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**Citation: Turner, Simon (2016) Yaoi online : the queer and affective practices of a yaoi manga fan community. PhD thesis, Birkbeck, University of London.**

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***Yaoi* Online: The queer and affective practices  
of a *yaoi* manga fan community**

Thesis by  
Simon Turner

Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
In the Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies

Birkbeck College, University of London  
London, United Kingdom

2015

## **Declaration**

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature.

The work was done under the guidance of Dr Joel McKim, Dr Nobuko Anan, and Dr Jonathan Mackintosh.

Simon Turner

## Abstract

This thesis examines the queer and affective aspects of an online *yaoi* fan community. *Yaoi* is a genre of Japanese manga focussing on homoerotic/homosexual themes. A key point of interest about *yaoi* is that it is largely created by and for women. Set within the context of *yaoi* fan studies, this thesis utilises queer theory to investigate how a diverse group of fans comes together in a fan community on the internet in order to explore alternative identities and develop new relationships with like-minded others. According to David Halperin, queer is “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (cited in Sullivan 2003, p.43). I queer *yaoi* studies and suggest that its fandom is not a homogenous group of heterosexual female fans as has become customarily thought. Expanding on the work of other scholars, I combine original ethnographic research in *AarinFantasy* (<http://www.aarinfantasy.com>), a *yaoi* manga community to demonstrate how, for many fans, an online community is a place to explore and discuss queer alternatives to heteronormative gender and sexuality. I also discuss how members of *AarinFantasy* invest into the site through affective connections with other fans. By creating and maintaining valued friendships with others members create not only a queer space but also a space where they feel accepted as *yaoi* fans. Relationships in the community are formed and maintained through communication that is grounded in the fans’ experiences and the contextual state that *yaoi* manga has in their lives.

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## **Acknowledgements**

Completing a PhD is very much a journey – one that has many highs and lows. Having now arrived ‘there’, I am able to sit here in my office in Bangkok and look back and reflect on my journey that has led me from student to lecturer, taken me to other side of the world for my first job, and thank all those who have met me along the way.

First of all I would like to thank my family – my partner Kevin, mother Janet, father David, and sister Joanne – they have all been along this journey with me and have never forgotten to simply ask how things were going and offer me a support in the form of tea and snacks.

To my partner Kevin, who has always believed in me – I love you and want to say thank you for putting up with the bad days and for always being there. To my parents and sister, although we have been in different cities I am grateful for the constant support throughout the three years of this journey.

I would also like to thank my supervisors over the past three years, Dr. Joel McKim, Dr. Nobuko Anan, and Dr. Jonathan Macintosh for their invaluable advice that has guided my research and opened my eyes to fascinating areas of study.

Finally, I thank the British Association of Japanese Studies for awarding me the John Crump Studentship which has supported the final stages of this thesis.

## Introduction

### Research Context

When talking about a genre of manga that depicts male homosexuality, it is often the case that others understand why I, as a gay man, should have an interest in manga that depicts gay men. The connection between my sexual orientation and assumed sexual interests finds a comfortable home in this manga in the minds of others. However, when I explain that this genre of manga is created and consumed mostly by heterosexual women I am asked why straight women are reading about gay men. This is representative of a fundamental curiosity that is piqued when an individual's assumed sexuality does not fit within normative parameters. This has indeed been a key focus of academic research into *yaoi* manga however this thesis aims to understand why *any* fan, not just heterosexual women, is fascinated by the genre. In this introduction I will define important terms, the development of *yaoi*, and present the research questions. As part of the introduction I have included the literature review in which I develop a theoretical framework to analyse the online community, *AarinFantasy*. Finally, I will outline the overall structure of the thesis.

#### *AarinFantasy*

*AarinFantasy* is an online *yaoi* manga fan community and, based on my own research and the assertions of the creator, it is the largest English language *yaoi* fan community online founded in November 2004. In the first years of its existence it supported no community features but has since developed them which has fostered communication between the fans.

The creator of the site, Aarin, is a 30 year old Malaysian female and the name of the site is a combination of the founder's name and the word 'fantasy' taken from her favourite game series title, *Final Fantasy*.

Aarin states that the purpose of the site is to:

provide yaoi fans a database in which they can find fellow yaoi fans...I was determined to find every single yaoi anime and manga out there and that formed my "yaoi collection". Satisfied with my collection which took me many months to download them, I share them to others because I know how hard for anyone to get it. (Aarin)

According to Aarin's post in the *Rules and Guidelines* thread<sup>1</sup>, all members must be older than sixteen; however there are sections that are only viewable by fans who are older than eighteen. This is not easily enforced as there is no security against fans entering a false age, but if discovered a fan will be permanently banned from the site.

I made the decision to study *AarinFantasy* and *yaoi* manga based on my personal interest in the *yaoi* genre. Whilst on my year abroad in Japan as part of my undergraduate studies I was introduced to *yaoi* by a friend and began to read her collection. It was some years later in my postgraduate studies that my interest took an academic turn after reading various studies that investigated issues of gender and sexuality in *yaoi* (Levi, McHarry and Pagliassotti 2010; McHarry 2011). Like previous research, I also found it interesting that so many heterosexual women were interested in reading about homosexual men. As a result I went online and simply used a search engine with the key words 'yaoi' and 'fans' and I found *AarinFantasy*.

Although I focus on *AarinFantasy* in this thesis, it is not the only website dedicated to *yaoi* manga. A simple search for "yaoi manga community" via Google returns a

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f12/announcement-main-forum-rules-tos.html> [last accessed April 23rd 2015]

possible 18 400 results in English alone<sup>2</sup>. Whilst we may assume that many of these results will not be community sites it is also possible to assume that many are. There are many pages of “top ten” sites dedicated to *yaoi* manga which include *AnimeA*, *Mangago*, *JuneManga*, *Yaoi Haven*, *YaoiOtaku*, *MangaEden*, *MangaHere*, *Yaoi Club*, *TenManga*, *Batoto*, and which often feature *AarinFantasy*. Not all the sites that make it into the lists are dedicated to *yaoi* manga however; those such as *AnimeA*<sup>3</sup>, *MangaEden*<sup>4</sup>, and *MangaHere*<sup>5</sup> are not specifically aimed at *yaoi* but are general anime and manga fan sites with sections dedicated to *yaoi* manga.

After browsing some of these general sites I can see that their purpose appears to differ from community sites such as *AarinFantasy* in that they tend to be more dedicated to solitary reading activities with few to no community features such as comment boxes.

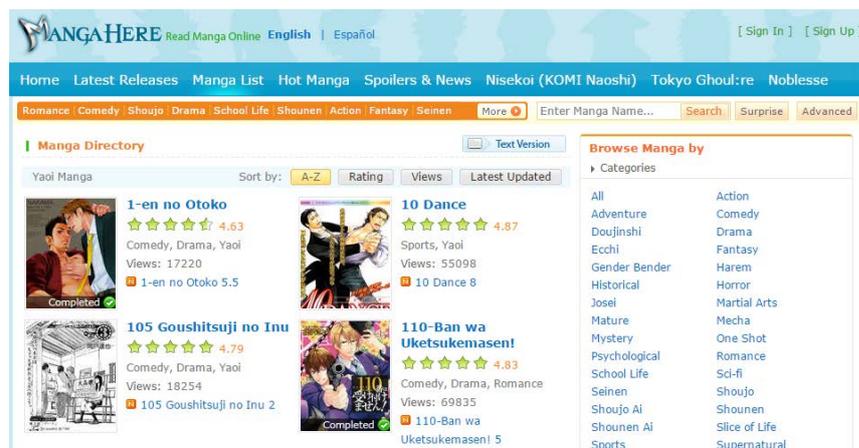


Figure 1: MangaHere Homepage

<sup>2</sup> Search made on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2015

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.animea.com/> [last accessed April 23rd 2015]

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.mangaeden.com/> [last accessed April 23rd 2015]

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.mangahere.co/> [last accessed April 23rd 2015]

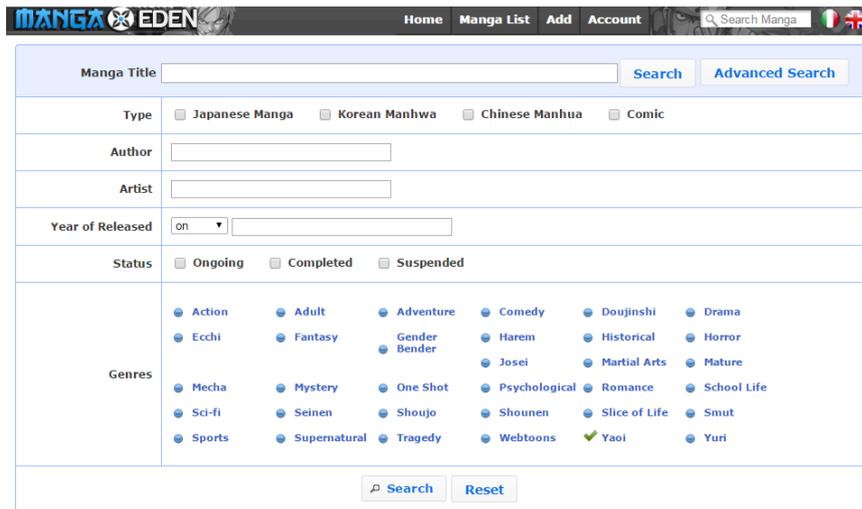


Figure 2: MangaEden Homepage

Other prominent *yaoi* sites featured in the lists focus on commercial sales of licensed manga such as *JuneManga*<sup>6</sup> which takes its name from one of the first terms used to refer to *yaoi* and Boys' Love manga, *Junemono* [thing of *June*] which in turn takes its name from the first Japanese manga dedicated to *yaoi* manga in Japan, *June*.



Figure 3: JuneManga Homepage

In figure 3 there is a link in the upper right hand corner to view the forums indicating it has community features, however when clicking on this link the user is taken to an external site at *digitalmanga.com* which explains in a popup that the page is not found and community sections have all been removed. *JuneManga* does have a blog section

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.junemanga.com/> [last accessed April 23rd 2015]

but this is dedicated to updates and information regarding releases and offers no support for *yaoi* fans to interact with one another. Overall this website is dedicated to selling and promoting *yaoi* manga via its parent company Digital Manga, Inc. (DMI) which focusses on the “importation and preparation of anime, manga, and related merchandise”.<sup>7</sup>

Although I have not conducted an in-depth analysis of other *yaoi* fan sites, it appears that *AarinFantasy* is one of the most popular in terms of what it offers and membership numbers. It is also one of the longest running active fan sites exemplified by the fact that a thread in a titled *Favourite BL/Yaoi Site*<sup>8</sup>, started in April 2004 with the last posting dated 28<sup>th</sup> February 2015. I found that many of the links offered when the thread first started are now dead and no longer active. According to the users in this thread *AarinFantasy* “offers everything [they] need” thus covering the various community features such as fan art, fan fiction, forums, and games amongst others with fans stating that “this site of course is the top for *yaoi*”. Other posters allude to technical superiority “I also have an account...on [www.yaoiotaku.com](http://www.yaoiotaku.com)/forums and they/we are doing the same things that the mods and staff here do, though not as quickly, unfortunately”. The site not only offers its member a much broader range of activities but does so quicker than other sites. The level of activity is an additional reason why I chose *AarinFantasy* over other community *yaoi* fan sites such as *Yaoi Haven* and which I will discuss in the methodology.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.digitalmanga.com/about/> [last accessed April 23rd 2015]

<sup>8</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f28/t20904-favorite-boys-love-yaoi-p18.html> [last accessed April 23rd 2015]

*What is yaoi?*

In Japan, the market for manga is highly compartmentalised with different genres segregated by age and sex. *Shōjo* [girls'] manga tends to focus on romance and is targeted at young girls, *shōnen* [boys'] manga, on the other hand, details adventure and action targeted at young boys. *Seinen* [adult] manga caters for a mature market and its storylines are more serious, they might include themes of office politics or the average working life of adult men and women.

*Yaoi* has been considered part of the *shōjo* genre due to the target audience being young women. The first *shōjo* manga with narrative that was specifically written with a female audience in mind is believed to be *Princess Knight* published in 1953 by Tezuka Osamu. It is about a cross-dressing princess who, as the only child of the king and queen, must present herself as the prince, she hides her sex from others because, as a female, she cannot inherit the throne. In the end, she marries a 'real' prince and "reclaims her femininity" as her husband becomes the King (Schodt and Tezuka 1983, pp.95-6).

It was men who wrote early *shōjo* manga such as *Princess Knight*, but the entrance of female manga artists in the 1960-70s led to changes in themes and characters. Female artists such as Hagio Moto and Takemiya Keiko fundamentally changed *shōjo* manga by introducing *shōnen-ai* known in English as Boys' Love (BL). BL manga may range from the romantic to the sexually explicit and like other manga genres is sold openly in Japanese bookshops and convenience stores. The material may be explicit but genitalia and scenes of graphic sex are often censored or blurred out. Originally, all BL manga was called *June-mono* named after *June*, the first magazine dedicated to

the genre, but as it became more mainstream it became known widely as BL (Mizoguchi 2008, p.55).

The early artists are often referred to as the *24 nen gumi* [year 24 group], also known as the ‘Forty-Niners’, which refers to a group of manga artists all born in or around 1949 (*Shōwa* 24 in the traditional Japanese calendar). There is no official membership of this group and not all members were born in 1949 but those often related to this group are Takemiya Keiko (born 1950), Hagio Moto (born 1949), Ikeda Ryoko (born 1947), and Aoike Yasuko (born 1948). Key titles of this new sub-genre of girls’ manga are *Tōma no Shinzō* [The Heart of Thomas] by Hagio Moto, which ran from 1974 to 1975 and *Kaze to Ki no Uta* [The Poem of the Wind and Trees] which ran from 1976 to 1984 by Takemiya Keiko.

According to Schodt and Tezuka, this new genre of manga usually depicted two young boys in a European or Western setting and often ended tragically (1983 p.120). Later, BL manga began to change from historical and overtly romantic European settings. Wakuni Akisato, though not a member of the *24 nen gumi* (being born in 1960), provides an example of BL manga that depicts stories set in contemporary times. For example, her *Nemureru mori no binan* [The Sleeping Male Beauty in the Woods] (1986) is set in Tokyo and New York during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s (Lunsing 2006, np). It was also the 1980s that saw the birth of BL *dōjinshi*. *Dōjinshi* refers to self-published BL work and is made using characters from commercial series and published privately by fans distributed through channels such as manga conventions. *Dōjinshi* that took male characters from existing commercial manga and appropriated them in homoerotic contexts became known as *yaoi*. *Yaoi* refers to the Japanese acronym for *Yama Nashi Ochi Nashi Imi Nashi* [No Climax, No Point, No Meaning] which emphasises the lack of detailed storylines in favour of sexually explicit art

featuring well-known characters. In some Western contexts, *yaoi* has become a blanket term that refers to all Japanese works which contain male homoerotic. From this point on ‘*yaoi*’ is the term used to describe the genre of manga that is the focus of the online community examined unless otherwise specified.

It is difficult to give a comprehensive description of *yaoi* manga, such as the types of stories that are popular however the focus of the relationship is almost exclusively on that between two male youths who are often referred to as *bishounen* [beautiful boys]. These boys are often so beautiful that they are at times considered more beautiful than women which has led some to suggest that *yaoi* “enables its consumers to actualize ‘aesthetic experience’ (Zanghellini 2009, p.169). Normally, the relationship in *yaoi* manga is depicted via one of the genres most well-known tropes, that of the *seme* and *uke* relationship. The *seme*, or ‘attacker’ is the dominant insertive partner in the relationship whilst the *uke*, or ‘receiver’ is, as the title would suggest, the passive receptive partner. These terms have their roots in martial arts and have, according to McLelland, often been applied to intimate relationships in Japan (2006).

Alcardo Zanghellini (2009) writes that “a typical *seme-uke* sexual encounter in *yaoi*...is as far removed from the conventions of western gay male pornography as one could possibly imagine” (p.170). Zanghellini cites the expressions of sex in *yaoi* that differ from his personal opinion of conventional gay sex such as the fact that the *seme* and the *uke* often face one another, the *uke* will not fellate the *seme* which in *yaoi* is considered the job of the *seme* “in contrast to gay pornography, where the bottom is supposed to do the servicing” (p.170). Often the *seme* character will pursue the *uke* with anal sex seen as the ultimate expression of love and how the *seme* successfully ‘conquers’ the *uke*. The older more masculine *seme* character is usually the one to

instigate sexual activities while the younger more slight character will be the receptive *uke* (McLelland 2000, pp.279-80).

The *seme* and *uke* image is an important way for *yaoi* fans to understand the sexual roles of characters before any romantic interaction has taken place between the two. The *seme* character is often depicted as having darker hair, is taller, and often has a broader frame than the *uke* who has lighter hair, a smaller frame, and generally more 'cute'. These visual codes continue to be so prevalent that fans are able to deduce the role of the characters simply by looking at the front cover of manga (Sihombing 2011).

*Why a study of yaoi now?*

According to Mark Duffett, part of understanding fandom is "identifying paths not taken, and returning to marginalized ideas or aspects of fandom" (2013, p.5). In the introduction to *Understanding Fandom*, Hills puts forward questions that are pertinent to an examination of any fandom:

What if established theoretical frameworks have missed certain elements of fandom? What if fandom can be analysed in new ways? What-ifs enable us to perceive aspects of our...reality which common sense, or dominant systems of meaning and value, tend to set aside. (Hills cited in Duffett 2013, p.5)

*Yaoi* has been the focus of academic study over the past twenty years. Taking Duffett's questions into consideration, this thesis returns to established thoughts on *yaoi* manga fandom and looks at how they can now be "analysed in new ways" (Duffett 2013, p.5).

Firstly, the emergence of the internet means that new avenues of research can be conducted that reach a wider fan base than has been previously possible. Indeed, in the early days of my research I searched for offline *yaoi* fan communities in London but was unable to find any that were active. I then widened my search to include

general anime and manga communities in the hope that these would include some *yaoi* fans; however, this was also unfruitful. I attended conventions with small cards detailing my research to promote the topic amongst potential participants but from this I only managed continued contact with one person. The internet has thus presented itself as an invaluable tool with which to examine the community, and a significant resource for the fans also.

Secondly, I push for a queer analysis of *yaoi* manga and use this thesis as a means to go further than gender normative examinations. The goal of such an analysis is to problematize existing academic readings of gender and sexuality within the *yaoi* fandom. Queer theory examines categories that may at first seem obvious such as ‘man’ and ‘woman’ or ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’. It also calls into question the idea that gender is the same as sex upon which conventional notions of sexuality and identity are built (Hennessy 1993, p.964). Without questioning the discourses that examine *yaoi* manga, the force of analysis is limited and imposes a definition of correct or proper representations of identities that queer theory aims to destabilise.

## **Definition of Research Questions**

In recent years, research on *yaoi* has increased both within Japan (Mizoguchi 2008; Nagaike 2003; Suzuki [Kazuko] 1998) and outside of Japan (Levi, McHarry and Pagliassotti 2010; McHarry 2003; McLelland 2001). The focus is often on issues of gender and sexuality to which there have been two main themes. The first examines the characters’ sexualities and gendered identities, whereas the second concentrates on the gender and sexuality of the fans. In both of these areas studies fixate on how readers look to *yaoi* for sexual freedom and discovery (Kee 2008; McHarry 2003;

McLelland 2001; Suzuki [Kazuko] 1998). These works form the departure point of my thesis which investigates a particular *yaoi* fan community and the activities that take place there. I associate this study with more recent *yaoi* scholarship that incorporates queer theory and examines why some individuals are fans of *yaoi* and what role it plays in their lives.

An additional goal of this thesis is to uncover ways of understanding fan articulations that problematize normative gender identities. Throughout the thesis traditional sexual terms such as ‘heterosexual,’ ‘homosexual,’ ‘bisexual,’ ‘asexual,’ ‘gay,’ and ‘lesbian,’ amongst others, are used, but a concern of mine has been related to the danger of imposing restrictive categories on what is, in fact, a rich and fascinating site of fluid fan experiences and discussions. However, whilst I do not want these terms to be thought of as rigid and exclusive, ignoring them as points of reference and differentiation when discussing fan sexuality would risk indistinctness to the point of losing the significance of *yaoi*’s queer role in the fans’ lives. As fan diversity is an important part of this thesis, the first question I ask is:

- Who are the *yaoi* fans?

This seems like a very basic question, but by asking this crucial question now we can learn much about contemporary *yaoi* fandom. Moreover, this question allows the thesis to examine what the existence of diverse fans may mean for our understanding of the fandom. For example, does the established assertion that homosexual male characters offer a safe vehicle for (hetero)sexual female exploration still hold true if the reader is homosexual, bisexual, or asexual? I do not suggest that existing literature rests on an assumption that all fans are heterosexual and female and that they all have heteronormative desires, indeed recent research has shown how those heterosexual

female fans can at times have quite queer connections with *yaoi* manga such as identifying with or desiring to be homosexual men (Meyer 2010). My only contention is that they focus on heterosexual female fans as the core demographic whilst little has been made to open the fan base to include other sexual and gender identities. Any approach that excludes fan diversity will inevitably only show one face of what is a fandom made up of multiple intersecting identifications, sexualities, and genders that force us to question any normative understanding of not only *yaoi* fandom but also wider conceptualisations of gender and sexuality.

It is also important to emphasise that the participants in my study have been recruited from an online community that is populated by fans who are not Japanese. This is significant as with a few exceptions (Abraham 2010; Donovan 2010; Fermin 2013; Malone 2010) the majority of researchers have focussed on the Japanese context; this is often the case when discussing sexuality and gender as *yaoi* is often described as a means for Japanese women to tackle patriarchy in Japan (McLelland 2000a; 2001). My thesis, however, makes a distinct contribution by adding a non-Japanese context to the research of queer sexualities and genders of *yaoi* fans. I do not wish to make generalisations of *yaoi* fans across the globe, but the introduction of non-Japanese fans to a Japan-focussed area of research queers the fan base by drawing attention to the plurality of fan identities.

As well as understanding who *yaoi* fans are I also ask:

- Why is an online community important to the *yaoi* fans?

According to Joli Jensen, “fandom...is what [fans] do” (1992, p.19). Not only should we understand *who* fans are but also *what* they do and therefore, importantly, *why*.

Simply put, this question seeks to understand how and why the community is important, specifically why *yaoi* fans join and maintain membership in an online fan site.

Henry Jenkins argues that fandom is an “interpretive community” (1992b, p.211) in which fans “feel compelled to talk” (1992b, p.210). He explains “fan reception...does not exist in isolation but is always shaped through input from other fans” (1992b, p.210). The social aspect of fandom that Jenkins discusses stands in contrast to a great deal of *yaoi* scholarship that isolates the fans from one another. However, the existence of sites such as *AarinFantasy* with thousands of members demonstrates that fans are coming together from all over the world. This compels us to ask new questions: ‘what is it that *yaoi* fans do together on these sites?’, ‘what do they discuss?’, ‘why do they discuss these things?’, and ‘why is a fan site necessary for these discussions, why not elsewhere?’ These subsidiary questions work to understand what fans do in the *AarinFantasy* community with other *yaoi* fans.

As the focus of my research is a fan community and its activities, I simultaneously work to understand how the community operates by asking:

- How do fans’ interactions help create a community?

Nessim Watson explains that online communities survive through interaction and bonding between members and if such connections did not exist, the community would also cease to exist (1997). Ultimately I am seeking to understand the possibilities that participation in a *yaoi* community offers or creates. I will inevitably deal with fan feelings, moods, and investments – namely affect and I engage with theories of affect in order to facilitate a discussion about the role that emotion and

intimacy play in the fans' participation. I will argue that fan emotions "do things and they align individuals with communities" (Ahmed 2001, p.11). As Sara Ahmed states, rather than seeing people's emotional states as "psychological dispositions" we need to understand how individuals' emotions work in certain ways to create "collective bodies" (2001 p.11).

By not examining what *yaoi* fans do we ignore the values and meanings that they create and share. In particular my research highlights social expressions of friendship and bonding as they occur online. Previous research focussed on offline ethnography as a means to contact participants and conduct research through manga magazines as well as conventions. However, physical attendance at events can be difficult for reasons such as shame, embarrassment, or simply living too far away. Even buying *yaoi* in person can be too embarrassing for some fans. Therefore, the internet with its ability to provide a feeling of safe distance means that more fans may participate online without fear of shame or stigma.

As will be explained in more depth in the methodology, I originally considered including both online and offline *yaoi* fandom in order to draw comparisons between the two. However, the difficulty in locating accessible *yaoi* fans offline forced me to reconsider and I made the decision to focus online. This decision proved to be a stimulating path and distinguishes this thesis from the work of fandom scholars such as Maria Bakardjieva and Richard Smith (2001) and Christine Hine (2005) who complimented their online research with offline participant visits to verify their findings. As I will examine the importance of an online community specifically and what the internet medium provides the fans, an offline verification check is not

necessary and may in fact compromise the candidness and free expression that fans have when online.

## **Thesis Structure**

My thesis begins with an introduction to *yaoi* manga and the development of *yaoi* studies examining the key themes and highlight areas for advancement. I then consider the literature and theories of queer and affect as means to address issues raised in the first part of the review.

The methodology discusses the research methods I use as well as the rationales for their application. I explore the opinions and thoughts of other researchers who have conducted online research whilst I discuss my methods, the problems I faced, and how I dealt with them. I consider the potential problems of conducting ethnographic research online and the safeguards I made against these. Netnography (Kozinets 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010) is a key methodology I have utilised in this thesis as it allows the researcher to gain access to an intimate community and gain a deep knowledge that comes from being a member of an online community.

Chapter one, as the first empirical chapter in this thesis, offers a description and analysis of *AarinFantasy*'s demographics in terms of age, sex, and location with sexuality discussed in chapter two. Fan sexuality is fluid and in chapter two the purpose is not to place fans into categories, each with their own rationales for *yaoi*, but rather to emphasise the fluidic nature of fan sexuality and the connections between *yaoi* fandom and a critical engagement with sexuality and heteronormativity. The chapter will demonstrate that a key rationale for *yaoi* fandom, common to the variety of fans, is that *yaoi* offers an alternative to heteronormativity in the fans' everyday lives whilst highlighting fantasy and escape as key issues for *yaoi* fans. Together,

chapters one and two demonstrate the variety of individuals that exist and their rationales for being *yaoi* fans. They further illuminate how the existence of different fans impacts upon our understanding of the fandom and disrupts notions of a homogenous group of like-minded heterosexual female fans.

In chapter three, I examine the context of *yaoi* manga in the lives of the fans as part of an analysis into the value that *AarinFantasy* has for its members. This lays the foundation for a study on how the community is established in the next chapter. I begin with a discussion of community that focuses on the value of “communion” (Watson 1997). This approach highlights how a fan community is not necessarily made by a shared interest, but by who fans consider themselves to be. I propose that there is something that binds the fans together that is deeper than a superficial interest in *yaoi* manga. I argue that a large part of the impetus to join an online community is related to how *yaoi* manga attracts certain affects and emotions (Ahmed 2001) such as shame and stigma. Many fans think that they cannot participate freely offline, and must hide *yaoi* from their friends and family. They thus turn to an online community where they may find similar others. In other words, I suggest that community membership on *AarinFantasy* emerges as part of a desire to meet and communicate with other fans within a safe environment.

Chapter four continues the analysis begun in chapter three and focuses on how communication between fans constructs the community through the bonds that they make. This chapter is concerned with issues of affect in terms of how *AarinFantasy* makes the fans feel and how it facilitates such feelings. I suggest that the community is an important place to meet other *yaoi* fans and these digitally mediated relationships. However, they are not removed from the daily lives of the fans and are in fact influenced by issues highlighted in chapter three.

In the conclusion, I re-examine the main research questions and the theoretical implications of my findings. The answer to these questions will be drawn from the empirical chapters. I also reflect upon the strength and limitations of the study and examine potential areas for future research. In particular, I discuss how my examination of the *yaoi* fandom opens new avenues for future research such as how fans view their identities, activities, and communities.

# Literature Review

## Introduction

This review provides the theoretical background to the questions presented in the introduction and will form the basis for the empirical chapters of this thesis. I have selected a subset of literature based on its relevance to the following two core questions:

1. What approaches to *yaoi* have been developed to date and what aspects of them are problematic?
2. How can these problems be remedied in order to allow for innovative approaches towards *yaoi*?

In response to the first question, I summarise two key themes in *yaoi* studies. The first is the belief that *yaoi* is a woman's genre and this discussion concerns representation, what *yaoi* means to its fans, and whether there is any inherent meaning to be read from *yaoi*. Based on this assumption, the second key theme has been an attempt to understand why these women create and consume male homosexual texts.

The second question acts as a reaction to the first. Further research is now required to understand *yaoi* fandom. This study is born from my response to conclusions made in the first half of this review: that current literature neglects the diversity of both the fans themselves and their activities. The lack of focus on fan diversity has led to a narrow understanding of the importance of *yaoi* in fans' lives.

## What Approaches to Yaoi Have Been Developed to Date and What Aspects of Them Are Problematic?

*Female fans as a basis for research*

*The history of fan fiction studies, for the most part, is a history of attempting to understand the underlying motivations of why (mostly) women write fan fiction. (Hellekson and Busse 2006, p.17)*

In the above quote, Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse identify a regular feature of fan fiction analysis that is also common in *yaoi* studies. The vocabulary used when discussing *yaoi* associates itself with identity politics such as “straight women” (Wood 2006), “Japanese girls” (McLelland 2006), and “women’s sexual subculture” (Mizoguchi 2008). Being able to categorise fans is a vital tool for *yaoi* scholars as it has formed the basis for identifiable rationales, but it runs close to foreclosing the readership to heterosexual women only.

In discussions of the *yaoi* manga characters the pairings are described in binary terms, one character in the relationship is dominant (*seme*), the other is passive (*uke*). Ultimately these traits are attached to gendered identities; the *uke* is gendered feminine whilst the *seme* is masculine. These readings have led to an assumption that the *uke* character is the representation of a heterosexual woman with whom heterosexual female fans identify. However, Neil Akatsuka (2010) and Uli Meyer (2010) are part of an emerging group of scholars who highlight multiple reader viewpoints in *yaoi* fandom. Akatsuka (2010) explains that female fans do not necessarily relate with the *uke*.

The argument that *uke* characters are not gay men has been described in Hori Akiko’s essay (cited in Nagaike and Sukanuma 2013, np) “On the Response (Or Lack Thereof) of Japanese Fans to Criticism that Yaoi is Antigay Discrimination” that deals with the

infamous *Yaoi Ronsō* [yaoi debate]. This debate began in 1992 between self-identified rotten girls and homosexual men in Japan. In Japanese media the female fans were described as ‘rotten’ which led to the title ‘*fujoshi*’ [rotten girls]. This word has become common place as 婦女子 and 腐女子 are both read as *fujoshi* in the Japanese language. In the former, the meaning is more akin to ‘lady’ with a hint of respectability, whereas in the later, the first character has been switched for the Japanese character meaning ‘rotten’ or ‘to rot’, which when combined with the final two characters translates to ‘rotten girls’ (Galbraith 2011b).

A self-identified homosexual Japanese male and gay rights activist, Sato Masaki, believes that *yaoi* is a derogatory text that discriminates against gay men as it does not represent the lived reality of (Japanese) homosexuals. Interestingly, *yaoi* manga of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century were “homosexual stories by and for women...however, the characters insist throughout that they are ‘normal (straight)’” and “in some stories, the heterosexuality of the male characters is...blatantly declared” (Mizoguchi 2008, p.132). Mizoguchi Akiko describes these “declarations of straightness [as] a reminder that the *yaoi* universe is a heteronormative and homophobic one” (2008, p.133). Sato would appear to agree with this idea because in his opinion, *yaoi* is simply the fans’ way of appropriating male bodies for their own pleasures, whilst ignoring the lives of real gay men.

### *Yaoi and Representation*

Stuart Hall (1997) raises a critical question regarding representation concerning whether things have any one essential, fixed, or true meaning. Although recent attempts favour a fan focussed approach to studying *yaoi*, there is a tendency to look to the manga content itself for answers. However with the growth of research that

focuses on different fans, all with their own rationales for enjoying *yaoi*, the question of whether or not the genre represents any one thing needs to be asked, and if so, with what are fans connecting?

Hall states that texts may carry dominant encoded ideological meaning but which may be decoded differently by the audience. He introduces three types of reading: preferred readings (intended ideology is accepted), oppositional (ideology is challenged), and negotiated (the interpretation are somewhere between the preferred and oppositional readings). Simply, a text is open to interpretation regardless of any innate meaning that was intended to be read. This is what Hall refers to as “representation as constitutive” (1997, p.7) questioning whether or not “events – the meaning of people, groups, and what they’re doing...have any one essential, fixed or true meaning” (1997, p.7). He compares this with another type of representation which works as a “reflection of reality” (1997, p.6), this is representation of some pre-existent reality that is being shown (or distorted) in media (1997, p.6). Following Hall’s ideas, I suggest that *yaoi* is not representative of a pre-existent entity in the material world but representative of a fantasy of queer exploration. Being aware of how representations may separate themselves from material referents, opens *yaoi* to the fluidity of interpretation that I argue for.

However there are some notable critiques of this model, some of which come from Hall himself on a return to his original work. Hall has reflected on how his model implies that media reflected reality however in his later work he reassesses this claim stating that representation is not simply a reflection of the real but what is accepted as reality (Hall *et al* 1994). Another important centres on definitions of his three types of readings. He writes that these are “hypothetical-deductive...they’re not empirical [or] sociological groups” (Hall *et al.* 1994, p.256). His return informs us that no one is just

one type of reader, and the types of reading can work in conjunction. For example, if an individual views a television report about a particularly violent incident between students protesting about tuition fees and the police but if s/he rejects a dominant reading that the students are to blame but the police is this as a misunderstanding on the part of the individual or a rejection of a dominant reading? Such a criticism has been raised by David Morley who argues that there is no clear demarcation between comprehension and agreement and that we need to be aware of the difference between a person not understanding and a person disagreeing (1981, pp.3-5).

Hall's theory is influenced by Marx's "1857 Introduction" (Hall *et al.* 1994). He discusses circuits of production and reproduction in relation to capitalism arguing that production is connected to its following stage and there is never a single point of finalised production:

The coding moment doesn't come from nowhere. I made a mistake by drawing that bloody diagram with only the top half. You see, if you're doing a circuit, you must draw a circuit. (Hall *et al.* 1994, p.260)

Indeed, in the earlier work encoding appears as the beginning of meaning but what Hall conveys with his update is that there is no 'beginning' and meaning is constantly produced and reproduced. Jonathan Gray in *Watching the Simpsons* (2006) proposes that instead of encoding/decoding we should consider "encoding/*redecodings* [my own emphasis]" because:

both reading and the text are a continual journey through [emphasis in original], a continuance of motion, and while there might be determinate moments, there are always potentially more determinate moments to come. (Gray 2006, p.34)

Gray refers to "reading through" to emphasise that reading will never be stationary but is an on-going "temporal process" (2006, p.34). 'Reading through' is described in terms of John Ellis' work on television viewing in the context of the news. Ellis argues

that the news presents us with a great deal of important information that needs time and effort to understand. Thus, for Ellis, texts are “read through other texts” (Ellis cited in Gray 2006, p.35). Gray’s addition of redecoding is useful as it gives the necessary nuance that meaning making is fluid and ongoing, indeed Gray highlights some pertinent questions that, although he does not take up in his 2006 book, can be asked in this thesis. For example he asks:

how recodings might be initiated, or halted; which texts or types of texts are particularly long lasting and why; which texts are prone to frequent decodings...and why; [and] which people are more or less likely to redecode. (Gray 2006, p.35)

Gray places emphasis on asking which people are more or less likely to redecode and I am also interested in different types of *yaoi* fans and examining their rationales of enjoying *yaoi* manga, and why these fans in particular, is there something in their lives that encourages or facilitates *yaoi* fandom? A question I would like to add to Gray’s list considers the possibility of ‘preferred redecodings’. Hall does not ignore power and claims that “audiences are [not] in the same positions of power with those who signify the world to them” (Hall *et al* 1994, p.261). As a result, although a spectator may interpret meaning in a variety of ways, there will always be an attempt to pin down a particular meaning. Indeed Hall came under criticism for not fully explaining the encoding side of this model. As Colin Sparks (1996) suggests, the encoding aspect is complex which Hall (1994 *et al*) agrees with admitting that media institutions have ideologies experience resistance in the production of a text. In relation to media institutions and ideologies, I would like to pay attention to ‘non-institutional’ fan encoding and a potential investigation into fan hierarchy and control.

The idea that a text does not hold inherent meaning is not new. For example, in *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (2005), Cornel Sandvoss argues that fandom is “a form of self-reflection” that acts as a mirror reflecting our own personal meanings which “ultimately depend on our own angle of vision” (p.10) and that “given [the] role of the reader in the constructing and the shaping of meaning, questions of polysemy and neutrosemy are dependent on the reception context rather than the text itself” (p.130). A particularly interesting chapter in this book is ‘Fan Texts: From Polysemy to Neutrosemy’ in which he suggests that as we delve further into fan studies and argue that meaning is contingent then we are arguing for polysemy. Such emphasis on the construction of meaning leads Sandvoss to argue that polysemy has become neutrosemy. Neutrosemy is the “semiotic condition in which a text allows for so many divergent readings that, intersubjectively, it does not have any meaning at all” (Sandvoss 2005, p.126). However this should not suggest that meaning making is free. Neutrosemy works well on an individual level but in a fan community we must ask, is it possible to suggest that *yaoi* manga is truly neutrosemic when one must participate with other fans who may have different or contradictory interpretations?

As time has progressed, and scholars have addressed wider fan readings, the issue of *yaoi* representation and what *yaoi* means to different groups becomes crucial. *Yaoi* fans interpret meaning based on their own contexts and life experiences. In this way, meaning is not innate but is created in a relationship between fan and text. The issue of context is demonstrated in Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1984) in which she shifts attention from how people read texts to what they do with them. She observes how women in an American town use romance novels to create their own spaces away from family life.

Radway's work emphasises the meanings created by the fans. To not examine the *yaoi* fans, is to miss what makes *yaoi* important to them because meaning will “*always* [emphasis in original] be a contested question” (Hall 1997, p.7). Mizoguchi (2011) and Björn-Ole Kamm (2013) should also be discussed in more depth as key thinkers in the advancement of *yaoi* scholarship, particularly in this area of what *yaoi* manga *means* to its fans. Mizoguchi states that:

Yaoi does not represent any person's reality, but rather is a terrain where straight, lesbian, and other women's desires and political stakes mingle and clash and where representations are born. (2011, p.145)

Mizoguchi writes that, fans can make meaning that is important to their own “desires”. Her use of the plural “representations” as opposed to the singular ‘representation’ is important as Mizoguchi effectively argues for a neutrosemic view of *yaoi* fandom. Kamm (2013) also calls for focus on the multiple fan interpretation. Kamm critiques studies that describe fans in neat categories of female and heterosexual as part of an attempt to search for the elusive, as well as enlightening, “single cause or motive” (Kamm 2013, np). Like my own thesis, which seeks to examine the diversity of fans and their online activities, Kamm is dissatisfied with:

homogenous explanations of the genre...and the exclusive focus on female readers in this discourse (men also consume these stories; see Yoshimoto 2008). Within the more recent discussions of the genre in Japan, however, a new position has emerged one highlighting the genre's *tayōsei*, that is, its diversity (Kaneda 2004; Nagakubo 2005; Yoshinaga 2007; Azuma 2009). (Kamm 2013, np).

Kamm's mention of Kaneda Junko (2004), Nagakubo Yoko (2005), Yoshinaga Fumi (2007), and Azuma Sonoko (2009) is a reference to a new generation of Japanese scholars which reassesses studies of *yaoi*. In particular, the group critiques methodologies which gave answers based on analysis of some well-known *yaoi* titles, as well as their exclusive examination of female readers. Indeed, it is common to find frequent references to a few well-known *shōjo* manga series such as Takemiya Keiko's

*Kaze to Ki No Uta* Hagio Moto's *Tōma no shinzō* (1974-5), and Ikeda Ryoko's *Berusaiyu no Bara* [The Rose of Versailles] (1972-73). However, by making recurring references to these titles as explanations for fan interest in *yaoi*, studies may inadvertently present anachronistic assumptions. Although I do not intend to compare girls' manga from the 1970s with contemporary *yaoi* manga, I would like to briefly elucidate how examining older titles in relation to contemporary fandom can be problematic.

On the following page I have included the front covers of *The Poem of the Wind and the Trees* and *The Heart of Thomas* with some more recent examples of *yaoi* manga anthologies. Figures 4 and 5 are examples of manga from the 1970s, whilst figures 6 and 7 are examples of more recent *yaoi* manga.



Figure 4: Cover of the second volume of *The Heart of Thomas*

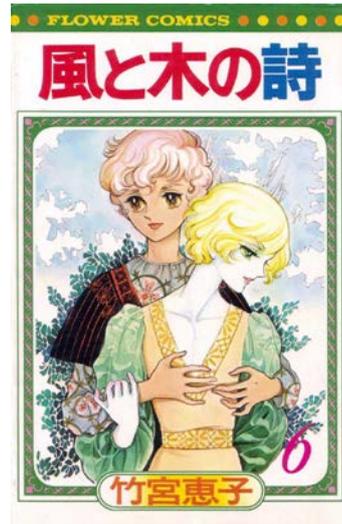


Figure 5: Cover of the sixth volume of *The Song of the Wind and the Trees*



Figure 6: Front Cover, BE-BOY (October 2006)



Figure 7: Front Cover, CHARA, (June 2005)

The protagonists in figures 4 when compared to the figures 6 and 7 appear more feminine with smaller body frames, larger eyes, and long curly locks of hair, often golden. The characters in the latter two figures could be said to be more masculine with broader frames, smaller eyes that appear to intensely stare back at the reader, wearing suits, as well as carrying weapons.

What I intend to convey by this brief comparison is that if scholars of *yaoi* are examining contemporary fan rationales using manga similar to those in figures 4 and 5, explanations that claim male characters are secretly women (and thus representations of a heterosexual relationship) become understandable. However, such an approach assumes that *yaoi* is a representation of reality (Hall 1997). However, Maana Sasaki (2013) summarises Japanese writers such as Ueno Chizuko and Matsumura Eiko who have argued that the characters are “sexless...neither man nor woman, male nor female disrupting the commonplace notions of sex, gender, and sexuality” and that “the beautiful boys exist as borrowed...bodies, allowing the girls readers...to participate in expressions of sexuality” (np). James Welker suggests that we understand the male characters in *yaoi* as expressions of a “third sex/gender” (2006, p.852). Similarly, Sharalyn Orbaugh suggests, the androgyny of the male characters in *yaoi* allow for a “fluid set of identifactory possibilities” (2010, p.181).

I believe it is dangerous to understand fan rationales by examining manga series that are almost half a century old. Meaning will always change, and there is no guarantee that every object will always mean the same thing when it is received in a different time or place, even by the same individual (Hall 1997). Moreover, contemporary fans read *yaoi* that contains characters much more similar to those presented in figures 7 and 8 who could be said to retain more masculine features. However, when *yaoi*

characters becomes the foundation for research, then we confuse identification either character type for the ways that actual fans identify.

### *Hierarchical Fandom*

In thinking about meaning making Hall (1997) refers to the media institutions and those who control them, but perhaps we can take this into fandom and consider how encoding and (re)decoding (Gray 2006) can be applied to fan communities and how meaning also implicates power, simply put, do fandoms have a preferred way of reading texts that may be policed within and across communities?

A natural component of hierarchy is power which is ‘always already there,’ that one is never ‘outside’ it” (Foucault 1980, pp.141-2). Fandom is argued to be connected to the “cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people” (Fiske 1992, p.30) and fans themselves “operate from a position of...marginality and social weakness” (Jenkins 1992a, p.26). Bourdieu (cited in Fiske 1992), writing in terms of capital and hierarchy, is useful in studies of fandom because he demonstrates how status can be achieved through accumulation of culture. Bourdieu’s economic focussed model is developed in relation to the accumulation of socially valued cultural texts. Whilst economic capital finds its home in monetary value, cultural capital may be gained from the appreciation of appropriate texts (Fiske 1992, p.31). In addition to economic, cultural, and social capital Sarah Thornton (1996, 2013) added subcultural capital which relates to status within a subculture, in other words, “subcultural capital confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder” (p.11). Thornton’s subcultural capital can be viewed in similar terms to Fiske’s popular cultural capital (1992) in that fandom, like a subculture, allows an individual a means of “filling cultural lack and provides the social prestige and self-esteem that go with cultural capital” (p.33).

Research on hierarchy, power, and shame has emerged in other female oriented fandoms. Kristina Busse (2013) examines hierarchies in relation to the *Twilight* series considering how gendering of fandom is key in “fannish policing” (p.73). Fan policing has also been observed in the work of Lynn Zubernis and Katherine Larsen who examine the television series *Supernatural* in their book *Fandom at the Crossroads: Celebration, Shame, and Fan/Producer Relationships* (2012). Zubernis and Larsen pay attention to the “dark underbelly of fan communities” highlighting bullying, shaming, aggression, and other less positive aspects which they refer to as “fandom wank” (p.115).

Zubernis and Larsen show how the *Supernatural* fandom “diligently police their...spaces” (p.13) creating “out-groups” with similar accusations to inter-fandom criticisms claiming some members are “doing [their fandom] wrong” (p.128) using ideas similar to those in the work of Busse’s examination of inter and intra-fan policing (2013). However what distinguishes the work of Zubernis and Larsen is how fan policing can be transformative:

Not only do fanworks explore the experience of marginalized or stigmatized people, which can increase empathy and create more positive attitudes...but fannish discussion about how these issues are explored contributes to the cultural dialogue by challenging norms related to racism, misogyny, ableism, homophobia, and other social problems. Fans may disagree...about what these norms should be, but discussion has the potential to be more transformative than silence. Fandom wank focussed inwards creates a constant interrogation of our own fannish practices and their broader implications. (2012, p.141).

Whilst a community will police its own fans, it is not to silence members who disagree but to open up discussion implying that a marginalised or unpopular opinion may have the opportunity to be accepted. This optimistic description of transformative discussion does not include the role of subcultural capital, the requirements for an unpopular opinion to be become acceptable, whose opinions are already acceptable

and whose are not, and who is leading these 'transformative' fan discussions which are issues that I will return to when considering subcultural celebrity and capital.

Busse (2013) also writes that "at every level of dismissal gender plays a central part" (2013, p.74). This is something that is supported by Melissa Click *et al.* (2010) who argues that descriptions of female fans are excessive, highly gendered, and dismissive of female pleasure. Busse writes that "if female fans are dismissed more easily, then so are their interests, their spaces, and their primary forms of engagement" because "female fan interests are much more readily mocked...even the same behaviour gets read differently when women do it" (2013, p.75). Therefore, gender plays an important part as it often male fans of series considered more 'worthy', such as *Star Trek*, attacking female fans of 'non-worthy' series such as *Twilight* and *Supernatural*. For example, Busse writes that a female fan of these series is "marked as a not good-enough...because she is a fan for the wrong reasons and in the wrong way" (2013 pp.87-8). What Busse means is that fans can be policed on "two fronts" (p.84), those that are not invested enough in their fandom and those that are too invested for wrong reasons. These studies give us an insight into how certain fan texts may attract criticism due to a perceived lack of worth however I am also interested in considering hierarchy within individual fandoms.

In an examination of a *yaoi* fan community issues of hierarchy influenced by social and cultural capital particularly will become apparent. Despite the fact that *AarinFantasy* will emerge as a place of acceptance the site is not egalitarian in its totality. What makes this particularly interesting is that in some cases gendered criticism of intra-fandom activities continue to occur despite the fact that the majority of this criticism flows from female fan to female fan. This occurs because as Hills

(2002a) argues, it is often not just gender alone, but gender ‘plus’ in which gender is accompanied by age.

Does being an older or younger fandom create friction between members? For example, do interpretations differ amongst older and younger fans, and if so, are those offered by older or younger fans more valued by the community? Harrington, Bielby, and Bardo in *New Areas of Inquiry in Aging, Media, and Culture* (2014) argue that media and cultural studies are “underinformed about gerontological (or aging) theory and....treat age as little more than a basic demographic variable” and that “aging/life course studies [are] underinformed about [the] differences in consumer/user/audience experience” (p.2). Whilst there is a growing body of research that addresses older fans (Vroomen 2004) Hills argues that fandom has been widely connected with adolescence because “this common sense notion of fandom as an ‘all-consuming’ stage in the life course that will later be abandoned...finds its stereotypes in the ‘hysterical’ teenage female fan of a pop band or male actor” (2005, p.804).

Harrington, Bielby, and Bardo (2014) argue that fandom is implicated in appropriate “age norms” which are used as “the benchmark against which we evaluate ourselves and are evaluated by others” (p.135). These age norms have negative effects on fandom because certain fan objects are deemed “arrested development” by Andrew Calcutt (1998) and, as Laura Vroomen (2004) suggests, involvement in some music fandoms has been described as “an attempt to delay adult responsibilities” (p.243) thus emphasising Hills’ assertion that fan policing will often be gender ‘plus’ (2002a).

### *The Anti-Fan and Hierarchy*

The discussion of fan hierarchies connects with anti-fandom as discussed by Gray (2006) and Hills (2013). Gray (2006) distinguishes between fans, anti-fans, and non-

fans stating that by paying attention to these different types of individuals we can better understand the text itself. This definition carries the idea that anti-fandom is inter-fan behaviour, placing the fan and anti-fan in opposition and as a result the text is almost secondary to the other types of connections/oppositions that are made. We are already aware of some the criticisms that female fandoms face in inter-fandom relationships, but can anti-fandom be a useful concept to consider when working towards an understanding of how *yaoi* fans create and maintain hierarchies within their own communities as a form of intra-fan policing?

In *Framing Celebrity* (2006) Hills addresses issues of subcultural capital and how this has blurred the concept of celebrity. His discussion of subcultural celebrity is extremely useful and does not ignore some of the earlier work that alludes to the potential of hierarchy and capital within communities (Thornton 1996). He begins with reference to the traditionally acknowledged split between celebrity and fan suggesting that this has been a result celebrity understood as “mass-mediated recognition” (p.103). But He notes that “such emphases have rendered invisible the way in which celebrity status can also be attained via nice-mediation within a subculture” (p.103). For example, In ‘*Get a Life? Fan Cultures and Contemporary Television*’ (2005) Lauri Mullens refers to those fans who are well known as “big name fans” (p.9). A big name fan is one who has accumulated the necessary subcultural capital and far reaching recognition within their relevant community. Simply put, an individual can become well known to a great deal of people ‘in the know’ despite the fact that their celebrity is not acknowledged by the wider public because they possess the relevant or recognised subcultural capital to earn them a level of stardom.

According to Rebecca Williams, “fan cultural capital and discursive power comes from having intimate and detailed knowledge of a show’s history and being able to

control the ways in which fellow fans read and interpret texts” (2004, np). This form of subcultural capital has become evident with the ubiquity of online fan communities where ‘executive’ fans can “enforce a specific reading formation around the fan text” (np). Hills argues that whilst Tulloch and Jenkins recognise the role that executive fans play within their own communities they did not make the connection to considerations of celebrity and “somewhat strangely” do not consider the executive fan as a fracturing agent that “stratifies fan subculture” (p.104). Indeed, if there are executive fans, that must suggest that there are non-executive or ‘ordinary’ fans, leading us to consider what aspects of capital differentiate them and what would need to take place for a fan to lose or gain status.

In examining subcultural celebrity and capital it is important not to forget the social world, something which Thornton has been criticised for by Ben Carrington and Brian Wilson (2004), as little is said about the relationship between subcultural hierarchies and social hierarchies of society in general. As a result Thornton may be critiqued for ignoring aspects of the social world which are so important in the work of Bourdieu such as dominance between different social positions or differences in the power to categorise. This is why it is important to remember the work of Busse (2013), Click *et al.* (2010), and Hills (2002a) who remind us of the importance of gender and other social categories such as age which can influence the accumulation of subcultural capital and celebrity within communities.

In his definition of anti-fandom Gray (2003) discusses fans and anti-fans as charged positively and negatively respectively. He pays attention to these anti-fans as “electrons” in his metaphor of fandom and asks who the anti-fan is. He argues that anti-fandom is not to be understood as those “who are against fandom...but of those who strongly dislike a given text or genre” (p.70). He writes that research has paid

sufficient attention to one end of the fan spectrum but has paid too little to the other which is “variously bothered, insulted, or otherwise assaulted” (p.70).

We must pay attention to what anti-fans do. As is often said, to hate something means that you still care, simply that you care enough to hate, and if you did not you would be indifferent such as the non-fan who is part of an audience for a text but has little to no “intense involvement” (Gray 2003, p.74). Gray (2003) writes that he is struck by how “many of the anti-fans and non-fans could provide a lengthy and impressive in-depth analysis” of the show and they were “responding in meaningful ways, for the show had considerable meaning for them” (p.65). Similarly Gray is keen to point out that the anti-fan “must find cause for their dislike in something (2003, p.71). He attributes this dislike to either the text itself or its paratexts such as advertisements or reviews. Gray highlights the potential benefit of studying anti-fandom for inquiry into the affective aspects of fandom. He gives the example of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* and the threat that was generated towards him to the due “strong anti-fan reaction” (Gray 2003, p.73) in which they disliked the text so much, without having read it, that they wished for his death. Whilst this is an extreme example, it demonstrates how hatred or dislike for an object can be a strong a reaction and should not be ignored.

I also wonder whether anti-fandom could be ironic in the sense that whilst fans criticise a text, they experience pleasure from something being ‘bad’. This is particularly relevant to the *yaoi* fandom and parody. Jessica Bauwens-Sugimoto (2011) considers how *yaoi* fandom has been seen as pathology, therapy, pornography but she also argues it can be understood as parody before in that whilst attempting to “rewrite heteronormative relationships....retain a lot of heteronormative traits” (p.4) but which are nonetheless “subversive and satirical” (p.1). I believe that we can advance on this

important work and can include the recent work of Francesca Haig (2013) and ‘snark’ fandom and Sarah Harman and Bethan Jones’ (2013) examination of the ironic fandom surrounding *Fifty Shades of Grey*. These scholars discuss how anti-fans enjoy the texts whilst taking pleasure in “bemoan[ing]...the flaws” (Harman and Jones 2013, p.951). Whilst fans and anti-fans might be found on opposite ends of the scale many of their activities are “resembling, if not replicating, each other” (Gray 2005, p 845). This is something that Haig (2013) suggests in her discussion of the *Twilight* fandom in that fans and anti-fans share similar levels of regularity and emotional involvement. Haig argues that anti-fans ‘devour’ the texts they dislike in order to take part in “passionate debates about the [Twilight] series and its flaws” (2013, p.12). This forms the basis for Haig’s discussion of ‘snark’ as a form of ironic anti-fandom that is neither overly critical nor overly affectionate. She thinks of it as ‘junk food’ because:

When one enjoys junk food, one doesn’t engage in a critical analysis of it. You know it’s bad for you and take pleasure in it, but engaging in a detailed analysis of its dietary shortcomings isn’t part of the pleasure. This is what seems to me to be distinctive about Twilight snark: the criticisms aren’t incidental to the pleasure taken in the texts; they appear, in large part, to constitute that pleasure. This form of critical fandom does not simply recognise Twilight as rubbish and enjoy it in spite of that recognition; the recognition itself and the analysis, discussion and parody that it permits, provide much of the fans’ pleasure. (Haig 2013, p.15)

Instead of inter-anti-fan perhaps we can think of intra-anti-fandom because the anti-fandom I have experienced in *AarinFantasy* comes from within the community. They have direct connections with *yaoi*, they read the ones they enjoy and they read the ones they dislike thus are positioning themselves both in allegiance with and opposition against, often citing the ‘bad’ aspects of *yaoi* manga. Sometimes this ‘badness’ is rejected, but at other times it is what they ‘love to hate’. Moreover, I believe that by including this type of fan activity in my analysis of the community we can further

understand issues of hierarchy and power as fans divide themselves along lines of capital and taste.

### *Why yaoi?*

*AarinFantasy* is accessible to Japanese fans however the majority of fans I have come into contact with are not Japanese. The international nature of this study which involves participants from various countries is an interesting addition to *yaoi* scholarship as explanations of the Japanese *yaoi* fandom may not hold true for those fans located outside of Japan. It should also be kept in mind that this thesis examines a single online *yaoi* fan community and I do not suggest that its results should be thought of as applicable to the general *yaoi* fandom. Nonetheless, this examination, whilst not presenting a location-specific reading, may shed light on some key issues of *yaoi* fandom that are generalizable to the wider fandom.

It would be disingenuous for me to lead the reader to believe that male homosexual fiction, such as *yaoi*, is exclusively Japanese. Slash is another type of fan fiction that features male homosexual relationships and appropriates characters from existing commercial popular media. The term 'slash' comes from the separation of the character names with a virgule (slash) to denote a specific homosexual pairing of characters such as 'Kirk/Spock' (Lothian, Busse and Reid 2007, p.106). Although it is not the purpose of this thesis to investigate the differences between slash and *yaoi*, a clear, but not exclusive, difference between the two is that slash is largely textual whereas *yaoi* is pictorial with much less text. There are *yaoi* novels which are exclusively textual but these appear to be much more popular in Japan and are not easily sourced in other countries. On *AarinFantasy* the low availability of *yaoi* novels is an issue that has been raised and there is a link to another community site,

*Gaiaonline*, where a fan has posted a thread *For all yaoi/boy love novels to be posted...just NOVELS and NOT mangas*<sup>9</sup>. Upon this discovery, I found it difficult to decide what counts as *yaoi* and what does not. Based on the fans' opinions, it appears that slash is assumed to be non-Japanese, whereas *yaoi* is Japanese regardless of whether it is textual or pictorial. However, *Yaoi* novels are not the focus of discussion in *AarinFantasy* and so 'yaoi' in this thesis refers solely to manga, unless.

To date *Boys' Love Manga: Essays on the Sexual Ambiguity and Cross-Cultural Fandom of the Genre* edited by Antonia Levi, Mark McHarry, and Dru Pagliassotti (2010) and *Transformative Works Releases* No.12 (Transnational Boys' Love Fan Studies Special Issue) are examples of the few collections that are solely devoted to *yaoi* in English. Within these works, there are few instances of comparisons with slash. If it is mentioned, it is often in passing to explain the nature of *yaoi* to a wider audience within fan studies who may not be familiar with *yaoi* as a Japanese text but who may be familiar with Western/European slash. This is interesting as both genres feature homosexual themes and often contain characters appropriated from commercial media. Whilst other researchers on Japanese fan cultures such as Sharon Kinsella (2000) and Mark McLelland (2001) have examined *yaoi* manga and their popularity outside of Japan, they have not made explicit connections between *yaoi* and slash. It would appear that the reason the genres have found themselves isolated from one another is because, as Hellekson and Busse state, Western scholars, lacking in contextual knowledge of Japan or Japanese culture, are wary of misrepresenting *yaoi*. At the same time, those studying *yaoi* fandom focus on the Japanese context to emphasise the

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.gaiaonline.com/forum/anime-manga-comics/yaoi-novels-some-other-boy-love-novels/t.39718245/> [Last accessed 9th May 2014]

specificity of their study though this may at times trap *yaoi* in an orientalist bubble (Hellekson and Busse 2006).

*Yaoi* manga and its fandom are often described as one of the few ways that Japanese women have been able to criticise and fight back against patriarchal Japanese society. In *Male Homosexuality in Modern Japan* (2000a) McLelland describes *yaoi* manga, with its “androgynous” characters who “combine feminine sensibilities with the freedom to live and act as men”, as the only way for Japanese women to be able to fight back against “constraining roles imposed by [Japanese] marriage and family system” (McLelland 2000a, pp.78-79). By doing so he creates an image of Japanese society that is patriarchal by relegating Japanese women to a “subservient role in life” (McLelland 2000a, pp.78-79). Ultimately, this has reduced the characters to vehicles for fans to forget their role in an oppressive patriarchal society. However, by not mentioning that there is a genre in the West that also deals with similar themes, which has also been widely interpreted as a means of female resistance to Western patriarchy, work such as McLelland’s runs dangerously close to reinforcing Orientalist stereotypes of Japanese women as “she-who-must-be-saved” (Yamamoto cited in Galbraith 2011b).

Discussions of *yaoi* by feminists such as Ueno, Yamada, and Nakajima in the 1990s that also criticise *yaoi* for its misogynistic characters have never been addressed in detail in non-Japanese literature (Kamm 2013). However, recent developments have begun to address this problem such as McLelland who has since moved away from his previous statements in his article “Why Are Japanese Girls' Comics Full of Boys Bonking?” (2006), by criticising “Western academic analyses of the genre which tend to pathologize both the women fans and Japanese society” (McLelland 2006). Similarly Tomoko Aoyama has introduced the Japanese debates into the Western

discourse, by translating and summarising the discussions of *yaoi* previously presented in the Japanese language literary magazine *Eureka* (Aoyama 2009).

Like *yaoi*, slash research has also seen an attempt to understand why females create and consume male homosexual texts (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992a, 1992b; Lamb and Veith 1986; Penley 1992; Russ 1985). Works, such as those by Patricia Lamb and Diane Veith (1986), and Joanna Russ (1985), suggest that the sexual content of slash must be understood as a means for female fans to envisage relationships between equal partners whilst exploring the masculine and feminine aspects of the characters. Ultimately, the homosexual relationship is a “displaced idealized heterosexual one” which values “deep friendship” (Hellekson and Busse 2006, p.17).

Scholars focusing on the motives for reading *yaoi* similarly suggest that fans suffer from restrictive female gender roles in Japan’s patriarchal society. By creating and inhabiting an ambiguous masculine subjectivity, female fans are better able to explore sexual identity without any negative repercussions. This is accredited to *yaoi*’s masculine subjectivity which is considered ambiguous because the protagonists “lack the cultural accretions of masculinity normative in the West and in Japan” (McHarry 2011, np). Examples of this are the perceived feminine bodies of the characters, which sometimes even have female reproductive organs known as ‘mpreg’ [male pregnancy] (Bauwens-Sugimoto 2011).

Assumptions concerning who the fans are, as well as their reasons for consuming male-male homosexual texts such as *yaoi* and slash, have produced a general movement towards gender essentialism. The consequence is that we miss an opportunity to understand the complexity of *yaoi* fandom and what it means to participate within it. The current literature implies that *yaoi* fandom can be generalised

resulting in oversimplified understandings of what *yaoi* fans do. This tendency is born from the heavy focus on a content analysis, which threatens to silence the opinions of the fan community.

