acts of passion, obsession, and possession. Many fans may participate in these acts but might never be seen as toxic. However, in terms of possession, once it leads to fans thinking that their ideas are better than the creative producer, I will take this as if it is a toxic behaviour.

Cornel Sandvoss offered a more inclusive definition of fandom in his 2005 book called *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*, which considered both dedicated and casual fans. He defined fandom as "the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text in the form of books, television shows, films, or music, as well as popular texts in a broader sense such as sports teams and popular icons and stars ranging from athletes and musicians to actors" (Sandvoss 2005, p. 8). This definition fits into the spectrum of my research as it uses the term emotion, which is a substantial aspect as to why fans act the way they do in regard to their respective fandoms. The emotional attachment fans have to these popular narratives is what drives them to take hold a sense of ownership to the creative material.

2.2) What is Toxic Fandom?

When looking at Toxic Fandom, it can be seen as the opposite of Healthy/Good Fandom. According to Rachael Lefler in their article *What's Toxic Fandom and What Creates it?*, a fandom that is

appreciative of the creative product, fellow fans and the creative producer can be seen as a healthy and good fandom. In a friendly environment, good fans help one another and praise the creators. They have opinions but do not demand changes. They seek to improve one another rather than controlling one another (Lefler,2023). While the latter works to build other participants in the community up, the former tries to tear them down. The act of tearing down others in the community would be things such as trolling[4], bullying other fans that are possibly less engaged or new to the fandom and giving the fandom itself a bad name. Toxic fandom can therefore be seen as when fans attack other fans with purity tests, display acts of public indecency, harass other fans as well as producers online and many other previously noted activities.. In an article by Richard J Eskow called *What corporate Democrats really mean* when they use terms like "purity test", purity tests are defined as self-graded surveys which grades the participants degree of innocence in worldly matters (Eskow,2020).[5] It is important to note here that I will be looking at possession as an act of toxicity in the context of this research paper as I believe that wrongful possession in many aspects leads to fans taking over an entity that does not actually belong to them and then further wanting to control it.

These acts of fans also manifest in the form of 'gatekeeping' amongst fandoms. According to Kemery S Lynch in an article called *Fans as transcultural gatekeepers: The hierarchy of BTS' Anglophone Reddit fandom and the digital East-West media flow*, a gatekeeper has the role of deciding how and what new to report which will then determine what becomes an individual's social reality and a particular view on the world (Lynch, 2022, p.110). According to this article, certain fans might act as digital gatekeepers when they have influence over other fans. It makes the case that by acting as gatekeepers, these fans acquire limitless social capital and employ it to regulate the information that the rest of the /r/bangtan community sees, just like a typical news gatekeeper. The BTS content that members of /r/bangtan interact with, perceive, and propagate along this East-West flow is controlled by doing this. The fact that users want knowledgeable curators to filter out "fake news"

[4] According to Maja Golf-Papez & Ekant Veer in *Don't feed the trolling: rethinking how online trolling is being defined and combated, Journal of Marketing Management* Trolling involves deliberate, deceptive and mischievous attempts to provoke reactions from other online users (Gold-Papez and Veer,2017,p.1)

[5] In an article written by Stella Akinwumi for Metri called *Metallica blasts 'fake fans' claim following viral* Stranger Things *success: 'Everyone is welcome'* a devoted fan of the metal band Metallica started to criticise newer fans for essentially jumping on the band wagon due to the band's seminal 'Master of Puppets' being played by a character in season four of Netflix's *Stranger Things* (2022) and claiming that they are 'fake fans' (Akinwumi, 2022). In contrast however Metallica who should be noted as the creative producers was stated by Akinwumi to have been "Happily welcoming new people into the fandom after a devoted fan criticised the 'fake fans' paying attention to their music following Stranger Thing's success" (Akinwumi, 2022). If the producers themselves were okay with gaining these new fans I argue then that these older fans have no reason to gatekeep the music created by Metallica and should not believe that it is only exclusive to older fan ships. Therefore, it can be seen that these said purity tests are created by fans to grade fans and shouldn't actually hold authority.

for them is also evidence of this (Lynch,2022,p.111). Lillian Durr writes in an article called *Durr: I'm a fake fan and proud of it: The gatekeeping of fans in pop culture* that gatekeeping is, "Placing arbitrary limits on what it means to be part of a group." (Durr, 2021). Therefore, gatekeeping for the purpose of this research can be seen to be present in nearly every fandom.

An example of gatekeeping is *Harry Potter* fans referring to themselves as Potterheads, specifically if they classify themselves as superfans. Brittany Hodak, a specialist in the idea of building superfans for businesses describes superfans in her book *Creating Superfans: How to Turn Your Customers Into Lifelong Advocates*,as "a customer or stakeholder who is so delighted by their experience with a brand, product, or service that they become an enthusiastic advocate." (Hodak,2023,p.13). Many *Harry Potter* fans also believe that only people who have read the books can be considered real fans, they believe that just watching the films cannot account to an individual being a 'real fan'. In an article called *Why Fandom Gatekeeping Needs to Stop* by Kris Keall, a breakdown of the reasons as to why the *Harry Potter* fandom needs to stop gatekeeping is offered. Firstly, he refers to the fact that it is classist in a sense that not every single fan has the means to go out to release parties, plays and theme parks based on their respective fandom, or afford the merchandise as well as all of the books and movies (Keall, 2017). Secondly, he goes on to refer to the *Harry Potter* gatekeeping as ableist as some people have learning disabilities or visual impairments that disable them from reading the books and lastly some people don't' like to read and it shouldn't be the job of other fans to "convert" them into readers (Keall, 2017). He lastly goes on to say that gatekeeping in the *Harry Potter* fandom is subjective because 'Everyone has different standards of what makes a "true" fan' (Keall, 2017). He says that some may think reading all the books makes you a true fan, while others believe you must read and/or write fanfiction on top of the original books to make you a true fan, while others believe that purchasing merchandise is what enables one to be a true fan (Keall, 2017). When looking at this specific act of 'gatekeeping' in the *Harry Potter* one may see this behaviour as toxic fan practise by believing that one person may be a bigger fan than the next. I suggest that for the purpose if this research gatekeeping can be seen as a toxic fan practise because it does not promote the inclusion and celebration of all types of fans because rather makes certain fans feel unworthy while other fans feel superior.

Gatekeeping is seen when fans call other fans, even though they are very often a part of the same community, "fake fans: solely because they don't agree with each other's opinion, or they are a 'truer fan' than the others. I argue then that gatekeeping defeats the communal sense of fandoms, commonly looked at by Jenkins, because the community itself is in a sense at civil war. Everyone that participates in a fandom and enjoys its content should be allowed to consider themselves a true fan and it isn't objective to certain standards that must be obtained in order to be a "true fan".

According to William Proctor and Bridget Kies in an article *On Toxic Fan Practices and the New Culture Wars*, fans themselves sometimes have the tendency to stereotype other fans in the sense that other fans do not meet the 'preferred' homogenous, harmonious fan 'community' requirements or preferences (Proctor and Kies, 2018, p. 136).

"Our concept of toxic fan practices, not to specifically analyse 'bad fans' per se, but to question extant methodological apparatuses in light of what the mass migration to the internet means for standard research protocols. Firstly, what is meant by the term 'toxicity' in relation to fan practices? Reframed by Bertha Chin and Mark Stewart as 'appropriate fandom' in their work-in-progress, the boundaries of toxicity are what we similarly acknowledge as the corollary to finding the boundaries of non-toxic fan practices. As the notion of 'toxic fandom' becomes part of mainstream discourses, how are journalists and fans using the terminology? What kind of research in fan studies embraces the 'toxicity' label? We seek to intensify studies that analyse fan conflicts or the way in which fans perform 'othering' of practices and individuals that do not meet their idea of a homogenous, harmonious fan 'community" (Proctor and Kies, 2018, p. 136).

For the purpose of this research this phenomenon can be seen as a toxic trait that exists among fandoms because these fans do not only want to praise the product, but they also want to control it. This phenomenon can then be seen as an instance whereby the fans have now claimed ownership of the product by wanting to control it. Another toxic trait fans have is that with the digital world they are now anonymous and therefore they are free to say what they want, whenever they want about their respective fandom without fatal repercussions. "We simply do not know who these people are, whether they might be fans, trollers or reactionary protestors jumping on what they see as politically correct objects — whatever they may be." (William Proctor and Bridget Kies, 2018, p. 134). Like the work of William Proctor and Bridget Kies it should be acknowledged that fandom is not toxic in and of itself, but that some actions carried out by some people who may identify as fans may well be harmful, a more appropriate title would be "toxic fan practices." To see one fan culture in particular as totally toxic, in other words, has little scientific merit and would merely serve to homogenize what fan studies has been stating for almost three decades at this time (Proctor and Kies,2018,p136).

To understand how a fandom becomes toxic Ray Evangelista examines this phenomenon in their work of *Rick and Morty and Toxic Fandom: Factors Contributing to Toxic Communication in the Online Rick and Morty Fan Community*. It was stated that there are five possible factors that contribute to toxic fan behaviours. Firstly, it refers to status seeking or a fan's desire to be superior to other fans who also enjoy the show. (Evangelista, 2019, p.4). "There is this sense that some fans

can better appreciate what it's doing on a deeper level than others, and this makes them 'better' fans. People think of themselves as gatekeepers" (Evangelista, 2019, p.2). Secondly, it refers to the personal traits of the fans which are independent to their enjoyment of the show. Thirdly, it refers to the fans' identification with the main character of the show called Rick Sanchez who is said to be the smartest man in the universe. Fourth the anonymity that online platforms provide allows for online medium to allow for toxic behaviour amongst fans. According to Evangelista it is the "anonymity, invisibility, lack of eye contact, and the lack of clear authority figures as features of the online medium that increase disinhibition when it comes to toxic behaviour" (Evangelista, 2019, p.2). Lastly fan groups tend to identify internal and external enemies to rally their members against, because this increases group cohesion. In this case, there is an element of possessiveness over the show that leads fans to antagonize anyone who challenges their idea of what the show should be (Evangelista, 2019, p.4). "Fan culture's feelings of ownership and protectiveness over something they enjoy can lead to them antagonizing anyone online, including the people who produce the things they enjoy" (Evangelista, 2019, p.3).

Looking at Figure 2.2.1 below shows a meme[6] regarding the Star Wars fandom created by Andrew Dobson which illustrates the effect that fans have on the creative producers of a show as well as the actors that play beloved characters.

[6] According to techopedia, a meme can be seen as an activity, concept, catchphrase or piece of media that becomes popular and spread by means of the internet. It is helped to spread from user to user by means of things such as social networking sites and blogs that post and repost these popular memes and in doing so reinforce their popularity (Technopedia.com, 2020).



Figure 2.2.1: Star Wars Fans by Andrew Dobson available at:https://www.reddit.com/r/StarWarsCantina/comments/edpx9z/a_new_take/

The comic above showcases the way in which creative producer, George Lucas sold his franchise due to fans causing him to lose enjoyment in creating *Star Wars* content, the actresses and actors enduring hate from fans causing them to delete social media platforms such as Instagram, actors contemplating suicide, actors quitting their careers and actors having to endure boycotts for the sole reason that they were cast in their respective role. The meme ends with bashing fans calling them

Kylo Ren, the lead villain of the JJ Abrahms run of the franchise, who seems to throw violent tantrums at any inconvenience. This comic shows the power fans hold over creative producers and how they inevitably make or break a show when they don't get their way, therefore it serves to justify and back up this research in the sense that toxic fans do indeed try and take over a creative work that does not belong to them. If they don't get their way, they throw tantrums causing an unease for creative producers and in this case actors as well.

2.3) Textual Poachers

Textual poaching is a term popularized by scholar of fandom, Henry Jenkins in his book called *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* whereby he explains the processes by which dedicated fans respond to popular media (Jenkins, 2012). Dale Southerton references textual poaching as defined by Henry Jenkins in the *Encyclopaedia of Consumer Culture* and describes fans as not simply being passive consumers of popular texts but says that they have "become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings" (Southerton, 2021). Southerton further goes on to state that Henry Jenkins argues that the fans are now seen as subversive readers operating outside of the cultural industry's paradigms, especially since they are not only readers. Jenkins emphasizes fans as producers of new cultural material: fans "poach" their favoured texts to create a variety of new analytical and creative works. These works include message board and blog posts, self-published zines, fanfiction, art, films, "filk" songs, and fan "vids" etc (Southerton,2021). Henry Jenkins' take on this phenomenon should not be looked at as a negative statement, but it will rather be used in this research to look at the ways in which producer's works are "poached" by fans, leading them to believe that the creative work is theirs for the taking and they are entitled to an opinion on how it should be written.

2.4) Conspiracy Theories.

According to Jan-Willen van Prooijen and Mark van Vugt in their psychology research paper *Conspiracy Theories: Evolved Functions and Psychological Mechanisms* (Van Prooijen and Van Vugt, 2018), they believe that a conspiracy theory can be defined using 5 points. Firstly, conspiracy theories use assumptions to draw on the ways in which certain people, objects and events may be casually interconnected. Secondly, conspiracy theories insist on the idea that the said conspirators have deliberate plans. Thirdly, a conspiracy theory works on the idea that there is not one single

conspirator but rather on the idea that there is a coalition or group of participants. Fourth, Conspiracy theories more often than not contain a form of threat and therefore assume that the alleged goal of the conspirators is actually harmful. Lastly, a conspiracy always has the element of secrecy and therefore is very difficult to prove or disprove. Once a conspiracy theory is proven to actually be true, it is no longer a "conspiracy" theory (Van Prooijen and Van Vugt, 2018). For the purpose of this research, I argue that conspiracy theories should be taken into account as they could be seen as fanon, until they are proven to be canon by the creative producers. If the conspiracy theories are disproved, they will no longer have a chance of becoming canon and will either remain fanon for fans that won't let the theory go or they will be disregarded completely.

Eric Bonetto and Thomas Arciszewski in *Creativity of Conspiracy Theories* defines conspiracy theories themselves as narratives which mostly tell fictional stories. "In that sense, conspiracy theories are creative productions similar to other productions involving narratives, such as poems, films, or stories" (Bonetto and Arciszewski ,2021). When looking at this definition we can relate conspiracy closer to the case studies used in this research paper. All three creative works are narrative and visual creative works such as films, series, and animation. There have been many conspiracy theories that fans have created throughout the making of *Harry Potter, Game of Thrones,* and *Rick and Morty* which will be looked at further in this section and the contribution these conspiracy theories have had on fandoms, mainly fanfiction. There have been instances which will be looked at further where fans have decided as a collective that one fans theory is better than the original story of the creative producer and as a community, they have decided to accept the fan theory as canon. This instance in itself therefore further builds on my theory that fans claim ownership over entities that do not creatively belong to them.

2.5) Conspiracy Fiction

Now that we understand the term conspiracy theories, we can scale down to a term called conspiracy fiction which is defined by Michele Ciba in *Conspiracy, Persecution and Terror: Harry Potter in a Post-9/11 World as* something that "focuses on big secret plots which the protagonists uncover, explore, and aim to dismantle. Often there is an in-depth investigation, which has to take place secretly, and the complot is revealed to go 'all the way to the top." (Ciba, 2017, p.123). In these circumstances there are often conspiracy theorists in this case *Harry Potter* and his friends and an oppressive government authority that holds a secret by which the conspiracy theorists must now expose.

In terms of *Harry potter* and the 7-book series it can now be clearly seen that Harry and his friends are the conspiracy theorists while Voldemort is an inaccessible authority. After Voldemort's return in *The Goblet of Fire* (2000) Harry and his accomplices, which include Professor Dumbledore, try profusely to convince, and warn the Ministry of Magic about his return. Their efforts work to no avail unfortunately due to the propaganda used by the Daily Prophet, which is the media report system of the wizarding world (Ciba, 2017, p.123). Voldemort continues to represent the unattainable authority throughout the *Harry Potter* series. Once again, the relevance of conspiracy theories in regard to fans taking over the creative producer's work is that they are exactly that, conspiracies. They are assumed by the fans and in many instances, I hypothesize that they are the fans trying to pressure the creative producer into transforming fanon into canon.

2.6) Fan Theories.

According to Manuel de Amo and Garcia-Roma, fan theories are interpretive hypothesis that are proposed by consumers of the material that collaborate and debate with other consumers of the same material. These consumers debate about signs and clues that appear in the narrative world created by the creative producer (Manuel de Amo and Garcia-Roma,2021). When they do in fact resolve certain plots with their theories ahead of confirmation from the original narrative the fandom doesn't in-fact reject the theories or consider them spoilers since they usually do not incorporate insider information. According to the Collins Dictionary a spoiler is defined as information about the plot of a TV series, film, or book that could spoil the enjoyment of someone who has not yet seen or read it (Collins Dictionary, 2022). "Given the large number and variety of interpretative possibilities offered, individual readers only access readings from other users and blur the lines of what is considered a spoiler, rumour (or hoax), fan theories, and fanfics" (Manuel de Amo and Garcia-Roma, 2021). The hypothesis is that fan theories influence the artificial generation of expectations by overvaluing narrative possibilities to consumers of these narratives.
"Confirmation of these hypotheses could explain the rejection of the fandom to the outcomes of the main transmedia narratives: *Game of Thrones, Harry Potter, Star Wars,* or *Lost*" (Manuel de Amo and Garcia-Roca, 2021). Manuel de Amo and Garcia-Roca mention *Game of Thrones* and *Harry Potter* as having experienced fan rejection to the chosen narrative of the creative producers, this further establishes my standpoint that fans do not take lightly to their wishes going unfulfilled in their fandom and they expect their own personal hopes to be met by the creative producers even if that was not something that was intended by the creative producers. If the creative producers do try and

fulfil the wishes of the fans but in turn they go against their own wishes for their work, I argue then that the creative producers have given over ownership to the fans.[ii]

2.7) Fan Practices.

Fan practice refers to the productive activities engaged in by fans, primarily those of various media properties or musical groups. These activities can include creation and editing of written works (fanfiction), visual or computer-assisted art (fanart), videos (fanvids, fan edit) or costuming and collecting (Guo,2020).

2.8) Easter Eggs.

The terms easter egg is based on the egg hunt game that is played by children during Easter. An Easter Egg designates either a secret message or feature or even an inside joke that is hidden in a video game or any type of software (Salvador,2017). "Nowadays, Easter eggs are everywhere, having spread from games and computer software to comics, TV shows, and movies." (Salvador,2017). I further argue that Easter Eggs are therefore placed into the creative work by the producer in order to give hints to the viewers as well as to give the audience what they want. Easter Eggs are an ode to fans from the creative producers to excite them about upcoming productions or to further hint and confirm fan theories, either way they are acts of service provided by the creative producers for the fans and therefore they play a role in the way in which fandom influences and effects the original work which in turn creates and promotes higher fan engagement. For further reading on easter eggs please refer to Appendix A.

2.9) Fan Service

Fan service is a technique used by creative producers whereby a sequence of narrative "rewards" is established in the film/ series specifically for the audience's appeal. This word refers to the tendency of cultural creators to supply fans with tale aspects that they want to see—to pander unashamedly to an audience's expressed demands. The term originated in the Western fandom for Japanese manga. Highly detailed representations of robots and other types of technology, as well as extremely eroticized and sexualized features similar to what Laura Mulvey has termed "visual pleasure" (also known as scopophilia) in the sphere of cinema studies, are typical instances of fan service in comics (Beaty, 2016). I argue that fan service is done solely to keep the fans happy and to fulfil their wishes

rather than the producers doing what they originally planned to do. For further reading on fan service please refer to Appendix A.

2.10) Fantagonism.

Derek Johnson coined the term fantagonism and claims that although he once defined it as "ongoing, competitive struggles between both internal factions and external institutions to discursively codify the fan-text-producer relationship according to their respective interests" (Johnson, 2017), the definition needs to be reworked. He states that more recently Fantagonism captures tensions within fandom, fans struggle to interpret the production of text and meaning from it and the ability of the creative producer to respond and incorporate these struggles into serial reproduction over time, disciplining any petulance or rabidity (Johnson, 2017). For the purpose of this research fantagonism can be seen as the competitive relationship that lays between the fan and the creative producer, the complicated relationship on who should decide what is right, what is canon and what should remain fanon, and the antagonistic behaviours showcased by fans that believe they are entitled to creative control as a fandom.

When looking at fandoms, more specifically the fandoms of *Rick and Morty, Harry Potter* and *Game of Thrones* the acts of fan theories have led to the fandoms becoming toxic by means of fantagonism and textual poaching. Fans have used these instances to take over the fandom that did not belong to them by feeling as though they have the right to say how a story should be written, even if that may disregard the wishes of the creative producer. Creative producers in some instances have given in to the fans wishes by providing them with Easter Eggs and Fanservices which will be discussed further later on. The next section will highlight instances where fans have taken control of a fandom and how they have pressured the creative producers into giving them what they want.

Literature Review

2.12) False ownership among Fans

Giving fans ownership over a property means some of them literally believe they own it, and that they are due only work that conforms to their opinions (Trendacosta, 2019). In an article written by Ray Evangelista called *Rick and Morty and Toxic Fandom: Factors Contributing to Toxic*

Communication in the Online Rick and Morty *Fan Community* it is said that "Fans can also be possessive over their chosen texts, sometimes feeling like they own the texts more than their creators." (Evangelista,2019, p.1-2). When looking at all three case studies there have been multiple examples where fans feel like they hold authority in comparison to the creative producer. "Consumers care about the product. Fans care about what the product stands for" (Evangelista, 2019, p.1). Fans find value in not just what the brand of a product promotes but the fan also likes the lifestyle it promotes as well as the participation of shared experiences among them and other fans (Evangelista,2019, p.1). Fans have the ability to impact the world around them by coming together and joining their individual voices into one collective influence. They can also have a significant influence on each other through the formation of fan cultures with their own hierarchies, norms, and social identities separate from outside cultures (Fraade-Blanar & Glazer, 2017). Therefore, fans start to believe their theories are better than that of the creative producer and so they start to write fanfiction and start blogs where they discredit the writer, and this can be seen on websites such as Faniction.net., Archive of Our Own and Wattpad. It should be mentioned that the act if creating fanfiction and fanart does not always mean that the fan believed their creative work to be better than that of the creative producer but for the purpose of this research I will be looking at instances where the fans do believe that their work is better and should be taken as canon. I argue further that this sense of false ownership is what has led many fandoms to becoming toxic in terms of taking over property that is not necessarily theirs.

2.13) Canon VS Fanon

When taking into consideration and looking directly at the original story one should take into account that text and the fictional universe were both constructed by the creative producer and therefore, they hold authority and can be considered authoritative. At these early stages of story development, I argue that the consumers do not challenge the texts but rather enjoy what the creative has provided them with rather than changing and criticizing it.

According to Lesley Goodman in her work *Disappointing Fans: Fandom, Fictional Theory, and the Death of the Author*, "fan-tagonism," may occur in which "factions of ... [fans] construct competing 'truths' about the series or source text, its producers, and its relationship to fandom" (Goodman, 2015, p. 5).This can be seen when looking at the example of *Harry Potter* where fans rejected the

idea that Harry fell in love with Ginny because they believed that he was more likely to have a relationship with Hermione (Goodman,2015,p.6). It is important to note that this specific instance can also be seen as a fan theory and an act of shipping. The evidence that fans gather relied on their understanding of Harry Potter's personality and psychology and so they assumed to know the character better than the author J.K Rowling herself (Goodman, 2015, p.6). "Fans do not easily agree to disagree—differing opinions become co-present, competing interests to define interpretive and evaluative consensus." (Goodman,2015, p.6). Here is a plain example of fans believing their opinions to be more right than the author and so I theorize that this is one of the points where the creative producer loses a sense of ownership to the fans.

"Canon" which is a derivative of the word canonical refers to the original text and or screenplays in this case, and their contribution to the fictional universe (Goodman, 2015, p. 7). Canon can therefore be seen as the official storylines, and backstories of characters that were directly created by the authors of television shows, movies, or books (Chaney and Liebler, 2007, p. 1) and in this case *Harry Potter, Game of Thrones* and *Rick and Morty*. When looking at canon to better understand it in terms of these case studies, it refers to facts that were created by the creative producers. In terms of *Harry Potter* this could be things such as the fact that he is part of Gryffindor or that he attends the school of Hogwarts at age 11 when he finds out that he is in fact a wizard. In terms of *Game of Thrones* this could be that Arya and Sansa are both part of House of Stark. In Terms of *Rick and Morty* canon refers to things such as Morty being Rick's grandson and Rick being the smartest man in the universe.

Canon is an important aspect to be taken into account when looking at what it entails for the fictional universe that the producer has created as it can be seen as fact. The Creative producer has confirmed aspects that are considered canon and therefore they have taken ownership of their work, which leads to fanon, created by the fans to fulfil their needs or to fill in the gaps that were not confirmed by the producers themselves.

"Fanon" describes the events created by the fan community in a particular fandom and repeated pervasively throughout the fan-text, fanon often creates particular details or character readings even though canon does not fully support it, or, at times, outright contradicts it" (Goodman, 2015, p. 7). "Fanon" are the ideas and concepts that fan communities have collectively decided are part of an accepted storyline or character interpretation (Chaney and Liebler, 2007, p.1). Now looking at Fanon, this could be things such as the fact that The Potters and Weasleys knew each other. In Canon, the books say the exact opposite. Everyone who knew Lily and James recognises Harry

immediately, but neither Molly nor Arthur does (tvtropes). In terms of *Game of Thrones,* the fans have come up with their own universal fictional characters that weren't created by GRR Martin or the HBO creators but yet they are commonly known by fans, for example Aegon Targaryen who is said by fans to be the first king of the seven kingdoms of Westeros in the fictional world of *Game of Thrones* doesn't really exist according to Canon. Aegon is known amongst fans and is a character that is referred to in multiple fanfictions despite the fact that his existence has not been confirmed canonically. I further showcase with this instance; the power fandoms have had by pushing forward their own narratives through fanon and making them universally accepted by the fandom. This power struggle shows that fans hold a sense of authority over the creator whereby they have the ability to change the origin story if they do not agree or even create their own characters that never existed according to the actual producer.

The nature of participatory fan communities makes it possible for both authors and fans to be active agents in collectively determining the validity of the "official" storyline (Chaney and Liebler, 2007, p.1). "Canon" and "Fanon" help to maintain the distinction between the official fictional universe and fan interpretation "(Goodman, 2015, p.7). Fans are generally aware of the discrepancies between fanon and canon, and not all fans may choose to participate in fanon interpretations, or even like them, but it is generally recognizable as an alternate version of the fictional universe. Fanon, along with classification categories, allow individual fan creativity in the midst of a communal understanding of the fictional universe; they actually help police or maintain the boundaries of the official fictional universe (Goodman,2015, p.7).

One thing that should be made clear is that the original text has more authority than fan text because it is the only thing that can contribute to Canon. In saying this, the influence of fanon cannot go unnoticed as in certain instances it can be seen that fans have caused fanon to in-fact become canon which is known as ascended fanon and will be elaborated on later.

2.14) Fanfiction

The term fanfiction, colloquially referred to as "fanfic", relates to the stories that are produced by fans. These stories are often based on the plot lines and characters of the original source story or what is known as the "canon" of the creative works. The fans themselves are able to create their

very own narratives which often takes the creative producers already established and pre-existing story world in a new direction (Goodman,2015, p. 5). By doing this, fans have already taken ownership over something that does not belong to them leading the original narrative in directions that the creative producers may not have initially wanted for their own storyline.

To further look at fanfiction I have gathered data from three fanfiction websites. They Include Fanfiction.net, Archive of Our Own and Wattpad.

Referring to the tables below, the data gives an indication of the volume of fan work directed to each property.

Table 1: Fanfiction.net

Fandom	Number of fanfictions	Most favs	Most reviews
Harry Potter	94 407	28 788	17466
Game of Thrones	2028	1666	3349
Rick and Morty	660	3	2

Table 2: Wattpad

Fandom	Number of fanfictions	Most Reads	Most votes
Harry Potter	210 000	4.9 million	168 000
Game of Thrones	9700	926k	26 000
Rick and Morty	8100	120k	3700

Table 3: Archive of Our Own

Fandom	Number of fanfictions
Harry Potter	358 838
Game of Thrones	54 547
Rick and Morty	4980

Note: Archive of Our Own does not have an upvoting system whereby it tells you the popularity of certain fandoms in terms of reads and votes and therefore the statistics could not be included for Archive of Our Own.

This data serves as valuable because it shows us how many individuals are engaging with and writing their own versions of the original works. It shows the engagement of these fandoms and how many fans chose to read works that are not created by the original producer; it therefore shows how many fans believe their fellow fans writing may be better than the original or they prefer it to the original work. The above statistics are also subject to change as they were taken from the still active websites of Fanfiction.net, Archive of Our Own and Wattpad.

2.15) "How it Should have Ended."

If you're a fan you should be familiar with this phrase, you might have even used it or even believed it to be true.

In the case of *Game of Thrones* there is a 2 hour, 6 minutes and 29 second video on YouTube whereby a fan has given his own perspective on how the entire last season of *Game of Thrones*[7] should have ended. Many fans seem to have agreed with him, proof being the 1658640 views with 29000 likes and 0 dislikes. This video has 4209 comments and I assume due to the video having zero dislikes that many people in the comments agree with the creator of the video. The top comment of this video has a link to another video whereby the creator has decided to make his own version of what season 9 of a *Game of Thrones* would entail[8].

Here it can be seen that fans of the show do in-fact believe that their own versions of the story are better than the original and have other fans that would back them and support their ideas outside of what the creative producers have said. This may be the cause of the sense of community that comes with being part of a fandom as theorized by Jenkins and of course the complete disagreement with the creative producers. Here it can be seen once again that there is an active show of protest going against the view of the creative producer from the fans.

There is an entire YouTube channel called How it should have ended (or HISHE for short) which has 408 videos and 10.2 million subscribers. This YouTube channel makes caricatural animated videos of popular fandoms such as *Marvel, DC, Harry Potter, Game of Thrones, Disney* and many other large franchises. The videos themselves critique, make fun of and most importantly change the way they

[7] Link to YouTube video referred to above: How Game of Thrones Should Have Ended? (Complete Version) - Game of Thrones Season 8 - YouTube
[8] Link to what season 9 would be like: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLn5KvOx-bjAozRPMrBNpXjE974hpFWwnF

creative works have ended. Many of these videos are



parodies and make jokes as well as poke fun at the series but still they chose to believe that their endings would have been better. Looking specifically at the Fandoms at hand, the YouTube channel has made a video in reference to both *Harry Potter* and *Game of Thrones* season 1. Below shows Figures 2.15.1- 2.15.5 which are screenshots of the video dedicated to how *Harry Potter* Should have ended, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YsYWT5Q_R_w

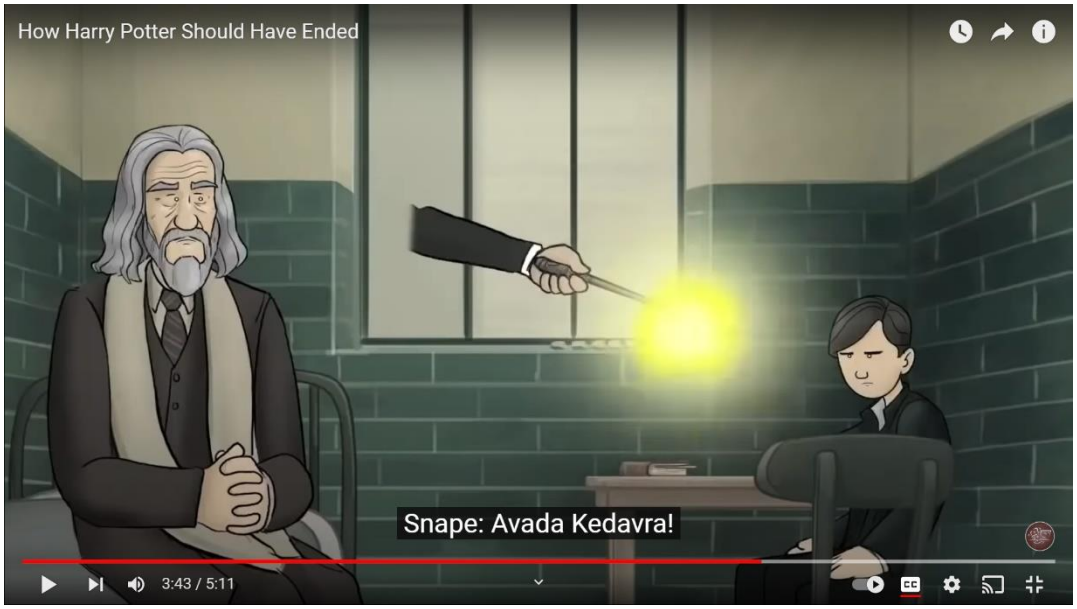


Figure 2.15.1: Professor Snape with time turner and invisibility cloak about to go back in time to kill Voldemort. Timestamp (3:10)

Figure 2.15.2: Snape Arrives at the orphanage Voldemort lived in as a young wizard. Timestamp (3:32).



Figure 2.15.3: Voldemort (Tom Riddle) tells Dumbledore all the evil things he is capable of. Timestamp (3:35).





As young Voldemort tells Dumbledore what he can do Snape uses the invisibility cloak to use the deadly spell against him, inevitably killing him before he could become the "Dark Lord". Timestamp (3:43).

Figure 2.15.4:

Figure 2.15.5: Snape explains to Dumbledore why he killed Voldemort. Timestamp (4:00).

Although this video pokes fun at the at the *Harry Potter* franchise with the simplicity of its ending it also shows how fans have theorised that it could have been so much easier to defeat Voldemort. The YouTube channel in itself is humorous and makes use of parody but there is a deeper sense of awareness, whereby fans believe that things could have been simpler in the *Harry Potter* universe.

2.16) Conspiracy Theories

2.16.1) Conspiracy Fiction

Now that we understand the term conspiracy theories, we can scale down to a term called conspiracy fiction which is defined by Michele Ciba in *Conspiracy, Persecution and Terror: Harry Potter in a Post-9/11 World as* something that "focuses on big secret plots which the protagonists uncover, explore, and aim to dismantle. Often there is an in-depth investigation, which has to take place secretly, and the complot is revealed to go 'all the way to the top." (Ciba,2017, p123). In these circumstances there are often conspiracy theorists in this case Harry potter and his friends and an oppressive government authority that holds a secret by which the conspiracy theorists must now expose.

In terms of *Harry Potter* and the 7-book series as well as the movies it can now be clearly seen that Harry and his friends are the conspiracy theorists while Voldemort is an inaccessible authority. After Voldemort's return in the *Goblet of Fire* (2000) Harry and his accomplices, which include Professor

Dumbledore, try relentlessly to convince, and warn the Ministry of Magic about his return. Their efforts work to no avail unfortunately due to the propaganda used by the Daily Prophet, which is the media report system of the wizarding world (Ciba: 2017, p.123). Voldemort continues to represent the unattainable authority throughout the *Harry Potter* series.

2.16.2) Conspiracy Theories in Animation

When looking at animation, one of the first franchises, and in this case producer, that comes to mind is Disney, and Disney itself does not run short when it comes to conspiracy theories and subliminal messaging. In a recent research paper written by Lejla Panjeta called *Dark Magic Kingdom of Disney* she states that "Different conspiracy theories may be found on internet pages and the most incredible (and funniest) is the one about sexual symbol interpolated within the small pictures of cartoons which allegedly influence the child's mind, "programming" children in their early age for sexuality" (Panjeta, 2017). These conspiracies found by viewers however were never stated to be fact by Disney and so I once again argue that fans, or in this case viewers sometimes look too deep into something and find reasoning behind an idea that may not in fact exist according to a creative producer. To further iterate on the viewers of Disney animations reading too much into things in 1999 the Associated Press started in an article called *Disney Recalls the 'Rescuers Video':* "Considerably so, in more recent times, viewers of Disney Films are reading into the context of the films and are taking away alternate ideas than what Disney originally intended" (Associated Press, 1999). For further reading regarding Disney conspiracy theories please refer to Appendix A.

Now that we have looked at well-known franchise where fans have created theories and conspiracy theories, we will look at the way In which conspiracy theories have affected the creative producers of the three case studies are being looked at in this research paper.

In an article by Benn Kesslen, *For 'Game of Thrones' superfans and devoted conspiracy theorists: Similar psychology, different outcomes,* it is said that both conspiracy theorists and *Game of Thrones* fans do almost the same things and have the same psychology but with different outcomes. He makes the example *Game of Thrones* fans on reddit believing that a group of maesters (scholarly men) are a part of a hidden conspiracy that entails the takeover of the magical kingdom in *Game of Thrones*. He then goes on further to say these 'maesters' are the same as the group of Reddit users that believe the Illuminati is part is of a hidden conspiracy in which a group of people try to take full control over the real world (Kesslen,2019). Russel Zimmerman, a game developer who theorizes the works of George RR Martin, is quoted by Kesslen saying "To me, that's about the level of 'out there' crazy-talk as assuming there's a kiddie porn ring in the basement of a pizza shop without a

basement," he said, referring to the "pizzagate" conspiracy theory that remains popular on the on the internet (Kesslen,2019). He later goes on to compare that fanfiction has many fandoms like *Rick and Morty* that have a numerous amount of real-world conspiracy theories that are all across the internet and one just has to search it (Kesslen,2019). By putting Superfans in the same category as conspiracy theorists similar to Benn Kesslen, the largest similarity I have picked up is the need to justify assumptions. Fans of a series like conspiracy theorists read deeply into things shown on a television show like *Game of Thrones* or *Rick and Morty* and try to make sense of things that may not have been intended by the creative producer, often forcing justification from the creators by looking too deeply into things. They then cause the creative producer to feel pressured by the fans to make their so called conspiracy theories true and this further leads them to losing creative ownership once again.