### *Transcultural Yaoi*

In a discussion of *AarinFantasy* it is important to pay attention to the transcultural aspect of this community. It is dedicated to Japanese *yaoi* manga created in Malaysia and populated by fans from across the globe. Whilst Fabienne Darling-Wolf's assertion that "few analyses have focussed on texts produced and/or consumed outside of the U.S" may now be questioned due to the proliferation of the internet, as well as the aforementioned studies that have examined non-American fandom, her argument that few "have considered the significance of fan culture on an increasingly global scene" is still relevant (2004, p.507).

Hye-Kyung Lee in "Transnational cultural fandom" discusses issues of global fandom connected to Japanese and Korean anime and manga thus calling for attention to how East-Asian popular cultural texts are received by fans across the world (2014). One of the most complicated questions for this thesis to ask regards the fans' reasoning for being *yaoi* fans as opposed to slash fans. Perhaps difference could be related to the fact that slash deals largely with pre-existing media characters whilst *yaoi* characters can be considered canonical as narratives are increasingly not based on pre-existing franchises, thus leading me to question instances when *yaoi* is referred to as fan fiction when nowadays a lot of the characters are original creations with no 'commercial' equivalent.

In relation to the international consumption of Japanese media texts, Iwabuchi Koichi suggests that what makes Japanese media popular abroad is that they are culturally

‘odourless’, what he refers to as *mukokuseki* [without nationality] (2002), to such an extent that there are few characteristics that would connect to Japan or Japanese culture. There have been various applications of Iwabuchi’s work on *mukokuseki*. For example, in her article ‘Imagining Transcultural Fandom: Animation and Global Media Communities’ Sandra Annett (2011) analyses a variety of cartoon and anime series including the Japanese series *Cowboy Bepop* (1998-1999). Annett warns us to not be overly celebratory with Iwabuchi’s work as in his definition of *mukokuseki* he not only defines a text as “lacking nationality” but also the complete “erasure of racial or ethnic characteristics” (2002, p.48). He claims this intended erasure is a marketing tool for a global market however Annett utilises the series *Cowboy Bepop* as a challenge to Iwabuchi’s racially neutral odourless texts arguing that:

Rather than erasing ethnicity, *Cowboy Bepop* self-consciously depicts a diverse society composed of African America, Italian, Chinese, and Moroccan-descended characters, to name just a few. Far from avoiding the cultural context of its production, the show hints ironically at its Japanese origins when it depicts the spaceship’s owner...engaging in markedly ‘Japanese’ cultural practices such as tending bonsai or bringing back [souvenirs] of a cute local food called *piyoko* (even in the English dub) (2011, np)

She suggests that rather being stateless in terms of erasing ethnicity it is more akin to Appadurai’s post national diaspora as “while nation-states have ceased to exist, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity has flourished and flow through the new channels of ethnoscaping and mediascaping” (2011, np). Annett’s reference to the scapes is an interesting alternative to Iwabuchi’s *mukokuseki* as whilst mediascaping allow globally diverse people to connect with their origins, they also provide a means for diverse audiences to form “communities of sentiment based around a common interest or goal” (Annett 2011, np).

The difference between Iwabuchi and Appadurai emerges in consideration of their application to fan communities. For example, Iwabuchi appears to conflate fans and consumers as essentially the same thing whilst Appadurai considers globalised texts and their audiences not simply in terms of economic flows but also includes the possibility of affective relationships between individuals. In *Modernity at Large* (1996), the scapes Appadurai introduces crisscross cultural flows including the financial (financescapes), people (ethnoscapes), media (mediascapes), technology (technoscapes), and ideology (ideoscapes). It is through entering these scapes that we may 'imagine' a "social practice...between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility" (p.27). By incorporating Appadurai's theorisation into considerations of globalised fandom of a Japanese media text:

a 'transcultural...fandom community' can be defined as a group in which people from many national, cultural, ethnic, gendered, and other personal backgrounds find a sense of connection across difference, engaging with each other through a shared interest while negotiating the frictions that result from their differing social and historical contexts (Annett 2011, np)

Another perspective comes from Anne Allison (2006) who researches the popularity of Japanese media in the West, which she refers to as "J-cool" (2006), suggesting that what makes Japanese culture popular abroad is that it "projects attractive images of Japan based more on [Japan's] particular brand of virtual playmaking than on its policies, culture, or lifestyle" (2006, p.96). Allison picks up on two words that I think are important for a consideration of the transcultural reception of Japanese popular culture, 'virtual' and 'cool'.

By alluding to "virtual playmaking" (2006) Allison hints at something not-quite-real, particularly so when she suggests this is not connected to a 'real' Japan. This connects with Azuma Hiroki (2009) who, in an examination of *otaku* [geek], culture suggests that popular Japanese media outside of Japan are a mix of both Japanese and non-

Japanese influences which are the results of localised globalisation. Azuma argues that references to real world itself, let alone Japan, are few and far between, that “the original is produced as a simulacrum from the start, and in turn the simulacrum of that simulacrum is propagated by fan activities” (p.26). Thus, when fans consume Japanese media texts what they are really fans of are derivatives without an ‘original’.

Bertha Chin and Lori Morimoto (2013) “advocate a broad framework for the exploration and interrogation of border-crossing fandoms in which the nation is but one in a constellation of contexts that inflect and influence their rise and spread” (p.93).

I follow their engagement with transcultural fandom which suggests that:

while national identity and transnational historical and socio-political contexts may inform fannish pursuits, this is neither necessarily the case nor the only possible mode of transcultural fan engagement” and like them I am also “convinced of the need to take seriously not just national, but also...the gender, sexual, popular, and fan cultural contexts within which fans consume...regardless of borders both geographical and cultural (p.93).

I propose that we include other contextual factors in the analysis of transcultural fandom particularly that fans have affective connections with the transcultural text in question. In Iwabuchi’s study of the flow of Japanese popular culture and transnationalism he focuses on a hybridised approach to pop culture. He highlights the difficulty in reading any text in terms of national contexts, particularly due to the flows of production and financing of films themselves. Aimee Richmond (2014) writes about Japanese cinema within the horror genre utilising a case study of the films *The Ring* (1998) and *Audition* (1999) and presents these as “the two most prominent examples of the genre in terms of their cross cultural appeal” (p.24).

Daniel Martin (2009) also examines the cross cultural appeal of *The Ring* within the UK but highlights a problem with film studies’ analysis in terms of an East and West binary. He relates this this discussion to how *The Ring* is often discussed in terms of

either its similarity or difference to the Western horror film genre. In contrast to perceived separation between the East and the West, Steffen Hantke (2005) attributes the popularity of *Audition* to its *mukokuseki* nature. Hantke locates the film's success in its deviation from a perceived Japanese horror trope of avenging spirits and deals more with issues of gender and wider society which are seen as more odourless. An important aspect of Hantke's analysis of *Audition* is a focus on the transcultural. The viewers in such studies are arguably not invested in national difference but with affective resonance. Therefore, because there is an ability of the text to depart from Japan as 'other' (Iwabuchi 2002) there is a possibility that "canonical distinctions between western identity and Japanese identity" fade (Tatsumi cited in Hantke 2005, p.62).

Chin and Morimoto prefer the term 'transcultural' over 'transnational' as it is "flexible enough to allow for a transnational orientation, yet leaves open the possibility of other orientations that may inform, or even drive, cross-border fandom" (2013, p.93). Indeed, the focus on the transnational as opposed to transcultural aspects of the fandom actually tells us little about rationales which is crucial to any examination of how fandom may be working when it crosses multiple borders such as an international fan community online. Aswin Punathambekar (2007) argues that "we need to think beyond the 'national' as the most important scale of imagination and identity construction" (cited in Chin and Morimoto 2013, p.98). Simply put, perceived Japaneseness, whilst affording capital to fans in some cases, need not be considered the most crucial aspect of *yaoi* fandom. It is important not to ignore the non-national aspects of identity and include other important aspect of fan knowledge as a means to understand the transcultural fandom and the "fans' multivalent relationship to it" (Chin and Morimoto 2012, p.98).

Such work has already been completed by Hills (2002b) who utilises transcultural homology and ‘symbolic fitting’ to examine the transcultural connections that Western and Japanese fans make when they call themselves *otaku* who, across borders, share an affinity with the label as a common transcultural title thus going beyond issues of nationality. For example, the term *otaku* is “hegemonically devalued both in Japan and the ‘West’” (p.13) implying that fan identity is given higher priority over that of national identity (p.12) and a strict distinction between East and West is not necessarily made. His ideas support the possibility that individuals become fans of international media and texts not simply because of the country they come from, but because the fans make an affective connection with the text regardless of national origins. This does not mean that country of origin has no influence in a fan’s choice but we must also pay attention to the other possible connections.

Transcultural fandom is likely influenced by the internet in the sense that “fans use digital technology not only to create, to change, to appropriate, to poach, or to write, but also to share, to experience together, to become alive with community” (Booth 2010, p.39). In Kaori Hayashi and Eun-Jeung Lee’s article regarding Korean pop culture they write that “on discussion boards and homepages, the walls between nationalities – all nationalities – vanish” (2007, p.210) meaning that a straightforward examination of transnational fandom becomes complicated. Whilst I believe it is unwise to suggest that no fan enjoys *yaoi* because of its national origin it is important to consider it as at least an influencing factor, particularly so when a great deal of fans discuss their fascination with ‘cool’ Japanese culture and praise the ‘Japaneseness’ of *yaoi*.

‘Cool’ is the second term that Allison (2009) used earlier in reference to international fandom for Japanese popular culture. Astrid Fellner *et al.* (2014) suggests that research

into 'cool' has been "recognized as one of the most pervading and...elusive qualities of contemporary consumer society" and is perhaps the "cultural dominant of our time" (p.10). How fans feel about Japan gives us some interesting issues to consider when we think about their affective connections with both *yaoi* and Japan. In the case of American popular culture, Fellner *et al.* states, "processes of Americanization can connect affect to national and transnational identity formations...around the world" (2014, p.14) and suggests that "the reception of American culture...has often entailed affective encounters that are structured by feelings of fascination [and] excitement...it seems as if cultural products...that are associated with 'America' still stir up emotion" (p.14). This returns me to work of Iwabuchi (2002) and Azuma (2009). For example, Iwabuchi's 'fragrance' is less connected to Japanese 'reality' than a perception of what is Japanese through popular media. Similarly, for Azuma there is no 'Japaneseness' in any ontological sense to be removed in the first place. In his database model what is taken is a selection of narrative elements of which some are picked up by fans, interpreted and then passed on to other fans through fan interaction.

A global fan community such as *AarinFantasy* has an important role in the imagination of the *yaoi* fans. Appadurai describes a "global order in which the nation-state has become obsolete and other formations for allegiance and identity have taken its place" (p.30) which scholars of Japanese popular media have also found useful such as Susan Napier who took Appadurai's work as a basis and added her own scape, the 'fantasyscape', which she argues is constituted of "temporary alternative lifestyles that exist parallel to the mundane, which people enter and exit as they please" (2007, p.31). Wood (2006) writes that in the shared multinational space of online anime and manga communities certain Japanese words have become a lingua franca for the community such as *yaoi*, *seme*, and *uke* (p.405) but are more related to understanding the fandom

and less a connection to Japan and Japanese culture. Thus, whilst it seems that there is a preference for Japanese culture via the use of specialised Japanese terms, the actual use of them may serve as part of cultural capital (Hills 2002b) thereby removing them from any original Japanese context and becoming part of transnational mediated communication.

### **Alternative Approaches to *Yaoi***

Normative explanations for sexual and gendered identities in *yaoi* fandom have overshadowed queer identities. Research should now focus on the ways that *yaoi* is received and used by fans rather than searching for hidden meaning in texts as these will always be open to diverse interpretations. Studies that focus on utilisation of male homosexual relationships to critique patriarchy may be seen as neglecting queer desires and identifications with the genre (i.e., desires that do not necessarily follow a heteronormative pattern based on an individual's sexual orientation).

There are of course exceptions in more recent work that considers alternative fan identifications. For example, Lamb and Veith (1986), sees slash as means for both men and women to create new and different ways of loving and Edi Bjorklund (cited in Boyd 2001) suggests that slash is not simply a woman's genre, but is a means to "defy a wide variety of social conventions and taboos...slash fandom is to sum up, a tactic of subversion" (p.86). Eden Lackner, Barbara Lucas, and Robin Reid question slash as a genre only for heterosexual women as this designation leaves out the lesbian, transgendered, transsexual, and other queer fans that are the focus of their study (2006 pp.193-195).

Like these approaches, the term 'queer' in this thesis does not refer to fans' sexual orientation but to a diverse the fandom, not only in terms of fans that exist, but also in

the range of identifications. There has been a reluctance to imagine fan sexuality that is not determined solely by the “gender of object-choice” (Sedgwick 1990, p.35) which is part of a problem in thinking about sex and gender in terms of binary opposition as has been criticised by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) and which has meant that fan interest in alternative sexualities and genders, as an explanation for a fan’s desire to create and consume *yaoi*, is not considered as much as it could be.

Psychoanalysis provides a means to challenge traditional concepts of gender and is utilized by scholars examining male homosexual fiction. For example, Nagaike takes a Freudian approach suggesting that expressions of male homosexuality in *yaoi* manga are not “object[s] of practical desire”, but are “representations of the ‘absence’ of a satisfying object” (2003, p.21). Utilising Freud’s article “A Child is Being Beaten” Nagaike argues that *yaoi* manga directs attention towards the subversion of female gender identities. Specifically, she introduces the stages of the formation of female fantasy from a Freudian perspective: (1) “A child is being beaten by the father”, (2) “I am being beaten by the father”, and (3) “I am watching a child being beaten by the father” and she focuses on the third stage defining female sexual orientation as “semantics of scopophilia” (2003, pp.25-6). Nagaike emphasises that the third stage disrupts fixed gender identities and “provides a productive phase of female psychological development” (P.27), namely the development of “fantasy (and desire)” (p.28).

Before paying attention to how psychoanalytic approaches to *yaoi* fandom have been developed I would like to theorise more on identification and look at how the topic has been approached and critiqued previously. A particularly useful approach to identification has been provided by Murray Smith in his article “Altered States: Characters and Emotional Response in the Cinema” (1994) and his later book

*Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and The Cinema* (1995) in which he theorises that identification with characters breaks down in a process he refers to as 'The Structure of Sympathy'. Rather than understanding identification as a "singular notion" he argues that we should consider a "range of phenomena" (1994, p.34) and similarly states that "we should never lose sight of the fact that characters are...parts of larger structures" (1994, p.34).

Smith prefers the term 'engagement' over 'identification' for its broader scope. He cites *The Thread of Life* by Richard Wollheim (1986) highlighting a distinction between 'central' and 'acentral' imagination. The former represents ourselves, that we imagine doing something ourselves directly, whereas the latter does "not represent the event to [one]self with any of the 'indexical' marks of the imagined action" (cited in Smith 1994, p.36). As part of his intervention, Smith combines psychoanalytic approaches theories of multiple identification in which the spectator does not identify with single, or multiple, characters because the spectator's attention "shifts across various characters and noncharacter positions, each representing a distinctive role in a given fantasy" (1994, p.37). This is similar to Elizabeth Cowie (1999) and her own work on Freud's "A Child is Being Beaten" essay in which she suggests that an audience member's spectatorship may move through a diverse range of positions which are "never finally contained by any one character" (p.101). Cowie's work emphasises the important role that fantasy plays arguing that fantasy is not directed towards an object of desire but instead is a fantasy about a "mise-en-scene" highlighting the scopophilic nature of fantasy which Nagaike has argued for her in analysis of *yaoi* fandom (2003). For Cowie, fantasy does not represent an object that we wish for because it is connected to a whole situation, in other words we sympathise

with a character rather than empathise (something which Murray is also keen on distinguishing between).

The fluidity of identification that Cowie works on connects with Smith's structure of sympathy of which there are three levels of engagement (1) recognition, (2) alignment, and (3) allegiance. Recognition "describes the spectator's construction of the character" simply put "we conceive of characters as integral, discrete textual constructs" (Smith 1994, p.40). Alignment "describes the process by which spectators are placed in relation to characters" and allegiance refers to the "moral and ideological evaluation of characters by the spectator" (p.41). Smith emphasizes that none of the three levels require direct identification with characters. For example he states that "recognition and alignment require only that the spectator understand that these traits...make up the character" whilst allying with a character means that an audience "go[es] beyond understanding by evaluating and responding...to the traits and emotions of the character" (1994, p.42). This is why Smith terms it a structure of sympathy, and not empathy, we can sympathise with the characters but need not require an empathetic connection because "in sympathizing with the protagonist [we] do not simulate or mimic his or her concurrent mental state. Rather [we] understand...his or her context, make a...sympathetic or antipathetic judgement...and respond emotionally" (1994, p.43).

This overview of fantasy and engagement are powerful for their emphasis of multiple points of identification. When applied to *yaoi* these approaches open up new ways in which we need not necessarily understand a fans' interest in *yaoi* as rooted in any identification with characters. As seen, traditional studies of *yaoi* manga often posited the female identification with the *uke* character due to his perceived femininity. Later suggested that the female fan need not identify with the *uke* but also with the *seme*, or

even both. However, if identification is as fractured as Smith (1994, 1995) and Cowie (1999) suggest then it is possible that fans do not identify with a character, but with the scene which has disrupted heteronormativity. This is what I wish to explore, particularly so when fans do fit within traditional concepts of whom the fan is.

### *Queer theory*

Alexander Doty (1993) argues that a queer reading should not be interpreted as making a text queer but as understanding how a text might be interpreted as queer. By moving away from the well-trodden heteronormative “path” (Ahmed 2006, p.170) I can reveal new subjectivities rather than fitting fans’ activities into binaries of heterosexual and homosexual or male and female. Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin (2004) make it clear that queer research should explore all sexualities and how they relate to the text (p.1), something that I also aim for in this study in terms of how all fans relate to the *yaoi* text.

One of the foundational texts of queer theory can be attributed to Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* (1978) in which he questions ideas of natural sexual identity introducing a constructivist approach to human sexuality showing that it is something discursively produced. His thinking on desire has had an influence on texts within gay and lesbian studies such as that of Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* which underlines the narrow-mindedness of Western societies in regards to sexuality (1990, p.35). Indeed, by naming alternative classifications for desire such as “human/animal, adult/child, private/public” Sedgwick unearths and questions the obsession with the “heterosexual/homosexual binary” (1990, p.35).

The concept of resistance is at the very heart of queer theory and it departs from binary thinking which is why queer theory is important for this thesis that endeavours to include all types of fans. For Nikki Sullivan, to queer is to:

make strange, to frustrate, to counteract, to delegitimise, to camp up....heteronormative knowledge, institutions, and the subjectivities and socialites that are (in)formed by them and that (in)form them. (Sullivan 2003, p.iv)

I base this queer approach primarily on Butler's (1991, 1999) and Sedgwick's (1990) approaches to sexuality. Butler, for example, fundamentally questions the binaries of male/female and heterosexual/homosexual. According to her theory: within such binaries gender flows from sex and in a similar fashion desire flows from either sex or gender, simply put, that the biological female body leads to femininity which in turn creates a female heterosexuality directed towards the opposite sex. Sedgwick also challenges sexuality in terms of a single model and proposes a "universalizing" model that defines sexuality as "an issue of continuing...importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities" (1990, p.1) which includes bisexual potential and social constructionism.

Jonathan Dollimore (1991) follows the concerns of Butler and Sedgwick arguing that "gender is implicated in all aspects of culture" however he claims in debates of queer theory "the argument never gets off the bed" (p.321). Dollimore implies that theorisation is often overly concerned with sexual practices whereas he would include thoughts of sexuality that may have little to do with actual physical sexual practices. His critique of other queer theorists' focus on the 'bedroom' highlights the potential danger that in an attempt to deconstruct sexuality, a focus on actual sexual practices risks a return to the body, damaging the social constructivist approach to sexuality and gender. Dollimore's warning to not forget sexuality which does not exist within the

bedroom is important as it is possible that the discussions regarding sexuality and gender online amongst fans may have little correspondence with actual or desired sexual practices in their everyday lives.

The constructivist aim of queer theory is to blur, or even remove, the distinction between gender and sexuality. However, Susan Feldman in *Bisexuality and Queer Theory* (2012) states that “most gender theorists...nonetheless accept...certain tenants of gender theory that become extremely problematic” (p.72). She highlights: (1) that sexuality as a social construct is the only alternative to essentialism, (2) that sexuality can be thought of as an attribute of identity, and (3) that identity is primary process in sexuality formation. Feldman cites these three tenants as they demonstrate that queer theory ignores the “psychic antagonism between sexuality and identity” that has led a great deal to “wed sexuality to meaning and/or identity” (2012, p.73). Simply put, there has been “considerable attention on deconstructing identities, but [queer theory] has not yet...theorised the flows of desires” and thus the socially constructed nature of sexuality” (Halperin 2012, p.5).

This interjection from bisexuality studies is fascinating as it allows us a way to theorise the fluidity of sexuality that is not connected to physical bodies. Scholars, like Feldman (2012) source the inability to think of sexuality in more abstract terms to queer theory’s adherence to the positions of Foucault and Butler in which queer theory is presented as the one “alternative to the conservative notion that sex is grounded in nature” (Dean 2000, p.176) leading to a conflation of sexuality with lived lives of individuals. Indeed, Feldman refers to Butler’s failure to think of subjectivity outside of an inclusion/exclusion binary:

The forming of a subject requires...identification with the normative phantom of “sex,” and this identification takes place through a repudiation which produces a domain of abjection, a repudiation without which the

subject cannot emerge. ... [T]he subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation. (Butler cited in Feldman 2012, p.75)

This passage highlights that for Butler, identification is connected with “symbolic norms” explaining why identification with the masculine or the feminine is ultimately necessary but, importantly, does not explain those varying “invest[ments]” with regards to sexuality. Halperin (2012) explains that bisexuality, as a “model of sexuality” will challenge the theory in which the “object of sexuality is conceived as the glue of the subject’s identity and meaning” (p.81). With the addition of bisexuality to queer theory we may consider sexuality that is not “conceptualised...on the basis of the relationship between the sex and gender of subject and object, but rather on the basis of...subjects’ distinctive relationship to their objects” (p.81). Dollimore claims that by including bisexuality into queer theory we are able to consider the “mass of tangled desires and identifications” (1996 p.528). He gives us the example of a “bisexual male [who] partakes of a threesome in which he watches a man fucking with a woman” (1996 p.529) which frees the subject from the constraints of subjectivity and enhances the ability to consider the diversity of sexuality as a constructivist concept.

I included discussions of identification based on the scholars Smith (1994) and Cowie (1999) to demonstrate how identification must be carefully approached in order to highlight its fractured nature and that an identification need not be indicative of an emphatic connection with a character, but may be a sympathetic connection with a fantasy thus freeing us from understanding a passion for *yaoi* as a passion for certain character types/actions. I complimented this with a discussion of queer theory and bisexuality studies to demonstrate how including the more recent debates regarding how bisexuality can reveal the constructivist nature of sexuality.

In pushing for theories of identification and queer theory in *yaoi* fandom I wish to consider how identification with *yaoi* need not be thought of as identification with characters but rather connections with whole narratives. Making sure that my research highlights the fact there are multiple types of fans is simply the starting point. The goal of utilising queer theory in this thesis is to take seriously the sexualities of those fans whose interests break out from heteronormative assumptions. This is particularly useful in considering the fluidity and transient nature of sexuality and desire of *yaoi* fans when explaining their rationales for their participation in the fandom.

#### *Applying queer theory to yaoi studies*

Frederik Dhaenens, Sofie Van Bauwel, and Daniel Biltereyst (2008) see slash as a “transgression of the boundaries to practices of queer reading and the theory of queer” (p.345). Their article calls for studies to give attention to the way that slash works as praxis of queer theory. In this thesis I am working towards a similar goal as I consider how fans think critically outside of normative assumptions. Similarly, in “Is Slash an Alternative Medium? ‘Queer’ Heterotopias and the Role of Autonomous Media Spaces in Radical World Building” (2007), Nathan Rambukkana uses Foucault’s concept of heterotopia to argue that slash fandom creates a “queer heterotopia” demonstrating an emphasis on the role of the power of fan practices. A similar example is Alexis Lothian, Kristina Busse, and Robin Anne Reid’s “‘Yearning Void and Infinite Potential’: Online Slash Fandom as Queer Female Space” (2007) in which they move away from how slash works as a text and look to what it does (p.130). The issues that are found in a great deal of this work emerges from the queer foundation outlined by Doty (1993) and Ang (1991) who argue against interpreting a text as queer in a sense of subversion but rather how a text may be read queerly by some individuals.

I intend to deconstruct *yaoi* fandom as a female heterosexual space and focus on the multiple aspects of the heterogeneous fandom found on *AarinFantasy*. This raises two questions concerning *yaoi* fans who are also consuming texts about male homosexuality, ‘what is it that the *yaoi* fans reject?’ and ‘what, if anything, is it that they embrace?’

In early *yaoi* literature a fan’s heterosexuality meant that her desire for male homosexual characters in *yaoi* texts was rationalised in order to fit within normative heterosexuality. Sedgwick argues against such tendencies to explain sexuality because there is no challenge to heteronormative logic and institutions, and expresses amazement at the fact that:

of the very many dimensions along which the sexual activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another [she mentions preferences for certain acts, sensations, physical types, age amongst others] that precisely one, the gender of the object choice has emerged since the turn of the century, and has continued to be...the universal category of sexual orientation. (1990, p.8).

The implication of Sedgwick’s work is that being a *yaoi* fan says nothing about one’s sexuality, and one’s taste in *yaoi* is not necessarily predictive of the kind of relationships or sex that one wants to have. Queer theory makes us aware of a diverse range of identities that we may then apply to *yaoi* fandom as its fans express complex gendered and sexual identities. Meyer (2010) and Mizoguchi (2008) are representative of recent *yaoi* scholarship that is paying attention to such a “queer continuum” (Mizoguchi 2008), a term used in reference to a range of non-normative sexual identities of the fans. Meyer in “Hidden in Straight Sight” (2010) suggests that the aversion to more “deviant” identities and desires in regards to *yaoi* (as well as slash) fans is changing (p.249). He takes a queer approach to identity and in his study of *yaoi* fans’ letters to magazines he throws light on female fans who claim gay male

subjectivities whilst still being attracted to males as heterosexual women. He shows how fans may develop queer identities as a means for connection with other fans, as well as a means to experiment with gender identities in a space that is distinct from their offline lives. If we consider the internet as a "queer space," (Lothian, Busse and Reid 2007, p103) where sexual identities can be assumed at will, the possibility that the reading/writing of *yaoi* is 'queering' should be recognised.

*Yaoi* manga has been theorized as a significant means by which the fantasies and its fans may be explored. Nagaike raises a number of significant questions concerning why fans are interested in "fantasies of male homosexuality" (2003, p.6) and one that interests me is "how can the idea of...fantasies of male homosexuality be analyzed in terms of a broader discourse concerning...sexuality" (p.6). In *Themes and Issues in Asian Cartooning* Shigematsu Setsu (1999) writes about the Ladies' Comics genre which depicts (sometimes aggressive) heterosexual narratives between men and women which has a majority female audience. However, despite the aggressive nature in which women are treated in these manga, Shigematsu warns academics from assuming that female readers automatically identify with the dominated, and sometimes raped, female characters but rather the entire narrative that departs from traditional gender relations. Shigematsu utilizes a Kleinian psychoanalytic approach of identification that is "oscillating and fluid, shifting and incomplete...depending on the specific history and experiences of the subject" (1999, p.136) in a discussion of identification that queers traditional concepts of gender and sexuality.

In connection with the previous discussion on bisexuality, Nagaike introduces bisexuality as "subversive" (2003, p.182) arguing that there is a growing difficulty in understanding the limits of sexuality in *yaoi* fandom and she critiques discussions that "describe representation of female sexuality...in terms of the problematic interactions

inherent in heterosexual paradigms” (p.182). The basis of such an approach relies on the fundamental concept of passive female sexuality however this ignores the queer potential that *yaoi* fandom allows when considering traditional gender and sexuality. How then should we study the significance of *yaoi* to these fans? I believe that it is helpful to consider the fans’ activities, or “play” (Galbraith 2011b), as affective.

#### *Fandom’s affective response*

Hills (2002a), Sandvoss (2005), Gray (2007), and Jenkins (1992a) highlight the emotional aspect of fandom as extremely important and I would like to consider the role of affect. Mediated emotions have taken an important position in the theorisation of affect. Jane Vincent and Leopoldina Fortunati’s *Electronic Emotion* (2009) and Athina Karatzogianni and Adi Kuntsman in *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion: Feelings, Affect, and Technological Change* (2012) consider affect and the politics of emotion within digital culture regarding the “structures of feeling...in our everyday digital life” and asking “how...digital media shape our...experiences and political horizons of love, boredom, fear, anxiety, compassion, hate, hope”? (Karatzogianni and Kunstman 2012, p.4). Building on the work of Sara Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Kunstman argues that “online performative acts of naming an emotion can create communities of feelings...as well as objects and subjects of feeling” (2012, p.6). Similarly, in a discussion of online community Debra Ferreday argues in *Online Belongings* (2009) that we desire to belong writing that the desire to belong to a community is just as strong in an online environment as it is in the “daily...sense of community” (p.98).

## *Affect Theory*

An emotion may be considered as something that people use to express the feelings that they experience either physically or socially. For this thesis, an emotion is considered something that can be shared through social interaction. Ahmed (2004) writes that emotions are both psychic and social, individual and group orientated stating that “emotions are not ‘in’ either individual or social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects” (p.10). Like emotion, affect has been defined in a great deal of ways, and whilst affect is a “slippery” (2004) notion that often flows between varying definitions, in its most basic form, we can think of affect as the precursor to emotion.

Emotions have been thought of as the “sociological expression of feelings” whilst affect is “firmly rooted in biology” (Gorton 2007, 334). Amongst these definitions Elizabeth Probyn has written that “a basic definition is that emotion refers to cultural and social expression, whereas affects are of a biological and physiological nature” (2005, p.11). This is similar to Brian Massumi’s definition of affect as an intensity that becomes an emotion once it is qualified. According to Massumi (cited in McKim 2008) “to get anywhere with the concept, you have to retain the manyness of its forms, [i]t’s not something that can be reduced to one thing” (p.1). This is similar to what he discusses in “The Autonomy of Affect” (1995) which discusses affect in terms of ‘intensity’. He describes intensity as an arousal that is the forerunner to an uncontrolled reaction. He further goes on to describe affect as distinct to emotion focussing on the gap between content and effect utilising the story of a man building a snowman that is shown in three varying ways during an experiment to children demonstrating that the way it is presented to the subjects can invoke different intensities. In particular Massumi states that affect and emotion “follow different

logics and pertain to different orders...[a]n emotion is a subjective context” that it is the “qualified...insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions...it is intensity owned and recongnized” whilst affect does not have a “cultural-theoretical vocabulary” (p.88). For Massumi, affect is used “as a way of talking about that margin of manoeuvrability” (2003, p.212) of which emotion “is a very partial expression of affect” (2003, p.213). Whilst it emotion, in Massumi’s definition, is the conscious expression of affect, it would not be correct to say that affects are pre-conscious, in fact, in an interview with Mary Zournazi, he is wary of calling affect “primal” preferring to call it “direct” because it happens too quickly to be described (2003, p.215).

He builds on this by highlighting affective expressions of anger and laughter that “are perhaps the most powerful because they interrupt a situation [and] the flow of meaning that’s taking place: the normalised interrelations and interactions that are happening” (2003, p.216) but they are not primal because “there’s always an instantaneous calculation or judgement that takes place as to how you respond” but it is unlike a qualified emotion because “it’s not a judgement in the sense that you’ve gone through all the possibilities and thought it through explicitly – you don’t have time for that kind of thing” (2003, p.216). In a later interview he describes affect as ‘shock’ stating that “affect...is inseparable from the concept of shock. It doesn’t have to be drama. It’s really more about micro-shocks, the kind that populate every moment of our lives” (cited in McKim 2008, p.4). For example, he gives the example of being scared, but before you understand what it is you are afraid of you “are catapulted into a feeling of the frightfulness of the situation. It only dawns on you in the next instant that you’d better figure out what might have done the catapulting” (cited in McKim 2008, p.5).

Thus, to simplistically differentiate affect and emotion based on Massumi's work, emotions are those qualified intensities that are recognised whereas affect is not "ownable" or recognisable but is "irreducibly bodily and automatic" (1995, p.89). In relation Eric Shouse gives definitions of feelings, affects, and emotion. He suggests that feelings are personal and biographical, emotions are social, and affects are prepersonal (2005). Building on Massumi's work, Shouse gives us some useful definitions of the terms and differentiates them quite clearly. Feelings are personal because when we feel something we 'check' it against past experiences. Indeed, what makes one person happy or excited will not do so for someone else. Emotions are social because regardless of whether they are true or not, they what we display.

Patricia Clough (2007) writes with the 'affective turn' there was a shift that moved from 'thought' to 'understanding' and argues that affect requires us to think about the body and the mind in relation to rationality and irrationality (p.ix). Joanne Garde-Hansen and Kirstyn Gorton provide an excellent overview of this turn as well as the background to the complex theory behind affect in the first half of their book *Emotion Online: Theorizing Affect on the Internet* (2013). The affective turn is concerned with a return to the physical and the body and is part of a "demand for the concrete" (Highmore cited in Garde-Hansen and Gorton 2013, p.35). For example Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich, and Ann Reynolds (2010) suggest that the "affective turn's sources and lineages are many, and its hybrid formation is part of its strength (cited in Garde-Hansen and Gorton 2013, p.33).

Silvan Tomkins is considered one of the key thinkers of affect who argues that "reason without affect would be impotent, affect without reason would be blind, the combination of affect and reason guarantees man's high degree of freedom" (cited in Garde-Hansen and Gorton 2013, p.35). He defines a motivational system and presents

shame, surprise, anger, joy, interest, distress, and disgust as a 'basic set' of affects (cited in Sedgwick 1995, p.5). In contrast to Tomkins' work, Clare Hemmings presents the work of Deleuze stating that whilst Tomkins "breaks down affect into a topography of myriad distinct parts, Deleuze understands affect as describing the passage from one state to another, as an intensity characterized by an increase or decrease of power" (2005, p.552). This idea is in turn based on the work of Spinoza who uses the terms 'affection' and 'affectus' to explain how affects can potentially be either active or passive respectively. Deleuze uses Spinoza's thoughts in *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* and argues that affects involve "both the nature of the affected body and that of the affecting external body" (cited in Garde-Hansen and Gorton 2013, p.36). Thus Deleuze places importance on both the physical and psychic in affect and this assertion has appealed to writers such as Massumi and other scholars who focus on media. For example in *Parables of the Virtual* (2002b) Massumi writes that "the problem with the dominant models...is not they are too abstract to grasp the concreteness of the real ...the problem is that they are not abstract enough to grasp the incorporeality of the concrete" (p.5) suggesting that theories of affect have been too 'representational' and thus miss the potential depth that the nonrepresentational examinations of affect can provide.

Although Tomkins, Deleuze, and Spinoza are key names in affect, there are discussions that draw on the work of others such as Raymond Williams. For example, Kathleen Stewart introduces the concept of 'ordinary affects' which are defined as "public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they're also stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of" (cited in Garde-Hansen and Gorton 2013, pp.35-6). This definition of affect is similar to Williams' 'structure of feeling' as he is also interested in the 'ordinary'. This has also influenced the work of Lawrence Grossberg

who pays attention to the ‘affective relationships’ that people have in their everyday lives, indeed, Grossberg names Williams’ ‘structure of feeling’ as one of the moments that he “met affect” (2010, p.10).

In feminist theory there is a great deal of work on the body, emotions, and women, for example Alison Jaggar examines women’s emotions in terms of everyday life and labour and is said to be one of the very first works that considered what studies of emotion and affect could offer feminist thought (cited in Probyn 2005, p.8). Berlant (1997) pays attention to the affective turn and, whilst still maintaining a return to the body, furthers the examination with studies of shame, public feelings, and proximity to others which in turn has been studied in connection with race (Ahmed 2004). For example Teresa Brennan in *The Transmission of Affect* (2004) proposes a body focussed approach asking “is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and ‘felt the atmosphere’”? (p.1). She further builds on this concept by suggesting that:

The transmission of affect, whether it is grief, anxiety, or anger, is social or psychological in origin. But the transmission is also responsible for bodily changes...In other words, the transmission of affect, if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject. The ‘atmosphere’ or the environment literally gets into the individual. (Brennan 2004, p.1)

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2010), Ahmed argues that affect is what ‘sticks’ between ideas, values, and objects (p.30). In Ahmed’s definition, affect is the glue that binds our ideas, values, and objects and as a result we are able to view objects and texts that transmit ideas and values. Ahmed’s definition of affect presents the concept as a collective ‘energy’ that not only brings people together but also keeps them together. Part of the discussion on stickiness is proximity, specifically how issues of space may affect how we feel and she refers to the “inside out” model of emotion

(2004, p.9) which theorises about how “we respond to objects and others” and how “we are shaped by...contact with others” (p.10).

Sally Munt’s work on queer emotions and shame is particularly important for considering how shame, often thought of as a negative sensation, can at the same time be productive and transformative. Munt writes in *Queer Attachments* (2012) that her identity as a ‘butch lesbian’ has taught her a great deal about different kinds of shame which is “an emotion that can occur momentarily, and intensely, in moments of acute embarrassment and humiliation, it is often a transitory feelings experienced intensely in, and on, the body as flushing” (p.2). Like Ahmed’s work on affect, Munt also describes shame as “a very sticky emotion” which leaves something of itself behind to which other emotions such as envy and hate can attach themselves. In other similarities to Ahmed’s discussion regarding how hate and fear can delineate groups, Munt also writes that shame works culturally to “mark out certain groups” (p.2) and that it is an emotion that:

travels quickly, it has an infective, contagious property that means it can circulate and be exchanged with intensity....it exceeds the bodily vessel....groups that are shamed contain individuals who internalise the stigma of shame [and] reproduce discrete, shamed subjectivities (p.3).

What I find interesting about Munt’s work in *Queer Attachments* is her emphasis that shame should be:

...understood as a variegated emotion with effects and practices that are not necessarily negative. Shame is popularly perceived to be an affliction, a toxin to be avoided by good behaviour or to be ‘processed’ out of existence into an ideally shame-free culture....But shame is more interesting than that; we require a degree of shame, as we do guilt, once a moral transgression has been perceived [but] sometimes there is no reason or justification for being stigmatised by shame, and shame is transmuted into pride as part of a strategy by individuals and groups to reverse the discourse, think of Foucault’s famous example of such in *The History of Sexuality Vol.1* in which the pathologised homosexual turns himself into the out, proud gay man. (Munt 2012, pp.3-4)

What this implies is that shame has “political potential” meaning that the result of shaming an individual or group can be the “political and cultural agency amongst the disenfranchised” (p.4) especially when one no longer cares that they are shamed and form horizontal bonds through communities of shame which can create collective desire(s) to claim a “legitimate self”.

As part of her discussion of sticky shame and queer attachments, Munt presents these as a means to question and engage with norms to “create liveable lives on the wrong side of the blanket” (2012, p.23). She introduces the work of Erving Goffman on shame as productive. In *Stigma – Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* Goffman writes that the stigmatised individual is “able to manage the social information by which s/he is delimited, to construct a self” thus, shame “is an emotion that is particularly attaching, it is gluey, with a revolving cycle of separation-attachment-disattachment” (cited in Munt 2012, pp.23-24), or in other words such groups have “turned away with/from shame, produce autonomous statements and turn back with a two-fingered ‘salute’” (p.25).

The introduction of shame and queer attachments from the work of Munt is important for this thesis particularly when attention will be paid to how *yaoi* fans on *AarinFantasy* discuss the problematic aspects of their fandom such as negative ascriptions from other fan groups as well as family and friends. Throughout these discussions there is a sense of shame from the *yaoi* fans but the shame they feel is not solely damning and ‘shaming’ and can in fact produce a stronger fan community and fan identity, as Munt writes, “unexamined shame can also fall like a mist, obscuring vital political connections” (2012, p.26). There is naturally a connection here to the work of Butler in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) in which Butler argues that “‘queerness’ might be understood not only as an example of citational politics, but as a specific

reworking of abjection into political agency” (p.21). But as will be shown in this thesis, shame or the anticipation of shaming, in terms of the fans’ interest in a queer text or their own queer identities “has a contradictory latency: on the one hand it can reinforce shrinking conformity, and on the other hand it can proudly bring into being new and expansive grammars of gender” (Munt 2012, p.94).

Munt’s work is apt for its examination of not simply how an individual or a group is shamed but how shame encourages the formation of groups. Indeed, she encourages us to think about shame self-reflexively and its role in the formation of ourselves and the connections we make with others, thus queer shame is not simply a ‘thing’, but it is also a process and a space that encourages new ways of thinking and identity formation. Munt is not interested in presenting the shamed individual as the repressed victim of wider forces but focuses on the experience of shame and its processes as a means to think about alternative identity, desire and the relationships it has the potential to create. *Queer Attachments* encourages this thesis to consider the ways that shame, as an affect, moves between bodies in what Ahmed refers to as an ‘affective economy’ (2004). The affect is felt and flows between individuals in a similar way to the Spinozan inspired Deleuzian ‘affection’ and ‘affectus’ which creates new potentials of subjectivity and becoming for a body is not defined by what it is but by its possibility (Munt 2012).

### *Affect and Fandom*

The return to the body has been considered central in considerations of affect but when we think of the online environment the body is in a context where touch or physical contact cannot be made, but nonetheless people ‘feel’ connected. Research suggests that physical touch is not particularly necessary for an emotional response, for example

in the article “The Thinking-Feeling of What Happens” (2008) Massumi argues that touch need not simply be physical touch alone, but also the *perception* of touch. As a result we can consider that the mediated touch of a person is just as important as the person physically with us. Massumi explains this idea further:

What I’m trying to say is that formations communicate only immanently, at the points where they live themselves in, or at their self-embracing fringes. They only virtually relate. All relation is virtual...it is only because relation is virtual that there is any freedom or creativity in the world. If formations were in actual casual conversation, how the effectively connect would be completely determined. (Massumi 2008 cited in Garde-Hansen and Gorton 2013, p.43)

Thus, it is the perception of others, as opposed to the actual presence of others that is important. In *An Archive of Feelings* (2003) Cvetkovich describes the archive of feelings as a bank of feelings and emotions which are steeped not only in the ‘content’ of the texts but also in the ‘practices’ that surround them (p.7) thus for Cvetkovich also the perception of a feeling and the connections that such a perception can create are important.

In this section I would like to consider how affect has been theorised in relation to fandom and the internet. There has already been work completed on the connections between affect and media due to theorists such as Ahmed’s assertion that texts are emotional (2004). In *The Routledge Handbook of Emotions and Mass Media* (2010) the editors Katrin Dovelung, Christian von Scheve and Elly Konijn argue that the way we live our lives will be “affected by experiencing this world through the mass media” (p.2). Similarly, in *From Revolution to Revelation* (2005) Tara Brabazon writes that “popular culture...reserves something of a life lived...It is not accurate or verifiable, but it is affective” (p.54).

Hills also argues that:

without the emotional attachments and passions of fans, fan cultures would not exist, but fans and academics often take these attachments for granted or do not place them centre stage in their explorations of fandom. (2002a, p.90)

We can perhaps locate this reluctance to address emotions due to fandom's previous poor image. The first waves of fandom research for example worked hard to detach itself from the image of obsessive fans that were considered emotionally overinvested in their texts to the point that they were considered irrational (Jenkins 1992). As a result, fan theorists worked to demonstrate that fans could be rational and creative. For example, Jenkins' (1992) writes that fans are dismissed for being too emotional and as a result of this any consideration of their emotional investments had to be reassessed. Grossberg states that "it is in their affective lives that fans constantly struggle to care about something, and to find the energy to survive" (1992a, p.59).

Returning to my discussion of psychoanalysis and identification I would like to apply these theories to fandom and media. In *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience* (2009) Carl Plantinga highlights the importance of fantasy and desire. For Plantinga:

Our folk psychological knowledge...is remarkably adept at gauging the psychology of others, [otherwise] social life as we know it would cease to exist [because the] intentions, motivations, thoughts, and desires of others [would be] baffling and unpredictable. (Garde-Hansen and Gorton 2013, p.70)

In addition to this, in *Understanding Popular Culture* (1989) John Fiske writes that:

popular culture is made by people...all the culture industries can do is produce a repertoire of texts or cultural resources for the various formations of the people to use or reject in the on-going process of producing their popular culture. (1989, p.24)

As a result of seeing popular culture as a creation of 'the people', he suggests that it will therefore be possible for it to provide emotional satisfaction.

Perhaps one of the most well-known scholars work on the psychoanalytic aspects of fantasy, desire, and identification in media fandom is presented by Ien Ang in *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World* (1996) in which she presents the concept of 'melodramatic identifications' (p.85). This concept is important for thinking about how fans may engage emotionally with fictional characters. Ang writes that fans identify with the characters in terms of fantasy meaning they do not view them as role models in 'real' life but as symbolic identities (p.92). In her work on the television series *Dallas* Ang writes that the audience, is able to escape everyday life and experience feelings that it would not normally experience. Whilst it is important to remember that not all viewers will experience these feelings, or even want to, Ang's work presents a possible explanation for the affects and emotions that are present in *AarinFantasy* which allow the fans to experience alternative ways of living but not necessarily ones that they recreate in their everyday lives.

The emotional investment that fans make has also been addressed in Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community* (1993) in which he began what would continue to be scholars' interest in fandom and computer-mediated communication (CMC). Since his seminal work, other research has been conducted to further any understanding of the ways that fans create and maintain a fan community online. Moreover, Rheingold writes that "community is a matter of emotions as well as a thing of reason and data" (1993, p.15). He is particularly nuanced in some of his arguments and discusses how it is important not to forget about the offline and the potential differences between sharing something online and sharing in a face-to-face setting, for example he writes that some people might feel more confident to share without having to see the other person whereas others will prefer to meet in person to enrich their

experiences if they have only met online. In this thesis I focus predominantly on the online aspects but it is important to highlight this tension that Rheingold raises.

Work on emotions and affect has also been conducted into other online communities. For example there has been a great deal of literature regarding *Facebook* and *Twitter* as examples of what Ahmed refers to as “shared spaces of dwelling” (2010, p.14) which exist online but are at the same time an ‘archive’ (Cvetkovich 2003) of people’s emotional and affective lives as they document their feelings. Interestingly, in a return to the potential hierarchical nature of fandom and boundaries that may be policed, a similar process of community maintenance can be found in affective communication. For example Ahmed discusses posts that contain messages such as “you’ll love this” which extends the promise of happiness to others, indeed, “the promise of happiness is what makes some things promising, as if to share in things is to share happiness” (2010, p.30). However at the same time as sharing happiness there is an expectation in the community, we are invited to view and reply but we are expected to stay in line with the original message in order for a continued presence in the community. Ahmed writes “the happiness can be promised as a return for investment in social norms...such optimism does not originate from a subject but is generate through promises made to the subject which circulate as ‘truths’ within a public culture” (2004, p.196). In terms of power and control, the happiness that Ahmed writes about is utilised as a means to promise one’s role as an acceptable member of a community. Grossberg situates his own discussion of affect to rock music fandom (1984, 1988, 1992a, 1992b). In parts of his writing he comes in close contact to queer theorists such as Ahmed (2006) regarding the new possibilities that rock fandom brings. In particular he claims that rock music is more than its “surfaces” (1992a, p.83) such as the lyrics,

the music, the production, and the consumption, rather its popularity is based on the fact that rock allows other alternative practices to evolve from it.

In what way can this be applied to *yaoi* fandom and the potential for queer readings? Specifically, how can a queer reading of *yaoi* be combined with affect? Previous descriptions of *yaoi* fans and their motivations have often been focussed on a binary of male/female or homosexual/heterosexual which has produced a representational relationship between an identifiable text and audience. Indeed, as Grossberg states, these types of binary descriptions are interested in comments on the texts, the practices, and the genres within certain cultures, but he suggests that we look closer and explore the articulations and when these types of practices are deployed in order to extend thinking beyond what has already been defined as (rock) fan culture (1992a p.132). This is a crucial point to make about the reception of *yaoi* because Grossberg does not suggest that certain interpretations are invalid, even those that may be considered the most normative will still be meaningful to certain fans. Similarly, my approach does not distinguish a correct interpretation of *yaoi*. Thus, whilst I do not claim that a heterosexual female fan's reception of a *yaoi* is incorrect, I follow Grossberg's assertion that we must "explore the articulations" and the contexts, within which fan "practices are deployed" in order to further our understanding of the *yaoi* fandom and its intricacies (1992a, p.132)

Grossberg states that rock fans did not give up their normative interests and passions such as desire for comfort and success, quite the contrary; he believes that rock created a new path whilst being caught in the space between the disciplines such as school and family, and so they image a space of enjoyment, pleasure, and fun, a space regulated only by the norms of rock. Could this mean that *yaoi* fans also find a space in which they may be undefinably queer, i.e. not moving from one stable gender or sexual

identity to another, but being happy to play and explore in the undefined in-between?

Grossberg considers fandom as a means to make life matter, for him, affect is crucial in fandom as it is the energy that fans invest into their activities (1992a). Rock was a response to its fans' loneliness, and uncertainty, "it is about the ways in which youth itself offers new possibilities of identification and belonging through the construction of a temporary mattering map" (1992a, p.179). The articulation of rock in this way makes it an affective statement. This is similar to statements that *yaoi* allows fans to identify new subjectivities and live them through their fandom (Galbraith 2011b; Meyer 2010). Therefore the *yaoi* fandom could be thought of as an affective community in that it gives the fans power over identity but that identity deviates from heteronormative ideas of gender and sexuality.

With the existence of multiple types of fans and the possibility for a variety of receptions we must attend to these new empowerments and understand exactly how an object of fandom empowers its fans. As Ahmed (2006) states, it is not always the object of our desire that gives us affective power, but the actual process of making affect. In this way, *yaoi* becomes an affective device that enables the fans to express themselves in queer ways online and from these expressions fans become happy (Sasaki 2013). As an affective device, it is not always *yaoi* as manga that fans invest with affect, but rather it is through sharing, discussing, and taking part in a community that creates affect. For example, in Grossberg's study, it isn't rock itself, in terms of the music, the lyrics, or the shows, but the fact that rock mattered to a certain group of people who connected and found power via it. By offering itself as something that mattered, rock continuously constructed and reconstructed new mattering maps which empowered fans in new ways by specifying the different forms, sites and intensities of what could matter (1992a).

Based on these discussions of communities that are brought together through a common interest in a variety of objects, whilst at the same time supported by Ahmed's theorisation that affect lies not in the object but through the relations made possible by the object, I suggest that *yaoi* becomes the device rather than the object of affect (Sasaki 2013). Hemmings describes the contagious nature of a yawn, smile, or blush which is "transferred to others and doubles back" placing the individuals "in a circuit of feeling and response" (2005, p.552). It may be argued that the interest that is directed to *yaoi* is reflected off the text and directed onto those fans who share a similar passion. Once this transfer of emotion between the fans is complete the interaction and friendship between them takes primary importance. Hemmings' description implies that affect connects us to others and provides "individuals with a way of narrating their own inner life (likes, dislikes, desires and revulsions) to themselves and others" (2005, p.552). In this description, our yawns, smiles, and blushes are not affective objects that contain an inherent meaning, for example a yawn could be interpreted as boredom or fatigue, smiles are often interpreted as happiness but can also be seen as cruel, and a blush could indicate embarrassment or even something more romantic. These things are not indicative of any one thing; rather they are means, or devices, of describing ourselves to others. The very fact that facial gestures or actions can be misinterpreted evidences the fact that they do not hold essential meaning.

Instead of attempting to isolate the identifications made possible through an analysis of texts and images, this thesis examines meanings that *yaoi* fans make in interaction with one another. The fans are not looking at the characters as objects of a heterosexual female gaze, instead they use it as an affective device to "experiment with sexual desire in spaces that [*yaoi*] create[s]" (Sasaki 2013, np). *Yaoi* fans care

deeply about their text and by focussing on their affective relationship and the community I am better able to understand the *yaoi* fandom.

## **Conclusion**

Two questions provided the focus for this review:

1. What approaches to *yaoi* have been developed to date and what aspects of them are problematic?
2. How can these problems be remedied in order to allow for innovative approaches towards *yaoi*?

In response to the first question this review has detailed the background of *yaoi* studies whilst at the same time identifying problematic areas that this thesis wishes to address.

In relation to previous *yaoi* research, the common question asked by scholars, ‘why *yaoi*?’ has looked to understand why a female heterosexual audience engages with texts about homosexual men. This signifies the widespread assumption that the audience is indeed female and heterosexual. This assumption has led to criticism on two fronts. Firstly that the audience is in fact all female whilst other research is now beginning to highlight that fans are also male (Ito [Kimio] 2009; Nagaike 2013). Secondly, more recent scholars such as Akatsuka (2010), Meyer (2010), and Mizoguchi (2008), amongst others, have criticised a simplistic understanding of ‘woman’ or ‘female’, this criticism was related to commentaries of feminist thought which has understood all women to be alike whilst ignoring the “multiplicity of...subject positions” (Berlant and Warner 1998, p.239).

As a result, scholars often attempted to understand why heterosexual women would be interested in gay men. Answers ranged from seeing the relationships as fundamentally heterosexual based on the nature of the relationships, the characters

personality types, and also the appearance of the characters. Interestingly however, not all saw the characters in this way; in particular some gay men were offended at what they saw as a commodification of their bodies for heterosexual women's pleasures (the *yaoi* debate). Although this presents the flip side of the coin in that one half saw women in disguise as men (but women nonetheless) and the other saw gay men, these conflicting subject positions highlight that the key to understanding *yaoi* is not to examine the genre and its content as representative of reality but to demonstrate that *yaoi* offers "representations" (Mizoguchi 2008) or, in other words, that *yaoi* is part of multiple receptions from different groups of fans. This approach is taken up by contemporary *yaoi* scholars such as Kamm (2013), Meyer (2010), and Mizoguchi (2008) who suggest that we examine the multiple ways that *yaoi* fans interpret the genre.

Queer theory is a way to identify the diverse range of alternative identities that exist in the fan community. By queering a study of *yaoi* fans we can see how the genre offers a means to explore new subjectivities and moves us away from an attempt to categorise a large group of individuals into a singular heteronormative identity category. In particular I have found work on queer emotions and queer orientations to be helpful in this area of understanding. By understanding that a fan's interest in a text about homosexual men is not indicative of their own sexual orientation we allow for a much wider understanding of the popular 'why *yaoi*?' question.

Similarly, by separating sexuality from orientation the study of *yaoi* can now move away from trying to rationalise fans' interest in *yaoi* as intrinsically related to their 'real' sexual orientation. For example, if a fan, as a heterosexual woman, does not enjoy reading *yaoi* and its characters as representations of an ideal heterosexual relationship between a man and a woman, then why does she enjoy the genre? Answers

to this question sometimes discuss *yaoi* as a means to escape the enforced pressure of compulsory sexuality (Nagaike and Suganuma 2013). These studies often evoke thoughts of escape, stress relief, pleasure, and companionship amongst the fans. Therefore when trying to understand the appeal of *yaoi* to its fans we move further away from normative understandings of fan sexualities and orientations and towards the affective aspects of fandom.

The role of affect in a call for renewed *yaoi* studies was discussed in relation to fandom as an affective statement that allows its fans to explore “other things” (Ahmed 2006). In the case of *yaoi*, I propose that the genre forms a queer affective space because it provides the fans a means of power over identity. In the case of the *yaoi* fandom this freedom pushes the heteronormative limits of gender and sexuality. Ahmed argues that “emotions should not be regarded as psychological states, but as social and cultural practices” (2004c, p.9) and as a result this thesis focuses on the affective communication in an online fan community that will complicate our current understanding of fans’ motivations, emotions, and identities.

## Methodology

This section of the thesis discusses my research methodology of which there are four parts, in the first I introduce the data and the research site, *AarinFantasy*, addressing why I chose this site rather than others. Following this I introduce netnography as the ‘tool bag’ of my research. In this discussion I highlight the similarities and differences between traditional ethnography and netnography. In the third and fourth sections I discuss my data collection and interpretation techniques.

### Data

#### *Choosing the research site*

I made the decision to study *AarinFantasy* due to its high rate of activity and easy accessibility. *AarinFantasy* is updated on a regular basis and user activity is widespread with numerous new postings in the forums on a day-by-day footing. As an example, the main page shows that on the 30<sup>th</sup> of September 2013<sup>10</sup> there are 252 users online made up of 139 members and 113 unregistered guests. The website has over 57 932 threads totalling with 1 000 277 posts, which grow exponentially with every passing hour. The site also hosts blogs of which there are a total of 1 305 comprising of 8 911 blog entries with 4 new entries between the 30<sup>th</sup> September 1<sup>st</sup> October 2013<sup>11</sup>. In total there are 282 321 registered users of the site of which 19 917 are considered active. According to the website, an active user is one who has logged on and posted within the last three days. This is a particularly active site as on the 10<sup>th</sup> January 2013<sup>12</sup> the total number of users was 249 567, this is an increase of 32 754 new members in

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<sup>10</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/forum.php> [30th of September, 2013]

<sup>11</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/forum.php> [1st of October, 2013]

<sup>12</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/forum.php> [1st of January, 2013]

less than one year. This high level of user activity combined with easy access means that I am readily able to keep updated with the website per diem.

I originally planned to include two websites in this study, *AarinFantasy* and another, *Yaoi Haven*. However the level of activity on *Yaoi Haven* is significantly lower than that of *AarinFantasy*. When I posted an announcement of my study and a request for participation in the forums of both websites responses from *AarinFantasy* were considerably higher than *Yaoi Haven*. In *Yaoi Haven* I created 8 threads to which I received a total of 18 replies from individual users. In *AarinFantasy* I created 4 threads and managed to obtain 79 posts as responses from different users of the site.

It was also much more difficult to create and maintain contact with users from the *Yaoi Haven* site and I was unsuccessful in my attempts to contact the administrative staff. There are however individuals who participated in my study who are members of both sites. To avoid any confusion I clearly stated that I was discussing *AarinFantasy* and I asked dual member participants to keep the distinction in their explanations or at least be clear in any comparisons they made.

As I have not conducted an in-depth cross comparison of *AarinFantasy* with other fan sites it is difficult to theorise why this community *appears* to be more popular than other sites. After conducting the bulk of my research I attempted to return to *Yaoi Haven* only to find that the main page would not load. I discovered that the main site had now been closed down and moved to Facebook with a message from the original site creator:

I'm sure most of you are wondering "What happened to Yaoi-Haven?"... There's a few reasons why Yaoi-Haven has been temporarily shut down, but the main reason is to rebuild into a much bigger, better, and feature filled stable website. These things take time, and doing all of this to a live

website is a hefty task when you're short on time. As of right now, the plan is to slowly rebuild from scratch, without losing any Member or Post information, to bring everyone a simple and stable website to use for your Yaoi needs. I'll be handling this with help from both our Staff, and a personal friend of mine who's offered to help with the coding portions. Another reason why the decision was made to take the website down during this time, is funds. The funds necessary to keep the current unstable version of Yaoi-Haven has grown, and from a monetary perspective it's best to save the funds towards more features on the rebuilt website. I know it's not ideal, and this might upset a large amount of members. Keep in mind though, we will not shut down permanently, we will be back, and we will be better. I hope to have a time-frame soon for when you can expect Yaoi-Haven to come back online, but for the time being, it's up in the air since the rebuilding is only just starting. I'll post updates as often as I can, and during the rebuilding I'll be sure to share any interesting progress we may have! "Like" us to stay up to date on our progress! Thanks for understanding everyone, -Munkii. (Yaoi-Haven Administrator)<sup>13</sup>

It would appear that the site shut down due to the creator's aim for modification as well as the collection of funds whilst changes were made. Whilst this post does not explain why the site was less active in my original examination directly, it does give us some clues as to why this may have been the case. Firstly, the administrator mentions their desire to "rebuild" the site into a "bigger, better, and feature filled stable website", there are two things that this statement implies, that originally it was not big and nor did was it feature filled, two things that *AarinFantasy* can be said to represent.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/yaoihaven/posts/10152168850537976> [last accessed April 23rd 2015]



Figure 8: AarinFantasy Homepage

Figure 8 shows an image of the homepage of *AarinFantasy*. The main page is an entry point for the site and above and below the banner is a selection of hyperlinks that lead to different parts of the site. At the top of the page there are links for *Home*, *About*, *Blog*, *Fansub Team*, *Glossary*, *Links*, and *Contact Us*. At the bottom of the page are links to *Community*, *AarinSecret*, and *Reviews*.

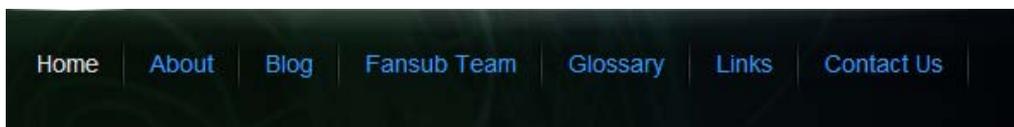


Figure 9: Main Page Tabs

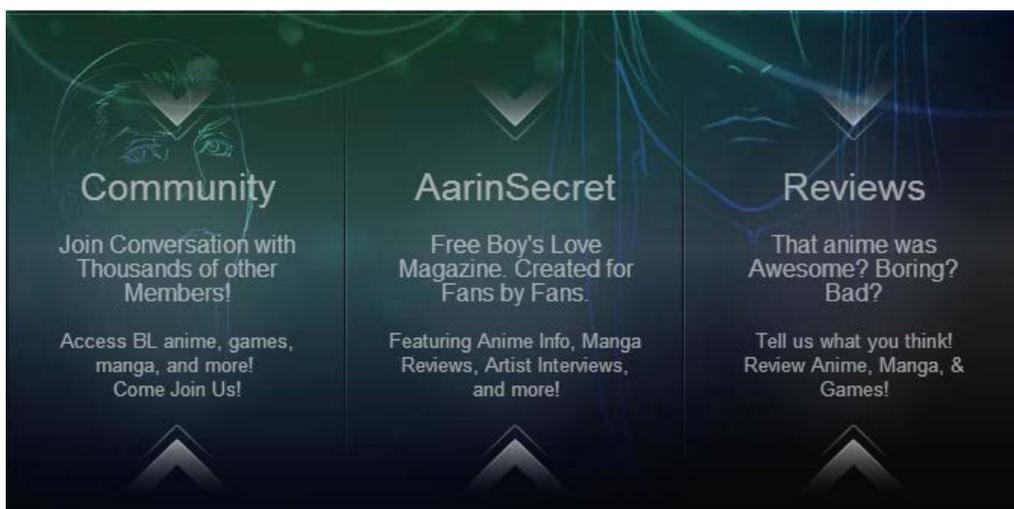


Figure 10: Main Page Tabs

The *Home* link leads back to this main page, and the *About* link leads to a piece that is written by the creator of the site Aarin in which she describes the site to potential new fans and members of the site. The *Blog* link leads to the main community forum of the site where the fans place their own personal blogs. *The Fansub Team* link leads to a list of the people in the fansub team. The *Glossary* is a list of twenty terms specialised terms that are related to *yaoi* fandom. Finally there is a *contact us* link for contacting the administrative staff.

Fans are able to customise the colour of the pages that they visit, so that when you change the colour theme of the main page.



Figure 11: Bleak Back Theme



Figure 12: Rosy Red Theme



Figure 13: Passionate Purple Theme

*AarinFantasy* is a highly complex and well-designed site, all things that the administrator of *Yaoi Haven* claims was not. Indeed for an online community to be

popular and maintain that popularity, the actual layout of the site must be manageable so that the fans are able to move from one place to another without getting lost. This attention to detail and focus on navigability can be seen in the *AarinFantasy* community where there are these clear headings at the top of page indicating each of the site's main sections.

David Garcia *et al.*, (2013) provides evidence that highly developed and extensive websites will retain popularity whilst the lack of it would lead to their downfall. In his study, Garcia *et al.* examines a variety of Online Social Networks (OSN) including *LiveJournal*, *Facebook*, *Orku*, *Myspace*, and *Friendster* to understand why some sites such as *Facebook* and *LiveJournal* continue to maintain high levels of membership whilst others like *Myspace* are rapidly declining and yet more such as *Friendster* closed down entirely. Garcia *et al.* suggest that “the appearance of competing OSN, with different functionalities and designs, create unexpected shifts of users that abandon one community for another” (p.1) and that the ascent or decline in popularity and membership levels “depends on both the social interaction between users, and the implementation and design of the OSN” (p.2). For Garcia *et al.* *Facebook* simply offers more functions for users than *Friendster* did, and secondly, *Friendster's* relationship system was a key factor. Garcia refers to the ‘k-core analysis’ to suggest that because users of *Friendster* had less user connections than other sites if one user left it meant that it was much more likely that their friends would also leave whereas sites with larger friend groups were less likely to suffer an exodus as the leaving of one friend in a group was unlikely to induce members of a network to leave.

Interestingly, since the *Yaoi Haven's* move to *Facebook* the page has reached over 34 000 ‘likes’ as opposed to *AarinFantasy's* 8 358 as of March 2015. However, I am cautious about making any simplistic assumptions that a greater number of ‘likes’

means a greater level of popularity. Liking *Yaoi Haven*'s page on Facebook does not necessarily mean they are invested in the site. Moreover, we must remember that *Yaoi Haven* now only has its *Facebook* page whereas *AarinFantasy* still maintains its own website with hundreds of thousands of users, who due to their separate participation may not feel need to 'like' the Facebook page also.

## **Ethnography**

Hy Mariampolski (1999) argues that ethnography "cannot be...defined as just another single method or technique," rather it is a research discipline based upon culture and a mix of both techniques to record behavioural dynamics. (p.79). Ethnographic research in online communities has become popular with the growing presence of the internet in the people's lives and can be found in a variety of disciplines under differing titles such as 'digital ethnography' (Murthy 2008), 'virtual ethnography' (Hine 2000), 'cyberethnography' (Ward 1999), 'internet ethnography' (Sade-Beck 2008), and 'netnography' (Kozinets 2010) amongst others. Research on computer mediated communication has been said to have come a long way from its 'first wave' when "the focus was on features and strategies that are specific to new media [and] the effects of communications technologies on language were given priority over other contextual factors" (Androutsopoulos 2008, p.1). As Jannis Androutsopoulos writes, data are "detached from their discursive and social contexts, and generalisations [are] organised around media-related distinctions such as language of emails, newsgroups, etc" (2008, p.1) thus the focus of research was texts and pieces of language as opposed to activity in its meaningful context.

Hine (2000) writes the difference between earlier and later research is a movement from the study of things to the study of actions and she identifies as two phases in research within computer mediated communications. The first phase is known for experimental approaches whilst the latter is known for its “growing application of naturalistic approaches to online phenomena and the subsequent claiming of the Internet as a cultural context” (2013, p.7). As a result Hine writes that “our knowledge of the Internet as a cultural context is intrinsically tied up with the application of ethnography” (2013, p.8).

Ethnography online is developed from traditional offline ethnography which in turn has its roots in anthropology. Its object of analysis is the lived experiences of people and its goal is to produce detailed contextualised accounts, otherwise known as ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973). Therefore ethnography works against generalisations in regards to digital experiences (Coleman 2010). Nonetheless, there are important issues that must be considered when considering ethnographic research online.

I would like to consider the dichotomy between the real and the virtual. I do not find the term ‘virtual’ in relation to ethnography helpful as when it has been used, such as in Hine’s research (2000), it suggests a form of incomplete ethnography due to the fact it is online only. In this sense, the term ‘virtual’ implies that there is a distinct difference between what online and offline. Beneito-Montagut (2011) writes that the term would only be truly applicable if the research is conducted into online worlds such as *Second Life* or *World of Warcraft* but is not applicable when the focus of study is the “everyday communications and interactions carried out online” (p.719).

It is possible to situate netnography within traditional ethnography through its adherence to the standards of ethnographic research and through providing the

Geertzian ‘thick description’ as a result of the researcher’s immersion into the culture of the online community (Kozinets 2015). Similarly, netnography follows six steps of traditional ethnography: research planning, entrée, data collection, interpretation, ethics, and research presentation (Kozinets 2010). Kozinets also suggests that the research needs to understand when, if at all, to combine traditional face-to-face ethnography with netnography and that the researcher fully understands the differences of the online in order to successfully adapt the ethnographic techniques. Thus another important topic worth mentioning is the necessity of the ‘term’ netnography. It has been referred to as another neologism, and that it is not very different from other accounts of mediated ethnography. One such debate is found on Kozinets’s blog online<sup>14</sup> to which Jerry Lombardi, an applied anthropologist, has contributed:

I recall that our dear, sacred word ‘ethnography’ is itself a NEOLOGISM coined in the early 19th century – which might make it an oldologism by now – to define a practice that had not previously existed in quite the form or with quite the goals that the word’s coiners were trying to convey. If we were having this discussion in 1835 at the Royal Society, I might be questioning why we need that new-fangled term, ‘ethnography’, when, say, ‘comparative moral philosophy’ or ‘manners and customs of the savages’ still work perfectly well. (Let us try those on our business clients!) The worlds of research and intellectual innovation are strewn with neologisms that might’ve sounded odd or wrong when brand-new: cybernetics, psycholinguistics, software. So yes, new mappings of reality sometimes call for new names, and sometimes the names take a while to settle in. (Lombardi cited in Kozinets, forthcoming)

Kozinets applies this questioning to the applicability of a new term such as ‘netnography’ and asks “is it really different?” (2015). His answer is yes. He suggests that there are at least three fundamental differences between traditional ethnography and the netnography: entrée into the community, gathering data, and ethical procedures. The first is that entering an online community differs from traditional face-to-face

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<sup>14</sup> <http://kozinets.net/> [last accessed April 23rd 2015]

entrée in terms of accessibility and approach. Similarly, participation can mean something very different online than it would offline, as would observation. In terms of data collection there can be a massive increase in the amount of data and the process of transcription is “radically altered”. Finally, for ethical considerations, there are no prescribed processes for ethnography when conducted online and “abstract guidelines of informed consent are open to wide degrees of interpretation” (2015).

As the internet and other information technologies have become so prominent in many aspects of everyday life it seems that we have now reached the point where we cannot ignore the online activities of communities or social groupings. Indeed, it is now the case that we cannot fully understand social life without including the technologically mediated aspects communication and socialisation, leading researchers to now question whether or not we can meaningfully consider a difference between online and offline social life. Kozinets (2015) responds to this by arguing that:

it seems like the answer is no...the two have blended into one world: the world of real life, as people live it. It is a world that includes the use of technology to communicate, to commune, to socialise, to express, and to understand. (2015)

Indeed, “our cultural portrayals would be extremely limited without detailed reference to the online data...that increasingly make these social collectives possible” (2015). In such a context it does indeed become difficult to differentiate between the real and the virtual in our social interactions as boundaries between the online and offline can seem very vague (Haythornthwaite and Kazmer 2002).

## Netnography

Netnography is the observation of, and participation in, online textual discourses to gain ‘in-depth understanding’ of the meanings, attitudes and consumption patterns of specific online groups (Kozinets 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010). It is comprised of five stages: the cultural entrée, data collection, data analysis, ethical research, and participant feedback (Kozinets 2010).

One of the key advantages of using a netnographic approach is that the synchronous and asynchronous nature of the internet undoubtedly means flexibility for both participant and researcher. For example, asynchronous message boards and email allowed me to send and respond to messages at my convenience and has allowed participants the same dispensation whilst at the same time minimising any possibilities of intruding on personal space and time. The use of the internet for ethnographic research allowed me, as researcher, to be in contact with people who otherwise may be difficult to reach offline. This corresponds with Hine’s (2005) claim that the ability to cross temporal and spatial dimensions results in greater opportunities for interactions with diverse people. With *yaoi* readers, who are often not seen in mainstream manga reading groups, this kind of access has only been advantageous to my needs.

The increased availability and accessibility that online communication allows does bring some of its own problems that need to be dealt with. First of all, in synchronous communication via mediums such as *msn* and *Skype* there are certain issues of frustration such as delays in replying to questions. There are many reasons for this such as participants taking time in considering their responses or taking part in another

activity at the same time. Another area that caused difficulties was arranging interviews. Sometimes participants would want to cut short interviews if something came up at home and then would like to rearrange for another time disrupting the flow of the interview and meant that I myself would have to spend time before resuming the interview and 'getting back into the feel of it'. Another interesting part of the interview process was that they took longer than I had planned. I found that sometimes due to the time it took for participants to respond, but more importantly the depth and amount of conversation that occurred, the time taken increased considerably. As a result it was common to set aside time for three to four sittings. This impacted on research both positively and negatively. It had a negative impact because I did not have the time to conduct more than the 25 in-depth interviews. However the positive aspect far outweighs this as these 25 interviews go into great detail and explanation and give me a clear picture regarding what is happening on the website.

Kozinets (1998, 2010) argues that the internet offers online groups opportunities to come together across geographic distances and participate in activities that are meaningful to them. Therefore, netnography is able to offer thick descriptions of the worlds of individuals. Traditional ethnography requires that the researcher place themselves in the community that they wish to study, either overtly or covertly, whilst conducting interviews and surveys is also required. In a netnographic study this type of observation can be accessed by a computer and an internet connection.

My role as researcher is both similar and dissimilar to traditional overt or covert ethnography. For example, in my netnographic approach participant observation took place through online interaction with website users. This can be overt and includes both the participant and I in open discussion or it may be covert where I take a less

involved role and simply observe interactions and read texts posted online, otherwise known as 'lurking'. Online I was able to take a more observant position and only involve myself when necessary, which would naturally be more much more difficult were I physically amongst the group, either as a covert or overt researcher. Finally, using netnography means there is a vast amount of pre-existing information in online environments via forum archives and message boards that were easily accessed and searched for using the websites own search system, something traditional ethnography would require more time and effort to do. Compared to other methods, netnography is more time and cost effective and less obtrusive (Kozinets 2002, p.63).

#### *Problems and ethical issues related to netnography*

Issues related to conducting offline ethnographic research are well documented and discussed such as: informed consent and access, the researcher's role in constructing knowledge, and the use of that knowledge (Gilles and Alldred 2002). However there are some issues that are distinctive to netnography. In relation to the discussion between the real and the virtual, or the binary between offline and online I would like to consider multiple modalities of the 'real' via various mediations such as message board posts, online interviews, as well as face-to-face interviews and whether or not what is 'real', or at least considered more real, differs in relation to modes of communication.

I had to recognise the implications that being online can bring and one such implication that grasps the attention of many internet scholars is the issue of authenticity. In the progress of my research how could I have been sure that those with whom I spoke were really who they say they were and were posting or telling me the

truth? The questions being, ‘does what exists online become fundamentally different from the offline?’

A starting point for answering these questions is to understand that by asking whether or not what is discovered online is ‘real’, we are ignoring key areas of thought and research. My role as an ethnographer in this study is to assess what exists in the chosen site, regardless of whether it is deemed real or not by others. The fascination with inauthentic identities online has been criticised by others who argue that in almost all facets of life, our identity is performative, and the internet thus should not be seen as something distinctively different. For Nalita James and Hugh Busher in *Online Interviewing* (2009):

It is the way in which participants’ stories are constructed and the consistency with which they present themselves that provides the strongest reassurance to researchers of the trustworthiness of their accounts whether in online research or face-to-face research. (p.67)

As promising as this seems, it in itself though does not fully resolve the problem. The notion of identity as constructed is just as important to online research as it is offline and ‘impression management’ can emerge in any research setting (Goffman 1959). The difference in an online setting of course is that I am not always afforded the non-verbal cues that carry the emotional meaning of the message (Beebe, Beebe and Redmond 2008). James and Busher suggest triangulating data with offline interviews but this requires physical proximity which is an indulgence I do not have when trying to contact *yaoi* fans who do not have clear and accessible offline groups and are located across the world.

It may seem germane to seek both offline and online sets of data as it is stated that the combination of both can aide in creating thick description (Sade-Beck 2004). However, Brian Wilson (2006) demonstrates how a decision to focus solely on online data can

be a wise context-sensitive decision emerging from a well-informed understanding of the study focus. Rather than being a means to obtain more fruitful results, studying the offline can simply be no more than a means to authenticate the online results. For example, in studying the integration of the internet in the everyday lives of users, researchers such as Bakardijieva and Smith (2001) and Hine (2005) conducted ethnographic visits and interviews in the domestic settings of internet users. By doing this, researchers are effectively, albeit perhaps not intentionally, organising the offline and online as separate and intrinsically different. By making this distinction between the offline and online I would recreate the dichotomy that the offline as authentic and online as inauthentic are separate distinguished locales. Moreover, highlighting the importance of offline authenticity to validate online identity behind online activities simply reifies that there is indeed a singular bound notion of identity that is linked similarly to a physical authentic body.

A major aspect of ethnography has been the face-to-face interaction between researcher and participants and as a result a key issue in conducting online ethnography relates to the usefulness of mediated ethnography for interacting with subjects who are not physically co-present. Hine (2000) writes that before the proliferation of the internet, “mediated forms of communication simply did not seem sufficiently interactive to allow the ethnographer to test ideas through immersion” and that “if mediated interaction is to be incorporated into an ethnographic project, the basis for focusing ethnographic engagement or immersion on face-to-face interaction needs to be considered” (p.44). But now with the technology available to us for mediated communication we can “explore the possibilities for a reconceptualization of ethnographic authenticity that incorporates mediated interaction on its own terms” (p.44). Hine draws her discussion of the ‘reality’ of ethnographic research online back

to the 'representational crisis' (Denzin cited in Hine 2000, p.44) which pointed to the growing realisation that traditional face-to-face ethnographic research was "not a transparent representation of a culture" rather they were "narratives or accounts that relied heavily on the experience of particular ethnographers and on conventions used to make...those accounts authoritative" (Van Maanen cited in Hine 2000, p.44). Thus, whilst the stories may be considered convincing, they should not be considered 'transparent representations' based on 'real' culture because they were textual constructions of reality (Atkinson 2014).

Hine also highlights traditional ethnography's focus on travel as a means to establish analytical authority by having actually 'been' there. Online ethnography does not have to include physical travel but can use "experiential...displacement" (Hine 2000, p.45) and the research can "travel by looking, by reading, by imaging and imagining" (Burnett 1996, p.68) thus "it is possible for an ethnographer sitting at a desk in an office...to explore the social spaces of the internet" however "the lack of physical travel does not mean...that the relationship between ethnographer and readers is collapsed" (Hine 2000, p.45). The focus on travel is deeply connected to the importance of face-to-face interaction as a key part of representing 'reality' in traditional ethnography. Shelley Correll (1995) includes face-to-face interaction in her online ethnography and she met her participants face-to-face in order to verify the information that they gave online. On the one hand Correll argues that this is part of ethnographic holism in the sense that it adds authenticity to her ethnography and that the group she studied did in fact meet together periodically offline and she took advantage of such pre-existing meetings. On the other hand, in many online communities many users have never and are unlikely to ever meet one another offline and thus to artificially create offline meetings with participants would, as Hine refers

to it, “place the ethnographer in an asymmetric position, using more varied and different means of communication to understand informants than are used by the informants themselves” (Hine 2000, p.48). In other words, whilst aiming for authenticity by triangulating data with face-to-face meetings (Silverman 1993) it can also damage the ‘reality’ of the community as it exists for its members. Thus rather than placing face-to-face ethnography as a more accurate mode of establishing ‘reality’ Hine states that “a more sceptical and symmetrical approach suggests that [face-to-face ethnography] should be used with caution, and with a sensitivity to the ways in which informants use it” (Hine 2000, p.49).

At this point it becomes important to question whether or not certain modes of mediated communication may be considered more ‘real’ than others. For example, is video call made through skype just as real as a face-to-face conversation due to greater inclusion of communicative cues and a possibility for a greater immediacy and social presence? Does the asynchronous nature of some modes of communication impact upon the ‘reality’.

The belief that the internet is a valid site for ethnography rests on the idea that what happens online is a form of social interaction. A fundamental requirement of interaction would be some level of communicative co-presence. Some aspects of mediated communication may be seen as more interactive than others, for example live message boards or chat boards with enough participants can create the sense of a conversation occurring in real time and with ever advancing communicative technologies the social presence of other users can be enhanced with voice and imaging technology such as ability to hold group voice and video calls via Skype. In contrast message boards and blog sites represent texts of static web pages give no

obvious indicators of co-presence or interaction. Because face-to-face communication is the 'default' form of communication that we are used to it has "become the standard for judging other media (Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, and Abras 2003, p.606). As part of this 'focus' social presence theory (Short, Williams, and Christie 1976) considers how successful various forms of media are at creating co-presence between individuals and explains how social interaction is affected by characteristics of different media. Social presence theory picks up on not only the verbal communication but also on non-verbal cues such as body language and information about participants' contexts. Reduced social cues are due to a lack of capability to express gestures, facial language, tone of voice, and so on. As a result, in many cases "clues about the communicators' emotional states are filtered out" (Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, and Abras 2003, p.606).

On the other hand, not being physically co-present with another can generate a more 'real' environment as people feel more able to be open and honest about themselves (Lea et al. 1992) explaining why there are "remarkably candid comments...made online about personal health problems, emotional relationships and feelings" and "when conversations are limited to just a few topics...a sense of feeling similar and shared identity can develop" (Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, and Abras 2003, p.607) known as 'self-disclosure reciprocity' (Wallace 2001) which appears more salient online.

Face-to-face oral communication may be considered the most important for traditional ethnography with written text considered in a "somewhat secondary role as cultural products" (Hine 2000, p.51). This is part of what Hine describes as part of a 'romantic legacy' of ethnography (Hammersley and Atkinson cited in Hine 2000, p.51). Based

on the work of Hammersley and Atkinson, Hine describes how other forms of communication other than face-to-face communication deserve greater attention and questions concerning the extent of their authenticity should be suspended. Indeed, “rather than being seen as more or less accurate portrayals of reality texts should be seen as ethnographic material which tells us about the understanding which authors have of the reality which they inhabit” (Hine 2000, p.51). Indeed the reality which a text online creates can be evaluated “on its own terms, without recourse to external, pretextual reality” (Potter cited in Hine 2000, p.53).

As social presence is an important aspect in influencing online interaction and the perception of authenticity and the ‘real’ it is worthwhile examining the different ways that mediated communication has been examined by ethnographers. In terms of textual communication Kate Stewart and Matthew Williams (2005) have examined the ‘realness’ of asynchronous and synchronous communication. They write that “text-based group interactions should not be viewed as the poor cousin to newer, flashier, prettier media that allow sound or...images to be exchanged by participants” (p.403). In terms of the practicalities of methodology, asynchronous discussions such as web-boards sometimes require users to register before reading or contributing to discussions and therefore the registration process “allows the researcher to retain control of the composition of the research sample and gather relevant background information on participants” (p.403) thus allowing for the possibility of background checks, however this doesn’t address the possibility of inauthentic profiles. They also discuss synchronous communication in the form of focus groups and group chat in previously popular internet relay chat programs such as *America Online* and *MSN messenger*. They write that chat systems offer a “heightened sense of immediacy [that] leads to the expression of more emotion and often produces more heated

exchanges” than asynchronous communication and whilst synchronous communication “is written and not spoken, many of its linguistic characteristics mirror the spoken word” (p.404). Similarly, Rodney Jones (2004) suggests that in terms of mediated communication online “the vast majority of people who engage in [it] regard it as an extension (McLuhan 1994) of their ‘real-life’ social interactions rather than as a separate from them” going so far as to state that participants in his study reject “the traditional dichotomy of ‘actual’ and ‘virtual’ reality insisting that computer mediated communication is as ‘real’ as anything else (‘as real as a telephone call’) (p.10).

Another example is provided by Nicholas Hookway (2008) who examines blogging online. Hookway defines a blog as something which:

Refers to a website which contains a series of frequently updated, reverse chronologically ordered posts on a common web page, usually written by a single author. (Hookway 2008, p.92)

According to Warren Kidd (2013), within a blog an individual may “share anxieties and experiences” and whilst it can be single authored it may also be written by multiple participants “shar[ing] permissions and editing...with each other as a group” (p.214). Furthermore he writes that “the immediacy created...allows for ‘naturalistic text’ to be constructed” concluding that the “qualities of practicality and capacity to shed light on social processes across space and time, together with their insight into everyday life” (p.93). However, Kidd writes that the blog, as a field of ethnographic enquiry, has differences to “a ‘lived’ one” in that “the use of hypermedia bestows privileges and priorities on the textual practices themselves” (2013, p.215), for example in Hookway’s work, the blog is presented as a ‘blogosphere’, thus the written text is paramount as well as the meanings that become attached to it but this is not something particular to blogs as Gertz writes that ethnographic data is always “our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are

up to” (1973, p.9) thus the text of the blog in online ethnography is “not all – but it exists devoid of other context” (Kidd 2013, p.215). Indeed as Chris Mann and Fiona Stewart write:

When data are collected online, much of the contextual materials is missing. In the mainly black and white world of text we lose the Technicolor of lived life and its impact on most of our senses. (Mann and Stewart 2000, p.197)

This suggests that the textual interaction online is somewhat less ‘real’ than face-to-face communication and if we rely on the text in an online environment then we need to restore the ‘Technicolor’ in our ethnographic pursuits. Kidd suggests this be done “in much the same way as we might ‘lived’ life: asking questions, seeking clarifications, engaging with dialogue, where we co-construct the meanings of the cultural and textual practices themselves” indeed “we might be tempted to question the ‘authenticity’ of reported lived experience if we are not seeing it first hand, and yet, what we might see first-hand and what it means are not always obvious – hence the need for ethnographic inquiry in the first place (2013, p.215) supporting what Stacy Horn says about appearances, “we are often fooled by [them] as we are informed by them” (1998, p.91).

That is not to say that offline communication or face-to-face interaction cannot be important. In her study of an online breast cancer community, Shani Orgad (2009) found face-to-face interaction to be “extremely significant for understanding the experience of breast cancer patients’ online engagement” and “consider[s] this transition to have been a key turning point in [her] understanding of the relationship between patients’ lives and their online experience” (p.8) thus positing offline interaction as more ‘real’ and more valuable because “so long as [she] only had access to participants’ construction of their online experience through their e-mail accounts,

the relationship between patients' lives and their online experience seemed...straight forward" and so "the offline data enlightened much more complex connections" through "personal narratives" (p.8). Kevin Steinmetz (2012) writes that "while the offline experience is important, the focus of the research should be directed more towards the online experience and interactions of the population (Fay 2000; Wittel 2000)" (p.29) and that:

it would be easier to get mired in the details of each users' offline life while losing sight of the focus of much virtual ethnography, which is online social interaction...and community. As such, offline lives should be considered as contextual for the field site but not of primary interest. (Steinmetz 2012, p.29)

However, he does highlight some problematic issues of mediated reality, particularly regarding time and authenticity. He writes that "a consideration to give to message boards is their temporality" (p.30) and often when they are found by the ethnographer are usually archived (Hine 2000) meaning that they are examined after they have already occurred and therefore the "ethnographer and participants no longer...share the same time frame" so whilst being a rich source of data, the ethnographer does not experience the threads in the same order as other users and thus the temporal aspect of reality is distorted (Hine 2000, pp.22-3). To mitigate this point, Steinmetz emphasises the very same fact that each user is unlikely to experience same temporality and therefore "differential exposure can be considered as part of the experience" (2012, p.30). Steinmetz suggests another way to deal with the potential distorted temporality of online communication is "to understand that each thread will have its own timeline" (2012, p.30) which is similar to what Hine (2000) highlighted in her own ethnography, specifically that it would be impossible to attempt to understand a website's message board as each post was made, "it would be easier to focus on each individual thread and treat these discussions as if they were happening in their own place in time, not

amidst the potentially hundreds of other discussions happening at the same time” (Steinmetz 2012, p.30).

However, there are differences between ‘real’ face-to-face communication and mediated communication and whilst advances in internet communication are allowing for video and voice communication, the majority is still textual and so we should consider how else individuals may convey ‘reality’ through text-based communication. The mediation of facial expressions can be achieved through the use of emoticons and meta-messages such as ‘\*cries\*’ or ‘\*shakes head\*’ can be used to indicate body language and emotion. Acronyms are also widely used in contemporary mediated communication such as LOL to indicate ‘laughing out loud’ whilst additional typographic methods can also be used to convey aspects of ‘real’ face-to-face communication such as the use of italics, capital letters, bold font, and font size to convey the writer’s emphasis and emotion in a posting.

Similarly, we should not ignore features such as usernames, avatars, post signatures, and profiles on websites. A username can tell us a great deal about interests, nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, politics, or job amongst others. Similarly, a username could include biographical information such as birth year (often used as a common addition when the desired username has already been registered), nicknames, and favourite number or colour amongst a myriad of personal interests. At times, of course, usernames can be misleading and it may be difficult, even erroneous, to assume anything from a username. Nonetheless, throughout this thesis I will refer to fans using gendered pronouns and possessive pronouns because I have to come learn a fans’ sex/gender via a variety of means. In some cases the information can be learnt from the messages they post and how they refer to or describe themselves, from their

biographical information in their user profile, or via messaging and asking the fan directly. Of course, information even this way does not necessarily mean it is 'real':

the lack of face-to-face contact available over most internet mediums (voice/voice chat has yet to rise to prominence though it is growing exponentially as we speak)...could potentially allow the informants to adopt a false identity that could fool the ethnographer. (Steinmetz 2012, p.30)

Indeed, Hine (2000) has also focussed on this issue writing that:

In the Internet postmodernity seems to have found its object, in an 'anything goes' world where people and machines, truth and fiction, self and other seem to merge in a glorious blurring of boundaries. (Hine, 2000, p. 7), the focus of this thesis is not to ascertain whether or not offline and online identities correspond, or the 'reality' of online identities, but rather an examination of them as they exist online.

For example, avatars can tell us a great deal about the 'reality' of user. An avatar is a visual representation of a user; it may be an actual photo of that user however it is often used to convey something about the user to others. Similar to usernames, an avatar can provide information about the user in terms of personal interests and in many cases websites allow users to post a quote or short descriptor below their avatar to convey further information. In other cases titles that have been earned on the site can be placed in the profile potentially telling us about the length of membership, the level of activity, or their position in the site's organisation all giving us information about the very 'real' activity of their online participation.

A profile can be easily accessed by a user and can hold a wealth of information about the owner. In *AarinFantasy* (figure 14) users have a great deal of liberty in the customisation of their profile being able to customise the colour, layout, and may include information regarding their favourite television shows, films, books, as well as tell other users about their lives in a small profile box.

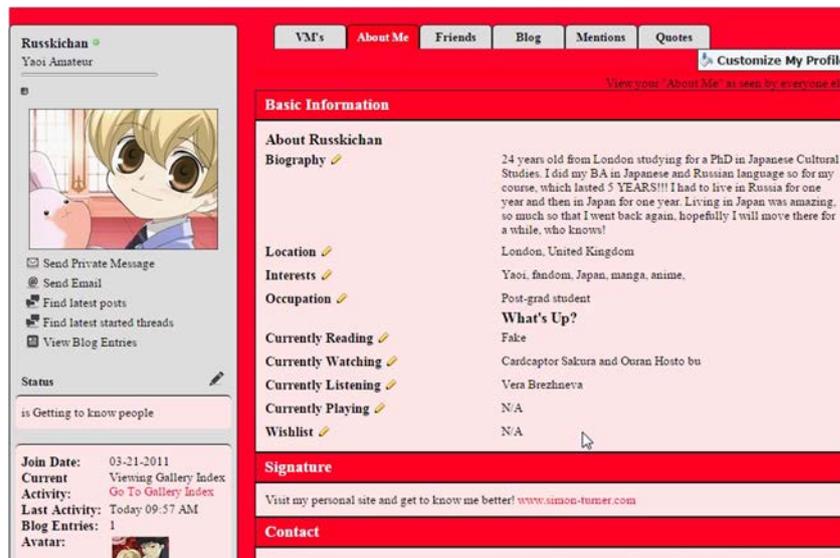


Figure 14: User profile page

Steinmetz argues that online, identity is flimsy because it is easier to play with than in real life due to the requirement for consistent and continued performance offline whereas online an individual can log off at any time they wish (2012, p.31). Similarly Hine (2000) and Turkle (1995) both document how individuals construct new identities online. However, we should not forget that offline or face-to-face communication is not free of “identity play” (Hine 2000, p.119). Annette Markham (2004) and Eleanor Wynn and James Katz (1997) remind us that identity play has existed long before the internet and Hine (2000) advises that we should not focus on the possibility of identity play but rather focus on how identity is negotiated online to which Steinmetz adds “we do this in virtual ethnography by not studying the people actually sitting behind their computer screens but, instead, by studying their projected identity and how identity is negotiated” (2012, p.31). Building on this Markham writes that focussing too much on how ‘real’ the identities that we are being presented with online is to “risk paralysis in the research process” (2005, p.800).

Like David Silverman (2011) I believe that there is no absolute authenticity; it is itself simply a “manifestation of the phenomenon that always escapes rule” (Silverman 2011, p.201). I am sure that as more focus is placed on mediating technologies such as the internet, the distinction between the online and offline will become ever more blurred. They will not be seen as separate, but complimentary places of data collection that help us to understand the communities that are the focus of research. The empirical chapters will show that *yaoi* is often seen as a sensitive topic and not something that is readily discussed offline with family and friends by the fans and by using the internet I hope that participants will be more less reserved with their responses as issues such as personal lives and culture can be a sensitive topic to discuss (Farguharson 2005, p.5).

I am however aware of the potential performance of identity in online interaction. Computer mediated interaction in a community could be considered a disembodied version of ‘face-work’ (Goffman 1972) in that users take part in self-representation and impression management thus users of the site may consciously and actively write their identities into existence and present themselves as having qualities that they themselves desire or that they belief others desire to see in them. In this sense, mediated communication could simply be described as a ‘stage’ (Goffman 1972) in the fans’ creation of an identity. Early virtual community scholars were concerned with the threat of deception online with Judith Donath writing that:

in the physical world there is an inherent unity to the self. The body...provides a compelling and convenient definition of identity. The norm is: one body, one identity. The virtual world is different....there is body to anchor identity. One can have as many electronic personas as one has time and energy to create. (1999, np)

In some respect I agree with Donath as in cases “virtual identities are not only anonymous, but ephemeral: names are taken temporarily...even simple design

decisions, such as how prominently a writer's name is displayed, influence[s] the ambience of an online community" (1999, np). Donath suggests that the offline is more real than the online, that the body has a 'real' identity, and Goffman's face-work is focussed on face-to-face interactions not examining the results of online anonymity. Indeed, like in offline communication the stage is there and so is the audience but in an online setting the actor is hidden, or masked potentially allowing online communicators the chance to be more honest and candid without the need to consider impression management.

As a result as a researcher, one must ask how trustworthy are the accounts I am being given, how do I know what they tell me is true or is it simply a fiction that they wish to express to me, or that they believe I want to hear? These are questions I am often asked when explaining that I conducted online research only. I believe an answer to these questions is impossible and the question is reductive, rather what we should, and what I do, respond with are more questions. The first simply being 'does it really matter?', even if my participants do not tell me the 'truth', what they do tell me is no less important and no less indicative about the social environment they inhabit, indeed what could be regarded as the 'truth' is largely irrelevant as the focus in this research is how *AarinFantasy* creates "particular effects" (Silverman 2001, p.122). Questions of 'truth' and 'reality' depend on the research focus. A concern about deception would be better placed in a study that aims to discover if online communication corresponds with an offline 'reality'.

My second question in response would be 'how do you ever know that what you are being told is the truth, regardless of whether it is online or face-to-face?' How does one know when a face-to-face interviewee is telling the truth, or how do you

when you watch someone filling out a questionnaire or survey that they ticking or answering truthfully? These are not new questions or concerns for neither ethnographic reason nor face-to-face communication in general (Goffman 1959; 1972). Concerns about validity are connected to how online research has been considered secondary material. For example Nalita James and Hugh Busher write that:

Although some researcher have argued that online environments and identities are valid in themselves and do not need to be verified offline Hine (2000), we believed that the authenticity of our participants' voices was enhanced by combining both offline and online interactions: 'by moving off-line to ascertain their *'visual...and embodied* ways of expression' (Orgad 2005, p.62), as well as online through their textual self-presentation. This reinforced how for both participants and researchers, the construction of their stories, and our understandings of these stories were shaped by the nature of our interactions. (James and Busher 2007, p.109)

These concerns seem to emerge from what Silverman calls the 'interview society' (2001) in which researchers believe that the authentic interview was the face-to-face interview. However in Busher and James' account they mention that the nature of interaction can shape the stories that they are being told and I cannot help but ask, how do they know that what they are being told face-to-face is not simply another fabricated or "construct[ed]" 'truth' as the participants engage in face-work and impression management?

## **Procedures of Data Collection and Analysis**

### *Participant recruitment*

Like Mary Gray in *Out in the Country* (2009), I wanted to fill a gap in literature concerning the lives of individuals who are often missed out. In Gray's case, her project concerns the life experiences of LGBT youth in rural America that are overshadowed by youth in metropolitan areas and as a result "we have largely drawn

our conclusions and developed our theoretical frameworks...from a very...limited data pool” (p.10). I have also suggested there is a gap in current literature regarding *yaoi* fans, particularly those that do not identify as female and heterosexual. As a result, a great deal of research may find itself focussing on these individuals, particularly so if researchers favour offline activities over online activities. Gray argues that “the rationale for researchers sticking to established...organisations is grounded in the limited access research have to [them]” (p.191). Indeed, there are extremely few examinations of online *yaoi* fan communities and it appears as though the female heterosexual fan is all that exists. There are other fans too who disrupt our common notion of the *yaoi* fandom and it is the purpose of this thesis to include their diverse genders and sexualities.

Gray’s examines LGBT youth in rural America who are not easily found and writes that “unless our research calls for staying online...I think there is a greater impetus to explore offline experiences of phenomena” (2009, p.106). In the case of this thesis I do the opposite but for what I believe is the same reason as Gray. She writes that LGBT youth experiences that are readily found in cities which limits the pool of participants to those who live in cities or readily have access to online groups, which themselves tend to serve metropolitan communities. Therefore she advocates going offline as a contextually based decision to include rural LGBT youth. I take the opposite approach for the same context based decision as being online presents a greater chance to include those fans one cannot easily meet offline. What Gray is examining could be referred to as what Fabiola Baltar and Ignasi Brunet call a “hard-to-reach population” (2011, p.57). Baltar and Brunet assess snowball sampling in *Facebook* for the examination of such ‘populations’ suggesting that “the internet

opens new ways to investigate...many scientific questions about some target population that do not look for generalised results but representative ones” (p.58).

Maryse Marpsat and Nicholas Razafindratsima (2010) define a ‘hard-to-reach’ population as having relatively low numbers making an investigation “throughout the general population very expensive”. Being hard to identify, they often have something in common that is not easy to detect because it is “illicit [or] socially stigmatised...which leads to a poor choice of places in which to approach them” (p.4). If we think in terms of the wider manga community then *yaoi* fans are certainly in the minority, at a manga convention or in the general public there is no way to know who is a *yaoi* fan unless one were to stay by a *yaoi* booth (if one was even present) but even then many individuals who spend time at *yaoi* booths may only have a passing interest in the now infamous genre and many actual fans may be too shy or nervous to walk up to the booth.

Snowball sampling, as described by Rowland Atkinson and John Flint (2001), “can be viewed as a response to overcoming the problems associated with sampling concealed hard to reach populations” (p.1). However, whilst in snowball sampling the seeds are, in theory, selected randomly they “tend to be biased towards more cooperative individuals or those who have a large personal network (Baltar and Brunet 2011, p.60), similarly it may be, such as was the case with Gray (2009), that the seeds will be in contact with similar others thus restricting the sample to a ‘type’ (Johnston and Sabin 2010). As a result, to include those individuals in the sample that are often missed, the researcher must “select sample members with a known probability of selection. In most cases this requirement means that researchers must have a sampling frame which is a list of all members in the population” (Salganik and Heckathorn 2004, p.195).

Unfortunately in most cases such lists do not exist and so the research must create their own. In *AarinFantasy* there is a member list by which one can see a register of all the members of the site but this list does not offer demographic information unless you click on the name to go their profile page but there is no guarantee this will offer the information required.

To counter this I generated a sampling frame that would give me access to those 'alternative' fans types that I wished to include in my research. To do so I utilised my initial survey that asked for this information that automatically generated a table of data with name, email, gender, sexuality, and so on that gave me a list of potential seeds that corresponded with the research aims. I recognise however that this is not a sampling framework of all *yaoi* fans but "tak[ing] a sample of a target population members in an institutional setting" is "a more efficient way to collect information and composition of hidden populations" (Salganik and Heckathorn 2004, p.195). I combined this with snowball sampling by selecting "a small number of seeds who are the first people to participate in the study. Then these seeds recruit others to participate in the study" (Salganik and Heckathorn 2004, p.196). This was particularly successful as it allowed for members of *AarinFantasy* to introduce me to similar types of fans with whom they were friends, this often occurred due to fans having similar interests such as was the case with the *Aarinboys*, a subgroup of users on the site who identified as male, regardless of sexuality which opened a door to a group of understudied fans within the larger *AarinFantasy* community. The use of an institutional setting, in this case *AarinFantasy*, has for some time been recognised by others researchers examining hidden or hard-to-reach populations such as drug users and HIV positive groups (Arcury and Quandt 1999; Watters and Biernacki 1989). John Watters and Patrick Bierbacki (1989), for example, also state that "individuals who comprise

hidden populations become more visible when they enter institutional settings” (p.418).

A snowball sample is not without its criticisms however. One of the main problems cited is representativeness and selection bias which will ultimately affect external validity and the possibility for replication. According to Atkinson and Flint (2001):

The problem of selection bias may be partially addressed, firstly through the generation of large sample and secondly by the replication of results to strengthen any generalisations. (p.2)

In traditional snowball sampling it is often far too complex, or too expensive, to generate a large enough sample with key determinates being the geographical scope (though this is often circumvented in online research) and the time needed to build the rapport between researcher and participant. However, it is important to also recognise the concept of “statistical generalisation” in which statistics are often associated with descending methodologies which are those methods for the study of general populations often conducted with standardised questionnaires and “rigorous population samples” (Baltar and Brunet 2011, p.61). Ascending methodologies, however, are “adapted to selected social groups with intensive data collection methods....like snowball sampling, ethnography and narratives” used “especially when the population of the study is hard to reach” (Baltar and Brunet 2011, p.61). Thus it is important to remember that these methodologies are used in research where the population is hard-to-reach, such as in this thesis.

In the statistical sense this kind of sampling is not generalizable. However, the aim of qualitative research such as mine is not generalizability, the aim of a study that desires generalizable results would be to test a pre-determined hypothesis and produce results that would be representative. Qualitative research on the other hand aims for an

understanding of certain social issues. The questions which use qualitative research methods are often ‘why?’ and ‘how?’ Martin Marshall surmises this difference between quantitative and qualitative research well. His basic description of quantitative research is that, “it is used to test pre-set hypothesis; its plan is pre-determined; the research is detached and results can be tested for quality directly and reliably using statistics”. My choice of sampling fits patterns of qualitative methods because I aim to “explore a complex human issues; I do this by being integrated overtly in the research process; and my results would be transferable” (Marshall 1996, p.534) to other situations such as studies that may focus on other mediums other than the internet or *yaoi* manga.

I have used other methods to initiate contact with participants on *AarinFantasy*. Firstly I took an active role in synchronous conversation with users on the website via the integrated chat room. Due to the friendly nature of the chat room it is indeed difficult to participate covertly as members will often greet new people as and when they enter the room and expect a greeting in return as a sign of politeness and of convention. After 10 minutes of inactivity you are listed as idle on the chat room members list and become ‘invisible’ meaning other users do not know you may still be there watching. However the website circumnavigates this problem by immediately freezing the chat thread which only becomes updated once active participation is initiated again by sending a message. In effect, there is no way to be invisible in this room and still see on-going communication. Therefore, through casual conversation I have introduced my research topic and I mentioned that if they would like to take part, then they may do so. A second means by which I contacted participants was by posting four threads in the *Community Café* section of the forum. This is the section where all general/non-*yaoi* conversation threads are posted.

In this thesis the participants' usernames, as given, are the same as they are in *AarinFantasy* and have not been changed. I will now explain the ethical debate behind this decision and why I have decided to not conceal them. For many users of online communities, their activities online are just as real and as important as their offline interactions. Whilst users can effectively remain anonymous online without giving any 'real' information it is common that individuals are known by their usernames and easily identified by them, therefore we cannot say that users are completely anonymous when online. Donath (1999) writes users are not anonymous but rather they are pseudonymous because even if they are not using their 'real' names, they are still recognised by their usernames.

Many researchers elect to change the usernames of participants as well as the name of the site that they are investigating in order to maintain privacy. Williams *et al.* (2012) suggest that "in the reporting of results, researchers should be encouraged to change this to a participant identifier or pseudonym" (p.378) but it should be acknowledged that there are differences between online and offline names when it comes to deciding the best way forward for ethnography of digital environments (Hine 2005). Myers (1987) writes that a key difference is that the users intentionally select a username that is often heavily based on how they wish to be perceived by others. Thus, the nickname works as a face that gives a user online some form of 'appearance' by which others recognise them. Similarly there are cases where changing the usernames of the participants may affect the overall data. Brenda Danet (2001), for example, writes that changing the usernames in her own study would have been extremely damaging as she found in her research that many of the users would use letters and symbols to create pictures in their usernames and to remove the names would have damaged the overall presentation of the individual user and what they wanted to represent about themselves.

Elizabeth Buchanan (2004) suggests that rather than an all or nothing approach to anonymity “we must measure advantages against risks in each specific case” (p.53). I have also taken this case specific approach and asked participants if they wanted to remain anonymous or not in which case I would have changed usernames accordingly on a case by case basis. Interestingly I found that in each case participants were happy to have their usernames used they claimed they wanted to be ‘representatives’ of their community. This surprised me slightly as in some cases the nature of communication can be personal and related to users’ life histories but of those that consented this did not pose a significant concern to them. Indeed Buchanan writes that:

protecting human subjects’ rights to confidentiality, humanities-based approaches...begin with quest different assumptions about the originators of texts and interactions online. According to those perspectives, people online may not always be subjects, but can just as well be authors who seek publicity and for whom ‘protection’ in the form of anonymity may not be ethical. (Buchanan 2004, p.53)

Furthermore, Renato Rosaldo writes that:

The Lone Ethnographer's guiding fiction of cultural compartments has crumbled. So-called natives do not ‘inhabit’ a world fully separate from the one ethnographers ‘live in.’ Few people simply remain in their place these days. When people play ‘ethnographers and natives,’ it is ever more difficult to predict who will put on the loincloth and who will pick up the pencil and paper. More people are doing both, and more so-called natives are among the ethnographer's readers, at times appreciative and at times vocally critical. (Rosaldo 1993, p. 45)

Rosaldo’s work is also brought up in Bruckman *et al.* (cited in Hargittai and Sandvig forthcoming) and leads to question if the ‘natives’ are entitled to respond to researchers’ representations of them? Indeed a great deal of ethical ethnography finds its base in Immanuel Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative – that one must always treat people as ends in themselves, rather than as a means to an end (Kant cited in Hargittai and Sandvig forthcoming). To treat participants as ends in themselves leads to the conclusion that participants are entitled to respond to our representations

of them. Indeed, in the digital age where an increasing amount of research is online, our participants could easily gain access to our accounts of them and therefore should, ethically, have a right to respond to representations of them if found. Moreover, treating participants as ends in themselves suggests that at some point they may want to be 'repaid' in some way for their efforts in taking part in the research such as by learning something new from their experience. This is supported by the Belmont Report's principle of 'justice' suggesting that we should share the costs and benefits of research with our participants (Ryan *et al* 2014). Any other view may appear colonial with an enlightened and powerful researcher that has come to investigate the natives whereas postcolonial ethics would suggest that the natives are not ignorant and have a right to respond to representations of themselves. It is true of course that an etic researcher position can lead to insights of a community that may not be possible by an emic position, but the etic point of view can be furthered by direct participation of the informants. Indeed, sometimes the 'natives' know exactly what is going on and we should give them the opportunity to speak and take credit for their information. Similarly, in fan communities particularly, there is often a desire for recognition amongst their fellow fans (Jenkins 1992a) which is considered something to aspire towards and it is entirely possible that these fans would want credit for their contribution to academic texts regarding their fandom and could lead towards a further accumulation of social capital within the community. Of course, usernames on *AarinFantasy* are already pseudonyms but as previously mentioned these are often intricately connected with real identities and sometimes individuals can be identified by them. Rather than considering the issue of anonymity to be non-existent by the use of a pseudonym I have treated them as real names and when I give them the option to wave anonymity, I ask what name they would want to be referred to in my research.

However, I must be aware of the fact that participants may not be fully aware of the consequences of their participation despite my explanations of the possible outcomes about revealing their usernames. Thus “what we can do is to make identification of users’ offline identities difficult” (Buchanan 2004, p.53). Indeed, in many cases I was aware of my participants’ ‘real’ names, locations, occupations and even appearance in some cases and so in cases where a certain level of anonymity was requested these have been changed or not given at all, in other cases however information has been given with the consent of the participant and member checks conducted to triangulate and be as open as possible. Nonetheless, many of my participants believed that it was important to have their usernames remain unchanged so that they could voice their opinions to a wider audience; indeed many participants felt that utilising their ‘real’ usernames gave more credence to their opinions. However this issue becomes problematic if/when participant responses could be considered damaging or critical without their realisation. Any “unflattering information” (Bruckman cited in Hargittai and Sandvig forthcoming) could potentially harm the subjects or any future research relationship, indeed whilst many participants may wish for their comments to be connected with their usernames, there can often be negative repercussions. Simply because a participant may request for their username to be used does not necessarily mean that a researcher should do so. Ultimately this leads to a decision that must be made by the researcher, complicated of course as often we do not know our participants well enough to comprehend fully if naming them can do them harm in the future either from critiques from other researchers or, as is relevant to this study. Given this conflict between participants’ wishes and the researcher’s exercising of power, I have not changed usernames in accordance with and respecting the participants’ wishes but

where I felt that a comment could potentially be damaging to the participant in the future I have created a new username for them.

### *Preliminary survey and semi-structured interviews*

I posted my survey online<sup>15</sup> so that I could get a feel for the issues that were important to the users and to establish any recurrent themes in the answers before writing an interview transcript. By conducting a survey I was also able to gain some basic quantitative data for my study such as age, occupation, sex, gender, and location. In total I received 181 responses to the survey.

After completing 25 in depth semi-structured interviews I achieved saturation. It is indeed difficult to clearly define an acceptable number of participants and most scholars when approached with the question ‘how many is enough?’ will simply reply “however many is needed”, certainly an ambiguous, but unavoidable answer. Marshall (1996, p.522) states that the size of the sample should be determined by the number necessary to enable valid interpretations, as similar to above. As frustrating as it may seem, this seems similar to asking how long a piece of string is, but I have gone by my decision that once I felt I wasn’t learning anything new or participants seemed to be repeating answers that I would stop. It does seem that the larger the sample size, the less chance of sampling error and this is where Marshall gives some useful advice, “the sampling error is inversely proportional to the square root of the sample size” (Marshall 1996, p.522), meaning there would be little gained by using an overly large sample size if the responses continued to be the same as one another.

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<sup>15</sup><https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1HtsnrrAxyZtnebvWLU7qOGSQjx4nwxOD5MYBM48beX4/view/form>

A qualitative semi-structured interview is “neither an open conversation nor a highly structured questionnaire” but is “conducted according to an interview guide that focuses on certain themes and may include suggested questions” (Kvale 1996, p.27). Therefore I constructed interviews that whilst allowing for ideas to thrive still enable consistency between interviews. Further, according to Steiner Kvale (1996), “the topic of the qualitative interview is the lived world of the subjects and their relation to it” therefore the purpose of these interviews is an attempt to “describe and reflect the meanings” that membership on the sites has for the participants (p.29).

### *Semi-structured interview process*

I completed semi-structured in depth interviews from September 2012 to January 2013. I made the decision to conduct a full interview before commencing with another so that I could focus my attention on one user. I made this decision as each interview would often last several days for reasons I will make clear presently. Although conducting interviews online means that it is possible to conduct them concurrently I felt that if I did so analytic focus would be detracted from the participant responses. In the beginning of each interview I would spend some time chatting casually with the participants explaining that I was a member of the site and had been for the past couple of years. This was an important conversation to have as it allowed me to introduce myself to my participants so that I could create intimacy between us. I did not want to appear in the research setting as an unknown researcher as this could have had adverse effects on trust or the quality of responses.

On average, each interview lasted one week. There were sometimes gaps between interview sessions as participants would often have prior engagements or found themselves busy with other tasks such as work, school, or family meaning that there

would sometimes be a day between interview sessions. Initially these gaps may seem like a disadvantage to online research, however without the availability of the internet and the flexibility it allows, much research that involves dispersed participants such as these *yaoi* fans would be impossible and it also means that I am able to keep in touch with individuals that may otherwise not be able to take part.

When I conducted the interviews they took part in real-time synchronous chat sessions via four mediums: (1) The *AarinFantasy* chat room system, (2) *Skype*, (3) *MSN Messenger*, and (4) *Gmail Chat*. The majority of the interviews took place either on *Skype* or *MSN* and the decision as to which one to use was left up to the participant and whichever they preferred. Conducting interviews in real time has many benefits over asynchronous communication. By being present with the participant I was able to intensify online interaction and create an atmosphere where the conversations were able to grow naturally. For example I did not begin each conversation by immediately starting the interview but would rather chat casually for a while to 'break the ice' before moving into more focussed interview questions. After I had asked the questions I wanted to or if I felt that too much time has passed then I would wind down the session with a casual chat once more before agreeing on a time to continue the interview and logging off. These off-topic conversations mean that I developed friendships with my participants and was able to learn about their daily lives. Intimacy with a participant can be a potential cause for problems as I will discuss in the following section, however it can also be a benefit as often topics of interest to my research would come up without my intention and I could then make a note and incorporate it into the interview. Therefore by knowing my participants better and more personally I was able to improve my interviews and collect richer data.

Due to the nature of my research the lengthy task of transcription is quickly resolved as copies of communication can be easily saved in text format. This also means a way of avoiding the issue of ‘transgression’ in transcripts of interviews. Kvale writes that “transgression [is] a transformation of one narrative mode –oral discourse- to another narrative mode – written discourse -[and] attempts at verbatim interview transcripts produce hybrids, artificial constructs that are adequate to neither the lived oral conversation nor the formal style of written texts” (1996, p.166).

When discussing the issue of context, the amount that can be included in a transcript is “infinitely expandable” (Cook cited in Lapadat 2000, p.1). Therefore no transcript can be seen as contextually complete so I must be selective. Traditional contextual issues that researchers look for are eye contact, immediacy of response, where participants look during the interview, and their body movements amongst “infinite” others (Cook cited in Lapadat 2000, p.1). In an online interview where researcher and participant are not physically present some of these markers are not visible. Also immediacy of response becomes problematic, in a face-to-face setting a slow response may be more meaningful than in an online setting where the participant may simply have gone to do something such as get a drink, something to eat, or even go to the toilet. Christina Davidson notes that in traditional audio/video taped interviews researchers are advised to summarise their notes and review their impressions as soon as possible after the interview has ended. This is so ideas remain fresh and is certainly possible through an online textual medium. In her discussion of audio recordings, she also notes that the researcher should pay attention to the nuances of the conversation such as voice, tone and specific language (2009 p.41). Therefore, in order to avoid gross misinterpretation during interviews, after the interview I immediately

summarised my thoughts on the discussion, and then relayed these to the participant to ensure correct interpretation of their comments.

## **Coding**

By using a netnographic approach and conducting online surveys and interviews, even in synchronous chat sittings, participants will have more time and less pressure to think about their responses to questions. This is something that was emergent in James and Busher's work when they found that participants' considered responses might be more detailed and that they have more time to reflect on their answers (2009). This reduced stress level and lack of intrusion produced coherent responses to my questions from which I coded the data for emergent themes

I have coded themes using the constant comparative method as developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the late 1960s, which has four stages: comparing incidents applicable to the emerging themes, integrating categories and theory properties, delimiting the theory, and writing the theory (cited in Lincoln and Guba 1985, p.339). By following this method, my research "combines inductive...coding with a simultaneous comparison of all social incidents observed" (LeCompte and Goetz 1982, p.58) thus as emerging themes and phenomena are recorded I compared them with others. After this initial stage of observation, the research process was further refined with more data collection and analysis such as interviews that fed back into the coding categories. By following this method my research discovers "new topological dimension[s], as well as new relationships" (LeCompte and Goetz 1981, p.51).

Regarding more practical issues concerning coding I referred to Johnny Saldana's *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (2012) Starting with a heuristic frame of mind I coded my data both during and after collection as an analytic 'tactic' and as an 'exploratory problem-solving technique' without any specific pre-existing formula to follow (Saldana 2012, p.8). To facilitate the coding and analytic procedures I used the qualitative data analysis computer software Nvivo10.

### *Primary coding*

Primary coding acted as a first step to developing a more rigorous analysis and interpretation. My first round of coding moved me "from the data to the idea, and from the idea to all the data pertaining to that idea" and as Saldana points out, coding is a cyclical act and it is far from common for primary coding to be final, rather secondary and even tertiary coding is required to develop strong theory (Saldana 2012, p.8).

To begin with the primary coding process I entered the forum threads and recorded interviews into the Nvivo10 software. I began primary coding using holistic and in-vivo codes which are coding processes by which one codes quickly to get a feel for the text and to extract emergent themes. In order to make best use of these coding processes I initially used two transcripts from the longest interviews that I conducted. From these transcripts I collected a list of over 100 codes that I then grouped together in common themes before moving onto a second round of coding then restarting the process with all interviews with a list of codes a basic frame.

This process funnelled data into relevant loose categories for later analysis. I made the decision to begin with codes that are grounded in both the data and on existing theory before moving onto a "fuller and more detailed categorisation" (Dey 1993, p.110). The

emphasis in this process is holistic whereby I attempted to find basic themes or issues in the data by looking at them both as a whole whilst also reading line by line. These codes allow the data to be organised easily and effectively without committing to any solid theoretical approach. It is important not to close off any potential options at this early stage of coding which are not based on a thorough review of the data in its entirety as this may have caused errors later on. Over-thinking and over-categorisation at this stage may miss important data or create themes that are not relevant.

Once I had organised the data into lists of codes I was able to move on and refine them into categories and subcategories which would then allow me to link the groups together to ultimately make the skeleton of my thesis.

#### *Secondary coding*

The second cycle of coding highlights important features that generate categories, themes, and concepts. Codes are “the bones of your analysis... [part of] a working skeleton” (Charmaz 2006, p.45). This is what Saldana refers to as his “codes-to-theory” mode (Saldana 2012, p.12). I have coded data using a combination of basic holistic and in-vivo codes simply to get the analytic process underway. I then grouped these codes according to emergent categories forming the overall body of analysis. The following step of secondary coding, is grouping the comments together into categories according to their themes and looking within individual categories to search for rearrangements/reclassifications of themes and categories that may be required. By doing this I grouped similar categories together into larger groups to construct an explanatory structure or ‘the skeleton’ of my research.

For the secondary coding in this study I ran through my total list of primary cycle codes and grouped them into five over-arching categories. These were: *Yaoi* manga, community site, fans and fandom, and Learning about Japan. In my coding processes I had the category of Learning about Japan. In the beginning of my thought process surrounding this project I considered the possibility of examining the transcultural aspects of the fandom in greater depth. In my preliminary survey I also asked fans' questions about Japan and their interest in Japanese culture in order to receive some basic ideas about this topic. However as often happens in coding I discovered what I felt to be a much more interesting trend related to the queer sexuality and gender of the fans which I then decided to focus the thesis on. For example, in some instances the fans mentioned how they felt Japan was more liberal towards sexuality as it appeared to be widespread in a lot of media and readily available for consumption whilst in others perceived alternative mind-sets towards homosexuality were also cited as an interest in Japanese culture and *yaoi* manga. As such I re-examined my categories and codes with my mind in a "codes-to-theory" (Saldana 2012, p.12) mode creating new codes and re-grouping others, as part of a secondary coding process, which lead to me a new category of Sexuality and Gender. Within each of these categories are around five to six sub categories which further separate into smaller codes that have citations from both interviews and forum content analysis attached. In future research I would be interested in developing the transcultural aspects of the fandom and any perceived differences between Japanese culture and attitudes regarding sexuality and gender and those of the fans however due to limitations of time and space I have decided to focus on why the fans have a particular investment in issues of alternative sexuality and gender in the first place.

## Researcher Positionality

According to Adrienne Evans and Mafalda Stasi (2014) “ethnographic practice is typically understood as having a murky history and conceptual baggage associated with a colonial gaze that has attempted to objectify ‘other’ culture” which “further implicat[es] for the fan studies researcher” (p.10).

Indeed throughout past fan scholarship that utilises ethnography there have been ongoing discussions of researcher positionality. A well-known example of such an issue is present in Bacon-Smith’s study of *Star Trek* fans (1992) which demonstrates a tension between accounts given by fans and that of Bacon-Smith as she positions herself as an ‘objective’ scholar external to the community. In Bacon-Smith’s work the researcher position emerged as dominant and offered what some have suggested was a critical perspective of the fans she studied “potentially colonizing the fan” (Evans and Stasi 2014, p.11)

Busse and Hellekson (2012) and Katharina Freund and Dianna Fielding (2013) also address issues related to researcher positionality in relation to the ethics of online ethnography. For example, Busse and Hellekson discuss the positionality in reference to ethical implications. They compare traditional ethnographic research of literary criticism which would not question whether or not the author of text should be contacted to ask for permission with digital ethnography where informed consent is readily prescribed with recommendations to contact ‘authors’ or receive permission from community gatekeepers (2012). Similarly, Freund and Fielding (2013) discuss the researcher who, when entering a community, may encounter suspicion from fans. In fan communities those who enter as an academic with overt research aims have often found themselves outcast from the community or heavily policed, for example

Evans and Stasi state how one fan-run mailing list demanded that fans declare themselves as non-academics and any research purpose posts would result in banning (2014), similarly Fielding (Freund and Fielding 2013) found that in her interviews with fan fiction writers some of her participants asked her to prove her fandom by uploading her own fan fiction before agreeing to take part in research. These scholars' work raises questions for any ethnography of fandom related to research subjectivity and disclosure such as whether or not a researcher should reveal themselves as a fan and/or academic, how such a revelation can change the research process and environment as well as the knowledge that one generates throughout engagement with the community.

My research focusses on the variety of fans that can be found within an online community and the rationales given for their fandom. I believed an approach was required that would focus on immersion and interpersonal relationships with my participants. My thought process, based on experience at conventions in London, was that participants would be more likely to take part in interviews if they could occur online without the necessity for face-to-face communication which could either be unwanted or logistically too costly. I generally found that those participants who came forward were very open about sharing information with me which they may not have felt were interviews conducted in an offline environment, something also found by Freund (Freund and Fielding 2013).

There is one issue I would like to pay attention to which regards my impact on the *AarinFantasy* by my very presence as a researcher. Indeed, despite my position as a participant-experiencer my very presence can influence *AarinFantasy* and what I am observing may be influenced by my interactions with participants and the questions that I ask that are, after all, research focussed.

According to George Psathas (1990) naturally occurring data refers to interaction and data that would remain unaltered regardless of the researcher's presence but during the process of collecting data, a researcher is faced with choices to make such as whether one should 'lurk' or if one should make one's presence known, the decision can lead to the 'Observer's Paradox' (Labov cited in Shanmuganathan 2005). In ethnographic research, dealing with this paradox means to understand the ways in which the presence of the researcher influences the object being studied, in other words "the very act of observation itself affects the phenomenon under study" (Shanmuganathan 2005, p.79). Indeed, whilst I can use my role as a *yaoi* fan to negotiate my way into the community and forge friendships with fans, the very questioning that I conduct can alter the fans' own perceptions and perhaps encourage them to think differently about their community in a way that may not have occurred in a 'natural' setting.

William Labov (cited in Shanmuganathan 2005) suggests that to deal with the observer paradox a researcher can leave the room so that participants can feel at ease with one another and not feel conscious of the researcher, or if leaving the room is not possible then a low profile should be adopted. In ethnographies conducted online one has the option of lurking but this itself brings another ethical dilemma regarding observation of those that do not know you are there. To 'lurk' would run the risk of not participating in the community online which may have negative impacts on research as previous studies have shown that fans do not enjoy being watched silently by external researchers. Moreover Hine (2000) argues that participation is something that must be experienced in order to gain comprehensive understanding of the community being studied. However, lurking has been conducted before in online ethnographies

(Hine 2000) and in such cases a participatory understanding of the community is forfeited in order to gain a 'natural' understanding.