Joseph Uscinski, associate professor of political science at the University of Miami and author of *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, said "diehard fans and conspiracy theorists share a love of extrapolating from the facts in their possession" (Kesslen, 2019). "Conspiracy theories are similar to fan fiction in that they both allow people to make up whatever they want," he said. Uscinski said that whether it's *Game of Thrones* or *Star Wars* or the JFK assassination, people can take a plot or an event and "go to wherever they want with it." (Kesslen, 2019). Comparing fanfiction to conspiracy theories for the purpose of this research is justified because I agree with Uscinski in the sense that they do enable people to make up anything they want, they create fictional worlds of their own without consulting the actual owners. They are able to create their own plots and create their own stories and scenarios with characters that don't actually belong to them without the approval of the creative producers.

Man of Recaps is a popular YouTube channel run by Bredon Boutin who states that there is an excitement that is generated by the creating of theories and that excitement of fans is what drives them (Kesslen, 2019). "I think the biggest similarity is the feeling you get, the rush of hunting for the truth and discovering secret knowledge," he then said, "I watched some 9/11 'Truth' videos back in the day, and those brought about the same thrill as discovering Jon Snow's parentage" (Kesslen, 2019). While there are many similarities in the psychology behind intense fandoms such as the *Game of Thrones* fandom and political conspiracists, Uscinski emphasizes the fact that they result in opposite behaviours as well. He said fans will generally abandon theories that don't hold up, whereas conspiracy theorists ignore evidence that proves them wrong. One very important factor is reality, many conspiracy theorists have been the influence behind violent acts and real-world consequence, while in fanfiction people mostly argue online and when a show comes out many just leave the theories that didn't prevail alone, or write fanfiction about it (Kesslen, 2019). With this in

mind, I argue that the act of writing fanfiction about failed theories still shows the fans unwillingness to let go of something that was actually shown by the creative producers to be untrue. These fans still show a sense of ownership and protectiveness over something that has been disproved and won't let go and so I say that they are relentless in the act of taking over the creative producers' original ideas.

In a research paper called *Can Pikachu Die? Online Fan Conspiracy Theories and the Pokémon Gaming Universe,* written in 2017 by Lincoln Geraghty, he explores fanfictions and conspiracy theories in relation to Pokémon:

> I explore how fans use the narrative structure of the games and television series to create their own fanfic to fill in blanks and gaps in the backstories of characters and develop their own theories behind mysteries surrounding different versions of the games. The prevalence and popularity of these conspiracy theories suggest that fans are in a constant struggle to seek some sort of control over the Pokémon story, finding understanding within the universe of the games. (Geraghty, 2017).

The above quote taken from Lincoln Geraghty suggests that fans are always trying to take over a story line. I argue that this is similar for the three case studies being used in this research paper as I argue that fans of these three creative works try and control the respective fictional worlds that don't belong to them through things such as fanfiction and fan theories. This quote therefore works towards the theory of this research paper whereby there is a constant power struggle between the fans and the creative producers.

2.16.3) Fan theories

According to José Manuel de Amo and Anastasio García-Roca in their work on fan theories in virtual communities, they have stated that you get three different types of fan theories. These three types of theories are namely: Predictive theory, explanatory theory and lastly the alternative theories (Manuel de Amo and Garcia-Roca, 2021).

Predictive theory is articulated as something that is aimed to push forward certain narrative actions that will be further developed in canon. These specific theories aren't made by the fans that have had a fairly large amount of emotional, intellectual, and social involvement with the narrative or creative product but rather by people that have a less specialized view and less knowledge but rather single-media readership of the narrative, (Manuel de Amo and Garcia-Roca, 2021) that is to

say that they have only engaged with one media form of the franchise, for example only watching the Harry Potter movies but never having read the books. These theories do not go beyond the surface layer of the narrative and are not fully fleshed out, they also seem to be the most abundant of the three theories and appear in non- specialized places such as social media platforms. "As narrative hypotheses, they are ephemeral and have little transcendence for the community: any user can guess the plot's outcome without mastering all available content" (Manuel de Amo and Garcia-Roca,2021). These theories are often temporary as over time they are either confirmed or denied.

Secondly, Explanatory Theory is discussed as canonical interpretations that provide and subscribe meaning to narrative events that are canon. Explanatory theories differ from predictive theories which infer outcomes explicitly; they aim to detail the complex process before the actual outcome (Manuel de Amo and Garcia-Roca,2017). It is said that these theories are found in more specialized spaces such as specific sections on Reddit and fanfiction sites such as Archive of your Own, and, more recently, on specialized YouTube channels (Manuel de Amo and Garcia-Roca, 2021). In these types of theories, we are provided with complex discussions and accompanying evidence to back them up.

> They [explanatory theories] are collective constructions created by forensic fandom and readers with a highly developed sense of literary reading competence that show great expertise in recognizing and gathering clues that help to understand what has not been explicitly narrated. The fandom carries out original research, collection, documentation, and analysis of works (Manuel de Amo and Garcia-Roca, 2021).

Theorists even go as far as to backing up their theories with things such as interviews with authors, statements on social networks, rumours, and leaks are some of the aspects that keep the fandom theories active among publications, releases, or broadcasts (Manuel de Amo and Garcia-Roca,2021).

Lastly, there are the Alternative Theories which are the least common, according to de Amo and Garcia-Roca, whilst simultaneously being the most complex of all three theories. Structurally as well as narratively, they are similar to explanatory theories as they produce well rounded arguments and explanations but the stray away from the shared interpretation of the community or what we now know as fanon (Manuel de Amo and Garcia-Roca,2021). If it wasn't for the evidence and arguments proved by these theorists the fandom would most likely discard these fan theories completely.

The alternative theories are understood as amusing theories but are not deemed viable interpretations by other users. They often display a high level of formulation, creativity, and

complexity. In this way, they allow readers with low literary and literary skills, through social reading, to achieve a greater textual understanding. (de Amo and Garcia-Rica, 2021).

They are often created in specialized places due to the level of creativity that they hold. These theories are interpretive proposals that defy the limitations of the core texts interpretations and unlike other fan works like fanfictions these theories keep characters and the fictional world in which they are originally from by using canon (Manuel de Amo and Garcia-Rica,2021).

To further analyse these types of theories they will be included in the methodology part of this paper whereby we use 6 phases to interpret how creative producers lose ownership. In the fourth phase: Fan theories we will analyse each case study according to the framework of Manuel de Amo and Garcia- Roca to establish the types of theories that each case study has gone through.

2.17) Fan Activities.

Merchandise includes countless numbers of items such as mugs, t-shirts Funko Pops figurines, and many more. These items allow the fan to display their affection for and their identification with the fictional world and act as a sort of link between both our world and the fictional world we are a fan of (Godwin, 2018). More specifically looking at the *Harry Potter* fandom merchandise and the separate Hogwarts houses, you could have one the items from one of the four houses namely Slytherin, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw or Gryffindor (Godwin, 2018). This item alone shows a sense of belonging by the fan, they have most likely done the quiz on the well-known website Pottermore which would enable them to know which house they would be a part of, or the fan has associated themselves with the attributes of the said Hogwarts house. “Merchandise also facilitates immersion, transforming everyday environments by bringing story world items into them, blurring the threshold between worlds” (Godwin, 2018).

Kurt Lancaster has conceptualised the term ‘interface’ as a “Material object that makes concrete the imaginary” in his research paper called *Interacting with Babylon 5: Fan performances in a media universe* whereby he facilitates the exploration of material fan practices such as collecting, displaying and the use of merchandise (Lancaster, 2001). He claims that through the interactivity of the object it facilitates entry for the fan into the imaginary universe in order for the participant to interact with the environment of the imaginary world (Lancaster, 2001).

Looking specifically at the *Harry Potter* and the respective houses of fans it can clearly be seen that fans feel comfortable to interact with each other if they notice items like a Slytherin scarf or a

Gryffindor hoodie as part of your attire. Fans speak to complete strangers due to the sense of community that is displayed by the fandom just by an item of clothing (Godwin, 2018).

According to Sumayya Baasir in *I Collect, Therefore I am* she believes that being a fan itself means that one must separate from the normal consumers themselves (Baasir,2018). To be labelled a fan, one must show commitment both in terms of time and inevitably in terms of cost. Besides the act of commitment, fans should also build and maintain the identity inherent in it. This identity formed through special consumption behaviour and patterns. According to Carolyn Stevens in *You Are What You Buy: Postmodern Consumption and Fandom of Japanese Popular Culture* when a person becomes a fan and enters the world of fandom, then that is when he performs specialized consumption (Stevens, 2010, p.199). This is certainly self-identified as a fan, as well as to distinguish oneself with non-fans and casual fans (who are not involved deeply in something) (Baasir, 2018). Therefore, it can be seen that in order for fans to be at the same level as each other according to the likes of other fans and to show their commitment and knowledge they must now fully engross themselves in the fandom and contribute financially to the franchise by purchasing merchandise.

In Avi Santos' work called *Fans and Merchandise*, it is said that some fans have become creative and have emerged as what we now know as "fan-treupeneurs" whereby fans themselves who have capitalised on their respective fandom by selling fan made merchandise to fans (Scott, 2014). According to Henry Jenkins, merchandise can be used by fans as an outlet to demonstrate their financial as well as emotional investment they have given to a franchise (Jenkins, 2006). Santos goes on to say that the collecting and acquiring of merchandise places a sort of agency of fans, by collecting these said items while also granting these said items with a sense of purpose within one's fan practices. This purpose that is given to these objects allows audiences to engage with these objects and in turn experience what is called tactile transmedia which is the act whereby media text is extended into the material world. By creating these opportunities of tactile transmediality fans are afforded the opportunity to continue the exploration of a story world even in the comfort of their own homes (Santos, 2017). "Fandom as lifestyle doesn't merely place greater emphasis on consumption, but on individuals using branded products as forms of self-expression and even self-promotion in order to establish their value in a reputational economy" (Santos, 2017).

Once again it can be seen that fans use merchandise to establish themselves in the fandom they belong to, they express themselves in the real world and it isn't just fiction any longer. I argue that fans urgency to feel a part of a fictional world gets brought into reality with the use of merchandise and the more merchandise one has the bigger a fan they are to their fan community.

2.18) Geek Culture

According to Jessica McCain, Brittany Gentile and Keith Campbell in *A Psychological Exploration of Engagement in Geek Culture* a Geek can commonly be defined as an individual or an enthusiast that develops an expertise of a certain topic through sheer determination and devotion (McCain, Gentile and Campbell, 2015). "The word "geek" is used to describe not only enthusiasts in science, technology, and engineering but also especially devoted fans of media" (McCain, Gentile and Campbell, 2015). Geek culture is a subculture of enthusiasts that is traditionally associated with niche media (Japanese animation, science fiction, video games, etc.).

The term geek was previously seen as derogatory as it was described as someone that is unsociable and obsessive. (Stanley, 2015, p.10) Now, in the past decade the term geek has been altered and changed to mean something that is a lot less offensive but rather empowering. The term geek can now be defined as a person that is passionate about a certain subject and therefore by defining geek this way, 'geekiness' is now seen as a specialized act for example a "Star- Wars Geek." (Stanley, 2015, p.11).

2.19) Fan Hierarchy

According to Michelle, L McCudden in *Degrees of Fandom: Authenticity & Hierarchy In The Age Of Media Convergence,* there are notably four distinct levels of fans. Firstly, the Authentic Fan, Secondly the True fan, thirdly the 'Big fan' and lastly the Casual fan (McCudden, 2011, p.40-41).

Other fandom scholars have considered the idea of hierarchy, but there is more study needed in this area, as no universal means of discussing hierarchy within fan communities has yet to be established (Hills, 2002).

According to this study the authentic fan is someone that is concerned with the way in which they are perceived within the respective fandom as well as the way the fandom itself is represented (McCudden,2011, p.42).I believe that an authentic fan is then someone concerned with the way a fandom is looked at by other fandoms and someone that cares about appearance, they want their fandom to be better than others and they use things such as merchandise to keep up appearances almost like a façade. When looking now at a true fan according to this study and the participants that were involved there were namely four aspects that made you a true fan: knowledge and communication with other fans, a sense of devotion to giving up time to the fandom, giving your chosen fandom exclusivity and not being a part of any other fandoms. One of the most interesting

points that was mentioned through the description of a true fan was that they are seen as judgmental. (McCudden,2011, p.45-46). These true fans in this study can therefore be seen as the fans that judge other fans for not knowing enough or being part of single media consumption, they feel the need to educate other fans as we have seen happen in the *Rick and Morty* fandom. When looking now specifically at the term big fan it has a more positive outlook describing these fans as people who are enthusiastic about the fandom, people that prioritize the fandom by scheduling time for it. "Those using the term "big fan" have described its characteristics using many of the same indicators as have been found in past works on authenticity in fandom: prioritizing activities around one's fandom, enthusiasm, and exerting effort." (McCudeen,2011, p.47-48). These are the fans that are supportive to one another, this is an important factor as one should always remember that there are good fans that support each other and although fandom may be looked at in a negative light it is important to remember that or some fandoms represent a place of joy, community, and a shared love for a fictional world. For the purpose of this research, one should still remember that fandoms are often created out of love but they unfortunately may lead to toxicity. Lastly now looking at the casual fan described by McCudden they are seen as the opposite of the big or the true fan which seem to have many similarities. Casual fans are described to have a lack of knowledge, a lack of devotion or willingness to undergo hardship or seek outside content about one's object of passion (McCudden, 2011, p.50).

In a blog post called the *7 Stages of being in a Fandom*, Chirali Sharma describes fandom as a very large dysfunctional family. "Fandom is very much a very large and very dysfunctional family. With some good and some bad, the creepy uncles, the nosey aunts, a few evil relatives, and it's like all of them have come for a visit. At the same time" (Sharma, 2015). She further goes onto say that one does not just join a fandom but rather goes through a seven-stage process before becoming a part of the fandom (Sharma,2015). Below I will briefly describe each stage.

- The Casual Observer Stage.

This is when you may already have knowledge of the said topic but you are not aware of the ins and outs of it. You may have now come across the topic by means of a friend or you have stumbled upon it through social media or so on. The main point is that you are now intrigued by the topic.

- You Like the Topic

There is still no commitment to the fandom yet, you like it but you are still able to distance yourself from the fandom.

- Intrigue

You are now wanting to find out more about the said topic, you have started to follow social media pages, you have started to develop your own opinions about characters. It is important to remember here though that these are still thoughts and there isn't really a sense of immersion yet.

- Can't Hold back Anymore.

By now you haven't completely started to follow and keep up with the series or show but you have now watched enough material that enables you to have your own theories and thoughts on what will happen next. You have started to comment back or post about the topic.

- The Discussions.

By this stage you are now considered to be in the middle. You have entered discussions with strangers or people you know about the topic, you know have a way of getting all of your opinions and thoughts out.

- The end is near.

This is when your real life will be changed forever as you have finally backed down and joined the fandom.

- You Get a following.

Lastly you start to gain followers now your part of the fandom because people follow you and value your opinion.

(Sharma, 2015).

I have provided these said stages of fandom as I believe they will give a better understanding and more insight to the six-phase theory that I am proposing. The six-phase theory shows the development of a fandom as a whole but these above explained stages show the fan individually and how they become one, which is a crucial part of the development of fandoms itself. Without the fans there can be no fandom.

In a recent study on *Fan Hierarchies and Superfans*, Jessica Edlom and Jenny Karlsson explore the hierarchies of specifically the music fandom and the motivations of superfans. We will look at this research paper as fandoms themselves share universal traits and therefore they can be linked between media. I will therefore use this research paper to specifically look at the ways that fans are ranked. In Jessica Edlom and Jenny Karlssons research they have identified that there are four specific levels of fans that lie within a fandom (Edlom and Karlsson,2021), I argue that they have categorised them this way in order to develop a hierarchy whereby they are able to rank fans from

highest to lowest. At the lowest level of the hierarchy, you find the ambient fans, these people are fans that like the music but are not necessarily active in engaging with the music other than once in a while, they are more likely to follow and look at news about the topic but they don't actively engage with it through the likes of social media for example (Edlom and Karlsson,2021). Placed above the ambient fan is the engaged fan who are actually involved and participate within a fan group, they participate on social media by liking posts and giving their input to some extent (Edlom and Karlsson,2021). Above the engaged fan on the hierarchy is the superfan, superfans are according to Edlom and Karlsson are fans that are highly engaged with the content and are seen by other fans as experts in the fandom group, they are influential and they drive new offerings into the fan community that actually contribute to the building of the community (Edlom and Karlsson, 2021, p.129). Lastly and at the top of the hierarchy Edlom and Karlsson place the executive fan who are said to lead the opinions of the collective group and are often at times the administrators who hold the power in their fandom (Edlom and Karlsson, 2021, p.129).

In Figure 2.19.1 below I have created a visual representation of the hierarchy that has been created by Jessica Edlom and Jenny Karlsson to better understand the levels of fans and how they are categorised in this specific study

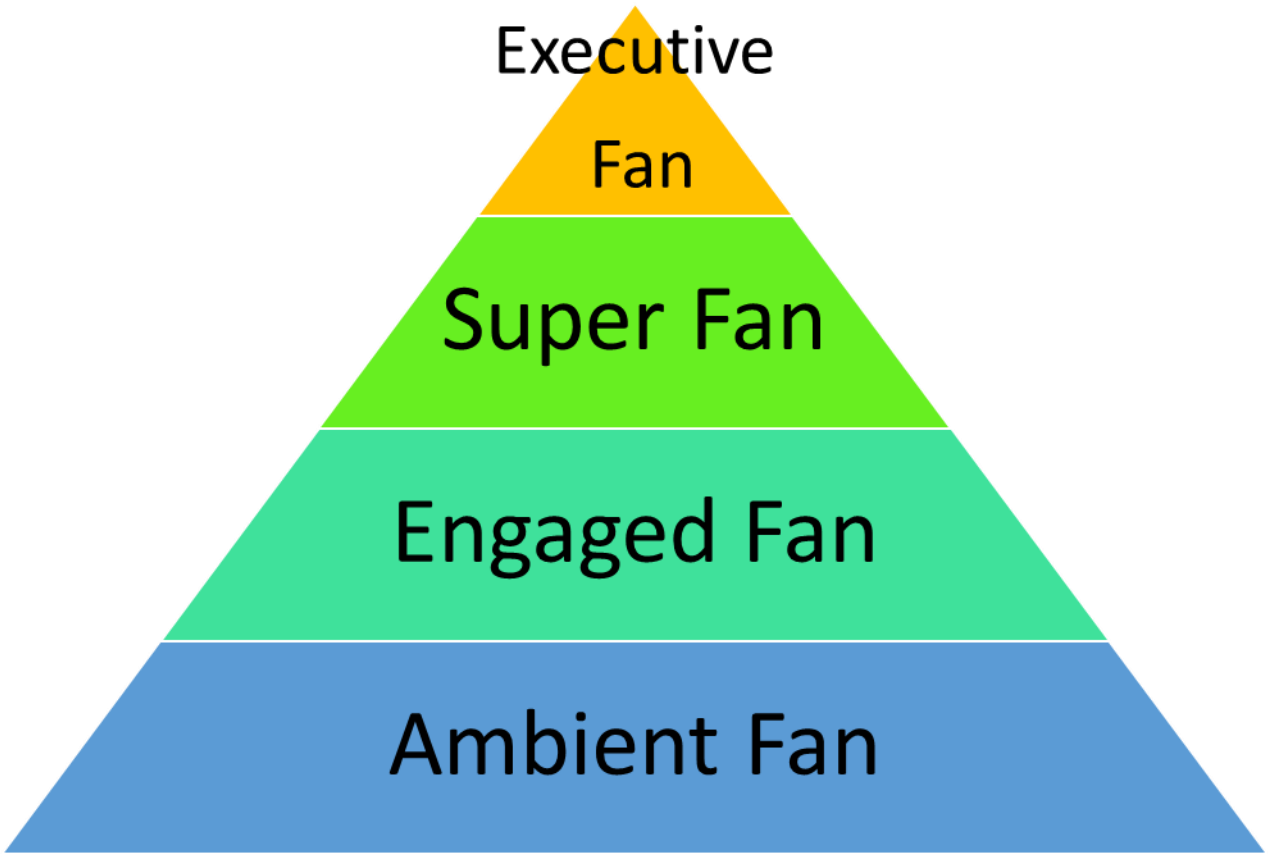


Figure 2.19.1: Hierarchy showing the levels of fans in a fandom.

This specific study mentions executive fans as they are looked at as being exclusive to the music industry fandoms that are described by Edlom and Karlsson. These exclusive fans are said to have had access to the performer/artist by means of VIP tickets and meet and greets. I argue that executive fans do exist amongst the fandoms that are discussed in this research paper i.e., *Game of Thrones, Rick and Morty* and *Harry Potter.* Executive fans can then be said to exist in this instant when they gain 'access' to characters or actors who play these characters by means of premiers and comic cons. For the purpose of this research the fictional fandoms being analysed have all four types of fans and I therefore argue that these classes are what divide fans, whereby fans believe to be better than her fans in their fandoms, they feel the need to gatekeep and educate other fans. This divide seen amongst fandoms due to the hierarchy placed upon them is one of the factors that leads to the toxic behaviour in fandom and the fantagonism that gets placed onto the creative producers.

Now that we have discussed the way in which you become a fan and the different categories fans are placed into, we can now look at the ways in which I believe that a fandom is created. Once a Fandom is created, I have hypothesized that this is the first step into how a creative producer loses ownership over his or her creative work.

2.20) Fair Use laws and Fanfiction

According to Copyright laws there are four factors that should be considered when looking at fair use in regard to copy writing someone else's work, more specifically for this research paper in terms of fanfiction. According to Neil Weinstock Netanel, in their 2011 article called *Making Sense of Fair Use* these are the four factors that are taken into consideration:

(1) the purpose and character of the use, including whether such use is of a commercial nature or is for non-profit educational purposes.

(2) the nature of the copyrighted work.

(3) the amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole; and

(4) the effect of the use upon the potential market for or value of the copyrighted work.

(Netanel, 2011, p.720).

Looking more specifically at Steven Vander Ark's *Harry Potter Lexicon* in a highly publicized decision issued on September 8, 2008, U.S. District Court Judge Robert Patterson the Lexicon actively broke the terms of J.K Rowling's Copyright according to the fair use law. The lexicon is a hard copy A-Z encyclopaedia of the characters, spells, creatures, places, events, and magical items in the series. It was found that the Lexicons was transformative under the first fair-use factor which is the purpose and character of the use (Band, 2009).

The Lexicon was once web based and something that J.K Rowling herself had no problems with even going as far as to calling it her "natural home". The problem arises when the author was approached by publisher RDR to turn his website into a book where it could be published in the real world for both money and profits (Richardson and Tan, 2009, p.3). J.K Rowling had started on the idea of creating her own encyclopaedia and therefore together with Warner Bros as holder of the film and marketing rights in the Harry Potter series Rowling sued, claiming copyright infringement.

Terry Pratchett has pointed out, with respect to the Harry Potter books "In fantasy writing accusations of copying are very difficult to make. You know who invented wizards? Who invented goblins? If we were going to start paying royalties for nicking one another's ideas, we'd have all given our life savings to the Tolkien family a long time ago" (Richardson and Tan, 2009, p.13).

When looking at the *Harry Potter Lexicon*, J.K Rowling won her court case, but she also admitted to using the website as a reference and referral when she wrote her other books which fall in the *Harry Potter* Universe. "The judge also found that J K Rowling herself admitted to consulting an online version of the Lexicon as did the producer of the film version of the fifth novel" (Band, 2009, p.45). If this was the case, I then argue that J.K Rowling was unfair in her actions as she herself has used an outside reference to her own work which she was not able to keep track of. In this particular instance the fans helped the creative producer instead of trying to take over a story but rather take J.K Rowlings existing world and give a detailed explanation of her creations not their own. The creative producer here took advantage of her fans and used the hard work of someone else for her own personal gain. In saying this though, it is also the creative producer actively taking ownership of her creative work and telling fans that this source material belongs to her and cannot be capitalised upon without giving her rightful credit. Although unfair to the Lexicon creator, this can still be seen as an active form of protest from the creative producer taking action and doing something about someone taking her work.

I argue here that J.K Rowling found it unfair that her original work could have been used by another person to profit from, as only then did she have a problem and decided to take legal action. For the sake of this research paper, it is safe to say then those creative producers do go against fanfiction works as soon as they are able to earn their own profits. Until that point though, some authors are fine with the creative input from fan producers.

2.21) #GamerGate

In September of 2014 the #GamerGate started to trend on twitter. #GamerGate users had started to harass and threaten several people that were engaged with games. According to Torill Elvira Mortenson in an article called *Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate, the* targets included people such as journalists, designers, critics, and scholars (Mortenson,2018), but they mainly focused on attacking game designer Zoe Quinn (Stuart,2014) and Anita Sarkesian (Wingfield, 2014). As if this wasn't enough, they also harassed and threatened everyone that stood up for them. It followed several years of aggressive attacks on women and feminists in gaming in general and feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian in particular, and this time included game scholars (Mortenson, 2018).

According to Caitlin Dewey in an article, *The only guide to Gamergate you will ever need to read* #GamerGate consists of two completely contrasting sides. On one side you have the independent game creators and critics, which for the most part mainly consist of females who are pushing for more inclusion to be incorporated into the gaming industry. On the other hand, you have misogynists, anti-feminists, trolls, and traditionalist who just don't want the games they are used to playing to have any form of change (Dewey,2014). "The divide is, in part, demographic: It's the difference between the historical, stereotypical gamer — young, nerdy white guy who likes guns and boobs — and the much broader, more diverse range of people who play now." (Dewey,2014, p.1).[9]

According to Micheal Salter in *From geek masculinity to Gamergate: the technological rationality of online abuse* the #Gamergate phenomenon took over the global video game industry calling it unprecedented to the scope of gendered harassment in social media (Salter, 2018). Technology throughout history has been stereotyped to be a very masculine concept (Salter, 2018, p.248). "Geek masculinity" describes a formation of gendered subjectivity in which boys and men claim technological knowledge and aptitude as a basis for masculine identity (Murray, 1993). Instead of mainstreams such as being athletic and heterosexual being the parameters of being masculinity, geek masculinity enables masculine self-esteem to be built through things such specialized technical knowledge and skill (Taylor, 2012, p.111). It was later stated by Kendall (2002) that it becomes difficult or females to be a part of this geek culture due to fear of losing control and females are not accepted unless they act like "one of the boys" (Kendall, 2002). The internet itself can be perceived as the as the privileged domain of geeks or technology literate young men (Condis, 2015). "Feelings of ownership have been extended to other technological fields such as video and computer gaming, where games are primarily designed by and marketed for the presumptive straight, white, male "geek" consumer" (Cordis, 2015). Looking at this statement it can be seen that these specific people hold and ownership over games and therefore when feminist get involved, they feel threatened and this in turn led to the phenomenon we now refer to as Gamergate.

In this research paper we can assume that a similar phenomenon happened when looking at the fandom of *Rick and Morty* whereby fans themselves decided that the directors of the show ere not

[9] Gamergate originated when game developer Erom Gjoni started to circulate a demeaning article about his ex-girlfriend Zoe Quinn after she decided to end their relationship. The article consisted of over 9000 words in which he accused her of many infidelities including an incriminating accusation whereby he accused her of using sexual favours in order for her to skyrocket her career in the video gaming industry and said that her success was attributed to this factor alone (Salter, 2018). Gjoni distributed his article to a website called 4chan which according to Caitlin Dewey is notorious for its acceptance of geek masculinity (Dewey, 2014) and therefore he was able to engage with an audience that was quite receptive to his claims and in turn harassed Quinn as well (Salter, 2008).

good enough purely for the fact that they themselves were female and not the stereo typical white heterosexual male (O'Meara and Bevan, 2018). The *Rick and Morty* fandom had built a misogynist reputation for its angry responses from fans regarding the show's efforts to hire a writer's room that gave equal representation to women. *Rick and Morty* trolls then proceeded to harassing a few of the show's female writers through 2017 and went so far as to post their private information online (Barsanti, 2017). This is quite substantial when looking at my research in particular as when we go further into the data analysis the percentage of females and males that participants are almost 50/50.

2.22) Fantagonism

I have decided to include a direct example of fantagonist again in this section as to show a real life example of how it has previously effected creative producers in the past and how it in turn adds relevance to this research study. In reference to the definition provided previously by Derek Johnson he uses the example of the *Ghostbusters* (2016) remake to explain what he means by the term fantagonism. In 2014 it was announced that Paul Feig was going to remake the classic film *Ghostbusters (*1984-1989), the only catch was that this time there would be an all-female cast (Johnson, 2017). Now, like that of #Gamergate that we previously looked at, many angry men emerged. They started to say things such as "killing the *Ghostbusters* franchise for everybody who grew up with the original", "stop ruining Classic movies", "stop ruining my childhood!" (Johnson,2017) claimed theses were things said on twitter. More tweets including things that fell into feminist politics such as "#Feminist Ghostbusters" serving "soccer moms," "feminist bimbos," and "angry feminists" (Johnson, 2017). Some of these posts included fan art of the *Ghostbusters* logo holding up the middle finger with captions that read: "Feminists. This isn't about women. This isn't about misogyny. It's about our childhoods. Stop making it about you!" (Johnson, 2017). When looking at instances of fans harassing creative producers into doings things they want and looking at the #Gamergate phenomenon, I do not believe that the *Ghostbusters* 'fans' only cared about their 'childhood being ruined'. They were clearly upset about the female participation in the *Ghostbusters* remake and they used a ruined childhood as a scapegoat. Fans once again are antagonistic to creative producers pressuring them into doing things that they don't want to do.

When looking now specifically at the case of sexism that occurred after fans harassed the female cast of the Ghostbusters remake Johson says that one should not look at fantagonsim in terms of activism but rather the racist and sexist harassment, he further goes on to say that on needs to ask

the question of whether we are even looking at fandom anymore but instead something that is more sinister (Johnson, 2017). “Particularly when such media fandom becomes articulated to the larger anti-feminist, racist”, Johnson goes on to say that it seems that we may need to question the ability of a concept like fantagonism to adequately capture all the struggles in play (Johnson, 2017).

To conclude this section, I argue that by the use of Transmedia storytelling for example Pottermore, and the use of Fanfiction, these acts have rewarded the audience a sense of false ownership. This newly found sense of false ownership amongst fans has given fans authority over the creative producers. I hypothesise that fan theories have led fans into pushing creative producers to give into their ideas instead of staying true to their own original storylines and ideas. Creative producers have in turn tried to please the audience by providing things such as Easter Eggs, Fan services and crossovers to keep the audience happy. Unfortunately, when fans do not feel satisfied by the creative producers’ choices, they lead to acts of fantagonism and become toxic fandoms. I therefore hypothesise that creative producers through these toxic acts of fans lose ownership of a creative work that once belonged solely to them whereby they were once able to make their own decisions. They now feel pressured to include the fans in decision making as to not disappoint anyone.

Summary of Findings

From the information gathered above in the review of Literature I will present a conclusive understanding of the concepts of Fan Practise, Fantagonism and Toxic Fandom. This will serve as a scale to further judge the case studies of *Game of Thrones, Harry Potter,* and *Rick and Morty*.

Fan practice is the term used to describe the constructive pursuits made by fans, particularly those of various media outlets or musical ensembles. Creating and modifying written works (fanfiction), visual or computer-assisted art (fanart), videos (fanvids, fanedit), costuming and collecting are a few examples of these activities (Wang, 2019, p.18).It can be gathered from the findings above that amongst the three fandoms being looked at , *Harry Potter* Fans were the most dominant in the acts if fan practise. I can therefore hypothesize they these fans don’t want to necessarily take over the story but can feel a need to control their stake in the property from the acts of things such as fanfictions. This fandom was also found to be the most inclined to gatekeep amongst their fan community and can be toxic by ‘ranking’ fellow fans’ dedication by the amount of participation in the extended fandom.

Fantagonism highlights the conflicts that exist within fandom, the fans' fight to influence the creation of the text and its meaning, and the producers' capacity to react to and incorporate these conflicts

into serial replication over time, taming any petulance or rabidity. The industrial dynamics of media franchising fuel fanaticism by iteratively replicating popular culture and targeting media texts at a variety of new markets, audiences, tastes, and modes of fan participation. This process can be gradual or abrupt (Click & Scott, 2018, p.25*). Game of Thrones* can be seen as falling a part of these phenomenon as they continuously had disagreements with the producers and wanted the show to go in a different direction.

In recent years, journalists, news organizations, and others have coined the term "toxic fandom" to describe admirers of popular culture who act in ways that are seen inappropriate and unpleasant. These actions can include making vehemently negative comments about the reboot of a particular work of pop culture, bullying other fans or those who worked on its production, or engaging in antisocial acts like making rape or death threats or doxing (publishing someone else's personal information). The majority of harmful fandom actions take place on online forums or on social media, particularly Twitter, though they can also be observed at fan gatherings and conventions. From the three case studies, all of them take on some forms or participate in acts of toxic fandom but the most prominent of these is the fandom of *Rick and Morty*. The series showed signs of fan toxicity in its fans acts of public indecency with regard to the McDonalds incident. Fans have also been known to bully the producers online through the twitter screenshots that were previously shown and lastly fans of Rick and Morty have been known to have a superiority complex whereby they attack fans who do not have the same views as them Fans have been seen as misogynistic to female producers and they have been verbal abusive online. For this instance alone, I believe that fans of the *Rick and Morty* fandom are the most toxic out of the three case studies chosen.

3.) Methodology

When looking at the evolution of fandoms it can be seen that before the internet, fandom and participatory culture was something that fans could only be a part of occasionally (Romano, 2019). “Before the Marvel Cinematic Universe, participatory fandom was something fans could only do publicly every once in a while; performative geek culture was reserved for special events like Comic-Con or the newest sci-fi or fantasy film” (Romano, 2019).

During his Ted Talk about Participatory Culture, Clay Shirky states that “Every time a new consumer joins this media landscape, a new producer joins as well, because the same equipment—phones, computers—lets you consume and produce.” (Shirky, 2005). Here it is possible to see that once a

story develops a fanbase they themselves become producers. Therefore, I argue that fandoms, once established go through phases that allow for a consumer to become or try to take over the producer role as there are technological means that enable them to produce their own content about the said media. This technology has also become much more accessible to people through the use of social media and accessibility of the internet. The reason I have chosen to research the ways in which creative producers lose ownership over their works is because in the field of fandom studies it is under-researched and therefore my finding will bring about a new understanding with regards to the producer and consumer relationships within fandoms. I argue that there are six phases that lead up to this process. In order to show how this theory works I will analyse it using the three case studies and show how each of them underwent the process from phase one through six but first I will describe these phases in full. This hypothesized six-phase theory will be used to analyse the way in which fandoms become toxic and therefore lead into the creative producer losing 'ownership' and creative freedom over their work. I have also conducted surveys with participants of each fandom to better gain an understanding of their respective opinions in regard to the matter of whether they should have a say in which the show they are a fan of should be written or produced.

Approach

Throughout this research I will delve into these aspects to look whether a story really belongs to the creator once they have fallen trap to fan theories. I will look at whether or not the author retains direct authorial control of their creation once toxic fans start to get involved. These six phases will be analysed by using the three previously stated case studies. I will also look at some cases where the fans were merely on the right track and guessed what the creator was about to do by dissecting the story piece by piece like in the case of *Game of Thrones* and who Jon Sno's parents were. I will look into *Rick and Morty* and how the creators reject fan theories and their reasoning behind why they do this. I will look into *Harry Potter* and how J.K Rowling is accused of giving into fan theories and adapting her stories to get a bigger following years after the last instalment of the series. Each fandom chosen has been done so for the purpose that they all work in different ways and therefore I propose that differing fandoms can still fall a part of the 6-phase theory.

By looking at the way in which a fandom turns toxic we will also be able to establish if authors consider pleasing the fans with a more popular fan theory and look into ways that change the dynamic of a fandom. It is important to note that toxic fandom may also lead to authors changing their stories to go against fans and prove them wrong such as in the case of *Rick and Morty*.

Furthermore, in making these conscious efforts to investigate these separate fandoms and their respective differences regarding how fandoms work I will be able to further try to answer the question of whether an original story belongs to a fandom or an author once it has been established. It might be the case where they both end up owning it to some degree and this will be looked at further throughout the research process Lastly, I will be using surveys to ask fans themselves if they've ever participated in practises that would alter the way a creator writes the next part of their stories. I will specifically be looking at fans of these shows as to not gather unnecessary information or create confusion in regarding this research. Please refer to the appendix in order to further understand how the surveys worked.