This ultimately leads to one of the central decisions in ethnographic research which is to decide whether to take an emic or etic position. To not lurk would risk changing the behaviour of the participants and the question to be asked here concerns how the participants would feel about their interactions if observed without informed consent. In this case what are we to make of the term 'participant', are they really participants when their participation has not been elicited in any way? However, even when lurking in online ethnography, what we reproduce will never be 'natural' data as all ethnography is representation and interpretation so what is presented can never be 'natural' not only because what will be reproduced is an interpretation of another's writing but also because the researcher is often 'not there' when the post is made and is thus viewing the text in another context. Likewise, Alessandro Duranti writes that "life itself is an attempt to resolve the participant-observer paradox, and the so-called neutral observation, where the observer is completely separated from the observed is an illusion" (cited in Shanmuganathan 2005, p.79).

In this thesis I have announced my presence on the site through gatekeepers and posting information about my project in the main forum that were voluntarily made sticky for two weeks by the forum administrator. This ensured that as many users as possible would see the announcement and be able to contact me. On the other hand the 'stickiness' of this thread could have potentially changed the dynamic of the forum by giving me a constant 'presence' critically positioning me as an overseer. I was indeed concerned at first that this presence would alienate members away from the forum or could even influence the kind of communication that was taking as users may feel as though their communication is being watched. I discussed this with the forum

administrator and after her initial suggestion of one month's 'stickiness' it was reduced to two weeks after which the post would remain but as more time passed with no new posts to the thread it would move further and further down the board eventually becoming 'invisible' amongst the hundreds of pages unless it was specifically searched for.

Whilst lurking has been conducted in previous ethnographic research I made the decision to announce my dual role as both fan and, in this case, researcher. Whether to lurk or not is indeed ethically ambiguous and there is no standard for whether a research should or should not lurk with Steve Jones writing that "for most internet researchers it is likely that gaining access is the least difficult aspect of the research process...What has become more difficult is determining how to ensure ethical use is made of texts" (2004, p.179). According to Hine (2005), "online research is marked as a special category in which the institutionalized understandings of the ethics of research must be re-examined" (p.5) which supports the idea that we need at the very least an understanding of the context of our research and what is ethically most appropriate in each case.

I made the decision to announce my presence based on three interrelating key factors, the first is a growing body of literature (Markham 2004) that has discussed the general disdain that fan communities towards covert observance. This relates with the second in that whilst internet mediated research is still relatively new with little established ethical guidelines some key issues have emerged which are informed consent, confidentiality, and privacy (Madge 2007, p.657). Clare Madge writes that if these key issues are not at least addressed then "the research should be abandoned, for these risks should be no greater than those encountered in normal daily activity for the research participants" (2007, p.657). The final reason for why I announced my presence is that

after discussions with the site administrator it was agreed best to announce my position as researcher as well as the provisions that would be made for privacy and confidentiality.

Trust can be difficult to establish in any situation, but the difficulty can be greatly increased when we cannot see whom we are speaking with. Referring lurking, James and Busher (2009) state that:

“Lurking” on newsgroups and online communities is an invasion of privacy. It is an illegitimate use of power to survey people’s activities through technological means without first gaining their permission. (p.86)

Simply because online communication is readily available for the public to access does not necessarily mean that the members of such communities see their communication as public and so James and Busher (2009) advocate a position of full disclosure stressing that participants know when and what data will be stored and disseminated and how their identities will be protected if they wish them to be. Before I participated officially as a researcher on the website, I sought out the creator and administrators of the group and explained my position and intentions in order to gain their approval beforehand. I then asked if they would take the time to write a short explanatory posting introducing me to the users of the websites. Gaining access through these gatekeepers has been identified as one of the best ways to facilitate ethical access and trusted membership on the sites (Lopez-Rocha, 2010, p.295). Trust can also reduce the risk of further problems related to netnography. For example when there is trust between the researcher and participant, if interruptions in communication occur it should not be difficult or uncomfortable to attempt to re-establish them. I can easily email the participant with a friendly email asking if they would like to carry on with the study or not and by doing this through means of asynchronous communication I can make the participant feel more involved in research whilst not intruding on their

private space and time. Also, by making my intentions clear to both administrators and users through forum postings my method of access to the participants is clear and those who wish to take part in my study will be able to do so in an informed way.

In the face of the prescriptions for ethical research such as full disclosure, participant confidentiality, participant feedback, informed consent for quotes, and the fundamental concept of unobtrusiveness, I was attracted to the writers Rosalind Edwards and Melanie Mauthner (2002) and Andrea Doucet et al. (2002), who propose a ‘thinking from caring’ approach. This approach involves thinking about responsibility and care as well as the outcomes of research contextually. Contained in this theory are foci on the participants’, as well as my own, values, feelings, and emotions in the online relationship. This is important as online communities are often celebrated by many as places for participatory culture (Jenkins 2006) but the supposition that research participants would want to be involved with my own research process is simply short sighted. Therefore a ‘thinking from caring’ approach in my own netnographic study allows me to be sensitive to my research environment as well as respecting the participants’. Issues such as confidentiality such as including participants’ direct text, covert observations of certain threads, usernames, and postings can be considered ethical if I follow the patterns and nature of the field site, *AarinFantasy*, and am always aware of what the participants want. I further built on this trust by following Kozinets (2002) advice on netnography. Other than disclosing my presence and intentions to the members and ensuring that participants know that confidentiality will be maintained, I also sought and incorporated member checks from the fans, thereby not only maintaining trust but also helping to triangulate my data and ensuring validity of results.

I describe my position in the community as a “participant-experiencer” following the work of Mary Walstrom (2004) who prefers this term over ‘participant observer’ as an experiencer “entails the role of active contributor to the group being studied. This role specifically refers to a researcher who has personal experience with the central problem being discussed by group participants” (Walstrom 2004, p.175). How a researcher presents themselves in the ethnographic field has been a concern for offline ethnographies (Mann and Stewart 2000) as the researcher’s identity can “affect how conspicuous they are in the setting and the likelihood that potential informants will be willing to talk to them” (Garcia *et al.* 2009, p.71). There have also been issues for online researchers such as Lori Kendall (2002) and Hine (2000). Kendall believed that her identity as a female researcher would damage her observation of a “virtual pub” and opted for the username “Copperhead” for its aggressive connotation which she believed would “allow [her] to fit in and to feel somewhat protected” (2002, p.18). Similarly Hine opted for the user name “Christine” in her study to present a less threatening image to her participants which she thought the name ‘Chris’, which she usually goes by, would present. These examples show the concerns that researchers can have about their own identities in online research. However both Kendall and Hine in these cases were not ‘fans’ or members of the communities they were examining whereas I would consider myself to be much more involved in the *AarinFantasy* community.

I have an interest in *yaoi* manga and read certain series and watch anime series. I have also been a member of *AarinFantasy* for some years now and have maintained a presence on the site through postings and thread discussions on topics of personal interest. However my role as researcher and my role on the site are not always explicitly connected and during many interviews or informal discussions with

potential participants I was asked about my own *yaoi* fandom. At times I found this concerning as I consider my own interests in *yaoi* to be ‘popular’ in the sense that they could be argued to be the basics of *yaoi* fandom. I would not say I have intimate knowledge of lesser known manga and anime series. However this proved unproblematic and my knowledge of *yaoi* and my interests in the genre were enough and interviews went well. This demonstrates that in instances of ethnographic fandom research the fan identity cannot be easily hidden and, in fact, researchers who lack a history in the community or fandom that they are studying may “suffer from it” (Freund and Fielding 2013, p.333).

It is also argued that the researcher’s position will have “enabling and disabling” effects (Peshkin 1985, p.278) and my identity as both a *yaoi* fan and researcher brings with it both advantageous and disadvantage aspects. I have briefly outlined the advantageous above in terms of how being a fellow fan can bring me closer to my participants. However, as a participant-experiencer in this research I found a further two problematic areas. The first was that as a researcher one must decide when to remain silent regarding opinions of various aspects of the fan community in order to facilitate valid comments from participants as any comments, either negative or positive, about aspects of *AarinFantasy* or a particular *yaoi* series may elicit interview responses that would not have naturally occurred.

Another problematic aspect of research I found was that the ‘openness’ of communication seemed to change as I entered and left ‘research-mode’. This became clear to me when I would tell a participant that I had asked my final question for that session and the tone of their conversation would become much more casual as opposed to a more formal tone when we were in ‘research-mode’. Examples of the kind of comments that I saw “shall we start”, “that was fun”, “you really made me think with

those questions”, “is this part of the interview”? Comments such as these highlight that for participants there were times when I was a fellow fan and times when I was a researcher. It is important to realise that *yaoi* fans may thus change their persona or “put on different faces for researchers” (Freund and Fielding 2013, p.334) and thus all research data should be viewed with this in mind.

Whilst these instances made me aware of my positionality as a researcher I feel that my dual position as a researcher and *yaoi* fan often outweighed these issues. In terms of research on positionality there has often been a focus on distinct identity categories such as gender, sex, race, nationality, and age, indeed in Kendall (2002) and Hine’s (2000) work it was their gendered and sexed identities that encouraged them to consider how to present themselves online to their participants. However, in the case of my research into the *AarinFantasy* community it was not so much the fact that I am male, homosexual, or British that influenced how open or closed participants were with me but rather my personality and my emotional responses to conversations, interest in *yaoi* manga, and knowledge of *AarinFantasy* that were the criteria by which I was judged by other users of the site. The issue of personality has been raised by other recent scholars such as Sarah Moser (2008) who explained that it was personality that allowed her access to Indonesian communities. She writes:

I observed that the ways in which we were treated and talked about by the locals in our field site varied significantly and were based less upon our biographies and more upon our unique individual social and emotional qualities – our *personalities* rather than our *positionalities*. (Moser 2008, p.383)

Traditionally ethnographic research had advocated for neutrality so as to not damage the research being presented. This is what appears to have been the concern for earlier fan scholars such as Bacon-Smith (1992) where the researcher was aiming for ‘truth’ as opposed to interpretations of it in order to produce valid and generalizable

results. However, “we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, a particular experience, a particular culture without being contained by that position” (Hall 1992, p.258). Some have criticised a move towards the personal as a slippery slope to relativism (Parker 1992) whilst others have argued that including the personal does not damage research but may in fact reveal more insightful analysis (Harding 1987).

There appears to be an assumption that one’s position in terms of power structures are perhaps the most important aspects of oneself to reveal to fans, indeed when researchers discuss their positions in terms of fan community research they often frame these in terms of “externally defined categories” (Moser 2008, p.385) such as female, male, Caucasian, feminist, and so on whilst not bringing up issues of personality perhaps due to difficulties in defining or measuring these as distinct understandable ‘things’. However how one is accepted in a community, or how participants respond to a researcher, particularly in a ‘faceless’ online environment, may have at times very little to do with such categories of positionality. As Moser writes “published research in which positionality is discussed is...markedly silent when it comes to revealing aspects of one’s personality” (2008, p.386) and I would agree with this, amongst researchers, as human beings, there will be those who are shy, outgoing, impatient, ill-tempered, and so on, but such issues of personality very rarely seem to appear in discussions of positionality. The problem that this presents is that categories and issues that *may* be of more importance to the academic community than the fan community being studied. Thus, my position as a homosexual Caucasian male was in my opinion largely insignificant in terms of positionality, rather the respect that I could earn from other users of the site was based on my personality and my ability to ‘navigate’ the site and the sociality of the community, my knowledge of *yaoi* manga,

my willingness to spend time chatting with other users in threads or in the chat room, and how I have formed and maintained friendships with other fans, in other words, how I was able to adapt and integrate to the *AarinFantasy* community.

## Chapter One: Fan Demographics

### Introduction

This chapter is made up of two parts. In the first I discuss *AarinFantasy*'s member demographics. The aim is to introduce the fans of *AarinFantasy* and answer one of the questions, 'who are the *yaoi* fans?' I believe that it has become permissive to assume that *yaoi* fans will be heterosexual females. However as Jenkins asks in regards to his own research, can we say that fandoms are coherent objects? In his work on television fandom, Jenkins (1992a) raises the issue of difference between individuals who have common experiences within their own group, but which differ to other fan groups. The implication of this approach disrupts our ideas for the rationales of being a *yaoi* fan. I must reiterate *yaoi* is not a monolithic genre, there are indeed *yaoi* manga, *yaoi* novels, one-shots, anime series and images with no context, thus it is important to emphasise that I am not examining the differences between *yaoi* texts, but between fans who have congregated on *AarinFantasy*.

In the second part I introduce my empirical data from my survey of the community detailing factors of age, location, sex, and sexuality. In this thesis I regard sex as the fans' biological status as male or female whilst sexuality refers to a fans' sexual orientation. Sexuality, as I will explain in more depth in chapter two, is a complex issue in regards to *yaoi* fandom, as it is not tied to a fans' biological sex but does have heavy implications for an individual fan's interest in *yaoi* manga. The data I present in this section of the chapter has been generated from examining existing threads on the *AarinFantasy* that were created by the fans themselves and were found using the site's own search feature as well as from the semi-structured interviews with fans. It is stated in each case whether the data has been procured from an interview or from

an existing thread. As I will explain, it is important to acknowledge whether the data emerges from threads or interviews as this has an influence on the modality of the ‘real’ and the ‘self’ and how fans may be more ‘honest’ in one-to-one interviews than in a post to the thread that may not carry the expectation of being examined and could be part of a presentation of a preferred identity on the site. Information regarding names, age, nationality, and gender of individual fans has been taken from information in their posts, profiles, or via interviews with me. Ultimately however, as part of a netnographic approach, it is difficult, if not impossible, to verify this data as ‘true’ in the sense that reported demographic factors may not correspond with an offline identity however a focus on identifying a correspondence with online presence and offline ‘reality’ is, as I will explain, irrelevant within certain research contexts.

### **The Importance of Knowing the Fans**

*Yaoi* fans are often described as being young which is connected to *yaoi* as an exploration of female sexuality in fans’ formative years. This has been examined through the use of teen magazines (Malone 2010); however this ignores the older fans that exist. Nationality has also been examined in America (Levi 2006), Australia (McLelland 2005) Germany (Malone 2010), Italy, (Pagliassotti 2008), the Philippines (Fermin 2013), China (Li 2009), and Indonesia (Abraham 2010). I believe that these studies in different countries are valuable for their documentations of the cultural contexts in which *yaoi* is consumed. However, my focus is an online community in which members come from across the globe and where cultural differences are not the cause for friction but a source of interest that fans have in one another.

The internet creates opportunities to consume *yaoi*, a text which, at times, is “unobtainable yet accessible” (Urquhart 1994, p.12). *Yaoi* is accessible to those who

are willing to purchase it in a shop or attend a *yaoi* convention that is within distance however it is unobtainable for reasons of discomfort or perhaps being seen as an outsider in what is assumed a woman's fandom. Thus the internet shines light on those fans that, through its medium, can find out about their fan texts.

I am aware that simply knowing that differences exist amongst a group does not address the theoretical issues and whilst we may be able to think of plausible reasons based on demographic data, they are nonetheless conjecture and require qualitative analysis to support suppositions. The results presented in this chapter demonstrate that *yaoi* fandom should no longer be thought of as solely female and heterosexual. This chapter is connected to the following in which I examine discourses concerning the queer potential of *yaoi* presenting my own data regarding fans' fluid sexual and gendered identities. 'Queer' here does not specifically refer to fans questioning their sexual orientation; indeed many fans are comfortable in their self-identifications, rather 'queer' refers to how fans question boundaries of sexuality having read and applied *yaoi* to their own life experiences.

Some may suggest that focussing on fan demographics may ignore the broader themes of a community as individuals may give a wide range of reasons for being fans. However, does diversity mean we should forgo studying a fan group as a collective? The emergence of diversity is in fact a means to refine our understanding of the fandom, and thus in the following chapter I will follow up on fan diversity to find why fans of varying ages, locations, and sexualities, both male and female, form a *yaoi* community.

## *Demographics*

Based on 181 responses, my preliminary survey shows that an average fan has been a member of *AarinFantasy* for 4 years and 11 months with some responses as low as a few weeks and the longest at 9 years. Based on the demographics of the site, a user could be assumed to be female, heterosexual, from America, and between the ages of 21 to 25. These results certainly did not surprise me and correspond with the findings of previous studies, but, interestingly, in the case of the fans' sexuality and gender, there was a discrepancy between the number of fans who identified as male (19%, including the trans male response) and those that chose a male sexuality (21%) in that the number of those who selected homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual male outnumber those who identify as male. In my survey when I asked fans about their sex I gave them the choices of male, female, and other and in asking about sexuality I based my question on a pre-existing survey posted to the site in a thread titled *What is your sexual orientation?*<sup>16</sup>. If they chose 'other' I asked them to identify their sex for me. It was in this instance that the response trans-male was given and I have decided to include this response with those that selected male (I will discuss the importance of imposed categories later in the chapter). However this 3% discrepancy totals to only 5 individuals and should not be considered a widespread phenomenon. One possible reason could be that some female fans, though identifying as female, self-identified with a male sexuality, or it may be that a male fan has self-identified with a female sexuality. I at first wondered why fans might do this, but as I will show in my discussion of the different demographics, some fans admit to claiming a biologically female body but a queer identity, based on how they feel or, in some cases, who they

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<sup>16</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f24/t16650-what-your-sexual-orientation.html> [Last accessed 23rd April 2015]

desire to be. Meyer (2010) suggests a similar connection in his study of queer fandom and the “girlfags/transfags” he identified. These are women who have a strong identification with homosexual men or feel themselves to be homosexual men inside the body of women. In a study of gender swapping online, Asai Ryoko (2010) discusses the phenomenon of ‘*nekama*’ defined as a male who pretends to be female on the internet. She shows how some Japanese men play out female identities and sexualities online in order to participate more freely in a community that is dominated by women and therefore pretend to be female in order to ‘pass’ and participate without causing any disruption to the communication. Asai also presents the reasons given for why these men choose to participate in a woman’s community as opposed to others. Often these are related to stress relief, enjoyment, or as a means to practice alternative masculinity/femininity (2010). Thus, not only should we question the extent and why *yaoi* fans may identify queerly, but we must also examine why they have chosen to do so in an online community. In the following chapters I will address these issues.

Traditionally it has been assumed that the presence of other types of *yaoi* fans, particularly straight men, has been considered weak, if not invisible (Mizoguchi 2008, p.70). Whilst perhaps some of the more well-known titles of *shōnen-ai* of the 1970s, such as *Tōma no Shinzō* have become widely popular (in other words, beyond women that typically made up the market of *shōjo* manga to which *shōnen-ai* belongs), studies of other fans are rarely made. This has resulted in other fans appearing as “foreigners in the girls’ comics genre” (Mizoguchi 2008, p.71).

The following tables present results from the preliminary survey:

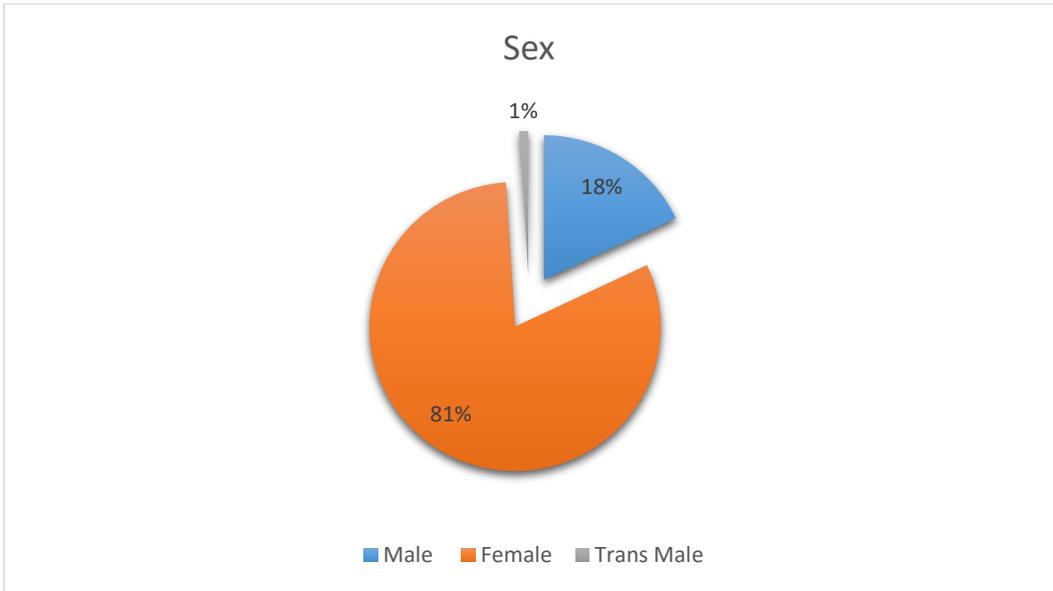


Table 1: Gender displayed as percentage of sample population

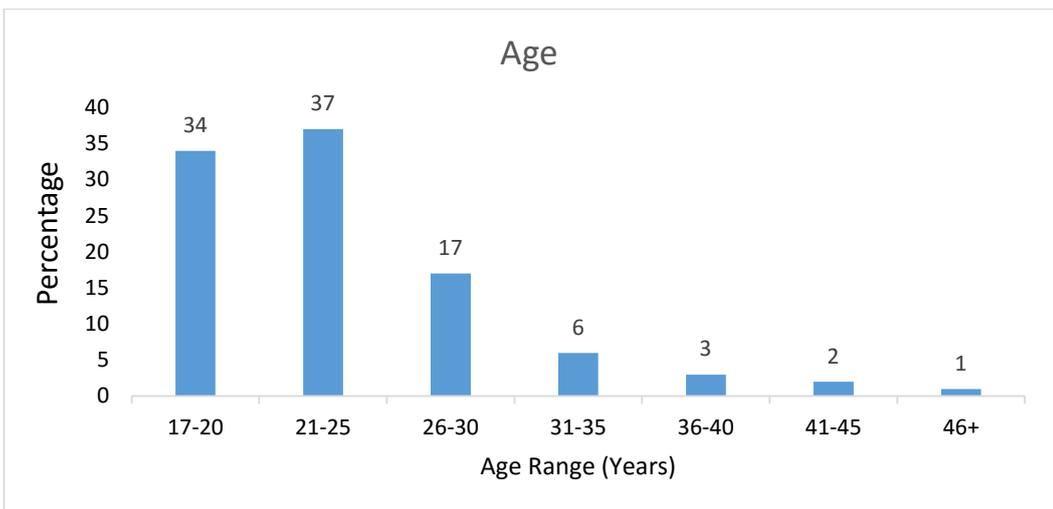


Table 2: Age displayed as percentage of sample population

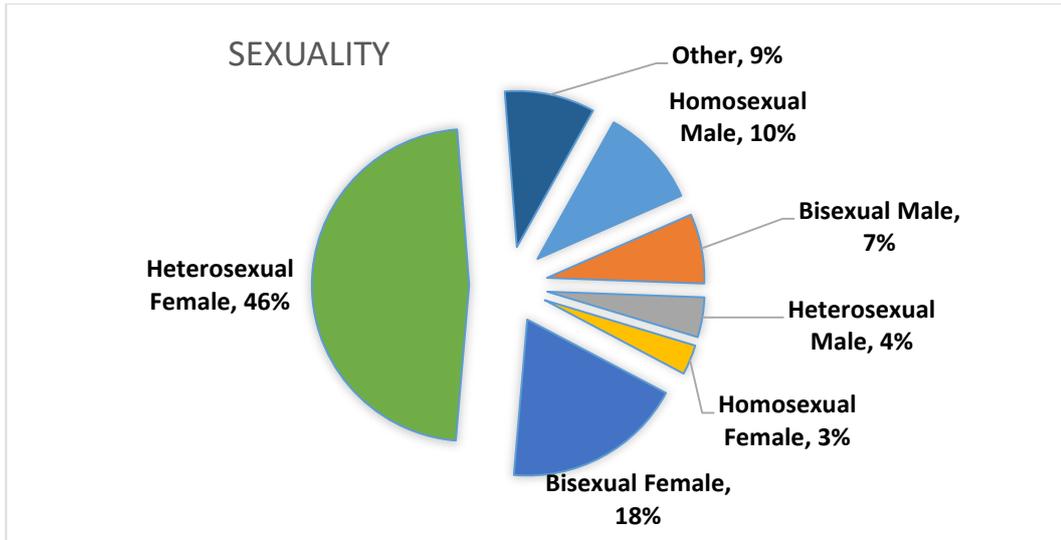


Table 3: Sexuality displayed as percentage of sample population

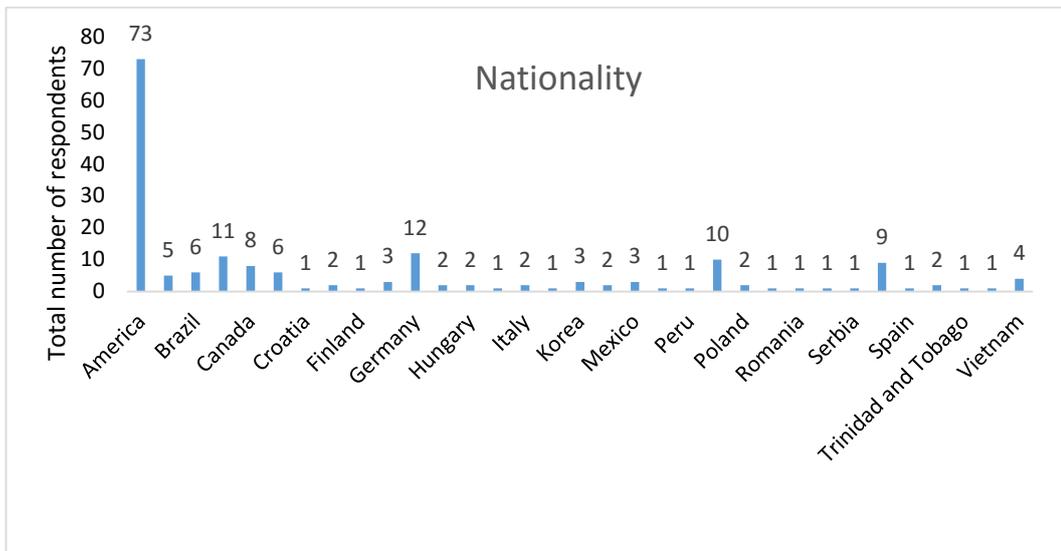


Table 4: Nationality displayed as total distribution of sample population

The data that I gathered from my preliminary survey was entered into Microsoft Excel to generate tables 1 to 4 shown above that illustrate the (1) sex, (2) sexuality, (3) age, and (4) nationality. Age is understood as the fans' age at the time of completing the survey, sex is understood as biological sex and distinct from gender and sexuality which I consider as social constructions that are subject to reconfiguration and change. Nationality is understood as the fans' political status as a citizen of a country and finally sexuality concerns both the fans gendered and sexual identity and is not

dependent on the fans biological sex. Sexuality is the most complicated and interesting aspect of the fans for this study and so will be considered in depth in the following chapter.

At first, I believed that quantitative data was secondary to my core intent to gather information on the activities and relationships of fans in *AarinFantasy*, however as I began to study the fans' activities I discovered that this of data plays a key role in why they participate, particularly in terms of the types of discussions as well as the choice of a *yaoi* fan site. I would like to stress that the results from my preliminary survey should not be relied upon too heavily as there is no way to know that it is a representative sample and because there are no statistics on the site for every member with which I can compare my results. I would also like to make clear that I do not intend my discussion of fan diversity to be exhaustive. As I call for a queer approach I keep in mind that labels are potentially infinite and individuals may move from one category to another.

I am also aware that certain contextual factors could mean that fans are unwilling to divulge some aspects of their identity, for example, the users of *AarinFantasy* must be at least 16 years old in order to join, however members below this threshold may give a false birthdate which they do not wish to reveal. Similarly, fans who are concerned about being too old for the site or *yaoi* manga may not want to reveal this either. Moreover, *yaoi* is a controversial text and its production and consumption can be problematic (Abraham 2010) therefore fans may not desire to have their participation revealed for fear of repercussions at the local level. Finally, gender is also problematic because in a community discussing male homosexual texts, certain male fans may be unwilling to reveal their sex, particularly heterosexual male fans, who are concerned that their heterosexuality/masculinity may be called into question by others.

Although the statistical information given in this chapter is only the first step in a nuanced understanding of a *yaoi* community online, mine is one of the few studies that provide such quantitative data on *yaoi* fans.

### *Nationality*

Table 4 details the nationality for the 181 respondents. The variety found in this shows how fans have joined *AarinFantasy* from various countries as means to meet other like-minded individuals. The vast majority, almost half, of those who responded come from America and countries in Western Europe, South America, and South East Asia. I would be interested to investigate the reasons why so many respondents to the survey came from America, possible reasons could be the time I posted the advertisement that was seen by more Americans in that particular time zone though I left the survey open for a number of weeks which would refute this. The most probable explanation for this could be that there are simply more American users on the site than other countries which is supported by an existing thread on the site titled '*Which Region are you in?*'<sup>17</sup> It includes a poll for fans to vote which is displayed below:

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<sup>17</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f24/t3195-which-region-are-you.html> [Last accessed 14th October 2013]

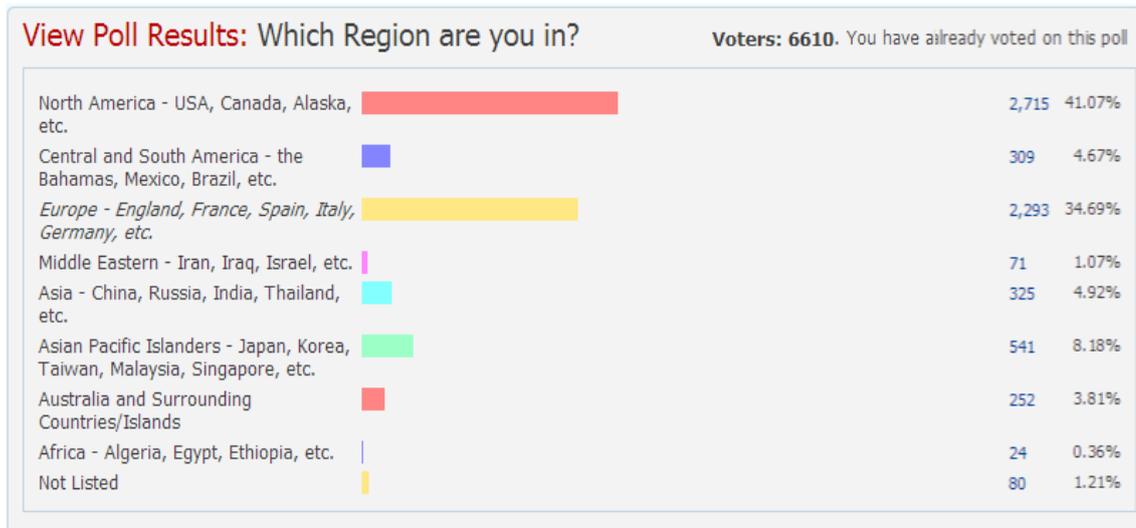


Figure 15: Poll of fans based on their current residence 14th October 2013

This poll is found in the sites *General* forum in a subsection titled *Voting Booth* where members of the site can post their own questions with voting options. This particular thread has been made ‘sticky’ and thus maintains a continuous presence on the site, other sticky threads in the *Voting Booth* are ‘*What browser do you use?*’, and ‘*Monthly Boys Love Fiction Magazine?*’ I came to participate in these threads as part of my initial foray into the site and its forum pages to familiarise myself with various topics. It should be noted that the creator of the thread, Dai-Kun, who is one of the administrators of the site, states in his opening post on the thread that this poll asks “for the region that you are in presently, where you lived or will live for a while, not from, or born, or used to live” (Dai-Kun). This is important as although the poll similarly suggests that with 41.07% North Americans are in the majority, it does not mean that they identify as North American. Taken with Dai-Kun’s instructions it is unclear if they are in America now having been born there, moved there, or have recently left and are now located elsewhere. However, based on the responses in the thread, the vast majority claim that they were born in their reported location.

Asian Pacific Islanders ranks third with 8.18%; this is interesting as the site itself is based in Malaysia. I also think an interesting avenue for future research would be to compare the different types of fandom or the influence that country of residence has on the fans' participation in the community as research so far has focussed on fandoms found in individual countries (Abraham 2010; Donovan 2010; Fermin 2013; Li 2009; Malone 2010). However I focus on the relationships between fans and the interactions on the site and, similarly, many of the fans themselves are unaware of the country of origin of the friends they speak with unless they ask or are told.

I was interested in learning more about the international features of *AarinFantasy* and where fans were located as well as any potential international interests that fans had. I searched the forum using the keyword 'international' and found 344 threads that either contained 'international' in their title or in the postings. I was interested in examining user postings as opposed to fan fiction and so filtered the search down to display posts only resulting in 263 potential threads over 11 pages. I selected threads for examination based on the appropriateness or potential richness of the thread as indicated by their title, for example I spent less time examining threads with titles such as '*clearance & sale at www.everythingyaoi.com*'. In the following sections I have highlighted some of the discussions that fans were having related to nationality and the international natures of *AarinFantasy* that I found through the search. Although fans do not appear to be concerned with the origins of their fellow fans, there are sub-groups based on country of residence. This has been noticed by the fans and a thread addressing this issue was created titled *International Sub-forum*<sup>18</sup>. This thread is also located in the *Voting Booth* sub forum. The thread's opening post by Suhi states that:

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<sup>18</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f27/t30032-international-sub-forum.html> [Last accessed 14th October 2013]

I noticed a certain tendency at the forum - people start regional groups... so I was thinking, that it would be nice to open a new sub-forum, dedicated exclusively to this purpose... I mean - people who want to discuss region related issues and chat in their native language could do it there... let's say, international sub-forum - or, if you can think about a better name - i mean - it's nice to chat about things you like in your language... or with somebody who's geographically close - so you can discuss where to buy manga...also, i met people who asked for technical support, but had problems with understanding the explanation in english (Suhi)

Suhi's comments point to the benefits of having such a forum in an international site such as *AarinFantasy*. The fans would be able to discuss local issues in their own language which may help deal with confusion or instructions that are lost in translation, particular those to do with technical issues. As a final point of interest, in the search results there is also a thread titled *Share your Asian blood!*<sup>19</sup> In which fans from Asia are encouraged to state their home country and give some information about it. The creator introduces the thread with the first post in which suggests that fans:

Write anything you want others to know about your country and life. It won't hurt to share how proud you can be. (Cyriistiine)

This is the only thread on the site which I have found that encourages fans to "share" their heritage, there are no 'Share your European blood' or 'Share your American blood' threads based on my examination. This may be because *yaoi* is considered a Japanese text by the fans and therefore there is a special link made between *yaoi* and Asia. It would be interesting to understand whether those fans who identify as Asian believe they have a closer connection to *yaoi* manga but this is something I do not take up in this thesis.

The internet has allowed a greater number of fans to come together in *AarinFantasy* which has now made the fandom much more international and has meant that fans that once were not likely to meet one another are now able to do so. Previous studies of

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<sup>19</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f305/t147279-share-your-asian-blood.html> [Last accessed 14th October 2013]

*yaoi* on an international scale have focussed on fan communities in differing countries however in these studies *yaoi* was discussed in relation to national contexts, such as the tenuous position that *yaoi* holds in some legal systems. This thesis focuses on an online community where a fans' nationality does not present such an interesting comparison. *Yaoi* fans are able to communicate with one another and discuss issues that transcend national borders. This leads me to question if there are facets of *yaoi* fandom that are shared not only nationally, but also globally.

### *Age*

Table 2 confirms that the average fan will be from a younger age bracket, but again, without knowing the age of all members of *AarinFantasy*, there is no way to confirm this. Although I am interested to see that the great majority of fans are from the ages 17-25 there does exist a group of older fans making up almost one third of the survey population. Often, issues of age in *yaoi* manga fandom are not a well-developed area of interest in academia and in many cases the age of the fans is left at brief description of the fandom (Levi 2009; McHarry 2003; McLelland 2001; McLelland and Yoo 2007; Zhang 2014). In many cases there is an exclusion of older *yaoi* fans besides the fact that they do exist (Graffeo 2014; Santos 2010). Why are older fans often excluded from descriptions of the fandom, and, why do younger fans appear to make up the bulk of the *yaoi* community? A possible reason for the exclusion of older fans in some literature may be due how older fans feel about admitting their age in a fandom that is generally seen as something for younger generations, something inappropriate for older individuals, as I will discuss now.

Jensen suggests that “fandom is seen as excessive, bordering on deranged, behaviour and therefore these fans are seen as deviant and therefore dangerous to society” (1992,

p.9). In a discussion of gender in *yaoi* manga, the fans on *AarinFantasy* mentioned that fans, usually younger fans, think *yaoi* represents reality, specifically a gay reality. As a result it may be the case that studies focussing on the excesses of *yaoi* fandom focus on younger fans who demonstrate an “inability to properly assess the real world, one of the other traditional indictments made against fans” (Jensen 1992). As Jensen explains:

there is a thin line between ‘normal’ and excessive fandom. This line is crossed if when the distinctions between reality and fantasy break down. These are the two realms that must remain separated, if the fan is to remain safe and normal. (1992, p.18)

Some fans suggest that they don’t make the distinction between reality and fantasy and see *yaoi* as representing the lived reality of gay men, whereas others see *yaoi* as a fantasy device that is to be received in a variety of ways depending on the individual fan. This is reminiscent of the discussion of representation in the literature review. It appears that older fans criticise the younger fans for assuming that *yaoi* reflects reality whilst the older fans believe that *yaoi* can have multiple meanings, none of which represent any reality. In particular the older fans appear to see *yaoi* as a “device” (Sasaki 2013) which does not work as a representation of anything ‘real’ but is a device that may be used for varying interpretations. I suggest that the lack of study of older fans in *yaoi* communities may be related to this movement from fan girl status to a ‘regular’ *yaoi* fan that has a more nuanced understanding of the genre and its queer possibilities. Indeed, including older fans, who may have more open minds towards the genre, could potentially disrupt the theories that wish to categorise fans’ identifications and connections with *yaoi*, particularly in the area of seeing the genre as a representation of a heterosexual relationship.

This does not mean that age is not an important topic of discussion for the fans. In fact, I have found that for some, age can be something quite personal as well as worrying. It would appear that because the community is made up of younger fans, the older fans begin to feel pressure about their continued presence on the site. In a thread created by Black Lotus titled *Growing with yaoi, is age going to be [a] problem?*<sup>20</sup> the fans discuss how growing older might be a problem. The thread opens with comments from the fan Black Lotus:

It's good to see a website where people openly can talk about yaoi and such...but we all get a little older in the time, and normally people don't like the thinking of older people...being on website like this. I like [that] the people here all are kind to everyone but what do you think about people around 40 or 50 being on website like this? Do you think that's strange or maybe pervert[ed]?? These questions keep spinning in my mind, because I like this website so much but sometimes I'm bit afraid the older I get the less I may be welcome...the thing i fear the most is to fall aside the community that people start ignoring you etc. (Black Lotus)

This thread is opened with what could be described as a somewhat hesitant introduction from its creator, Black Lotus. Her comments reflect an assumption that the *yaoi* fandom is indeed believed to be made up of younger fans, to such an extent that being older may lead one to feel out of place. Nonetheless, her introductory post to the thread is polite and not accusatory rather it creates a space for open dialogue about the issue of age in a *yaoi* fan community. It is interesting to see, that *yaoi* fans worry about age and being labelled a “pervert” by others. Black Lotus’ comments suggest that she may in fact see *yaoi* as a kind of porn and that there is a level of shame with older individuals viewing pornographic material. However, in response to her question many fans posted their own opinions and suggested that it is in fact the younger fans who may cause more problems for the community:

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<sup>20</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f28/t115946-growing-yaoi-age-going.html> [Last accessed 14<sup>th</sup> October 2013]

I really don't see why getting older is supposed to be a problem. I think it's more the opposite way. Too young people getting in touch with yaoi and sexual topics before they can understand such things without getting the wrong idea. (UniQ)

In her post to the thread, UniQ believes that *yaoi* is more appropriate for older fans due to its content. Therefore she connects *yaoi* manga stories with sexual imagery which is inappropriate for younger fans and so rather than age being a problem; it may in fact be seen as a benefit. Some fans point to their community online and the benefits that it may bring:

Besides, what's so good at the internet is that age differences are less obvious... many people are a bit prejudiced when it comes to people's age but on the internet and communities like this we are connected through our interests and it overrides the differences in age. It's awesome! (CaveTrouble)

CaveTrouble's post comments on how being in an online community means that some of their differences should be irrelevant because unless the fans disclose this information then there would be no way to know how old a fan is. I also find this comment to be interesting as it suggests that the community is there for the fans and when they feel that they may be regarded as perverts. When stigma is attached to their particular fan interests we see that the fans view these as ascriptions brought from outside of the fandom whereas within the fandom they can be open and accepted by other fans, a topic I will expand upon in chapter three.

The above comments concerned with age are posted by fans that identify themselves as younger, and not yet old. In response to these young fans' comments, some older members of the forum began to post in response:

I'm 43, and well, I guess if you're a pervert, then when you get old, you'll be an old pervert, right? So it all depends on what you think is perverted. If liking yaoi is perverted, then when you're old, you'll be an old pervert. (Daniyagami)

The post from Daniyagami, almost acts as an argument against the younger fans in the thread. She counters the comments that as you get older you'll be considered more perverted by others. However, in response she suggests that if the fans already think of *yaoi* in perverted terms then they have always been perverts regardless of age. Perversion in this sense is subjective and Daniyagami questions why one should be offended by the term. Some fans embrace it as making their community and identity as *yaoi* fans more special. They don't see themselves as being truly perverted, but accept the difference that this bestows upon them. This is similar to Grossberg's discussion of the affective capabilities of rock (1992a). The fans, like those of rock, don't see the object of their interest as particularly transgressive but they accept the difference as a means to signify their community and forge bonds with one another. It is ultimately a means of forming their community.

Another fan, Gizmo, quoted Daniyagami in her post and added:

First, it should be clear that *yaoi* isn't exactly porn. It's not the same...too much notable *yaoi* contain artistic or literary value. The point of porn, in contrast, is exactly for sexual entertainment. So to think that the older you get the creepier you are for enjoying *yaoi* is not exactly right. I think in a *yaoi* community you get a certain kind of openness with members. I agree though that it is uncommon and weird to find people in their 40s and 50s reading *yaoi*. That's because of what we think with comics and manga/anime overall, not just *yaoi*. People from Western societies don't take comics or manga or anime seriously so this issue is not just exclusive to *yaoi*. (Gizmo)

Gizmo's addition to the thread makes several useful points concerning *yaoi* and age. She also counters the younger fans comments on perversion, *yaoi*, and getting older by explaining that *yaoi* should not be considered porn at all because this misses the main concern for age being a problem. Her comments are a good example of how fans feel judged by societal values of *yaoi* and porn that are external to the community's own thoughts. She links *yaoi* to wider manga/comics and suggests that getting older

is not a problem unique to *yaoi* but is common across the world. In chapter three of the thesis I will discuss how the fans differentiate between *yaoi* and porn. Overall, although younger members may worry about growing old as *yaoi* fans, the older members reassure them that there is no problem and if a one does occur it is likely not to be because of the content but due to cultural concerns regarding adults reading manga and comics.

The term ‘fan-girl’ is not exclusive to the *yaoi* fandom and indeed can be found in other research (Levi, McHarry and Pagliassotti 2010; Pagliassotti 2008; Yi 2013) and is generally used as an insult. Indeed, the younger fans on the community are associated with types of behaviour that are considered poorly by the older fans in the community. Further on in the thread the fan Mueti makes her own addition and posts that:

Another thing I don't like is the immaturity. I guess it's hard to avoid when the fandom has a large preteen and younger teen following. The ones that get all hype and squealy during inappropriate times can be annoying.  
(Mueti)

This concept of “squealy” was mentioned by many participants I spoke with and can be defined as by being overly excited reaction to something they have seen or read. Many of the fans actively avoid being bracketed together with the younger fans to whom such descriptions are given due to the negative associations that they carry with them:

Also, the silly, possessive or obsessive talk like "OmG!!!1111!SESSHY Ish teh haWtest BISHiE!!!1111!!! \*glomptacklehugglesiihgdihgdishgds\*" It makes me cringe. :( A lot of people will base their opinions of the *yaoi* community on immature kid fans like these. So unfortunately, a lot of people will hate *yaoi* fans and I keep my own interests quiet. (Jess S)

The above comment came from an online interview with Jess S, a 27 year old fan, during our discussion about the stigma that is attached to *yaoi* manga. The young fans

“possessive or obsessive” behaviour is clearly viewed negatively and she views it in such a negative light that she keeps her own interests in *yaoi* “quiet” in fear that she may be associated with them. This suggests that young fan girls are considered dangerous for the community. They are certainly seen as disruptive based on these quotes from the fans. Perhaps they feel that fan girls don’t think about *yaoi* in a mature, open minded manner. Does this mean that there is an issue of seriousness connected to being a *yaoi* fan, and if there is, why?

Jensen explains that in the dominant cultural hierarchy, “the division between worth and unworthy is based in an assumed dichotomy between reason and emotion... [and] describes a presumed difference between the educated and uneducated (1992, p.21). Some of the fans on *AarinFantasy* do such a thing when they characterise the younger fans as crazy, excessive, emotional, irrational and perhaps overly invested in a ‘real’ depiction of homosexuality. However it could also be suggested that such fans are simply using the site to view different sexualities than those that are accessible in their everyday lives and as a result get excited about doing so. This could be described as “meaningless play” (Galbraith 2011b). What I suggest by this is that there might be a difference between meaningless play and serious thoughts about gender and sexuality. For some, *yaoi* is simply about viewing something different which need not be questioned any further, on the other hand for other fans it is a place to queerly question gender and sexuality, both the characters and their own. By focussing on only one group of fans, or suggesting that one interpretation is more valid than the other then I run the risk of homogenising the *yaoi* fandom, or suggesting that one aspect of *yaoi* fandom is more valid and worthy of academic attention.

I am wary however that my comments thus far could be seen as an implication that a fan-girl interpretation of *yaoi* is invalid whilst those fans who consider the queer

possibilities of *yaoi* more seriously are valid and worth interpretation. Such an implication could leave this thesis open to the criticism that I am replicating traditional fan studies that stigmatise aspects of fandom whilst valorising others (Jensen 1992). The existence of these types of threads and the discussions on the site demonstrate that there are a variety of ages in the community challenging the view that *yaoi* fans are all young. The above discussion of age has also brought forward the fans' sense of shame or self-consciousness regarding *yaoi*, in particular they are concerned with what others think about them. It has also shown that the site allows for difference in opinions for some its play, whilst for some others it's serious. Neither is incorrect because the community is diverse with a multitude of fans using *yaoi* in different ways: to play gender, to seriously question their own, to question what is and isn't porn and what is and isn't perversity, themes that I will take up again in later sections of these thesis. I will revisit the theme of *yaoi* stigma in the community in chapter three in a discussion of the support that fans can receive in the community.

### *Sex*

When discussing sex and *yaoi* we must be careful to avoid two problems. The first is part of "textual essentialism" (Duffett 2013, p.149), that we make a connection between a text and a particular social group. For example it is wrong to suggest that because *yaoi* features stylised romantic relationships between characters that appear feminine, that the audience is entirely female also. This idea ignores the fact that gendered portrayals of characters can be read in a variety of ways. Secondly, we must be careful not to essentialise the audience either. If we examine the "cultural world...through the prism of gender" (Duffett 2013, p.149) then we run the risk of thinking that the ways in which male or female fans take part in their respective fandoms are inherently different from one another.

Table 1 confirms previous reports that *yaoi* fan communities are chiefly made up of female fans and indeed in *AarinFantasy* there are many more female fans than there are male. However this result is also based on a survey of 181 respondents whilst the site itself has tens of thousands of members and so any firm conclusions cannot be drawn from this. Whilst Pagliassotti (2008) puts the male *yaoi* fandom at around 10% of the overall community, the respondents to my own survey show that this figure is closer to 19%, constituting a strong minority on this site, almost 1/5 of the community. There is also a ‘sticky’ poll in the *Voting Booth* that exists on the *AarinFantasy* forum that asks the fans for their sex. Based on 8592 votes there 75% are female, 22% are male and 3% have chosen to describe themselves as ‘other’<sup>21</sup>.

Helena Sheenan (1992) criticises the tendency to associate certain genres with men or women in sexist ways. However, Mark McLelland reports that in 2001, 82.5% of registered attendees at the San Francisco YAOI conference were female (McLelland 2001) and almost 10 years later, according to her online English language survey of *yaoi* fans, Dru Pagliassotti found that 89% of respondents were female. A similar statistic was found in her Italian language version of the same survey (82%) (Pagliassotti 2010). These results do indicate the genre is, mostly, made up of female fans. However, although the assertions that *yaoi* fans are all women may be based on actual statistical evidence such as those given above (McLelland 2001; Pagliassotti 2010), what is problematic is that they lead to a universalising tendency of understanding ‘woman’ in which case there is little room for diversity amongst fans.

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<sup>21</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f24/t10-what%27s-your-sex-gender.html> [Last accessed 14<sup>th</sup> October 2013]

I thus question the implicit assumption that the genre is *exclusively* a heterosexual woman's text.

We must be aware of potential mistakes that can be made when we conflate a fan's sexual identity with their sex, and even their sexual desires with their sexual identity. This is a particularly important point for considering an online community because distinctions can be found between these concepts. For example, (Asai 2010) suggests that what an individual desires to do online may have little correspondence with their offline sexual orientation; similarly, one's sexual orientation should not be automatically understood based on one's biological sex. I believe that one way to re-examine *yaoi* is to separate heterosexuality from heteronormativity. Heterosexuality may be thought of as the "lubricated set of interactions between [heterosexual] bodies", i.e. biologically male and female whereas heteronormativity is the "institution...that makes heterosexuality coherent" but which is nonetheless "a concept distinct from heterosexuality (Berlant and Warner 1998, p.565). A fresh approach is required that removes heteronormativity from heterosexuality showing that although fans may be heterosexual, *yaoi* affords new experiences and exploration of alternatives to those offered by heteronormative heterosexuality.

This queer approach to gender and sexuality allows for a more nuanced understanding of the *yaoi* fandom and the diversity of its fans who cannot always be neatly quantified into simple identity categories such as female or straight. I will go on to demonstrate that there is fluidity in fans' sexual identities to such an extent that to discuss the fans' identities in restriction of their biological sex is disingenuous to a queer examination of this *yaoi* fan community.

I found it interesting during my interviews with fans that a number of them are aware of the assumption that the *yaoi* community is entirely female and take issue with it:

I don't like when people assume that every yaoi fan is female, and talk about every single one of us as "she". I know it's a minor thing but it irritates me. It's like male fans don't exist and everyone is so surprised to find out there are guys here too. (Cyril)

Although this is a simple statement, it leads me to question assumptions of the overall fandom. The belief that *yaoi* is exclusively a female genre should not be blamed entirely on the academic world either, the idea that *yaoi* is a woman's world also exists in the fan community itself. In a thread titled *Pet Peeves about SOME Members [of] the Yaoi Fan Community*<sup>22</sup> created by the fan Dark Adonis, who is female, makes several criticisms of *yaoi* fans, one of which is concerned with this assumption that fans are all female and in her post to the community she writes:

I know that yaoi was created for the entertainment of women. And that's all groovy with me. But there are a lot of sites that seem to pretend that male fans don't exist. It is almost like some of the fan girls just want to hog it all to themselves. For example, there is this official site for yaoi manga fan club, and they call it "The Girl's Only Sanctuary". I find that evocative of elementary school where none of the girls would sit by the boys because they believed them to have cooties. I just find it rather immature. And such exclusivity squashes my wanting to even visit that site. At least this site seems to accept fanboys as well. But so many other sites don't even seem to acknowledge them. (Dark Adonis)

Dark Adonis mentions an official site for a *yaoi* fan community, which referred to itself as a "girls' only sanctuary" indicating that the club envisaged itself as a community for women only. It is entirely possible that this fan club intended itself to be a place for female fans only, however Dark Adonis criticises this "elementary school" attitude where male and female students would not sit next to one another and she believes this is "immature" resulting in her praise for *AarinFantasy* which "seems

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<sup>22</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f28/t43036-pet-peeves-about-some.html> [last accessed December 16th 2013]

to accept fanboys”. This quote hints at a sense of inclusivity on *AarinFantasy* where fans of all types may come together and mix with one another which is something that another fan mentioned in response to Dark Adonis’ comment:

I really hated that slogan as well and am glad they no longer use it hmm and the "disregard for male yaoi readers" I personally think it's great that there are males in this community and it may seem silly to say but when I happened to notice a "Aarinboy" had read one of my fics, commented and enjoyed it. I was really happy that my story could go cross gender and get over that "for girls only" stereotype. (ChibiHime)

ChibiHime introduces the term ‘Aarinboy’ as a reference to the male fans on *AarinFantasy*, indeed this term appears to have become widely accepted and used with many other threads referring to the male fans on the site. Interestingly this user mentions that she enjoys it when she finds out a male fan has read one of the fan fictions that she has written as she is happy that her creativity “could cross gender”. She is also pleased that her participation on *AarinFantasy* helps to “get over that ‘for girls only’ stereotype” indicating that not only are the fans aware that the stereotype exists, but they are also keen to move away from it and demonstrate the inclusivity of their community.

Although my survey, poll data and the comments from the fans in their thread postings and interviews with me demonstrate the existence of male fans, these statistics should be taken carefully, especially those that are reported online when a fan’s self-reported gender cannot be verified and is often subject to the fans desire to create alternative identities (Asai 2010; Turkle 1999). For example, I noticed in the *AarinFantasy* poll asking the fans’ sex that one post said:

Heh, I voted that I am male. Although my body's female. I swear, I'm a gay guy on the inside XD \*wishes body was male but too afraid to get sex change. (BakaChan.003)

Therefore although male fans do exist, the numbers may be exaggerated by such fans as BakaChan.003 who vote as male but also identify as female. What should be asked at this point then regards why a fan should wish to do so, what her attraction to being a man in this case is, and why has this occurred in a *yaoi* fan community. The answer to these questions problematize our concept of the *yaoi* community as a stable body of heterosexual female fans and can thus provide clues to the understanding the *yaoi* fandom on a new scale of multiplicity and alternative identities. On the other hand we should not assume that all female fans secretly want to be male. Her desire for a male body may only be temporary as was found in Asai's (2010) study of *nekama* who had no desire to be female and were content to live their offline lives as men who simply desired a temporary respite in the form of an alternative identity online.

In a similar way, we should not assume that all those fans who respond as female are in fact so. It is possible that some male fans have chosen to identify as female for a variety of reasons, for example, as BakaChan.003 identified as male, through my interviews some fans on the site inform me that they identify with the female gender:

Currently I'm a gay male but sometimes I'm not sure what I am on the inside....I have thought about sex changes or trying to pass as a woman...I do wear makeup...but so far I'm still undecided, some days I feel more like a woman....sometimes more like a man, i hate that its considered weird to change and stuff. (Jaiden)

In the above interview comments Jaiden discusses the fluidity of his identity and that depending on the day he may feel more masculine and others, more feminine.

It is entirely possible for other male members of the community to feel the same or a similar way to such an extent that they identified as female in my survey. I accept that this leads to potential inaccuracies in my survey based largely on the fact that I am unable to verify the 'real' identity of the respondents. This is indeed an interesting point to be raised concerning differing modalities of 'reality'. As the fan

BakaChan.003 mentioned, the identity that she voted for differs from what she considered her 'real' identity, something that would have remained unknown had she not made the admittance. It also seems that I am able to get closer to the offline identities of the fans through interviews where they may be more candid with me suggesting that interviews that allow for more intimacy and rapport to be built may be considered more 'real' than the posts in threads where fans may feel less need to be honest in their answers, or at least present a different 'self' than they do in interviews with me.

The implication of BakaChan.003's revelation is that thread posts could be part of a presentation of a preferred self or identity online. However, despite that on the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog I believe that instead of investigating whether or not there is a dog on a computer, we should be investigating why that dog is able to and does become something other online. In other words, the fascination with inauthentic identities online often overlooks the point that in almost all facets of life our identity can be thought of as performative and the internet, thus, should not be seen as critically different, but simply as a new lens through which to consider new possibilities for expressing identity (Wynn and Katz 1997). Therefore, rather than wondering if the fan with whom I speak is male or female, it is more important to examine why and how certain fans feel so and what role *yaoi* manga plays in these identifications which is the task of the proceeding chapters.

Interestingly, for a community of female fans there is often a negative association in *AarinFantasy* with being a female fan otherwise known as a 'fan-girl'. For example Sapir Be mentions:

I also don't like to read comments from young Fangirls who wish that they were gay boys/men/guys simply because they read so many whirlwind romantic yaoi mangas and actually think that what they read is possible in

reality. It's not all peaches and cream. Get real and grow out of that fangirl phase! (Sapir Be)

Sapir Be, though only 22, criticises the fan-girl type and being a proper fan for her means leaving this stage behind. Indeed the term fan-girl contains negative associations and is often thought of as being “crazy” (Milwaen), “rampant” (Diepenhorst) or “brainless” (Shy Uke). The fan-girl is a gendered subject, as there is also the fan-boy stereotype (Jensen 1992; Tulloch and Jenkins 1995), however the fan-girl is associated with ideas of being crazy, overzealous, and naturally, female which are often seen as the main criticism in many fandoms which are dominated by male fans. *AarinFantasy* is predominantly female, yet the stereotype and term is used widely to describe other female fans negatively.

I suggest that the criticism is not necessarily always based on the fans' age or sex, particularly seen as the majority of the community is also female, but is based on fans' behaviour, how they interpret *yaoi* and is often a phase that many of the fans go through:

At first I shipped certain characters like a rampant fangirl, everyone has that phase but I grew out of it rather quickly, got mature and stopped being so stupid. (Diepenhorst)

In an interview with Diepenhorst she claims that being a fan-girl is something fans may go through “at first” when they become *yaoi* fans and members of community. In her particular case she “shipped” characters “like rampant”. ‘Ship’ is a contraction of the word ‘relationship’ and refers to the fans writing fan fiction or drawing pictures of two characters that are not in a canonical relationship. But she also claims that she “grew out of it” and “got mature” indicating a transition out of being a fan-girl that comes with growing older. Therefore, the low position of fan-girls in the community is because of their behaviour.

*Yaoi* manga has been theorised as a means of escape for some fans and therefore the depictions of male homosexuality in *yaoi* should not be understood as fact. Indeed, Mizoguchi (2008) described the first *yaoi* magazines as the “first genre in which female artists and writers have assumed the position of exploiting male-male representations to serve female readers’ pleasure” (p.191). In my interviews about this with some of the fans from *AarinFantasy* I was told that:

Many fan girls seem to have a fixation on “authenticity” (whatever that means) even if this authenticity is largely just a heavily codified set of rules and stereotypes that are perhaps just as stupid as the cliches and stereotypes in the *yaoi*. (Sapir B)

Sapir B questions what authenticity in *yaoi* means to both her and in general. I pressed her on this issue. In particular I discussed with her the idea of seeing *yaoi* as authentic or not:

*Yaoi* is fundamentally fantasy...so why is there this need among fan girls to discuss this fantasy in “real” terms? One example I can think of is how *yaoi* is always about the *seme* and the *uke* and while I’m no expert on gay porn, I’m sure it uses similar distinctions so why the need to act like they don’t exist? I think it’s difficult to discuss *yaoi* in “real” terms, what is real for me might not be real for you and what you like in *yaoi* is probably different to what I like. (Sapir B)

Based on a similar line of questioning Diepenhorst also told me:

*Yaoi* is mainly...empowering us to become more expressive of sexuality (especially in cultures....that only allow limited expressions of it) so yeah, it is meant to be fantasy and when fan girls try to discuss it in realist terms it is definitely weird and shows a vital misunderstanding of what *yaoi* is meant to be doing and could possibly be offensive to real gay guys. (Diepenhorst)

Sapir B and Diepenhorst shed some light on the criticism of fan girls in *AarinFantasy*. They both suggest that the reason they like *yaoi* and the depictions of male homosexual relationships, as opposed to female homosexual or male-female heterosexual relationships, is because *yaoi* acts as a means to project their fantasies and expressions of sexuality. Indeed, Diepenhorst comments that in a society which restricts and limits

expressions of alternative sexuality, *yaoi* allows her to escape. Ultimately, the fan girl in *AarinFantasy* is criticised for her behaviour and what other fans assume is her supposed misunderstanding of *yaoi* and real gay relationships:

I myself have transitioned from being one of the ‘crazy fan girls’ who was straight/bi-curious, but confusingly obsessed over anything homoerotic, into a person of gender queer identity with a penchant for pairings in general, whether hetero/homo/transgender/etc...In fact, [*yaoi*] helped me to understand more about my own personal means of identity. Which I think is an immensely important step for fan girls that is sometimes not made, Getting stuck on reality is dangerous and starts personifying even real people as what they can/can’t do with their bodies. What about the character’s presentation? What of their personality, passions and interactions with others? When these other elements are added in it makes a brilliant piece of work, without needing to be focused on the legitimacy in terminology or relationship roles. (Diepenhorst)

Diepenhorst criticises the potential for fan-girls to get “stuck on reality” when she believes that this is not what *yaoi* is only capable of providing. For her, it enabled a “gender queer” identity. Simply, she criticises younger fans that look to *yaoi* for representation of male homosexuality which she believes is not really what is being represented at all. One might criticise such comments made by Diepenhorst as according to her viewpoint *yaoi* does not include any natural meaning thus it is entirely possible for fans read it as a male homosexual romance story. However whilst she does not criticise the fan-girl interpretation of the text, she criticises the fan-girl’s refusal to realise that *yaoi* may be read in a number of different ways. The fan-girl criticism is not to do with the fans gender but their behaviour and analysis of *yaoi*. In particular they are criticised for limiting *yaoi*’s queer potential by reading too much realism into *yaoi* manga and thus they limit how the characters and stories may be differently interpreted.

## Conclusion

Examining *yaoi* fan demographics and understanding who *yaoi* fans are, is such an interesting topic to begin with in a study of *yaoi* fandom because an audience, that at first seems firm in our understanding, suddenly becomes much more abstract. What has been done is similar to Jenkins' own assertion in *Textual Poachers* in which he argued against a "case for fandom as having any degree of coherence and stability at all" (1992a, p.3).

In this chapter I have introduced some of the demographic aspects of the *AarinFantasy* community, Overall I have shown how *yaoi* fans should no longer be thought of as a homogenous group of heterosexual female fans. A vital part of the emergence of other types of *yaoi* fans is in fact the implication this has on our understanding of *yaoi* fans' relationship with *yaoi*.