This research aims to investigate the influence that toxic fandoms have over the creative freewill of the producers. This research aims to focus on the ways in which these specific fandoms become toxic and further influence the way a story is told and the outcomes of said story by influencing the producer to sway further from their original ideas and concepts to please the audience. This research paper will be using a form of qualitative research as it is data that does not hold specific values but rather approximates and characterizes. As case studies will be looked at as well as the analysis of surveys of people who are fans of the three chosen case studies, it can therefore be seen as subjective rather than objective since answers will vary according to the person, participant, or specific case study. This form of data is indefinite and therefore forms a part of qualitative data. Being a fan is a very subjective practice and an individual will give into their own opinions and be quite bias and therefore this in turn makes the research qualitative as it is based on opinions rather than facts. The reasons I have chosen to use qualitative research methods rather than a quantitative research method are due to its flexibility and variety of responses that it allows for. Primary data was collected by me as it was opinion based and therefore the descriptive manner of participants answers was done through individual surveys to enable a variety of answers to be produced. Unlike quantitative research that limits me to the use of statistics I am now able to look at a variety of responses from participants. In order to fully understand how fans, react to creative producers I have asked participants for long answers regarding their opinions and therefore I chose to use qualitative research as it enable my participants to give opinion-based answers. Quantitative research does not enable me to look at outliers in a collective group and therefore if a single participant had a completely different opinion in comparison to other participants it would be difficult to analyse whereas qualitative data enable me to do this. The Qualitative research method would therefore suit my research analysis as it is subjective rather than objective and does not rely solely on numerical figures and statistics.

The research design model I decided to use was the case study approach as it allows in-depth, multi-faceted explorations of complex issues in their real-life settings. The case study approach is particularly useful to employ when there is a need to obtain an in-depth appreciation of an issue, event, or phenomenon of interest, in its natural real-life context. I therefore felt that this method would be appropriate as it deal with the real-life context of the way in which fans interact with the creative producers of a fictional world. The case study methos was also appropriate as it allows me to draw information from multiple sources which is an important factory for this research paper as I am analysing each fandom as a whole through my 6-phase theory in the form of a case study as-well as collecting data from surveys provided to participants.

I feel that these specific methods used provided me with the most accurate and best data possible to further understand my hypothesized theory as they enable me to ask participants a range of questions. Participants were able to answer the questions with either long and short answers and they were also able to answer the questions specifically to which fandom they fell apart of. By doing this I was able to compare the *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones* and *Rick and Morty* fandoms as well as look at them separately for more in depth look at the way each fandom worked individually. Using the surveys in this way was beneficial in the sense that it showed how each fandom acted individually while still enabling each and every participant to state their own opinions and thoughts on the various questions.

Ethical considerations were taken into consideration to make sure the research was uncompromised and valid. Each survey was completely voluntary and people that chose to participate were completely made anonymous.

In order to gain better insight into the ways in which creative producers lose ownership of their creative work to their fan's, structured surveys were conducted with 37 participants. Out of the 37 participants, 16 fell part of the *Harry Potter* Fandom, 14 were a part of the *Rick and Morty* fandom and 7 were a part of the *Game of Thrones* fandom. It is important to note that each group had a varying number, this information was kept and I did not reduce the size of groups to have an equal quantity for each fandom as this information was useful in the sense that it showed which fandom was larger and how larger groups impact a fandom in comparison to smaller groups of people. The differing sizes of each fandom also showed the popularity in today's times of each fandom in comparison to earlier years.

Surveys were used to get the views of participants on whether they believed that they should have an opinion in regard to the way in which a show is written or created. The survey was done online

and consisted of multiple choice, yes and no questions, short answer questions and one long answer question.

Three works were also looked at in regard to the 6-phase proposed theory, namely*: Harry Potter (*2001-2011*), Rick and Morty* (2013-present) and lastly *Game of Thrones (*2011-2019). The way in which I analysed these works was by using social media platforms that have given fans a way to communicate about their feelings towards the shows and these will be Reddit, Twitter, Wattpad, Fanfiction.net and Archive of your Own. I also used previous academic works in the fandom studies field to analyse these case studies further. I proposed this 6-phase theory after the case study analysis provided in the introductory section of this research paper whereby, I have collected data regarding all three of these case studies. With this in mind the process taken to analyse the case studies has been broken down below to further show the ways in which each case study was looked at according to the three specific case studies. Taking previous academic works regarding fandom studies and looking at how each fandom has evolved I propose the below six phase theory in figure 3.1 as a basis for the way in which fandoms evolve into becoming toxic which leads creative producers into a loss of ownership.

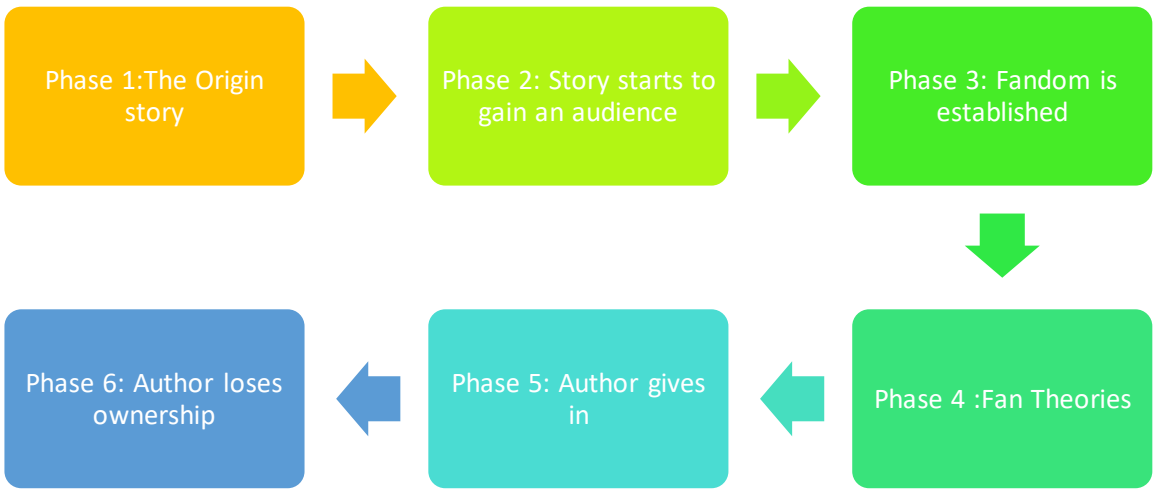


Figure 3.1: Flow Chart showing the proposed six-phase theory.

It is important to remember that opinion-based surveys usually produce results that cannot be generalized beyond the point of the specific subject group that is being tested, but they provide a more in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions, motivations, and emotions.

I therefore believe that by using these methods of analysing the qualitative data I have collected, I will be able to better understand the process of how a creative producer loses ownership over their work. The information gathered from the surveys are from fans themselves and are more accurate as these participants actively fall into the fandoms I am researching. I propose that by the gathering of this information I will further be able to establish my six-phase theory as a base line for future fandom studies in regard to the producer and consumer relationship.

4.) Data Analysis

Analysing *Game of Thrones, Harry Potter,* and *Rick and Morty* according to the six-phase theory.

Game of Thrones

Phase 1: The Origin Story

Game of Thrones started in 1996 with a series of novels named *A Song of Fire and Ice* and was later developed into a television series by HBO in 2011, dubbed *A Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) (Escurignan,2017).George RR Martin was approached by many movie directors to turn his book series into a film but he continued to turn them down until David Benioff and D.B. Weiss approached him with the pitch of turning the novels into a television series, due to the length and depth of the books and taking into account how much air time they would have to tell the story. George RR Martin agreed (Taite,2018). Martin was, however, still hard at work on the final novel of his series which meant that although the writers had a storyline, they had no determined ending to work towards (Taite,2018). This brings me to the first phase of my hypothesised theory, the origin story.

Phase 1: The Origin Story

It can be seen here that the original story was developed by George RR Martin. Martin has publicly said that his work of a *Song of Fire and Ice* was heavily influenced by the *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy by J.R.R Tolkien. In an Interview with IGN George RR Martin talks about the ways in which he used Tolkien's work as a lesson and what he wanted to use from him.

> When I started writing *Game of Thrones*, one of the things I did was to look at *Lord of the Rings* and see what Tolkien did and tried to take some lessons from it. A big lesson was his handling of magic. You know, I think a lot of epic fantasy has too much magic. But Middle-earth is suffused with a sense of magic, it's always on the peripheral and it's used to set the stage. (George RR Martin in an interview with IGN,2019)

> He reframes this statement by saying that he knew that magic was something he wanted to keep in Westeros (the fictional world of his book series), but he wanted to keep it as something that was in the background (Preston,2019). He later went on to say that he was highly influenced by the way in which Tolkien framed the narrative structure of his trilogy (Preston,2019).The structure was very influential on *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019). If you look at the structure of *Lord of the Rings*, it all begins in the Shire and it's very small. And then it gets bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger. The Fellowship starts together with the four Hobbits and then they pick up Strider — Aragorn — and then they get to Rivendell where they pick up more people. And for a while they're together, but then later in the books they split apart, they separate from the two groups. Now if you look at *Game of Thrones*, everybody except Dany starts out in Winterfell, then certain things drive them apart, and then they're scattered all over the world. (George RR Martin in an interview with IGN, 2019)

He lastly goes on to say that Tolkien created the basis for fantasy languages referring to elvish which is a fully fleshed out language created by Tolkien and used in his work of *Lord of The Rings*. George RR Martin talks to the interviewer saying that he in contrast just gave the show writers a few words of Dothraki which is the language used in certain parts of Westoros (Preston,2019). By making this clear distinction between himself and Tolkien, he gives credit to Tolkien praising him for his efforts in making *Lord of The Rings* what it is and therefore I say he is showing how inspired he was by Tolkien.

From these above statements it is clear that George RR Martin felt inspired and passionate about writing fantasy which was heavily influenced by his love for the author Tolkien. At these beginning stages however, his story of A Song of Fire and Ice still belonged solely to him in a creative sense. He was yet to have a huge fan influence over his work and therefore he was still able to achieve creative freedom.

Robert Dickman in his work called, *The four elements of every successful story* states that Passion, Hero, Antagonist and Transformation are what lies at the basis of what inevitably makes a good story (Dickman, 2003). In regard to *Game of Thrones* I hypothesize that George RR Martin was still at this stage of his creative process and was trying to fabricate his own 'good story'. I will therefore analyse his origin story in regards these four elements to better understand my theorised first phase called "The Origin Story".

Passion: Through the many seasons and the continually growing fandom of *Game of Thrones* I would conclude that the target audience has indeed found an emotional connection to the creative work, this can be proved by just taking into account the viewership of the show after so many years. In an article written by Robert Milakovic called *How Many People watched Game of Thrones* it was estimated that by the end of the last season *Game of Thrones* had an average viewership of 44.2 million people(Milakovic, 2022).With the highs and lows that the audience of *Game of Thrones* experiences with the countless deaths and twists and turns in the storyline I feel that the writers have made sure that the stakes are indeed high and therefore have piqued the interest of their target audience.

Hero: Unlike the view of Dickman, *Game of Thrones* doesn't provide only one single point of view but rather provides many views from different main characters. This though, may be the case due to the act that the story of *Game of Thrones* takes place in different parts of Westeros. We are however provided with distinct point of views and audiences are given the free will to choose which point of view they will align with, for example wanting Daenerys to sit on the Iron Throne or wanting Jon Sno on the Iron Throne. The audience has had the opportunity to bond with both parties and therefore gets to choose which side they will be rooting for. I therefore believe that Game of Thrones still fits into this category as they are given a point of view which they have the choice to embrace themselves whether that may differ from another viewer or not.

Antagonist: When it comes to an antagonist it often occurs that there will be a protagonist. Looking at Rob Stark as the protagonist and Walder Frey as the antagonist, this first scene that comes to mind when hearing these two names alongside each other is the Infamous "Red Wedding" that took place in season 2 in the episode called *The Rains of Castamere.* In this episode Robb Stark met and fell in love with Talisa, which presented a problem because he was at the time promised to a daughter of the cruel Walder Frey, this promise was made in order to secure an alliance at the time with the house of Frey and the House of Stark. Robb however broke his promise by marrying his love Talisa instead. Robb did try to save the alliance however by promising that Lord Edmure who was Catelyn Starks brother, would still marry Walder Frey's daughter. This is what led to the Red

Wedding which was the wedding of Edmure and Walder Freys daughter named Roslin. After the wedding, when Edmure and Roslin had left the party to consummate their marriage, Roose Bolton, who was thought to have been an ally by Catelyn, and his men positioned themselves strategically around the room in which the party was still ongoing. Walder had previously sworn that Robb, Catelyn and the then-pregnant Talisa would all be safe at the wedding as they were under his protection, however he himself along with Roose and with the backing of Tywin Lannister, betrayed the Starks, and Bolton and his men killed all three of the beloved characters .Roose said the now-famous phrase, "The Lannisters send their regards" to Robb right before he stabbed him in the heart. In an article written by Aidan Milan called *What happened during the Red Wedding in Game of Thrones and who died?* It is stated that the act of displays shown in the, *The Rains of Castamere* episode were personal attacks on fans. "Now raise your hand if you've ever been personally victimised by Game of Thrones" (Milan, 2019). She states that the events of the Red Wedding had felt like a personal attack, and in saying this it can be seen assumed that the emotions of fans have caused them to hate the antagonist of the show so much so that years later the Red Wedding still seen as one of the most unfair scenes of *Game of Thrones*. It is also however seen as one of the pivotal moments of the series and many fans know that this was required in order for the series to continue on its storyline.

Transformation: This element begs the question of whether or not the story has transformed the audience's life in a positive meaningful way, I suggest that this goes both ways for the Game of Thrones fandom in particular as it did in fact bring about a positive and joyful experience for the audience up until the last season whereby it disappointed a fairly large number of the fandom.

In an Article called *Why is Game of Thrones so popular - The psychology behind it,* M.Farouk Radwan describes the reasons he believes that the *Game of Thrones* franchise is so popular amongst viewers. He states seven distinct reasons for the shows appeal:

1. Women enjoy the idea of watching other woman rise to power, he states that women enjoy watching the show as it portrays the rise of women in a world dominated by men. This is in contrast to what we see I reality and is therefore appealing to the female audience.

2. Throughout the show viewers are continuously frustrated by the outcomes that are portrayed for example, antagonists getting away with instances with no repercussions. The appeal lies in the hope that the protagonist will one day prevail and therefore people continue to watch the show for hope of a better outcome.

3. The unconscious desire of people to be liberal, *Game of Thrones* allows viewers to watch a world where the idea of incest, homosexuality and all other kinds of sexual encounters are possible and allowed. People watch things that aren't necessarily accepted in our reality and therefore they keep going back for more.

4. The world of *Game of Thrones* allows the viewers to take part in the act of curiosity. With is highly complex plot lines as well as numerous characters, guessing what might come next becomes increasingly hard for viewers and so they continue to come back to see what happens next.

5. Many people enjoy the complexity of the plotlines and numerous characters and as fans it makes them feel intellectual.

6. The love of violence and guts and gore. "One of the unconscious elements behind loving war movies and violent games is the love for violence and gore". *Game of Thrones* has a large amount of violence that appeals to fans who share this love.

7. Fans enjoy seeing the power struggle that is portrayed in *Game of Thrones.*

   (Radwan, n.d).

Taking these aspects of why *Game of Thrones* has such a high appeal it can clearly be seen why *Game of Thrones* at this stage had such a large fan base and how George RR Martin was able to capitalise on his 'good story'. At this point of the 6-phase theory Martin has now gained the audience he wants, he still has creative control, but it will be seen further how when a fan base grows the author loses their creative ownership to the fans.

Phase 2: The Story Starts to Gain and Audience

After the announcements that the books were being turned into a series there was an increasing amount of anticipation regarding the release. According to a Forbes article by senior contributor Dana Feldman, the US viewership averaged at about 9.3 million viewers per episode and as the show continued each season saw a rise in viewership. Season 2 saw 11.6 million, season 3 saw 14.4 million, season four had 19.1 million, season five saw 20.2 million season six saw 25,7 million and season seven had 32.8 million viewers (Feldman,2019). Season 8 has been averaging 44.2 million viewers per episode in gross audience, an increase of more than 10 million viewers compared to Season 7 (Mitovich,2019).

Please refer to the figure 4.1.1 below to see visually how the number of viewers increased over the span of season 1 through 8.

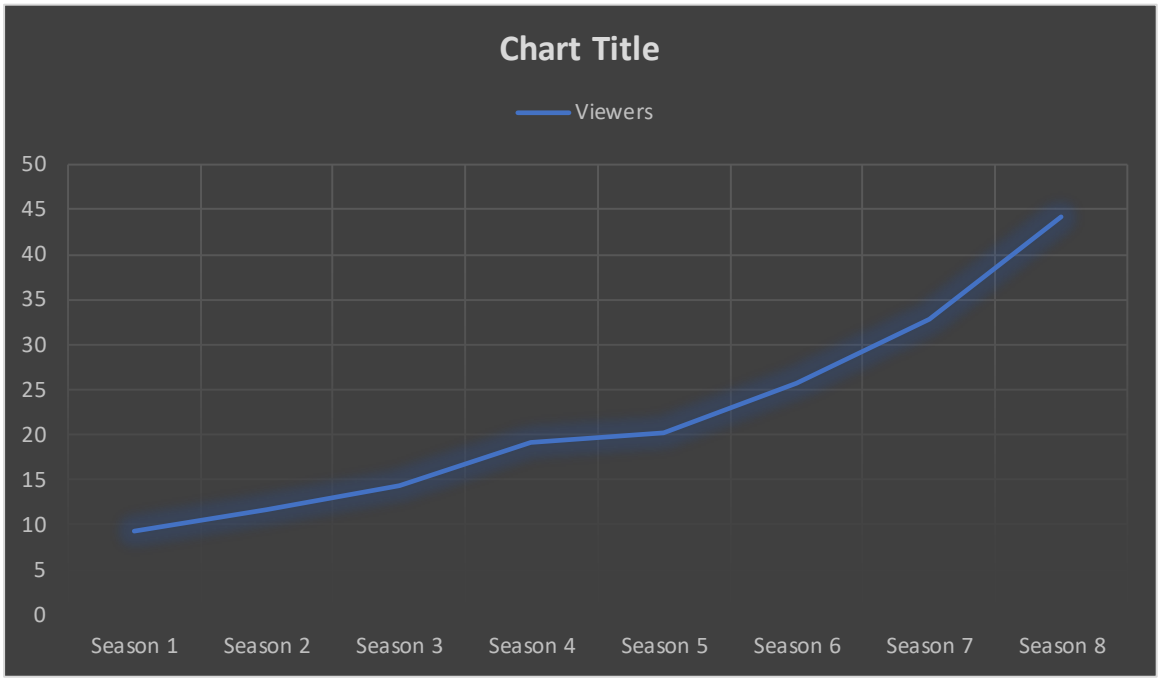


Figure 4.1.1: Chart showing how the number of viewers increased for Game of Thrones each season was released.

Now that the fan base has been established in phase two and fandom is established in phase three which will be looked at next. There is still no loss of creative control here for the creative producer at this point.

Phase 3: Fandom is Established

From season 1 to Season 8 it can be seen how the number of fans increased. It is important though to take into account that the television series had an already established fandom going into it release due to the book series and its already established fanbase. After the release of the show more fans emerged and so fandom was established further, but with fandom comes fan theories which brings me to the next phase of this hypothesis.

I theorize at this point that the large rise is fans leading to an established fandom is the point in which fans start to take ownership of the creator's story. I the next phase this can be seen as when a fan creates their own version of the story through things such as fanfiction and fan theories.

Phase 4: Fan Theories

According to an article by Dave Gonzales called *Tracking the origins of the oldest Game of Thrones theory,* it is said that the oldest fan theory was that of Jon Sno's parentage, which dates to even

before the series was released due to the existence of the novels (Gonzales, 2019). The theory was confirmed in the television series and not the books because George RR Martin has not yet completed his novel series (Gonzales, 2019). The theory is commonly known as "R+L=J" which is a reference to Rheagar Targaryen + Lyanna Stark = Jon Sno. Many fans have speculated, according to, Gonzales that the first person to have come up with this theory was Anne Groell, the publisher of the books. Therefore, it was assumed that she would have had a better understanding according to fans and more insight into his work. "Being deeply involved with every tweak made to Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire text Groell was in a position to suggest that certain clues be better hidden or excised entirely" (Gonzales, 2019). He states that this information was provided and theorised by other fans solely because they believed that having such a close first-hand look at the novels and being able to edit them, she would have been able to come up with this conclusion (Gonzales, 2019). It is important to remember that before this theory was proven by creative producers, it highly influenced the way fans expected the series to pan out, up until that point Jon had no true claim to the Iron Throne, but if this theory was true, it would mean he had just as much as claim as Daenerys. Therefore, this fan theory was increasingly important to fans when looking at the overarching story.

Due to the books being out long before the series was created, it is important to note once again that *Game of Thrones* as a franchise had already established a fandom years before the television series was released. There were therefore countless theories already developed by fans and so it is important to establish that for the purpose of this research and how fans influence the *Game of Thrones* fandom I am specifically speaking to the television series. However, the book series must still be mentioned as this is the basis of phase 1: The Origin story.

Now looking at the three types of fan theories theorized by Manuel de Amo and Garcia-Roca we will look at examples of theories found in Game of Thrones and the different categories that they fit into.

- Predictive Theory

Bran was predicted even before the television series to have been the Night King[10], the theory gained traction later through the television series though due to what seemed to have been a visual resemblance between the two characters[11].

[10] According to an article by Erica Gonzales called *What You Need to Know About the Night King on Game of Thrones*, the Night King is the biggest threat to humankind in the Game of Thrones world of Westeros (Gonzales, 2019).

[11] Bran is set to be the King of Winterfell which is a northern kingdom in Game of Thrones, he develops supernatural powers throughout the show and it was earlier theorized that he was actually the Night King (Gonzales, 2019).

- Explanatory Theory

The theory of R+L=J was raised in 1997 when only the first book was published. It has been one of the most widespread fandom theories and was confirmed in the canon almost 10 years later. This theory gives meaning to many details of the plot as we could see earlier when fleshing out this theory more (Manuel de Amo and García-Roca,2021).

- Alternative Theory

A common alternative theory is that Ned Stark who is shown being beheaded in season one is still alive. This theory is built upon the idea of two concepts, the one being that Ned Stark, like his son Bran, has body-shifting powers and before his execution he shifted into one of the birds that were flying away from the scene. The second concept is based on the idea that Ned shared a cell with Jaqen[12] before his execution, Jaqen was able to change faces with Ned and therefore Ned wasn't the one that was executed. This second concept looks at the fact that Catelyn was surprised and shocked to see Ned Starks dead corpse as she stated the bones were too small (Manuel de Amo and Garcia-Roca,2021).

[12] Jaqen is part of The Faceless Men, they are a sect of assassins who believe that death is a kind way to put an end to misery and worship the Many-Faced God. They view the act of murder as a sacred offering to their God and will give the "gift" of death to anyone in the world for a fee. They do this by taking on another's identity by stealing their face and wearing it as a mask in order to kill an individual.

From the information above I therefore hypothesize that *Game of Thrones* boasts a number of different fan theories which can fit into all three of these categories. Therefore, it can be assumed that fans have given their own inputs on the creators/ producers work and, in some instances, believe their theories to either be true or if proved wrong, better than what the author has given them.

Another aspect that can fall into fan theories are the 'shipping' of relationships, *Game of Thrones* had fans romanticising relationships throughout the series which they themselves believed would be a good match but that may have not been the creator's idea to begin with. An example of this would be the shipping of Jaime Lannister and Brianne of Tarth. In an article written by Debra Ferreday called *Game of Thrones, Rape Culture and Feminist Fandom*, Jaimes character went from an evil killer who had tried to murder children to being the topic of many fans works which focused on his new emerging respect for woman solely by shipping the relationship between Brainna and himself (Ferreday,2015).[13]

With this statement I further hypothesize that many a times it is the fans who reinforce unwanted relationships upon a creative producer and have an influence over whether or not the creative producer themselves wants the relationship to be official in the canon universe. Here is a prime example of the author losing ownership by being pressured into fans and "giving in' which will be looked at throughout the next phase of my hypothesized theory.

Phase 5: Author Gives In

Due to the fact that it was known that George RR Martin had not written the ending of *A Song of Fire and Ice*, Jon Sno's parentage was never actually confirmed by him but was rather confirmed by the HBO series (Gonzales,2019). With this in mind I theorize that although the original creative producer may have hinted at this theory it was never confirmed until the show. Was this the first instance whereby the showrunners were influenced by the fans and felt pressured to actually confirm the theory?

[13] Another relationship that was shipped by fans was the pairing of Gendry and Arya who even have a hashtag #Gendrya dedicated to fanfictions written about the pair according to an article written by Phil Hornshaw called *Game of Thrones Season 8 Fulfils Two Fan Ships Years In The Making* (Hornshaw,2019). Phil Hornshaw goes on to later say that "It's worth noting, however, that this isn't really a thing in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* books on which *Game of Thrones* is based" (Hornshaw,2019). The relationship was however confirmed by the show runners in the premiere episode of season 8 whereby the pair shared an intimate moment (Hornshaw,2019). I further posit that due to the fact that this was not confirmed in the book series that the creators of the television series may have incorporated this scene as a nod to theories which then resulted in a fan services.

In a Quora[14] Forum which asked the question "Is R+L=J confirmed in the show only and not in the books?" many fans gave their opinion on the matter:

"To put it another way: R+L=J was confirmed on the show *because* the writers knew it would bear out as well in the books, *when* the time comes."-Kelsey.L,Hayes

"In the books, it's not confirmed, just heavily hinted at."-Daniel James

"It's not confirmed in the books but I've always thought since reading book 1 that it was the only hypothesis that made sense: Ned told Jon he is a real Stark, Ned's honour would not have allowed him to father a bastard, therefore, Jon can only be Lyanna's son."-William James Hoffer

It is however important to remember that these Quora posts are in fact fan theories and not fan facts. Therefore, they cannot be proven to be canon unless stated otherwise by the show runners themselves.

Adam Epstein in an article for quarts called *Internet Fandom is running Hollywood as, fanon that is promoted to canonicity* defines the term Ascended Fanon and how it effects the canonical worlds of fictional media (Epstein,2018). He uses the example of the fans of *Game of Thrones* theorising that a mysterious character named Coldhands is actually Benjen Stark but he is in disguise. The author of the books George R. R. Martin had actually denied this claim by fans but despite his decline of the theory, when Coldhands actually did show up on the television series it was in fact the likes of Benjen Starks character who was portrayed earlier in the television series (Epstein,2018). He further goes on to say that the term "warging" (Epstein,2018) which is when Bran Stark can transcend into the minds of others to see what they see. The action is in-fact canon but the term itself was created by fans and become canon. Therefore, fanon has ascended into canon by the act of fan persistence and the pressure creative producers felt to satisfy them.

In an article called *When Does Fan Service Go Too Far?* Monique Jacobs describes the act of fan service as any content that is added in order to excite and please the audience rather than actually progressing the storyline. She also goes on to say that fan service can be done right and they can be done wrong in her opinion, for example in *Game of Thrones* season one episode four there was an "RL" carved into a tree which was a foreshadow of the R+L=J theory, she says that this was indeed a fan service done right in her opinion as it excited the fans (Jacobs,2021).

[14] Quora is a Q&A website which enables users to share knowledge with other users. People use Quora to read high quality, personalized, and relevant content, and ask questions about any topic. It is said to be a platform to share knowledge and learn more about the world (Quora.com).



According to Jacobs there were a few instances where *Game of Thrones* implemented fan service quite well before the final season, for example in season 7 where Ser Davos references a famous fan meme by saying to Gendry "Thought you might still be rowing" which was a nod to fans' humour. There was even an instance where famous musician, Ed Sheeran, who fans had wanted to see on the series played a Lannister soldier that sang a song in season 7's premier episode (Jacobs,2021).

Further on in the article Jacobs talks about how fan services were done incorrectly according to fan backlash in *Game of Thrones* and why the constant attention to fan services rather than the complex narratives of the series in the final season of *Game of Thrones* led to its downfall of the final season. She claims that the writers used fan services such as Jon being able to successfully ride a dragon, to distract the audience from things such as Cersei's vaguely thought-out death, Bran's uselessness and Daenerys becoming the "Mad Queen" without any build up as to why she become this way so rapidly (Jacobs,2021). Figure 4.1.2 below shows a fan response directed at the different seasons of Game of Thrones and how they progressively got worse as time went on.

Figure 4.1.2 showing a meme image of the progression of the *Game of Thrones* television series' narrative quality available at: https://www.pinterest.cl/pin/531354456035003516/

In an Article by Kritin Hunt named *11 Game of Thrones Easter Eggs You Might Have Missed*, Easter Eggs were placed into the television series when David Benioff and David Weiss who were the co-creators of the show placed their own faces in the Hall of Faces scene of *Game of Thrones* (Hunt,2019).

I hypothesize that these acts of fan service are performed by the creators not for their own wants but rather for the sole enjoyment of the fans. Here it can be seen that the authors have handed over ownership as they have prioritized the fans wishes and, in many instances, may have not followed their own create wants.

Phase 6: Author no longer owns story.

While the author does legally own the story it can be posited that they can be influenced by the wants and needs of fans. The above statements made by fans prove that they themselves agreed to this happening in the series and therefore I suggest that the writers might have added the above Easter Eggs and fan services to please and satisfy the fans. To further analyse the ways in which a fandom loses ownership in this case *Game of Thrones* I will be using the area of Toxic fandom with examples.

George R.R Martin has publicly stated his rage against the toxic fans of *Game of Thrones*. In an article by Narjas Zatat called *George RR Martin attacks 'toxic and mad' fandom over Game of Thrones finale*

backlash, he further explains how the author went about criticising the toxic fandom of *Game of Thrones* (Zatat,2019). Speaking on the podcast Maltin On Movies, he said:

"The internet is toxic in a way that the old fanzine culture and fandoms – comic fans, science fiction fans in those days – was not." "There were disagreements, "he went on to say. "There were feuds, but nothing like the madness that you see on the internet" (Zatat,2019).

Due to the way in which the end of *Game of Thrones* occurred fans seem to have been outraged, so outraged in fact that they had over 1 million signatures on a petition on Change.org to *remake Game of Thrones* season 8 with competent writers. The petition caught the attention of Sophie Turner who plays the role of Sansa Stark in the television series, she claimed that the petition was disrespectful and in an interview with New York Times she said that "People always have an idea in their heads of how they want a show to finish, and so when it doesn't go to their liking, they start to speak about it and rebel" (Zatat,2019). She then went on to say "All of these petitions and things like that – I think it's disrespectful to the crew, and the writers, and the filmmakers who have worked tirelessly over 10 years, and for 11 months shooting the last season. Like 50-something night shoots. So many people worked so, so hard on it, and for people to just rubbish it because it's not what they want to see is just disrespectful." (Zatat,2019)

Fans here display the unwillingness to let go of an idea that was not actually theirs to begin with and like the actress Sophie Turner explained they start to rebel. I further conclude that the fans have taken over the creative producers work and in turn turned a once enjoyable fandom into something toxic. Taking into account the ascending fanon, fan service and Easter Eggs that were placed throughout the television series of *Game of Thrones* I further conclude that the creators of the show have given into the wants of the fans. Fans, through the use of toxic fandom and being anonymous of the internet have bullied show creators into feeling that their ideas alone were not good enough. This observation leads me to believe that creative producers have started to lose ownership over the own creative works and do not feel creative freedom to make the choices they want due to the wants and needs of fans.

Harry Potter

Phase 1: The origin Story

In an excerpt from the book *The Creative Curve: How to Develop the Right Idea, at the Right Time* by Allen Gannett he writes about how the idea of *Harry Potter* was created as told by the author herself J.K Rowling. Rowling spoke to the New York Times and said that in the year 1990 she was stuck on a train that was delayed from Manchester to London. She therefore came to the realization that she wasn't actually going to reach London at the time she estimated for arrival. Her mind started to wander and she dreamt up the incredible idea that would one day be the phenomenon that is Harry Potter (Gannet,2018). "It was the most incredible feeling… out of nowhere, it just fell from above." (Gannet,2018).

"I could see Harry very clearly; this scrawny little boy, and it was the most physical rush of excitement. I've never felt that excited about anything to do with writing. I've never had an idea that gave me such a physical response." She continued by saying "By the end of that train journey I knew it was going to be a seven-book series. I know that's extraordinarily arrogant for somebody who had never been published but that's how it came to me." (Gannet,2018) Rowling spent the next five years engaged in creative iterations, developing the plots of all seven books, and writing the first book (Gannet,2018).

Looking specifically at what makes a good story and the four elements that it entails according to Robert Dickman we will now analyse the story of *Harry Potter* according to this framework in order to establish if the origin story is actually a good story.

Passion: It goes without saying that the audience and fandom of the *Harry Potter* series is passionate about the story that has been created by J.K Rowling. From the beginning of the story where the audience is told that Harry is mistreated by his family and lives under the staircase to the first time Harry finds out that he is a wizard rom Hagrid the audience's interest has been piqued and intrigued by the magical world and the story told by J.K Rowling.

Hero: In this story written by J.K Rowling she has created a character in which many of the audience members can resonate and root for throughout the story, although he seems to always get out of trouble the audience is always rooting for his success. We all want Harry to succeed, and we want him to be happy because he has already been through too much and therefore the audience becomes invested in his character and point of view. We are told the story directly from Harry's point of view and therefore never stray away from what needs to be done in order for him to succeed.

Antagonist: Throughout the films and books there are countless challenges that Harry faces when it comes to specifically Voldemort, the audience is always invested, and they accept the task to go along with Harry as he fulfils the challenge of ridding the world rom Voldemort and dark magic.

Transformation: With fans being invested in their own respective houses taking the Pottermore which has recently been renamed the Wizarding World, website quiz to find out which house they would be a part of, finding out their Petronus and what core their wand would have (Wizarding World, u.d). These outside activities that fans engage with in their everyday lives show that the impact of The *Harry Potter* world has had on them in the real world. I therefore hypothesize that Harry Potter has been transformative in the lives of its fans and has transcended fictional worlds into reality for many fans.

Phase 2: The story starts to gain an audience.

According to Box Office Mojo by IMDbPro these are the lifetime Gross figures that each film in the Harry potter franchise has made to date.

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone(2001) made $317,575,550; Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets(2002) made $261,988,482; Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban(2004) made $249,541,069; Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (2005) made $290,013,036; Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix (2007) made $292,004,738; Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince (2009) made $301,959,197; Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1 (2010) made $295,983,305 and Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2 (2011) made $381,011,219

(Box Office Mojo,2022).

According to a recent article by Wradmin published in 2021, Table 4 below shows the recorded number of book sales made by each novel (Wradmin, 2021).

Book Name	Estimated number sold worldwide
Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone	120 million
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets	77 million
Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban	65 million
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	65 million
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix	65 million
Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince	65 million
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows	65 million

Table 4: recorded number of book sales made by each novel

When looking at these statistics it can clearly be seen that the *Harry Potter* fandom is well established due to the entirety of the franchise spanning of multiple years. The series continued to have viewers which increased over time as the last film of the franchise seems to have the highest lifetime grossing value. It is however important to point out that for the purpose of this research I am referring directly to the *Harry Potter* book series and the *Harry Potter* films and not the spin-off based in the wizarding world J.K Rowling has created.

Phase 3: Fandom is Established

The fandom still continues to grow even years after the publication of the last book as well as the release of the last film instalment of the *Harry Potter* film series. One should also consider the World of *Fantastic Beasts* and the *Cursed Child* when referring to the expanding *Harry Potter* world even though they aren't explored in this research in complete detail, they still exist and show how *Harry Potter* as a franchise continues to grow. The "potter verse' still seems to be expanding." It keeps being revisited, expanded, and at least partially reinterpreted by different agents, who are endowed with varying degrees of authority, including fans, scholars, people who work for the franchise in different capacities, and, of course, J.K. Rowling herself." (Gymnich, Burkhard and Birk, 2017). With the use of places such as fanfiction.net and Pottermore, fans continue to be engaged with the wizarding world o Harry Potter and therefore a fandom was strongly established by the creative producers of this series of novels and films.

Phase 4: Fan Theories

Now looking at the three types of fan theories as theorized by José Manuel de Amo and Anastasio García-Roca I will use analyse three well known theories by fan in each category.

- Predictive Theory

It was speculated by the many fans of *Harry Potter* that the only way to end Voldemort would be the death of Harry Potter himself or the likes of one of his friends (Manuel de Amo and Garcia-Roca,2021).

There were also a number of relationships or what we know as "ships" whereby fans speculated about them in the J.K Rowling wizarding world (Manuel de Amo and García-Roca,2021).

- Explanatory Theory

It was theorized that Dumbledore represented 'death' in the fable of the *Three Brothers.* This theory was later confirmed by the author herself on social networks (Rowling,2015).

- Alternative Theory

It was theorized by a reddit user named Ronin_Ikari 6 years ago that the whole of Hogwarts is actually a mental health institute in that Harry himself was admitted to. In this farfetched theory the whole Harry Potter sage was seen as just a figment of Harry's imagination (Ronin_Ikari,2016).



In an instance whereby the author J.K Rowling herself intervened (Rowling,2015) in 2003 Knight2King had theorized that Ron Weasley and Albus Dumbledore were in fact the same person and that he had used a Time-Turner to travel back in time to end Voldemort (Knight2King,2004). Figure 4.1.3 below shows J.K Rowlings response to fans continuing to convince themselves of the theory.

Figure 4.1.3: J.K Rowling denies fan theory about Ron and Dumbledore being the same person available at: J.K. Rowling on Twitter: "False theory. https://t.co/c89Erq9hnD" / Twitter .

The Wizarding world of *Harry Potter* is filled with theories that fall into each one of these three categories; I therefore hypothesize that the fans have tried to lay claim to a creative producers work by believing that their theories are better than what actually happened in the canonical universe even if they are disproved by the creative producer.

Once again, I will now be looking at the various pairings also known as "ships" that were theorised by fans in the *Harry Potter* universe. According to Catherine Tosenberger in an article called *Homosexuality at the Online Hogwarts: Harry Potter Slash Fanfiction*[15] she looks at fictional relationships between Harry and Draco and Dumbledore and Grindelwald (Tosenberger,2008).

When looking at the relationship of Draco and Harry, or the "shipping" of Draco and Harry contextualized by fans. Harry Potter and Draco are seen as the most prominent slash[16] fanfiction pairing but become problematic for some fans because they are seen as sworn enemies, this however did not stray fans from continuously writing fanfiction about the two characters (Tosenberger,2008, p.192).[17]

the latest instalment of *Fantastic Beasts: Secrets of Dumbledore* (2022) where Dumbledore tells Grindelwald that he was in love with him.

I further state that this was done as a fan service to the slash fans of *Harry Potter* due to the fact that previously there were only heteronormative relationships that were portrayed in the films and books as stated by Catherine Tosenberg (Tosenberg,2008).

Phase 5: Author gives in

Looking specifically at the 'Dumbledore as Death' theory it was theorised that in the fable of the Three Brothers[18] Dumbledore himself was actually death.

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[15] According to Ika Willis in an article called *Writing the Fables of Sexual Difference: Slash Fiction as Technology of Gender* slash fiction is defined as a sub-genre of fanfiction which is written by fans and is set in pre-existing fictional universes. She goes on to say that slash fiction can be defined as fiction that is written by women and man on man sexual or romantic relations amongst characters of fictional universes (Willis, 2016, 291).
[16] Slash Fiction is also elaborated on by Catherine Tosenberger as she defines it to be "fan writing concerned with same-sex romance." (Tosenberger,2008,p.185)

[17] A number of slash stories and pairings are based on fans' claims that there is subtext in the canon. Rowling would agree in the example of Albus Dumbledore's friendship with his boyhood friend-turned-enemy Gellert Grindelwald. Three months after the release of Deathly Hallows, she verified the rumours of many slash fans, revealing that Dumbledore was gay and had loved Grindelwald in response to a fan's enquiry (Tosenberg,2008, p.187). Rowling was quoted saying "I think a child will see a friendship and I think a sensitive adult may well understand that it was an infatuation" (Tosenberger,2008, p.187). Although she has said to go back on this, the theory was still proven in *Fantastic Beasts: Secrets of Dumbledore* (2022).
[18] The fable is about Death having afforded each brother with a gift. The first of the brothers chooses the sorcerer's stone which is a magical item that can bring the dead back to life, the lesson that can be learnt from

It was theorised by fans that Voldemort is the eldest brother, Severus Snape is the middle brother, Harry is the youngest brother, and Albus Dumbledore is 'Death' (Jaworski,2015). When asked by fans on twitter what J.K Rowling classed as her favourite fan theories she stated "Dumbledore as death. It's a beautiful theory and it fits." Figure 4.1.4 below shows a screenshot of her tweet where she states to fans that the theory does indeed fit.



Figure 4.1.4: J.K Rowlings tweet to fans confirming Dumbledore as 'Death'. Available at: https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/634666937990152192?lang=en

With this tweet in mind and taking into account that J.K Rowling had never officially mentioned this herself it can safely be seen that fans influenced this theory and she gave in by saying it fits. It can also be seen that she herself wanted to please fans by agreeing. This is a good example again off what is known as ascended fanon, as it was theorised by the fans and later become canon.

As stated by a Meredith Warren in *My OTP: Harry Potter Fanfiction and the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, "a fan reading the canon will also have in mind many of the accepted fanon facts and read those assumptions into the literature seamlessly" (Warren, 2006, 63). She further goes on to say that it is widely known by fanfiction fans that Draco Malfoy was suffering abuse at the hand of his father even though it was never mentioned or alluded to in canon. She goes on to say that a fan that is reading canon will rather have the facts on fanon in mind and therefore seamlessly read those fanon facts into the original literature without even realizing (Warren, 2006, 63). Taking this into consideration, it can be assumed that fans that are aware of widely known fanon assume it to be true in canon and subconsciously take fanon into consideration without it ever being confirmed by

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this brother is that is he decided not to acknowledge death is the past by choosing to resurrect his past lover. The second brother choses the elder wand, which is the most powerful wand to historically exist, therefore the lesson learnt is that he chose to avoid coping with the present form of death and wanted the wand to keep him from dying and to seek revenge on other wizards. Lastly the third brother asked for the cloak of invisibility to cheat death and hide from it as he himself was afraid of his mortality (Rea and Sterling,2014).

the creative producers. With this being said it can be hypothesized that fans have the power to influence other fans perspectives on the real story through things such as widely known fanfiction (the instance of Malfoys abuse by his father). Therefore, fans have started to control the story in the sense that their theories have become canon in the fandom and creative producers never had a say in the matter, it was just accepted.

Both the books and the movies of the *Harry Potter* saga are known to have many Easter Eggs hidden for fans. In an article written by Danny Salemme regarding this he refers to an Easter Egg placed in the Harry Potter series can be found in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001) and is also one of Harry's first encounters with magic. On his train ride to Hogwarts Harry has a magical experience with a chocolate frog that contains a trading card, the frog can move but the frog also gives readers as well as watchers an introduction to Gellert Grindelwald, who could be known as one of the wizarding world's main villains second to Lord Voldemort (Salemme, 2017). The Magic chocolate frog comes with this magic trading card and this is where the viewers see Gellert Grindelwald's name for the first time. The Trading card is dedicated to Albus Dumbledore but makes reference to Grindelwald. This can be seen as a forshadowment to *Fantastic Beasts* where Grindelwald is more relevant.

In an article by Eoghan Cannon the continuous fan service given to fans by J.K Rowling is addressed. "Revealing information about characters *after* the original franchise has ended seems like a bit of a cop out" says Cannon referring specifically to Dumbledores character being gay which was revealed after the release of the books and the movies. It was never mentioned before and therefore fans seem to believe that J.K Rowling did this as a fan service (Cannon, 2019). I therefore hypothesize that J.K Rowling did in-fact agree with the fans only to satisfy them, she did not feel the need to justify her reasoning or give more information about Dumbledores sexuality before fans started to question it and I do believe that if fans didn't come up with this theory she would have never felt the need to address it later on in the *Fantastic Beasts* world.

Another fan service was the appearance of Professor Minerva McGonagall as a then young teacher at Hogwarts in the film *Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald* (2018). Fans have calculated that McGonagall shouldn't have appeared in the film as she was born in 1935, the film however was set in the year 1927 (Cannon, 2019).

In the case of *Harry Potter*, it can be seen that fan services can be done completely wrong, in this instance the creative producers wanted to please their fans so badly that they didn't stick to accuracy in the *Harry Potter* worlds timeline. Due to this careless mistake fans started to question the timeline of *Harry Potter* and certain scenes may have started to feel forced.

Phase 6: Author no longer owns story.

The author has given in to fan theories that weren't originally canon and therefore passed over a sense of ownership to the *Harry Potter* fandom, this was previously seen in regard to her tweets regarding dumbledore as death and to her confirming Dumbledore sexuality. There have also been instances whereby the creative producers have also messed up their timelines unintentionally by performing fan services for the sake of the fans but in turn lost authenticity to the story and therefore their own world that they created. It should also be considered that J.K Rowling has received multiple instances of fan backlash due to her hateful comments on social media to the point where fans have said that they love the franchise but hate the creator. I hypothesize that for these reasons many fans believe that their opinions are far better than J.K Rowling and they do not want to leave their beloved *Harry Potter* world in her hands, therefore they create their ow theories and often at times completely go against what the creators have given them.

In the case of *Harry Potter* the appropriation of the source material by the fans in itself does not completely fall into the act of toxic fandom. Some of these acts of fans are done solely out of enjoyment and love for the creators producers work. In saying this though, the appropriation in itself can be looked at as the fans taking away the ownership of the creative producers due to the fact that they have created fanfiction worlds where their thoughts and words can in same cases be more important or have taken over canon completely. A pure example of appropriation by fans can be seen in the Lexicon whereby an idea that was not created by a fan was being taken over by them without the rights from the author. I argue then that although fan practises in The *Harry Potter* fandom may not seem negative or malicious, fans are still taking over a story that does not belong to them.

Rick and Morty

Phase 1: The Origin Story

In an interview with Las Angeles Times in 2014 Justin Roiland and Dan Harmon recall the inspiration behind *Rick and Morty*. Roiland starts off by saying that the answer lies in Channel 101, a short film festival which was the brainchild of Harmon. He goes on to say that he loved to send animated features that were extremely short to mess with the audience of the film festival (Floorwalker,2019).

The original concept was just me screwing around," Roiland said. "I would go through phases in my involvement with Channel 101 where I would make stuff that was kind of intended to just shock

people — a lot of screaming and people covering their eyes, groaning. This was one of those things. It started just for me, doing these two voices, really bad impressions of Doc and Marty from Back to the Future (Harmon and Roiland, 2014).

Roiland then went on to creating the animation short called *The Real Animated Adventures of Doc and Mharti* which later seemed to be the precursor for the character design and influence behind *Rick and Morty*. Roiland admitted that he started to get extremely attached to the concept and hoped that Channel 101 would take to the content (Floorwalker,2019)."That's the beginning of it. And me sort of falling in love with it over the short period of time I made it... by the time I was finished, I really had grown to like it. I was hoping the audience would [as well]. I had very little hope that they would because of the content, but I really did have this energy to continue telling stories with these two guys."(Harmon and Roiland,2014). Roland had to wait for fellow creator Dan Harmon though who had wanted to approach Adult Swim about creating an animated series. "I knew I wanted to work with Justin if I was going to work at Adult Swim because, the truth is, my sensibilities left to their own devices are pretty bad," Harmon told the Times (Harmon and Roiland,2014). He said that when he approached Roiland about the concept he immediately went back to the idea of *Doc and Mharti* which would become what we know as *Rick and Morty* (Floorwalker,2019).

Passion: “Rick and Morty has become immensely popular in recent years and now enjoys cult status thanks to its dedicated fan base” (Koltun,2018). The show was even able to bring the old McDonalds Szechuan sauce which was discontinued but after Rick claimed to have loved it (O’Meara and Bevan,2018). The passion can be clearly shown by the fans of the show here.

Hero: There can be seen to be two heroes in the Rick and Morty series, by which the show is named after. The target audience are willing to accept both the view of Rick and that of Morty as they feel that they can resonate with both and due to both of the characters interesting storylines which cross over in very episode. Although one would not consider Rick to be the typical Hero due to his horrible character traits and views on the world, I hypothesize that the fans see him as a hero like character as the show is solely based on his and his grandson’s adventures. Therefore, I believe that fans resonate with him in hope that he will make the right decisions down the line.

Antagonist: Looking specifically at Rick and the choices he makes the audience may not necessarily agree with his decisions but always seem to back him up, for example his treatment of Jerry, who is his son in law and Morty’s father, throughout the animated series may seem harsh to some viewers but they understand where Rick’s frustration stems from.

Transformation: Take into consideration the McDonalds infamous Szechuan sauce and the way in which fans reacted to it. According to Suzanne Scott in *Food poisoning. Eating Fandom: Intersections Between Fans and Food Cultures* after Rick mentions the sauce in the series McDonalds re-released it for fans but unfortunately underestimated the fan demand (Scott, 2020). Empty handed *Rick and Morty* fans then took their frustration out on McDonalds directly by the sue of corporate phonelines as-well as social media accounts. Many fans even went to the extent of in person interactions with McDonalds staff at certain locations where the franchise were based (Scott, 2020).[19]It can be seen here that the story may not have actually impacted the lives of the audience, but it has most definitely transformed their lives in the sense that they started to portray disruptive behaviour in the real world which I argue can be seen as an act of toxic fandom.

Phase 2: Story starts to gain and audience.

Looking at the Rotten tomatoes[20] website it ranked each season of *Rick and Morty* in terms of critic ratings and in terms of audience ratings. Season One was rated 8.2/10 by critics and given 4.7/5 by viewers. Season 2 was given 7,8/10 by critic and stayed on 4.7/5 by viewers. Season 3 was given 8,95/10 by critics and 4,6/5 by viewers. Season 4 was given 8,7/10 by critics and 4,2/5 by viewers. Season 5 was given 8,1/10 by critics and 3.1/5 by viewers (Rotten Tomatoes,2013-2021).

What is interesting to see here is that *Rick and Morty* is the one case study that is known to not give into any fan theories and rather rebukes the idea of them, could this say why the fanbase seems to decrease over the course of the series existence as a whole. Have the creative producers lost viewers and ratings due to the fact that they don't actually give the fans what they expect or want?

Phase 3: Fandom is established.

According to Juan Velasquez in an article written to MovieWeb he says that since the debut of *Rick and Morty* in 2013, they have had a very dedicated fanbase which consisted of many highly opinionated males including the likes of Kanye West (Velasquez,2022). Kanye West as stated previously, a highly opinionated male, shows the misogyny that lies within the *Rick and Morty* fandom and how the male fans feel entitled to the show. The show started off targeting a very niche

[19] These person interactions are referring to the infamous video footage of a fan disrupting a McDonalds and screaming "I Am Pickle Rick" at the frustration of there not being enough Szechuan sauce which is available at : RICK AND MORTY MCDONALD'S SZECHUAN SAUCE FREAKOUT!!!! (ORIGINAL VIDEO) - YouTube

[20] Rotten Tomatoes and the Tomatometer score are one of the world's most trusted recommendation resources for quality entertainment. They are seen as a leading online aggregator of movie and television show reviews from critics in order provide viewers off what is good to watch and what is not (Rottentomatoes.com)

audience that was curious about *Rick and Morty* because they were watching other adult animations like *Family Guy* but it quickly grew to become a cultural phenomenon (Velaquez,2022). Velasquez goes on to say why the show has so many viewers and why people find it so interesting with four main reasons: World Building, Complex and Interesting Characters, Dark, Crass and Absurd Humour and lastly Philosophical Contemplations (Valesquez,2022). Looking more closely at these three aspects lets delve deeper into them to see why *Rick and Morty* has such a high appeal with regards to these categories.

- World Building

"Justin Roiland and Dan Harmon haven't just made a TV show, they've created a whole metaverse of characters, cities, galaxies, and alternative realities." (Velasquez,2022). Due to the shows universe and the way the characters go on vast adventures throughout the universe, this enables the animated series to allow the main characters to go on outrageous adventures where they are able to meet countless amounts of outrageous creatures. They are able to visit other worldly planets that have absurd resources and they are even able to meet alternate versions of themselves (Velasquez,2022).

- Complex and Interesting Characters

Even though *Rick and Morty* is known to have crazy, unpredictable plotlines, it is brought back down to earth with is complex characters. "Rick and Morty are wholly human characters with clear strengths and flaws, hurdles to overcome, and lessons to learn." (Velasquez,2022). Many people have fallen in love with the characters of *Rick and Morty* despite their flaws, this could be in relation to the way in which fandoms develop to have a sense of community as theorized by Henry Jenkins when speaking upon Participatory culture (Jenkin,1992). Fans like the fact that they can relate to the characters of their chosen fandom and maybe the fact that Rick is flawed like so many of us contributes to the large fan base of *Rick and Morty*. According to Karen E. Dill-Shackleford, Cynthia Vinney ,Kristin Hopper-Losenicky in *Connecting the dots between fantasy and reality: The social psychology of our engagement with fictional narrative and its functional value*, the more an individual lets go of his or herself when engaging with a narrative, the more one slides into becoming the character in the story, thus they share in the fictional persons experiences. This use of experience taking goes even deeper than identifying with the character whereby ones feels like the character is "like-me" but also that the character shares the same feelings, goals, traits, and emotions as them (Dill-Shackleford, Vinney and Hopper-Losenicky, 2016).

- Dark, Crass and Absurd Humour

“The Rick and Morty writers have developed a signature sense of humour that combines the absurdity of its plotlines with quick one-liners from jaded Rick, hilarious breakdowns from the anxious Morty, running gags from extra-terrestrial characters, gross but funny violence, and ridiculous situations that one cannot help but simply laugh at.” (Velasquez,2022). The creators of the show are not afraid to joke about anything as they are known to make risqué jokes about taboo subjects such as sex, identity, existential crisis, addiction, and death (Velasquez,2022).

- Philosophical contemplations

"Nobody exists on purpose, nobody belongs anywhere, everybody's gonna die. Come watch TV." This statement is said by Marty to his sister Summer in episode 2 of season 1 (‘Rixty Minutes’,2014). The infamous line made by Morty shows the shows philosophical contemplations and why so many people are drawn to it and appealed by its characters and messages. “The show reflects a society riddled with alienation and anxiety, and while it may not offer any solutions or happy endings, it is always good medicine to laugh at the things that usually make us cry” (Velasquez,2022).

According to Julia Alexander in an article called *Rick and Morty breaks Adult Swim record, including 11 million viewers on April Fools,* back in the year 2017 Adult Swim announced that Rick and Morty’s third season was the most watched show in Adult Swim history (Alexander,2017). When the fourth season of *Rick and Morty* aired it had an audience of 2.33 million people and that was besides the digital viewers that would come after the premier date (Porter,2019).

Phase 4: Fan Theories:

- Predictive Theory

One fan Theory is that Rick knows that he is actually on television, fans believe this theory to be true due to the fact that Rick has broken the fourth wall many times where he actually talks to the audience of the show directly (Norris,2020).[21]

Figure 4.1.5 below shows a screenshot from the episode 1 season one where Rick screams Roll credits to announce the end of season 1 episode 11

[21] In a YouTube video called *Top 10 Times Rick and Morty Broke the 4th Wall* by WatchMojo, the channels creators showed their favourite instance of ten times that the show Rick and Morty has broken the fourth wall and spoken directly to its audience. The YouTube video is available at: Top 10 Times Rick and Morty Broke the 4th Wall - YouTube



Figure 4.1.5: Rick breaks the fourth wall.

- Explanatory Theory

This theory suggests that C-137's[22] original Morty was Evil Morty. This theory is based on evidence from season 1 episode 10. One of Rick's memories contains an image of him holding a baby Morty, despite this Rick having been absent from the family for 20 years. Since C-137 Morty is only 14, it would mean that Rick was present in the life of a different Morty before abandoning him, thus turning him evil according to fans of the show (Norris,2020).

The chances of this theory coming true are extremely high according to an article for Inverse called *8 'RICK AND MORTY' FAN THEORIES YOU SHOULD KNOW*, by Corey Plante who says that it is simple math, "If Rick has memories of Morty as a baby and even picture holding him, then how else could the timeline be reconciled? Evil Morty might have nothing to do with it but expect more Morty's to factor into the mix." (Plante,2017).

Figure 4.1.6 below shows the picture of Rick holding baby Morty available at:https://www.reddit.com/r/rickandmorty/comments/ppuboo/what_about_baby_morty/

[22] In an article by Caitlin Busch called *WHY RICK C-137 IS THE RICKEST RICK ON 'RICK AND MORTY'*, she writes that Dimension C-137 is the dimension in which the television show of Rick and Morty takes place. There are many other dimensions named differently and this is why there are a countless number of Ricks and countless number of Morty's in the television series. It is said that the Rick of dimension C137 is the 'Rickest Rick' of them all and it was theorized that Morty of Dimension C137 is the evil Morty portrayed in the TV series (Busch, 2017).



Figure 4.1.6: Rick holding baby Morty.

- Alternative Theory

Another fan theory that arose after the release of "M. Night Shaym-Aliens" of season 2 aired and it was theorised by fans that Rick and Jerry never ever left the simulation. It was believed that they would exit the simulation somewhere in season three but that never happened and many believe the theory has therefore been debunked as there wasn't enough evidence to show that they were in a simulation after the episode (Norris,2020).

One outlandish theory comes from reddit user czloedraikc who suggests that Ricks wife is actually Ms. Frizzle from the Magic School Bus which is a children's television show. The only evidence that this reddit user was able to provide was that Ms. Fizzle and Summer both share the same red hair colour (Norris,2020). Here is an instance of fans using the term shipping, placing unwanted relationships onto the creative producers. They are using the mere fact of two characters having the same hair colour as a sort of genetic link, even though these said characters do not even exist in the

same fictional universe. I therefore hypothesize that fans will always find a way to romanticise unlikely relationships if they themselves find them appealing with blatant disregard to the creative producers wishes.

Phase 5: Author Gives In

From the previous discussions of *Rick and Morty* throughout this research paper it can be seen that the writers Dan Harmon and Justin Roiland are not exactly the biggest fans of Fan Theories. They have been known to poke fun at fan theories throughout their episodes and we will look at examples of this below.

In episode 6 of season 4 "Never Ricking Morty" fans of the show had theorised that Evil Morty was creating an army, this was shown later in the ending of the episode whereby our Rick and Morty encounter Evil Morty's army. The entire episode takes place on a train that Morty had bought which we find out at the end of the episode and therefore everything that happened on the train was not a canon but rather the writer's poking fun at fan theories (Suarez, 2021).

The larger message of the "Never Ricking Morty"[23] episode was intended to make fun of fan theories. The episode itself delved into the fans that try to pick apart episodes and preview trailers. The episode alluded to this idea by making comments such as Morty telling Rick that's things are getting "too meta" and Rick responding with "If you don't want to be meta, stop deconstructing shit." (Suarez, 2021).

An example of the creators directly debunking fan theories on twitter can be seen below whereby Justin Roiland responds to a fan theory with the tweet "Is jussa cartoon dawg". By replying with this comment, he shows fans that they read way too much into the show and once again they should just watch and enjoy. Figure 4.1.7 below shows Justin Roilands response mentioned above.

[23] In the episode the train had several cars is which a fan theory was addressed as they moved from one to the other. Every car of the train therefore addressed how fans have the tendency to dig into things too much. For example, there was a car dedicated specifically to the reasons as to why people in the *Rick and Morty* universe want to kill and destroy Rick. There was one filled with women who have dated Rick and there was one that was dedicated solely to debate which musical moments of *Rick and Morty* were most memorable (Suarez,2021). "Their final battle with the Story Lord teaches viewers about story burnout from doing too much anthology. The main takeaway? Just relax and enjoy the story" (Suarez,2021). This shows that the creators are blatantly asking fans to stop theorizing and just to watch and enjoy.



Figure 4.1.7: Justin Roilands response to a fan theory available at: https://twitter.com/justinroiland/status/893157635029032960

One Easter Egg worth mentioning is the sort of cross over that is o Rick and Morty and Gravity Falls. Although characters don't' necessarily cross over into each-others respective universe, Gruncle Stan, who is a character of Gravity Falls, can be found when they pop out a portal that Rick has opened with his portal gun. The items are very specific namely a notebook, a pen and a yellow mug with a "?" on it. This homage is one of Justin Roiland's shout-outs to other friends and co-workers in multimedia, one of them being Alex Hirsch, creator of Disney XD's Gravity Falls (Brackett,2019). This sense of a cross-over can be seen as a fan service for people who have theorized that both the Gravity Fall and the Rick and Morty universe are linked in some sort of way.

Phase 6: Author no longer owns story.

Although it can be seen that many fan theories are debunked by the writers of the show as seen above, they have also confirmed certain theories which may be to keep fans quiet and so that they can stop looking too deep into things.

An example of this can be seen in "The Wedding Squanchers" season finale and what can be taken as canon happenings of season 3, Rick and Morty addressed two fan concerns with only one line by Beth as she tells Rick: "You can't talk to Jerry like that anymore. We're a real family now. In many ways, things will be like season 1, but more streamlined." (Suarez,2021). By saying this in the show the writers have now officially confirmed the theory of fans that the characters on the show know that their lives take place on a television show and they also address that too many of the fans are known to be obsessed with the first season of the show because it seemed to have a more plot heavy based season unlike season 2 and 3 (Suarez,2021).

A very anticipated theory by fans that was addressed was Ricks long awaited backstory. Ricks back story was originally teased in the episode “The Rickshank Redemption” whereby many of Ricks back story theories were addressed. Beths mother was absent from any of seasons 1 and 2 and therefore fans had theorized that Rick and Beths mother were either divorced or she was in fact dead. Rick then goes on to show a memory of another version of himself blowing both Beth and her mother up to federation agents he goes on to imply that this memory was a lie (Suarez,2021).

Many fans toyed with alternate theories or argued that the memory was partially true. It turned out, however, that the story did have some form truth to it, and our original Rick’s wife and Beth were actually murdered. Rick makes a meta-statement about the many theories after Morty sees the memory, stating, "Now everyone can shut up about it."(Suarez,2021)

With that final statement “Now everyone can shut up about it.” I argue that although the writers say that they will not give into fan theories they inevitably feel pressure into doing it so that the fans can just put things to rest and continue with watching the animated series. I then argue that the writers of the show have had their original plans for their story stripped away due to the toxic fans of *Rick and Morty* forcing them to provide fan services. Fans of *Rick and Morty* have shown toxic traits through misogynistic fans bashing female writers, overly obsessive fans behaving indecent in public places for a McDonalds sauce and fans bullying the show’s creators online via social media platforms like twitter. Despite toxic fandom practices, Dan Haron and Justin Roiland follow this six-phase theory differently than the other two case studies in the sense that they reject the idea of fan theories but still follow through with them by poking fun at the fans. Could this be that they feel pressure to do so or that they really do want to give into the fan theories. For the purpose of this research paper, I hypothesize that they themselves feel pressure from fans to give them what they want rather than following what the originally planned for the show.

Rick and Morty is known to have an extremely toxic Fandom whereby fans have been misogynistic in wanting non female writers like that of the #Gamergate phenomenon as well as forcing the writers to give into things such as fan theories. Fans have even gone as far as to bashing the creators of the show on twitter. In the tweet below a fan bashing Dan Harmon telling him to go and finish the new Rick and Morty season by using vulgar language as well as reverting to calling him an alcoholic.

His tweet directly reads “Quit wasting time and go finish the next R&M season, you lazy alcoholic. Run the Jewels can get the animator to make a music video but We’re waiting on them for the next season? Nah we’re waiting on you to finish writing it, like that F@%$*n book.” Figure 4.1.8 below shows a screenshot of the verbally abusive fan responding to Dan Harmon’s tweet.

Rick and Morty does not follow suit with *Game of Thrones* and *Harry Potter*, in this instance it can be seen that although many toxic fan practises happen within the fandom of *Rick and Morty* the fans have yet to take over creative ownership.

Figure 4.1.8 below shows a twitter thread of a conversation where a fan attacks Dan Harmon, one of the creators and writers of Rick and Morty.



Figure 4.1.8: Verbally abusive fan responding to Dan Harmon's tweets via twitter. Available at: https://twitter.com/DJWisePariah/status/974705798852104193?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E974705798852104193%7Ctwgr%5E6fe85cbca070509dc3a6dfffbb735bd20078a690%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fmelmagazine.com%2Fen-us%2Fstory%2Frick-and-morty-and-the-rise-of-the-im-a-piece-of-shit-defense-2

Dan Harmon responded directly to the fan on twitter saying "I hear ya, tough spot. On one hand, it can be challenging especially with crippling laziness and alcoholism, to write a show that hasn't been ordered by the network. On the other hand, the thought that fans like you have to pay the price…I mean…I'm gonna grab a drink". Figure 4.1.9 below shows Dan Harmon's response to the abusive fan.



Figure 4.1.9: Dan Harmon's response to the verbally abusive fan.

Note: Dan Harmon's twitter account is currently suspended and therefore this above tweet is unavailable at the moment.

Dan Harmon however replied with a sarcastic comment back to the toxic fan. His comment may have been sarcastic but it still shows an instance where the fandom of *Rick and Morty* display toxic traits. *Rick and Morty* fans have previously been seen to have no boundaries for instance the McDonalds Szechuan sauce incident. If fans do not get exactly what they want they continue to pester the writers of the show to the point where they add an episode that addresses fan theories and although it makes fun of the fans need to read into things one should take into consideration that if the fans did not pressure these fan theories would Dan Harmon and Justin Roiland have actually created the episode in first place or was it a fan service to end the theories completely?

I therefore theorize that Rick and Morty creators are pressured into the ideas of the fans, taking once again into consideration the words of main character Rick Sanchez " Now you can all shut up about it" once again, this very statement inserted into the television show by the creators is Dan Harmon and Justin Roiland actively telling fans to leave theories out of their universe as they will continue to debunk them or make fun of them so that fans can " just shut up about it".

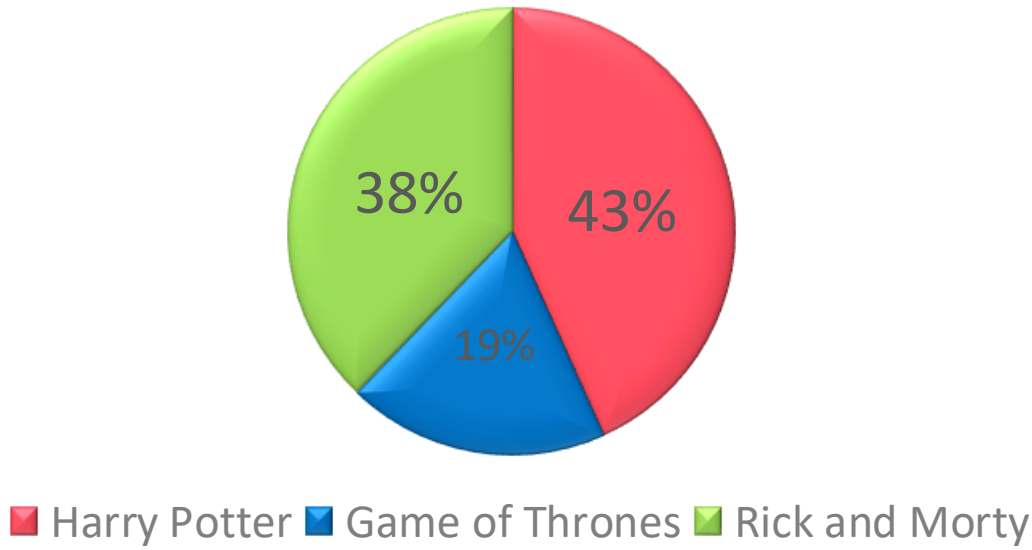
In order to better understand how my theorized 6 phase theory came about I will now refer to the data collected from participants through my surveys that were sent out through the University of Witwatersrand's registrar. This will further establish how fandoms have become toxic and how creative producers have started to lose ownership over their works due to toxicity amongst fandoms with direct answers and opinions of participants that fall part of the three respective fandoms.

Analysis of Survey Data

After my surveys were sent out through the Wits registrar and distributed amongst students, I had accumulated 37 responses. It is important to remember here that participants had a choice between the three fandoms being discussed in this research paper. Of the 37 responses that were acquired, 16 (43,2%) were *Harry Potter*, 14 (37,8%) were *Rick and Morty* and lastly 7 (18,9%) were *Game of Thrones* which are represented below in figure 4.2.1.

Figure 4.2.1: Which Fandom are you a part of?

In the fanfiction section of the Literature Review *Harry Potter* was also ranked as number one in terms of the number of fans that were a part of the fandom. However, what differs in the information that was gathered in this particular study was that the *Rick and Morty* fandom has more members in its fandom than that of *Game of Thrones*. While these statistics are made through the number of fanfictions written about each fandom, it is something that should be taken into consideration because in this particular data collection they are ranked differently as follows : *Harry Potter* is still number one, *Rick and Morty* is number 2 and *Game of Thrones* in ranked number 3.This data is different from the previous data collected in the Literature Review whereby *Harry Potter* was ranked number 1, *Game of Thrones* was ranked number 2 and *Rick and Morty* was ranked number 3 in terms of which fandom is larger.



This is of course in contrast with the information that was previously gathered, I concur that this may be since *Game of Thrones* may have lost fans because of the last season over the years and the

fact that *Rick and Morty* is relatively newer and is still an ongoing series. The petition discussed previously in the Literature Review whereby a Change.org petition gathered more than 1 million signatures to remake Game of Thrones season 8 with competent writers earlier created by fans asking HBO to "Remake Game of Thrones Season 8 with competent writers" (Zatat,2019), was due to the act that fans had disliked the season so immensely. "In the eyes of many viewers, this long-anticipated final season had fallen significantly short of what they had come to expect in terms of storytelling" (Fannery,2019). The reason for the large amount of dislike was accounted for continuously throughout the final season with instances of beloved characters slaughtering other characters or characters being killed off with no warning or foreshadowing whatsoever. There were also unbearably long monologues which should have been swapped out for more carefully thought out and planned plotlines (Fannery,2019). With fans having disliked this finale to the point of creating this online survey I therefore believe that fans may have lost hope and don't consider themselves a part of the fandom anymore, which is in contrast with *Rick and Morty* where there might be a larger number of fans due to the fact that the series hasn't ended yet and hasn't disappointed the fans enough in comparison to *Game of Thrones*. It is important to note once again that the book series created by George RR Martin does exist and therefore fans may feel that the series did not actually live up to the novel series and they are hoping that the final book will end differently to that of the series.

Out of the 37 responses 19 were male and 18 were female. This is almost 50/50 and therefore gives me more of a level playing field when analysing these questionnaires and looking at #GamerGate. In this research paper we can assume that a similar phenomenon happened when looking at the fandom of *Rick and Morty* whereby fans themselves decided that the directors of the show were not good enough purely for the fact that they themselves were female and not the stereotypical white heterosexual male (O'Meara and Bevan,2018). The *Rick and Morty* fandom have built a misogynist reputation for its angry responses from fans regarding the show's efforts to hire a writer's room that gave equal representation to women. *Rick and Morty* trolls then proceeded in harassing a few of the show's female writers through 2017 and went so far as to post their private information online (Barsanti,2017). This is similar to what Erom Gjoni did to his ex-girlfriend when he started spreading personal and also false information about her on the internet during the #GamerGate scandal, this is a breach of privacy. #Gamergate is therefore a phenomenon that is present amongst all fandoms and seems to be prominent in the *Rick and Morty* fandom.

Respondents for the survey ranged between 17 to 40 years old. This demonstrated how, at least in the smaller context of this study, fandoms include people from all age groups.

Table 5 below represents the number of males and females that were a part of each fandom.

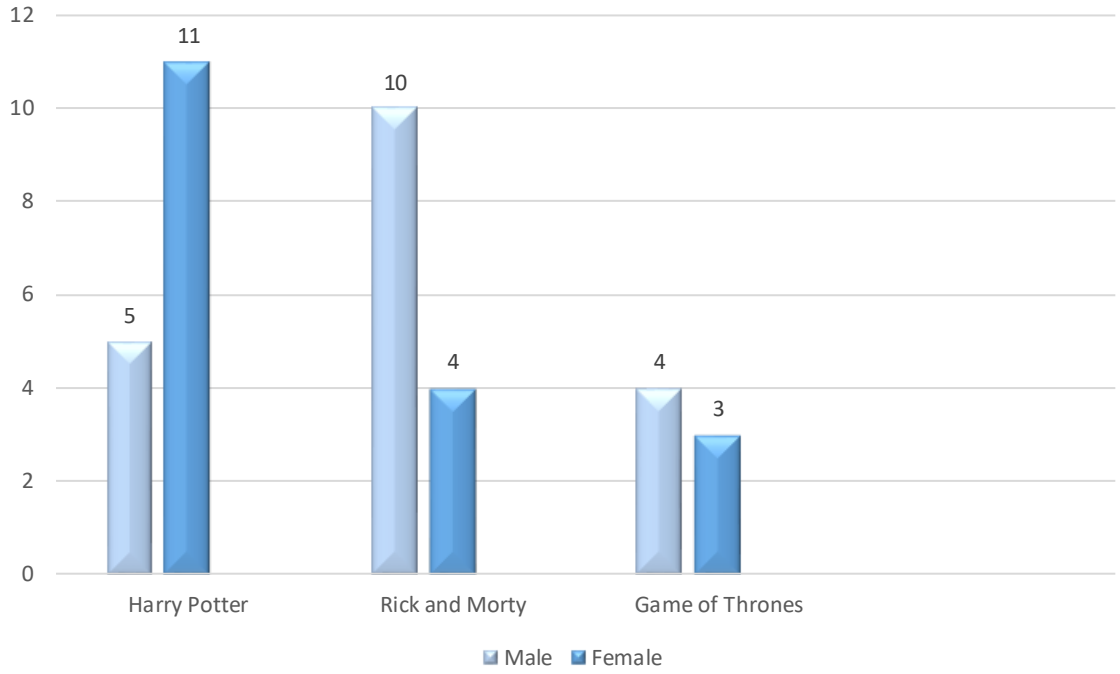


Table 5: Number of Males and Females in each respective fandom.

From the data that was collected from the participants, *Harry Potter* had more female fans with 11 out of 16 fans being female. *Rick and Morty* had more male fans with 10 out of 14 fans being male and *Game of Thrones* had more male fans with four being male and three being female. Due to the misogynistic qualities that are evident in the *Rick and Morty* fandom it isn't surprising that the majority of its fans consist of males because as previously stated, fans have been known to dismiss female writers in the show and therefore it can be assumed that the fandom of *Rick and Morty* has a higher majority of males in comparison to females. This reputation of the fandom of *Rick and Morty* could have discouraged potential female fans from joining the fandom for the sole reason that their opinions may not be taken seriously amongst the misogynistic fandom and this may have also been a cause to us seeing fewer female fans in regard to specifically the *Rick and Morty* fandom.

The participants were then asked whether they believed that fans should have a say in the way in which a show is written, the data is represented below in figure 4.2.2.