A previous trend of *yaoi* research works on an understanding that the fandom is female and heterosexual. As a result, fans' interest has been considered, either queerly or normatively, within understandings of heterosexual female gender and sexuality. Another, more recent, theme of research takes a fresh approach highlighting how female fans are not restricted to identifying with the *uke* but could have multiple viewpoints (Meyer 2010), similarly different fans are examined for their own personal reasons for enjoying *yaoi* such as lesbian fans (Nagaike 2003) or male fans (Ito [Kimio] 2009). If heterosexual male fans or male and female fans with gender queer identities such as Jaiden and BakaChan.003 exist, then how can we rationalise their interest in *yaoi* manga if heteronormative understandings of gender and sexuality no longer hold their boundaries and fans move between them? Moreover, these differences cause visible contrasts between the groups such as between older and

younger fans with older fans accusing younger of not recognising *yaoi*'s potential to be a device for different readings. The implication of these differences demands that we ask why are these fans of varying demographic groupings *yaoi* fans, and what brings them together. Are there individual reasons that are particular to each individual fan or are we able to find common themes running across certain groups?

## Chapter Two: Fan Sexuality

### Introduction

Previous *yaoi* research has provided an explanation for why heterosexual females make up a large proportion of the fan base. The premise has been that the narratives are interpreted as a heterosexual relationship between a man and a woman thus explaining why heterosexual women read them. Not only does carry normative assumptions of gender, sexuality, and desire but an approach that utilises a fan's sexuality as its base will find it difficult to account for the possibilities that the fans think critically about sexuality.

In response to my survey question 'What is your sexual orientation' the majority of those who responded were female and heterosexual (46%). The second largest group was female but identified as bisexual (18%) whilst the third largest group was homosexual male fans (10%) followed by bisexual males (7%). Homosexual females (3%) and heterosexual males (4%) represent the smallest proportion of those fans who responded. There is also a group of respondents who responded as "other" (9%). These results largely correspond with a thread in the site titled *What is your sexual orientation?*<sup>23</sup> From a total of 6106 responses 48% identified as "straight girl[s]", 27% as "bi girl[s]", 3% "gay girl[s]", 11% "gay guy[s]", 9% "bi guy[s]", and 2% "straight guy[s]". These correlate with my findings and they highlight fan diversity but it is important to realise that these categories have been imposed and leave little room for negotiation.

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<sup>23</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f24/t16650-what-your-sexual-orientation.html?highlight=sexuality>  
[last accessed April 23rd 2015]

However, *yaoi* fandom complicates any basic understanding of sexual orientation. As Sedgwick (1990) suggests, our attraction to certain objects need not necessarily be understood in terms of our sexual orientations. Simply put, what *yaoi* fans find desirable need not be dictated by the bodies they are attracted to in their daily lives, so why must we assume that fans like *yaoi* due to reported sexualities or gender?

This chapter is made up of three sections. In the first I discuss approaches to fandom that have explored why some individuals are fans at all. In particular I pay attention to the issue of fantasy to frame *yaoi* as means of escape. I will show that whilst there is variety of fans in terms of reported sexualities, genders, and sex on the site, the desire for an alternative to heteronormativity is a feature that unites the fan rationales together. This turn towards fantasy and imagination concerning alternative expressions of sexuality is an important feature. In the second section I engage with the fans' sexuality examining how the object of attraction is not focused on *yaoi* characters but with narratives. As part of this discussion I incorporate recent theory concerning bisexuality to highlight how thinking of *yaoi* fans in terms of distinct sexual categories restricts considerations of *yaoi* fan sexuality. In the final section I discuss how *yaoi* fan sexuality may be considered queer. In particular I consider postmodern sexuality (Saito 2011) in the sense that expressed sexualities often go against what would be expected of fans. As part of this discussion I draw on discussions of *otaku* sexuality from Keith Vincent (2011), Saito Tamaki (2011), and Patrick Galbraith (2011a) to differentiate between real and fantasy sexuality. As a conclusion I consider the possibility of 'yaoi fan sexuality' as a productive term to describe the fluidic nature of expressions of the fans in *AarinFantasy*.

### *An Alternative to Heteronormativity*

A major aspect of fandom research has often been to ask why fans like their chosen media texts in the first place. Jenkins tackles this question with *Textual Poachers* stating that “there is something empowering about what fans do with those texts in the process of assimilating them to the particulars of their lives” (1992a, p.291). When thinking about fan empowerment it is useful to consider audience studies. Audience studies share a similar focus as this thesis in the sense that they seek to understand how people ‘understand’ texts. For example, Janice Radway in *Reading the Romance* (1984) examines female readers of romance novels and the role that the texts play in their lives. Radway finds that it is not only the fiction that women enjoy, but also the act of reading. She suggests that reading is transformative, helping women separate their reading lives from their everyday lives. Similarly, Mary Brown (1994), in her study of soap opera fans, finds that fans place importance on the pleasure of the story. An important contribution that Brown makes is her focus on female fans specifically as a marginalised group stating that the empowerment women find in their fandom is from “viewing a program that is designed for them” (1994, p.1) and that their fandom “contains information contrary to ideas validated in dominant or hegemonic culture” (1994, p.32) thus creating “a space for women to construct their world in their own terms” (1994, p.37) thus “validat[ing] feminine meanings and pleasures” (1994, p.32). Jenkins further writes that “fans are drawn to particular programs because they provide the materials most appropriate for talking about topics of more direct concern” because texts “continually raise issues the fans want to discuss...offer[ing] insights not only into...different strategies for resolving personal problems (1992a, p.83). Thus fan texts are empowering because they provide safe spaces for sometimes marginalised fans to deal with their personal problems.

In the forums I found empowerment to be an important aspect as to why fans enjoyed *yaoi* manga. However this empowerment differs from Brown's (1994) in that the marginalisation I find is not exclusively a 'woman's issue', rather *yaoi* is utilised in opposition to heteronormativity by a broad range of fans. For example, some fans often got bored with what they call "hetero love stories":

I have to say that I get tired of...hetero love stories. I got tired of them long before I discovered *yaoi*. There are het [heterosexual] pairings that I support though, but that is usually because I either really like the characters involved, or the relationship is a bit different. It also bares mentioning that lots of het couples...(or at least in shounen) suck. They are overly sappy, usually between totally incompatible people, and often seem thrown in just for the sake of having a love story. (Cindy Wu)

Interestingly, Cindy Wu applies her dislike of heterosexual romance stories to other mediums. She mentions that she likes the type of relationships that are depicted "a bit differently" and criticises portrayals of heterosexual romance in wider media which points to another critical aspect as to why the fans are bored with heterosexuality:

I'm not exactly tired of het pairings, just the usual hetero-stereotypes...I'd just LOVE for a het pairing where both the male and female are on EQUAL terms; not this "one is stronger than the other" crap. That both a male and female can love each other DEEPLY AND COMPLETELY but not be victims to stereotypes. It's possible; not all straight women are stupid, weak little flowers who need a person protecting them. (Mueti)

Whilst these comments correspond with earlier *yaoi* research such as Ueno and her discussion of *yaoi* fans' restricted femininity (1998) it is important to remember that Ueno's theorisation is more akin to Brown (1994) and her focus on female fans as marginalised. Ueno writes that "male homosexuality [in girls' manga] was a safety device....it was the wings that enabled girls to fly" (Ueno 1998, p.131) however the fans are not necessarily bored with heterosexuality, but with depictions of heteronormative heterosexuality. Therefore whilst the sexual identity of the characters is not the main issue, the depiction of the relationship is. The fans dislike how the female characters must be passive and the male dominant, and if the opposite is ever

depicted then the man is a “wuss” and the woman a “bitch”. Indeed Muetti admits she would “LOVE” (emphasis in original) a heterosexual relationship where the male and the female characters are on equal terms.

This opposition to heteronormativity is highlighted when fans say they are not only bored with heteronormativity in heterosexual stories, they are also bored of it in *yaoi* stories:

Many yaoi has very feminine uke which is very annoying to me. The ukes look and act exactly like a girl....so when you asked the question "does anyone else get bored of seeing straight relationships in a story?" I will say yes, but if someone asked me if I get bored of seeing a gay relationship in yaoi then I MIGHT say yes as well... I'm seeing a LOT of female fans lately taking a stand and supporting seke pairings or at LEAST being against girly/whiny ukes (shudders) like Fake or something like that. (CitrusXxFantasy)

CitrusXxFantasy does not assume that *yaoi* will be a queer saviour from heteronormativity as she claims that she “MIGHT” (emphasis in original) get bored with *yaoi* if it depicts a heteronormative relationship between the characters. A similar finding has been reported by Mark Isola (2008) who suggests *yaoi* manga is “liberating...because unlike heterosexual stories, where women are routinely the object of the male gaze, *yaoi* constructs an egalitarian model for gazing” (p.89) but its egalitarianism is not, perhaps, a result of depictions of homosexuality. I have found this to be the case in some of my interviews with female *yaoi* fans, for example when discussing the issue with Diepenhorst in an interview who specifically mentions a male gaze. I was told:

You escape the male gaze by viewing yaoi...I hate how a lot of hetero/yuri messes with proportions to emphasize what’s supposedly attractive to men, objectifies, and generally ignores the actual pleasure of the women. Notice how only the woman has to be attractive in lots of porn. Notice how hetero usually ends once the man has orgasmed....I enjoy [yaoi] because I get to see the men, the ones who always are central and in control in society, crying, vulnerable, and submissive. Also, I don’t feel as guilty seeing perverse things in yaoi because the portrayal doesn’t reflect actual harmful

attitudes towards men (that said, yaoi's got some pretty bad rape and abuse apologia going on). (Diepenhorst)

*Yaoi* manga becomes an “act of agency over sex/gender hegemony by constructing liberating spaces within which females can negotiate the male gaze” (Isola 2008, p.89). There are two particularly interesting aspects of Diepenhorst's comment. Firstly she mentions throughout how she likes to see men in roles other than those that are commonly featured in other media outlets but this does not mean that she ‘hates’ men, she still self-identifies as a heterosexual but what she does do is remove the heteronormativity out of the heterosexuality. Rather than being a simple reproduction of gender norms, the *seme* and *uke* provide a queer means to think about gender and sexuality for fans who do not necessarily relate to feminine uke characters. Indeed, fans often mention their displeasure with the predominance of *uke* characters' point of view and in a thread titled *ANYTHING yaoi from SEME's POV* [point of view]<sup>24</sup> fans discuss series told from the *seme*'s point of view. The thread was started by the fan Suhi:

I LOVE to see what seme thinks! And, it really frustrates me to be by default associated with the uke all the time. I'd like to have variability of the options and more often than not I imagine myself as the seme more than I do the uke. (Suhi)

It appears to be a common viewpoint as a reply from a fellow fan suggest:

As usual, you take the words right out of my mouth! XD It's just a "perception" that girls are "uke" in nature; of course it isn't always true, maybe not even true most of the time. I like to read from the point-of-view of seme characters, and when I write my bishies, I imagine as semes all the time. (Artemis Moonsong)

Identification with *seme* characters queers the expected relationship between fan and text. However, we cannot ignore fans that do identify with the *uke*, but is this identification with a passive femininity in contrast to an active masculinity? This is

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<sup>24</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f28/thread121761-print.html> [last accessed April 23rd 2015]

something that members of the community have considered as demonstrated by the fan momobunny who began the thread *Your thoughts on roles?*<sup>25</sup>

Many argue about the roles and stereotypes shown in yaoi. Some claim that an uke doesn't have to always bottom. Some claim that a seme always has to top. Some believe that the seme is somebody who dominates both inside and outside of the bedroom. The words "uke" and "seme" come from words that literally mean "receiver" and "attacker" and people associate femininity with the uke and masculinity with the seme. So one would think that that's pretty much the final definition to it. But as I've said, there are a few interpretations of these terms. One could be dominate in a relationship and still bottom. What would that person be called? Some people would say a dominate uke... some might say a submissive seme. Some might even say something completely different. (momobunny)

Momobunny questions the relation between masculinity and femininity with the common roles in *yaoi* manga. She questions whether being 'passive' in sex means one is fundamentally passive thus separating passivity from the *uke*. Indeed, the *uke* character can rework passive femininity because he receives both the benefits of patriarchy being a man whilst at the same time parodying the benefit by occupying the typically female position as the object (Akatsuka 2010, p.168). The *seme* desires the *uke* that is rendered the object of desire without the typical connotations of femininity (Wood 2006). Thus, even if fans identify with the *uke*, they are presented with femininity that is not disempowering.

The second intriguing part of Diepenhorst's comment is that she mentions she doesn't feel guilty seeing men in passive, almost abusive portrayals, because they aren't real men. This separation between what is real and what is fantastical is crucial. *Yaoi* manga is simultaneously indicative of queer *yaoi* fan sexuality, whilst at the same time, many aspects of these alternative sexualities are largely limited to their fandom and do not correspond with actual lived. Perhaps more interestingly we are making an

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<sup>25</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f28/t112420-your-thoughts-on-roles.html?highlight=your+thoughts+on+roles> [last accessed April 23rd 2015]

erroneous assumption in connecting fans' interest and connections with specific characters. When Orbaugh states that neither character is the object of the gaze she is insisting that identification is fluid (2010) but we can explore an alternative avenue, one that suggests fans' don't only identify with characters but entire narratives. This possibility has implications for understanding fan sexuality and gender.

Up to this point I have highlighted dissatisfaction with heteronormativity on the part of the *yaoi* fans, however I am aware that this has largely focussed on female fans. As an "act of agency over the sex/gender hegemony", as described by Isola (2008), I have found that *yaoi* also helps male fans to overcome problems associated with acceptable forms of masculinity which they feel that they cannot, or would not, like to inhabit.

Some male fans on the site have discusses this with me:

I'm straight and a guy and I'm not curious but yaoi is just this really special thing for me, it's like 'okay these guys are pretty cool, they play sports and other guy stuff but they also do what you could think is girl like baking and so on but they're still guys'. It made me realise I don't have to be the tough guy saviour of the world to be a cool guy, I can just be myself and enjoy what I do. (Dai-kun)

We are always told to be the best, to be tough, it can really add a lot of pressure. You can always see guys worried that they're going to be made fun of so they hide certain things, it's like we're all trying to be this thing that doesn't really exist and yaoi for me is one of those things. Yeah I still don't tell people cause they'd probably think I was gay or weird but it lets me accept myself for me and not I think people think I should be. (Craig Orton)

Male fans find empowerment in consuming alternatives to hegemonic masculinity. In a study concerning male homosexual texts, Janet Staiger (2005) writes that male homosexual texts are also a means for men to express their emotions as a critique of traditional masculinity. This is similar to Nagaike and Ito who discuss male fans of girls' manga (Ito [Kimio] 2009) and *yaoi* (Nagaike 2013). For example, Nagaike suggests that male fans of *yaoi* are able to overcome socially imposed male roles. In

particular, she quotes male fans who describe *yaoi* as a “salvation”, or a “tool...to liberate ourselves from pretence” (Nagaike 2013, np).

As Raewyn Connell and James Messerschmidt discusses in relation to hegemonic masculinity, we must not forget men also suffer oppression, indeed, “the concept of masculinity is flawed because it essentialises the character of men or imposes...a heteronormative conception of gender that essentialises” (2005 p.837). Their discussion of hegemonic masculinity and those that surround it highlight that heteronormative heterosexuality is an important, if not the most important, aspect of ideal masculinity, but, as they explain, “hegemonic masculinity is not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense...but it [is] certainly normative” because it is “the currently most honoured way of being a man” (p.833). However, male *yaoi* fans demonstrate that they are also not always comfortable with the idea of normative sexuality. I have found that there are a variety of male fans on *AarinFantasy* who all indicate dissatisfaction with masculinity and sexual normativity and find release in *yaoi*. For example there are those male fans that identify as heterosexual and express a desire to be dominated by their female partners:

I prefer yaoi to het [heterosexual] manga for many reasons, but one of them is the fact I get to see a man in submission, it helps sometimes that both the guys look a little like women, because I'm a guy (straight) and I'll admit I've fantasised about what it would be like if my girlfriend was the seme and I was the uke, maybe even with a strap on. (Dai-kun)

Nagaike suggests that there is an “existence of a (subconscious) psychological male desire for self-feminization through male readers' identification with those images of seemingly gay men” (2013, np). She connects this desire for “self-feminization” with a desire she assumes many men have to negate the “socially imposed construction of a strong masculine ego” (2013, np) and therefore she believes that male participation in the female space of *yaoi* fandom presents an ideological challenge to the “socially

constructed archetypes of strong masculinity” (2013, np). I agree with Nagaike that for these male fans there is an element of escapism involved. I also agree that this is escapism from hegemonic masculinity which is something that Kimio Ito (2009) confirms as a male fan of shōjo manga that allows a temporary departure from socially enforced masculinity. However, I question Nagaike’s choice of words, particularly, “self-feminization”. I believe Nagaike puts herself in danger of inscribing gender binaries into *yaoi* fandom by describing an interest in *yaoi* as feminine creating a masculine and feminine binary assuming that *yaoi* feminises readers.

Nagaike’s “male-feminization” is similar to Asai’s *nekama* (2010) and is not a desire to be female but rather it is “male involvement in female-orientated subcultural activities” (Nagaike 2013, np). Accepting that Nagaike does not intend to create a binary between male and female but rather to show how men’s involvement in *yaoi* works against an established gender binary, then *yaoi* manga establishes itself as a means for men to question their gender roles in society . In Dai-kun’s comment previously he identifies as heterosexual but brings his subjective position *yaoi* manga and applies it to his own life enjoying *yaoi*’s ability to subvert heteronormative masculinity. There is a similarity to the work on *soushokukei danshi* [herbivore men]. In Japan, some men who do not inhabit traditional masculinity have been called the *soushokukei danshi*, or herbivore men, as a comment on their lack of traditional ‘meat-eating’ masculinity. The term was coined by Fukusawa Maki in reference to men who were seen as slim, unambitious, consumerist and either passive or uninterested in heterosexual relationships (Fukusawa 2009). Similar to the comments of the male fans on *AarinFantasy* there is an opposition to traditional heteronormative masculinity which, just like the herbivores, “exemplifies a[n]...oppositional masculinity” (Charlebois 2013, p.94). However, I would be hesitant to claim that all male *yaoi* fans

can be considered herbivores as whilst both “contest hegemonic masculinity” a point made about those in the Japanese is that they are “disinterest[ed] in sexual intimacy (Charlebois 2013, p.89). Some of the male fans in my research, such as Dai-kun, however have expressed a continued interest in sex and intimate sexual relationships. Thus, whilst both male *yaoi* fans and herbivores express a counter hegemonic form of masculinity, there appears to be a slight difference. Fukusawa writes that herbivores are often not unattractive and in some cases have some level of sexual and romantic experiences, simply what defines them is that fact they are not assertive or proactive. This is similar to male *yaoi* fans as in sexual relationships or everyday life they do not present a traditional form of masculinity but are they not assertive and proactive? While hegemonic masculinity is in a state of flux the emergence of new idealisations of masculinity, particularly in an online environment such as *AarinFantasy*, does not conclude that gender relations are changing in ‘real’ life. As expression of alternative gender online might suggest a counter hegemonic gender like that of the herbivores in Japan, but it does not mean that because it is occurring online that it is simultaneously occurring offline.

As I discuss queer possibilities I am faced with a contradiction. The fans mentioned up to this point have countered heteronormative models of heterosexuality and masculinity. However, there many non-heterosexual fans of *yaoi* who make up a sizeable minority of the fan community. According to the thread aforementioned thread *What is your sexuality?* and my own survey there are many fans who self-report as otherwise.

Some fans on *AarinFantasy* enjoy *yaoi* because it creates a space within which alternatives to heterosexuality are accepted. As one homosexual male fan told me:

I'm gay and I like *yaoi* because all around us there is straight people and at times it's annoying. Like when a commercial has a man and a woman all over each other but as soon as its two guys or two girls, people freak out. I must admit this really can get depressing for a homosexual boy so *yaoi* is like my refuge from all that. (Cyril)

Unlike mainstream media texts, *yaoi* rarely presents the problematic aspects of homosexuality. For example *yaoi* manga often, but not exclusively, lacks themes of suicide, homophobia, or AIDS which are common themes for gay narratives in other media. One fan told me:

I'm a gay guy and I like *yaoi* because it shows me what a gay world could look like without any of the horrible reality, two guys together and no problems being brought their way by their family, friends or society. It probably won't happen any time soon for me but a boy can dream. (Jiyutenshi)

*Yaoi* narratives, which are open to alternative sexualities that exist within them, are valued by homosexual male fans such as Jiyutenshi because *yaoi* offers an affirmative space for same-sex desire. Thus, *yaoi* presents alternatives that do not necessarily exist and the lack of reality is what attracts some of the gay male fans to the genre. Members of the Japanese lesbian community have also pointed to *yaoi* as a means for them to question gender and sexuality also. But if their sexual orientation is towards other women, why do they focus on a genre that depicts two homosexual males? The normative assumption would be that instead of being *yaoi* fans, they would be fans of *yuri*. *Yuri* [lily] could be described as the lesbian equivalent of *yaoi* in which the characters are both female and are in a sexual relationship with one another.

According to Welker, in the process of:

cross-embodiment manifested in writing and reading boys' love manga, the beautiful boy signifies both the *shōjo* manga reader and the phallic power that, through him...[she] is indeed able to transgress, thereby gaining the freedom to explore her own desire". (2006, p.865)

Therefore the fan is able to read the characters as female, but also see herself within the world of *yaoi* and explore “homoerotic desire, either as a beautiful boy or as herself” (Welker 2006, p865). In this way, regardless of whether characters are read as male or female, they can also be lesbian because fans are offered a means to experiment with gender and find a place of acceptance. I nonetheless wondered why so many lesbian fans criticised *yuri* manga. Not being particularly knowledgeable with the *yuri* genre I assumed it was merely the lesbian equivalent of *yaoi* but what I found is something quite different helping me to understand what some fans think *yaoi* has that *yuri* does not:

I think *yuri* lacks a lot of the good stories and manga, that’s why my answer would be that I prefer *yaoi* but I know that in real life I would definitely always go for some *yuri* action, or maybe if I’m just looking for some cheap thrills. I find *yuri* almost boring, it’s just so bland at some points yet *yaoi* has a lot of conflict yet you also have the funny cute parts too. (akumukoneko)

*Yuri* is more for male otaku since it often just seems like hentai manga....I am just not attracted to look for it on websites filled with 18+ advertisements. (akumukoneko)

*Yuri* is described as being for male *otaku* [geek/nerd] and is a form of “hentai [strange/perverse] manga” which is considered a form of pornographic anime and manga. It should not be forgotten that whilst some fans on *AarinFantasy* consider *yuri* to be a genre aimed at men, this hasn’t been the case in Japan. Indeed the term *yuri* was first used by Bungaku Ito, an editor of the gay magazine *Barazoku* [rose tribe] in 1976. The specific term he used was *yurizoku* [lily tribe] in reference to the female readers of a gay male magazine. This difference between what is considered *yuri* inside and outside of Japan has been noted by Erica Friedman in her essay “What are Yuri and Shoujo-ai, anyway?” (2005) noting that in Japan *yuri* is used to refer to the sexual or romantic love between women whilst in the West it often related to explicit

*hentai* manga. Friedman also discusses “*shoujo-ai*” [girls’ love] thus we must be careful with how definitions and terminology are related to these genres.

The fans don’t always criticise *yuri* for being graphically sexual, however, it is seen by the fans as a form pornography whereas *yaoi* is emotionally fulfilling. Realism, or at least something that can be realistically related to, appears to be important:

As a lesbian I don’t really like *yuri*, it’s so thin on the character development and plot and is a lot of fan service with under skirt shots or with those anime and manga tits that seem to defy the laws of gravity and physics, *yaoi* on the other hand is deep, meaningful and fulfilling. Why do they need to be two girls for me to identify with the feelings? It’s not like men and women feel things differently, or that in order to connect with a character they can’t have a penis...that’s so stupid. (MysteryGreenTea)

MysteryGreenTea makes an interesting comment about the universality of emotions, she believes that men and women do not feel differently and as a result why should the depiction of two men limit her experience of the story and connection with the characters. I wondered if this meant that she and others were fans of other genres of manga other than *yaoi*:

Well I guess some are okay and they can get pretty complicated and go on for ages but generally a lot of het manga is so typical, which as a lesbian, I just can’t stand. Girl likes boy, boy doesn’t notice girl, something bad happens, girl and boy fall in love and live happily ever after. The guy is the saviour, even when the girl is clearly more strong and independent...why would she even need the guy in those cases (MysteryGreenTea)

She suggests that lesbian fans have something in common with all other fans; their boredom with heteronormativity. Lesbian fans dislike *yuri* for its *hentai* features and prefer *yaoi* for its deeper narratives. But at the same time they also dislike heterosexual manga, which may also have in-depth stories, because they are ultimately heteronormative.

With the existence of fans with varying sexualities and genders it was at first difficult to pin down a clear commonality between them. Jenkins also provides a wide range of

rationales for fans' pleasure in fan fiction and he is unable to come up with a single reason for why individuals become fans. The existence of a varying motivations for being a *yaoi* fan requires deeper investigation but I believe it is helpful to place it within in the context of understanding how fans use *yaoi* manga to improve, or at least rethink, their lives.

Assuming that all *yaoi* fans interpret the genre in the same way has been part of the approach of many studies' search for the single cause' of fandom. Kamm (2013) writes that this approach is surprising because the authors of *yaoi* manga:

who are usually not professional writers, borrow...characters from mainstream manga or games, redefine homosocial relationships into homosexual ones, and self-publish their stories....[a]s one commercial text is often the basis for many different adaptations, these derivative works can be seen as the physical documentation of individual consumption and interpretation processes, if nothing else. (Kamm 2013, p.2)

Indeed, recent scholarship has highlighted the diversity of the *yaoi* genre and its fandom (Kamm 2013) whilst critiquing the earlier positions largely due to their focus on "only a few well-known titles and their exclusive focus on female readers" (Kamm 2012, p.2) and in addressing these issues they advocate a greater focus on reception and appropriation. This shift in focus in *yaoi* studies reflects the wider shift in media reception theories and an understanding that media preference is a result of social contexts amongst others as opposed to an essential personality type such as being female or heterosexual might has been the presumed cause of *yaoi* manga fandom.

Nonetheless, a commonality that exists amongst the fans' rationales for their investment in *yaoi* is that it offers an alternative to heteronormativity. Whilst the details of their rationales may differ it is the word 'alternative' that is fundamental to their reasoning. This suggestion is supported by the work of Smith (1994) and Cowie (1999) which reconsider the issue of identification to highlight that audiences need not

identify with a character or characters directly but rather than enjoy the overall scene. Perhaps the fans' identification with *yaoi* is "fluid" (Orbaugh 2010) to such an extent that it flows over the entire narrative. Indeed, looking over the fans' comments presented thus far there is little reference to overt connections or identifications with characters rather the attention is focussed on the narrative context.

### *Object of Fan Attraction*

Fans appear to make a distinction between fantasy and reality, in particular there is a greater connection with 'scenarios' as opposed to characters. The *yaoi* fandom is made of a great deal of fans of varying genders and sexualities thus the suggestion that fans relate to specific characters in accordance with gender compatibility is problematic. I am keen to keep in mind the work of Smith (1994) who argues that rather than thinking in terms of 'identification' we should consider 'engagement' as it involves a broader range of possibilities because characters are part of a larger narrative and therefore fans may engage with non-heteronormative narratives as opposed to specific characters.

Smith (1994) makes a distinction between 'central' and 'acentral' imagination suggesting that identification is not imagining the objects as representing ourselves; rather we sympathise with the object. This is what Cowie (1999) refers to as a fantasy about *mise-en-scene* in that our fantasies are not directed towards characters but towards the whole situation and the composite elements. If we apply this thinking to the fans' comments it helps us to deal with the varying connections that fans are making. Indeed, as part of Smith (1994) and Cowie's (1999) movement away from central to acentral imagination, I suggest that scholarship have been overly concerned with defining the bodies of characters as opposed to the *mise-en-scene*.

In the thread *ANYTHING yaoi from SEME's POV* fans raised the issue that *yaoi* often takes the *uke* character's perspective:

I've been thinking and realized that all *yaoi* stories are always told from uke's POV, which is rather boring. I think the problem is that *yaoi* is written in the classical model where girl meets boy/ girl wants to be with boy/ girl wonders if boy likes her/ girl gets boy - only we have two boys in this case. (Suhi)

In response to this common theme the fan Suhi continued by stating that she:

would LOVE to see what seme thinks! And, it really frustrates me to be by default associated with the uke all the time. I'd like to have variability of the options. I personally love how in *yaoi* the roles include dominating and the dominated, I like it that *yaoi* is a rather emotional and less physical genre...I just want to see it all from the seme's POV :D. (Suhi)

Suhi mentions that she likes “variability” and enjoys domination, as well as the emotional, aspects of *yaoi* thus suggesting variable engagement in which it is less that she identifies with characters but engages with relationship narratives. This is supported by other fans' comments in the thread:

It's easy to imagine a scenario from both angles and fill in the gaps almost subconsciously ~ maybe that's why I never noticed the POV always being uke-centric cause it never really was about putting myself in the body of the seme or uke and just enjoying the story and of course the hot sex. (NekoInBlack)

I personally prefer when the story focus at no-special point of view (may start with whatever character) and then shows what each character is thinking and how each face their relationship... That way you can really understand what's going on with both characters and get more into the story that way. It's especially good in conflict situations, then you can really see what both think and make a better judgement about who you think is right (like Winter Cicada or Junjou Egoist, for example). (LadyZeus)

These fans suggest that it would be beneficial to see switching point of views or a third person perspective. In such a case, when attempting to understand fans' attraction to *yaoi*, it is prudent to shift focus towards narratives as fans demonstrate an interest in the whole scenario. This implicates an understanding of *yaoi* that does not find a simple connection between fan and character sexuality. Indeed if we return to Dai-

kun's comments in the previous section and his fantasy regarding "if [his] girlfriend was the seme and [he] was the uke", he comments that "it helps sometimes that the guys look a little like women" which could lead us to suggest that he is making a direct identification with the characters however after this particular interview session I returned to Dai-kun in a further interview and asked him to elaborate on this topic. I asked him if he did indeed imagine himself as the either the *uke* or the *seme* every time he reads *yaoi* or if he changes character points of view:

It's not that I think I am the seme or the uke, when I said it helps that they look kind of feminine I it has more to do with the genderless aspect of it, that they could be either men or women, or neither, but when I talked about the getting dominated by a woman thing, it wasn't that I imagined me as the uke and my girlfriend as the seme characters in any of the manga I've read its more the being exposed to the situation, of a guy being dominated that I like more. (Dai-kun)

Dai-kun comments that the feminine characters have little to do with his fantasy of submission lending his interpretation to an engagement with a narrative in which men can be dominated. The fact that the manga characters in question are being dominated by men is irrelevant as it is not those specific characters but the fantasy that facilitates his attraction to the genre. This is supported by other male fans with whom I spoke:

I don't think it has anything to do with the fact that girls can relate to the *uke* more than anyone else. The main characters that I like in the manga are usually uke even though I'm a straight seme dude irl [in real life] so I'm into girls... but I do not want to be an uke I just like that part of their personality and the new types of stories it creates. (Drizzt101)

Similar to Dai-kun, Drizzt101, who self-identifies as a "straight seme dude" in real life, suggests a disconnection between 'real' and fantasy personality if we are to assume that as a 'seme dude' he means a more stoic dominant attitude in his everyday life but he finds pleasure in "new types of stories". Drizzt101 does not centrally imagine himself as a *uke* character, rather he acentrally engages with narrative in which males are able to express their emotions. He does not raise the issue of sexuality

in his comments and the fact that he does not appear to see his self-defined heterosexuality as a problem supports the suggestion that a fan's interest in *yaoi* is less dependent on an identification with a character that corresponds with their 'real' identity and is rather an engagement with the narratives.

This points to a decoupling of traditional ideas of sexuality, gender, and sex in that we cannot assume a certain sexual or gendered outcome based on either the fans' bodies or their assumed interest in particular *yaoi* characters. Thus, why has such importance been placed on the object of attraction to define sexuality (Sedgwick 1990) when instead we could potentially consider any number of alternative points of attraction? Based on the comments so far a 'real' heterosexual or homosexual identity does not dictate what the fans will be attracted to in *yaoi*. Indeed as Artemis Moonson mentions in an interview regarding her own engagement with *yaoi* manga characters:

I think it's very possible to fall in love with the values, ideals and personality of a *yaoi* character, but to fall in love with a bit of paper? Well, I don't doubt it can happen, but it would be interesting. (Artemis Moonson)

Whilst this claim suggests a more traditionally accepted form of human sexuality, because she questions the possibility to only fall in love with pieces of paper and not a person, it is nonetheless important for understanding fan sexualities because she describes how they can be attracted to the values characters represent as opposed to the characters themselves. I believe this discussion of attraction to *mise-en-scene*, or fantasy can be theorised on further by the inclusion of recent work on bisexuality as an addition to established queer theory.

Some theorists discuss bisexuality in terms of transcendence of a hetero-homo binary in which bisexuality projects a "transgressive nature" (Hemmings 2002, p.5). Clare Hemmings sees bisexuality as a middle ground that is a nullifying space existing between homosexuality and heterosexuality whilst easing tensions between the two.

As part of her discussion, bisexuality is found in a binary space which is made normal by 'real' genders and sexualities allocated as homosexual or heterosexual. Maria Hall and Pramaggiore (1996) state that for bisexual people, the actual identity of an individual does not correspond with sexual acts and, thus, desire is not bound by object of desire (p.3). Malena Gustavson's chapter 'Bisexuals in Relationships: Uncoupling Intimacy from Gender Ontology' in *Bisexuality and Queer Theory* (2012) suggests that "within queer theory the idea of intimacy seems to be attributed to a gendered ontology" or, in other words, "the regulation of gender representation as the point of departure for understanding sexual identities". She refers to this as a "circular understanding of gender as a reflection of intimacy" that is "predicted on monosexual desires" (p.215).

Gustavson (2012) prefers to examine relationships as the focus point of understanding sexuality. This is useful in considering fan attraction to *yaoi* as something that is not fused with 'real' sexuality and gender because early queer theory, whilst critical in its theorisation of heterosexual-queer opposition, often posits same-sex desire as the epitome, or most crucial, form of queer desire. Indeed such approaches place the body as the most important object in understanding desire whilst ignoring the other possible aspects.

In *AarinFantasy* there is evidence that fans discuss their gender and sexuality in terms other than bodies. We can see such a queer focus on gender and sexuality from fans who have posted to a thread titled *Asexuality and yaoi*<sup>26</sup>. A basic definition of an asexual would describe an individual who does not have any, or at least a low level of, sexual attraction. Based on such an understanding the fan Karvajalek, who started the

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<sup>26</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f270/t167206-asexuality-and-yaoi.html> [last accessed April 23rd 2015]

thread, asks others why they like and read *yaoi* manga. Interestingly Karvajalek also asks potential contributors to the thread to comment on the aspect of sex in *yaoi*:

Do you like it, ignore it and concentrate only on romantic aspects of homosexual relationships? Do you even get aroused by reading manga?  
(Karvajalek)

A particularly interesting response to this question comes from Starcomet who writes:

My interest in *yaoi* stems from my fetishes. Since I am asexual and aromantic, I do not find any of the largely romantic *yaoi*/yuri/hentai interesting (which is why I am not fond of the romance genre). But being a fetishist, I like *yaoi* or any material that depicts the various fetishes I enjoy. (Starcomet)

Starcomet writes that she has little interest in sex, or even romance, and as a result does not find *yaoi*, or other genres of manga, that solely depict either to be interesting. However she does describe herself as a fetishist which is intriguing, and is something that other fans in the thread have also argued, because whilst she does not claim an active sexuality she does nonetheless have an interest in sexual acts so whilst identifying as asexual it does not mean that she has no interest in consuming narratives of sex, simply she does not wish to take part in it. This is a point that is also brought up later in the thread by the fan GeoffGem who writes:

I think that we asexuals like *yaoi* for the same reasons that het women do, I think it's more about whom you like seeing naked than whom you would be naked with. (GeoffGem)

This fan makes a very useful distinction here concerning the *yaoi* fandom stating that there is, in his opinion, a difference between whom you like to see naked and whom you wish to be naked with in reality, if anyone at all. In the case of Starcomet, we have an example of a fan identifying as asexual who, nonetheless, has become a fan of *yaoi* manga for its depictions of fetishism. In other words, this suggests that when considering *yaoi* fan sexuality we should at the very least consider removing focus from reality, bodies, or characters' gender and sexuality. Concerning Starcomet, as a

self-identified asexual fan, it would be difficult for us to rationalise her fandom based on her gender and sexuality if she has little interest in the bodies of the characters. Rather her interest is dictated by the presence of fetish acts. In her case, is it enough to try and define her sexuality as heterosexual, homosexual, or asexual or are these terms too restrictive with their presumed focus, or lack thereof, on bodies and sexual acts. Perhaps, as Sedgwick (1990) considers, we could, or should, simply describe her as a fetishist as it lacks inclusion of bodily desire in its definition.

Sedgwick (1990) who, in discussing the fascination with bodies in defining sexuality and gender, claims that not only do people fantasise about things they would never normally do in their 'real' lives, but also that we should not be so focussed on bodies when defining our sexualities going so far as to question why we can't consider sado-masochism as a sexuality corresponding with what Starcomet makes in her assertions. Thus, the fact that her profile says she is female and that she is a fan of *yaoi* manga in fact tells us very little about her sexuality. Indeed it would be difficult to make a connection between asexuality and *yaoi* fans on based on a basic understanding of sexuality and gender using bodies as the definition. One may even ask what one would call someone who identifies as asexual but has an interest in fetishism. Or perhaps, as I assume, that is the wrong question to ask and we should not attempt to define a person's sexuality based on objects of desire. Such an approach is potentially too restricting.

In the same thread, another fan, who identifies as bisexual, supports the idea of not defining one's sexuality based on one's interest in *yaoi* manga:

Anyone can read yaoi. Just open your mind...don't be that close minded and enjoy it. Besides i think that even people that are straight could read [yaoi]. It's all about the story not about being male X male or male X female. (DcStarz)

DcStarz highlights that for many fans, an interest in *yaoi* is not an interest in characters bodies but an interest in the story. This is precisely why Gustavson feels that bisexuality is of such importance when updating queer theory for it “indicates that the object of desire might shift, and gender, as an object choice is not central to sexual identity” (Gustavson 2012, p.216). If this is the case, then what is it the object of fan desire and sexuality? Or is asking about an object too simplistic when, instead of objects, we should be asking about contexts?

Bisexuality “disturbs existing sex and gendered categories” (Gurevich *et al.* 2012, p.44) and has the ability to “reveal and disassemble existing regimes of power and knowledge that shape gendered and sexed discourses” (Foucault cited in Gurevich *et al.* 2012, p.44). I believe that bisexuality, as an epistemology, is useful in understanding fans’ sexuality because it deconstructs sexuality. I utilise bisexuality to rethink subject-object relations to understand the fans’ attraction to narratives. This approach is suggested by Feldman (2012) who writes that bisexuality should not be considered:

a distinct sexual identity with an indefinable content of its own, but a distinct relationship a subject assumes of its own nonmeaning and the limits of symbolic identity”. As such bisexuality underscores the “alternative logic of the not-all and the limits of social constructionist theories of subject formation. (p.81)

In a thread titled *Bisexual people, do you tend more towards.....*<sup>27</sup> a poll was started to ask the members of the forum who self-identify as bisexual about their preference towards a particular gender. The most recent results of that poll are shown in figure 16:

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<sup>27</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f24/t134493-bisexuals-people-do-you.html> [last accessed April 23rd 2015]

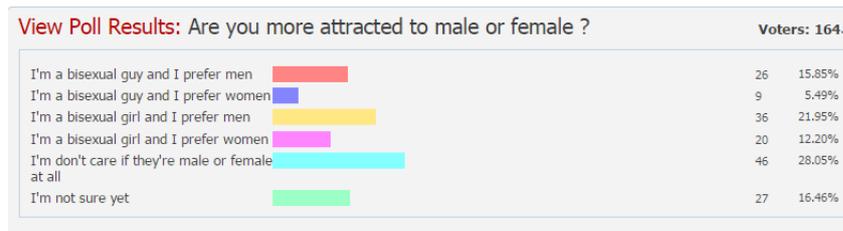


Figure 16: Responses to question about bisexuality

The creator of this thread, ShyDevil has decided that for most of the options available the fans are required to identify as bisexual, either male or female, or with a preference for either male or female. Two other options available counter this by allowing fans to select that they don't care if someone is male or female, or that they don't know yet. On one level the results appear to follow the wider distribution of fans on the site as seen in previous demographic polls on the site in that females responses are higher than male responses and perhaps what could be considered more normative responses are also higher with more girls reporting a stronger attraction to men and more males reporting an greater attraction to men corresponding with the higher numbers of self-identified heterosexual female and homosexual male fans on the site.

However there are a considerable number of responses for those who do not select a preferred sex as well as those who do not know. Indeed, those fans who do not care outnumber all over responses whilst those who do not know are the third highest group. By examining the posts in the thread we can further elucidate on how object choice for those fans that identify as bisexual, or even those fans with an interest in the thread, is often independent of the sex or the body of an individual. I would first like to show some of the opinions given by fans who selected the "I'm not sure yet" option. The fan Temporal writes:

It's hard for me to say. I wouldn't say that I prefer one over the other... even though I think that I find a greater % of women desirable than men because of their personalities I guess, but between two people that I was attracted to, 1 male and 1 female... I wouldn't have any real preference just

based on their junk. Who they are as a person and how we get along is far more important than what equipment they bring to the party :P Maybe I just get along with girls better. (Temporal)

She highlights the point of “get[ing] along” as crucial to whom she finds attractive and does not focus on “what equipment they bring to the party”. Within Temporal’s comments there is a differentiation made between sex and gender as has been defined by Butler (1990). If we accept that gender and sex are ‘real’ things, so far as they influence and guide our lives via their performative nature, then sex would refer to the physical attributes of the body that differentiate male and female whilst gender refers to the repetitive performances of behaviour that make male and female. Temporal’s comments lead us to believe that she is attracted to Butler’s definitions of gender and not sex. Temporal mentions that she prefers women over men based on their “personalities” and that she thinks she “get[s] along with girls better” but this should not lead us to assume that her sexuality is bisexual with a preference for women, or a questioning lesbian because these definitions would require a belief that her sexuality is towards the female sex, something which Temporal denies.

Such an assumption would be the result of a belief that gender, performative behaviour, is the natural product of sex. Butler (1990) explains that this is not the case and that gender does not flow naturally, simply we are victims of our own socialisation and a desire to ‘fit in’. Rejecting this assumption we can say, that as a questioning fan, Temporal assumes a bisexual sexuality but this sexuality is guided by types of behaviour and not the body. In other words, Temporal is more attracted to ‘feminine’ behaviour this does not mean that she is attracted females or that the behaviours she likes are inherently feminine. This open-minded attitude towards bisexuality specifically and attraction in general emerges in both other posts to this particular

thread as well as in my interviews with fans. For example in the thread another fan posts:

I'm not entirely sure....male or female hmm? I mean that I find women and men about equally attractive sexually, but I'm a tomboy and I have usually very little common with most women emotionally and personality wise, and I need my partner to be my best friend, so I'm most of the time emotionally more attracted to men and their personalities. (Allied)

Allied is unsure if she has a stronger attraction to men or women. In terms of appearance there is little difference for her but she does describe herself as a tomboy who, crucially, believes that she has little in common emotionally with women and as a result is more often attracted to men. Allied makes the important point that personalities and emotions guide her attraction, not bodies. Whilst we could suggest that Allied makes a stereotypical assumption that women will not be masculine and men will be, we cannot say that her attraction to men is due to any physical 'requirement' thus allowing for the possibility that she may also be attracted to 'masculine women'. In some cases on the thread the attraction, or lack thereof, to sex's personality can lead fans to distrust:

Females are fast becoming the only people I really want to be around, It's not that I'm not attracted to men, I'll just say it's just getting very difficult to put trust in a guy and that lack of trust is threatening to develop into outright fear. (Pervert Paradox)

Nonetheless, in such cases when an individual fan such as PervertParadox says she is becoming solely attracted to women, but not because she dislikes men or the male body, but because she feels it difficult to trust a man. Indeed, the trustworthiness of an individual is not to be found in their sex, but in their personality as well as in the trustee's experience thus her attraction towards women and lack of attraction towards men is not to physical bodies but to intangible personality and emotion. I propose that when it comes to the fan interest in *yaoi* it is the expressed emotions that are more

important than characters' bodies. For example Yoshitaka Karyu is a fan who selected the "I don't care" option and writes:

I hit the "Doesn't matter" (basically) button. Either male or female, as you never know what package you might end up getting that is the one for you, be it male or female. Love comes in various shapes, sizes, colors, ages, and it really doesn't matter. Love is love, and that is that. (Yoshitaka Karyu)

Similar thoughts to hers are expressed throughout the thread from others who also selected the same option:

I honestly don't care who/what the person is if I love them. Their personality is what matters most to me. If there's someone you love with all your heart, then the gender shouldn't matter at all. (Sarutobit Nanase)

Hmmm, the gender of my partner doesn't really matter to me. The whole 'gender blind' thing is really big with me. I would love to have a boyfriend, but if there's a girl that I like and likes me back, then I could try with her. Ah, basically whichever sex has the person I'm interested in is the one I go for. (Mrs. Sugiyama)

Basically it doesn't matter. If I fall in love the gender-factor is insignificant. Since I'm not falling in love very often my choice of partners are mostly based on attraction. (Calloutyuru)

The fans' comments are both illuminating because they complicate any basic understanding of sexuality. Whilst fans claim a bisexual identity they rationalise this on a basis that they are not attracted to either male or female sex in any heteronormative binary system. Rather they claim attraction to those that they love, that they're interested in, or attracted to, to such an extent that the object of "gender-factor is insignificant":

I think we should all be asking ourselves the question "does it matter?" if we're in the last two cohorts of this poll. For me, it doesn't matter. :3 Love is love, bros. (Usagiko)

Thus these comments complicate bisexuality as an identity category because they are akin to considering bisexuality as an epistemological position rather than a distinct sexuality that has a distinct object of attraction. Indeed there appears to be some

confusion, or at least critical thinking, in the thread when it comes to defining sexuality as evidenced in the following post:

I said bisexual girl and that I prefer guys, but when I really think about it I am not put off by the idea of dating a girl either cause what really makes me like someone is their personality or type, does that make me bisexual or pansexual or even demisexual!?!? I read that bisexual means attracted to both sexes but what if I'm not attracted to either of the bodies and I'm attracted to the personality? (Jyan)

Jyan's awareness to terms such as pansexual and the slight nuance between this, and other terms such as demisexual, highlights awareness that the term bisexual limits their understanding of sexuality. Jyan mentions pansexuality and demisexuality which are characterised by an attraction to any individual regardless of sex or gender or a lack of sexual attraction unless becoming attached emotionally respectively. Without going into the specificities of the nuanced differences between different categories it is of great importance to highlight that the bisexual fans in this and the aforementioned threads deviate from an identity or object based understanding of bisexuality because they suggest that their attraction is not based on biological sex but are attracted to emotions and personality.

Therefore, when explaining fans' attraction to the *yaoi* genre we can, and perhaps should, shift focus from explaining the rationales based on normative assumptions of attraction to bodies, particularly those of the characters, because these have limited explanatory power considering the diversity of the fandom. Instead we can consider the fans' attraction to narrative, emotions, and relationships which can transcend and cut across the varying fan sexualities and genders that exist on the site. This can be seen if we return to some comments from the thread concerning *yaoi* and asexual fans.

For example the fan loulou950 posts:

While I have zero interest in doing anything that actually involves *me*, something about reading *yaoi* fulfils a kind of emotional fantasy. I think

sometimes I'm emotionally attracted to the characters' relationships...I know that none of what I'm looking at applies to me in any way, so the detachment makes it more enjoyable...No participation is necessary on my part. I don't know that I'd call it an actual turn-on because more often than not it doesn't arouse me. (loulou950)

Loulou950 emphasises the lack of connection she has with *yaoi* in terms of the activities that are taking place but she does have an emotional connection. This relates to what Smith (1994) suggests with his preference for sympathetic connection as opposed to emphatic identification. For loulou95, her enjoyment is not found in any direct connection with the characters, in fact the detachment makes it more enjoyable because she does not feel the need to identify with the characters but with the emotions involved in the development of their relationship. This is not an uncommon evaluation of a fan's interest in *yaoi* and has found agreement from other fans who posted to the thread:

I've more recently come to realize that the idea of having sex with other people doesn't interest me...I still do enjoy shipping characters and I can appreciate smutty fanart of my favorite pairings. As for *yaoi*, I'm not actually that interested in the sex aspect (though some people don't believe me when I say that :c ) as I tend to be more interested in the development of the relationship between the characters as they get to know each other better and become emotionally intimate. (Kumoshi)

I find it extremely enjoyable that I can't put myself in the pair's shoes, it almost amplifies my love for the genre. Personally, I feel drawn to the attraction between the characters, it gives me that warm, fuzzy feeling all over. I love the chase, the difficulties they face as a taboo couple, and how love conquers all. (Akiu)

There is a distancing made between fan and text, an interest in *yaoi* is not necessarily an interest in bodies. Moreover, whilst the fans enjoy *yaoi* characters, it would be erroneous to suggest, as a blanket theory, that fans enjoy the genre because they can identify with them. It is perhaps more accurate to suggest that they sympathise with the genre. Simply put, they do not 'see' themselves in *yaoi*, but they understand and enjoy the narratives that they are presented with. If this is the case, then attempting to

rationalise *yaoi* fandom based on strict categories of gender and sexuality of its fans loses some standing. Understanding what fans enjoy about *yaoi* manga should not be based on a simplistic cause and effect model of sexuality and object choice.

Feldman writes that “one way of conceiving of this [bisexual] subject-object relationship would be to suggest that the object in bisexuality serves not to mask the inconsistency of the subject and the symbolic, but to foreground and eroticize this inconsistency and instability” (2012, p.81). The argument that we should accept an idea of intimacy that is not attached to gender and that our understanding of desire and attraction should focus on relationships and not be bound by objects or bodies (Gustavson) leads to a possible situation in which all traditional categories of gender and sexuality are rethought,

#### *A Yaoi Fan Sexuality*

Ang (1985) suggests that it is not the content of a text that gives an audience pleasure but the fantasies that surround the text. In fantasy we ‘try out’ positions without having to worry about their ‘reality value’ (Ang 1985, p.134). Simply put, “at the level of fantasy we can occupy those positions without having to experience their actual consequences” (1985, p.134). This notion of fan empowerment through fluidic engagement is important as it suggests that fans are able to use their chosen texts to reflect on their own lives without having to ‘live’ them out. In terms of the fans of *AarinFantasy*, by consuming *yaoi* they fans are liberating themselves from heteronormativity and traditional definitions of sexual categories and fulfilling desires for alternatives.

However, in terms of the content, the fans’ comments echo closely the work of Saito Tamaki who has written on queer, or what he calls ‘perverse’ sexuality, desire in

relation to the wider *otaku* community. He states that *otaku* sexuality is “estrangement from everyday life” and that “there are many varieties of odd [otaku]sexuality...that could be seen as pedophilic” but “contrary to popular expectations, the vast majority of *otaku* are not pedophiles in actual life hav[ing] the kind of sex lives one would term healthy” (2011, p.228). Patrick Galbraith states something similar in relation to *yaoi* manga fans in “Rotten Girls’ in Contemporary Japan’ in which he writes that females fans specifically, “lead heteronormative lives despite their queer fantasies” (2011a, p.212). There is a distinction between what fans consume within the contexts of their fandom and their ‘actual’ desires in their ‘real’ lives.

As shown by Radway (1984) and Kamm (2013) it is possible that experiences will shape an individual’s media interests and the types of fantasies that they engage with as a result of their media consumption. For example in a thread titled *Not Interested in Normal Straight Sex*<sup>28</sup> the fans of the site discussed their sexual desires which they believe deviate from heteronormative sexuality. The thread was started by the fan OutoFani:

So I’m a girl, and I don't really like being penetrated in the front (i'm virgin but have used my fingers and toys). I'm totally okay with the idea of anal and with a boy I'd love to have some fun with a strap-on. (OutoFani)

Whilst the narratives of *yaoi* manga or the fantasies that they elicit may not be an accurate reflection of *yaoi* fans’ actual lived desires, they may still be understood as a space in which *yaoi* fans can express and engage with aspects of their sexual identities and desires. Saito (2011) argues that *yaoi* fans are not confused in the slightest but in fact have a much more nuanced understanding of the distinction between reality and fantasy and are more than prepared to interact with and consume media in what he

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<sup>28</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f270/t179463-not-interested-normal-straight.html?highlight=Interested+in+Normal+Straight+Sex> [last accessed April 23rd 2015]

refers to as postmodern consumption. I do not wish to go so far as to say that the *yaoi* fans on *AarinFantasy* are more intelligent or culturally aware than those of other fandoms, however I do subscribe to Saito's idea that *yaoi* fans engage with *yaoi* manga in a nuanced relationship between reality and fantasy.

This can be exemplified by a common discussion that often takes place in *AarinFantasy* which regards the issue of rape. Rape appears to be a common trope in *yaoi* manga in which the *seme* character often will overpower and, in some interpretations, rape the *uke* character who, through being sexually subjugated, discovers his latent love for the *seme*. This theme has led to discussions amongst fans about whether rape should be allowed in *yaoi* manga. It is here that a separation between fantasy and reality occurs because the majority of fans oppose rape in reality but when it is present in *yaoi* it is often acceptable. In one such discussion in a thread titled *Does rape in yaoi bother you?*<sup>29</sup> the fan Aritagomina wrote:

The existence of rape in yaoi doesn't bother me at all. Rape has been common in fiction since the greek gods. I recall one where the god snatched the girl while in the form of a bull. How's that for kinky? Bestiality FTW. Having yaoi where rape is pleasurable rather than traumatic requires a suspension of disbelief, but so do all of the "bland boring uke nabs super hotty seme" stories. If it were realistic, it wouldn't be fantastic, and the people who like this stuff like the fantasy. That's the entire point. I like yaoi with magical powers, nipples as sensitive as clits, and guys who shudder from a kiss. Pleasurable rape isn't at all difficult for me to accept. (Aritagomina)

Whilst this opinion does not directly relate to a fan's consideration of their own sexuality it is crucial in its ability to show us that in some cases *yaoi* fans distinguish between what is real and what is fantasy, specifically that certain acts that they would not consider acceptable in the 'real' world are often acceptable in *yaoi* precisely

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<sup>29</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f28/t177136-does-rape-yaoi-bother.html?highlight=Does+rape+in+yaoi+bother+you> [last accessed April 23rd 2015]

because it is fiction and it is this ‘fantastic’ fictive qualities that appears to attract them to the genre.

Vincent discusses what he calls ‘otaku perversion’ (2011). He references key queer theorists such as Butler and Sedgwick and examines male *otaku* in Japan and describes their ‘perversion’ in the Japanese context paying particular attention to its refusal of a distinction between fantasy and reality and an opposition to heterosexual normativity of sexual relations with ‘real bodies’. Vincent translates Saito’s *Beautiful Fighting Girl* and offers an introduction to the work in which he suggests that the beautiful fighting girl, present in a great deal of *otaku*’s media consumption, is “a beautiful girl with no referent in reality” rather she is “a fictional creature in her own right” (2011, p.x) covering Saito’s suggestion that images of female characters can be a source of sexual pleasure regardless of whether they real or not. Indeed, the importance of the *otaku* for Saito is in the existence of a “subculture of which the members have...become proficient fictionalisers of perverse desire, taking one another as their primary audience for their performances of their strong attraction[s]” (cited in Moon 2013, p.149).

Part of this discussion about manga fans’ ‘erotic’ interest in images is what Michael Moon refers to as a “strong disagreement” (2013, p.150) between Saito and Azuma Hiroki who both question “whether, in engaging in masturbation in conjunction with reading manga, watching anime, or playing a video game about a ‘girl warrior’, an *otaku* is performing a sexual act” (2013, p.150). This is interesting because in Vincent’s introduction to Saito’s work he suggests that Azuma denies that “masturbating to a picture” is a “sexual act”, rather it is more akin to “thumb sucking” as an act of compulsion as opposed to an active sexual desire. Saito on the other hand argues that masturbating to images of beautiful girl warriors to orgasm is an important

act that distinguishes the *otaku* from other manga and anime fans. For Saito, *otaku* are often heterosexual “in reality” and are able to have healthy relationships with “perfectly respectable members of the opposite sex” but he places importance in their ability to differentiate between fantasy desires and real orientations (2011, p.30). For him, the ability to traverse between the ‘real’ and the fantastical is what marks the *otaku* as particularly successful, as well as their heightened awareness of the fantasy aspects of their relations with certain objects whether they are ‘real’ partners of texts that elicit sexual interest.

Queer theory is useful in this discussion of ‘perversity’ of male *otaku* as their object of desire contradicts the normative desire for ‘real’ bodies which requires “the self-evident anatomical facticity of sex” (Vincent 2011, p.xxi). However, Vincent argues that male manga fans need to be recognised for their:

expression[s] of an unrepressed and de-instrumentalised sexuality. Whilst most of the male *otaku* in Saito and Vincent’s work may be considered heterosexual by their own accounts, it is important to remember that their attraction to the images of the beautiful fighting girls exists outside of any “biologically determined logic of sexuality. (2011, p.xxi)

Vincent suggests that *otaku* go against normative sexual norms, particularly that their object of desire must have a reference in the ‘real’ world. Saito argues, in defence of *otaku*, that “in the imaginary realm all human beings have the right to be perverts” (2011, p.31), indeed as Sedgwick also writes, “many people have their richest mental/emotional involvement with sexual acts that they don’t do, or even don’t want to do” (1990, p.25) thus sexual fantasy and sexual reality are two very different things.

It is in this sense that I utilise queer sexuality as a form of sexuality that problematises heteronormative social roles and questions assumptions about sexual identity and desire. This form of queering can be found in the *yaoi* fans’ separation of sexual desire

from ‘real’ bodies and identities. Saito’s work does not offer a great deal of information regarding the female equivalent of his male *otaku* however it is his focus on the separation between fantasy and reality that I find useful for a focus on the fans’ sexuality presented on *AarinFantasy* and on which I form the basis of my discussion of *yaoi* fan sexuality. I have shown that in general the fans have a similar connection with *yaoi* manga, specifically its provision for difference and divergence from heteronormativity, both heterosexual and homosexual. Therefore fans have something in common with one another despite their sexual differences. This could suggest that although fans have different sexualities their sexual orientation to *yaoi* unites them. I wonder if this means that we can consider the existence of a *yaoi* fan sexual orientation to which the object of desire is narrative alternatives to heteronormativity as opposed to particular bodies.

*Yaoi* is seen by its fans as a celebration of what has been denied and the fact that the genre depicts two homosexual men is largely irrelevant:

Though we are straight our interests are quite different then what is considered normal and in this day and age you can’t label things by gender anymore....there is just waaaaaay too much gray in that spectrum, y’know? Everybody’s into everything. (Archi)

*Yaoi* fans are consuming narratives that provide for different “ways of being that are marginalized or do not exist” (McHarry 2011, np) and in this way they are creating new ways to think of themselves. Could these varying sexualities, with a similar orientation to *yaoi* manga (because of its difference), be considered a *fujoshi* sexuality that is not so much defined by its ‘members’ sexualities, but by an orientation to queer fantasy?

Thomas Flynn writes in reference to Foucault that shifts in knowledge bring about new ways of thinking which may at times lead to an epistemological break (Flynn

2003, p.33). *Yaoi* manga depicts narratives that allow for new ways of thinking, imagination, and fantasy. A consideration of *yaoi* fan sexuality may indicate such an epistemological break from the fans' pre-existing ideas of heteronormativity, heterosexuality, homosexuality, romance, and masculinity. By reading these stories of homosexual men the fans have been given a space within which they can discuss and consider "new...and liberatory ideas" (McHarry 2011, np).

Indeed, there was a discussion held on the *AarinFantasy* forum that debated creating a new term to describe the fans of *yaoi* which was titled *What are We Called?*<sup>30</sup> In the introduction to this thread the fan jojo1038 writes:

What I was curious about is what you would call yaoi fan girls. I mean are we technically hetero because we still like guys or are we something very new and different because of how we like yaoi and all. I was just curious what anyone else thought about this subject. As well as is there such thing as yaoi fan boys who are not gay and how do they fit in? I'm very curious at how they would be termed as well. I'm sorry if this is too serious for this site. I just thought this would be quite interesting to find out. Should we have our own sort of vocabulary as well? Just curious again. (jojo1038)

The response to this thread's question took two sides; there were those fans who did not agree with the thread creators thoughts that a new term should be coined:

Hmmmm....I don't think we have a different sexuality just because we like yaoi. To me, girls who like yaoi are straight. Same for guys who like yuri...why don't they have their sexuality scrutinised for liking to watch two girls, why is that normal male lust which women can't have for two men? As for guys who like yaoi....they can be gay, bi or straight. I'm a girl, and I like yuri. I don't enjoy the sexual part of it, but I like the more romantic storylines and I like yaoi for the same reasons, I like the romance and how well its done in comparison to all the other rubbish out there, its something different that's for sure but that doesn't make me something different to other girls I know who don't like *yaoi*. (DazzleKitty)

Whilst there were fans who agreed that there was something special about the *yaoi* fans that should be defined in some way:

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<sup>30</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f28/t39315-what-we-are-called.html?highlight=what+are+we+called> [last accessed April 23rd 2015]

To me that yaoi fans are quite a different form of straight. Though we are straight our interests are quite different than what is considered normal. You can find people of pretty much every sex, gender, and sexuality reading, watching, and enjoying yaoi. While straight women do make up the majority of the fandom, they are by no means all of it. I do agree with, that human sexuality is way too complex to try to categorize, everyone is different and likes different things. But I do definitely think there is a difference in psychology between a hetero girl who likes yaoi and one who thinks it's gross. (PeaceLily)

For those who do not agree with a new term, such as *fujoshi*, used as a descriptive category for sexual identity like heterosexual or homosexual, there is nothing particularly special about being a *yaoi* fan. DazzleKitty, for example, compares *yaoi* fans with male fans of *yuri* and she laments the fact that girls, presumably heterosexual, have their sexuality scrutinised for gazing at two males in sexual/romantic situations whilst males who enjoy lesbian porn or *yuri* are considered normal. As a result of this, DazzleKitty does not consider herself special, rather she considers her own interest to be completely healthy, thus a specialised term is not required. On the other hand of are those such as PeaceLily who consider *yaoi* fans to be psychologically different from those who are not fans. In particular she makes a comparison between heterosexual females who are and are not fans. She believes that this difference manifests itself in the fans' interests which are "quite different [than] what is considered normal". She goes on to explain how it would be difficult to categorise everyone in the fandom with one definition as everyone is different and likes different things, but she does "definitely think there is a difference".

I suggest that the two sides can be reconciled and that it may be possible to consider a *yaoi* fan sexual orientation. The answer, I believe, lies in thinking about the fans' interest in *yaoi* as an orientation that is not necessarily based on 'real' or self-identified sexuality nor the gender or sexuality of the objects of desire. DazzleKitty, for example, appears to be arguing from the position that *yaoi* fans of are not inherently different

from those who are not fans. She identifies as a heterosexual woman who has a healthy interest in *yaoi* and that this interest does not necessarily make her distinctly different from other types of fans. On the other side of the debate, is PeaceLily who suggests that they are different, even psychologically different, because of their interest in *yaoi*. However PeaceLily does not suggest that this difference will result in a new type of individual who has a sexuality that is different compared to established categories of sexuality such as heterosexual and homosexual. She does not think there will be a 'yaoi-sexual' identity for example.

A potential reconciliation comes from the base of their arguments; neither DazzleKitty nor PeaceLily believes that *yaoi* changes their 'real' sexualities. Regardless of an individuals' interest in *yaoi* they will remain heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and so on in their 'real' lives, however what makes them unique is their interest in the difference that *yaoi* offers. Therefore, a *yaoi* sexual orientation is just that, it is an orientation towards *yaoi* and the possibilities that it offers in terms of rethinking sexual desire. As Rio Otomo (2010) has suggested in similar terms, "the self that is expressed through reading BL...is a far cry from the self that is determined by the notion of identity" (p.14). Therefore, future research could consider a *yaoi* fan sexuality that demonstrates a fan's preference or taste orientation (Mizoguchi 2008). A *yaoi* fan sexuality would not be considered as a 'real' identity category, but as a way of "living and a utopian worldview" (Otomo 2010, p.15) that celebrates difference and alternatives to heteronormativity.

I would like to close this chapter with a nuanced discussion regarding just how 'queer' we can say the fans of *AarinFantasy* are. Indeed Galbraith (2011), Vincent (2011), and Saito (2007) suggest in their studies of female *yaoi* fans and male *otaku* that whilst they may have alternative desires and fantasies that question heteronormative

standards they nonetheless “lead heteronormative lives despite their queer fantasies” (Galbraith 2011, p.212). Moreover, Galbraith reports that according to the female *yaoi* fans in his study the homosexual male relationships they consumed are “pure fantasy” (2011, p.213) which corresponds with Saito’s suggestion that *otaku* desire is “asymmetrical” and “deliberately separated from everyday life” (cited in Galbraith 2011, p.213).

Related to this is the issue of age and growing older as a *yaoi* fan as mentioned in chapter one. Galbraith (2011) writes that when the female fans in his study grow older and become less interested in *yaoi* manga they are said to have “graduated” (p.227) marking a critical shift in thinking and behaviour which “for *fujoshi*...means the loss of a space for queer fantasy” (p.228) which is similar to what Welker suggests concerning the utility of the beautiful boys in *yaoi* manga because the power that fans access through him is “ephemeral” and “slowly wan[es] as adulthood approaches” (2006, p.865). Adulthood, as Welker and Galbraith discuss, is a key issue here as by ‘graduating’ from young girls to women the fans leave behind their *yaoi* interests for “responsibilities at home and work” which “decrease access to *fujoshi* friends and (rotten) girl time” (Galbraith 2011, p.228).

On *AarinFantasy* there is a thread titled *Why do people leave Aarin or become less active?*<sup>31</sup> in which the fans are asked why fans leave, become less active, or what the reasons are if they are planning to leave. There were a variety of different personal reasons given but what appears to connect vast majority together is in fact the issue of age and growing out of *yaoi*:

List goes on, and everyone have their own reasons....and here is a shocker to you all, some people can get tired, or grow out of BL/*yaoi* anime and

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<sup>31</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f18/t103466-why-do-people-leave.html> [last accessed April 23rd 2015]

manga, and therefore making it quite pointless to stay on a forum that is dedicated to these. (Mordor)

Probably they got bored or fed up with something/someone. Or in some cases their priorities changed, maybe they don't have as much free time as they used to. Endless possibilities. (SexyRyu28)

I, myself, has been inactive for weeks now due to real life issues - I had a very hard time at work, personal issues and organizing many things outside the forum. I don't even have the time to update or do things for the next AarinSecret. I am frustrated in real life issues that I couldn't focus properly or have much time to be online. (Grottenberg)

These comments highlight the fans move one to other things in their lives. I think it is important to pick up on a few of the sentences made in the fans' comments above in particular however. For example, the fan Mordor suggests fans may get tired or grow out of *yaoi*, SexyRyu28 suggests that "priorities" change, and Grottenberg refers to "real life issues". The distinction that Galbraith (2011), Vincent (2011), and Saito (2007) raise, that of fantasy vs. reality, makes an appearance here in some sense, whilst these theorists are discussing the divide between real desire and fantasy desire, the same thing occurs here when fans make a distinction between their activities on *AarinFantasy* and their 'real' lives. The implication being that what happens on *AarinFantasy* is not "real life" and when "other life things" crop up they may soon leave the site as they 'return' to reality. If this is the case, just how radical or transgressive are the fans' activities on the site? Do their queer desires and interests fade into the background once they log off the site and go back to their daily lives? Indeed, these comments from the fans suggest that the activities that they take part in on *AarinFantasy* are temporal, not lasting, and at some point in the near future will be, or are already, losing their influence on the fans who move on to other things in their lives.

This idea can be further examined by addressing the somewhat rigid nature gender and sexuality, as reported by the fans. For example, earlier I introduced some male fans

who expressed desires for alternative forms of masculinity including the desire for penetration from their girlfriends. What is particularly interesting about them is that despite queering heteronormative masculinity, quite often heterosexual male fans are nonetheless adamant that they are heterosexual in a heteronormative sense:

I definitely identify as heterosexual and don't think I am gay or anything like that. Just because I want to try something that I guess most men would think meant I was secretly gay, doesn't make me gay, I'm straight, I just want to be passive sometimes. (Dai-kun)

I am not suggesting that heterosexual male fans on the site are not straight or are attempting to conceal an aspect of their sexuality that may be deemed problematic. Indeed I believe that anyone can be a fan of *yaoi* manga regardless of their gendered identity or sexual orientation but here is the problem, if anyone can potentially be a *yaoi* fan then, perhaps, the separation of fantasy and reality simultaneously both queers and sustains heteronormativity. In other words, simply being a *yaoi* manga fans may in fact say little about a possibility of declaring all *yaoi* fans 'queer'.

As I have written throughout the chapter, *yaoi* fans have a variety of reasons for participating in the fan community, it may be because they identify with certain character portrayals or the larger narrative scene of a particular. *AarinFantasy* members appear to be quite outspoken against the idea that male fans of *yaoi* are typically gay or bisexual, indeed there are a number of threads that discuss this issue in which fans discuss the separation between what male *yaoi* fans are thought to be like and what they are actually like. One such instance of discussion appears in the thread *Straight Guys and Yaoi*<sup>32</sup>:

I think it's weird, yaoi doesnt turn you on? 'Scratches head', I thought you guys were something like a legend somehow, man, it's weird... (Polkagris)

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<sup>32</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f28/t74329-straight-guys-and-yaoi.html> [last accessed April 23rd 2015]

I know some guys who say there are straight but still like [*yaoi*], but for me it's kinda hard to understand that. I don't mean to be rude to anyone, but I can't see this happening. Fine, a straight guy saw a BL anime like *Gravitation* or *Loveless* and thought "ah, that was cool". I'm ok with that, but if that same guy goes around the internet looking for [*yaoi*] related things and likes to read manga where 2 dudes are making out..... I must think he has some sort of homosexual tendency. (Yuu\_chan)

Firstly these comments from some members of the community highlight heteronormative ways of thinking that exist on the site, particularly the comments from fans such as Polkagris and Yuu\_chan who express disbelief and amazement at the fact that heterosexual male fans can enjoy *yaoi* manga, appearing to draw a strong connection between the consumption of homosexual male narratives and a homosexual male fan identity. On another level the male fans in these threads, such as Dai-Kun, often assert that there is no connection between sexuality and an interest in *yaoi* manga, which as I suggest, highlights the queer potential of the *yaoi* manga audience which can consume *yaoi* from any subjective position for its alternatives to heteronormativity whilst simultaneously asserting very 'real' normative sexualities in their daily lives.

This attraction to fantasy as opposed to reality is raised by Galbraith in his discussion of *moe* (2009) which he defines as "a response to fantasy...not a specific style, character type or relational pattern" as they are "removed from context, emptied of depth and positioned outside reality" (np). Galbraith draws on the work of the Japanese philosophers Honda Touru and Hiroki applying their theories of *otaku* desires to the case of *fujoshi*. He writes that "whilst radically different in their approaches, Honda and Azuma agree that...the [*moe*] response is unconnected with 'reality' and thus offers new potentials to construct and express affects" (np). The *yaoi* fans' form of consumption may be connected to a form of *moe* which does not represent a desire on the fans' part to resist 'reality' which makes the consumption of *yaoi* a "fantasy [that]

exists for the sole purpose of play, something completely distinct from physical partners” (Galbraith 2009, np). Simply put, fans ‘queer’ sexuality by separating desire from bodies. However they are not always queering themselves, indeed in some cases they do not aim to be political and therefore, as Yuji Sone writes it can be the case that “*otaku* simultaneously maintain both their actual heterosexuality and perverse...fantasies” (2014, p.208).

## **Conclusion**

It is difficult to construct a universal theory of *yaoi* that accounts for all the reasons why fans enjoy it but it is precisely this fluidity of engagement that makes the *yaoi* genre particularly interesting. In earlier *yaoi* scholarship there have been attempts to rationalise an individual’s interest with a subject-object based approach. This led to theories that women were interested in the genre because the *uke* characters were in fact women in disguise and focused on making connections between the readers’ own femininity and heterosexuality and that of the assumed heterosexual femininity of the *uke* character.

The problem of these approaches is that they base themselves on a hetero-homo binary of sexuality, gender, and attraction which I found did not explain the fans’ own explanations of their interest. For a great deal of fans an interest in the genre cannot be easily explained by their ‘real’ sexualities and genders as it is often the case that these play little part in the fans’ attraction. I drew on bisexuality as an epistemology to support my finding that whilst many of the fans self-identify as heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual, amongst other normative sexual categories, these often play little part in what attracts them to the genre, rather it is the opposition to heteronormativity that they find most appealing.

I further developed this by drawing on theories of *otaku* sexuality (Saito 2011) suggesting my own possibility of *yaoi* fan sexuality. I considered the real-fantasy divide of the fans' sexuality. Whilst an interest in *yaoi* may be considered queer in the sense that it provides alternatives to heteronormativity or by the mere fact it presents homosexual narratives this, for the most part, tells us nothing about the fans' 'real' sexualities. Indeed, despite an interest in *yaoi* some fans still think of themselves as heterosexual, homosexual, male, and female and, as highlighted in the discussion of bisexuality, we need not define our 'real' sexuality based on the bodies of those characters that we find appealing or interesting. Thus a *yaoi* fan sexuality, just like bisexuality as an epistemology, says nothing about the particularly bodies that we are attracted to, rather it demonstrates a fans' engagement with heteronormativity.

I suggest that when we consider fans' attraction to *yaoi* we should not focus on attraction based on an opposition between homosexuality and heterosexuality, but rather queerness against heteronormativity and in doing so emphasise the complex sexual and gender identities of fans. Indeed, the binary categorisations of gender and sexuality have already been imposed on fan practices and while some *yaoi* manga narratives will conform to these notions, such as the seme/uke trope, *yaoi* fan practices that do not fit with this model have been less explored which I have done in this chapter and which disrupt such a model.

Considering queerness in opposition to heteronormativity, instead of homosexuality in opposition to heterosexuality, allows any study of *yaoi* manga to engage with a much more complex discussion of fan practices. Indeed, the internet has allowed this increased visibility of heterogeneous communities that offer alternatives to a broad range of different fans. I have discussed fans of different sexualities and their attraction to *yaoi* manga and I found that despite the fact that fans identify with different

sexualities and genders they all, in varying ways, enjoy *yaoi* for similar reasons, specifically they like *yaoi* for its transgression past heteronormativity. Despite their differences, queerness is something common to them. Fans are queer because despite any differences in 'real' sexual orientation, they look to *yaoi* as a means for difference and as a means to explore alternative sexual and gendered identities.

## Chapter Three: *Yaoi* in Fans' Lives

### Introduction

Although there is a growing body of literature regarding *yaoi*, little is known about the fans' lives and identities. In the previous chapters I examined the demographics of *AarinFantasy* demonstrating variety in terms of age, sex, location, and sexuality. This produced a range of fan types and contexts which affected the fans' relationship with *yaoi* manga and what it meant to them. This raises the question of whether or not the fandom can be examined as a coherent whole. If there are so many different types of fans with varying connections to *yaoi*; is it possible to study a singular fandom?

In this and the following chapter I discuss the role that *yaoi* manga has in the fans' lives. Lee Harrington and Denise Bielby suggest that being a fan "requires not only participation...but the adoption of a particular identity that is shaped through subjective and affective experiences" (2001, p.97). In other words, in order to be a fan one must adopt a fan identity writing that a fan identity is shaped through experiences. In this case, what prior context exists that facilitates the development of *yaoi* fandom? Moreover, if each fan brings their own experiences to the fandom, then it is interesting that *AarinFantasy* has become a crucial means for individuals with marginalised sexual identities and non-mainstream cultural interests to communicate with one another. This chapter will show that *AarinFantasy* not only demonstrates a fan's desire to be social but also articulates the problematic position that *yaoi* continues to hold in the lives of many of its fans. The site enables the safe articulation and discussion of alternative and marginalised fan voices that are impermissible in dominant heteronormative discourses.

I being discussing the efficacy of the term ‘community’ and consider *AarinFantasy* as a unique space in which queer alternatives to heteronormativity may be reflected upon. Following this, I examine why an alternative space is important to fans. In particular, I look at two themes related to *yaoi* consumption: pornography and homosexuality. While I am cautious that such an analysis will reinforce *yaoi* fans as primarily concerned with sexuality and gender, any attempt to understand the value of an online community cannot be made without attention to these topics as they feature heavily in discussions that are both internal and external to the fandom.

The topic of stigma has appeared in fandom studies and Jensen, for example, points out how fans have their behaviour criticised as pathological (1992) whilst Jenkins (1992a, b) and Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) have discussed the stigma attached to fans of soap operas. Issues of pornography and homosexuality have been discussed previously in studies of *yaoi* (Nagaike 2003), however the approach I take in this chapter is to not focus solely on the fans’ individual relationship with same-sex desire but also to include the fans’ perception of what those external to the fandom will think. The desire to find like-minded others with whom fans can share their fandom will be highlighted as a rationale for the prevalence of social discussions on *AarinFantasy* as a unique and safe online fan community. It is crucial not to lose sight of the position that *yaoi* holds as a cultural text in society and the everyday lives of the fans. As fan activities rarely occur alone and fans themselves often feel compelled to talk (Jenkins 1992a, b) it is important to understand not only what fans talk about but also *why* these topics are important to them thus positioning the study *yaoi* manga fandom in a wider context.

## The Importance of Community

Key aspects of community in studies of groups online are shared ideas and interests. Nancy Baym argues that as groups develop, they “generate group-specific meanings [and] new forms of speech, or genres, unique to that community” (Baym 1995, p.151). In other words, Baym argues that a group’s development and use of expressions can only be fully appreciated by its members. This draws a distinction between those who are in the group and those who are not. However the only thing pushing this process of distinction is the common interest shared by the community’s members. Watson quotes a fan in her study who mentions that “take away the music and you don’t have much, to be a community we would have to relate to each other more for what we are, not [just] the music we love” (Watson 1997, p.106). In this case, *AarinFantasy* provides its members with the ability to access information from a collective of other members and to interact with others who share similar interests, however, these abilities do not explain the commitment that members have to their community. In other words, a shared interest in *yaoi* manga may not be enough to define *AarinFantasy* as a community.

A statement that *AarinFantasy* is a community because all its members are *yaoi* fans barely scratches the surface of the importance that the site has for its members. This is further complicated by the fact that fans have varying relationships with *yaoi* manga based on their own life experiences and particular interests. Thus there must be something more than a simple shared interest in *yaoi* manga that forms the community. This is what Watson is referring to when asking about the role of ‘communion’ (1997). What particularly interests me about the quote concerning music fans that Watson

references is that fans must relate to each other not only for what they like, but for who they are.

In the literature review, I introduced my proposal that *yaoi* manga acts as a device as opposed to an object (Sasaki 2013). In *AarinFantasy*, members are assumed to be *yaoi* fans otherwise their presence in the community would be considered strange. However, I propose that the *AarinFantasy*, whilst having a strong foundation based on a common interest in *yaoi* manga, must contain be a deeper communal aspect that maintains continued interaction between its members. It would be far too simplistic to assume an interest in *yaoi* as it does not fully examine the impetus for the community's formation and continued popularity. I will argue that it is *yaoi*'s contextual position as a queer text in the fans' lives that is the communion for the fans community.

I have identified two rationales for why *yaoi* fans join the site. The first is found in the fans' belief that they are similar to one another which supports Watson's assertion that in order for there to be community, there must first be communion. Therefore, I examine aspects of *yaoi* fandom which cut across the fans' demographic and preference differences. There is a deeper connection between the fans which resonates with their lives on a personal level. This is reinforced by the second rationale which regards feelings of loneliness and isolation. The fans feel that they are similar to one another not only due to their age, location, sex, or sexual orientation, but also because many are unable to share their *yaoi* interest with others. I will investigate the causes for this sense of isolation and examine how this links into the overall importance of *AarinFantasy* as a queer community.

*A common yaoi fan identity*

The fans' desire to find similar others is a significant rationale for joining *AarinFantasy*. Sharing a common identity has been identified as crucial by scholars studying online communities and is something that can be reached through interaction (Darling-Wolf 2004) implying that a common identity is the basis for communities to exist. This is particularly the case for online communities of interest (Wasko and Faraj 2000) and practice (Wenger 2011) rather than communities that are founded, or at least dependent, on geographic proximity (Black 2008; Darling-Wolf 2004) as communion is no longer based on physical location within which members will meet one another face-to-face.

*Yaoi* fans see themselves as part of a group of friends on *AarinFantasy* and it is clear that it is their identity as a fan that brings them together. In an interview with the fan Liam Aether, we discussed how he reads *yaoi* and why participates on the site:

There is only one lonely part of *yaoi* for me, it is when I read it alone, I don't mind, I always read alone...but I'm never lonely online, knowing that my friends here are reading it, appreciating it and we can talk about it online. (Liam Aether)

He mentions that he consumes *yaoi* alone as this is how he often reads but also because he cannot find other friends to read with offline. He specifically refers to this as the "lonely part", however he also says he is "never lonely online". Although he cannot find anyone in his offline live to read *yaoi* with he knows that there are his friends on *AarinFantasy* with whom he can discuss *yaoi*. This is similar to statements made in interviews with other fans on *AarinFantasy* such as Misty:

Whether I've spoken to you or not during my long spent time here on the forums is beside the point. We're one in the same, we talk about similar things and know what we're going on about...we're all kindred *yaoi* fan spirits! (Misty)

For Misty, *yaoi* fans are all "kindred spirits" and even though she may not have spoken to all the other fans on *AarinFantasy* she feels a strong bond with them precisely due

to sharing an identity as *yaoi* fans. This is not dissimilar to Anderson's imagined communities (1991) because even though all the members of *AarinFantasy* may not know one another each member of the community feels an almost psychic connection to the others. However, what is it that unites the fans, specifically and what makes them "kindred spirits"?

Against any idea that audiences separate themselves based on their social identities some researchers have argued for "shared perceptions" (Duffett 2013) or "mattering maps" (Grossberg 1992b) suggesting that fan texts are interpreted in ways that are shared by a large audience but which are not determined by the identity of each member. Duffett describes a perception as a common interpretation of a cultural text which cannot be owned by any one audience demographic but rather "float[s] around as [a] discursive resource open to appropriation by a wide variety of audience members for a variety of reasons" (2013, p.68). Grossberg argues that mattering maps help guide fans understand what is important and particular to their fan community thus enabling commonality amongst a potentially diverse group of individuals.

Misty admits that she has not spoken to all the members of the site but refers to a unified "we" thus fortifying the idea that there is a common community identity amongst the fans despite their social identities. The idea of a shared perception is again similar to Anderson's comments as he suggests that in an imagined community members require something that will create community despite not knowing all of those within said community (1991). The idea that *yaoi* manga offers itself as a discursive resource to its fans suggests that *yaoi* manga is free of any exclusive bond to a particular fan type. Thus, we must understand the context of these perceptions or the contexts which make *AarinFantasy* matter to the *yaoi* fans.

Stanley Fish, in *Interpretive Communities* (1980) provides one possible way of approaching this area of examination. He suggests that fans interpret a text as a community of readers suggesting that fans have shared ‘concerns’. Sharing an identity as *yaoi* fans provides a great deal of satisfaction and relief from feelings of isolation and loneliness. Indeed, similar to Liam Aether previously, feeling alone in their offline lives has emerged in interviews as a common issue for many *yaoi* fans on *AarinFantasy*:

Reading manga is a private lonely experience for me until I met other *yaoi* fans by chance online who also told me that they felt lonely...I like to talk to new friends now online almost every day about what I'm reading. (Solene)

I don't know anyone who likes *yaoi*, and nobody knows that I do. I hope I can meet many awesome people here, and maybe make a few friends!! I'm back in a small town in west Texas where you'll never find manga, let alone *yaoi* and where I'm, once more, the odd ball so this site is my refuge when I have my free time. (NerdyMum)

Both mention that *AarinFantasy* as a place where they can “talk to new friends” and “make a few friends” and is ultimately their “refuge”. NerdyMum also suggests that her “small town” environment restricts her access to *yaoi* manga and also she is judged as an “odd ball” for assumingly not fitting in with dominant ideologies. She expresses frustration at the difficulty in accessing *yaoi* manga offline which makes *AarinFantasy* a refuge for her. Refuge, is a key point that I will return to later regarding the necessity for an online *yaoi* community in terms of how the fans feel that they must conceal their *yaoi* fandom.

A number of fans discuss the benefits of *AarinFantasy* for finding friends online which may have been difficult for them to do offline:

I guess being a fan, it can get pretty lonely. I don't have friends that are fans, so it's impossible for me to talk them about the latest *yaoi* I'm reading (because to them, all manga is weird). But I do visit message boards, so that helps wash away that feeling of loneliness. (Craig Orton)

Well it's always been kind of lonely for me as I don't know anyone else interested in anime... but I do feel the need to talk about it with others, and that's why I come to these forums...it's not really lonely thanks to the internet and thanks to forums like *AarinFantasy*... I've got a couple of friends who are into manga but I never really talk about *yaoi* with them due to conflicting interests... but on forums and such there's always people who share your sense in manga. (Airaay Art)

Both Craig Orton and Airaay Art have also experienced isolation as *yaoi* fans. For example, Craig Orton believes it is impossible for him to discuss his interests with offline friends because they will think it is weird whereas Airaay Art simply does not know anyone else who would be interested. Although they mention that they are lonely in their offline lives in terms of having difficulty making friends in general (as is this case with Craig Orton) or in terms of finding friends who share an interest in *yaoi* (such is the case for Airaay Art) they mention that by coming to the site and meeting new people online they are able to “wash away that feeling” (Craig Orton) because there will always be “people who share your sense” who don't have “conflicting interests” (Airaay Art).

Socialisation is an important part of *AarinFantasy* as it provides us with an answer concerning why previous studies have concluded with the idea that *yaoi* fandom is predominantly female and heterosexual. In her 1992 edited volume, Lisa Lewis suggests that “fans are the most visible and identifiable of audiences” (p.1). What Lewis means by this is that fans can appear highly visible at times due to wearing t-shirts, badges, and gathering at large events. Whilst it is true that in certain locales, at certain times, and with certain fandoms, people may express themselves freely, to reduce all fandom to such liberated visual displays is “to confuse a common consequence with an innate cause” (Duffett 2013, p.32). Indeed, Lewis' performative definition of fandom focuses on fandoms that have benefited from wider public acceptance thus ignoring those fans who never ‘come out’ and who pursue their

interest in *yaoi* in private. Furthermore, closeted *yaoi* fans may not be closeted at all; they may just be shy individuals, unsociable, isolated, and cut off from the community of like-minded others.

Many of the fans with whom I spoke mentioned that their friends and family should not, or could not, know about their *yaoi* fandom. In this context *AarinFantasy* serves as a means for fans to identify with others who are not only fans, but also share similar experiences. This corresponds with other work on support in online communities (Gross, Juvonen and Gable 2002) which finds that a sense of loneliness increases the possibility of an individual using an online community to contact those who are not part of their daily lives. These instances of having a sense of similarity with unknown others and then finding friends with a common interest online suggests that many fans feel a strong desire to communicate and connect with other *yaoi* fans. In the absence of similar others within their existing communities and social groups *AarinFantasy* provides a means for the fans to access a community of like-minded others. What this means is that Lewis' idea of visibility ignores those fans who feel that they cannot express their interest publicly in any visible way, indeed, a "performative definition" (Duffett 2013, p.32) of fandom works on a public level that many *yaoi* fans simply do not have access to.

The previous section partly answers the question of why *yaoi* fans choose to participate in a community online. Specifically it explains the rationale for joining but it does not elucidate upon why fans feel cut off from others in the first place. Airaay Art does mention "conflicting feelings" and friends online who "share [his] sense"; I believe these are crucial for understanding *AarinFantasy* as a refuge which I will build on in the final sections of this chapter however I first want to highlight them for how they explain *AarinFantasy*'s role in alleviating fans offline loneliness and isolation. Being

a *yaoi* fan does not necessarily isolate one from others in general, at least not if you keep your fandom hidden. Therefore, *yaoi* fans are not intentionally asocial and do not necessarily have difficulty making friends offline but isolation persists because they have not told friends nor family about their fandom. This may suggest that during the interviews the fans did not want to appear as though they had no friends but it also suggests that isolation does not necessarily stem from a difficulty making friends, rather shyness and loneliness emerge as a result of not being able to share *yaoi*.

Previously, the fan NerdyMum mentioned that *AarinFantasy* was her “refuge”. This is interesting because it suggests that *yaoi* is a safe haven for those fans who question their sexualities in heteronormative regimes. Therefore *AarinFantasy*, and its discussions between fans, offers a supportive queer atmosphere where fans feel safe. Indeed, other of fans cited the fan material as the reason for any feelings of isolation:

For me, this [*yaoi*] is pretty much a solitary activity. I don't really talk about it with anyone I know, especially since it still has a negative images for a lot of people (at least those who have even heard of it)...most I know who I hang out with equate it with Japanese gay porn when really it's just another love story most of the time...except with two guys, nothing that major. You guys on this forum, my buddies, are just about the only people I can freely talk to about it without feeling shy or weird, I suppose you could say it's a little sad really. (Misty)

Misty mentions that *yaoi* is a “solitary activity” but like others she also mentions people that she will “hang out with” suggesting that she herself is not alone and does indeed spend social time with others away from the site. However, in terms of her *yaoi* fandom, she is isolated and the other fans on *AarinFantasy* are “the only people [she] can freely talk to about it”.

According to Grossberg (1992a), the importance of an alternative space for expression, can be better understood in the contexts that the sites arise out of. Similarly, in *Cyberspaces of Their Own: Female Fandoms Online* (2005) Rhiannon Bury studies

online fan fiction communities that are run and inhabited predominantly by women. In this study, a separate space is crucial to the types of alternative activities that are important to (female) fans in a patriarchal society. Bury suggests we consider “an understanding of such cyberspaces as potentially heterotopic in their reworking and transgressing of normative spatial practices and relations” (p.18). In a similar vein to my own research Bury explores online communities that are referred to as “virtual heterotopias” (p.167) in which she argues that thoughts on gender, power relations, sexuality, and nationality can be reconsidered. For Bury, this is critical for a fan fiction community with a focus on slash fiction as a subgroup of fan fiction in general because slash fiction communities produce not only a space away from mainstream commercial fiction, but also heteronormative fan fiction. In other words, Bury is discussing not simply heterotopias, but queer heterotopias.

We can also see from these comments that *yaoi* manga is often seen by fans as the cause for their loneliness and isolation. Indeed, some fans say that *AarinFantasy* is the only place where they are able to find others like themselves and where they may freely participate in the *yaoi* fandom. There is a sense that isolation is one of the traits shared by many of the fans who have come to join the online community. In their case, the internet mediates their imagined community uniting fans across great differences not only due to their common interest in *yaoi* manga but also for the context that it has in their lives (Anderson 1991). However, what it is about *yaoi* manga that makes them feel this way. Why are they unable to share their *yaoi* fandom with others around them, such as family and friends, which then makes the online community and its social discussions online necessary for fans?

The key to answering these questions can be found by returning to Craig Orton and Misty’s comments. Craig Orton mentions that others may think *yaoi* is “weird” whilst

Misty suggests that her family and friends equate *yaoi* and its content to “Japanese gay porn” therefore they are reluctant to share *yaoi* with others, making the online community ever more important to them. For many, being a *yaoi* fan means suffering loneliness and a lack of friends with whom to share *yaoi*. Many claim this comes from being too shy to share their love of *yaoi* with others that they know. When individuals become *yaoi* fans they often have to face and deal with the attitudes of others such as family and friends. As a result of this, fans of all types go online to *AarinFantasy* rather than to others in their offline social groups in order to participate as a *yaoi* fan even if such groups were to exist which, in many non-urban regions, do not.

It is crucial to realise however that the source for the fans’ sense of isolation does not come from any idea of being a *yaoi* fan, rather it is often from how *yaoi* fans think others perceive *yaoi* based on its content. Although fans may experience discrimination and are stigmatised for being homosexual in a heterosexual society, for example, or for being a heterosexual male with desires of being dominated by a woman, these identities are not the cause for why fans hide their *yaoi* fandom from others. For example, Misty’s says, “most I know who I hang out with equate it with Japanese gay porn”. This highlights two key themes of the stigma that fans feel is connected to their interest in *yaoi* manga: homosexuality and pornography. Fans believe many think *yaoi* is taboo and seen as inappropriate by their friends and family thus do not talk about it in public offline. I will now pay attention to the fans social discussions regarding these two topics and demonstrate how perceptions of these simultaneously encourage the fans to hide their interest in *yaoi* from those external to the community and to seek refuge in the *AarinFantasy* site.

## *Stigma*

Generally, the sexual scenes of *yaoi* appear to be one of the problems for all *yaoi* fans' feeling of stigma as well as one of the root causes for their participation in an online "refuge". In this section I will now turn attention to the problematic contextual position that *yaoi* holds in the lives of its fans that transcends demographic categories. In particular I will focus on how issues of pornography and homosexuality mean that fans often feel that they cannot share their interests with others offline.

Stigma attached to *yaoi* is felt to originate externally to community and social pressure compels the fans to go online, therefore it is not always the case that the fans see *yaoi* as a form of either homosexual representation or pornography. However, these topics often fuel the fans' discussions on the site and so offer us a means to understand why this communication between fans is extremely popular and often vital to their enjoyment.

According to Munt:

Shame is an affect that entails communal effort, sometimes shame is enacted specifically *as* [emphasis in original] a collective rite, intended to re-attach those who are alienated to a communal bond. (2008, p.219)

Munt explains that shame is an affect and, in similar terms to Ahmed (2006), does not originate and reside within us. As a brief example, Ahmed asks us to consider the child who happens across a bear in the wild. The child is afraid of the bear, not because the bear is fearful, but because the child is taught to fear the bear. Therefore, the affect of fear does not reside in either the bear or the child but moves between them. It is the context of the child's upbringing that makes the bear fearful, indeed another child may come face-to-face with a bear and feel nothing. Ahmed refers to affects as "sticky"

(2006) intending that certain things get stuck down with specific affects through discourse.

I believe that Munt's discussion of shame can also be thought of in a similar way when we consider *yaoi* manga fandom. As I mentioned previously in a discussion of why different types of fans enjoy *yaoi*, the text itself contains no inherent meaning and can be identified with by different fans for a variety of reasons. However, the fans often bring up the stigma attached to *yaoi*, and how they feel they cannot share their fandom with others around them as they fear the repercussions of such a revelation. Nonetheless, when fans discuss *yaoi*'s problematic contextual position in their lives, the stigma they discuss originates not from the manga itself, but from others' understanding of what that context represents. Therefore, shame, although felt by the fans, does not have an origin in the manga itself, indeed whilst pornography and homosexuality are seen as the problematic themes, the fans themselves do not see them as shameful, rather it is their understanding of what others think. *Yaoi* stigma and the associated shame move between non-*yaoi* fans, the *yaoi* manga text, and the fans themselves which results in *yaoi* being seen as a shameful object.

Moreover, Munt describes shame as something that "entails communal effort" and that it can "re-attach...communal bond[s]". I find this particularly interesting because shame, as an affect, can bring individuals together through "communal effort" suggesting that although it is often understood as a negative affect, it brings shamed individuals together through group recognition. A supporting example of this can be found in the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) community. Members of this community, who also do not share a common geographic location in most cases, are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender. They are joined in a community, not because they share a common sexual orientation towards the same object of desire but

because their various orientations are not normative and so LGBT communities have been formed to unite individuals who share such non-normative sexual orientations. However, one may question to what extent these communities would continue to exist, at least on the political level, in ways that they do now if their orientations were not stigmatised. If, like in many cases of *yaoi*, non-normative sexual identities were unquestioned, then would those who identify as gay or lesbian feel a need to join a community to find like-minded others? By posing this question I wish to convey that the stigma connected to *yaoi* by those external to group encourages fans to go online to find like-minded others as to do so offline is in many cases unthinkable.

### ***Yaoi* as Homosexual Pornography**

Pornography is commonly defined as the depiction of sexual behaviour through either images or writing which is intended to cause the audience sexual excitement. *Yaoi* and slash fiction have been considered forms pornography and discussions over the term can be found in discussions of slash and *yaoi* fandoms. Indeed, within the *yaoi* community some fans willingly claim the term ‘porn’ whilst others reject it. Overall, fans tend to emphasise the romance aspects of *yaoi* over the pornographic (Pagliassotti 2008).

Despite any idea of fluidity of interpretation, there has been considerable debate over whether or not to consider male homosexual fiction as a form of female pornography. Joanna Russ claims that “yes, there is pornography written 100% by women for a 100% female readership” (cited in Bauer 2013, p.49), despite Russ’ disregard for other types of fans that exist within this “100% female readership” her enthusiasm for describing slash as pornography can be better understood in its context of the “Pornography Wars” (Bauer 2013, p.49) which are linked to feminist politics of the

1970s. During these ‘wars’ the discussion on the “relationship between [sexual] fantasy and behavior” (Bauer 2013, p.49), pornography and sexual crimes became important topics for feminist debate.

The fans of *AarinFantasy* often mention that their friends and family do not (if they already know) or would not (if the fan still keeps their *yaoi* hidden) understand their fandom:

Well I tried telling my best friend about *yaoi* and she gave me a weird look and changed the topic. My aunt saw an Aariner's [member of *AarinFantasy*] avatar of two guys about to kiss (the uke looked like a girl) and asked me "what I was doing" in a tone as if she saw me watching X-rated porn. I tend to keep my *yaoi* habits away from the people I know because if they knew what I was reading [I usually cover my books with a book cover just to keep people from gawking at me and I can read in peace] they'd be really weirded out or worse offended. (Pweedie)

Well, I had a conversation with my parents about the viewfinder manga. Not that it was much of a conversation, it was mostly just them sitting there and using words like 'vile' and 'smut' and 'disgusting'. (Shy Uke)

It may be inferred that the fans believe there is stigma attached to *yaoi* and so they feel they must keep their fandom hidden because they believe that others will think it is “weird”, often these fears are not unfounded as many fans often hear friends or family refer to *yaoi* as “vile”, “smut”, or “disgusting”. Fans feel that there is a risk attached to discussing *yaoi* with family and friends and those fans whose friends and family do know about their fandom feel that there is a lack of familial or friendly support, or that they are made fun of/stigmatised for liking what is believed to be porn.

When I asked the members of *AarinFantasy* in my interviews whether or not they thought *yaoi* was pornography I received a variety of answers but overall the belief is no, *yaoi* is not pornography:

*Yaoi* has a storyline, characters and some romantic or sexual content, unlike porn which is just sex with some kind of half assed story thrown in but even that is rare to see. Gay porn mostly goes like this , A meets B then

has sex, that's it no feelings or romance just meaningless but entertaining sex but *yaoi* shows me many other things that I could never experience here in my town and it just happens to be two guys. (Sapir B)

This is an interesting point because in Japan, it is generally assumed that *yaoi* has pornographic aspects, although the majority of fans do not think that it is gay porn (Fermin 2013). The focus of this thesis is an online community that is inhabited mostly by non-Japanese fans and I do not provide a comparison between Japanese and non-Japanese fans of *yaoi*. Rather, the goal has been to demonstrate the diversity of the fandom in this particular community. Overall, the relationship between two men in *yaoi* is sometimes interpreted as an expression of gender equality by the fans. In this logic, the couple “has as much to do with homosexuality as the [American] Civil War did with *Gone with the Wind*” (Jenkins 2006, p.78). The voyeuristic appeal for female fans in general, not just *yaoi* fans, is assumed to consist in an unapologetic heterosexual gaze on the male body. Russ talks about the *Star Trek* slash fiction in which Kirk praises Spock's genitalia as a “beautiful flower, an orchid” (Russ 1985, p.90). Penley similarly emphasizes in “Brownian Motion” that slash fiction would turn men into “sexual objects,” whose “yielding [of] phallic power” functions as a significant turn-on for its female readers (Penley 1991, pp.155-6). However, Russ and Penley in discussing American slash fiction, and Ueno in discussing *yaoi*, appear to be certain that there is a heterosexualisation of the sex between the characters therefore a queer desire of female fans for homosexual men is often ignored, and so even if female fans have an “aggressive identification with men” (Jenkins 1992a, p.198), a possibility for alternative forms of desire is not considered as a departure from heteronormative conceptualisations of gender and sexuality.

I wished to find out whether fans had an interest in ‘real’ gay porn (between live actors) or if their interest in homosexual men was restricted to *yaoi*. There are those fans that

have seen it and those who haven't, those who enjoy it and those who don't. Mueti and Cindy Wu provide the opposing views of those fans who enjoy gay pornography and those who don't:

I've seen gay porn, I guess a lot of us *yaoi* fans think about it and wonder if we'll like it just as much as *yaoi* so I went on some porn sites to check it out, but it's nothing like *yaoi* at all, no storyline for the most part and if there is its just as bad as het stuff, I mean all that straight-boy-goes-gay crap, I don't think a supposed straight guy handle himself so well if it really is his first time. Not that I think it's bad, porn has its purpose and so does *yaoi*, unfortunately porn doesn't fulfil my need like *yaoi* does. (Mueti)

There are some good gay porn out there, I love seeing two guys together and it's pretty hot lol!!!! I'll admit it's not like *yaoi* and I don't like them for the same things...I mean I like that in *yaoi* its two guys but because it's different and has a different slant on the relationship but when its 3d gay porn its more about the hot guys and sounds they make....in *yaoi* its more about the love and the emotion, in 3d it's the dominance and the sex...so yeah I like both but for different reasons. (Cindy Wu)

Interestingly these fans both differ but at the same time highlight a similar point. Whilst Mueti dislikes gay porn and Cindy Wu enjoys it, she enjoys it because she enjoys viewing two men together in sexually explicit situations, however this does not correspond with why she likes *yaoi*. Both like *yaoi* for the difference that it provides them away from heteronormativity. Both accept that real (what Cindy Wu refers to as 3d) gay porn does not serve this need even though it may serve other desires such as Cindy Wu's desire to gaze upon two men. While *yaoi* may seem simply to be about gay sex, the *yaoi* fans themselves don't necessarily view it as such. In other words, the purpose of *yaoi* for some fans is not simply to induce sexual arousal.

A worthwhile topic to include on a discussion of the pornographic elements of *yaoi* concerns *Redisu/Redikomi* known as Ladies' Comics in English. Ladies' Comics emerged in the late 1980s out of the *shōjo* manga genre (King 2011, p.26). These comics are known for their "graphic sexual descriptions and images that frequently

depict women being sexually hurt, beaten, or humiliated” (Jones 2005, p.97). Like *yaoi*, these comics are also written by women for other women, but, due to their depictions of women suffering sexual harm, have given the impression that they are created by and for men. Anne Allison, in *Permitted and Prohibited Desires: Mothers, Comics and Censorship in Japan* (1999) equates Ladies’ Comics to *ero* [erotic] manga made for men with straightforward pornographic intent (p.185). Deborah Shamoan explains that Allison’s understanding of Ladies’ Comics is based on her “Freudian model of phallogentric power and desire” (2004, p.80) which leads her to view sexualised depictions of women, using a “phallogentric gaze” (2004, p.80), as all the same. However, such views are criticised as too simplistic and for their failure to explain why women continue to read Ladies’ Comics if they are pornographic manga for men. Shamoan, for example, criticises Allison’ reliance “on a psychoanalytic theory of spectatorship...which leaves no possibility of female spectatorship” and asks “is it really impossible for women to take pleasure in looking at other women” (2004, p.95).

Japanese critics such as Fujimoto and Fusami Ogi have examined Ladies’ Comics and offered their own insights. Fujimoto (cited in Jones 2005) argues that Ladies’ Comics are a means for women to express their sexuality and draws a connection between the violence that is depicted and the female fans’ desire to explore their sexuality. Ogi also argues that Ladies’ Comics provide women a “subjective position for their sexuality and pleasure” and “show women who enjoy their sexual affairs in a forum that is more age appropriate for both women writers and readers than...*shōjo manga*” (cited in King 2011, p.28). As a result, “looking at ladies’ comics only in terms of porn for men can in fact lead to confusion” (Shamoan 2004, p.82). Shamoan explains that the difference between porn for men and ladies’ comics is the “strong fantasy elements”

that she also says are present in *yaoi* manga. In men's pornographic manga, the female body is used for enjoyment and male heterosexual gratification whereas in Ladies' Comics, like *yaoi*, the body is presented as a fantasy device "which can prove empowering" (2004, p.86) and "encourage strong identification...and demonstrate ways in which women can express and act on their desires" (2004, p.89). Thus, Ladies' Comics exemplify what manga scholar Fujimoto Yukari deems a "powerful means for the female character to access her own sexual desire" (cited in King 2011, p.29).

I did find that some fans considered *yaoi* pornographic as they believe that any form of sexual depiction to be a form of pornography whereas others like Mueti suggest that it is absolutely not pornography and they sometimes "find it offensive when people say that it is porn" because "it is so much more than that" (Mueti). However even when fans such as Mueti and Cindy Wu deny that *yaoi* is form of pornography there will always be certain titles that do not fit the general *yaoi* description such as those known as 'one-shots' which have little to no dialogue and feature graphic depictions of sex. These are considered "blatant porn" (Mueti) and for some fans such as Mueti are not considered *yaoi* at all.

One of the most popular theories concerning why women are fans of *yaoi* was initiated by Japanese feminist scholars in the 1990s. Ueno argues that female fans are able to experience freedom and liberation which they are restricted from in their everyday lives as women. As a result of this they relate to the male characters in the *yaoi* texts (Ueno 1998, p.127). This identification with the male characters on the part of the female fans is made possible because of the aforementioned androgyny of the characters (McLelland 2000a) which Ueno has called an "idealised personification of [the female] self" (1998, p.131). A similar argument has been made by Nakajima Azusa who argues that the female *yaoi* fans are able to escape 'sexual inferiority' by

making associations with the *uke* character. For Matsumura Eiko however, the characters in *yaoi* are neither man nor woman, thus disrupting the normative ideas of gender and sexuality which allowed the readers to escape these restrictive notions altogether (cited in Sasaki 2013, p.7). Indeed, in some cases the characters have been read as androgynous, in that although the depiction of the characters' physiology makes them undeniably male, their faces, body frames, and personalities are female (Nagaike 2003).

If male homosexual texts are porn by and for women as argued by some feminists such as Russ (1985), may we call it gay porn because the characters are gay men regardless of the audience? On the other hand *yaoi* critics such as Ueno suggest that *yaoi* is about identification and seeing the female in the male, and is therefore not about the female's gaze on a sexualised male body. Thus, which argument should we follow? My answer would be neither, or both, because it is the wrong question to ask. The pornography debate when it concerns *yaoi* and slash applies an inherent meaning approach to the text leaving out the fans' own interpretations. The focus of this discussion therefore is not to define what is considered pornographic and what is not, rather we must also consider the reaction to what *yaoi* fans think others will consider pornography. For example, while the fans do not believe that *yaoi* is a form of pornography they are aware of the potential for *yaoi* to be seen as such. Thus, whilst fans may not see *yaoi* as pornography, this does not mean that stigma will disappear as such an affect is "sticky" (Ahmed 2006) and cannot be easily removed.

It is worth examining the wider cultural position of *yaoi* manga at this point. As part of this discussion I will consider the social and legal position of *yaoi* manga both in Japan and abroad, particularly in countries where *yaoi* has come into contact with censorship laws such as in Australia (McLelland 2010) and Canada (Zanghellini 2009).

Whilst the term *yaoi* in this thesis is being used as a general term it should be remembered that distinctions can be made between *yaoi* and Boys' Love with the former being more sexually explicit whilst the later, being used more often in Japan, tends to favour the less explicit. Because *yaoi* is often seen as having an "overwhelmingly female" audience (Mizoguchi 2003, p.65) the oft assumed pornographic nature of the series may seem surprising to those less familiar with Japanese culture because despite the fact that most assume pornography to be primarily aimed solely at a male audience, in Japan there are various forms of print media that are created by and for women which can often be sexually explicit leading Gretchen Jones to suggest that "in Japan, visual pornography is not for men only" (2003, p.5) and *yaoi* is "an example of narrative pornography directed at female readers" (2003, p.77).

The fact that such sexual content is available to readers may seem strange to non-Japanese audiences because "pornography has not been as strongly compartmentalised in post-war Japan as it has in post-war America or Britain" (Jones 2000, p.136). Indeed, in Japan, censorship laws are extremely specific regarding explicit depictions of genitalia but rather unclear about anything else and generally allow a wide range of sexual activities so long as genitals are not depicted. Similarly Japanese laws regarding child pornography only go so far as ban depictions of 'real' children leaving the depiction of fictional anime and manga characters legally ambiguous (Schodt 1983, p.136). The depictions in *yaoi* can often be considered pornographic and explicit despite often circumventing censorship laws in Japan, as Mizoguchi suggests many of the stories involve depictions of "rape as an expression of love" (2003, p.56) and because the characters often appear young in age "these illustrations and stories...can be classified as child-abuse publications" and because "*yaoi* is characterized by its

emphasis upon sexual scenarios and interactions...this form of expression cannot avail itself of any artistic merit clauses” (McLelland 2005, p.14).

McLelland writes about the San Francisco *yaoi* convention as evidence of the perceived pornographic nature of *yaoi* manga as “registration at the conference is open only to those over the age of 18, and...the translated boy-love novels feature Explicit Content warnings restricting them to readers 18 and over” (2005, p.16). He suggests that “as its visibility increases, concern about the genre is growing” (2005, p.16) and cites that in America some librarians and book sellers had refused to make *yaoi* available for fears concerning the nudity, sex, and violence that the genre often features which they felt would “make it inappropriate for teen readers” (2005, p.16).

In terms of its socio-legal position McLelland examines *yaoi* manga’s standing in Australia (2010) stating that in 2007 “the Australian Labour Party...intended to introduce legislation that would require ISP’s to offer a ‘clean feed’ internet service” (p.2) which as child sexual abuse imagery as its “primary target” (p.3). In relation to his discussion of *yaoi* manga, McLelland writes that the legislations terms, including ‘child sexual abuse imagery’ is “an extremely broad category that extends even to purely fictional representations of ‘under-age’ characters” (p.3) and as a result, legislation not only tackles those dealing in images of actual children, but also those *yaoi* fans “whose activities...would be classified in Australia as ‘child abuse publications’” (p.3).

Indeed, the artistic conventions of manga and anime in general which favour characters who “may appear to be under age 18...becomes a problem for Australian fans when these fantasy characters are placed in violent or sexual scenarios (McLelland 2010, p.6) which is supported by the fact that in 2008 the Australian Judge

Michael Adams convicted an individual for possessing “child pornography material” in the form of characters from *The Simpsons* (McLelland 2010, p.7) in which case the plaintiff appealed, but lost, on the grounds that characters from *The Simpsons* could not be described as people due to their fictional nature. It is for these reasons, McLelland writes, that “it is Australian scholars who have focussed specifically on the problematic nature of the representations” of *yaoi* manga characters as opposed to nature of the sex acts only (McLelland 2010, p.8). It may be argued that whilst *yaoi* manga can be sexually explicit featuring youthful characters, the fan does not contain stories that are meant to represent ‘real’ people. Indeed, on *AarinFantasy* the fans have expressed displeasure regarding stories that could potentially feature underage individuals or even real gay pornography.

Similarly, McLelland (2010) writes that in some contexts, *yaoi* manga is not necessarily a problem for the fans, but can also be a contentious issue for those scholars examining the genre. He writes that “under current legislation it is extremely difficult for an Australia0based academic to study [*yaoi*] fandoms since it is impossible to know in advance whether in the course of the research the researcher may be exposed to illegal material” and that in the case of one of his PhD students, “all the necessary exemptions have not been forthcoming and we have received contradictory advice from federal and state authorities” (p.13). Wood (2013) also examines “how Boys’ Love fans in Japan and other countries often operate in contradictory tension with and against anime industries and socio-cultural values as they access” (p.44). Wood takes a stance that *yaoi* “narratives are not simply queer because they depict homoerotic love stories between men, but rather because they ultimately reject any kind of monolithic understanding of gendered or sexual identity” (Wood 2006, p.397). She writes that in convergence culture, anime and manga

producers have noticed their global audiences and are cultivating “niche genres” that are expanding daily which has led to “both positive and negative effects” on the genre (Wood 2013, p.46) such as “greater mainstream attention...that seek[s] to regulate and censor access to erotic media deemed ‘deviant’”(2013, p.46). Indeed, the wider public attention that *yaoi* has earned has led to those outside of the fan community in societal leadership roles to “censor and regular Boys’ Love texts for people of all ages – making the consumption of and participatory culture around Boys’ Love narratives in these contexts more deeply politicized” thus “fans in Japan and other countries often operate in tension with...socio-cultural values as they access, consume and create around a form of homoerotic media that they do not want to assimilated into mainstream culture (2013, p.46).

Some fans have a vested interest in not seeing their fandom become public knowledge, especially by non-fans who can be critical of its narratives and depictions. As *yaoi* manga depicts homosexual narratives, often in sexually explicit forms the fans can see their communities come under threat. Similarly to McLelland’s examination of Australian fandom, Wood has also examined the legal particularities of *yaoi* manga fandom in America which “could potentially come under legal scrutiny under the United States’ PROTECT Act (which stands for Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to end the Exploitation of Children Today)” (2013, p.50) which aims to protect ‘real’ children from exploitation but also “outlaws computer generate images, drawings, and sculptures that show a minor in an obscene position or engaged in a sex act” (Strickland cited in Wood 2013, p.50). It is for this reason that Wood believes *yaoi* fans may become victims of the PROTECT Act and some cases certainly suggest this as in 2005 the site *Yaoi Shrine* was forced to close after the mother of a 12 year old girl found her daughter browsing the site. According to Strickland, “when the mom

discovered that [the creator] worked at a junior high school in real life, she contacted the police, the school board, and the PTA. The site vanished, and [the creator] disappeared as a visible online presence” (cited in Wood 2013, p.50). Indeed, *yaoi* manga artists and fans have also experienced this type of pressure and social policing as “through centralized public gatherings such as Comic Market, the possibility of attracting unwelcome notice increased, resulting, in recent years, in arrest and last-minute cancellations of planned conventions” (Orbaugh 2003, p.114).

As introduced earlier, there is a growing number of countries which have instigated processes to police and control sexual images in manga and anime with efforts being carried out in Australia (McLelland 2005), Japan (McLelland 2011), Indonesia (Abraham 2010), and Canada (Zanghellini 2009) which demonstrate the every growing risk that *yaoi* fans place themselves in by continuing their fandom and access websites that depict images that may be problematic. This kind of environment is indeed making it much more difficult for fans to access material openly or, in some cases, legally leading a great deal to take their activities online, often hidden from families and friends who may also view these images as problematic. Wood states that such censorship efforts on the part of governments has begun to “affect the attitudes and behaviours of consumer retailers” such as Walmart which in 2007 “pulled original English language Boys’ Love manga that it had been selling on its website after the online blog The Consumerist announced they were selling pornography”, similarly, “in 2012, the North American manga publisher Digital Manga Press...announced on Twitter that Apple asked that *yaoi* titles be removed...saying it was ‘an issue regarding mature scenes” (Wood 2013, p.50).

As these examples demonstrate how retail companies have distanced themselves from manga due to its erotic nature we can understand why fans in *AarinFantasy* see *yaoi*

as problematic in the sense that it may not be viewed favourably by those who are not fans. Whilst legal action has not been taken against these companies (Wood 2013) they have nonetheless taken the initiative in avoiding any scandal by complying with request and pulling *yaoi* manga from their stores potentially promulgating the stigmatic nature of *yaoi* manga and perpetuating any negative connotations associated with it. This is also not a problem related to offline retailers, commercial fan sites also appear to be following suit. Sites such as *Hulu* and *Crunchyroll* that offer streaming services for licensed anime only offer a small selection of *yaoi* titles of which none are from the 1990s or any of the more recent *yaoi* specific series such as *Junjou Romantica*.

A great deal of the legal attention that *yaoi* manga has attracted has indeed been focussed on the visual representation of the characters, however, other efforts have also targeted the homoerotic nature of the genre. Canada, for example, “has been one of the more extreme examples of this with its long record of targeting and seizing LGBTQ literature and media as ‘obscene’” (Wood 2013, p.51). As a result of this cultural context that *yaoi* finds itself in, particularly outside of Japan, it does not seem surprising that many *yaoi* fans on *AarinFantasy* wish to hide their interest from those around them unless they can be sure they would be accepting or at the very least tolerant of the text. It is also not surprising that they elect to participate in an online community if they were to feel any discomfort in accessing *yaoi* manga offline by entering a shop or attending a convention. Indeed, before the proliferation of the internet and digital media the fans would have been much more restricted in terms of accessibility and dependent on producers and distributors, either legal or illegal, for their access to this potentially problematic text. However, now fans can access such material readily online and meet with other fans to share and discuss *yaoi* with one

another. Indeed, for many *yaoi* manga fans it seems that existing offline retailers are not meeting their demand due to socio-legal reasons whilst at the same time socio-cultural norms and values are labelling them as deviant or problematic due to their homoerotic content.

The fans on the site do have a perception of wider public opinion in terms of *yaoi*. I intentionally use the term ‘perception’ to indicate that in some cases the fans’ fears are without proof. However, the fact that fans are nervous about revealing *yaoi* in public is very real and in some situations are very self-conscious about their activities. For example, in a thread titled *When buying yaoi manga at shops...*<sup>33</sup> the fan Ninjalovergirl asked:

When buying yaoi manga at shops do the people on the till ever look at you weird? Since there are 4 volumes of the manga I like all they had to do was look at the title and I had THAT look 4 times!!! (Ninjalovergirl)

In this thread there is a common response from the others that for the most part they don’t receive any strange looks from shop assistants because “they care more about the green [money] than what you buy” (Suracis) but nonetheless the fans have reservations about purchasing *yaoi* manga in public, regardless, of whether or not they believe those selling to them will care. It is as though these fans have internalised an opinion that *yaoi* is somehow shameful. On the one hand it is understandable why an individual may feel embarrassed purchasing *yaoi* in a face-to-face setting, but as other posters mention, in many cases the people working the shops often don’t know what *yaoi* is and as the front covers are often not explicit then often there would be no raised eyebrows. On the other hand, if this is the case, where have the fans’ fears come from? In many instances the shame may be borne from perceptions of homosexuality and

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<sup>33</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f28/t26627-when-buying-yaoi-manga.html> [last accessed April 23rd 2015]

pornography from friends and family members that fans have experienced or believe they would experience. However there is a further source of marginalisation that contributes to the fans' concerns and this is the wider anime and manga fan community. One might expect that as part of the wider manga community, *yaoi* fans may feel themselves better placed to purchase *yaoi* in specialist anime and manga shops where a more accommodating and sympathetic atmosphere may be found, however this is not always the case in and in some instances even here the fans face difficulty, perhaps more so than in general retail outlets as in these places, other fans and specialist shop keepers may be more aware of what *yaoi* is. For example, in the same thread a fan named Kirie writes:

Yes, I feel embarrassed when I buy mangas... anyway, the only clearly shounen-ai [yaoi] manga that I buy is Fake.... and I try to not to make much noise... I enter the manga store... look at all the mangas they have (even though I know what I'm going to buy and where it is... maybe I like to torture myself looking at mangas I would love to have)... the boy in charge ALWAYS asks me "may I help you?" and I'm just like "oh, no, no, I'm just looking, he then I take the book and walk fast to pay it.... I feel very uncomfortable. (Kirie)

Thus even in manga specialist bookshops fans can feel ashamed, embarrassed, or “very uncomfortable” because they believe others will be judgemental. I believe this issue can be expanded upon by considering issues of inter-fandom policing (Busse 2013; Zubernis and Larsen 2012) and, perhaps, also intra-fandom policing and using examples from the forums and interviews in which fans discuss their experiences of other manga fans' perception of *yaoi*, particularly at conventions and amongst friends. When I spoke to fans who have had the opportunity to attend anime and manga conventions there was a common belief that non-*yaoi* fan attendees would look down upon the *yaoi* fans:

I remember going to a convention here in the Netherlands once and the yaoi section was so small, literally just one booth with a few people hovering around. You can guess that it's not that popular compared to the other booths and you could see people just looking at them with a weird look (Diepenhorst)

My town has never had a Yaoi-Con because my town does not have a fan base large enough to warrant such an event but there was a place to buy yaoi dojinshi at one anime and manga con I travelled to and there were some people looking but the way they reacted told me that they weren't fans so I avoided, I don't want to be that 'perverted lady' (NerdyMum)

In these cases the fans have witnessed how fans of other genres of manga have reacted to *yaoi* at some conventions and how other *yaoi* fans, or the fans themselves have reacted to such instances either by seeing how others give “weird look[s]” or by creating an atmosphere that deters the fans from announcing their *yaoi* interests at a convention by purchasing materials. Moreover, in a thread titled *Do you wear yaoi related stuff* a group of fans discuss whether or not they wear paraphernalia related to their fandom such as t-shirts or badges. Many of those posting said they do not wear anything giving little indication as to why they chose not to however the latest post to thread by the fan enjoiPANDAS wrote that:

People are make going to make snap judgments about you whether you want them to or not. I would MUCH rather tell someone about my yaoi affinities at a con while wearing a nice outfit then the opposite. It gives out the message that...you can dress completely normal and be normal and thus proving your yaoi interests can also be normal. Yaoi isn't "weird" but if you look conventionally weird then people will lump your interests in with it. There's a time and place for everything just as there's a tactful way to go about anything. (enjoiPANDAS)

In this case, enjoiPANDAS mentions that at conventions, often referred to simply as ‘cons’ she prefers to “dress completely normal” as opposed to wearing a *yaoi* paraphernalia in order to give an appropriate message about both herself and her to

normalise *yaoi* manga. In another post on the same thread a fan details a case of a *yaoi* booth suffering complaints from other attendees at the convention he attended:

Twice at the main anime con here a few years sago, there was a vendor selling all sorts of *yaoi* DVDs (ranging from *Kyou Kara Maoh!* to *Sensitive Pornograph*) and manga (again, all sorts of ratings) and it was amazing! But we heard some people, mainly guys I think that complained about supposedly weird things being at a con that was supposed to be family friendly. (kawaroFanboy)

His use of the word ‘supposedly’ suggests that he does not believe that *yaoi* is an adult text, similar to how enjoiPANDAS does not believe that it is weird, however in both cases they are aware of how other attendees would perceive *yaoi* and have adjusted their behaviour to compensate such as by wearing “nice outfit” which gives no overt indication of their fan preferences. These are useful examples in understanding inter-fan policing and how the wider fan community can judge and critique fandoms that exists within their wider community. However this is also an indication of intra-fan policing in the case of enjoiPANDAS’ comments as she is giving advice to others concerning how to act in such a way that would not draw attention to themselves. Her comments are indicative of her belief that fans who display *yaoi* paraphernalia will appear ‘weird’. Thus, whilst she may not believe that *yaoi* is strange she is making a critique on certain fan activities that may be detrimental to an individual’s self-presentation in public.

Evidence of what is at risk for the fans of *yaoi* manga in the consumption of a text that is often considered to contain sexually explicit material can be related to how one makes a distinction between what is pornography and what is erotica. Jane Juffer in *At Home with Pornography* (1998) suggests that how erotica attempts to distinguish itself from pornography is via an aesthetic argument that “erotic is complex, concerned

with developing characters and plots in a manner that shows the struggle between mind and body, eventually resolving it; pornography is predictable, stock, concerned solely with bodies and penetration” (p.114). She goes on to suggest that “erotica has provided a way for women to explore, under the legitimating auspices of aesthetic discourse, the many different ways to reconcile reality and fantasy, the everyday and the erotic” (p.105). Wood (2013) suggests it is difficult to claim *yaoi* manga as erotica due to it being a “visual media” (p.58) and she supports this claim by highlighting the example that in 2012 Digital Manga had its account on the Amazon website suspended for ‘content violation’ that “infringed upon their guidelines against ‘Pornography and hard-core material that depicts graphic sexual acts” (p.58). The company Digital Manga attempted to claim that *yaoi* manga was erotica and not pornography and explained that there was no clear definition between the two but Amazon nonetheless rejected their claim.