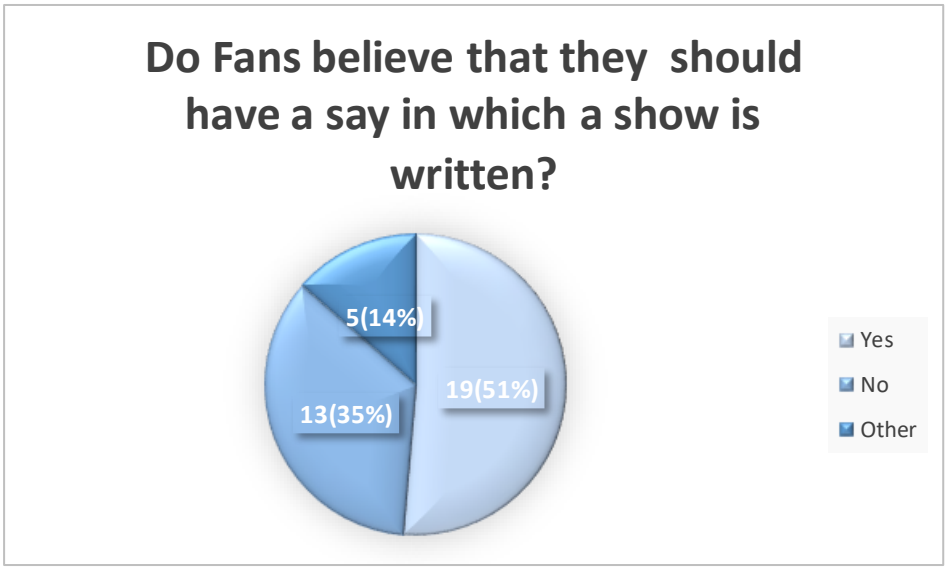


Figure 4.2.2: Do fans believe they should have a say in which a show is written?

In this question it is easy to see that more fans believe that they themselves should actually have an input in the way in which a show is written with 51% of people stating yes and 35,% of people saying no. This answer specifically works in favour of my research question which is trying to show the influence that fans hold over the creation of a show.

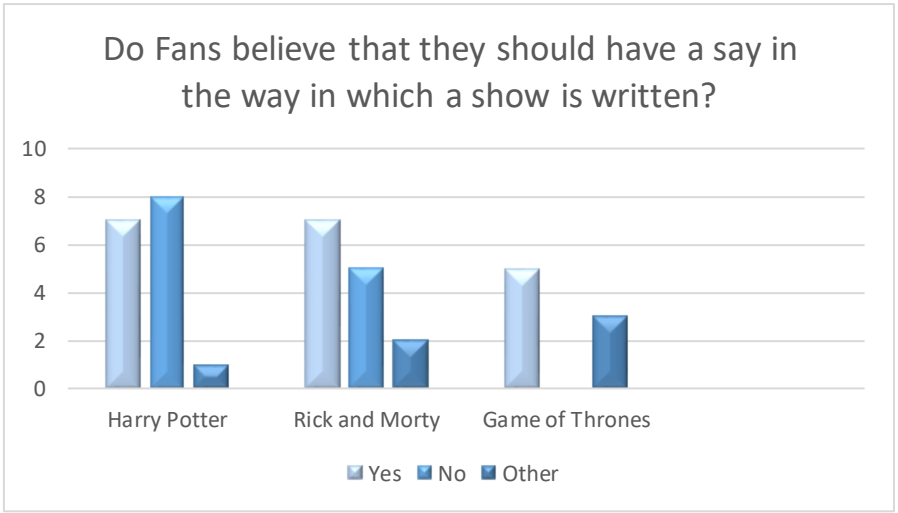
Table 6 below shows the way in which each fandom answered the question respectively.

Table 6: How each fandom believes whether they should have a say in which a show is written

Game of Thrones, which had fans signing petitions for the remake of its final season, is unsurprisingly the only fandom to have zero participants who believe that the fans shouldn't have a say in the way in which a show is written, five of the seven fans believe that they should be included in the show's writing process. This information fits in with the fans' distrust of the creative producer's authority and the disappointment that the show runners have placed on the fans of *Game of Thrones.*

Each fandom had some participants that were more on the fence and gave "Maybe" answers:

One Harry Potter fan stated, "Maybe not how it is written but possibly give input that may be used to improve the show." This



respondent believes that fans can be used as a tool to improve the property rather than destroy it. This is a useful response as we know that many creative producers like J.K Rowling in this case takes

some of the opinions of her fans seriously as she believes it is for the betterment of the Harry Potter Universe.

In the Rick and Morty fandom, two fans stated the following:

Th first fan of *Rick and Morty* stated, “Yeah, but not if it's pushing a political or social agenda at the expense of the story. “This fan speaks specifically to political and social agendas used by fans. This is interesting as well because fans as we have seen throughout this paper like to use fandoms as a place to do this and force their views onto other fans. The second *Rick and Morty* fan stated, “Maybe, as a separate type of series.” This fan may be referring to elements such a fanfiction, fanart and so on whereby fans should be allowed to control what happens in the fandom based on their own opinion.

In the *Game of Thrones* fandom, the two participants who didn’t answer yes to the question had the following to say:

“Yes and no. At the end of the day, the show is the artist’s work. Writers, directors etc. should have creative freedom to express themselves. If the show is determined by the fans entirely, it can become somewhat predictable. However, fan’s opinions should be taken into consideration, to make them feel acknowledged and that the show is for made for them. I believe that Rick & Morty side characters recur based on viewer response, and memes (e.g., Mr. Meeseeks)”. This fan believes that writers should have authority, but fans should be taken into consideration for the purpose of acknowledgement. This is a different approach in comparison to other fans as it draws on the need of participatory culture that was previously mentioned in the literature review. It should also be taken into account that this fan is a *Game of Thrones* fan but decided to speak on the Rick and Morty fandom for this question, this shows that the participant is in fact a fan of both shows and may therefore have differing opinions when it comes to either fandom.

The second *Game of Thrones* fan stated, “It depends on the show and the source material I think.” This fan believes that it actually lies within the source material. This is true as it seems that J.K Rowling is more open to receiving fan input than let’s say the writers of Rick and Morty are.

Fan activities include things such as the creation of fanart, the writing of fanfiction, participating in cosplay, twitter discussions, blogs or even things such participating in online forums where you discuss things about the fandom. Have you ever participated in such fan activities or any that may not have been mentioned which you deem valid? You may list more than one of the above options if you have participated in multiple activities. Figure 4.2.3 below asked participants if they had participated in fan activities.

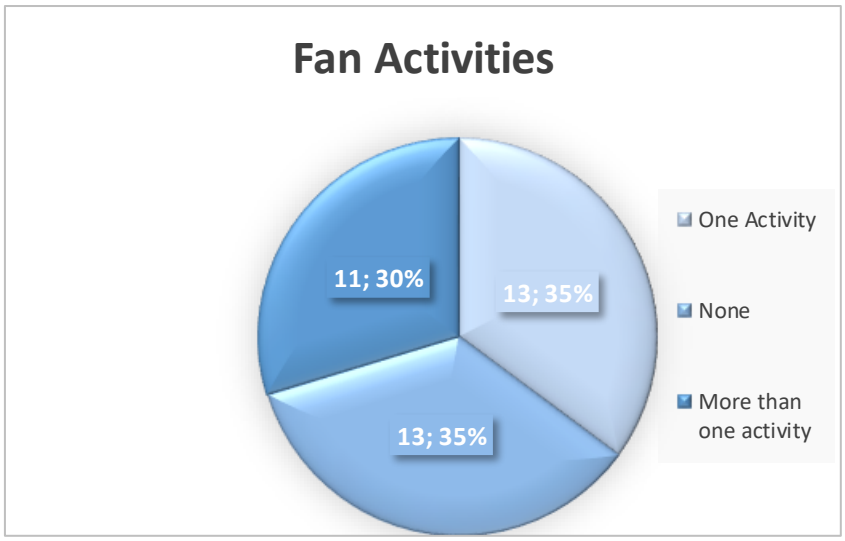


Figure 4.2.3: Fan activity participation

In this question out of the 37 participants, 13 of them have claimed not to have participated in any fan activities. The remaining 24 participants have all participated in fan activities and out of 24 participants, 13 have participated in one fan activity whereby 11 have participated in more than one fan activity.

Participants mentioned numerous activities that they have participated in which they consider to be fan activities such as cosplay, fan discussions, fan art creation, fanfiction reading as well as writing, the sharing of memes and jokes on social media platforms, discussion in forums, the reading of blogs, twitter discussions and playing games based on the respective fandom.[24]

Looking at the Fandoms separately and how they participate in fan activities below in figure 4.2.3.1,4.2.3.2 and 4.2.3.3 as it is useful to see how many participants of each fandom felt the need to partake in the fan activities and go further than just watching the show.

[24] The high participation in fan activities in comparison with the fans that don't participate shows just how important fan activities are. The participation of people in fan communities makes the fans themselves engage better with the content and they feel close to the world of that fandom that they are a part of (Godwin,2018). Therefore, that is why there is a higher number of people who chose to go further than just the source material but rather chose to delve into the fandom with outside activities.

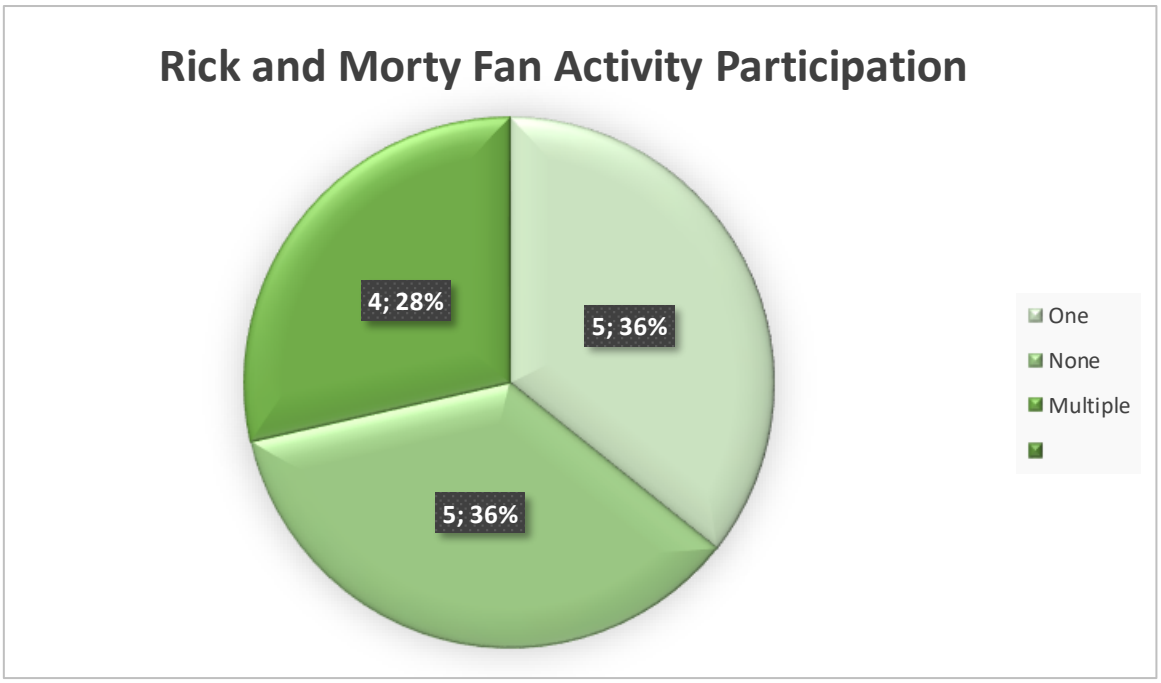


Figure 4.2.3.1: Fan activities in the Rick and Morty fandom.

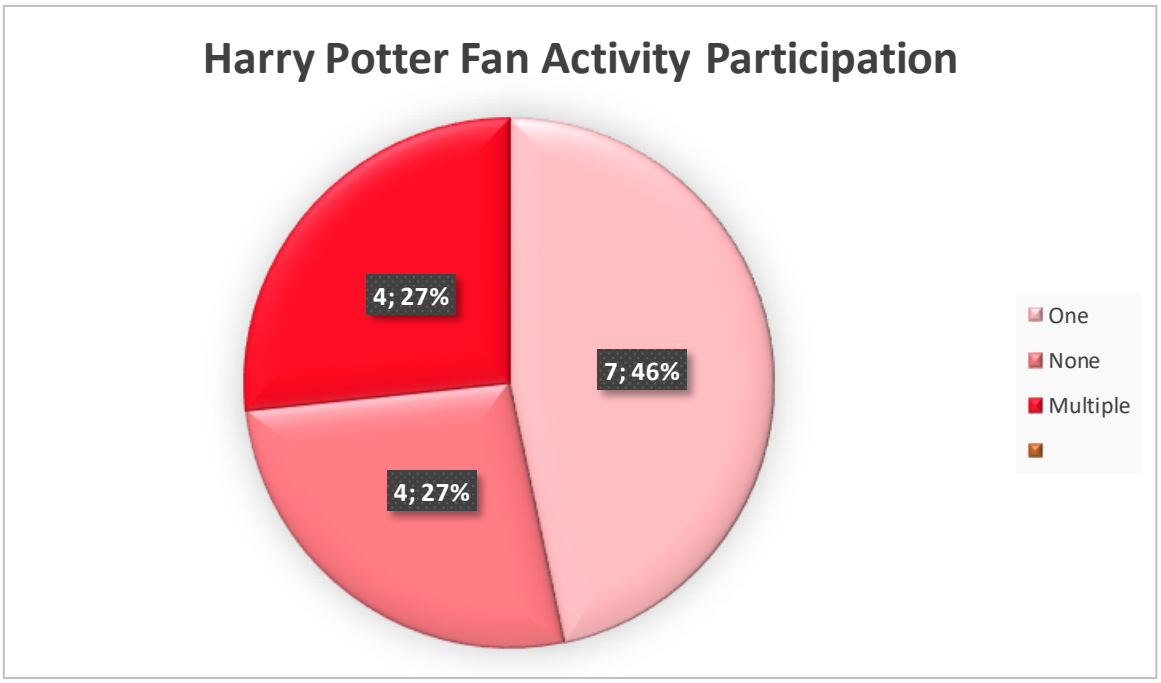


Figure 4.2.3.2: Fan activities in the Harry Potter fandom.

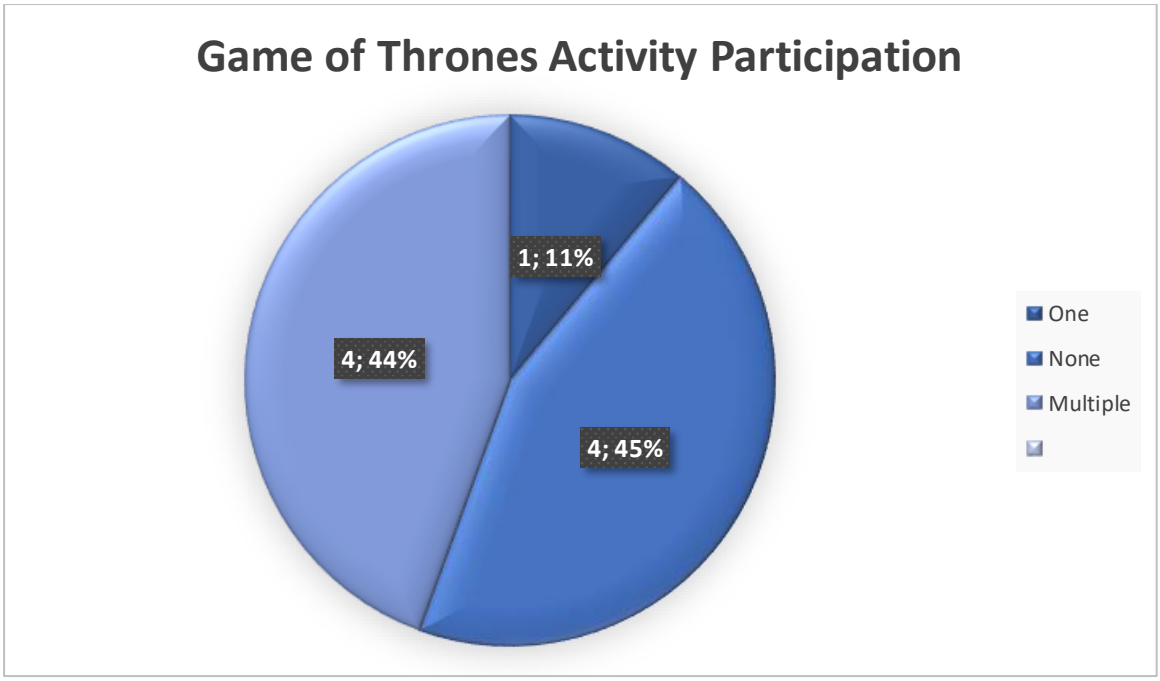


Figure 4.2.3.3: Fan Activities in the Game of Thrones fandom.

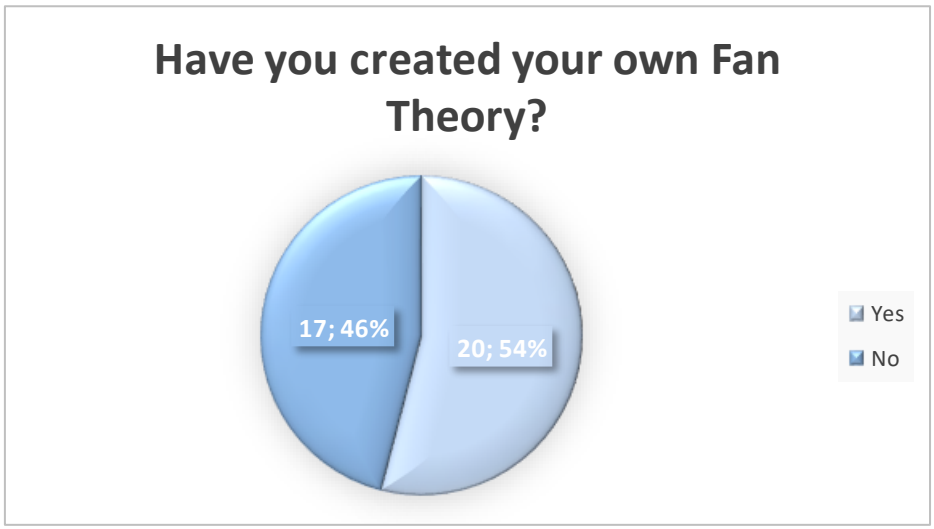
When comparing fan participation in activities fans of *Rick and Morty* and fans of *Harry Potter* have a majority of people that have participated in at least one fan activity. This is in contrast to the participants of the *Game of Thrones* fandom as it can be seen that the majority of fans haven't even participated in at least one activity. This once again leads me to believe that fans were so disappointed in the writing of the show that they wouldn't even participate in activities outside of just watching the television show. This may be a form of active protest amongst the fans or an out right decision to stay away from their respective fandom community.

Fans have been known to produce their own fan theories, they have been known to even believe their theories to be better than that of the creative producers, and so the next question asked participants whether they have in fact created their very own fan theories. The data collected can be seen below in figure 4.2.4.

Figure 4.2.4: Fan created theories.

Out of the 37 responses, more than half of the participants have produced their own fan theory. This further helps to show that fans come up with their own concepts and to some extent take ownership of the creative producers work as they have their own idea of what should take place next or what should've happened. Like it was previously stated in the work of Evangelista, "Fans can also be possessive over their chosen texts, sometimes feeling like they own the texts more than their creators." (Evangelista,2019, p.1-2). It is important to note though that some fans may choose to keep their own theories to themselves and many in this case may not expect their theories to necessarily be incorporated but rather they come up with conspiracies which they hope to be true.

Looking



specifically at each fandom it is useful to see how many participants have created their own fan

theory in each respective fandom as this will indicate which fandom has a higher number of fans that create their own theories as opposed to following canon written by the creative producers themselves. Table 7 below shows how each fandom answered the question separately.

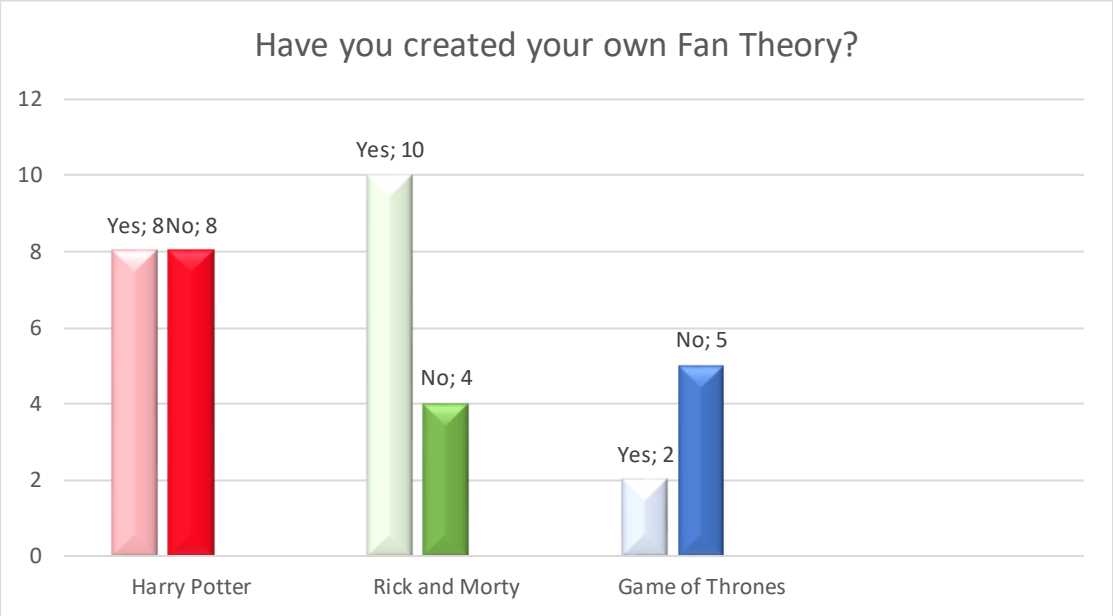


Table 7: Fan theories created amongst separate fandoms

In the *Harry Potter* Fandom, there is an equal amount of yes and no which indicated that the fans both agree with the original stories given to them by the creative producer as well as their own theories, this could be an indication why J.K Rowling confirms and denies on social media platforms with fans i.e., Dumbledore as Death (Jaworski,2015). *Rick and Morty* on the other hand have far more participants that have come up with their own theories, this indicates that the fans, as the show writers have claimed, seem to read more into the story than they should and therefore come up with theories to better understand the intricacy of the *Rick and Morty* plotlines which take place in many different alternating universes as well as timelines.

Intense arguments are common in fandoms where fans battle each other's thoughts. From the information that was gathered from other writers in the field such as Ray Evangelista who discussed the phenomenon of fandoms becoming toxic specifically referring to *Rick and Morty* in *Rick and Morty and Toxic Fandom: Factors Contributing to Toxic Communication in the Online Rick and Morty Fan Community* as discussed in the Literature Review. It is said that *Rick and Morty* fans are known to have a superiority complex whereby if one does not know enough and isn't a super fan they are

seen as less worthy in the fandom (Evangelista,2019, p.4). Taking this into account the data gathered below in figure 4.2.5 shows the ways in which the respective fandoms interact with each other.

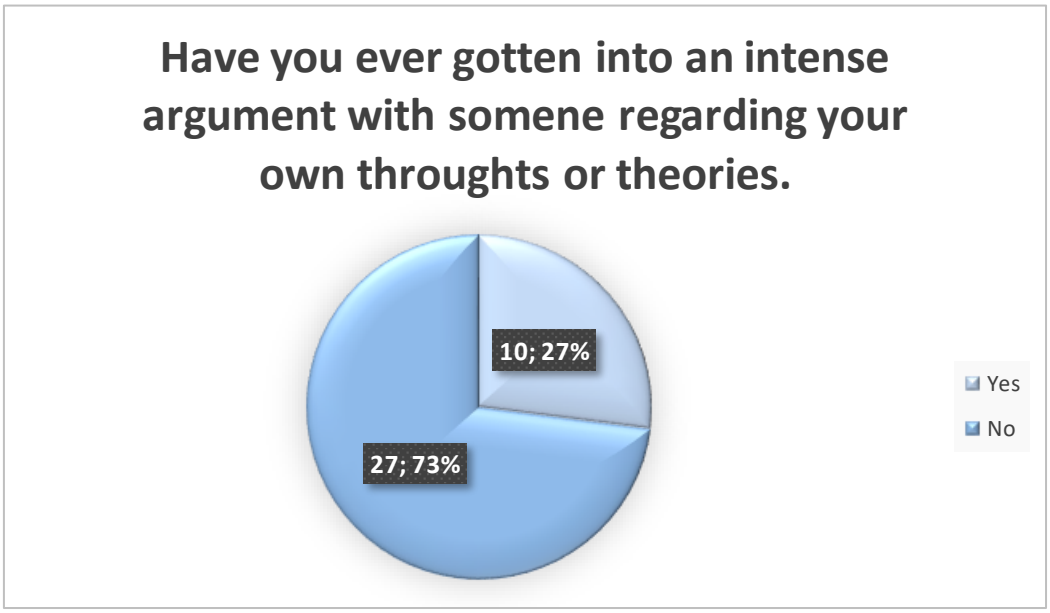


Figure 4.2.5: Intense Arguments amongst fans.

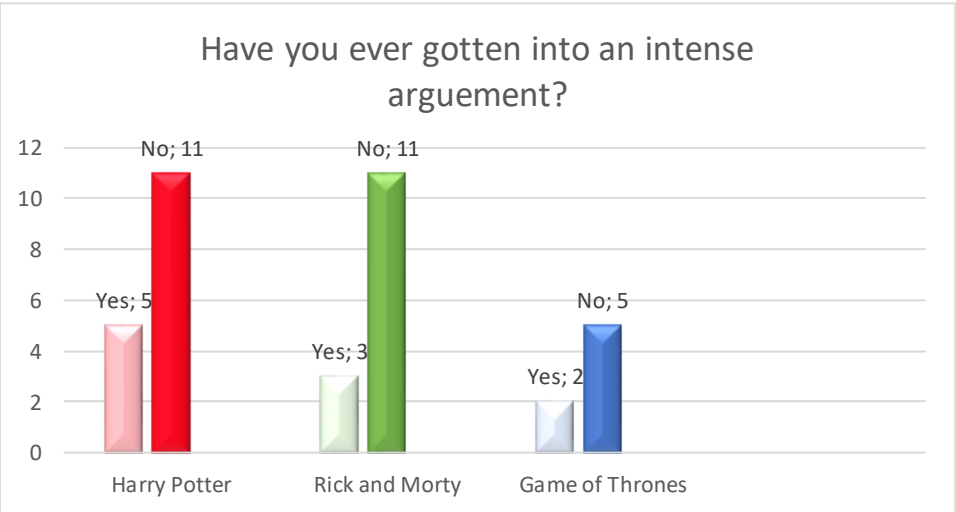
Out of the 37 participants 27 said that they have not gotten into intense arguments with other people over their beliefs in a fandom and one even went as far as saying no because they would rather let ignorant people stay that way. This response alone proves to me that fans will always stick to what they themselves believe in and will go against the same fans that belong to their fandom, they may not react, but they will not change their own opinion or take someone else's perspective into account. They may also then believe their opinion to be better than the creative producer themselves.

Looking at each respective fandom will further analyse the ways in which participants of each fandom react towards each other individually displayed in Table 8 below.

Table 8: Intense arguments amongst fans of each individual fandom.

The Rick and Morty participants specifically have answered differently to what was previously expected as they chose not to argue with each other about their fan theories and ideas around their fandom.

Fanfiction in itself is a way for fans of a particular show to create a world where their own theories are taken into account, they may have completely different outcomes to what the creative producer had and therefore it gives them freedom to change the story in a way that they feel it should've have



happened. In this next question participants were asked if they have ever written any fanfictions, answered are shown below in figure 4.2.6.

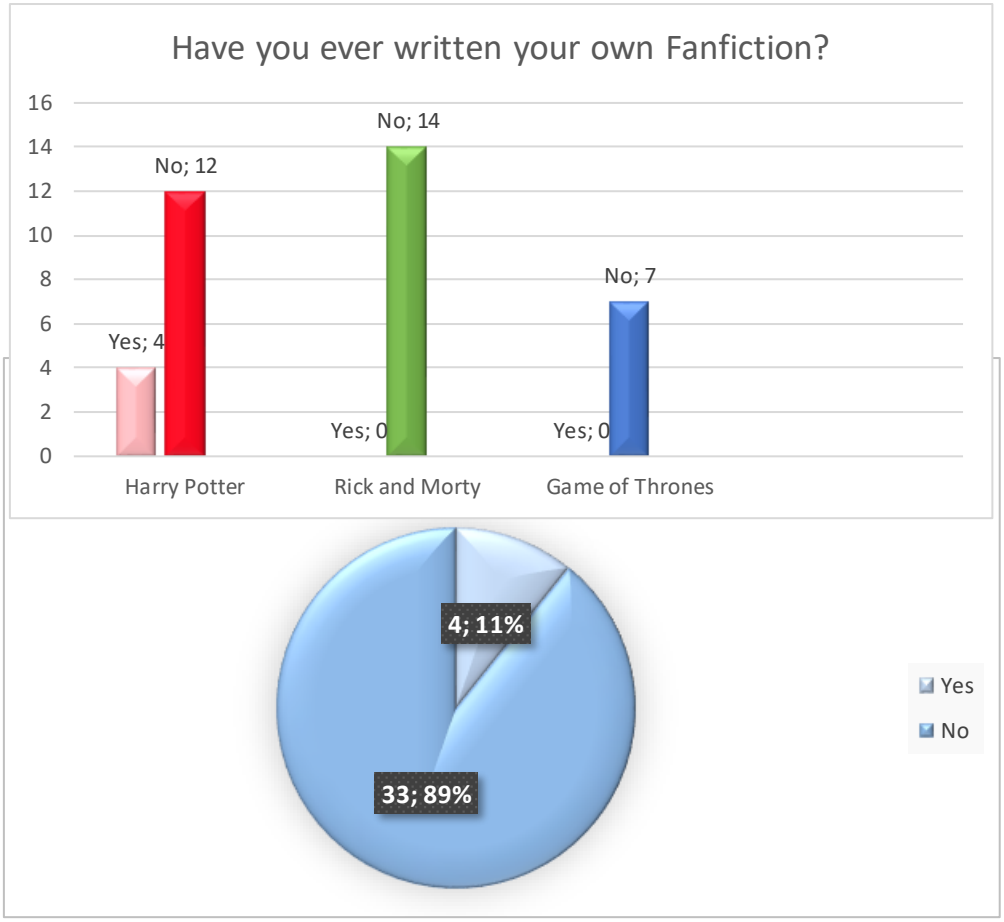


Figure 4.2.6: Have you written your own fanfiction.

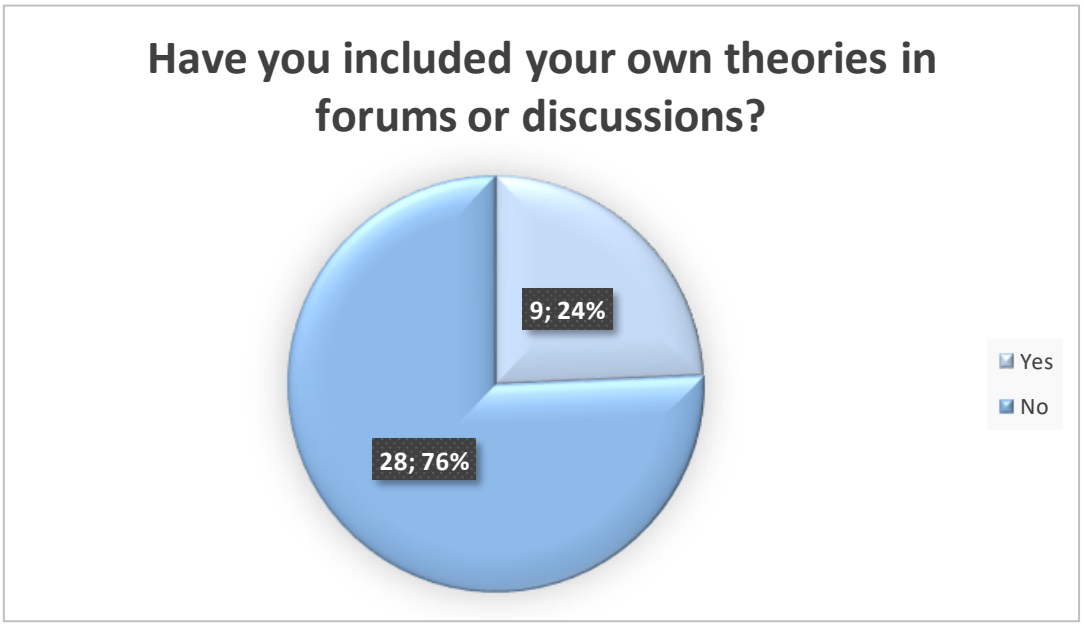
Only 4 participants have written their own fanfictions that include their own theories and 33 (89%) have not written anything about their respective fandom. This shows that more of these participants chose to participate in other fan activities rather than fanfiction itself. Looking at each fandom separately in Table 9 below will give a better understanding of which fandoms partake more in the act of writing and creating their own fanfiction.

Table 9: Individual fandom fanfiction writing.

When looking at fanfiction and the data statistics obtained on fanfiction websites that was mentioned earlier, *Harry Potter* was known to have the highest number of written fanfictions on each website. This information correlates with the information obtained from participants of this survey as the only fandom to have participated in the creation of fanfiction was the *Harry Potter* fandom.

The next question asked participants whether they have included their own fan theories in forums or discussion. This question was asked as fans may have not written fan fiction which included their own theories but they may have discussed their theories online or in person with other fans. Figure 4.2.7 below shows the way in which all participants answered the question as a collective group.

Figure 4.2.7: Included theories in forums or discussions.



This is a surprising response when you take into account the previous question. More participants have answered yes to this question which indicates that although they don't write their own fanfiction, they do write about their beliefs on forums which could be seen as a form of fanfiction or

even a way of giving other fanfiction writers new content and adding to the never-ending archive of participatory culture within the fandom world. One should understand that fanfiction doesn't have to be published on places such as Wattpad, fanfiction or Archive of our Own to be considered fanfiction. The data obtained below in Table 10 shows how many fans in each fandom have included their fan theories in discussion or forms.

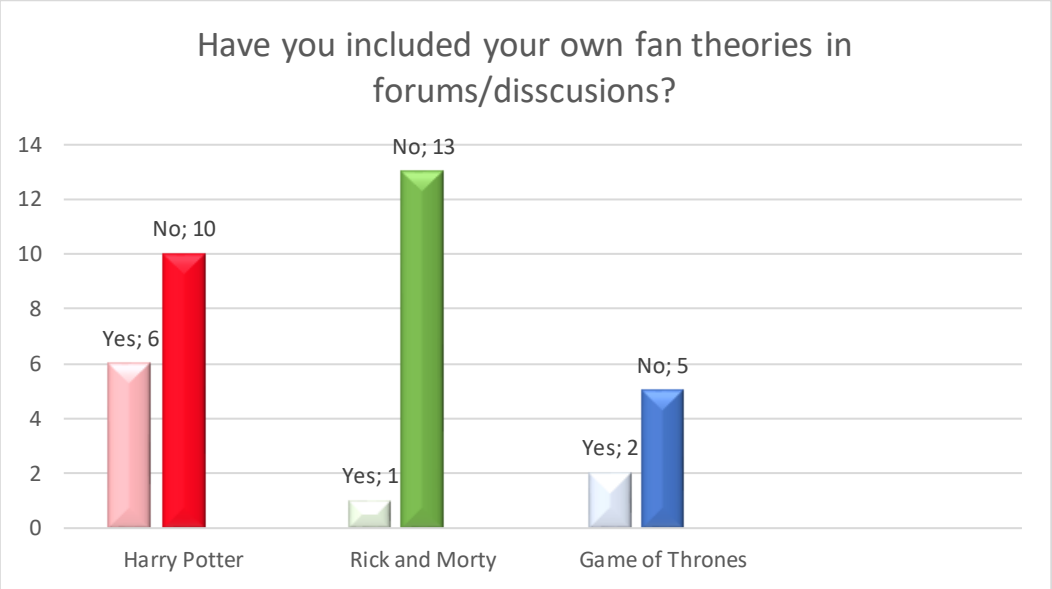


Table 10: Included theories in forms or discussion of each individual fandom.

The next question asked participants whether they believed their own theories to be better than what the creative producer had given them. Figure 4.2.8 Below shows the data obtained by the collective group of participants.