In order to escape the complicity of being seen as viewers of pornography Nagaike suggests that women created the world of *yaoi* so that they had a means to avoid the “disadvantages of exposing their eroticism” (2003, p.180). By doing so, Nagaike argues that women could escape the male gaze by projecting the sexual act on to another male thus eliminating a relation emerging between reader and women-as-object in heterosexual pornography. In this way:

female readers are liberated from feelings of guilt and shame connected with deriving sexual excitement from their identification with the....objectified female characters. (Nagaike 2012, p.114).

This, Nagaike argues, explains how female readers develop a:

balanced status of identifying with the protagonists, and at the same time dissociating themselves from them....thereby achieving a safe and comfortable involvement with the pornographic. (Nagaike 2012, p.114)

Nagaike suggests that fans, specifically female fans, are able to project their sexual desires onto the male characters in *yaoi*. For her this suggests that the power *yaoi* provides the fans is “access to the phallus” (Nagaike 2003, p.87). I agree with Nagaike’s argument that it is possible for female fans to disassociate themselves from the guilt of viewing porn by consuming *yaoi* because the direct link between female viewer and passive female object is disrupted through the use of fictional male bodies. But this does not resolve the issue of why some fans still feel shame about viewing *yaoi* and it also ignores other types of fans. For example, can gay male fans still resolve issues of pornography in the same way that female fans do if their bodies are male, just like the characters that are represented? Indeed, what about straight male fans who identify with gay male characters? Ultimately Nagaike’s argument rests on the reader-text relationship suggesting that a fans inner guilt with viewing pornography can be resolved via the use of two male bodies but rarely is an individual’s shame limited to their own relationship with *yaoi*, often, as I will show, many fans are acutely aware of what others will think about their interest in *yaoi*.

Discussion on whether or not to call *yaoi*, or even slash, a form of pornography needs to focus on what the fans themselves believe. The user LawlietsLullaby created a blog entry titled *Are You Ashamed?*<sup>34</sup> In which she discusses others’ reactions or attitudes towards *yaoi*:

I think I'm ashamed to tell anyone I read *yaoi*....I guess it's like telling people you read p0rn...because to people who don't watch *yaoi*, they think it's nothing but sex all the time. It's more like a love story... Unless in the right crowd, like when I used to be a part of my college anime group, everyone else I knew would make snide remarks and see it in a negative light. Especially amongst guys, it was okay to talk about porn and the sites they went on, but anything, even slightly related to *yaoi* came up in conversation the first thing that was said was 'butt sex'. Then their comments would get more ridiculous by the second. (LawlietsLullaby)

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<sup>34</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/blogs/lawlietslullaby/5762-are-you-ashamed.html> [last accessed December 16<sup>th</sup> 2013]

In response to this entry the fan Agent101 replied:

You are totally right, they are so closed minded and aren't willing to see *yaoi* as anything more than anime gay porn. They don't see how stories have character development or, as an example put forth by LawlietsLullaby, how *Junjou Romantica* is a love story between two guys. A lot of my friends think it's like 'Sexual Pornography' all of the time. (Agent101)

Fans like LawlietsLullaby and Agent101 are aware of a double standard for the judgement of *yaoi* and pornography, particularly so for female fans, as well as the “closed minded” nature of those who are not *yaoi* fans. Specifically, fans believe it is more acceptable for men to be seen as viewers of pornography or sexually explicit texts whereas it is not deemed acceptable for women to do so:

It's normal for guys to watch porn, I mean some guys just casually talk about the best porn they've seen and then it seems like it's expected for women to be disapproving that guys watch porn and if they don't then she is strange because either she thinks its fine to watch porn or she watches it herself. (Kaida)

I hate having my interest in something that might be considered sexy analysed and judged weird. Not to be offensive to you [the researcher], you're different and are actually asking us what we think, but definitely you read these articles about *yaoi* fans with all this big statements about us but you don't often see many studies about male fans of *yuri* or *hentai* cause it's assumed normal that a guy would like watching lesbians but as soon as a women watches *yaoi* its strange. (Gloomy Gloo)

Gloomy Gloo mentions *hentai* and *yuri* which are genres of Japanese anime and manga that also involve explicit content (*hentai*) or are focussed on lesbian narratives (*yuri*) which the fans believe are marketed towards males. In general *hentai* and *yuri* are considered pornographic by *yaoi* fans because it lacks the plot and emotional bonds between characters which are pushed aside for explicit sexual content. The point of these genres, according to the *yaoi* fans, is to provide sexual excitement for males in the same way that live action pornography does. Therefore fans feel it is important to

that they receive the same treatment as fans who enjoy *hentai* or *yuri* when it comes to sexually explicit material, even when the sexual content between the two is between characters of the same sex. Unfortunately, how the *yaoi* fans perceive their fandom does not resolve the fact that others see it as depicting sex between two men.

Agent101 claims above that others “aren’t willing to see *yaoi* as anything more than anime gay porn”. The issue of homosexuality is raised in this comment and the fact that fans are reading a text that is read not only as pornographic but also homosexual causes a double burden for some fans in the community. In response to this other fans agree, suggesting that is precisely because others saw it as porn they felt like they could not be open about their interest but also that they would be further questioned as to why they are interested in what is thought of as “gay porn”:

I’m pretty much out to everyone except at work, my family knows I’m a lesbian, all of my friends but I don’t think I would ever be able to tell them ‘hey, have you seen this? It’s pretty good right?’ because they’d be so confused about why I was interested in reading about gay men when I’ve already told them I’m a lesbian...mom would probably be happy that I’m not really a lesbian after all lol...when in reality it’s just that I like freshness it shows, it really isn’t much to do with sex for me, I certainly don’t get off on seeing a guy naked. (CrystalFairy)

CrystalFairy mentions her identity as a lesbian which she believes will cause a mismatch in the minds of others if they knew she liked *yaoi*. For example the depiction of males in homosexual relationships causes her relatives and friends to make assumptions about both her identity as a lesbian and *yaoi* manga. Firstly, they assume that *yaoi* is pornographic and that CrystalFairy is actively gazing at male bodies as a form of sexual stimulation. Secondly, they question her lesbian sexual identity because she is viewing images of men as opposed to women which would be more appropriate in their minds for a lesbian. They do not explore the idea that CrystalFairy does not view *yaoi* as either pornographic or the representation of male homosexuality and also

make the normative assumption that one's interest in viewing certain acts, if considered sexual, are indicative of one's 'real'/every-day sexuality. A similar comment and problematic situation was found in my interview with Dai-kun who identifies as a heterosexual male:

Most of my friends know I'm into anime and manga, that's acceptable to them and I only started helping out on AF cause I saw it needed some technical help....Naturally I read a view *yaoi* to see what I was getting into...It definitely doesn't turn me on but there is something about the idea of being a passive guy that I like and *yaoi* helps me understand that, I can be a man, and still be passive. Now I would never tell my friends at college that I like this gay manga and I don't think I'd tell my girlfriend either, she'd freak and think I was gay....I don't consider myself a paid up *yaoi* fan but I have an interest, but no one I know here would ever accept that so I stay here, chat to the other straight guys here...even though there isn't many of them. (Dai-kun)

CrystalFairy and Dai-kun provide a fresh insight into the fans' understanding of other's perception of *yaoi*. Nagaike (2003) suggests that for straight female fans, the problem about *yaoi* and stigma stems from the pornographic nature of *yaoi*. The problem begins and ends at the fans' reception and understanding of their own relationship with *yaoi*. However, even though the fans themselves may not see *yaoi* as pornography, they are aware that others do. Fans feel that there is stigma attached to *yaoi* and so they come to *AarinFantasy* as a place to find others who share their interest and are able to discuss it in a safe environment. CrystalFairy and Dai-kun enjoy *yaoi* for the alternatives that it provides, but do not wish to recreate the sexual scenarios that they read. Dai-kun, as a heterosexual male with a girlfriend, does not enjoy *yaoi* for its pornographic features but rather that it provides an alternative to a masculine ideal of power and dominance which he does not connect with. CrystalFairy also suggests that *yaoi* is not a sexual stimulus as she does not "get off" on seeing men in sexual scenarios rather she enjoys the "freshness" of *yaoi* that provides something different.

However these fans have what could be considered a non-normative interest in texts that do not fit with a heteronormative understanding of their sexuality such as a lesbian who would be interested in lesbian texts, or heterosexual male fans who would be interested in heterosexual texts and therefore feel that they must hide their *yaoi* fandom from others because they assume that others would not understand. Goffman suggests stigmatised individuals avoid stigma through “contact with sympathetic others” and that stigma acts as a powerful agent for group formation “as individuals grapple with its effects” (cited in Lopes 2006, p.390). The formation of a group of stigmatised individuals helps them to deal with the negative effects of stigma. This is where the importance of *AarinFantasy* as a social community comes into force. Fans are aware that others will not understand their interest in *yaoi* and so they come to *AarinFantasy* in order to meet like-minded others who would understand the queer aspects of their fandom. As I have shown, pornography is often seen as problematic, particularly so when the viewer of sexual texts is a woman. Fans show disdain for a double standard when men are excused for what is considered a healthy interest in viewing pornography, even when those depicted are two women. However fans, largely seen as women, have their sexuality questioned as something to be examined under a microscope. Their interest in depictions of male homosexuality are questioned whilst men’s interest in female homosexuality is accepted such as was the case with *CrystalFairy*. Not only is the fact that it is pornography questioned, but also the fact that it is seen as gay male pornography.

I would tentatively say that in recent years, in a small number of countries, attitudes towards homosexuality are improving with countries passing anti-homophobia laws whilst at the same time pushing marriage equality for homosexuals. However homosexuality amongst the general public is still a sensitive topic. Indeed, for many

fans the topic of homosexuality is something they cannot bring up with their family and friends and is another key reason why they continue to keep their interests hidden regardless of whether they are heterosexual or homosexual themselves. In a thread titled *how do you react to people being against homosexuality*<sup>35</sup>, which was started by the fan dark-samira, some fans discussed the problematic position that homosexuality held in various societies:

I think it all comes down to how society views the topic of homosexuality - even reading materials are seen as a no-no and for many of us who like to read stuff like *Yaoi* and *Shounen-ai*, we become reluctant to speak about it in the open because of how society is. (ItaChan)

I'm not sure if my family knows that I read *yaoi*. I'm gay, they know that, but we don't talk about it so anything gay just isn't mentioned, that goes for *yaoi* too. Here in Singapore being gay is not totally accepted so it is hard, especially in military training. You just have to keep your head down and don't talk about it with anyone you know or will have a chance of seeing again or getting in touch with your family, friends or work. (Jaiden)

Okay, I'm pretty sure no one knows that I read *yaoi* in RL. And I don't plan to let them know because homosexuality is still not widely accepted in my country. Plus, I don't have any friends who likes to read manga. AND many of my friends and teachers are Christians so I prefer not to bring the subject into talk when I'm with them. (Yunomuna)

Negative attitudes towards homosexuality has kept the *yaoi* community relatively secretive both for non-homosexual identifying fans such as ItaChan and Yunomuna as well as homosexual fans like Jaiden. Indeed, for many fans there is a tactic that if no one asks about *yaoi*, then a fan should not mention that they are a fan:

I'm quite comfortable with reading it alone and maybe I wouldn't hesitate to answer someone if they asked, but I wouldn't start a conversation simply because if I don't know the person and how they might react to the whole gay thing, I won't go into that much personal detail. It's all a matter of being comfortable and finding the right friends to fan-girl squeal with...places like AF are perfect for this, we all know we like it or at least have no problem with gayness. (ItaChan)

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<sup>35</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f18/t40225-how-do-you-react.html> [last accessed December 16<sup>th</sup> 2013]

sadly my friends are somewhat homophobes so I read it alone, my parents wouldn't understand if they saw it so I have to hide my guilty pleasure until I'm on *AarinFantasy* and then I can be free. (Jaiden)

'Closet' *yaoi* fans such as Jaiden must manage a constant tension offline, but when they are online, in *AarinFantasy*, they can discuss and celebrate homosexuality openly, and "be free" whereas in other situations they must hide their interest in queer texts from those outsiders who are not members of the community just as he must hide in a heteronormative society as a homosexual.

This feeling that fans cannot be open about their *yaoi* interest offline is understandable because fans may become stigmatised or misunderstood by those who do not understand their interest in *yaoi*:

I came out as a lesbian a while ago, and it was rocky at first but then my family eventually accepted me, then one time my mom find out that I was reading this "gay manga" and when she realised it was two guys I swear to god I think she thought there was some hope for me after all, that I might secretly be straight but I don't know why, I definitely like women more hahaha but I like *yaoi* because I think it's just so romantic. It just gives me this fluttery feeling whenever I watch it. When I watch girl x boy anime's I usually get irritated because of various reasons but of course my mom just thinks guys must mean I'm straight....maybe I should force myself to read *yuri* or leave it lying around lol! (Kiara)

Kiara experienced a similar situation to CrystalFairy in that her lesbian sexual identity was questioned by those who assume that *yaoi* is gay male pornography used for sexual stimulation. It seems that for some, sexuality is a clear cut, black and white issue; one is either homosexual or heterosexual with those who claim a bisexual identity occupying an unclear position. And so *yaoi* fans who enjoy homosexuality between boys in *yaoi* manga have their sexuality questioned as their queer interest does not fall into the boundaries of heteronormative understandings of sexuality. The fan community of those who understand the problems of other fans, as well as their interests, contributes to fans' strong bonds between one another. Indeed, one of the

attractive features of the community is not that the fans share an interest in *yaoi* manga, but that they share a similar attitude towards the same social problems that they experience.

Interestingly, this double bind of homosexual pornography makes it so that stigma of runs across the range of the fans despite their differing sexualities. For example we have seen typical reactions from a diverse range of fans and in each of the cases we fans complain about not only having their sexuality questioned due to others perception of *yaoi* as porn, but also that they must conceal their interest due to the position that homosexuality holds. Moreover, whilst some female fans complain that it seems acceptable for males to watch and enjoy pornography, this does not resolve the issue of homosexuality for straight male fans of *yaoi* who must conceal their fandom due to the homosexual nature of the text as was mentioned by Dai-Kun previously:

I can't imagine what my college friends would say if they knew I read this stuff, for sure they'd call me fag or something like that. (Dai-kun)

What appears to be the problem is that non-*yaoi* fans would not immediately, if at all, understand that one's sexual orientation need not permeate one's interest in all texts and that it is entirely possible to enjoy a text for its queer possibilities as opposed to a superficial depiction of homosexuality. For male fans, *yaoi* can cause problems due to its perceived homosexual content. This means that male fans may be seen as homosexual themselves, or at least socially inferior to other males outside of the fandom as their masculinity is questioned for having an interest in what is considered a female genre.

Donna Haraway (1991) argues that politics of affinity allow individuals to go beyond the limits of identity politics and therefore, spaces such as slash fan communities are

heterotopic because they work as spaces where fans are safe to discuss non-heteronormative topics. What makes *AarinFantasy* interesting is the fans' negotiation with heteronormativity. In this way, *yaoi* has become a means for its fans to confront marginalised sexual identities and non-mainstream interests. *AarinFantasy* offer its members a means to express and discuss such queer desires and construct queer identities via an online community.

One may consider that homosexual male fans of *yaoi* would perhaps be best placed to enjoy *yaoi* safely as not only does it cater to the perceived connection between sexual orientation and object of sexual orientation but it also can be comfortably placed within the context of males enjoying pornography. However as Jaiden exemplifies, even to today, demonstrations of homosexuality are only accepted in certain instances and certainly cannot be considered fully accepted. Individuals who identify with non-heteronormative sexual orientation are still positioned on the margins and while homosexual orientations are no longer illegal in some countries, homophobia continues to exist. Thus, public exposure of reading texts depicting homosexual male sexuality is not only problematic, but could also be dangerous, this is more often the case in countries who attitudes towards homosexuality are more conservative such as was found by Abraham's study of *yaoi* fans and *yaoi* publication in Indonesia (2010).

The issues of pornography and homosexuality resonate with studies of sexuality and 'coming-out'. Indeed many fans' discussions and stories often involve issues of admitting that one is a *yaoi* fan, that one has an interest in sexual depictions of male homosexuality, how they hide their fandom from others, and what the reactions that they get from others upon learning about their non-normative interests. Cindy Wu discusses how open she is as a *yaoi* fan in a thread titled *Are you sure you need to*

*hide*?<sup>36</sup> In this thread the fan Yasashii93 begins and encourages other fans to discuss with one another how they feel about their *yaoi* fandom and what they believe others think about *yaoi*, if indeed others even know:

This is *yaoi* fan forum. A lot of gay guys. A lot of gay guys who often don't want their friends to know that they are gay. I used to be like that too. (Yasahii93)

Well, with *yaoi*...I still didn't come out of the closet in real life...on the net I go to forums like here in *AarinFantasy* where other fans talk about it...but on Facebook and such I don't comment or share things of *yaoi* cause there are friends there as well that I see every day in different place for example but on the internet almost 60% of what I do, it's about *yaoi* and talking to others about it like what we read, why we like and stuff .(Cindy Wu)

Here Cindy Wu mentions that when offline, she does not discuss her *yaoi* interests, even in some online environments she will not discuss it, such as on Facebook. Her reason for this is because those are the people she communicates with in her everyday life, to whom she is yet to “come out of the closet” to. The reference to coming out is a clear indicator that for Cindy Wu, *yaoi* must be kept hidden from people she knows and see on a daily basis. However, in an online environment where an individual knows they will meet others like themselves alongside the possibility of not meeting these individuals in “real life” means that online environments such as *AarinFantasy* offer fans one of the few safe places for them to go to because not only is it detached from the offline world but it is further removed from those online social network sites such as Facebook that have heavy connections with offline social connections.

It has also been suggested that individuals are more likely to discuss sensitive topics and hold confidence with their friends rather than with other relationships such as parents (Ackard and Neumark-Sztainer 2001; Dilorio, Kelley, and Hockenberry-Eaton 1999). Therefore researchers suggest that some individuals are more likely to confide

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<sup>36</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f18/t164387-you-sure-you-need.html> [last accessed December 16<sup>th</sup> 2013]

in friendships or with others who they see as being like themselves. However, some individuals feel that certain aspects about themselves cannot be told to their friends. For example, studies on homosexual adolescents found that their awareness of social norms lead them to suppress their identities from peer networks for fear of being ostracised (Bond, Hefner, and Drogos 2009, p.33). These individuals turn away from offline social networks to the safety of online communication where the risk of being ostracised is greatly diminished as not only is anonymity afforded to individuals but they are also able to meet others like themselves.

## **Conclusion**

Initial experiences lead to practices and forms of self-identification that ultimately result in an individual describing oneself as a *yaoi* fan. Fans often describe feeling lonely, a sense of isolation, as well as perceived stigma from family and friends and in these cases the fans turn to *AarinFantasy* in the belief that they will be able to find others like themselves on the site and reduce or erase their feelings of loneliness without threat of backlash from those that would otherwise have a negative understanding of *yaoi*.

The chapter has shown how *AarinFantasy* is a place for fans to discuss social topics; it has also presented rationales for the fans' social discussions online particularly the desire to find like-minded others as well as a "refuge" from potential repercussions. In other words, it reiterates not only why fans enjoy *yaoi* but also describes the reasons why fans may turn to *AarinFantasy* for its socially supportive function as opposed to consuming *yaoi* alone. In this way, I have shown how many fans on the site describe feelings of loneliness and stigma. The source of this loneliness for *yaoi* fans is that many others do not understand their fandom or because fans fear the repercussions

should any of their family or friends find out about their interest. As a result of this, many fans turn to *AarinFantasy* for support, not only to find other fans but also to be able to discuss their fandom with the others that they believe are similar to themselves in a safe non-judgmental environment.

Finding a community of like-minded others is important for the *yaoi* fans of *AarinFantasy*. By focussing on the their discussions of homosexuality and pornography I have shown how *yaoi*'s complicated position in the fans' lives is not dominated by an individual reader-text relationship but is also influenced by those external to the fandom. Therefore, whilst fans may not see *yaoi* as either pornographic or representations of male homosexuality, they are nonetheless aware that this is how others view the material and so they feel compelled to hide their interest. Also, these problematic issues were common to the variety of fans who feel a sense of stigma. Although the reasons for their feelings were different the issue touched all of them. In this way *AarinFantasy* provides a safe heterotopic space where they may explore these interests within the borders of an accepting "open-minded" community.

One final question remains that I would like to explore in this thesis and it concerns how the community is formed and maintained. The thesis up to this point has examined the fans' rationales for being *yaoi* fans as well as the impetus for their participation in an online community, with particular focus on the communion that joins the fans together. But what happens once they are members of *AarinFantasy*, what aspects of the site do the fans enjoy and what encourages their continued participation. In other words, how is their desire to find and interact with like-minded queer others supported in *AarinFantasy*?

## Chapter Four: Affective Connections

### Introduction

Throughout this thesis I have referred to *AarinFantasy* as an online community as it emphasises the focus of mediated communication via the internet. It has been argued that online communities are not real based on definitions of community as a physical geographic location. Neil Postman's work for example, (cited in Watson 1997) claims that community must exist in a physical space. However, considerable time and technological advances have occurred since Postman's writing in the early 1990s and the necessity of seeking common obligation in the material world alone is becoming more difficult and less essential as fewer places exist in the 'real' world that would adhere to his definition of community.

On the other hand, scholars who argue for the efficacy of the term in relation to online environments have been criticised for being too eager (Baym 2010). Watson argues that when online, community is related to communication as the former cannot exist without the latter. However, community also depends on what Watson refers to as "communion" (1997, p.104). Communion is used largely in religious discourses but even in non-religious contexts the term may be used to discuss "spiritual, emotional, or...human feelings that comes from the communicative coordination of oneself with others" (Watson 1997, p.104). Rheingold's (1993) discussion of virtual communities reflects this definition of community which includes the importance of communion *and* communication in an online community:

Virtual communities...emerge from the Net when enough people carry on....long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form....personal relationships in cyberspace. (p.3)

But how are we to know when there is sufficient human feeling to realise a community? Using the previous chapter's findings as my basis for this discussion, I suggest that fan emotions constitute bonds of friendship and support which ultimately form the community. Rather than seeing emotions as "psychological dispositions" Ahmed proposes we examined how they "mediate the relationship...between the individual and collective" (2001, p.11). In other words, emotions "do things" and through the "intensity" of emotion individuals may be "aligned....with communities" (p.11). I will thus discuss how the fans come together in relationships with each other through what Ahmed refers to as "affective encounters" (p.11) which are the ways that individuals connect to one another through their online activities.

This chapter is made up of three parts. In the first I introduce and discuss my use of affect, feelings, and emotions. Following this I examine how *AarinFantasy* is used to make fans feel connected. I focus on relief and acceptance as how fans feel when entering the site as a form of escape. Finally, after focussing on *what* emotions are felt I will examine *how* they feel them, specifically how *AarinFantasy* facilitates the flow of the feelings between the fans. In particular I emphasise the fans' communication with one another by means of the site's features through which fans generate community. Overall this chapter will demonstrate the highly affective nature of the *AarinFantasy* community and the important position it occupies in its members' lives.

### **Affect, Emotion, and Feeling**

Daniel Cavicchi comments that "fandom is not a bounded entity to be discovered....it is a complex, private yet shared, ongoing experience" (1998, p.18). Similarly, Matt Hills suggests that studying fandom as a text tends to focus on semiotics as opposed to emotional experiences and he encourages other researchers to focus on the later

(cited in Jenkins 2006, p.139). Hills and Cavicchi present the fan as an individual who has a deep and positive emotional connection with something, or someone, and their activities are connected with pleasure. Therefore this chapter is informed by theories of affect, emotions, and feelings.

It is difficult to define affect, the difference between it and related concepts of feelings and emotions can be complicated to identify with multiple definitions in existence. In light of this, Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth state in the introduction to their collection of edited works, *The Affect Theory Reader*, that “there is no single, generalizable theory of affect: not yet, and (thankfully) there never will be” (2010, p.3). After having read around theories of affect, emotions, and feelings, I too found it difficult to find a singular definition, therefore in this thesis I have opted to use terms such as ‘affect’, ‘emotion’, and ‘feeling’ in a more general sense though it is important to acknowledge that the theories of affect have a detailed history and the difference between affect and emotion in particular have been well theorised and discussed. Up until this point, I have used the terms ‘affect,’ emotion,’ and ‘feeling’ almost interchangeably without clear definition, however there are definitional distinctions.

Affect is often described as a non-conscious intensity, in this way we are unaware of affect as it is more akin to a bodily response (Massumi 1995). Two key proponents of this line of thought are Brian Massumi and Eric Shouse. Shouse states that “the importance of affect rests upon the fact that...the message consciously received may be of less import to the receiver...than his or her non-conscious affective resonances” (2005, np). Massumi provides a similar argument, suggesting that affects “must be viewed as...non-signifying, autonomic processes that takes place below the threshold of conscious awareness and meaning” (cited in Leys 2011, p.437). Simply put, for Massumi affect is “irreducibly bodily and autonomic” (2002, p.28) and is best

explained by his belief that “response at skin level is the barometer of affective intensity” (cited in Labanyi 2010, p.225), it is not something consciously understood until after the event, but at which point it becomes emotion due to the socially based interpretations that we give it..

Emotions, as codified sets of affect, have also been argued to be non-cognitive. This is what Ruth Leys refers to as “the Basic Emotions paradigm” (2011, p.439). According to this model our emotions “operate blindly because they have no knowledge of...the objects or situations that trigger them” (Leys 2011, p.437). Emotions in this sense are understood as “comprising [of] ‘affect programs’ located subcortically in the brain” (Leys 2011, p.438). This view is criticised by scholars such as Lisa Barrett who argues that emotion categories “do not have ontological status” (cited in Leys 2011, p.440). Thus, another way to separate affect from emotion may be explained by a definition given by Panteleimon Ekkekakis who argues that emotions are “elicited by something...and are generally about something” (2013, p.42). This description includes a “cognitive appraisal”, thus we are angered by something or someone, or feel love for them, but in either case we are aware of our emotion and its cause (2013, p.42) corresponding with the differences between affect and emotion proposed by Masumi (1995).

In this thesis I avoid a strict definition of affect and emotion and use the two terms interchangeably to refer to the fans’ experiences of *AarinFantasy*. I avoid this strict definition of affect as an unconscious bodily intensity because the fans’ responses I discuss often have cognitive underpinnings and I am hesitant to think of these as unconscious responses to unknown stimuli. In other words the fans are aware of the causes of the emotions that I discuss in the chapter such as relief, acceptance, and comfort. This raises a critical question, ‘if I do not refer to affect as an unconscious,

pre-linguistic experience, then why use the term at all?’ A key point I wish to emphasise is that affect can be thought of as functional, “in that [it] help[s] the individual address...problems” as argued for by Agneta Fischer and Antony Manstead (2008, p456) when they discuss the social functions of emotions.

This is an approach that Edward Lawler (2001) and Ahmed (2004a) take in their work on affect. For example in his paper “An Affect Theory of Social Exchange”, Lawler “incorporate[s] emotions as explicit, central feature[s] of social exchange processes” (2001, p.321), by “conceptualizing individual actors as...feeling as well as *thinking* [my own emphasis]...and analysing how individuals’ relational and group attachments are connected to their emotional experiences in social exchange” (2001, p.321). The application of affect to social exchange is what Ahmed discusses in “Collective Feelings Or, The Impressions Left by Others” (2004b) where she writes that “emotions play a crucial role in the ‘surfacing’ of individual and collective bodies” (p.25). Both Ahmed and Lawler reference emotions, rather than affect, in fact, whilst Lawler presents an affect approach to social exchange, his intention is to integrate emotion but without making any clear distinction between the terms. In order to better understand affect and emotion as used by Lawler and Ahmed, we can include a description of feeling(s). Linked to affect and emotion, a feeling, as defined by Teresa Brennan in *The Transmission of Affect* (2004), is unlike affect as described by Massumi (2002a, b) because it must be conscious as “one feels it” and thus a form of cognitive judgement is involved (Brennan 2004, p.23). One interprets a feeling and is able to convey it, something that is not possible with pre-linguistic affect (Labanyi 2010, p.224). In this thesis I use the term ‘feeling’ but a similar description of conscious appraisals has also been referred to as “sentiments” by Janice Kelly and Sigal Barsade (2001, p.105), providing more evidence for the variable nature of the

discussion concerning affect, emotion, and feeling. It is this blend of affect and emotion that I utilise in examining how fans view *AarinFantasy* with my aim to understand when and how *AarinFantasy* leads fans to *cognitively* relate certain affects and emotions with specific events, objects, or collectives (Ahmed 2004b) on the site.

### *Relief*

As fans discussed the difficulties of being an ‘out’ *yaoi* fan and their need to hide their interests from family and friends, the theme of relief arose. Relief can be both banal and political. It is banal, in the sense that many fans found relief from everyday life such as a hard day at school or work. In these cases relief is not directly related to the stigmatised nature of *yaoi*. On the one hand, relief may be political when it emerges from escaping heteronormativity.

In respect to the banal, it is important to remember that *yaoi* is not simply an outlet for queer identities. Indeed, it would be wrong of me to lead the reader to assume that *yaoi* is solely a queer text for queer fans. For example, the fan Pweddie discussed with me how *AarinFantasy* is an escape from offline confines at school:

I love *AarinFantasy* because it's an escape to reality for me... whenever i feel down sometimes *yaoi* helps me to be occupied on something even if it's just for a short time but also just the chatting with people online never fails to make me laugh or feel all giddy reminding me that life can be happy and don't have deal with all the hate at school. (Pweddie)

Pweddie refers to an “escape from reality” and I wondered what he meant by these ‘escape’ and ‘reality’, and what aspects of his existence he was referring with these words. I initially assumed that, as a homosexual male, *yaoi* was his escape from the problematic aspects of being openly gay. I discussed this further with him expecting to have my suspicions confirmed however he explained that whilst *AarinFantasy* does offer an escape from the problems associated with being gay, this was only one part

of the impetus for his *AarinFantasy* participation. Indeed, by coming online, Pweedie is not always claiming a queer identity or ‘coming out’ as a *yaoi* fan, he is simply reminding himself that “life can be happy”. It is interesting how Pweedie discusses the ways that *AarinFantasy* “never fails to make [him] laugh”:

Aarin isn’t always about me going somewhere to be gay, not that it isn’t good for that, but sometimes there is nothing better than after a bad day at school to make a cup of hot chocolate, put on my PJs and just read some manga online and then chat with my AF friends as I unwind. (Pweedie)

In this way the site becomes a means to heal him and is a means through which *yaoi* fans like him are comforted and refreshed. This experience of going online, reading manga, and exchanging comments and posts with friends has special value for Pweedie who feels stress because it offers him relief whilst he “unwind[s]” away from his offline life. His relief however is not directly connected to his homosexual identity; rather it is connected to his everyday experiences.

This theme of banal relief disconnected from issues of sexuality continued in other fans’ discussions of their own experiences of *AarinFantasy*:

At what point during my recent life did I stop and feel like I got hit in the head with a giant realization?..I’m NOT having fun. In fact I don’t think I have had fun in a long time. I have finally sat down and I haven’t spent nearly enough time here with my friends. Which made me feel bad...Hopefully I can put some life back into that and start having fun again with all my friends. (HyoRinEun)

Like Pweedie, HyoRinEun talks about his recent daily life and surmises the experience to “NOT having fun” and that “EVERYTHING needed to slow down”. It appears that the fun had on *AarinFantasy* is a result of connecting with friends, finding out about their lives, and what they have been doing which he “can’t wait to find out” about. Ultimately, he gains pleasure from participating in the community and his desire to escape from being too busy is strongly connected to his desire for connection with

other fans online. The relief and fun that these fans experience, though perhaps not queer or political, are certainly affective in the sense that they do not get the relief just from signing on to the site, rather these emotions are the results of a process of cognitive affective communication. The fans' desire for escape is a desire for connection as they face others who "are already recognised as...giving pain or pleasure" (Ahmed 2001, p.17). This is in line with the general argument that emotions are cognitive and functional (Lawler 2001) and are thus important to the fans' social survival because the emotions they feel from interactions with others "form and maintain social relations" (Fischer and Manstead 2008, p.456).

*AarinFantasy* is made a pleasurable object through the connections of the fans' feelings to the community. For example, Pweedie and HyoRinEun's fandom is part of an emotional process which begins with the pleasure and joy that the fans experience even if these pleasures are found in some seemingly less exciting practices such as "just...chatting" (Pweedie) which they then attribute to the community itself. These fans cognitively appraise pleasure and joy discussing how they feel empowered by the site and describe their connection with *yaoi* manga in terms of reinvigoration and reconnection with happiness. In the latter half of this chapter I will elaborate on this and demonstrate the various processes that enable these conclusions.

Returning to relief, fans are not moving away from heteronormativity, nor do they critique normative systems. I asked the fan HyoRinEun about his sexuality and gender and he told me he is a heterosexual male. I mention this here specifically as I would like to make a point about fans with sexualities that may be considered normative. HyoRinEun, as a heterosexual male, may have less need to utilise *AarinFantasy* as an escape from normative heterosexuality:

I'm a straight guy and that's how I see myself and want to be seen, I don't think that makes me a homophobe or closeted just because I come to *AarinFantasy*, we're just maybe more open-minded and different here and I think that's what is good about being here, we accept one another and get along better for it. (HyoRinEun)

HyoRinEun does not critique the normative systems of sexuality. Indeed, whilst there are fans that reject all labels of sexuality and gender, in *AarinFantasy* there are many heterosexual and homosexual fans who may experience a degree of anxiety or indifference about leaving the political aspect of their sexualities and genders behind even in the process of escaping and having fun in the community.

Relief, however, can be political. For example, fans may be more radical when considering their own gendered and sexual identities than was expressed by Pweddie and HyoRinEun. When I discussed gender and sexuality with Jaiden, and I asked him what he identified as, he replied simply that he was “just Jaiden”, despite being biologically male, and having an exclusive sexual interest in other men, he did not identify as homosexual, nor as male, but neither did he identify as female or feminine, he insisted to me that despite his biology he is simply “[him] self, just Jaiden”. There are other fans who reject more simple understandings of sexuality and gender, and identify as gender neutral at times. I asked Jaiden if *AarinFantasy* had any influence on this process of identification as “Jaiden”:

I always knew I was different so it's not that AF or *yaoi* has had some big impact on that, but at the same time it is the best place to be me, it's so great to come here and not have to hide or explain myself to others so in the way it's a lot off my back. (Jaiden)

Whilst a political or queer engagement is not necessary the desire for escape does carry political implications. Fans enjoy *yaoi* not only because it is fun, but because of its ability to offer alternatives in resistance to heteronormativity. This transformative power of *AarinFantasy* includes an engagement with the politics of gender and

sexuality. The relief found on *AarinFantasy* in this case is likely because of the fandom's ability to accept and include difference.

### *Acceptance*

For many fans *AarinFantasy* is a means to escape political ideas of sexuality and gender. Interestingly, going to *AarinFantasy* in order to be feel accepted through contact with other fans highlights the sociality of affect and emotions (Fischer and Manstead 2008; Lawler 2001). For example, in the previous chapter the fan NerdyMum described *AarinFantasy* as her refuge where she would be able to relax with like-minded others. She feels comfort in escape to a place where there are other fans similar to her. In this way, acceptance is an important emotion that helps formulate the community, such as how Ahmed (2006) suggests that affects align us to groups. This is what Fischer and Manstead refer to as the “affiliation function of emotions” (2008, p.458), specifically “emotions enable us to form and maintain long-term and intimate relationships by promoting closeness and harmony thus avoiding social isolation” (2008, p.458).

Fans turn to the *AarinFantasy* community to find acceptance with other fans. Perhaps this is because, as Solene points out:

Most fujoshi and fudanshi I have encountered tend to be more open-minded about most things than other people. I think that helps a lot. It makes a friendly comforting atmosphere. They tend to act carefree, because they do not fear being judged for who they are or what they like and others are more willing to take the time to listen to you and give you advice and good feelings. (Solene)

What makes Solene feel accepted on the site is the fact that the others with whom she interacts are also *yaoi* fans. In this sense acceptance could be understood as an emotion, but it may also be thought of as a feeling as Solene consciously associates it with a

cause. In this case she believes *yaoi* fans, both male and female, will be “open-minded” and “friendly”, namely, accepting. A connection is established between being able to act carefree, not worrying about being judged which would be unavailable in any other spaces.

I wondered how *AarinFantasy* fostered an accepting affect context:

It just feels cool, the new opportunities, chatting to people privately and openly, reading all the posts...it feels great...connected with so many people...whilst sitting in my room at home...we're all different and I don't mean different from each other, but we are, I mean different in that we are different to those around us in real life but here we can be ourselves and not have to worry about what others think cause at the end of the day we are all special in our own ways, I'm gay, he's straight, she's a lesbian, and s/he is whatever they want to be and I think makes us realise that it is okay, doesn't that just make you feel great?! (Cyril)

In my conversation with Cyril he mentions that *AarinFantasy* allows him and the other fans to be themselves and they don't “have to worry” because it's “okay” to be “special in [their] own ways”. Acceptance on *AarinFantasy* makes Cyril feel extremely positive about his experiences with people who are “all different”. What he means is that difference to normativity that unites the fans and what makes them feel good about being online. Similarly, Cvetkovich (2003) discusses queer music bands that are key sites of queer culture, in which lesbians are able to articulate and work through traumatic experiences. She suggests that “as a name for experiences of socially situated political violence, trauma forges overt connections between politics and emotion” (p.3). By this she argues that lesbian cultures become uniting responses to the violence of trauma. Thus, by offering affectively charged modes of engagement by marginalised fans, lesbian bands cultivate a culture of acceptance.

What is fascinating about Cvetkovich's work is that she assigns lesbian band music as a text and the performances as sites of social belonging. In these sites, painful experiences give a voice to stigmatised fans unable to speak out. She thus moves

beyond the individualistic aspects of the fans' shame by focussing on the affective dimensions of participation in a community that is born from emotional intimacy. Participation on *AarinFantasy* works in much a similar way and becomes an affective device that is able to be used by the fans to communicate emotional meaning. To exemplify this I refer back to Jaiden's experiences of going online in order to feel accepted:

I don't have too many friends in real life...my closest friends are here on AF [*AarinFantasy*]...for some it must be weird because I've never met them but they can still cheer me up... in this little world of our own.  
(Jaiden)

Jaiden defines *AarinFantasy* as a "world of [his] own" where he is able to connect with people that can cheer him up and make him feel "good" more than any other place. *Yaoi* fans are aware of the healing and empowering role of *yaoi* manga which helps them to deal with homophobia and social isolation. I asked Jaiden what it is about *AarinFantasy* that makes Jaiden feel "good" and how this specifically relates to his own experiences:

As you know I am gay, and here in Singapore it is not that great to be gay or lesbian. Usually, when I've had a bad day I'll come online and read some posts, or post on the site...I'll just write. [I]t felt pretty good when people replied and offered me advice and help... I think it's because *yaoi* fans are more okay with people like me either because they are open minded or because they are going through similar things. (Jaiden)

Jaiden refers to his sexuality and the problems that he encounters as a result of it. After many years of being thought of as strange, he is pleased to have his opinions accepted. He looks to the site as a place for emotional support in which fans establish connections which 'affect' a sense of community based on queer discussions. What characterises *AarinFantasy* for Jaiden is the caring relations that goes beyond any form of physical closeness, at its most emotional, it is the comforting responses from other *yaoi* fans that makes the community for him. It is this ability to give and receive

support through recognition and acceptance of his queer differences that makes *AarinFantasy* so important for him. Even when communication may be just a post, or reading someone's comments, only a few words of support and comfort make a great impact for fans such as Jaiden. Acts of communication are the manifestations of "sharing affect" (Kelly and Barsade 2001) that create the bonds between the fans through informal but deeply meaningful social connections.

When offline experiences do not allow *yaoi* fans to feel comfortable, respected, or accepted for their identities, the online environment of *AarinFantasy* provides a space for fans in which their queer interests and identities can be explored. A similar finding has been suggested by Jennifer Egan (2000) in an article titled "Lonely Gay Teen Seeking Same", which describes how the internet has opened an accepting world for homosexual youth. Indeed, acceptance in general is not a given for *yaoi* fans, rather it must be sought out for themselves online and for many, such as Jaiden, coming out as queer individual may result in the loss of offline acceptance:

Usually I just go to work, come home and go straight to my room, I can hear my parents downstairs and my mum will cook something for me and leave it out for me, then, when they go to bed I'll go down and eat. It's pretty depressing but they don't like who I am and how I look...I don't talk to them, and they don't talk to me... this is where AF comes in and helps, here everyone accepts me for me...you can't realise how important my friends here are. (Jaiden)

For fans who identify queerly, but who cannot be 'out', there is a deep sense of loneliness and rejection that is replaced by *AarinFantasy* which offers acceptance as a way of dealing with rejection and loneliness. Robert Owens writes in *Queer Kids* that "within a support network especially one consisting of other[s]...individual internal conflicts can subside and a youth can begin to heal. Self-esteem can be rebuilt" (1998, p.149). Indeed, Jaiden describes how *AarinFantasy*, which is made by and for other *yaoi* fans, rebuilds and strengthens the fans' self-esteem.

In spite of this, it would be erroneous to suggest that fans find acceptance by simply joining the site. Feelings of acceptance do not unconsciously arise by simply clicking a button. As Ahmed suggests, emotions, as responses to others, “do not respond the way that they do because of inherent characteristics” (2001, p.16). This implies that the importance of *AarinFantasy*, as a place that makes the fans feel accepted, is not because *AarinFantasy* is inherently accepting and thus cannot pass on such feelings by going online. Rather it is through the ‘affective encounters’ (Ahmed 2001) or through affective exchanges that it is seen as having this composition or “context” (Kelly and Barsade 2001).

We must understand how the affective context of *AarinFantasy* is generated. The first step in doing so is to remember that whilst an affect, feeling, or emotion may originate in the body (Ahmed 2004a, p.5) their actual meanings comes from the ways that individuals “frame and judge...experiences” which implies conscious action on the part of the fans (Ahmed 2010, p.31). Thus, in an examination of the affective context of *AarinFantasy*, it is helpful to also consider how fans cognitively appraise their experiences.

### **Affective Devices**

If fandom is a meaningful experience then where do we locate this significance? Why does the idea of taking part in a community or immersing oneself in the *yaoi* fandom give rise to strong feelings? Feelings are formed in the ways that we “generate, understand, and frame our experiences” (Duffett 2013, p.112). Fans often participate in communities that share a fan text, however, given that the *yaoi* fans all have varying interpretations, we must pay attention to how this fandom is “socially practiced”

(Duffett 2013, p.112). In other words, how *yaoi* fandom is ‘done’. More precisely, how are relief and acceptance generated and maintained in *AarinFantasy*?

I introduce three affective devices through which fans learn about one another, share stories, and exchange their diverse interests. They demonstrate that whilst fans may enter the community alone, they rarely continue their participation as an individual. The meaningfulness of *yaoi* surfaces through continued participation with others and it is this communication that makes *yaoi* matter. In this sense they are devices because, it is not the objects that generate affect or emotions themselves, but it is how they are used by the fans on the site that creates them (Sasaki 2013).

The desire to find bonds with others makes the fandom matter for reasons external to *yaoi* itself, particularly for the fandom’s social function rather than the “apparatus itself” (Grossberg 1992a, p.236) thus working very much so in the sense of a device that facilitates a great deal of pleasure as well as being a source for it. Grossberg, in describes fans who go clubbing and to concerts with others fans of rock styles that are different to their own preferred taste. He highlights the fact that fans had “gone clubbing for social, not musical reasons, “actually [they] loathed the sound” (Grossberg 1992a, p.236). I suggest that although a knowledge and interest in *yaoi* is a crucial factor in the *yaoi* “alliance” (Grossberg 1992a) there is also the affective power of the site which depends less on its relation to any specific type of *yaoi* or queer manga fandom than on its existence as a safe space for the bonds between fans to exist.

Similarly, Bury (2005) explores slash fan fiction communities as heterotopic spaces and suggests that these communities are less about slash than they are about fans having a space free of certain heteronormative conditionings in which to converse and

share meaning, reflect on life, politics, and the world. Therefore a shared appreciation of stories where the gay male body is being objectified, acts as a shield that keeps other aspects of normative culture at bay.

### *The Friending Thread*

*The Friending Thread*<sup>37</sup> demonstrates how the fans on *AarinFantasy* seek connections or “alignments” (Ahmed 2006) with other *yaoi* fans. This thread is found in the *General* board of the site and its purpose is for fans to meet and make new friends. The fans post messages about themselves and the kinds of people that they would like to meet on the site. The beginning of the post introduces its own goals:

The purpose of this thread is to make new friends, meet others who share your interest...and create a comforting environment...If you find someone you want to befriend based on what they posted in their Friending Form then leave them a visitor’s message or private message to let them know and send them a friending request...be respectful and have fun! (Gloomy Gloom)

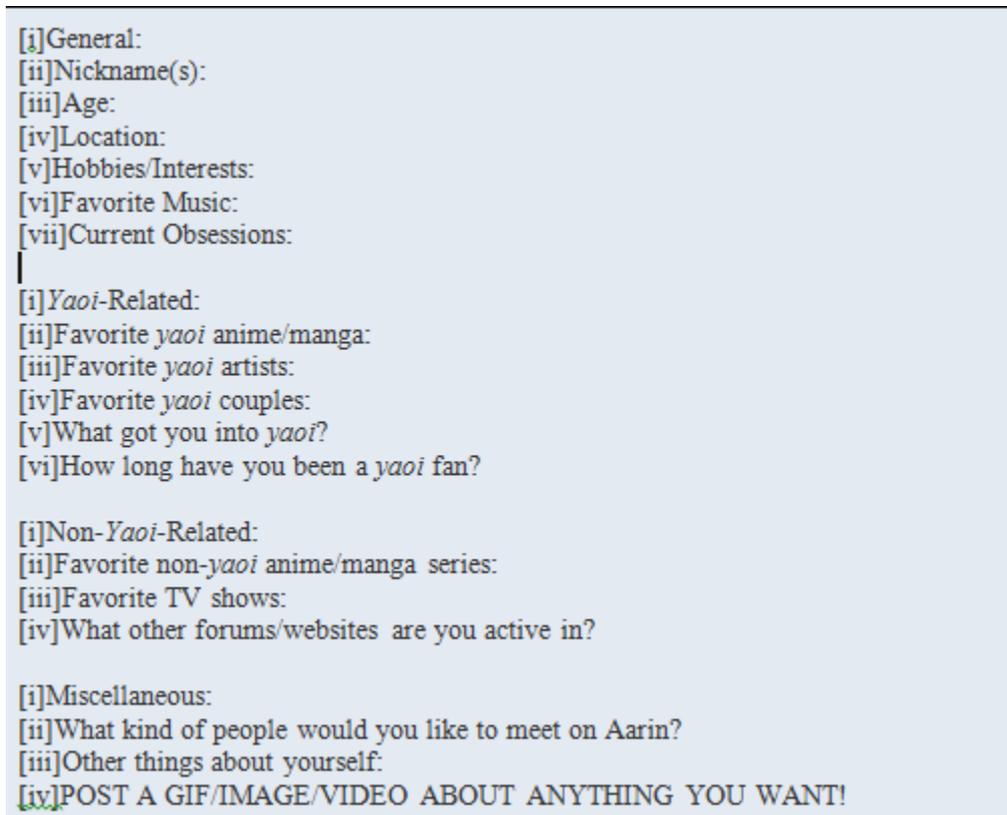
When the fans communicate on *The Friending Thread* the site becomes a point of convergence enabling communal modes of reception (Jenkins 1992a). According to Jenkins, “for most fans, meaning-production is not a solitary...process but rather a social and public one” (1992a, p.75). *The Friending Thread* allows the fans to discuss *yaoi* manga and explore it together, turning its reception into a social event.

When making friends on the thread, users fill out what is called a *Friending Form*. They are only asked to fill what they feel comfortable with and are not required to answer every point. These questions allow fans to tell others about themselves and the

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<sup>37</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f13/t159851-%5Bopen%5D-friending-thread-%7Bcome.html?highlight=friending+thread> [Last Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2014]

point is to learn something about the poster and to help fans decide if they would like to get to know this person better.



[i]General:  
[ii]Nickname(s):  
[iii]Age:  
[iv]Location:  
[v]Hobbies/Interests:  
[vi]Favorite Music:  
[vii]Current Obsessions:  
|  
[i]Yaoi-Related:  
[ii]Favorite *yaoi* anime/manga:  
[iii]Favorite *yaoi* artists:  
[iv]Favorite *yaoi* couples:  
[v]What got you into *yaoi*?  
[vi]How long have you been a *yaoi* fan?  
  
[i]Non-Yaoi-Related:  
[ii]Favorite non-*yaoi* anime/manga series:  
[iii]Favorite TV shows:  
[iv]What other forums/websites are you active in?  
  
[i]Miscellaneous:  
[ii]What kind of people would you like to meet on Aarin?  
[iii]Other things about yourself:  
[iv]POST A GIF/IMAGE/VIDEO ABOUT ANYTHING YOU WANT!

Figure 17: Example of the Friending Form

For the purpose of this section I would like to focus on the question which asks the fans “what kind of people would you like to meet on Aarin?” The fans who take part in the thread often give answers that can be split into two categories; they would either like to meet someone who is different to them, or someone who has things in common with them. I will focus on the acceptance of difference amongst fans later in this chapter in the section concerning the existence of subgroups on the forum; however I would like to first focus on fans wanting to meet fans who are similar to themselves.

Sometimes the commonality that users are looking for is based on demographic factors such as age, location, and profession. A good example of this type of appeal to meet

similar others is found in a posting by Laketica who demonstrates a desire to meet people with a variety of similar demographic points:

I'd like to find people around my age... I feel like everyone is really young around me at work...it makes me feel old. Healthcare professionals are cool too. =) And west coast people! But really, if you're easy-going and we've got stuff in common. (Laketica)

Laketica shows that some fans would like to meet people who are of a similar age, in a similar job or who live in a similar area to them. Interestingly she qualifies her statement by also mentioning that she is also happy to meet people who are “easy-going” but who may not necessarily be in her area or line of work. Other fans are similar to Laketica in this respect in that they would like to meet those who have similar interests in *yaoi* or hobbies to them:

I really just want to meet new friends who share my obsession! I want to be able to discuss pairings and recommend manga to each other that we may never have heard of! (ShuichiLuv)

Fans are not so much concerned with meeting other fans who are of a similar age, in a similar job, or live in the same area but are much more focussed on meeting people who “share [their] obsession” because they “want to be able to discuss...and recommend manga to each other” highlighting the social activities of the fans and the things they would like to do together with their friends but are unable because their friends may not understand. The focus on sharing helps to build the community not just as a group of *fans* but as *friends* that have similar interests which can be seen in the following excerpt:

I love...this group of friends who are just like me and like the things I do...I love chatting about everything without worrying about what people will think about me or that I'm weird for liking reading about two guys together. (AudyGayle)

The fans found in *The Friending Thread* suggest that a major factor of taking part in the community is as the name suggests, making friends. For example, AudyGayle, much like the fans mentioned in the previous section, feels better knowing that she has a group of friends who are similar to her. In this case she does not have a support group offline on which she can rely and so she comes to *AarinFantasy* to chat about *yaoi*, free from a threat of stigmatisation.

Taking part in the thread and meeting new people with similar interests over time leads to acceptance. While *yaoi* fans may be isolated in their everyday offline lives, they are also community builders, learning to use the site to create an emotional network of *yaoi* fans. This is not a phenomenon particular to *AarinFantasy*, or indeed *yaoi* fans in general, Joanne Addison and Michelle Comstock have shown that “as a result of their isolation and increasing access to the internet...more and more les-bi-gay youth have begun to employ technology in order to...express their experiences” (1998, p.368). The similarity with *yaoi* is that fans experience difficulty gaining acceptance offline and like some LGBT youth are creating alternative bonds and practices with others whom they believe are similar and thus more accepting. In similar terms to Susan Driver’s discussion of queer youth (2007), I suggest that *yaoi* fans have developed awareness about the difficult contextual position that *yaoi*, or indeed their queer sexual identities, have in their offline lives and therefore are taking part in *AarinFantasy* where they can find relief and acceptance. These feelings, however, do not naturally occur; there is in fact a “strong degree of intentionality” in the creation of their community as they are developed out of lived problems such as not being accepted into the “norms of traditional community frameworks” (Driver 2007, p.173).

While it may seem that an online community, such as *AarinFantasy* and its *Friending Thread*, are poor mediums for the exchange of emotion, it is important to question

divisions between the 'real' and the 'virtual'. For example, Mary Chayko, in her book *Connecting* (2002) suggests that some of the strongest emotional bonds are formed and shared in what she refers to as the "sociomental realm" (2002, p.7). She argues that getting together and forming social connections with similar others, through which emotions can be shared, is based on the "mental, perceptual, and imaginative interchange between people who may never physically meet" (2002, p.7). Chayko suggests that these kinds of connections between relative strangers are:

an absolutely genuine and often deeply felt sense that despite physical separation, a closeness among people, a nearness, exists; that while the physical distance separating people may be great, the social distance between them may be very small indeed. They represent an experience of communion. (2002, p.2)

Chayko, like Watson (1997), mentions communion as a connection based on who fans are, rather than the fan text. Indeed, the questions in the *Friending Form* are an attempt at communion as by joining the *AarinFantasy* site most fans would be aware that others online are also *yaoi* fans but what the thread demonstrates is that for most fans, a common interest in *yaoi* is perhaps not enough.

An interest in *yaoi* does not tell the fans anything about why others have joined the site, or their interests. Indeed, a singular shared interest is a poor explanation for why two individuals may be friends. A comparison can be made to communities of practice and communities of interest, which, as terms, are often used interchangeably, but there are distinctions between the two. A community of practice is thought of as a group of individuals or "practitioners" who are interested in a topic and further their knowledge about it through interaction with others (Wenger 2011). A community of interest, however, is more focussed and more closed to outsiders as it brings together those who wish to share information internal to their community (Wenger 2011). At times *AarinFantasy* is a community of interest as fans are sharing their enjoyment of *yaoi*

manga, and at other times it is a community of practice as fans share technical information related to subtitles of anime series or which program to use to read manga online such as CBR (comic book reader) software. However, definitions of communities of practice and interest do not explain the intimate connections that take place between fans that are removed from a direct interest in *yaoi* manga. Therefore this thread becomes the device through which affective processes can begin take place. *The Friending Thread*, as an affective device, fosters meaningful and emotional connections between fans and whilst their connection may be argued to be inauthentic or of little importance due to the electronic medium, they are in fact very meaningful forms of communication that enable the affective construction of a community of fans.

### *AarinSecret magazine*

To date (15<sup>th</sup> March 2014) there have been three issues of the *AarinSecret* magazine released online with a one year gap between issues one and two, and then a further five years before the latest issue was released. According to Aarin, the delays have been due to personal circumstances, although she has not commented on what these reasons are specifically.



Figure 18: *AarinSecret* Issue 1 (2006)



Figure 19: *AarinSecret* Issue 2 (2007)



Figure 20: *AarinSecret* Issue 3 (2013)

The magazine itself is prefaced with an introduction from Aarin and details any updates, as well as thanks, to those users that contributed to the magazine. The body of the magazine is made up of five sections. The first is a review section in which three members of the site review a selection of anime and manga. The following section is a collection of interviews with certain *yaoi* fans from the site. For example, in the latest issue a scanlator (someone who scans, translates, and uploads manga), a cosplayer, and a fan fiction writer are interviewed. Thirdly, there are reports of recent manga and anime events from across the globe. The penultimate section is dedicated to *Special Topics* in which fans write short essays regarding an issue that interests them. The final section is the *Fan's Spotlight* in which fans answer a set of questions related to their own personal *yaoi* fandom, and which will feature in this section of the chapter.

In a preface to the latest issue, Aarin writes that:

AarinSecret is part of *AarinFantasy.com*. This is a free online magazine created by *AarinFantasy* staff members – by fans for fans. (*AarinSecret* 2013, p.3)

This comment is made in reference to the participation from *yaoi* fans on the site. For example they either contribute interviews, reports, or information about themselves as part of the *Fan's Spotlight*. Similar to *The Friending Thread*, the *AarinSecret* magazine has characteristics of an affective device for community formation. In order to demonstrate the magazine's role as a device to forge new friendships, I would like to draw on an excerpt from AlexiaLee's response to Miko's call for feedback:

I want to say that my favorite sections are the interviews, I like to know more about the people that share the site with us and this way I can have a better image/idea of the persons dedicating their life to *yaoi* in one way or another and I can also go say hi to them, kind of like meeting a famous person. (AlexiaLee)

In this kind of feedback, the sociality of the magazine suggests how fans work together to maintain the magazine and the wider site. AlexiaLee would “like to know about the

people that share the site” underlining a desire to learn more about other fans on the site, as well as having the opportunity to meet them, which she likens to “meeting a famous person”. Readers of other, perhaps gossip, magazines may not have the opportunity to meet the celebrities interviewed within, but in the case of the *AarinFantasy* magazine, simply knowing the username of those interviewed in the magazine, means a fan has a greater chance of being able to simply say hello and introduce themselves online through the site’s messaging system.

In many cases, the magazine is one of the most important ways that fans get to know one another on a more personal level as it gives them these direct connections to others. For example Diepenhorst explained to me the importance of the *Fan Spotlight* sections for her:

You feel like you’re really getting to know these other fans, they’re not just some posting on a thread anymore but a real person that you can contact and chat to about anything...one time I read about one girl who lived in the same country as me ...it made it more personal for me...I messaged her...and we became good friends...I haven’t met her yet but if I have a problem sometimes she is the only one who can understand.  
(Diepenhorst)

The *AarinSecret* magazine thus builds community through the construction of an “affective network” (Cvetkovich 2003) of fans which has fostered Diepenhorst’s feeling of community and acceptance and becomes a device for the emotionally charged interpersonal communication is taking place. The opportunity to learn about other fans on the site through the magazine is expressed by others; in particular, the aforementioned *Fans’ Spotlight* is exceptionally popular:

In general I like finding out what interests other fans and what we share in common...[The Fans Spotlight] is a great way to learn about other members and see what they have to say about *yaoi* and about themselves. I like learning these things because I find it helps to know what kind of community we share here on the forum. (Kayaz)

I love reading about the other fans here online, it's funny to see how people from opposite sides of the planet come together by sharing some of the same interests. (SexyRyu28)

Similar to AlexiaLee above, both Kayaz and SexyRyu28 refer to the ability to meet new friends. What is important about these two examples, however, is that these users mention the theme of sharing on the site. Alongside AlexiaLee's comments, these fans demonstrate a shared *yaoi* identity amongst the users. Baym (2000) also finds similar results between members of an online community arguing that it is communication between members that allows community to continue and it is through "communicative participation" that members disseminate information about one another and allow community to exist and grow stronger.

Thinking of Anderson's ideas of a nation as an imagined community in which its members "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (1991, p.6), the readers of *AarinSecret* might think of themselves as part of a wider *yaoi* community that is not physical but which generates "deep, horizontal comradeship" (p.7). Even without any physical contact, the sections of the magazine that features profiles of other users encourages the fans to feel that they are part of a real community. I further discussed these ideas with AlexiaLee, and she told me:

Sometimes on the online profiles it can be difficult to get a sense of the other person but in the magazine usually there are real pictures of the people...so it gives me that feeling that I am not alone, not simply that there are other *yaoi* girls but also there are other people who don't really know what they are yet, gay, straight or bi...this way I can feel the connection and don't need to risk going out in public to a meeting or something where I might bump into someone I know. (AlexiaLee)

In spite of offline experiences of shame, stigma, or isolation, the *AarinSecret* magazine acts as an affective device which presents *yaoi* fan culture as a shared social experience

that is generated by the fans themselves. Moreover, through these affective encounters, the members of *AarinFantasy* realise that they are not alone, and that a community exists where *yaoi* fans like AlexiaLee can be herself and realise that this is not shameful.

*AarinSecret* provides the *yaoi* fans of *AarinFantasy* a means to communicate with one another through their self-descriptions. Using devices, such as the magazine, discussing details of their favourite manga or past-times, showing pictures of themselves, sharing a poem, or an essay they have written the fans are creating a space through which to share themselves openly. Simply by being able to participate the fans are forming a liberating space where their individual interests in *yaoi* manga do not define the connections between the fans therefore the magazine's role in *AarinFantasy* is as fluid as the fans that are reading and contributing to it. As well as giving the fans an opportunity to find out more about their favourite *yaoi* texts and to commune with one another the magazine has also provided the fans with a means to affectively express themselves in different ways.

### *Sub-groups*

It is important to remember that not all fans have the same relationship with *yaoi* manga and “although interpretative communities can promote particular ways of seeing a text or performance, they do not prevent individual idiosyncratic interpretations” (Jenkins 1992a, 88). We must be careful to avoid the belief that all *yaoi* is the same and, thus, that all *yaoi* fans have the same corresponding interests. Although this would make their desire to connect with one another far simpler to examine, this is not the case. We should not, therefore, romanticize an idea of unity as fans establish connections and relationships with other fans.

With the massive size of the community, the *AarinFantasy* administration team have long since introduced sub-groups on the site. In total there are 869 groups on *AarinFantasy* as of March 2014 which are categorised into 15 themes. The largest theme for the groups is *Anime & Manga*<sup>38</sup> (380 groups). In general, the groups dedicated to *yaoi* manga are dedicated to certain *yaoi* series, or pairings of characters that may be *yaoi* originals such as the *Junjou Romantica* group<sup>39</sup> which is the second largest group (2261 members). Other groups cater to pairings or *yaoi* series that are based on commercial manga that is not originally a *yaoi* series such as the *Sasuke X Naruto* group<sup>40</sup> (1300 members), which is the third largest group in this theme and caters to fans of the anime and manga series *Naruto* by Kishimoto Masashi created in 1997 and focusses on the pairing of two its main characters.