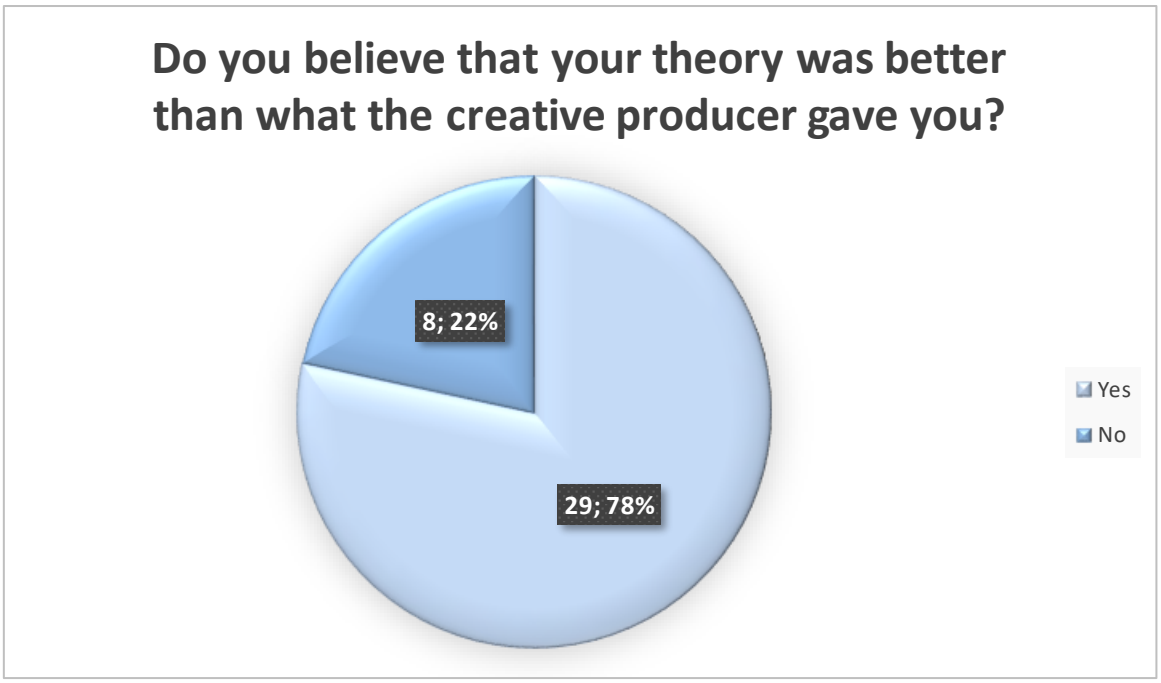


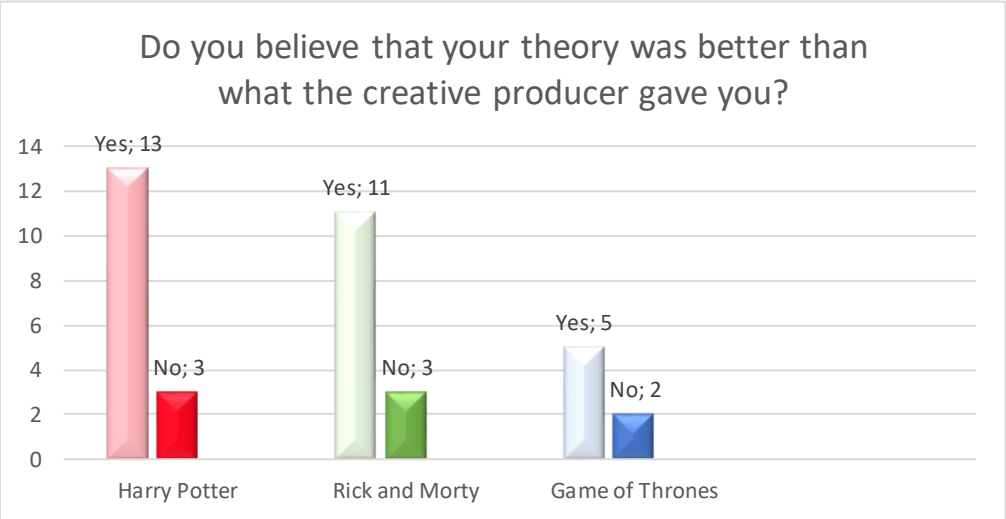
Figure 4.2.8: Believe own theory is better than what the creative producer wrote.

This question interesting to look at, as we can see 78% of people (29 participants) believe that their own theories are better than the likes of the original creative producer. This further shows how fans believe that they in fact do know better than the actual creative producers themselves. With only 22% (8 participants) having answered no to this question it can clearly be assumed that fans themselves take some form of ownership over a work by disagreeing with the choices that are made by the original producer.

Fans may not necessarily discuss their own theories with others but this does not change the fact that they believe their own theories to be better than of the creative producer, in order to take a closer look at this the data provided below in figure Table 11 will show whether fans of each respective fandom believe that their theories are better than what the creative producer provided them as canon.

Table 11: Do you believe your theories is better than the creative producer in each fandom.

This data shows that participants of all three fandoms believe that the theories that they themselves have come up with are better than what the creative producer has given them.



Participants were then asked whether they have ever criticised a creative producers work and if yes how they had gone about doing so. Figure 4.2.9 below shows how the participants answered.

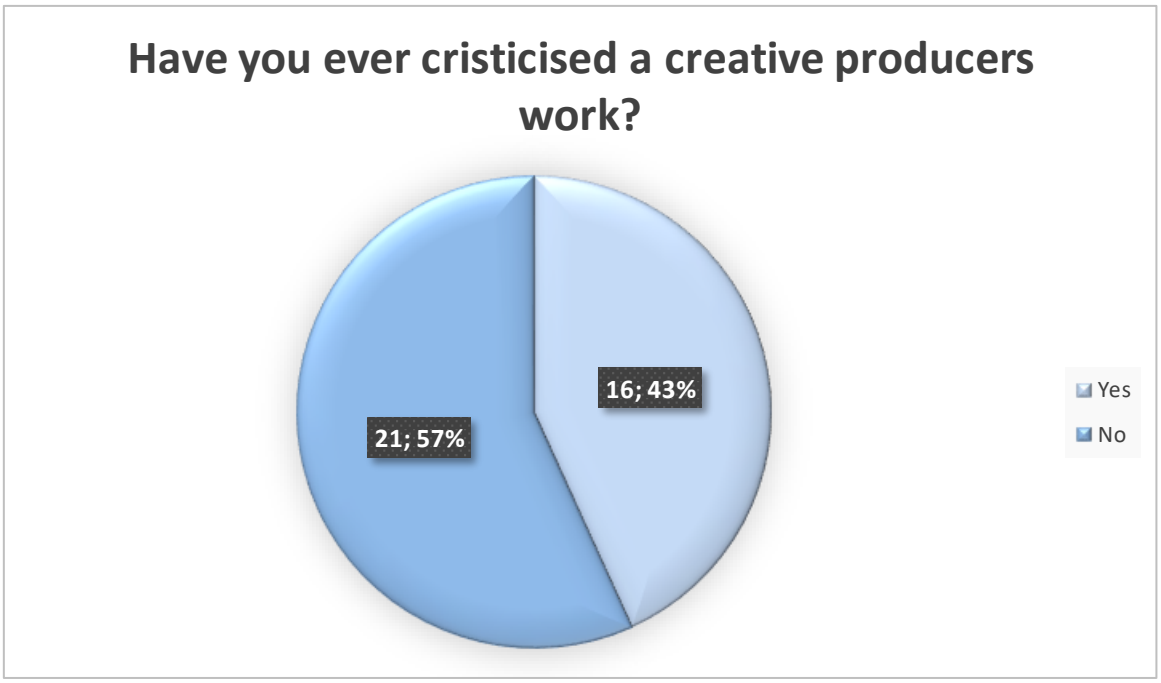


Figure 4.2.9: Criticising creative producer's work.

Table 12 below shows the way in which each fandom answered the question individually.

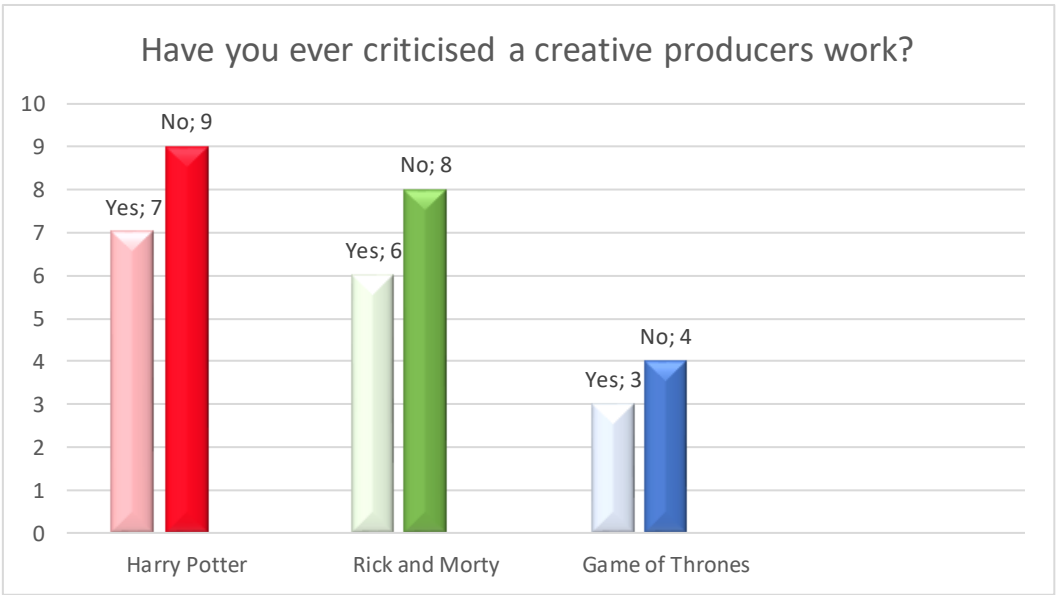
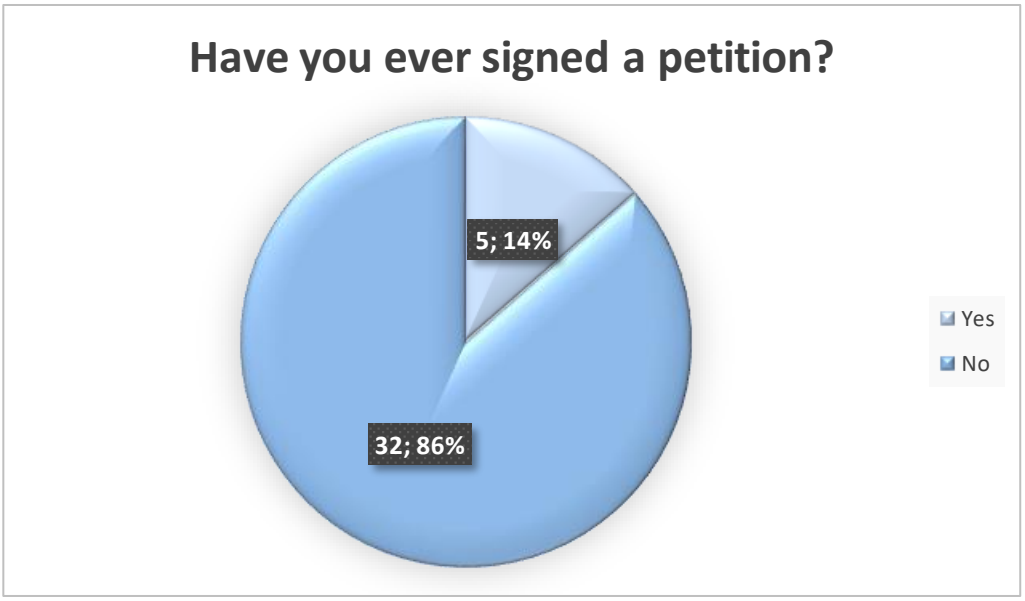


Table 12: Criticising creative producers work in each fandom.

Out of the 16 people that had answered yes to criticising a creative producers work, four people had said that they have had verbal discussions amongst friends while the remaining twelve people had gone online to criticise the creative producer. These people used online platforms such as twitter, blogs and through commenting on YouTube videos and Instagram posts.

This information indicates that many of these participants, although they may not have agreed the way a show was written, chose to keep their thoughts to themselves or solely amongst their circles of friends rather than taking their thoughts to social media.



The next question asked participants whether they had ever signed a petition to reinstate the making of one of these shows. Figure 4.2.10 below shows the number of people that had and the number that haven't.

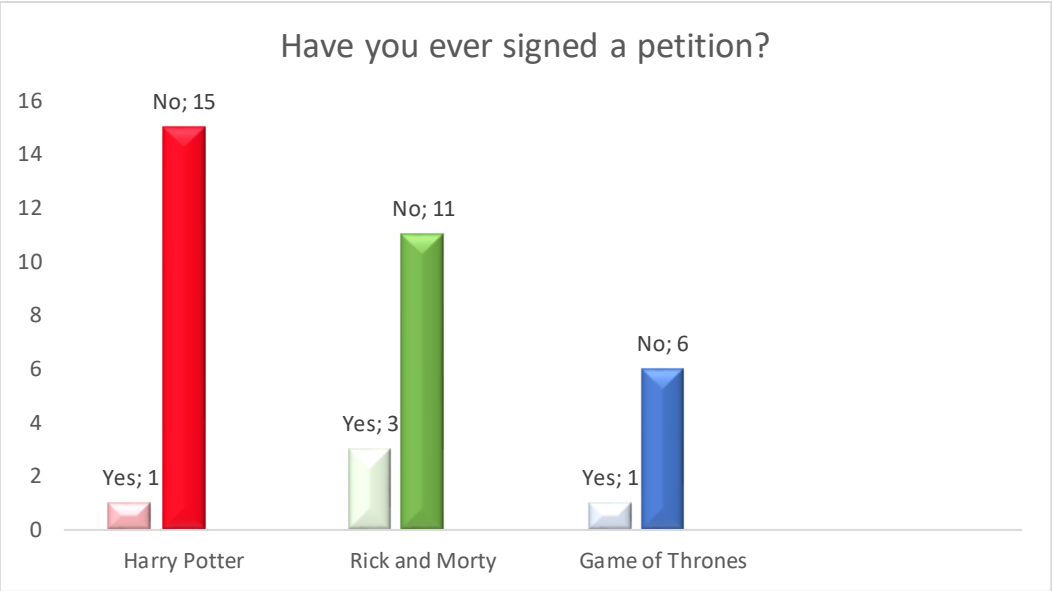


Figure 4.2.10: Signed a petition.

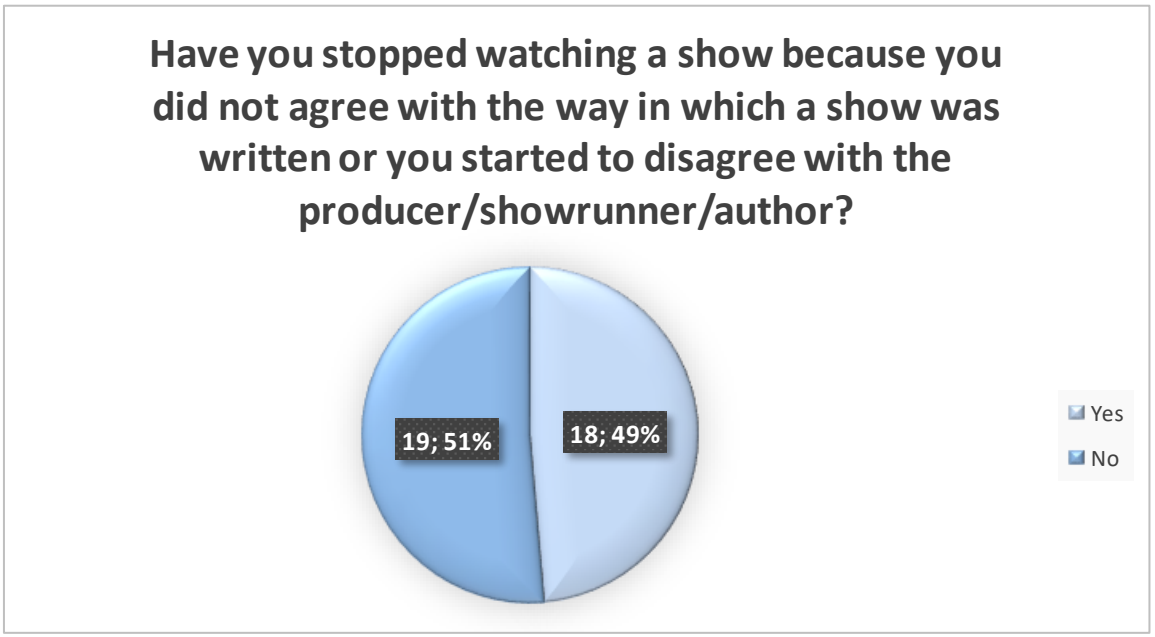
A fairly small amount of people has actually signed petitions to reinstate the making of a one of these shows accorded to the data that was collected from these particular participants. Table 13 below shows each individual fandoms response to the question.

Table 13: Signing a petition in the individual fandoms.

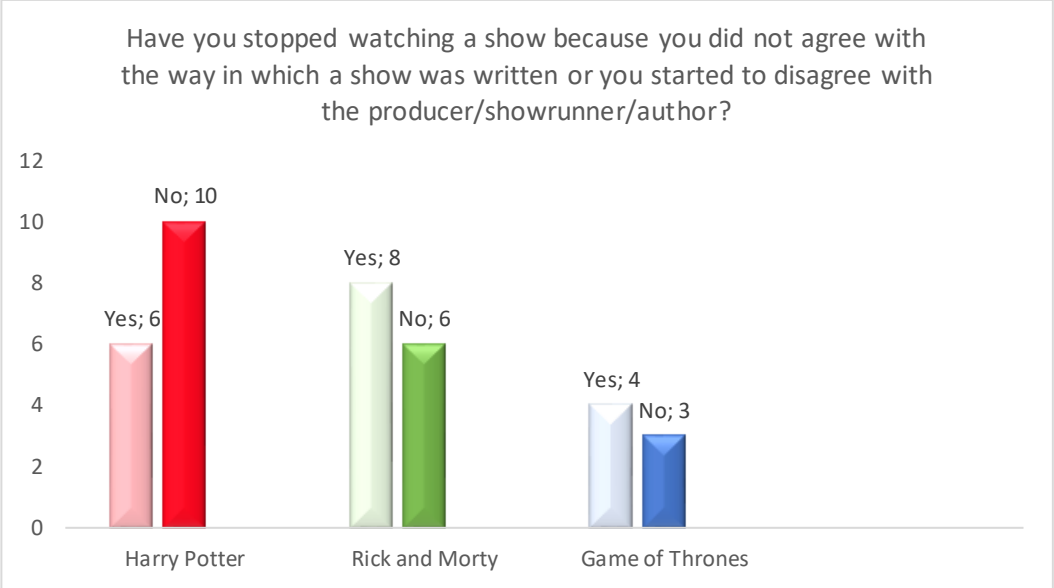
Rick and Morty surprisingly has the highest number of participants that answered yes in comparison to the other two fandoms, this information is unusual due to the infamous *Game of Thrones* petition mentioned earlier. It does however need to be taken into consideration that *Game of Thrones* has the smallest subject group and this may have led the number of participants that answered yes to be significantly lower than that of the other two fandoms.

The following question asked participants whether they have actively stopped watching a show due to them not agreeing with the way a show was written or because they started to disagree with the producer/ showrunner/ author. Figure 4.2.11 below shows the way in which the question was answered by the collective group of participants.

Figure 4.2.11: Stopped watching a show.



There was only one person that separated the data from being equal, there were 18 people that said no and 19 people that actually said yes. This was almost a 50/50 verdict, and it can be looked at in the perspective that although people may not necessarily agree with the creative producer, they will still continue to support the fandom and watch the shows seen though it might come with



disappointment. Table 14 below displays how each fandom answered the question individually.

Table 14: Stopped watching a show in each fandom.

Harry Potter seems to have fans that don't give up as easily, out of the three fandoms they were the only one to have a higher number of participants that didn't give up on the show completely once they disagreed. Fans of the *Rick and Morty* and *Game of Thrones* franchise however seem to have a

higher number of fans that actively protesting to the creative producers stopped supporting the franchise once they were disappointed or didn't get what they wanted out of the storylines.

For some fans, the disappointment seemed to have been too much as they decided to completely stop watching the show. This indicated that the fans displayed an active form of protest to the show runner. They went against them by leaving the fandom completely and ultimately this would not be what the creative producers would want. Some fans stick to their respective fandoms through the ups and downs but by leaving the fandom completely the fans have indirectly told the creative producers that they hold power in the sense that if they don't get what they want they will stop supporting the franchise completely.

Participants were then asked if they would consider themselves to be a superfan, the figure 4.2.12 below shows how the collective group of participants answered the question.

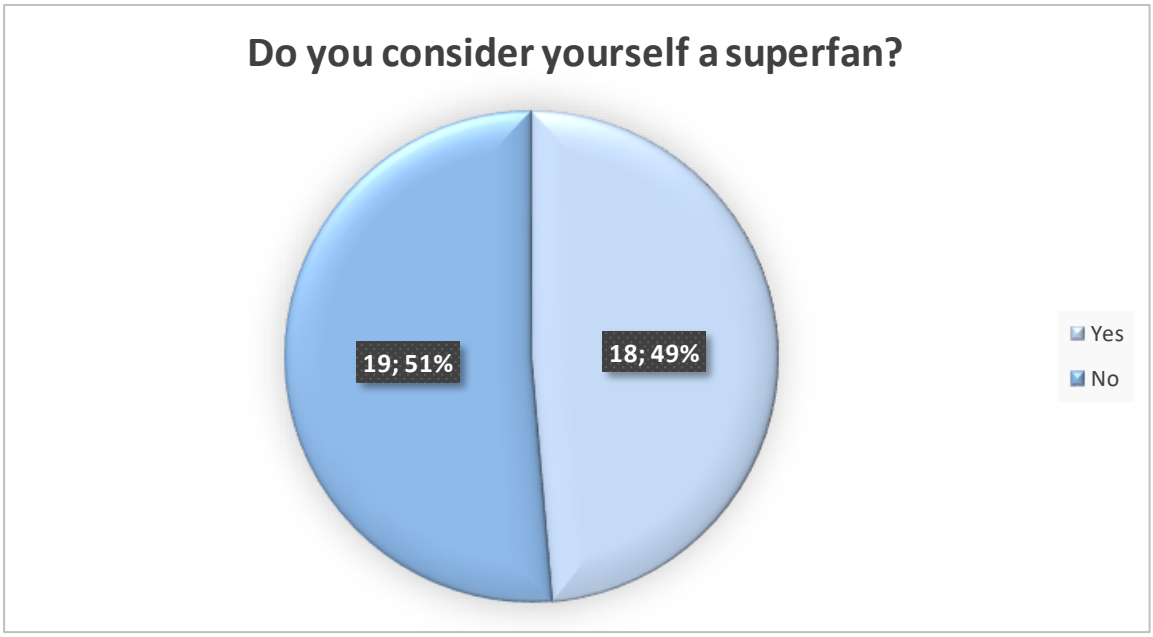
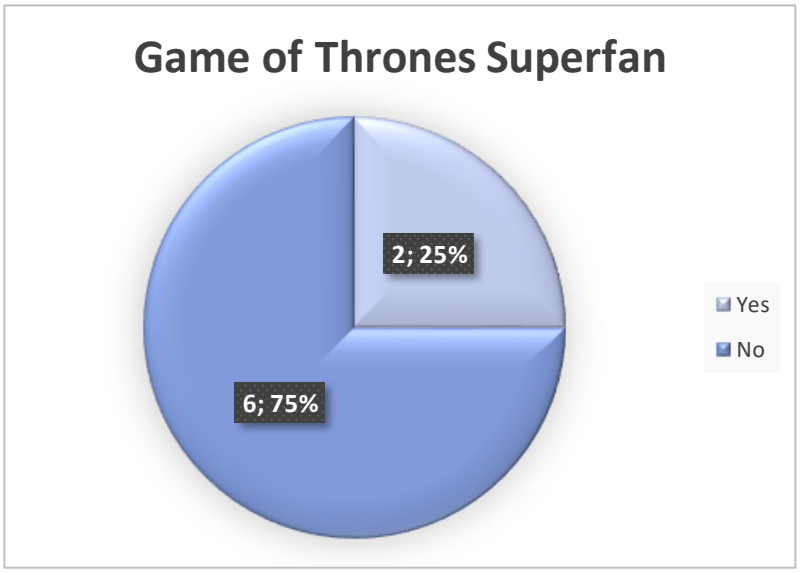


Figure 4.2.12: Do you consider yourself a superfan

Again, this was another 50/50 verdict where we see 18 people saying yes and 19 people saying no. This showcases the way fans place themselves on the hierarchy but still believe that their opinions matter more than those of the creative producers or even those who do actually consider themselves superfans. It is important here to take into account that some fans who may or may not call themselves super fans do tend to have a superiority complex which we previously looked at closely with regards to the Rick and Morty fandom. Figure 4.2.12.1,4.2.12.2 and 4.2.12.3 below show how each fandom answered the question separately.



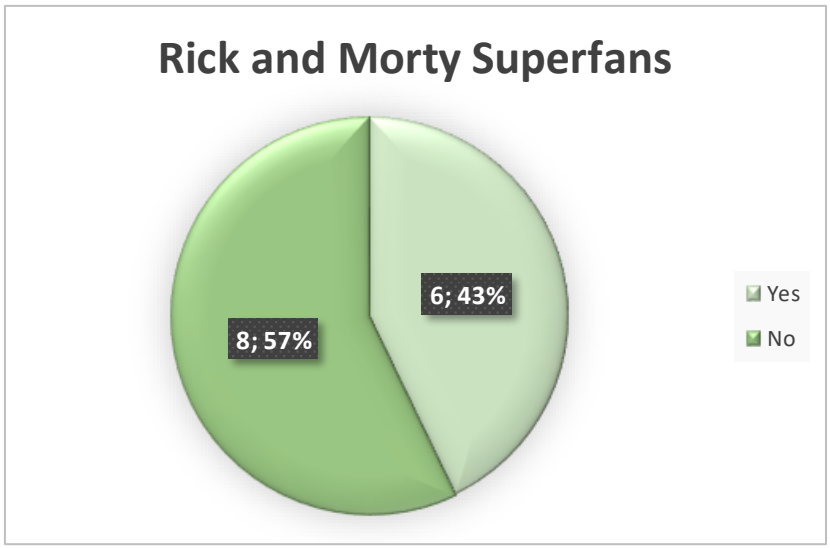
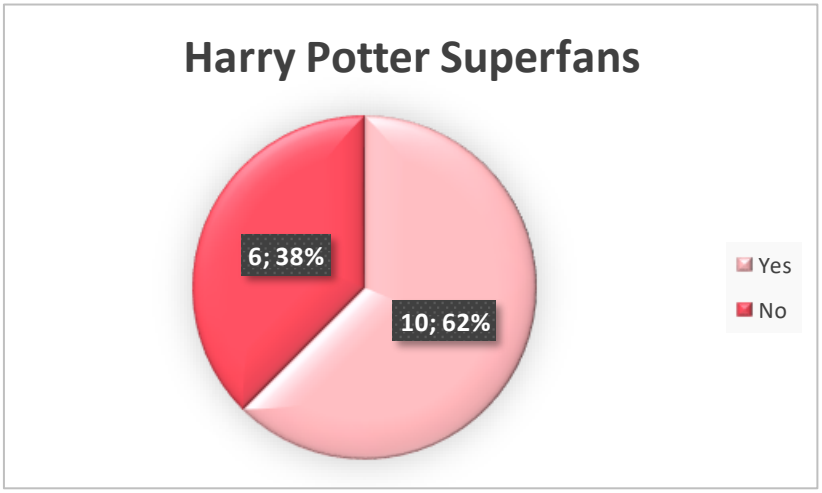


Figure 4.2.12.1: Game of Thrones Superfans

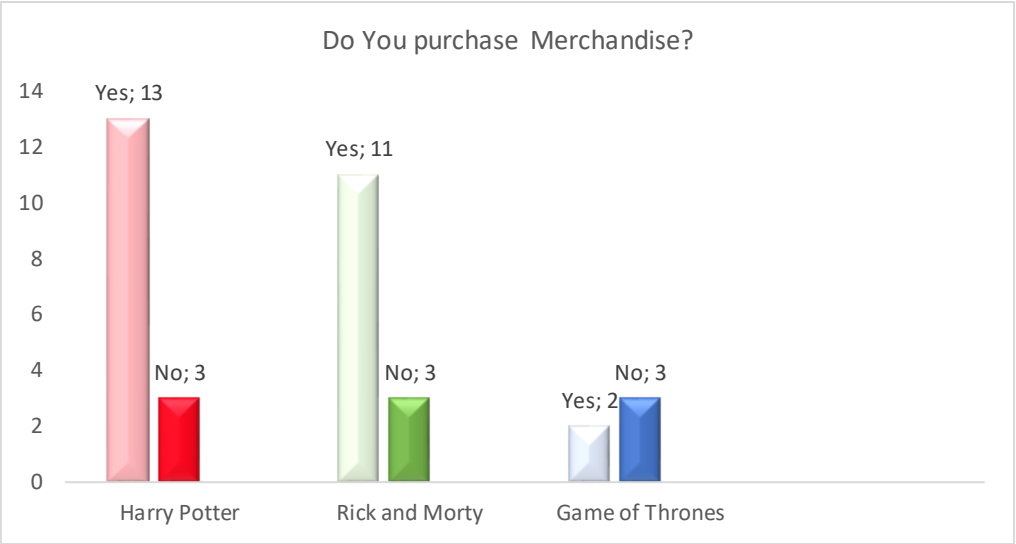
Figure 4.2.12.2: Rick and Morty Superfans.

Figure 4.2.12.3: Harry Potter Superfans

Due to the different sizes of each subject group the data has been represented in three pie charts which show figures as well as percentages. For the purpose of this question the percentages will be analysed. *Harry Potter* seemed to have the largest number of participants that considered themselves superfans with 62%, *Rick and Morty* had 43% and *Game of Thrones* had 25%. This indicates that both *Harry Potter* and *Rick and Morty* have a significant number of participants that consider themselves to be more than just a fan while *Game of Thrones* once again may have lost fans due to the disappointment of the last season.



The



participants were then asked whether they purchase merchandise, buy fan art, bid for props or replicas that were on the show, support fan patrons, subscribe to channels: YouTube, OnlyFans etc. Figure 4.2.13 below indicates how the collective group of participants answered the question.



Figure 4.2.13: Purchasing Merchandise

The response for this question was that 6 participants said yes and 11 participants said no. This shows that fans still chose to support the fandom that they are a part of and purchase things to make them feel closer to the show that they love. It also shows that although fans may disagree with the creative producers, they still chose to support them financially as a franchise. Table 15 below shows how each fandom answered the question separately.

Table 15: Purchasing Merchandise in each fandom.

Both the Fandom of *Harry Potter* and *Rick and Morty* have more than half of the participants purchasing items from their respective fandom. This indicates the love that these fandoms have outside of just the television shows or movies. Game of thrones again has less people participating in fan activities such as purchasing merchandise which further instates that the fans don't participate in fan activities due to their disappointment in the franchise.

Fans were then asked if they felt the need to 'educate' other fans on the things that may not have been aware of and I they felt as though they were bigger fans because of this. Figure 4.2.14 below shows the way the collective group of participants answered the question.

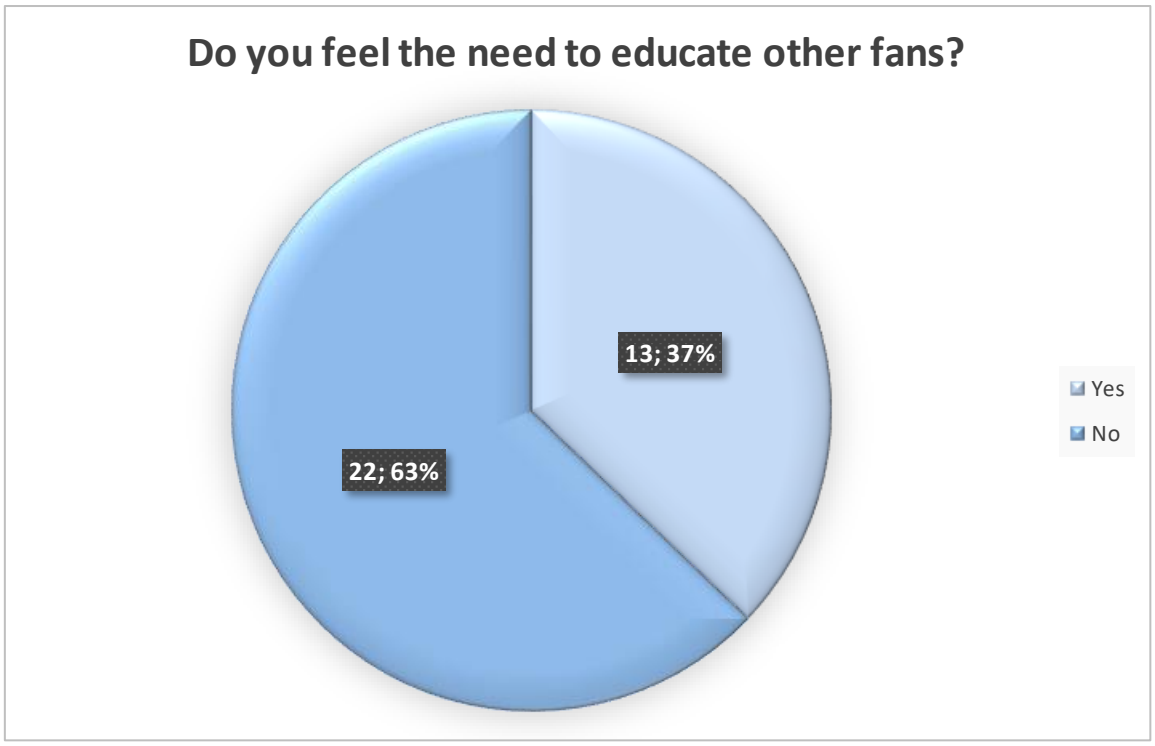


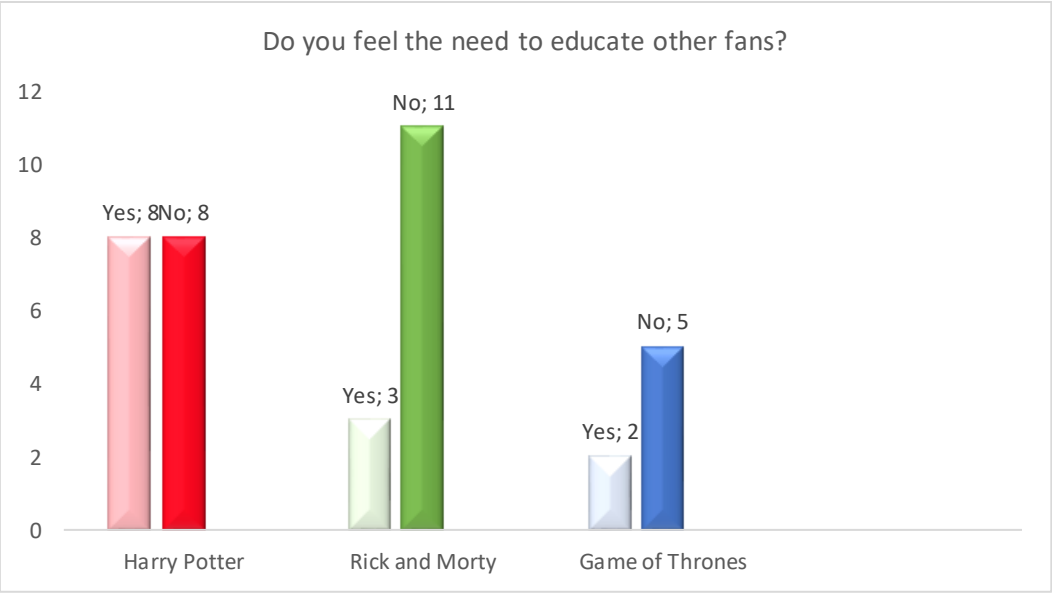
Figure 4.2.14: Educating other fans

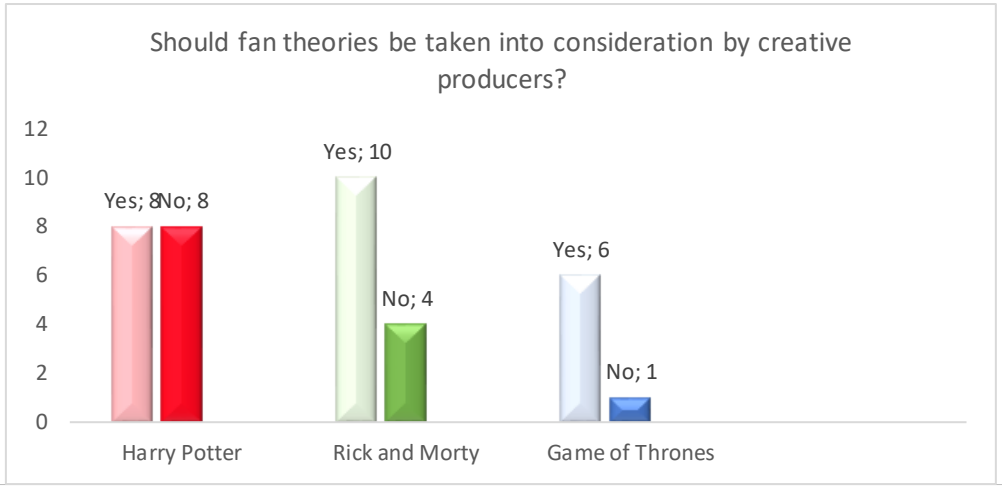
Surprising the participants have a majority of fans that don't feel the need to educate other fans, this information was in contrast to the superiority complex displayed by *Rick and Morty* fans that felt they were bigger fans if they knew more about the subject matter of their fandom than just a casual watcher. Table 16 below indicates the way in which each fandom answered the question individually.

Table 16: Educating fans in each fandom

In the data collected from these particular participants, *Harry Potter* fans seem to feel the need to educate other fans on their respective fandom more so than the *Rick and Morty* fans. *Harry Potter* was seen earlier to have more people that consider themselves superfans and this might be the reason for the sense of entitlement that these *Harry Potter* fans have over casual fans. The fans of *Harry Potter* indicate signs of gatekeeping amongst their fandom for example believing a fan that has read the books and has watched the movies is more of a fan than somebody who has only watch the movies as stated by Kris Keall previously (Keall,2017), and when they don't agree with each other's opinions they tend to call each other fake fans.

Participants were then asked whether they believed that fan theories should be taken into consideration by the creative producers. Figure 4.2.15 below shows the way in which the collective subject group answered the question.





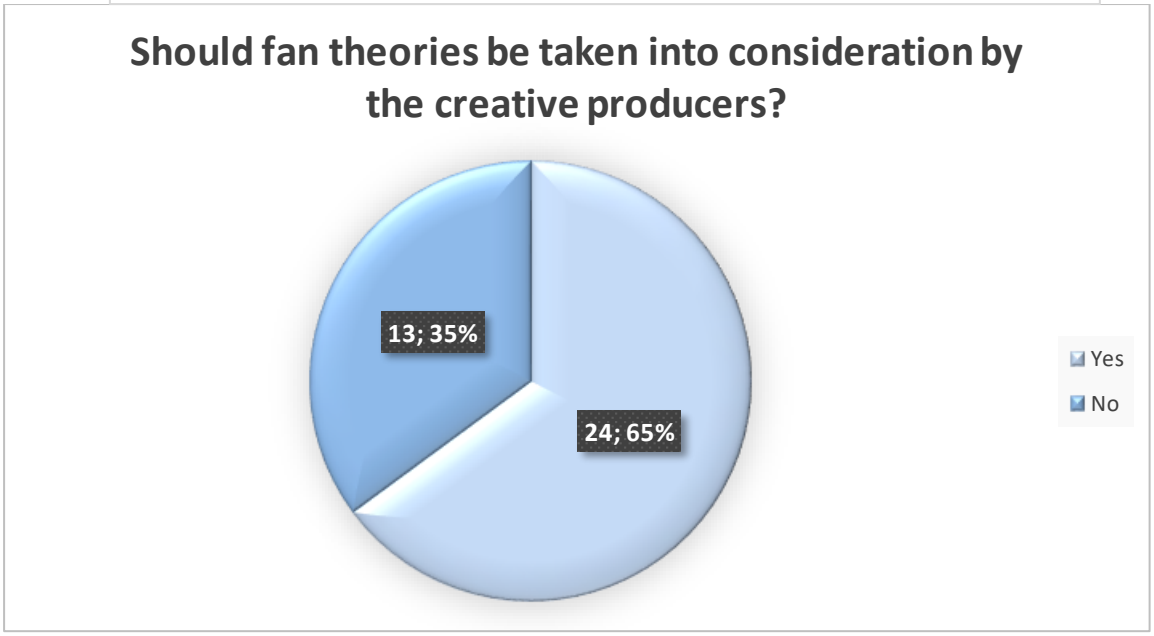


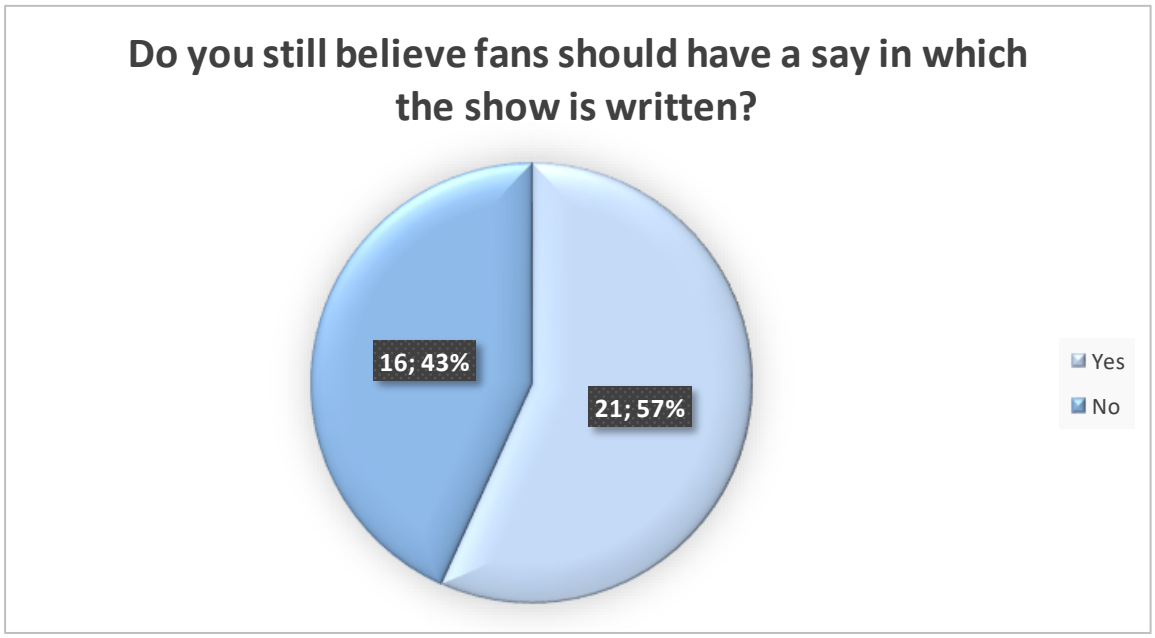
Figure 4.2.15: Fan theories taken into consideration by creative producers.

More participants of the survey believed that fan theories should be taken into consideration when creating a story. Table 17 below will show how each fandom answered the question in the separate fandoms to better understand how each fandom feels about fan theories.

Table 17: If fan theories should be taken into account in each respective fandom

Both *Rick and Morty* have more fans that believe their theories should be included or taken into consideration by the creative producers. The *Harry Potter* fandom has an equal number of participants answering yes and no, this may be because J.K Rowling has been known to confirm their fan theories online for example Dumbledore as Death, therefore the fans feel that she has fulfilled their wishes. *Rick and Morty* fans have been known to pressure the writers into confirming theories for example the 'Total Rickall' episode where they confirmed multiple fan theories on of which ended with Rick stating "Now you can all shut up about it. The *Game of Thrones* fans had a petition where they wanted the final season to be rewritten and so I argue that the fans believed the ending would have been better if the writers listened and incorporated their fan theories.

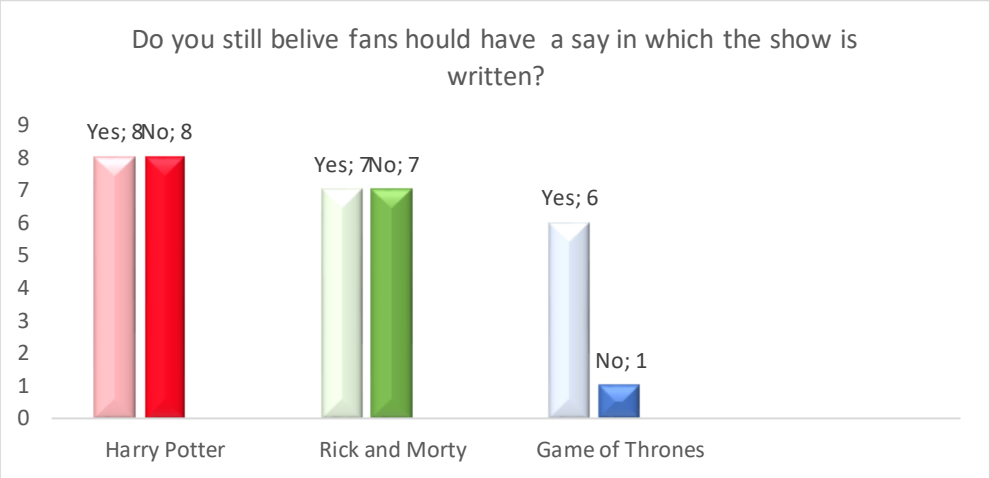
The final question participants were asked was whether they now believe that fans should still have a say in the way in which a story is written. The participants were asked to provide a long answer to explain their reasoning. Figure 4.2.16 below shows the number of participants that said yes and no



collectively as one group.

Figure 4.2.16: Do you still believe fans should have a say

This last



question in itself shows the large number of people that wish to have control over something that doesn't not actually involve or include them at its basic start point. Table 18 below shows how each fandom answered the question separately.

Table 18: Do you still believe fans should have a say in which a show is written in each fandom

The *Harry Potter* and *Rick and Morty* fandoms are split down the middle with half believing fans should have a say and the other half believing they shouldn't. What should be taken into

consideration is that 3 of the fans who answered no stated that fans shouldn't have a direct say in how the show is written but they still believed that fan theories should in fact be included.

Participant 11 who is a *Rick and Morty* fan stated the following: "Not necessarily to have a say, although I believe creative writers/producers should take into account fan theories as it makes for a greater feeling of satisfaction and fulfilment as well as the feeling of being heard out and appreciated by the creators of shows said person is such a big fan of and is so influenced by."

Taking this answer into consideration it can be seen that although fans may in fact answer no to the question they still feel as though their opinions need to be included in some way. All long answers to this survey will be included in the appendix.

To understand this data further I will now propose a data synthesis using the grounded theory approach.

Data Synthesis

Systematic Review

As this research is qualitative, the data collected is derived from interviews (online surveys) as well as observations regarding the three fandoms of *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones,* and *Rick and Morty* which were looked at separately. Due to the three different fandoms being used the data collected was heterogeneous and therefore a narrative/descriptive synthesis will be used to summarise the data and come up with findings to further understand what this means for the proposed research question.

Narrative/Descriptive Synthesis

When Henry Jenkins first theorised the term 'textual poachers' it was stated that fans themselves are not just consumers of media anymore but are rather active participants in constructing the said media. The idea of fanfiction which can be seen as a form of fan authorship (as explained earlier by Stein and Busse*),* it is known that fan authors write their own stories with built in constraints due to the extant canon provided by the creative producer. This, however, was seen as an act of creativity by the fans and was praised by Stein and Busse. It should be noted, though, that this stance was not taken throughout this research study. I argue that fans have taken control by changing canon to fit their own constraint through activities such as fanfiction, fan theories and the concept of 'shipping'.

Toxic fandom, which was heavily theorized by Ray Evangelista, looked at the way in which the *Rick and Morty* fandom had become toxic through acts of fantagonsim amongst misogynistic male fans, similar to what was described by Caitlin Dewey in the phenomenon that was #GamerGate. Gatekeeping was a false sense of ownership amongst fans of the same community and was discussed by academics such as Kemery S Lynch to have been toxic fan behaviour in the *Harry Potter* fandom whereby one fan claims to be a bigger fan than another among their community. This further enabled superiority complexes amongst the fan community and so in turn formed the fan hierarchy described earlier by Michelle, L McCudden in *Degrees of Fandom: Authenticity & Hierarchy in The Age of Media Convergence.* Fandom was earlier seen by academics such as Henry Jenkins as a community-based phenomenon, however as time went on later academics in the field of fandom studies found that within the world of fandom lay toxic behaviours from fans towards each other as well as the creative producers. In the case of *Game of Thrones*, fans went as far as signing a petition that called for the final season's remake and bashing the creative producers which can be seen as fantagonism theorized by Derek Johnson in regard to the *Ghostbusters* (2016) remake which can be found in the literature review section of this research paper.

Lastly, academics in the fan studies field looked at Easter Eggs and Fan services as creations that were praised highly as they promoted more fan engagement and more interest in the creative works for future productions. Bart Beaty previously looked at the ways in which Easter Eggs and fan services promote future films and therefore are used as tools to gain more fans as well as to excite fans when specifically looking at the Marvel Universe. I argue against these claims by previous academics as for the purpose of this research I believe that creative producers, although they hold control in what kind of fan services and easter eggs they provide, they still feel the need to add them due to pressure from fans and the need to satisfy their theories, questions and demands.

Findings

Amongst the *Harry Potter* fandom more fans believed that they shouldn't have a say in how the show is written which in comparison to the *Game of Thrones* and *Rick and Morty* fandom where more fans believed that they should in-fact have a say on how a show is written. Regarding this information in the written works of Ray Evangelista and the *Game of Thrones* petition that was signed by fans to remake the last season, the fans of these two fandoms both display toxic

behaviour. The matter of Gatekeeping has been displayed amongst the *Harry Potter* fandom, but it seems that fans are more open to accepting the decisions of the creative producers according to the data that was collected from the surveys.

Fan theories are a form of participatory culture and fan authorship, in the data collected from participants it was seen that most fans to have come up with their own theories lied within the *Rick and Morty* fandom. This *Rick and Morty* fandom were noted by academics as toxic and misogynistic and fans believe that their word is better than they creative producers (Evangelista, 2019). They have displayed acts of fantagonism amongst themselves as well as abusive online behaviour towards the creative producers. I argue that these toxic behaviours are what has led the creative producers of *Rick and Morty* to give in to fan theories which was addressed by in earlier tweets amongst the creative producers Justin Roiland and Dan Harmon with abusive fans as well as instances where the creators' provided fans with theories in the 'Never Ricking Morty' episode of *Rick and Morty*.

When asked the question of whether participants believed their theories to be better than what the creative producers had provided in content, each of the three fandoms answered yes. This display shows the authorial control displayed by fan ownership amongst fandoms discussed by earlier academics. This further shows similarities between the act of shipping and the 'How it Should Have Ended' YouTube channel that was discussed in the literature review section of this research paper. Earlier academics have therefore displayed this phenomenon of fans believing their theories to be better than the creative producers and this information further instates the hypothesis that creative producers have lost ownership to their fans. Many fans have engaged with fanfictions where the ending has been different and therefore, I argue that readers of these fanfictions and those who have watched these YouTube videos indicates that these fan producers have taken over work that does not belong to them. Looking at *The Lexicon* case of *Harry Potter* further shows that fans have taken ownership over works that do not belong to them.

When asked whether the participants have stopped watching a show due to disagreement with the creative producers' choices, only the fandom of *Harry Potter* displayed more participants answering no. Furthermore, I argue that *Rick and Morty* fans and *Game of Thrones* fans are displaying public acts of protest like the petition signed by the *Game of Thrones* fans. These active displays show that if these fans don't agree with the creative producer, they will protest in terms of completely leaving their once loved fandom and so creative producers once again feel pressured into giving them what they want. When asked whether participants wanted their opinions and theories taken into consideration by the creative producers, *Harry Potter* fans had a 50/50 response, while both the *Rick and Morty* and *Game of Thrones* fans has more participants answering yes to the question. Once

again, the *Rick and Morty* and *Game of Thrones* fandoms show active displays where they believe that their ideas are better than the creative producers and they have stated now that they want you to be involved in the creative process.

When asked whether fans have gotten into arguments with other fans, each fandom had a higher number of participants answering no to the question. This is in direct contrast to other academics in the field of fandom studies and goes against what we now as gatekeeping. It was earlier said that *Harry Potter* fans were known to gatekeep, for instance saying that if you didn't read the books but only watched the movies you were not a true fan as stated by Kris Keall.

Discussion

Taking the above instances into consideration, I have found that the *Rick and Morty* fans as well as *Game of Thrones* fans display more toxic behaviours and more instances where they want to control the creative work than that of the *Harry Potter* fandom. Once again, these findings are similar to Ray Evangelista's work on the toxic behaviours that exist within the *Rick and Morty* fandom (Evangelista, 2019) as well the *Game of Thrones* fans rejection of the last season leading them to sign a petition as a form of protest (Zatat, 2019). This is not to say that the *Harry Potter* fandom does not hold forms of toxic behaviour such as gatekeeping (Keall, 2017). The instances of shipping were discussed by previous academics as being very prominent in *Harry Potter* fanfiction (Tosenberger,2008, p.192) as proposed in the six-phase theory. These findings might have not shown in the survey results as fan theories were asked about rather than the specific act of shipping which falls under the fan theories umbrella. These finding of the data collected from the surveys therefore show that the participants that answered the survey have more toxic behaviours that lie within the *Rick and Morty* and *Game of Thrones* fandom rather than the *Harry Potter* fandom. This may be due to the idea that the *Harry Potter* subject group was the largest and therefore they were more inclusive of each other and their fan community.

When looking at the six-phase theory, all three of the fandoms that was analysed had some sort of toxicity that had led the fans to have taken over the creative producer's work. In the instance of the *Harry Potter* fandom, creative producer J.K Rowling in a sense lost ownership of her creative work when at fan Steven Vander Ark's *Harry Potter Lexicon* (Band, 2009). She however is different in the sense that when fans came up with theories, she decided to just go with them rather than taking a stand and producing what she specifically wanted rather than giving into the fan's ideas. I suggest that it may even be seen that J. K Rowling has lost creativity by stealing the ideas fans. As it was stated by Eoghan Cannon he felt as though the creative producer J.K Rowling 'copped out' by

revealing information and agreeing with fan theories once the original franchise had already ended (Cannon, 2019). Therefore, in the case of specifically the *Harry Potter* fandom it was found that the fans although they gatekept the wizarding world never deliberately forced J.K Rowling into giving them what they wanted but rather they convinced her to take their ideas into consideration. Th finding show then that Rowling has given over ownership as the creative producers to the fans willingly.

In the instance of the *Game of Thrones* fandom referring to the Change.org petition signed by over one million fans to remake the final season of *Game of Thrones* with new writers (Zata,2019), the fans had started to physically protest regarding the creative producers' choices rather than respecting their create ideas. The fans created memes bashing the franchises writing showing how it decreased from good to bad writing and so they displayed fantagonism towards the creative producers. The creative producers in the final season of the show felt such a huge need to impress the fans that they started providing them with fan services, easter eggs and confirming theories (Jacobs, 2021). By this growing need to give fans what they wanted they left questions unanswered and did not fulfil and close off many story arcs (Jacobs 2021). Actors such as Sophie Turner of the series bashed the fans of *Game of Thrones* on social media saying that they should accept what the producers had given them because they had worked hard on their creation and further went on to say that fans need to accept the ending and move on (Zatat, 2019). With the rise of the last book that will be written by George RR Martin, fans are still hoping that he will change the ending and in saying this, it further proves that fans aren't willing to accept the series producer's work (Zatat, 2019). Therefore, the findings regarding the *Game of Thrones* fandom was that the fans have claimed false ownership over the creative work in not accepting what the creative producers have given them and they still although the series is in fact canon, hope to find a new ending in the books. This observation leads me to believe that creative producers have started to lose ownership unwillingly over their own creative works and do not feel creative freedom to make the choices they want due to the wants and needs and often pressure of the fans.

In the instance of the *Rick and Morty* fandom fans have continued to display acts of toxic behaviour (Evangelista, 2019), they have shown misogynistic behaviour amongst fans (Barsanti, 2017), and they have created public indecencies referring specifically to the McDonalds Szechuan Sauce incident (O'Meara and Bevan, 2018). The fans have also antagonised the creative producers of the show by using social media and being disrespectful to them on twitter. These toxic behaviours are what may have led to why the creative producers although they have stated to be fully against fan theories, have decided to give into their fans wants as to not risk their continuous toxic behaviour. In the episode of 'Never Ricking Morty' the creative producers gave in to multiple fan theories as to make

fans “shut up’ about it and move on (Suarez, 2021). Therefore, through the six-phase theory as well as the survey answers gathered from participants, I believe that the toxic behaviours of fans have led to the loss of ownership to the creative producers of *Rick and Morty*. Although these producers have publicly said that they dislike fan theories, they still provided fans with an episode which addressed all of these said fan theories and so through this the findings have shown that *Rick and Morty* creative producers have lost ownership creatively to their fans unwillingly.

The purpose of this section is to gain a further understanding of the different ways that fans have tried to take over and control the works of the creative producers. I have not only looked at the case studies through the eyes of real-world fans, making use of surveys, but I have also analysed each case study as an entity of itself in regard to the proposed six-phase theory I proposed at the beginning of this research paper. This section therefore demonstrates the way in which a creative work can be taken over by fans once they have established a big enough fan base. I have showed the ways in which fans become toxic through this process as well as real life instances where fans have admitted that they did not agree with what the creative producer wanted to do with the creative work. Through this analysis it is fair ti say that in many but not all fandoms, fans feel a sense of control and try to take ownership and change a story that should not belong to them.

Limitations

The limitations of this research study were that the findings could be seen as extremely subjective, participants all have separate and vast opinions and therefore there can be no objective answer as to whether fans should have a say in the way a creative work is written. Taking this into consideration and the fact that the answers gathered are solely based on opinion it might pose difficult to prove this research theory without the basis of using assumptions. Another limitation is that surveys were distributed out to Wit’s students and therefore from a geographical standpoint the answers might vary from the literature by academics. Also, in terms of geographical standpoints one should take into consideration that although the surveys will be South African based, the tweets, forums and fanfictions that were being looked at for the six-phase theory are international and that might influence the way in which they are written. This may be a reason as to why certain findings in the surveys did not relate to the six-phase theory such as *Harry Potter* fans being more accepting than the other two fandoms.

5.Conclusion

The aim of this research was to investigate how creative producers can perceptibly lose a sense ownership/ reputation because toxic fans have taken over their authorship. In order to investigate this phenomenon, I proposed the following research question: Does Fandom have the potential to exert an influence over a narrative beyond its original context and platform?

By researching this topic my hope was to gain a better understanding of the ways in which certain toxic traits that exist within fandoms cause the creative producers of a project to lose ownership to their fans. I hoped to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon by comparing three case studies to a well-constructed six-phase theory. I wanted to show how once a fandom is established, the original creative producer of said fandom will always have less ownership over a work which once belonged solely to them, I also wanted to show the influence fans have over the fictional world and how creators feel the need to always please the consumers' needs rather than looking at what they want.

This research aimed to investigate how creative producers could perceptibly lose ownership/ reputation because toxic fans have taken over their authorship which is based on the perception of fan behaviour whether that may be positive or negative. When looking at the qualitative research analysis with regard to my proposed six-phase theory related to the fandoms of *Rick and Morty*, *Game of Thrones* and *Harry Potter* and the qualitative analysis of surveys distributed to participants that belonged to those very fandoms, it could be concluded that creative producers have lost some form of creative control due to pressures and toxic behaviours of fans. The findings of this research have indicated that creative producers have to some extent given up creative ownership both willingly and unwillingly to fans. I make this statement as throughout this research I have seen instances and acts where the creative producers have given the fans exactly what they want through acts of fan service and instances of fan practice and fan fulfilment such as 'shipping' and the addition of Easter Eggs. There were many instances where instances where fanon (fan theories around canonical events in the main property's storyline) become canon because the fans all adopted ideas from other fans that weren't exactly confirmed by the author themselves. Finally, there were instances where creative producers started including fan theories in their productions, and one might argue that this may have never been their intention for the story in the first place.

I consider myself a fan of *Harry Potter*, *Rick and Morty* and *Game of Thrones* which meant that I experienced differences and similarities within each one of these fandoms. I noticed the need to control the story that was evident in each one of these fandoms and therefore, I felt the need to explore this phenomenon that occurred within fandom communities. Within each fandom the fans around me always wanted to have some sort of authorial control over these franchises. I was guilty of the acts of creating fan theories and believing my ideas were better than the creative producers' ideas as well. Throughout my research I highlighted that these acts of fan creation and fanart are not necessarily a bad thing, they are acts of passion and should not be punished, however, for the purpose of this research I have highlighted the extreme cases where these acts were no longer due to passion but rather became a need to control and obsessive over something that did not belong to the fans themselves.

I was disappointed by the ending of *Game of Thrones* as well. I wanted to know more about *Rick and Morty* and wished the writers would give more insight into the fictional world . In light of the new allegations against Justin Roilland and his arrest, which can be looked at in the article by Kat Tenbarge and Tyler Kingkade in an article for NBC News *called 'Rick and Morty' co-creator Justin Roiland faces felony domestic violence charges (Tenbarge and Kingkade,2023).* I believe that the depictions shown in the world of *Rick and Morty* make a lot more sense because of the allegations against Roiland, the actions and abusive behaviour of the main character Rick now more than ever resonate with the writer and it gives audience a better understanding as to why the characters had such outlandish behaviours. The actions of Rick could somewhat be seen as a reflection of Roiland himself and therefore he has mirrored himself into his main character.

Finally, I wanted J.K Rowling to stop back tracking on her word and retrofitting characters to suit personal agendas. Taking all of this into account and being a creator of art myself, I thought about the fact that I would dislike for someone else to try and take over creative control of something that belonged to me. I was sure that the creative producers of *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones* and *Rick and Morty* must have felt the same and so I decided to explore the ways in which creative producers lose ownership of their creations to their own fans to bring more insight into this phenomenon.

This research was driven by the idea that authors should have the final say and authorial/creative control over something that belonged to them. It is important to not though, that there have been instances where fans have actually saved a series by taking control away from the producers, for example the Sonic franchise. For the purpose of these research, I oppose this for the sole reason that I am referring to instances where fans become aggressive and toxic when they are not given what they want. The reason they have gained the fans in the first place is due to the idea that their

creations were liked by others and so I felt that they should be trusted and entitled to doing what they want with their story. I decided to propose this research to bring awareness to the toxic pressure that lay within fandoms and how the fans can be become negative in the sense that they are trying to control something that does not belong to them. I looked specifically into these fandoms as being a fan of them myself has allowed me to relate to the findings of the research as well as understanding where the fans are coming from.

This research specifically looked at a collection of samples from the fandoms of *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones,* and *Rick and Morty* in order to potentially answer the research question. Therefore, in saying this the results found for these specific fandoms cannot be assumed to be the same for every existing fandom, as well as outside of the small group that was consulted with. In the case of this research however it was seen that the creative producer of *Harry Potter* had willingly given over authorial/creative control to fans while the creative producers of *Rick and Morty* and *Game of Thrones* had given over authorial/creative control to the fans unwillingly. I created a scale to further look at these case studies where I defined *Harry Potter* being part of acts of extreme fan practice, *Game of Thrones* having participated highly in the acts of fantagonism and lastly *Rick and Morty* having taken part in many acts of Toxic Fandom. I used this scale to further look at the different ways in which each fandom has had an influence over the creative producers and their work. To better understand the implications of these results, I suggest that future studies use fandoms that are more similar in terms media used to create them. I would suggest using fandoms that only include movies or fandoms that only include books.

This research helps to answer the question of whether creative producers have lost ownership of their work to their fans by providing a six-phase theory explaining how fandoms become toxic as well as asking active participants of these three fandoms whether they believe that their opinions should be taken into account by the creative producers. These specific fandoms have fallen into acts of toxicity, misogyny, fantagonism and false ownership indicated within the six-phase theory, which has led the creative producers into handing over their creative works as not disappoint or aggravate the fans by making decisions the fans do not approve of. This six-phase analysis has shown how creative producers feel pressured to add instances of Easter Eggs and fan services to their creative works for the sole purpose of keeping fans happy rather than using them for their own creative freedom. This six-phase analysis has therefore shown that once a fandom has enough fans there is a chance that they could include toxic fans, who unfortunately hold a false sense of ownership over a work that does not belong to them and therefore they will try to control it.

By distributing surveys to specifically the fans of *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Rick and Morty,* the data collected provided insights into how each fandom reacted differently to whether or not they believed that they should have some sort of control over the creation of the story. Each fandom had large amounts of participants who felt they should be able to contribute to the way a show is written which indicates the false sense of ownership that each of these fandom's fans holds. By using participants that belonged to the fandoms that were being analysed according to the six-phase theory, it gave better insight as to how these specific fans feel in a real-world setting. These answers contribute to this research in real time as well as they speak to the participants in regard to where the franchises lie at the moment whether they have ended for example *Game of Thrones* as having ended or whether they are still growing in terms of the *Harry Potter* fictional world and *Rick and Morty* future seasons. These fans still see themselves as belonging to these fandoms and so their specific insights were useful as a look into the way in which the fandoms of *Harry Potter, Game of Thrones,* and *Rick and Morty* functions.

Previous academics, including Henry Jenkins, have discussed participatory culture and the community-based structures that fandoms hold but rarely had there been research on the steps that lead to a fandom becoming toxic. It is not to say that fandoms are negative in any respect, but previous academics have looked at the positive aspects of fandom in the majority of studies, this research then is different in the sense that it addresses those harmful activities that lie within fandoms and addressed how they contribute to the creative producer feeling pressured into giving the fans what they want instead of being true to their own creativity. There have also been no clear studies examining the ways in which creative producers lose ownership other than looking only at fanfiction. This research then provides further fan studies academics to have other aspects to look at in regard to loss of ownership besides fanfiction. This research provides a six-phase theory that could be a basic framework for future academics in regard to fandom studies when looking at how a fandom forms and how it could become toxic as there has not been much research into the ways a fandom is formed and the stages a fandom must go through in order to become toxic. This research study has therefore contributed to filling a gap in fandom studies that addresses the toxicity that lies in fandom communities and how these acts in turn cause the creative producers to lose creative and authorial ownership over their work.

Having this new knowledge about the way in which creative producers can inevitably lose ownership over their work can now be used by future creators to better understand the ways in which something that is created by them can be taken over by someone else. It will therefore give them more control over their work once they understand that a fandom comes with negatives as well as positives and they need to be aware of the consequences that occur when they do not give the fans

what they want. This study will also bring awareness to actual fans about their toxic behaviours and how they may not have realized that their behaviours negatively affect the creators of shows that they love. The proposed six-phase theory can now be used for future fan studies to analyse how fandoms form and can also be used as a framework to indicate where along the lines a fandom has become toxic. This research gave me a better understanding as to how the creative producers may have felt when their work was taken over by someone else and allowed me as a fan to be more sympathetic towards creative producers. This research can then be applied further in real world situations whereby the fans themselves are more aware of their behaviours and how they affect the creators of fictional worlds as without them there would be no fans to begin with.

In conclusion, it can be seen that in their most extreme, fandoms follow a six-phase process that can lead to the creative producers losing creative control over their work and ultimately (unwillingly, or in some, case willingly) handing creative control over to the fans. My findings have suggested that this may be the occurrence due to the fact that fans now have a much larger sense of access to the creative producers through social media and can therefore have a bigger influence over the way a story is told. Technology has played a large role in helping consumers become creative producers through the use of fanfiction and I therefore conclude that the rise in technology has had a major effect on creative producers losing a sense of ownership. Therefore, in response to my research question: Does Fandom have the potential to exert an influence over a narrative beyond its original context and platform? I do believe that fandom holds the power to take over a creative producer's work in extreme cases and at many times with the inclusion of toxic behaviours.

Appendix A

Further Reading

Fandoms and Shipping

Shipping is referred to by Owen. G Parry as "a speculative method in fanfiction of creating new erotic relationships between characters or celebrities un-substantiated in the official narratives or source texts, and characterised through fan-authored processes of imagining, re-writing and 'fictioning'" (Parry, 2019). The word shipping that is used frequently in fandom and mostly fanfiction is derived from the word relationship, and it is seen as the desire of fans to create a fictional relationship between two or more people whether that may be romantic or otherwise (Parry,2019).

An individual is able to ship two or more characters whose relationship follows canon but in most cases the ship may not be canon at all or only slightly canon in some cases. In some cases, the characters don't even have to be from the same fandom, for example the pairing of Elsa from Disney and Jack Frost from *Rise of the Guardians* (Bothe, 2014, p.5-6). The relevance of shipping characters even those characters that aren't necessarily canon, shows the persistence of fans to take ownership over something that does not belong to them. Shipping may be an innocent act, but it still creates relationships that may not have been there to begin with and therefore puts pressure on creators to explore relationships between characters that might not have been intended from the beginning. I argue that the act of shipping pressurises creative produces into fan service to the sole purpose of making the fans happy rather than staying true to their original ideas.

Easter Eggs

In a research paper by Rodrigo Salvador called *History's first Easter Egg*, he talks about the history of easter eggs and how they originated. Atari was a very large producer of Video Games in the later 1900's to early 2000's. Atari decided that they weren't going to give credit to game developers in fears that they would be poached by other companies. A Game developer by the name of Warren Robinett Jr. then decided that he was going to credit himself and put his name in the game called *Adventure* which was released 1979-1980 (Salvador,2017, p.63). It was later seen that Steve Wright

who was the director of Atari at the time decided to keep the hidden message because it would give the players of the game a reason to go looking for it and therefore it would add a fun easter egg hunt aspect to the game (Salvador,2017, p.64). Although this may not have been the first Easter Egg in known history it certainly did give rise to the term. Easter Eggs were important to fans because they were placed by the creative producers, they were put there for the fans to find and they could almost be seen as a secret message from creative producer to the fan. Easter Eggs are important to this research as they are deliberate and unlike fan theories they are in-fact created by the producers themselves.

Another example of the use of Easter Eggs is in Marvel movies whereby Marvel Studios uses the act of anticipation to make the audience keep coming back for more and to always be invested in the story line. “These strategies include the use of anticipatory post credit sequences that serve as advertising teases for future releases; “Easter eggs,” or semi-hidden onscreen elements intended to be noticed only by certain viewers” (Beaty,2016).

Easter eggs can be a tool used for comic amusement but are also used to support the artists message for the artwork itself. “Easter Eggs can amicably fall somewhere on a continuum between messages for the creators’ personal enjoyment, and hidden content which supports and strengthens the message of an artwork” (Weinel, Griffiths and Cunningham, 2014).

In relation to this research paper, I will use Easter Eggs as a counter argument due to the fact that unlike Conspiracy Theories they are deliberately placed into a creative piece by the producer themselves. The fans have no say as to what Easter Eggs are placed into a creative work and it Is solely up to the producers. By doing this the creative producer intends for the audience to see them, they are not merely assumed by the audience and therefore they give full ownership, authority, and power to the creative producer themselves. It should, however, be kept in mind that by placing Easter Eggs in a creative work the creative producer is still trying to please fans, they aren’t necessarily doing this out of creative freedom as they still wish to make the fans happy by doing so.

Fan Service

When looking at the Marvel Cinematic Universe in particular the concept of fan services can be more easily understood. The anticipation for future films is built to the point where each film not only acts as an event/text in and of itself, but also as a promotional tool for future events/texts. The promotional materials engage hardcore and casual audiences in distinct ways, developing a hierarchy of knowledge, connection, and intimacy within the consumer base to convert casual

viewers into deeply committed, hardcore fans. According to Bart Beaty in an article called *Superhero fan service: Audience strategies in the contemporary interlinked Hollywood blockbuster*, Marvel Studios has employed a variety of tactics to achieve this goal, including post-credit scenes, Easter Eggs, crossovers, and linked repercussions (Beaty,2016).

Post credit scenes have been widely used in the marvel cinematic universe since the release of *Iron Man* (2008). In that film, the post-credit sequence introduces the central character of S.H.I.E.L.D. director Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson), who approaches Tony Stark (Robert Downey, Jr.) to discuss "the Avengers initiative" (Beaty,2016). To date, most of the post credit scenes that are teased at the end of Marvel movies look towards the future whereby they promote upcoming films and future releases by the franchise, however the presence of cult character Howard the Duck in *Guardians of the Galaxy* may have been more explicitly fan service than a promise of future material. Some post-credit scenes are also used to divide the audience into insiders and outsider (Beaty,2016).

The Marvel Cinematic Universe increases the divide between insider and outsider audience even more with its tendency to add "Easter Eggs" to films or what can also be known as "semi-hidden visual clues to potential future plot directions" (Beaty,2016). These elements are harmless to the parts of the audience who do not catch them, but they are in contrast of high importance to the more knowledgeable members of the crowd (Beaty,2016). An example of this type of "Easter Egg" placement can be seen in Iron Man, in which a version of Captain America's shield is briefly visible in scenes set in Tony Stark's laboratory, and so this tendency to place these "Easter Eggs" has continued throughout the development of the universe (Beaty,2016).For the purpose of this research, I see Easter Eggs as the creative producers taking a stand by actively placing an object in plain sight for the fans, therefore they are inviting fan theories which can be proved by them, in a sense they also have a chance to have a say in a fan theory as they were the ones who initiated it. Therefore, Easter Eggs are the creative producers standing up for their creative rights as they hold the power, they started the fan theory and therefore they have creative freedom as they build up anticipation amongst the audience. The logic behind these Easter Eggs which have these very brief and minimal appearances causing them to almost be subliminal is to activate and engage with the imagination of even the most dedicated consumers and to reward their brand loyalty and story knowledge with these aspects. The relationship and distinction of the insider and outsider relationship are thereby formed by their ability to recognize these unclear and often trivial relationships between objects which may not actually be developed in a meaningful way (Beaty, 2016).

Marvel started doing crossovers in its Comic stages and this is where the phenomenon actually started. The reason they have done this according to Beaty is to reinforce the necessity of buying all the tie-in Marvel Universe Comic books, one may not be a fan of *Fantastic Four* but they are a fan of the *Adventures of Spiderman* and so they buy the comic that has a crossover between the two (Beaty, 2016). Characters appearing in many publications not only assist to generate the idea of a shared universe, but they also emphasize the importance of collecting all Marvel comic books or watching all Marvel movies (Beaty, 2016) With the exception of *The Incredible Hulk* and *Guardians of the Galaxy*, Samuel L. Jackson has appeared in seven Marvel Cinematic Universe films and the television show Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., and his appearances throughout the franchises are what most visibly connect them as a series (Beaty, 2016).

Beaty further goes on to say that linked repercussions are the most important narrative element of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. It is claimed that because the events of this all take place in a shared universe, the events of one work in have an impact on the characters of another. Notably, The Avengers' invasion of New York is referenced in subsequent Thor and Captain America films, is the source of much of the drama in Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. and has a significant psychological impact on Iron Man in the third film in the franchise, where he suffers from a form of posttraumatic stress disorder as a result of his near-death experience in the previous film (Beaty, 2016).

I therefore argue that Fan Services which include things such as Easter Eggs and Crossovers are the creatives producer's way of taking a stand and trying to re-takeover control of their narrative. They deliberately place these instances into their creative work and they hold the control in doing so. They have taken a stand and have in turn invited the idea of fan theories while still holding a sense of control because these fan theories are based off something they deliberately created rather than arising from thin are and assumptions. Again, however it should be taken into consideration that the creative producers are still doing these acts to please the fans and so, are they really doing it for themselves?

Fan Authorship

Fans create artworks and fanfictions according to pre-sets made by the original creative producer and therefore create works with already set boundaries. According to Louisa Stein and Kristina Busse in their work *Limit Play: Fan Authorship between Source Text, Intertext, and Context* it is stated that "Fan authors and artists embrace repetition as a central mode of creative production" (Stein and

Busse, 2009). Fan authors celebrate reproduction of creative works but they still pose threat to the concepts of original artistic creation and the idea of aesthetic ownership (Stein and Busse, 2009, p.193). For this research, it is important to remember that we have taken the stance that fan authorship indeed does pose a threat to artist creation as it has caused them to lose ownership or as stated by Stein and Busse, "aesthetic ownership"(Stein and Busse, 2009).

In this work of Louisa Stein and Kristina Busse "Fan authorship signifies a broader cultural transition away from a celebration of originality and newness, of creativity in a vacuum, and of individuals owning creative ideas and styles. Instead, fan authorship reveals a broader cultural embrace of the stimulating limitations of intertextuality" (Stein and Busse, 2009, p.193). In the research of Stein and Busse limitations are something that is emphasized throughout, they believe that although fans create their own works, they are still limited to a set of pre-sets which may include things such as characters and places. It is said that the existence of a source text or source work itself gives the fan authors a framework of requirements which most of the fan authors decide to obey for the most part of creating their own fan works (Stein and Busse, 2009, p.195). I argue then that those fans still follow the core text to some extent, meaning that they are never fully given creative freedom in fanfiction but in saying this they continue to rework creations that don't belong to them.

Looking at the example of *Harry Potter*, for fans to write their own fanfiction they must take into consideration the intricate details regarding the laws and policies and the history of the fictional universe that has been created by J.K Rowling throughout her seven novels as well as the inspiration that can be taken from the films (Stein and Busse, 2009, p.196). Fans may not always adhere to every single detail of the primary source text but they do need to take into consideration that many readers will read their fanfiction with the knowledge of the original source text at the back of their mind and therefore fan authors still need to be careful in how they approach the writing of their fanfiction (Stein and Busse, 2009, p.196). It could therefore be seen that the core text/work is still a vital part of the way fanfiction is written and even though fan writers use their own opinions they must still adhere to the creators' ideas to some minute extent.

It is important to consider that even if a fan author decided to divert completely from the original source text by means of an alternate universe for example, they still need to state that in the description of their work. They therefore are still constrained to the limits of the original source text. "The author's choice to clearly mark a text as "alternate universe" or "constructed reality" signifies notable changes to the reader, thus maintaining the source text as discursive referent" (Stein and Busse, 2009, p.196).Therefore, is can be assumed that although a creative producer is hypothesized

in this research paper to have lost ownership of their own work it can still be seen that to some extent fan authors still have to follow pre-sets created by the author themselves.

Conspiracy Theories in Disney

The link between real world conspiracy theories and fan theories is shown here and it is relevant to this research as it shows that just like people of the real world, fan theorists are always looking for the "deeper meaning" and reasoning behind why something has happened. They always need some sort of explanation and can never take something for what it is at plain sight, they therefore read into things and tend to make assumptions while even going as far as to trying to make sense of something that may not exist. That happens in the real world but it also happens in fictional words, people assume and make up things to fabricate a truth that they wish to see. And for the purpose of this research fans do this to justify their opinions.

It is clear to see from this statement that assumptions are made by the viewers of Disney creations even though these said assumptions have not been proven or stated to be true by the creators themselves. This shows how fans of something tend to make conspiracy theories just like they make fanfictions. Andreea Loana talks about the sexual subliminal messages that are apparent is Disney films in her research paper called *Disney sexual Subliminal.* According to Andreea Loana Disney uses hidden messages in their creative works to portray the notion that "sex sells" (Loana,n.d).This is portrayed in Disney by the use of hidden messages shown in countless Disney movies, for example the Infamous portrayal of the word "sex" written above Simba's head as dust and leaves blowing in the air in *The Lion King* (Loana,n.d). According to E! Magazine, in September of 1996, three Texans filed a lawsuit against Disney whereby they accused the creators producers of placing subliminal sexual messages in certain animated films namely: *The Little Mermaid, Aladdin*, and *The Lion King* (Loana,n.d). It was said that Disney and Buena Vista fired a number of the writers and engineers that were apart construction of these said subliminal messages due to a lawsuit filed against them but charges were later dropped and they were found not guilty (Loana,n.d,p.7). What is interesting about this is that Disney shows guilt by firing these people, I therefore argue that again the viewers have control over the creative producer and once they have made an assumption they don't back down, unfortunately these people suffered the consequences and lost their jobs due to something that wasn't actually fact but rather an assumption about Disney and a fan conspiracy theory.

Appendix B

Consent Form

The Influence of Fandom on a Creative Producer.

Seyurie Moodley

I, ……..., agree to participate in this research project. The research has been explained to me and I understand what my participation will involve. I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below).

I agree that my participation will remain anonymous	YES NO
I agree that the researcher may use anonymous quotes in his / her research report	YES NO
I agree that the interview may be audio recorded	YES NO
I agree that the information I provide may be used anonymously after this project has ended, for academic purposes by other researchers, subject to their own ethics clearance being obtained.	YES NO

…..

…… (signature)
…… (name of participant)
…… (date)

…… (signature)
…… (name of person seeking consent)
…… (date)

Participant Information Sheet

Dear Sir / Madam,

My name is Seyurie Moodley and I am a Masters student in Digital Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. As part of my studies, I must undertake a research project, and I am investigating the influence fandoms have on a Creative Producer under the supervision of Ray

Whitcher. The aim of this research project is to find out how fandom holds an influence on the way in which a story is written.

Being a fan is something that many people are familiar with and I therefore believe that your input would contribute and be very useful to my research project. I will specifically be asking for fans of Harry Potter, Game of Thrones and Rick and Morty to take part in answering this survey as my research is based on these three case studies and therefore the input of these fans will be highly useful.

As part of this project, I would like to invite you to take part in an answering a questionnaire. This activity will involve the answering of a few questions and will take around 5-10 minutes.

There will be no personal costs to you if you participate in this project, you will not receive any direct benefits from participation but there are no disadvantages or penalties if you do not choose to participate or if you withdraw from the study. You may withdraw at any time or not answer any question if you do not want to. The questionnaire will be completely confidential and anonymous as I will not be asking for your name or any identifying information, and the information you give to me will be held securely and not disclosed to anyone else. I will be using a pseudonym (false name) to represent your participation in my final research report. If you experience any distress or discomfort at any point in this process, we will stop the interview or resume another time

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research, feel free to contact me on the details listed below. This study will be written up as a research report which will be available online through the university library website. If you wish to receive a summary of this report, I will be happy to send it to you (optional. The data collected from this research project will be stored in XXXX and will be kept for XXX years. With your permission the data collected from this research project may be used by other researchers (optional). If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the ethical procedures of this study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za

Yours sincerely,

Researcher:
Seyurie Moodley, 1634999@students.wits.ac.za, 0764119397

Supervisor:
Raymond Whitcher, raymond.whitcher@wits.ac.za

Questionnaire/ Survey

This Questionnaire serves the purpose of gaining insight to the ways in which fans interact with the creative producer of a show. It is specifically aimed at the fans of Harry Potter, Rick and Morty and Game of Thrones. The data gathered throughout this process will be voluntary and anonymous and will solely be used to gather information regarding the relationship you, the fans, have with the creative producers and the influence you hold in these fictional worlds.

1.) Do you believe that fans should have a say in the way in which a show is written?

2.) According to Henry Jenkins fandom refers to the social structures and cultural practices created by the most passionately engaged consumers of mass media properties (Jenkins, 2019).
Have you ever been a fan of one of these shows (if YES please state which one/s.)

3.) Fan activities include things such as the creation of fanart, the writing of fanfiction, participating in cosplay, twitter discussions, blogs or even things such participating in alone forums where you discuss things about the fandom.
Have you ever participated in such fan activities or any that may not have been mentioned which you deem valid? (if YES please state which one/s)?

4.) Have you ever produced your own Fan Theory?

a. Have you ever gotten into an intense argument with someone regarding your theory? (If YES please elaborate.)

b. Have you written a fanfiction in which you include you own fan theories.?

c. Have you included your fan theories in a forum/discussion?

d. Have you believed a fan theory (you own or someone else's) to be better than that of the original creative producer)

5.) Have you ever criticised a creative producers work and if so, how? (For example, Twitter rants.)

a. Have you ever signed a petition to instate the remake of a one of these shows?

b. Have you stopped watching a show because you disagreed in the way it was written or because you started to disagree with the producer/ showrunner/ author?

6.) Do you consider yourself a super fan?

a. Do you purchase things such as fan merchandise, buy fan art, bid for props or replicas that were on the show, support fan Patreons, subscribe to channels: Youtube, OnlyFans etc?

b. Do you feel the need to "educate" fans on things they might not be aware of and if so, do you feel as though you are a bigger fan than them?

7.) Do you believe fan theories should be taken into consideration when writing a show?

8.) Do you still believe that fans should have a say in which a show is written or produced and if so please elaborate?

Survey answers

Participant	Question 1: How old are you?
1	19
2	21
3	20
4	21
5	21
6	
7	
8	
9	
10	23
11	20
12	15
13	34
14	22
15	30
16	24
17	28
18	21
19	25
20	22
21	32
22	26
23	27
24	24
25	21
26	38
27	20
28	37
29	17
30	26

31	25
32	22
33	21
34	21
35	21
36	20
37	22

Participant	Question 2: What is your Gender?
1	Male
2	Male
3	Female
4	Male
5	Female
6	Female
7	Female
8	Male
9	Male
10	Female
11	Male
12	Female
13	Male
14	Male
15	Female
16	Male
17	Male
18	Female
19	Female
20	Female
21	Male
22	Male
23	Male
24	Male

25	Male
26	Female
27	Female
28	Male
29	Male
30	Female
31	Female
32	Female
33	Female
34	Male
35	Male
36	Female
37	Female

Participant	Question 3: Do you believe that fans should have a say in the way in which a show is written?
1	No
2	Yes
3	No
4	Yes
5	No
6	No
7	No
8	Yes
9	Yes and no. At the end of the day, the show is the artist's work. Writers, directors etc. should have creative freedom to express themselves. If the show is determined by the fans entirely, it can become somewhat predictable. However, fan's opinions should be taken into consideration, to make them feel acknowledged and that the show is for made for them. I believe that Rick & Morty side characters recur based on viewer response, and memes (e.g. Mr. Meeseeks)
10	Yes
11	Yes
12	No

13	Yeah, but not if it's pushing a political or social agenda at the expense of the story
14	Myabe not how it is written but possibly give input that may be used to improve the show.
15	Yes
16	Yes
17	Yes
18	Yes
19	Yes
20	Yes
21	No
22	Yes
23	Yes
24	Yes
25	Yes
26	Yes
27	No
28	Maybe, as a separate type of series
29	Yes
30	It depends on the show and the source material i think.
31	No
32	No
33	No
34	Yes
35	Yes
36	No
37	No

Participant	Question 4: According to Henry Jenkins fandom refers to the social structures and cultural practices created by the most passionately engaged consumers of mass media properties (Jenkins, 2019). Which of these shows have you been a fan of? (Please select the one which you know the most about)

1	Rick and Morty
2	Harry Potter
3	Rick and Morty
4	Rick and Morty
5	Harry Potter
6	Harry Potter
7	Harry Potter
8	Rick and Morty
9	Game of Thrones
10	Harry Potter
11	Rick and Morty
12	Harry Potter
13	Rick and Morty
14	Harry Potter
15	Harry Potter
16	Harry Potter
17	Rick and Morty
18	Rick and Morty
19	Game of Thrones
20	Harry Potter
21	Rick and Morty
22	Rick and Morty
23	Game of Thrones
24	Game of Thrones
25	Rick and Morty
26	Game of Thrones
27	Harry Potter
28	Rick and Morty
29	Harry Potter
30	Game of Thrones
31	Rick and Morty
32	Harry Potter
33	Rick and Morty

34	Harry Potter
35	Game of Thrones
36	Harry Potter
37	Harry Potter

Participant	Question 5: Fan activities include things such as the creation of fanart, the writing of fanfiction, participating in cosplay, twitter discussions, blogs or even things such participating in online forums where you discuss things about the fandom. Have you ever participated in such fan activities or any that may not have been mentioned which you deem valid? You may list more than one of the above options if you have participated in multiple activities.
1	no not one
2	Yes. I have cosplayed and joined in discussion
3	I have not participated in online fan activities.
4	regular philosophical discussions on Rick's view on the world, often done in person since we didnt have regular internet access
5	Yes
6	Yes, fanart and fanfiction and forums.
7	No
8	No
9	I share memes and jokes about shows on Twitter/my WhatsApp status. I also watch video essays about shows on YouTube
10	Yes, I drew fanart and used to blog.
11	Yes
12	no
13	Too many, DC universe, resident evil , mortal Kombat
14	Cosplay
15	Yes, costuming
16	
17	No

18	No
19	No
20	No
21	Yes. Cosplay
22	Creation of fan art, participating in cosplay, discussions in forums
23	No
24	Yes, I have. Many discussions with friends who shared their views on the topic.
25	Twitter discussions and cosplay.
26	None
27	Yes, fanfiction, fanart, blogs
28	Yes, played online games and drew them in some of my sketches
29	I have being part of Twitter discussions.
30	The most ive done for GoT is shared memes and have live discussions with other people about it. I could say the same for Harry Potter. I enjoyed the material but im not the biggest fan ever. Was late to the party as well.
31	fanart
32	Twitter discussions
33	yes i have just had discussions about the concept of the show
34	I have not participated in those activities
35	None
36	Yes, I have been apart of blogs
37	Yes

Participant	Question 6: Have you ever produced your own Fan Theory?
1	Yes
2	No
3	Yes
4	No
5	Yes
6	Yes
7	No

8	Yes
9	No
10	Yes
11	Yes
12	Yes
13	Yes
14	Yes
15	No
16	Yes
17	No
18	No
19	No
20	No
21	Yes
22	Yes
23	No
24	Yes
25	Yes
26	No
27	Yes
28	Yes
29	Yes
30	Yes
31	Yes
32	No
33	No
34	No
35	No
36	Yes
37	No

Participant	Question 7: Have you ever gotten into an intense argument with someone regarding your theory? (If YES please elaborate.)

1	no
2	
3	No. I have online had in-person discussions about my fan theory in which we talk about fan theories similar to mine but offer different outcomes
4	No
5	No
6	No
7	No
8	No
9	
10	Yes sometimes, for example in comment sections or even in real life. I tried to prove it to them using moments from the films/ shows that I felt supported my argument.
11	Yes, an argument on whether or not some wild theories could be possible or not and if you have conflicting/opposite theories with another person.
12	i have not gotten into an argument
13	No I tend to let the ignorant stay as such
14	Just different points of view that contradicted each other.
15	No
16	Yes we had an intense chat about a Harry Potter theory
17	No
18	
19	No
20	No
21	Yes
22	No
23	No
24	Yes, I believed that the TV series of GoT should have ended with the white walkers completely taking over as they were advantageous in most categories- ie army size, no need to rest or consume food, ability to withstand cold etc.
25	No
26	Yes
27	No
28	Yes GOT, Brandon Stark was a whitewalker king. I still stick by

29	Yes i was i had said that harry potter was immortal and could not die due to the fact that he survived Voldemorts named avada kedavra, but my sister totally disagreed and said that is was because Harry got lucky.
30	No
31	No
32	No
33	no
34	No
35	No
36	Yes, we just debated about certain situations from certain aspects of the show. Each person had their own theory but everyone was passionate about their point of view.
37	

Participant	Question 8: Have you written a fanfiction in which your include you own fan theories?
1	No
2	No
3	No
4	No
5	No
6	Yes
7	No
8	No
9	No
10	No
11	No
12	No
13	No
14	No
15	Yes
16	No
17	No

18	No
19	No
20	Yes
21	No
22	No
23	No
24	No
25	No
26	No
27	Yes
28	No
29	No
30	No
31	No
32	No
33	No
34	No
35	No
36	No
37	No

Participant	Question 9: Have you included your fan theories in a forum/discussion?
1	No
2	No
3	No
4	No
5	No
6	Yes
7	No
8	No
9	Yes
10	No

11	No
12	Yes
13	No
14	Yes
15	Yes
16	No
17	No
18	No
19	No
20	No
21	No
22	Yes
23	No
24	No
25	No
26	Yes
27	Yes
28	No
29	Yes
30	No
31	No
32	No
33	No
34	No
35	No
36	No
37	No

Participant	Question 10: Have you believed a fan theory (your own or someone else's) to

	be better than that of the original creative producer?
1	Yes
2	Yes
3	Yes
4	Yes
5	Yes
6	Yes
7	No
8	Yes
9	Yes
10	Yes
11	Yes
12	Yes
13	Yes
14	No
15	Yes
16	Yes
17	No
18	Yes
19	No
20	Yes
21	Yes
22	No
23	No
24	Yes
25	Yes
26	Yes
27	Yes
28	Yes
29	Yes
30	Yes

31	Yes
32	Yes
33	No
34	No
35	Yes
36	Yes
37	Yes

Participant	Question 11: Have you ever criticized a creative producers work and if so, how? (For example, Twitter rants.)
1	no
2	Conversation with friends
3	No I have not
4	i have but i was mainly through a rant with another person, i couldn't take my opinions online since i couldn't access internet on a regular. Data is expensive
5	No
6	Yeah, sure. To friends, mostly or on fandom-related subreddits/youtube videos etc.
7	No
8	No
9	Yes. I ranted and retweeted other people's rants about Netflix's Fate the Winx Saga.
10	Yes. On a blog.
11	Yes. From lazy writing to predictability, I've criticized it while in discussion with friends over social media and in person.
12	no
13	Most video game movies suck , accept animated ones. The justice League movie the non Snyder cuz oooh and Masters of the universe
14	No
15	No
16	Yes the ending of Rick and morty just didn’t not relate to anything
17	No
18	
19	No
20	No

21	Yes. In my head :)
22	No
23	No
24	Yes. Not on online platforms but definitely amongst friends and family.
25	Yes,as I believed that the Episodic way that Rick and Morty is produced does not give the characters depth.
26	No
27	Yes, verbally
28	Not really criticise but always love when it's their style. So I get excited when I see a typical Scene a producer loves using. Ie Tarantino music, staying blood. Taika watiti, cheese comedy and brilliant cgi - he also does cameos. He's the rock guy in Thor.
29	No I have not.
30	Not the biggest user of social media so again I've done it more in live discussions. I definitely have, I especially tend to make comments about the writing and such when watching the series. For game of thrones, I expressed my displeasure and frustration at the way the characters kind of stopped doing anything towards the end of season 7. They became shallow and almost one dimensional and a lot of the build up from previous seasons was either resolved in a rush or not at all.
31	No
32	Yes, through creative essays and Twitter rants
33	yes. mostly through random conversations with friends and sometimes twitter.
34	Yes, mainly in discussions with people
35	Yes, YouTube and Instagram comments
36	No
37	

Participant	Question 12: Have you ever signed a petition to instate the remake of a one of these shows?
1	No
2	No
3	No

4	Yes
5	No
6	No
7	No
8	Yes
9	Yes
10	No
11	Yes
12	No
13	No
14	No
15	No
16	No
17	No
18	No
19	No
20	Yes
21	No
22	No
23	No
24	No
25	No
26	No
27	No
28	No
29	No
30	No
31	No
32	No
33	No
34	No
35	No
36	No

37	No

Participant	Question 13: Have you stopped watching a show because you disagreed in the way it was written or because you started to disagree with the producer/ showrunner/ author?
1	Yes
2	No
3	Yes
4	Yes
5	Yes
6	Yes
7	Yes
8	No
9	Yes
10	No
11	No
12	No
13	Yes
14	No

15	No
16	Yes
17	No
18	Yes
19	No
20	No
21	No
22	Yes
23	No
24	Yes
25	Yes
26	Yes
27	No
28	Yes
29	Yes
30	No
31	No
32	No
33	No
34	No
35	Yes
36	No
37	Yes

Participant	Question 14: Do you consider yourself a super fan?
1	No
2	No
3	No
4	No
5	Yes

6	No
7	No
8	No
9	No
10	Yes
11	Yes
12	Yes
13	Yes
14	Yes
15	Yes
16	Yes
17	No
18	No
19	No
20	No
21	Yes
22	No
23	No
24	No
25	Yes
26	Yes
27	Yes
28	Yes
29	Yes
30	No
31	Yes
32	Yes
33	No
34	No
35	Yes
36	Yes
37	No

Participant	Question 15: Do you purchase things such as fan merchandise, buy fan art, bid for props or replicas that were on the show, support fan Patreons, subscribe to channels: Youtube, OnlyFans etc?
1	Yes
2	Yes
3	No
4	Yes
5	Yes
6	Yes
7	Yes
8	No
9	No
10	Yes
11	Yes
12	Yes
13	Yes
14	Yes
15	Yes
16	Yes
17	No
18	Yes
19	No
20	Yes
21	Yes
22	Yes

23	No
24	Yes
25	Yes
26	Yes
27	No
28	Yes
29	Yes
30	No
31	Yes
32	Yes
33	Yes
34	No
35	No
36	Yes
37	No

Participant	Question 16: Do you feel the need to "educate" fans on things they might not be aware of and if so, do you feel as though you are a bigger fan than them?
1	No
2	No
3	No
4	No
5	No
6	No
7	No
8	No

9	No
10	Yes
11	No
12	Yes
13	No
14	No
15	Yes
16	Yes
17	No
18	No
19	No
20	Yes
21	Yes
22	No
23	No
24	Yes
25	Yes
26	Yes
27	Yes
28	Yes
29	Yes
30	No
31	No
32	Yes
33	No
34	No
35	No
36	No
37	No

Participant	Question 17: Do you believe fan theories should be

	taken into consideration when writing a show?
1	No
2	No
3	No
4	Yes
5	No
6	No
7	No
8	Yes
9	Yes
10	Yes
11	Yes
12	No
13	Yes
14	Yes
15	Yes
16	Yes
17	Yes
18	Yes
19	No
20	Yes
21	Yes
22	Yes
23	Yes
24	Yes
25	Yes
26	Yes
27	No
28	No
29	Yes
30	Yes

31	No
32	No
33	Yes
34	Yes
35	Yes
36	No
37	Yes

Participants	Question 18: Do you believe fan theories should be taken into consideration when writing a show?
1	no
2	yes
3	no
4	yes (Theories)
5	yes
6	no
7	no
8	yes
9	yes
10	yes
11	no
12	no
13	yes
14	yes
15	yes
16	yes
17	yes
18	yes
19	no

20	no
21	no
22	no
23	yes
24	yes
25	yes
26	yes
27	no
28	yes
29	yes
30	yes
31	no
32	no
33	no
34	yes
35	yes
36	no
37	no

Participants	Question 19: Do you still believe that fans should have a say in which a show is written or produced and if so please elaborate?
1	no mainly because the original ideas of the show are reason you might fall inlove with it yes the show might fluctuate, evolve and change and the new ideas introduced might not be see as good but most of the time the core idea is still there ,the show might have been trying to carry a specific message out ,so all in all maybe the way it is written might not be good for certain fans but that does not necessarily mean fans should be given the power as it may make the show worse than what the bad ending or show already was

2	Some consideration should be taken but not to the point where it ends up negatively affecting the show
3	No, because a creative producer brings forward an idea or a concept in which the fans consume as a result consumers become fans because they like the content that is being shown to them. In a way fan theories and ideas should not completely be disregarded as they may provide interesting ideas for creative producers to possibly incorporate into their content.
4	Yes and no, i believe if the theory is good then i don't see a reason why they shouldn't take it into consideration when writing, as long as they give credit to the fan if they use it.
5	The producers and writers should take the opinions of fans into account while writing and producing it as to not disappoint fans.
6	Are you ready for a rant? I think it might be appropriate given this survey's subject matter :) A fair warning: most of this uses Star Trek as an example - because it's the fandom I'm most involved in at the moment and is also the mother of all fandoms. *inhales* Not if it's still being made by its original creators, such as George Lucas or Gene Roddenberry. Most fanfiction/fan theory is headcanon garbage, or cringy self-inserts (even the good ones, or older stuff like the Star Trek novelisations). Fans should appreciate creative products for what they are, or just leave them be and join other fandoms. The whole point of a fandom is to take something that already exists and explore it further, though that doesn't give fans (who are generally inexperienced in media and writing) to undermine a

	show creator's decisions. This doesn't even take into account that fans can hardly agree on anything that makes everyone happy - there isn't really a way to break this cycle. I think this is because there are various sub-fandoms within fandoms. I'm not sure how familiar you are with the Star Trek fandom, but it's quite an interesting rabbit hole to fall into. Anyway, you either like something or you don't - and if you don't then you can rant on a forum or write some fanfiction and post it online (that's what makes fandoms fun in the first place). The only time where I feel like fan complaints to this extent are legitimate is when awful/unnecessary remakes and adaptations are made (like the Star Trek reboot films, because they've completely lost what the franchise is supposed to be about, its characters, etc.) JJ Abrahams is the only person in the entertainment industry who managed to profit off his poorly written fanfiction and lens flare - and his reputation among fans has suffered the consequences. Though, this doesn't mean that his films shouldn't exist or should be undermined to the point where others tell him 'how it should be done because I have a limited edition Mr Spock action figure, so I somehow have authority over how someone else tells stories'. I think that if fans want to change the way a franchise is written/produced (like Abrahams), it's a sign that they might have some interest in the industry and should pursue that. Then, they could look at some licensing opportunities to make their ideas come to life. Another great alternative is to rip it off and make a parody - something you can call your own. That's what I've done - because I don't have money for Star Trek

	licensing, even though it costs a bag of peanuts. Treading through a fandom's most sacred texts is dangerous, so it's best to just call it an influence and make something on your own. There's also quite a bit of potential in the webseries/parody industry itself, which gives fans an interesting platform for their ideas (I suggest checking out Star Trek Continues). Otherwise, if something isn't an interactive, collaborative storytelling experience (because it hasn't been designed that way) then it should be left up to the creator to decide what to do. Nobody tells fanfic writers how to finish their stories (sacrilege!) so why would you do it to a show's creators? A fandom's greatest power comes down to the box office. They determine whether a concept succeeds and continues, or fails and gets buried beneath a pile of bad remakes and poor adaptations. In the end, I think that this influence is far more impactful than anything else. *exhales* Anyway, I hope this managed to help you in some way. I don't think they run these sorts of things anymore, but Star Trek was well known for running fan-based writing competitions and the like - this could also be an avenue to look into. There's a lovely film called 'Please Stand By' that highlights Star Trek's influence on fans in ways that challenge their creativity and inspire their own growth. Although this all seems way too nerdy and space-y, I think the film's message can be applied to all sorts of franchises and really speaks to what you're trying to prove here. Thanks for such a fun survey!
7	No
8	Yes. But not total control. Fans can be quite insightful and creative so writers and creators should at least take

	notice of fans and their theories and get some inspiration. After all it is still the creators or producers work
9	Yes. Fans by definition like the show they are watching. They therefore want the best for it, so if they see room for improvement, they should articulate it and it should be considered. This doesn't mean that fans are always right, there's a reason why writers/producers/directors etc. are professionals. Again shows are made for audiences, not solely for the creators.
10	Yes, however, only to a certain extent. Some creators have a vision that shouldn't be changed just because fans don't agree with them. I think that fans should be allowed to express how they feel about the show, what they would like to see or how they would have preferred things to be, but they should also understand that at the end of the day it is the work of the creator. With that being said, creators should know that their work is only popular because of their fan base and should at least consider what the fandom says and try to engage with them. They should also anticipate any sort of criticism that comes their way if they do something that they know their fandom will not appreciate.
11	Not necessarily to have a say, although I believe creative writers/producers should take into account fan theories as it makes for a greater feeling of satisfaction and fulfillment as well as the feeling of being heard out and appreciated by the creators of shows said person is such a big fan of and is so influenced by.
12	no as the producer already had an idea in mind and changing it might influence the rest of the show
13	Yes , but as a community. Best example in an earlier run of batman , the first robin I think . Dick Grayson was kidnapped by the joker and fans had to decide weather

	or not the joker killed him ... But also I feel that original content should be pushed more , because everything started becoming a remake of sequel the toxicity on both sides make it bad . The benefit Is that it forces you to find something new . Cue the invincible fandom
14	Yes. There is the possibility that the producer can use the input to make the story even better.
15	Yes, a lot of people become a fan either through reading or watching a movie. Therefore allowing a fan to express which way it should be, stats will show which area is more valuable to the fans
16	Yes we are the reason the show still operated and runs
17	Yes , as there opinion can keep a show on track or even create a more interactive and intriguing view in a show
18	Fans spend so much time watching many seasons of certain series just to be disappointed by the ending. Fans should be allowed to decide how the show ends when we're the reason the show is such a big hit.
19	No
20	No
21	Nope.
22	Maybe fans shouldn't get a say but I believe their theories should be looked at by the creative producers.
23	Yes
24	To an extent.- Fans should be able to have a say and producers should consider relevant theories that make sense, are well thought out and would add value to the overall outcome of the show. However, I do understand that the show is created from the producer's vision and is theirs ultimately. Therefore, the producer should have a final say in what goes into the show. Having said that , they should also try an incorporate and listen to their fans to an extent.

25	Yes,as ultimately the fans make the show. Fans should feel like their theories and predictions are valid as it connects them with the characters at hand.
26	Yes
27	No, creative control should be dictated by intention not audience
28	I see your argument. But I think this is a new type of genre, ie social interactive series/shows. I do think it's something that is inevitable as reality shows are, people realise they can be creative and have platforms to speak, and this is where the platform of YouTubers and similar come. They've already started creating content directed by their viewers.I think it's just a matter of time. Ps a group of fans would have never been able to create what Tolkien did. It's came from his personal experience and it was his way of expressing himself. On the other hand. I do believe the avengers was influenced by its audience. There were too many fans to dissapoint. But for lesser movies and shows. Maybe I would agree with you. Ie movies with bad endings.
29	Yes I think fans should have a major role In the way the show is written. A perfect example of this would be the latest spiderman movie , where many people came up with a theory that all the spidermans would be in one movie and it soo happend that writers listened to the fans and this iconic scene may have led the movie to be one of the most successful movies ever produced.
30	I think so, but mainly because I feel there may be some unique or interesting plot twists or storytelling moments that could arise from fan theories.
31	Nope
32	No

33	not really. i feel like the anticipation of not knowing what may happen is more fun than having a say in how the show should go on.
34	Yes, it makes it more enjoyable to watch
35	Yes, while producers and writers might be talented and have ideas, there can be endless amounts of fans who have better ideas which others would prefer over the ideas of the producers/writers. Therefore, I think it is important to incorporate fan service/ideas into popular shows.
36	No, theories make things more fun but the producer should follow their own artistic ways.
37	No

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List of Figures

Figure 2.2.1: Star Wars Fans by Andrew Dobson

Figure 2.15.1: Professor Snape with time turner and invisibility cloak about to go back in time to kill Voldemort. Timestamp (3:10)

Figure 2.15.2: Snape Arrives at the orphanage Voldemort lived in as a young wizard. Timestamp (3:32).

Figure 2.15.3: Voldemort (Tom Riddle) tells Dumbledore all the evil things he is capable of. Timestamp (3:35).

Figure 2.15.4: As young Voldemort tells Dumbledore what he can do Snape uses the invisibility cloak to use the deadly spell against him, inevitably killing him before he could become the "Dark Lord". Timestamp (3:43).

Figure 2.15.5: Snape explains to Dumbledore why he killed Voldemort. Timestamp (4:00).

Figure 2.19.1: Hierarchy showing the levels of fans in a fandom.

Figure 3.1: Flow Chart showing the proposed six-phase theory.

Figure 4.1.1: Chart showing how the number of viewers increased for Game of Thrones each season was released

Figure 4.1.2 showing a meme image of the progression of the *Game of Thrones* television series' narrative quality

Figure 4.1.3: J.K Rowling denies fan theory about Ron and Dumbledore being the same person

Figure 4.1.4: J.K Rowlings tweet to fans confirming Dumbledore as 'Death'.

Figure 4.1.5: Rick breaks the fourth wall.

Figure 4.1.6: Rick holding baby Morty.

Figure 4.1.7: Justin Roilands response to a fan theory

Figure 4.1.8: Verbally abusive fan responding to Dan Harmon's tweets via twitter.

Figure 4.1.9: Dan Harmon's response to the verbally abusive fan.

Figure 4.2.1: Which Fandom are you a part of?

Figure 4.2.2: Do fans believe they should have a say in which a show is written?

Figure 4.2.3: Fan activity participation

Figure 4.2.3.1: Fan activities in the Rick and Morty fandom.

Figure 4.2.3.2: Fan activities in the Harry Potter fandom.

Figure 4.2.3.3: Fan Activities in the Game of Thrones fandom

Figure 4.2.4: Fan created theories.

Figure 4.2.5: Intense Arguments amongst fans.

Figure 4.2.6: Have you written your own fanfiction.

Figure 4.2.7: Included theories in forums or discussions.

Figure 4.2.8: Believe own theory is better than what the creative producer wrote.

Figure 4.2.9: Criticising creative producer's work.

Figure 4.2.10: Signed a petition.

Figure 4.2.11: Stopped watching a show.

Figure 4.2.12: Do you consider yourself a superfan

Figure 4.2.12.1: Game of Thrones Superfans

Figure 4.2.12.2: Rick and Morty Superfans.

Figure 4.2.12.3: Harry Potter Superfans

Figure 4.2.13: Purchasing Merchandise

Figure 4.2.14: Educating other fans

Figure 4.2.15: Fan theories taken into consideration by creative producers.

Figure 4.2.16: Do you still believe fans should have a say

Image References

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List of Tables

Table 1: Fanfiction.net

Table 2: Wattpad

Table 3: Archive of Our Own

Table 4: recorded number of book sales made by each novel.

Table 5: Number of Males and Females in each respective fandom.

Table 6: How each fandom believes whether they should have a say in which a show is written

Table 7: Fan theories created amongst separate fandoms.

Table 8: Intense arguments amongst fans of each individual fandom.

Table 9: Individual fandom fanfiction writing.

Table 10: Included theories in forms or discussion of each individual fandom.

Table 11: Do you believe your theories is better than the creative producer in each fandom.

Table 12: Criticising creative producers work in each fandom.

Table 13: Signing a petition in the individual fandoms.

Table 14: Stopped watching a show in each fandom.

Table 15: Purchasing Merchandise in each fandom.

Table 16: Educating fans in each fandom.

Table 17: If fan theories should be taken into account in each respective fandom.

Table 18: Do you still believe fans should have a say in which a show is written in each fandom.

Endnotes

[i] According to an article by Thomas J Law, Reddit is something that is hard to define as it has many facets, but it can be seen as a platform that combines web content, social news and therefore it is a forum and a social network. Registered members can contribute to the site with content such as images, text, videos, and links. All content on the site can be voted up or down by other members (Law, 2021). The upvoting and freedom for fans that this platform enables will assist this research process as it shows what people engage with more and therefore, I will be able to gage how people feel about certain fan theories and what is popular in regard to one another.

Twitter is a social networking and microblogging online service that allows users to send and receive text-based messages or posts of up to 140 characters called "tweets." (Technopedia;2020). In this research Twitter is a valuable tool to use as it is easily accessible to fans all over the world and is also a way in which they can directly communicate with showrunners who use the platform to update the fans of the show for marketing purposes.

Wattpad, Fanfiction.net and Archive of Your Own according to Urban dictionary are websites; a multi-multi-fandom archive for fanfic of all fandoms, pairings, ratings, and genres. Fiction quality ranges from poor to excellent, by authors of all levels of experience and talent. Fanfiction sites are used to house original fiction as

well, before spawning FictionPress, where all previously submitted original fic is now stored. These websites will be useful for this research as they are completely written by the fans and therefore, they write about what they would have wanted to happen in the creator's version. They in turn create communities who agree that their story is better, and this starts to prove my theory.

[ii] Henry Jenkins Coined the term Transmedia storytelling in 2007 defining it as "a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story" (Jenkins, 2007). Transmedia storytelling in this instance is an integral part of fan practices as it shows that there is no one single source for information in regard to a franchise, fans may gain information from books, movies, fanfiction, forums, blogs and even the instance of conversating with other fans. For the purpose of this research the concept of transmedia storytelling is therefore a showcase of the way in which fans share and distribute information amongst a fandom. In the instance of *Harry Potter* an example of this is the *Lexicon* written by a fan which J.K Rowling herself used as a reference guide when writing the books.