The existence of different groups does not detract from the fans' sense of bonding. It is precisely this ability to sustain a variety of groups that helps maintain the connections between the fans as it allows them to find their own niche within the tens of thousands of members. I suggest that the members of *AarinFantasy* share a sense of a common *yaoi* fan identity and importantly that this identity is not based on a commonality of demographics such as sex, gender, or age but rather on their shared identity of being a *yaoi* fan. However for some fans, this common identity is not always visible on the site itself:

I noticed something after starting to participate in the general forum in the beginning. There doesn't seem to be that much cohesion between the members when I look more closely at the threads. In the most active [threads] I feel like everyone is simply answering a question and their own, separately, even though everyone is so friendly, they might not always be that close or know much about each other. (Solene)

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<sup>38</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/groups/category-anime+%26+manga.html> [Last Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2014]

<sup>39</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/groups/228-junjou-romantica.html> [Last Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2014]

<sup>40</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/groups/10-sasuke-x-naruto.html> [Last Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2014]

Solene critiques the community because although it has information and fans are interacting with one another, the interaction is task related and fans are only answering questions without creating bonds or sharing emotional intimacy and therefore there is no meaningful interaction, or affect, taking place. This is similar to Watson's comments regarding the importance of communion in an online community (1997). The importance of communion over communication is what Solene refers to when she describes how members appeared to focus more on task based communication rather than meaningful communion. Having mentioned this though, Solene qualifies her statement when she begins to discuss the groups:

I haven't been in a lot of the groups, most of the ones I go to are French ones because it's my first language. We tell each other a lot about ourselves and can connect each other because you know there are French speakers from different countries too, I definitely feel close to these guys having spent some time with them. (Solene)

Indeed, with a site made up of hundreds of thousands of members it may well be intimidating and difficult to identify where any 'meaningful' communication is taking place that isn't task orientated. Nonetheless, the users of *AarinFantasy* are breaking off into smaller special interest groups within the site that allows them to build "close...connections" with one another. This suggests that although the site may be massive in terms of the number of users, they are still able to find communion with other fans in the smaller groups. This further supports the suggestion that community is found in the affective communication between the fans. For example, although the number of threads is lower in the groups than in the main boards, the ones that do exist are valued by the subgroup members:

I really like the groups, at first it was a little intimidating, and difficult to decide which groups. I wanted to join but after seeing the variety I really think that AF is a real good mix of different people and we can get to know each other. (Kaida)

What we can see from Kaida's comments is the celebration of difference on the site; specifically she mentions "a real good mix of different people". Although heterosexual female fans make the largest proportion of fans on the site, at the same time members come from different backgrounds, with different life experiences, and all have different interests that may or may not be *yaoi* related as evidenced by the variety of different groups, yet they are entering this shared space of the site in order to meet and "get to know each other" (Kaida). Fans unify not only in terms of demographics, such as Solene and her search for other French speakers, but also in terms of their different tastes in manga.

I wondered if the existence of sub-groups on the site with many diverging interests in *yaoi* manga and other topics would be damaging to the overall feeling of community and how fans felt comfortable on the site. However, what I found was that the fans enjoy the differences between them all and feel that this is something that makes the community feel special. In a thread titled *When anime/yaoi/yuri fans insult others interests*<sup>41</sup>, fans discuss why some individuals insult others based on their interests. In this discussion the user Roxie92 told other members that she had attended a recent anime convention:

I was at an anime convention today, and I was buying *yaoi* manga and some girl came and was chatting to me about *yaoi* but then she started saying how gross yuri was and that lesbians are nasty, now that just pissed me off. I told her I disagreed strongly with her about the yuri and walked away. You shouldn't be insulting other people's interests just because it's not in your 'tastes'. They shouldn't be saying its gross I like *yaoi*, nor should they be saying gays are disgusting. (Roxie92)

Roxie92's comments demonstrate the attitude that many on *AarinFantasy* have when it comes to difference amongst fans. Although she does not like *yuri* she will not

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<sup>41</sup> <http://aarinfantasy.com/forum/f28/t127415-when-anime-yaoi-yuri.html> [Last Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2014]

criticise it to other's or insult their interests as she believes that fans shouldn't "be insulting other people's interests". In her examination of online communities Aimee Morrison discusses the importance of affect for 'niche' groups, such as new mothers in a blogging website. These safe spaces for small "intimate" groups are intimate enough to allow a "full range of emotional and pragmatic experiences, often breaking social taboos constraining who can speak and what can be said" (Morrison 2011, p.40). For Morrison, the ability to break taboos is the affective power of what she refers to as "personal mummy blogging" (2011, p.40). Like the 'mummies' of Morrison's study, the *yaoi* fans are also brought together by a text which is "suffused with feeling and affect" as described by Lena Karlsson in a discussion of the affective power of online blogging (2007, p.139).

This acceptance of difference is common throughout the rest of the thread. In response to Roxie92's comments, other fans gave their own experiences or thoughts on the theme of accepting difference amongst their community:

I'm not into yuri either but I have nothing against it or anything. I mean, I have a guy-bff [best friend forever] from this site and he also likes yuri. He also knows I don't like yuri and is okay with it. In fact, we're working out an agreement when we go to our next convention. I'll go to the yuri panel with him and he goes to the *yaoi* panel with me. (ShadowYinYang)

ShadowYinYang agrees with Roxie92 and maintains that she doesn't have a problem with *yuri* and explains that she has a good friend on the site who is interested in it, but rather than letting it get between them they are in fact "bff[s]" [best friends forever] further cementing their friendship in spite of the fact that they have different interests. This is further supported comments made by the user Kaida who is also a fan of *yuri* manga:

Come on, we're in the darkness together, man...though we maybe have our own rooms. You in your xx fandom and me in my yy fandom, but basically the same evil darkness. To be honest, attacking someone else's

interests because they're different is just pointless, I mean isn't that the reason why we're here in the first place, because we like something different that our family and friends would tell us is weird? If we all liked the same things, life would be boring! (Kaida)

When discussing how to deal with those who are critical of *yuri* Kaida mentions “the same evil darkness”, by which she refers to the *yaoi* and *yuri* fandoms, and to the fact that in many anime and manga fandoms, *yaoi* and *yuri* fans are often considered subversive. Ultimately, although Kaida believes that rather than splitting themselves up they should unite together as fans and friends of genres that are potentially problematic. She also claims that “life would be boring” if everyone liked the same thing. This accepting attitude suggests that friendship amongst differing interests is welcomed on the site in the form of a variety of subgroups.

It is the collectively shared aspects of *yaoi* manga fandom that is discussed in these groups, comprising what Fish calls an “interpretive community” which is formed around “a point of view or way of organising experience...its assumed direction, categories of understanding, and stipulations of relevance and irrelevance were the content of consciousness of community members” (1980, p.150). Whilst Fish discusses interpretive communities in ways that reduce differences and thus unifies fans, I would suggest that the *yaoi* manga fandom is a fractured and fluid interpretive community within which shared ideas and interests are fostered, accepted, and discussed openly. In other words, what matters to the fans is the interpretive process that allows affect and feelings to move between the fans who talk about and enjoy *yaoi* manga together. Simply put, the sub-groups of *AarinFantasy* provide the fans with manifold connections to manga and one another who would otherwise not have such access.

A sense of belonging to something bigger is communicated by the fans as a source of both pleasure and learning as it provides a framework for collective *yaoi* fandom. *AarinFantasy* provides a relaxing online community for *yaoi* fans to chat with one another, listen to one another, and consume *yaoi* manga together. However, the community is not bound by a single common interest in any particular type of *yaoi*, rather it becomes an open space for fans to talk openly and find others with similar interests. Being able to participate in an open-minded community, where sexual preferences or *yaoi* tastes do not become definitive, means that *AarinFantasy* becomes an important part of their sense of acceptance and relief.

## **Conclusion**

The *AarinFantasy* *yaoi* fandom originates in the process of emotional investment; it starts with how the fans are motivated to join the *AarinFantasy* community, even if that motivates some less exciting practices such as discussing everyday lives or school problems. Nonetheless, fans discuss how they feel empowered by their fandom and often describe their connection with *yaoi* and *AarinFantasy* in terms of comfort, relief, and acceptance. Participation in the community generates these feelings of connection and happiness and in some cases supports the fans in helping them get through difficulties in life.

Cvetkovich (2003) suggests that a community can work as an “affective network” in which participants, with differing personal histories and reasons for joining the community, can come together (p.173). Affective networks connect individuals and provide a space for the members to express their needs and desires. Cvetkovich argues that “there is a significant link between performance...and testimony in terms of a shared desire to build culture...the life stories...are often structured

around...moments of intense affect that are transformative or revealing” (2003 p.26). These moments of “intense affect” that are created by the individuals’ “life stories” are transformative in both the instance of their occurrences as well as the instance of sharing them (Cvetkovich 2003). As a result, they connect people in a queer community in transformative ways.

*AarinFantasy* is heavily based in an affective process of connection. It starts with certain feelings such as relief and acceptance and these actions frequently foster strong positive affects. Furthermore, the fans often discuss how they felt empowered by these activities describing their connections with other fans in terms of relief, joy, and acceptance. These activities create feelings of connection that are felt by all the fans involved. In some cases, these connections helped fans to get through difficult times in their lives. Overall, these accounts suggest that instead of compensating for any lack in their lives, their *yaoi* fandom is in fact a source of power that fans turn to at various points.

Despite the diverse range of groups which evidences the diversity of the fans and their varying interests and connection to *yaoi*, *The Friending Thread*, *AarinSecret*, and the sub-groups demonstrate that the members of *AarinFantasy* are creating a sense of community through affective communication. These affective devices allow forms of connection with others whom an individual fan may not know, may not be similar to in terms of demographics, or may not share the same *yaoi* interests, but the fans have generated a sense of community because of a shared *yaoi* fan identity. Fans’ emotions are vital to the process of how they come together and envisage their community in relation to others. These emotions and personal histories are mediated by the devices, moving between the fans via communication and although it is difficult to describe all the emotional connections to *yaoi* manga and the ways that these emotions are created

and shared, it can definitely be said that *AarinFantasy* brings into being powerful and meaningful affects regarding the fans' lives.

## Conclusions and Future Work

### Conclusions

During the my study of *AarinFantasy* I have communicated with and observed a variety of *yaoi* fans who are members of a massive, international, and vibrant fan community built around *yaoi* manga. In this conclusion I summarise my research findings followed by the limitations and areas for future research.

The general theoretical literature on this subject, specifically in the context of *yaoi* manga fandom, is inconclusive of several vital questions regarding fan diversity and resultant rationales for *yaoi* fandom. The thesis sought to answer three of these questions:

1. Who are the *yaoi* fans?
2. Why is the community important to the *yaoi* fans?
3. How do fans' interactions help create the community?

I began the study by looking at the fan demographics and how there are many different fans coming together. I then moved on to examine the *AarinFantasy* community online, its importance in the fans' lives, and how the site encourages community formation through fan interactions. This course of examination was necessary as our understanding of the *yaoi* fandom has slowly become too comfortable with the idea that *yaoi* is a heterosexual woman's genre with only a few studies highlighting other queer fan positions (Nagaike 2003; Meyer 2010; Mizoguchi 2008; Yoshimoto 2008), more so when we consider the lack of English language studies of differing fan types because those that exist in Japanese remain untranslated (Yoshimoto 2008). This has narrowed the area of study to one demographic group and it risks imbuing *yaoi* manga with innate meaning. However, if other fans are reading *yaoi* manga then research is

compelled to re-ask a few seemingly basic questions of the fandom once more. By doing so it becomes apparent that *yaoi* manga is important to many different fans that each have different rationales for enjoying *yaoi*. Thus, I selected my research questions based on this gap in the field and which were the key objectivities of this study.

*Who are the yaoi fans?*

*Yaoi* fans are much more diverse than has previously been assumed. In particular, early *yaoi* studies ignored, or were unaware of, the existence of other types of fans. Most studies regularly focussed on the heterosexual female fans that were and are more visible in public such as at *yaoi* manga conventions.

The community of *AarinFantasy*, as the focus of this thesis, highlights the shortcomings of the previous approaches since it is a group comprised of a wide range of differing fans each with their own rationales for enjoying *yaoi* who gather online to participate in a community. *Yaoi* fans can be found all over the globe and are of differing ages, sexes, and sexualities yet thousands have all come to *AarinFantasy* to share in the *yaoi* fandom with another. Chapters one and two focussed explicitly on the fan demographics in terms of age, location, sex, and sexual orientation. It soon became apparent after conducting my survey of *yaoi* fans that any singular understanding of the fan base is untenable. This first step in formulating a more nuanced understanding of the fan base compels a re-examination of why individuals become *yaoi* fans.

My findings do not contradict the results of previous studies but rather they advance them. Previous studies did not have the benefit of examining internet mediated communities and so focussed on offline research involving participation at

conventions or face-to-face interviews. This methodological restriction meant that only female fans came forward. Urquhart discusses forms of media that are “unobtainable but accessible” (1994, p.12), applying this to the *yaoi* fandom, the reason that heterosexual female fans became the face of *yaoi* may possibly be because these fans had the least to risk in admitting an interest. Unlike male fans, their fascination with male bodies would not raise suspicion concerning their heterosexuality, and unlike homosexual fans their open participation in research and conventions would not ‘out’ them publicly. Thus, the internet has emerged as an invaluable methodological tool to examine contemporary *yaoi* fandom. This thesis has shown that now is the time to re-examine mediated *yaoi* fandom which is now open to wider participation from many fans who feel safety online and more visible to researchers.

This thesis is now one of the few studies to examine the fans on a wide scale with statistical evidence of a *yaoi* fan community online. It became quite clear that I could not formulate a common fan ‘backstory’ that would help to understand the reasons for an interest in *yaoi* manga as the demographics demonstrated that there are multiple fan stories. Orbaugh refers to this as the “fluid set of identifiatory possibilities” (2010, p.180) of a queer text such as *yaoi* manga whilst Buckley argues that *yaoi* is the “champion” of imagined potentialities of alternative differentiations (1991) both suggesting that there are many different ways that *yaoi* can work for different fans. Specifically, the existence of different types of fans suggests that rationales for *yaoi* fandom are equally divergent as each fan has their own reasons for enjoying the manga. As a result, this thesis has worked against a threat of a unitary category of fans as the diversity allows us to now rethink our understanding of *yaoi* fans. Indeed, my focus on the multiple types of fans has been part of an attempt to work alongside a content

based analysis of *yaoi* manga. To not include the fans' interpretations of what they read assumes that *yaoi* manga has an innate meaning to be read by fans but meaning can never be read from a text and our interpretation will always be contextual, influenced by our life experiences. Thus, whilst I do not negate previous findings of the meaning and value of *yaoi* manga for heterosexual female fans, my thesis does not stop there, as to do so would assume that this is all *yaoi* has to offer which is reductive and does not present the true value and use of such a queer text. This has a crucial implication for the study of a *yaoi* fan community because understanding why fans come together necessitates an understanding of the fandom that goes further than a common interest in *yaoi* manga. I discussed the importance of communion in chapter three of the thesis and it was a useful concept to understand the fandom as it relates to what binds the fans together other than their mutual interest.

Overall, “*yaoi* is liberating” (Welker 2006, p.843) and members of *AarinFantasy* are not fans of *yaoi* because they are heterosexual or homosexual but because *yaoi* it ‘talks’ to different fan demographics. As I delved deeper into the fans’ identities and reasons for enjoying *yaoi* in chapter two I discovered that despite different fan sexualities there is a common theme running throughout the rationales for enjoying *yaoi*, this was the fans’ desire for a queer alternative to wider heteronormative media. I could see that as I talked to fans any attempt to bracket them off into different categories would only give a partial understanding of *yaoi*’s importance. *Yaoi* is a queer text, not because it depicts homosexual male narratives, but because these narratives may be read queerly. For example, whilst a heterosexual male and female fan use *yaoi* to question normative masculinity and femininity, a homosexual male fan may read the same story for its ability to divorce homosexuality from reality whilst an asexual fan may enjoy it for its depiction of preferred fetishes which they have no desire to act out in reality. As we

study *yaoi* and its growing popularity it becomes useful not to ask why any one group enjoys *yaoi*, but perhaps more generally, why anybody likes *yaoi*.

Whilst *yaoi* may appear as a deviant text due to an assumed portrayal of pornography and homosexuality, the fans within *AarinFantasy* think differently and emphasise how the relationship between the characters, regardless of their sexuality or sex, offers an alternative to heteronormativity that is relevant to differing identities. Whilst it is acceptable to say that *yaoi* is not normative, it should be noted that in a study of *yaoi* fans there is a difference between heteronormativity and sexuality. The former represents the systems that the fans' sexuality was deployed into, whilst the later represents the fans' physical attraction to a specific sex. The importance of *yaoi* for the fans is focussed on having a preference for something that heteronormativity does not provide them and locating other people with similar tastes. An important part of this analysis demonstrated that an interest in *yaoi* manga does not give us any indication of a fans' sexuality or desires but rather their relation to the systems that make certain sexualities normative.

A question to be asked here is 'just how queer are the *yaoi* fans in *AarinFantasy* '? My thesis has shown that *yaoi* fans gain a level of pleasure from consuming *yaoi* manga and I have suggested that *yaoi* enables transgression from heteronormativity and resistance to normative sexuality. It could be said that *yaoi* manga consumption allows fans to question sexual identity but I wonder to what extent this can be said to be true. It certainly seems that this is what is occurring but if we were to go further, perhaps into the fans' offline lives would it still be valid to suggest that fans have queered sexuality and gender, or is it temporal pleasure only to found in the safe realms of an online fan community?

As there appears to be a disconnect between what the fans discuss on *AarinFantasy* and their offline lives it may be wise to discuss *yaoi* fandom, as it exists on the site, in terms of pleasure as opposed to identity. Indeed, there is a postmodern facet of the fans' activities in the sense that they make use of the site and their fandom as a means of temporary pleasure and escape into a queer identity online that is not unified or continues into their offline lives. They experiment with gender and sexuality online but do not so offline frequently, if at all. Pleasure itself is not necessarily connected to the political but might be, as Elizabeth Grosz suggests, a "politics of imperceptibility" (2005, p.194) in that through pleasure the fan creates something distinct from their everyday offline lives. Moreover, in relation to wider *otaku* culture Takashi Murakami writes that fans "are not opposed to the system" (2005, p.20), Azuma suggests that *otaku* have no political implications (2005), and Lawrence Eng (2002) argues that *otaku* "resistance is less outwardly political and rebellious to the system" (p.20). These thoughts on wider *otaku* culture would appear to correlate with the *yaoi* fandom on *AarinFantasy* as fans enjoy and find release in discussing queer topics online but in their everyday lives they are less willing to enact or explore queer gender and sexuality. This further problematises fantasy and reality as discussed in the thesis as the relationship between them may not be straightforward. For example Fujimoto claims that manga, and anime, are not "about the representation of objects of desire that exist in reality...no[r] about compelling parties to realize their desires in reality" (cited in Galbraith 2011c) therefore, what a *yaoi* fan claims to be into when online in a relatively safe environment with little to no consequences may not correlate with what fans offline everyday lives. It is important to remember that what *yaoi* fans are interested in may not actually be 'real', the characters, acts, and narratives that the fans are attracted do not have "shape or actuality" (Honda 2010, p.32).

There is literature in Japan concerning the ‘reality’ of fiction, another key thinker in this area was raised in the thesis, Tamaki who has written about *otaku* sexuality suggests that *otaku* are well aware of reality and have a more acute understanding of the distinction between reality and fiction (2011) shown by their strict distinction between the two (2007). As Saito argues, *otaku* have an affinity for “fictional contexts” realising that what they enjoy is temporal and is in “an utterly imagined space with no correspondent in the everyday world” (2007, p.245) coming to his conclusion that whilst *otaku* may seem quite queer they are in fact quite conservative in their everyday lives. Scholars have used the idea of liminality which corresponds with Napier’s work on anime and manga when she writes that transgression through anime and manga occurs in “a place that is not a place and a time that is not a time” (2007, p.171). These liminal spaces allow individuals to temporarily overcome hurdles. I made a similar finding in this thesis with the *yaoi* fans in that whilst they discuss alternatives to normative gender and sexuality they make a disconnection between fantasy and reality and are, at times, intent on keeping their fandom separate. If this is the case, then just how queer can we say *yaoi* fans are? Perhaps they are only temporally queer?

Shigematsu refers to ‘non-real’ writing that whilst manga is not unreal, there is a distinction between social reality and internal reality and that “it is in between these that *manga* is read, mediated, and elaborated on through the reader’s internal/mental processes” (1999, p.133), she suggests that because “identifications are...fluid” that “consumption will not...cause the reader to think certain thoughts, feel aroused, repulsed, or indifference, or become a paedophile, or child protection activists” (1999, pp.136-7). Thus if this thinking is applied to the seemingly contradictory position of *yaoi* fans who consume and discuss queer narratives online but do not do so offline, then how *yaoi* fans consume *yaoi* manga online and how they act in their everyday

offline lives cannot be so easily demarcated. These arguments are important for understanding the fans' interest in this particular genre of manga. Indeed, the narratives and characters are perhaps not meant to inspire fans in the 'real' world, perhaps they have nothing to do with the 'real' world and the queer environments that they create exist only in safe and temporal setting of *AarinFantasy*.

I would like to also theorise about a further possible way to consider the position of the *yaoi* fans in *AarinFantasy* and the queer expressions experienced on the site. Saito (2011) writes that manga and anime are at their core non-mimetic in that they establish their own self-referential reality that has nothing to do with the real world. I wonder if further research could consider this issue in relation to performativity (Butler 1990). Saito writes that anime and manga are 'high-context' media suggesting that meaning is dependent on others' understanding and being familiar with tropes and narratives (2011). Thus *otaku*'s sexual desires and fantasies are grounded in a highly coded culture and the fans are almost directed to perform sexual desire and interest when they see certain codes that they believe they should feel arousal towards. Simply, they are responding to accepted codes of attraction and desire within their particular fan group. This suggestion of self-reflexivity may be important for future studies of *yaoi* fan communities because I wonder to what extent the fans' interest in *yaoi* manga is directed by performance of what is considered an acceptable *yaoi* fan sexuality or enthusiasm towards those discussions/considerations of gender and sexuality in their own community. Indeed, the expressions of queer desire and identity in *AarinFantasy* may have less to do with a declaration of lived queer sexuality and more about a declaration saying 'I am a *yaoi* fan, I belong here'.

On a practical level, the process of understanding the interest in *yaoi* manga at first had its own problems. I was aware that there were differing types of *yaoi* fans and before embarking on this research I had my suspicions about the implications of this on fan interpretation as well as on an understanding of why individuals are fans of *yaoi* manga. As Kim Schroder writes however “doing audience research is a messy and slippery business” (Lewis cited in Schroeder 2000, p.233).

Fandom has for some time been understood as community comprised of active consumption (Fiske 1992). In the thesis I made reference to the work of Hall (1980) and his model of encoding/decoding with additional references to his later work (1994) as well as the work of Gray (2006) and re-decoding as a means to give a more nuanced understanding of the process of *yaoi* manga interpretation. Hall’s theory has been useful because it highlights how media can be interpreted in any number of ways resulting in a single audience consuming the same media text but deriving differing meanings. But when applying this idea to the often cohesive and positive view of fandom (Jenkins 1992) there is disconnect which does not fully account for the differing interpretations that may lead to potential conflict. In this thesis I have shed light on some of the different interpretations that fans make based on their differing demographics such as the slight conflict that emerges from differences in age. Moreover, not all fans focus on the same aspects of the text, drawing on different series, story lines, characters, or even narrative scenes depending on their particular identity and interest. Hall’s work (1980) suggests *yaoi* manga can be interpreted in a variety of ways and these differences in interpretation result in groups and subcultures within the fandom whose interpretations differ with each other, potentially leading to fan conflicts. This has been shown to occur in some fandoms (Busse 2013) or even across fandoms (Hills 2013) but despite discussion of differences in age and the role of older

*yaoi* fans in the community, conflict was not something that emerged in this study's examination of *AarinFantasy*.

Perhaps the danger of multiple fan interpretations that can often lead to fan conflict depends on the very nature and purpose of the fan community. A large majority of fan communities often engage in similar practices such as reading and writing fan fiction, creating art, and participating in communication with other fans and these practices are more often than not heavily focussed on the chosen media text. In *AarinFantasy* the fans with whom I spoke all come from very different backgrounds which influences their reading of *yaoi* manga but these differing interpretations coexist with little to no conflict. I believe that the potential danger of multiple fan readings is pacified by the pleasure that fans receive from the text, indeed, in various ways *yaoi* manga is meaningful and fulfilling as it acts as an outlet for them to express their unique and non-normative concerns. Perhaps multiple interpretations of *yaoi* manga can exist peacefully on *AarinFantasy* because in many cases the focus of the fandom is not to discern a 'correct' interpretation of the text, perhaps the text isn't even the focus of the this particular fan community, rather importance is found in the fans' ability to find a community of like-minded people with whom they can discuss their personal stories without fear of shame.

The implication of this is that there is a need to shift focus in research on media reception in general, not simply in fandom. Categorising readings as dominant, negotiated, or oppositional implies that the media text is all powerful in its meaning retention and has indeed been a focus of research in *yaoi* manga research. This has been reworked with redecoding (Gray 2006) based on the idea that all meaning is an interpretation thus an original or dominant reading cannot be easily found. Indeed, the

process of meaning making differs from fan to fan and has potentially infinite results which runs the risk of becoming impossible to analyse, but this is only the case if we attempt to pin down any 'real' meaning to be found in the text. However, help can be found in the work of Fish (1980) who suggests that meanings are not fixed but are social constructions which depend on cultural assumptions and conventions that are decided upon by a community within a specific context. Thus a community's interpretation of any media text is shaped by the specificities of a particular community. This corresponds with what has been found in this thesis as whilst there are a multitude of different focal points for fans, there is an overall suggestion that what unites them is their attitude towards gender and sexuality which has translated into an accepting online community that, despite the varying interpretations and desires expressed, are accepted because in this particular community the opposition to heteronormativity is an interpretative commonality.

The internet has been an incredibly useful tool for learning about and understanding the multiple meanings that fans in *AarinFantasy* are producing with their chosen media text and interactions with other fans. Indeed the emergence of the internet has provided this work with the opportunity to access a broader range of fans that would have been possible in an offline only context and it shows how this incredibly diverse range of fans are able to take part in what Jenkins refers to as a participatory culture (1992a, p.23). Indeed, it offers a more inclusive means of participation and increases the chances of offering an alternative view point from the dominant perspectives. Thus, in future research of fandom and problems of conflicting/multiple fan interpretations scholars should consider that what unites a fan community is less the actual content of a media text and more its potential for offering itself as a device for a range of interpretations. Future studies that focus on media audiences and the problem of

multiple fan interpretation may consider an approach that does not try to resolve differing interpretations by looking to the fan text, but perhaps by looking towards the community and the fans themselves.

Perhaps we should consider that fandom as an activity pushes us to explore why vast numbers of individuals identify themselves with particular texts or activities instead of specific genres or series. As Jenkins writes, fandom is something which tells us what fans “have in common: their shared understandings, their mutual interest, their collective fantasies” and thus rather than explaining different interpretations we should also “focus on those aspects of the narrative that the community wants to explore” (1992a, p.249) indeed, I propose that future research considers how these shared understandings or interpretative frames often go far beyond specific source material because fans are demonstrating their shared ways of seeing and talking back, not only to media but society as a whole.

*Why is the community important to the yaoi fans?*

The fans build a queer-friendly space online where they can support and communicate with one another in order to avoid stigma. The site offers them a means to engage with a variety of issues that may at times be related to issues of sexuality whilst at other times they may be more banal. In either case, *AarinFantasy* offers a means to engage with issues through community participation. Fan participation online is liberating, in some cases therapeutic, and functions as an alternative space in which opposition towards normative ideologies may be rethought.

*AarinFantasy* has also become important in the contexts of the fans’ everyday lives. The site is a place where they are able to create community and friendship, namely

communion. My thesis has been focussed on explaining these feelings in terms of the meanings that the fans attach to community.

I have presented a context-specific approach to the *yaoi* fandom and one theme that flows throughout is my examination of the consistent way in which *AarinFantasy* members describe the site as a means to find acceptance and relief. Chapter three demonstrated how *yaoi* would often be understood to be homosexual pornography. This problematic nature of *yaoi* manga found its way into the lives of fans regardless of their varying demographics or contextual positions. Therefore fans often swap information on how to consume *yaoi* safely, thus preventing friends and family from discovering their interests. Rather like being gay, *yaoi* fans have to carefully consider who and when to tell others about their fandom because such a revelation may disrupt the relationships they have with those external to the community who may not understand.

This thesis' approach to *AarinFantasy* and *yaoi* manga has been focussed on what fans *do* as opposed to who they simply are. This approach of thinking in terms of processes as opposed to objects of study highlights the importance of *yaoi* and *AarinFantasy* for the fans as well as opening these up to multiple interpretations. Chapter four of the thesis focussed particularly on the role of *AarinFantasy* in the fans' lives and how it responds to *yaoi*'s contextual position discussed in chapter three. Based on the ethnographic approach I used the fandom is made up of individuals who take part in an online community for personal reasons. It appears that *yaoi* fans are compelled to look for others. In these cases, *AarinFantasy* emerged as an important place to go to in order to consume *yaoi*. Chapter four laid out my explanations of how the fans of *AarinFantasy* engaged in these social practices – finding acceptance and community

though a thread, a magazine, and groups. I argued that an important part of these activities were fuelled by affect (Grossberg 1992a, b; Ahmed 2006). By focussing on the affective communication in this community I have complicated our understanding of *yaoi* fan identities, communities, and the context of *yaoi* in their lives. The communication between the *yaoi* fans in *AarinFantasy* is affective communication because the fans negotiate the problematic position of *yaoi* with other fans. The fans participate online in *AarinFantasy* for their interest in *yaoi* manga but also for their friendships with other fans. Many fans make posts to find new friends, support each other in different groups, and contribute to the site's own magazine.

In the final chapters of the thesis I approached *yaoi* from perspectives of queer and affect enabling me to view the bonds between fans that brought the community together. *AarinFantasy* offers fans acceptance and relief which are formed through participation, meaningful communication, and mutual care with other as they form a united whole with one another. *AarinFantasy* is an affective community formed by fans themselves and through affective communication, maintaining an environment of mutual care, and communication they have learnt to negotiate with their varied identities, particularly when they may differ from mainstream heteronormative ideologies.

As a result of this approach, *AarinFantasy* is simultaneously diverse as a result of the multiple fan identities but is also unified by these diverse queer experiences. I have shifted the research question from not only *why* fans are interested in *yaoi* manga but also what *yaoi* fans *do* emphasising the activities and processes that *yaoi* fans take part in an online *yaoi* fan community. By presenting the emotional aspects of the community and ways that fans communicate and support one another through their

activities I hope for this thesis to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the *yaoi* fandom, the diverse range of identities, and varied experiences. I have shown the fans' desires and experiences in varying contexts in which *yaoi* manga and *AarinFantasy* brings the fans together as a caring and engaged community of friends. This inevitably has impact on understanding how online communities can become valued to their members. The site is an online community for *yaoi* fans and has been incredibly successful in bringing together a diverse group of individuals who would otherwise have not known one another and been able to tell their stories.

It appears that an online community must be able to meet the requirements of its members and be able to maintain this provision over a period of time. Indeed to survive *AarinFantasy* has provided the benefits and experiences that fans seek. In *AarinFantasy*, dialogue between members is the fundamental means by which individuals can find what that they are searching for. Whether they are asking direct questions to one another or simply searching for somewhere to discuss *yaoi* manga in general, those fans that join and interact with others are boosting their chances in the community to receive what they seek. Similarly, the success of the community appears dependent on the desire of its members to continue their interaction with one another over a period will only continue their participation as long as it serves their needs better than alternative sources.

I would suggest that my netnographic research on *AarinFantasy*, including the interviews with several participants, reveals a number of key factors that contribute to an online community's success. Firstly, interactive community features provide a means for the fans to build meaningful relationships with one another, and secondly

*AarinFantasy* presents a culture of openness that is required to foster and maintain trust and respect within the site.

In regards to the first, Rich Gordon (2010) writes about interactivity in an online environment as ‘community experience’ which includes participation and socialisation and it is the motivation of an online community’s members to connect with one another that creates stronger ties and loyalty to the site. Randall Collins (2004) also writes that for interaction to occur there must be a level of group assembly, mutual focus of attention, and emotional attachment for what he refers to as ‘collective effervescence’ to emerge. Whilst Collins is referring to actual physical interactions in an offline environment, *AarinFantasy* is an excellent example of how these interactions can occur in an online environment. This is due to the fact that such a massive group of diverse *yaoi* fans would not have been able to create a similar environment offline. For them, the online instance is, in many cases, the only chance they have to meet like-minded others. The formation of strong ties enables members’ commitment to the community thus facilitating an actual formation of community. The examples of the communication between fans on the site are good examples of how interactivity between emotionally close fans’ can give way to friendships and fans embracing their community.

*AarinFantasy* has created a culture of its own with its own values, norms, and attitudes to certain topics, particularly those regarding gender and sexuality as shown throughout the thesis. This kind of formation in an online setting is only possible if there is an actual community in the first place, regardless of its dispersed nature, which can share its emotions, values, and experiences via the online medium. Tyrone Adam and Stephen Smith (2008), for example, refer to an online community as an:

exclusive, narrowly focused, network-supported aggregate of human beings in cyberspace who are bound together by a common purpose and employ a common protocol and procedure for the consensual exchange of information and opinions. (Adam and Smith 2008, p.17)

*AarinFantasy* is exclusive to a specific group of people who have an interest in *yaoi* manga, otherwise their conversations would have little base and it is also inclusive because the community is not dominated by any one type of *yaoi* fan or one particular reading of *yaoi* manga, rather all interpretations are welcome and actively encouraged through open discussion.

*How do fans' interactions help create the community?*

The fans' desire for meaningful emotional interaction has been one of the key contributions of the study. I suggest that this particular characteristic facilitates community loyalty and maintained participation. These factors of research may now be applied to other online groups as critical factors for the permanence of other communities.

The important point is that the social and the emotional should, and perhaps must, exist concurrently as they do on *AarinFantasy* because they encourage the members' interaction whilst also maintaining their own culture which becomes invaluable for them. However, online communities are continually changing and it can be difficult to understand what makes any one successful, but what is clear from the existence of some less popular or 'dead' online communities is that technology alone cannot support a successful online community. I would suggest that whilst a well laid out site with useful features can be the base, for an online community's success the social and cultural are crucial. The purpose of my research was to gain a better understanding of

the *yaoi* fandom and the types of interactions that took place within one such community. The results imply that understanding affect in online communities will be useful for creators and researchers of online communities.

Affect has played a large part in this study in terms of the fans' affective responses to the community as it fulfils their needs to find an alternative space online. Fans turn to *AarinFantasy* for support in terms of discussing alternative sexuality and gender, or simply finding a place to discuss a text that is potentially problematic to consume publicly. Therefore, in studies of online communities and why individuals turn to them in place of offline contacts I believe it is crucial to understand the needs and feelings of members. Indeed, in terms of sexuality and gender the need for social support was highly prevalent due to the perceived stigmatic nature of *yaoi* manga. Interest in these topics from a community that is largely comprised of queer individuals is not particularly surprising but what is surprising is that a great deal are unwilling to discuss their emergent or queer sexualities with those offline and have taken to an online community to seek advice and discussion with others. Therefore this study provides an insight into the benefits received by different types of users and the different types of online behaviour. It is clear that online environments are being used to ask a variety of sensitive questions and the discussions that members have are full of personal stories, opinions, advice and, as a result, are emotionally charged. In the future, online communities can consider ways to foster these types of interactions in different contexts. Indeed, future studies may consider addressing the effectiveness of the internet as an ideal environment for queer discussion and support.

One of the most important contributions of this thesis is that not only are individuals turning online for emotional, as well as informational support, but they are also giving

and receiving a great deal of information about themselves to others as well as advice covering a wide range of issues. My data shows that one of the main reasons why individuals join an online community is to share personal information with others which could be argued to be one of the primary rationales for why people go online. Does this suggest by turning to the internet to find affective resonance we are turning the internet into its own social being as opposed to a basic source of information seeking practices? My data, at this point, would suggest so implying that online communities, like 'real' ones, are joined not simply for information but also because they serve the affective requirement of its members such as finding friendship, social support, and a safe space within which to express and share personal histories.

The integration of the internet into online community members' lives is creating new spaces at the intersection between offline and the online realms as boundaries between people and places are blurred thus enabling new forms of connection to emerge. I described *AarinFantasy* as an 'imagined' community (Anderson 1991) but perhaps this description can be pushed further to imagine the internet itself as 'imaginary' because many groups are forming senses of community and commitment to one another, indeed, it appears that a great deal of individual's online experiences are being gratified online and are not entirely separate from our 'offline lives' (Baym 1995). It may be the case that online groups are often considered to be real by their members because, as result of affective resonance, they establish a "sense of place" (Polson 2013). The idea of considering the internet as an imaginary space can be seen in the stories that are shared between users via mediating technology which can often be thought of as taking place in an online community. It can also be seen in the use of communal language that is prevalent in some online groupings such as *AarinFantasy*. Indeed "the metaphor of...community gives members a common image they can use

to make their mediated experience...more visible and even more tangible (Chayko 2014, p.979).

In this thesis I have shown how an internet based community has formed via the generation and maintenance of feelings to such an extent that individuals 'feel' the connection with others and it can be such a powerful feeling that individuals actively chose to utilise the internet to fulfil their social needs. As a result we may consider the internet as not simply a virtual space that is 'not-quite-real' but as an imaginary space. The internet's users may not physically 'know' all the other users, they are unlikely to meet all the other internet users in the world, but that does not detract from the "we feeling" (Schutz cited in Chayko 2014) that its users experience.

My study has been a small, but significant, contribution to understanding the internet's impact on affective communication through the use of netnography examining the participants' thoughts, feelings, and emotions and has thus been a useful means to offer insights into the way that online communities help individuals deal with experiences such as isolation and disconnection by forming new, and often intimate, connections online. I have also discussed the importance of affect in terms of its significance for the continued participation of an online community's members. Future research could continue this by considering how affect shapes members' actions as well as how interaction between individuals who have differing motivations for joining contribute to the community's function and existence. Research would benefit from paying attention to individual motivations rather than assuming that all members of a community have similar participatory rationales.

Moreover, my research relates to a number of research questions that could be of importance for the development of studying mediated affect regarding how affect

emerges in digital environments. My results suggest that netnography is a suitable means to examine this topic. Methodologically I have shown that *AarinFantasy* demonstrates how online communities can be rich data sources to study highly personal issues related to identity that may in fact be much more difficult to study offline. The message board threads and other archives present in some online communities are an ideal means to study many phenomena of hard to reach populations, even those that we may not be aware exist offline due to their largely hidden or online existence. Whether individuals are turning to online communities because of time convenience or a lack of offline support it is a simple fact that a massive group of individuals are signing on to an online community almost daily. Therefore, when future scholars wish to examine the affective aspects of their chosen fandoms or the emotional connections that individuals make with texts and other fans, it may well be an excellent idea to turn to the online environment for information.

This study stands as the first step towards an understanding of the types of social contexts that *yaoi* fans find themselves in as well as the types of support that they seek. By understanding the types of interactions that fans take part in, not only can the needs of the *yaoi* fans be identified but also the overall impact of an online community on marginalised groups can be considered in terms of the services it provides for its members. With demonstrations of group support and personal experiences being shared amongst fans there is an implication for the design and examination of future online communities. By understanding what types of interactions between members are important, researchers, community organisers, and administrators would be better placed to create and support online communities that are suited to their groups' needs. In addition these findings are beneficial to the creation and implementation of community features to existing online communities that are seeking to expand on their

online socially interactive presence. As a practical recommendation for future researchers, when examining online communities researchers should consider that the members of the online communities are not simply there for information but also for friendship and social support because in some cases these particular activities are the primary objectives for its members.

Ethnographic research into online communities is, by its very nature, a selective process. Therefore the results of this study could be further tested by the inclusion of other types of online communities. This is because the data in this study suggest that the motivation to join an online community is related to the overall concept of community as opposed to information seeking, and as a result more research could validate these findings. Being able to cover more groups in the future would enable any project to give more generalizable results. An alternative approach would be to study the threads of a failed community, in the similar topic area of *yaoi* manga fandom, to understand whether or not the social and cultural factors that appear to support the success of *AarinFantasy* existed or not. Moreover, a long-term research project of a newly formed fan community could be conducted to understand what factors enable a community to grow or which ones contribute to its failure.

It is evident that fans are more than willing to spend their time in an online community; however they are selective regarding the communities they elect to stay in. Other individuals wishing to create and maintain an online fan community could benefit from considering the issues discussed in this thesis. For example, what is the goal of the community, how does one motivate members to contribute their own stories and ideas, does the community have values that correspond with those of its members, and how are these values decided upon? Does the site have a means to establish and

maintain relationships between fans? These are all questions that should be considered by those wishing to establish a successful online community such as *AarinFantasy*.

## **Recommendations**

### *The proliferation of yaoi in the future*

As Grossberg (1992b) and Jensen (1992) suggest, we are all fans of something based on our own personal interests, but what makes certain interests more acceptable than others? As I found, many fans commented on the stigmatised nature of their fandom and how they felt it necessary to hide it from friends and family. However, if society continues with a trend to more tolerance of homosexuality in general I wonder, how will the importance of fan sites such as *AarinFantasy* fare as attitudes change and *yaoi*, perhaps, becomes more popular? Will the importance of socialisation between *yaoi* fans change as the felt need to find like-minded others with whom to share *yaoi* decrease if *yaoi* manga becomes more mainstream?

In a recent article on the BBC titled “Do gay people still need gay bars?”<sup>42</sup> the necessity of gay bars was questioned as “Britain, and many countries [move] towards total legal equality”. My initial response after reading the short article was to question the author’s rationalisation that legal enshrinement would naturally mean total acceptance in the daily lives of gay people as well as the affective power that having a ‘community’ location has. Indeed, in the article many gay and lesbian people shared my concern that a legal standing would not magically change the opinion of the public. Thus, even as the *yaoi* genre may become more popular, or its availability more widespread, I wonder if this will have any change on the *yaoi* fan community itself.

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<sup>42</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-26817128> [Last Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2014]

Moreover, if *yaoi* becomes available in more places, will *yaoi* fans still feel the need to come together online and help one another or will the consumption of *yaoi* become much more localised to the individual's immediate surroundings negating the need for an international online community? Similarly, as *AarinFantasy* attracts more and more numbers, perhaps within the next couple years even hitting the million member mark, will it become the architect of its own demise as it becomes less personal and as members split off to form their own groups? Perhaps, we can see this already happening as fans discuss the desire to be able to use alternative languages on *AarinFantasy* other than English.

These questions may be pessimistic, but I believe that despite the increasing size of the community the fans will still be able to find those few others with whom to connect via *yaoi* manga. Most of the fans I spoke with cited at least one important friendship which was formed and maintained through *AarinFantasy*. Therefore as the community becomes larger and expands I believe that the friendships formed online through the site will continue to survive in spite of any changes to the *yaoi* manga landscape. Whether or not *AarinFantasy* manages to maintain its position as a beacon for the fans remains to be seen.

#### *Yaoi and empowered queer fans*

It has been my intention with the thesis to encourage a nuanced understanding of the *yaoi* fandom. I discussed in chapter three how fans believed that those external to the fandom didn't truly understand what *yaoi* meant to them and dismissed it as homosexual pornography. However, I emphasised how fans believe that it should not be viewed as pornography because they focus on the relationships between the characters and not the sexual acts. Overall, fans are convinced that *yaoi* is not about

the sex, but the relationships that were able to present a range of romantic contexts and that whilst some sex was involved; it was not the focus and is not important for the narrative. On the other hand, by arguing against the idea that *yaoi* manga is pornography I wonder whether or not *yaoi* fans are fighting against themselves and removing agency and power from their *yaoi* consumption. For example, whilst I do not want to suggest that *yaoi* is or isn't a form of pornography, I wonder if by emphasising romance over sex, fans are maintaining their marginalised positions in society. For example, many of the fans suggest that they either don't want to or don't feel guilty for being *yaoi* fans, but nonetheless hide their *yaoi* fandom because this is how friends and family make them feel.

Whilst *yaoi* may become less controversial as attitudes towards homosexuality become more accepted, in order for *yaoi* to be less stigmatised there may also need to be a change in perceptions of viewing potentially pornographic texts. By suggesting these ideas I do not intend to invalidate the rationales for enjoying but I simply question whether or not the relationship is the only part of the fans' interest. Similarly, if *yaoi* manga is downplayed as a pornographic text by the fans, do *yaoi* fans also destabilise their own agency as fan for whom it is more than appropriate to consume a pornographic text as empowering as thought of by feminist scholars in the debate surrounding pornography during the 1970s.

## **Limitations and Future Considerations**

My thesis has been an analysis of one online *yaoi* fan community and details the variety of fans and how *yaoi* fits into and affects their lives. However, information on their daily lives and offline actions are largely anecdotal. Moreover, I do not know much about the amount of time and activities related to *yaoi* that the fans take part in,

or the money that they spend on their *yaoi* activities such as donating to the site itself or purchasing hard-copies of *yaoi* manga. However, details about their online activities have been the focus of this thesis and provided the main empirical evidence concerning *yaoi* manga fans and their online activities. The majority of the fans involved are not the most active members of the community in terms of content that they upload or create. Indeed there are fans on the site that create artwork and videos dedicated to *yaoi* manga who represent a smaller but passionate proportion of the *yaoi* fan community on *AarinFantasy*. On the other side of the scale are those fans who read only and do not post in the threads or communicate with other fans. These ‘lurkers’ form a large part of many fandoms and it is extremely difficult to understand how much they gain from their online participation without any interaction with other fans and I can only speculate as to why an individual may choose not to contribute to the communication. Taking these limitations into account, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of *yaoi* fandom one could consider the combination of supplementing online research with offline methods such as face-to-face interviews with fans, or focus group discussions. Indeed, I have discovered recently that in Malaysia the creator of the site, Aarin, now attends manga conventions and informs other fans in the regional area that she hopes to meet up with other members of the site offline.

I would like to take that opportunity in the future to research more into fan identities and to explore more about their offline performances. Related to the methodology of the thesis, I have examined *AarinFantasy* as a bounded community that fans enter and leave as *yaoi* fans, however, individuals are rarely fans of one thing. A *yaoi* fan may also be a fan of *yuri* manga, or traditional *shōnen* manga and in each of these cases the manga community may provide a purpose for different rationales that each fan has. In this case, a *yaoi* community could be compared with a *yuri* or *hentai* manga

community in order to understand how demographics and social relationships between fans change as they enter and leave different fan communities.

*Yaoi* fandom is also now a global phenomenon and making generalisations when considering an international online community complicates the international cultural and legal differences that may occur. The majority of fans in my study were located in Western Europe and Northern America and so it becomes difficult to claim that this is an example of global *yaoi* fandom as I am unable to generalise these results to what fan experience may be like in other countries such as the Middle East where, without any knowledge on the topic, I would assume that there are limitations on access to texts that contain homosexual/homoerotic content. Thus it might be useful in future to use a similar approach to expand our knowledge of *yaoi* fans within single locales though it would become difficult to do so in countries where there are legal and cultural blocks on potentially problematic internet sites or where large scale manga conventions are not *yaoi*-friendly.

As this thesis is focused on *yaoi* fandom that is external to Japan, indeed none of my participants were Japanese, it would also be interesting to compare Japanese *yaoi* fandoms with non-Japanese *yaoi* fandoms to see how they are similar and/or different. Japanese fans have the luxury of having more influence via feedback on the *yaoi* manga industry, more organised and visible fan structures and events to attend, as well as greater access to manga as it is easily found in any bookshop or convenience store. It would be interesting, for example, to see if increased visibility and access to *yaoi* has any influence on the activities of Japanese *yaoi* fans who may not feel any intense stigma related to being a *yaoi* fan. It would also be useful in conducting comparative studies of *yaoi* fandom to understand how the status of different fan groups in respective countries alter reception and understanding of *yaoi* manga. For example, do

fans in countries where images of homosexuality are more diverse and open still have an affective connection with *yaoi* manga fan communities compared to those countries where homosexuality is more stigmatised and underground?

Loosely related to the contexts of different countries, is the question, 'why are Western fans drawn to a Japanese text rather than Western media that would presumably be more accessible?' In this case the work of subcultural theory could be of use to understand how some individuals make a conscious choice to consume certain texts in order to distinguish themselves from others. It is important to understand why fans choose *yaoi* manga over local homosexual texts such as LGBT romance literature or why fans pick manga and anime texts consuming *yaoi* instead of slash. Indeed, being fans of *yaoi* instead of slash goes against traditional ideas of cultural flows originating in the West to the rest in the form of American films and television suggesting a possibility of investigating the issues of orientalism or images of Japan and 'Japaneseness' in Japanese made *yaoi* texts as well as fan created *yaoi* texts based on original Japanese manga.

I mentioned in my methodology how in my preliminary survey I asked fans about their interests in Japan and Japanese culture and found in some comments that fans discussed their perceptions of a more liberal Japanese attitude towards gender and sexuality based on their *yaoi* manga consumption. In future I would welcome the opportunity to foray into examining the transcultural aspect of the fandom in greater depth to understand the origins of the fans' perceptions about Japanese culture if they believed they were true. Similarly, what may happen if fans discover that Japan is, or is not, what they believe it to be? Would fans stop enjoying manga as much as they had previously? Would it stop being a fantasy text? Or, alternatively, does the Japanese cultural aspect have little or nothing to do with the fans' enjoyment? If this is the case,

I would reiterate the question of why fans elect to consume *yaoi* manga over other texts. Of course, this kind of thinking assumes that *yaoi* fans are only fans of *yaoi* and nothing else which I am sure is untrue. A potential avenue of future research could be to investigate individuals who are fans of both *yaoi* manga and slash fiction and compare the two. Does *yaoi* provide something slash does not and vice versa? Despite the fact that they are often mentioned together in research literature, a comparative analysis of slash and *yaoi* fandom is yet to be conducted but it is one that could provide for an understanding of the pleasure of each text and may allow for clearer interpretations of the two.

Related to the issue of the manga texts is the fact that this thesis has relied on fan posts and interviews for its evidence and has not provided an in-depth analysis into the content of *yaoi* manga thus lacking in context. I made this decision to focus on the fan voices and less on interpretations of specific *yaoi* texts in order to provide a more detailed analysis of the wider *yaoi* community. In particular I wished to focus on the importance of *yaoi*, as a genre, in the fans' lives and why fans of different demographics all came to the same fan site forming a community with one another. I took this approach in opposition to examining how fans interpreted *yaoi* which has already been presented in previous literature examining how individual fans come to their interpretations after reading particular series (Galbraith 2011; Meyer 2010; Mizoguchi 2008; Nagaike 2003; Ueno 1998). However this approach runs the risk of presenting an overly cohesive community that does not differ in opinion over textual interpretations or has differing *yaoi* 'tastes'. Mizoguchi (2008) writes in her own work that fans are often required to 'declare' their 'tastes' to a community so that other members can understand what kind of *yaoi* they find interesting and thus, perhaps, what kind of an individual they are. Further investigation into this avenue could

demonstrate any rifts that exist in the community allowing a greater impact upon a nuanced understanding of the community in terms of hierarchy, anti-fandom, and power. Indeed, now that we know there are different ‘types’ of *yaoi* fans, the interpretations of the main tropes that they are making, and the importance of *yaoi* manga and the fan community in their lives, it is time to investigate just how cohesive the fan community is. The reinsertion of the (con)text into such an examination may shed light on divisions and differences in tastes and whether particular series, themes, settings, or characters appeal to any particular demographic groups.

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## Appendices

### A. Script of Interview Questions

This is a list of questions that I have utilised in a semi-structured interview setting. The list is extensive but not exhaustive and is designed to promote a dialogue rather than a standard back and forth interview setting. As a result not all questions were asked whilst others were investigated in more depth with additional questions that might be required should the situation have arisen.

#### *Yaoi Manga and Japan*

1. Do you consider yourself a manga fan?
  - a. If not, how would you define your connection to manga?
2. Are you a member of any fan sites?
3. How did you become interested in manga?
4. Do you think there are degrees of manga fandom?
  - a. For example, what do you think about the word 'otaku'? Would you object to being called one?
  - b. What kind of fans are there and what are the differences between them?  
Which one are you?
5. Are you interested in Japan?
6. Have you ever been to Japan?
  - a. Would you like to go?
7. Have you ever had any contact with Japanese people either online or offline?
  - a. What was the contact like?
  - b. What happened?
  - c. What did you talk about, what did you do?
8. What aspects about Japan are you interested in?
  - a. Do you try to learn about them? (classes etc)
    - i. How do you do this? Do you use the internet or mainly offline?
      1. If you use the internet do you use any community sites?
  - b. What are your goals related to learning about Japan and Japanese life?

- i. Do you think you have achieved any of these goals? What are the reasons for this?
- 9. There are a lot of stereotypes about what Japan is like. Do you think you have any stereotypes or do you think what you know is accurate?
  - a. Do you think that reading manga has changed your impressions of Japan and Japanese society in general?
    - i. If you do, can you give me some examples?
- 10. Do you think it is important to know about Japanese culture and to understand it in order to fully understand *yaoi* or manga in general?
  - a. If not, why do you think this?
  - b. If you do think it's important, how much knowledge about Japan would you say is sufficient?
    - i. How do you learn this knowledge, where does it come from?
- 11. Do you feel that reading *yaoi* manga has affected your knowledge about Japan?
  - a. If it has can you think of any examples of how this happened?
  - b. Have you learnt anything new? What was it?
  - c. Have any of your previous ideas changed? How did they change?
- 12. Why do you think (*yaoi*) manga has become popular outside of Japan?
  - a. What is its appeal to fans?
  - b. What is its appeal to you personally?
- 13. Do you like other genres of manga?
  - a. Which ones do you like?
  - b. Which ones do you not like?
- 14. How does manga compare with viewing live action drama, manga, film or other mediums?
- 15. Can you speak Japanese?
  - a. If you can or if you could, would you like to read the manga in original Japanese?
  - b. Does it bother you when an original manga is altered (dubbed, edited, made into live action etc.) If so, why does this bother you?
  - c. Do you feel that by reading manga your Japanese language skills have been affected in any way?
- 16. It is often said that (*yaoi*) manga is just full of sex and violence, what do you think about this statement?

17. Do you think the manga reflects Japanese culture?
  - a. If so, how? Do you think it is an accurate representation?
18. Is there anything in manga that you find or have found difficult to understand?
  - a. How did you overcome this?
19. Are you able to relate to manga characters?
  - a. Do you think they seem real or correspond to actual people offline?
20. Is Japanese culture accessible to you?
  - a. Is it easy to understand?
  - b. Does your participation online help with understanding aspects about Japanese culture?
  - c. Do people ask each other questions?
21. Have you ever obtained information about *yaoi* manga, or manga, or Japanese popular culture from a 'Japanese' person?

### **Manga related activities**

1. Do you participate with other fans regarding manga? Online chats, drawing, reading magazines etc.
2. Is it important to you that others understand your interest in manga?
3. Is manga reading a more private experience for you or do you prefer to read it with other fans? Do you hang out with other fans either offline or online?
4. Do you try to get other people interested in the manga?
5. What sort of attitudes have you encountered toward your interest in manga?
6. What sort of attitudes have you encountered toward your interest in *yaoi* manga?
7. How much time do you think you spend on activities related to manga such as reading, participating in groups, online activities?
8. Can you tell me about an experience with manga that was particularly significant for you?
9. Have you ever had a negative experience related to manga or your interest in manga?
10. Do you use other *yaoi* fan websites?
  - a. If you do, why did you decide to use them?
  - b. What kind of things do you do on there?

11. Can you tell me about your thoughts regarding manga publishers or manga companies?
  - a. Are there any shops near you that sell manga?
  - b. Do you think manga artists think about their international audience?
12. Unless it is made explicit to the contrary, do you think that *yaoi* characters are Japanese?
  - a. How do you decide this? What informs your decision?
  - b. If there was no contextual information, just a face, would you say they were Asian, Japanese, etc?
13. Is the Japaneseness of the *yaoi* manga/community important to you?
  - a. Do you only read Japanese manga?
14. Have you ever had experience with manga licensers, producers or artists?
  - a. Which ones?
  - b. What was the contact like?
  - c. What happened?
  - d. Were there any problems?
15. Do you often read scanlations?
  - a. Do you only read unlicensed or both?
  - b. Does licensing matter to you?
  - c. Why does it matter or not matter?
  - d. Are you worried about the legality of reading manga online?
16. Is manga Japanese?
  - a. Is its origin Japanese but the medium itself can be from anywhere now?  
What does that mean?
  - b. Can manga ever not be Japanese?
17. How Japanese is the manga you consume online?
18. Do you think manga artists and producers take international fans into consideration when they make new manga?
19. Do you go to manga and anime conventions?
  - a. Would you like to go?
  - b. What kind of things do you do there?
  - c. Does this affect your participation online in anyway?
20. Does manga sell Japaneseness?

- a. Do you think that sometimes Japaneseness is emphasised in order to sell or make the product more commercial?

### **Online Community**

- 1) Could you describe the website to me a little bit?
  - a) Is it friendly? What are your experiences of this?
- 2) How long have you been a member for?
- 3) How often do you visit the site?
- 4) What made you want to sign up in the first place?
- 5) Would you consider yourself an experienced member or new?
  - a) Why do you say that?
  - b) What has changed in your participation since you joined the website?
- 6) Since you joined the website, what role does *yaoi* play for you now?
  - a) When you are using the website and community with other people do you find yourself talking about *yaoi* or other things the most?
- 7) What has been the best experience?
  - a) Can you describe this to me?
- 8) What has been the worst experience?
  - a) Can you describe this to me?
- 9) What do you mostly use the site for?
- 10) Does the website have a goal?
  - a) What do you think it is?
  - b) What is your personal goal?
- 11) What types of things are you looking for on the website?
- 12) What keeps you participating on the website?
  - a) What are the things that you think keep the website going on the whole? What keeps it popular and why do people keep coming back?
- 13) What kind of things do you contribute to the website?
  - a) Why do you do this?
  - b) What kind of response do you get from people when you do it?
- 14) As you look for things about Japan in the website what are your thoughts about Japan? How do they change if at all?
- 15) How do you deal with any problems you have with finding out about Japan?

- 16) What kind of help can you get from the website when you are searching for something to do with Japan or *yaoi*?
- 17) How has the website helped with your searches and situation?

### **Investigating the community**

1. Is the website a community or not?
2. Why do you say this?
3. If it is a community what makes it a community?
4. Does it feel real or authentic even though it is online and you may not ever meet these people?
5. Is it any different to an offline community?
6. Do you think that it is a Japanese community?
7. Why do you think that?
8. How much of yourself do you disclose to people on the website? Name, age, location etc.
9. Do you ever keep things about yourself secret?
10. Why do you do this?
11. Do you ever give false information about yourself online?
12. Why do you do this?
13. Is it important that people keep their offline identities online? Does it matter if people online do not tell the truth about themselves?
14. What kind of methods do you use to decide what kind a person is like?
15. What do you think about lurkers or people who do not actively participate on the website?
16. Do you adapt how you speak when you are participating online?
17. How do you do this?
18. Do you often think lots before you post something, i.e. do you research things to make sure they are accurate before you comment on something?
19. Do you feel personally or emotionally close to any of the other users on the site?
20. What do you think allows or doesn't allow you to think that way?
21. How do you communicate with other users the most? What kind of mediums do you use; these can include things in the website or even methods outside of the website.
22. Do you have different kinds of friendships online?

23. Do you ever use the chat rooms on the website?
24. If you what is it like for you? What is the difference from the main forum threads?
25. If you don't, why not?
26. Can you describe your personal profile page to me a little bit and explain the choices you made when designing it? Images, colours, text, avatar etc.
27. Diaspora Consciousness – When you are online in the community do you feel that you are away from home? I.e. do you feel like you are in a different place or do you feel like you are in your physical location?
28. If you do, how would you describe this place?
29. How is the Japaneseness of the site maintained? What kind of things do the users or the administration do or use in order to maintain it?
30. Are users expected to have an allegiance to the site in any way? Or are users expected to have a common allegiance to something?
31. Would say you put a lot of effort into your fan activities?
32. What kinds of things do you that take effort?
33. Why do you put in such effort?
34. Do you hope to get anything back in return?
35. What kind of feedback do you get from people?
36. Why do you contribute to the site? What urges you to do this?
37. Do you often share things with other users online?
38. What kind of things do you share?
39. Why do you share?
40. What does sharing/receiving mean to you?
41. Do you tend to share or receive more often?
42. Would you consider yourself a beginner user online or do you have lots of experience? Consumer to creator.
43. If you are a newcomer, what do you think about the site and other users?
  - a. Do you think you can become a more central user of the site?
  - b. How do you think you can do this?
  - c. Do you ask more experienced users of the site for help?
44. If you have lots of experience, how did you gain this experience?
  - a. What kind of things did you do?
  - b. Do you have any privileges as an experienced user?
  - c. Do you often help people who are less used to the site?

45. Have you experienced a 'division of labour' online, i.e. do users perform particular jobs on the site or are certain groups more well known for certain aspects of activity on the site.
  - a. I.e. are their sub communities that help the broader community?
46. Is the site a safe place to explore Japan and Japaneseness?
47. What kind of user would you describe yourself as?
48. Lurker, passive, medium, active, producer/contributor?
49. Can you tell me why you chose your user name?
50. Is there a story behind it?
51. Does it have any relation to your real name?
52. Do you keep a blog on the site? What for?
53. Is your manga fan site dedicated to Japan and Japaneseness? Or is it its own entity?
  - I.e. is it important that what is shown online may not be truly authentically Japanese?
54. Is your offline identity important to your online activities?
55. How would you describe your offline identity? How is it different to your online identity?
56. Do you try to create a distinct identity online?
57. How do you do this?
58. Do you do it in relation to the site?
59. How much information do you like to know about other people with whom you speak to online?
60. How much information do you ask for about other people?
61. Are you often asked about your offline identity?
62. What kinds of things do people ask about?
63. By maintaining anonymity online do you reveal more of your real self to people?
64. When you contribute to the fan communities what are the reasons for this?
  - a. Ambition, integrity on the site?
65. When you are participating online, do you feel fully immersed?
66. i.e., do you have any external distractions or do you do multiple activities at the same time?
67. Do you consider your participation as work sometimes?
68. Do you think you invest enough time and effort into something for it to be called work?

69. Are the products you create commodities?
70. Would you like to be paid for them?
71. Does the fact that it's not the same make it any less authentic?
72. How Japanese is the fan site? Does it represent Japaneseness well?

### **Control in the website**

1. How is order maintained online on the website? How is a positive atmosphere sustained?
2. Other than the rules laid out in the FAQ are there some commonly held ideas about what is and what isn't acceptable?
3. How is content controlled online? Must everything online be *yaoi* or related to Japan?
4. Are people expected to know or think in a certain way about Japan?
5. Are certain things stressed as being Japanese on the website?
6. Do you think people have different levels of authority on the site?
  - a. How about amongst non-admins and moderators?
  - b. How about in terms of knowledge about things? Are there certain people that are well known to know more about something than others?
  - c. How well do you need to know a person?
7. Does it feel like there is a hierarchy where one person controls everything?
8. Other than admins and mods, is there any user online who you think are respected for some reasons?
9. Buddy system – are you a member? How does it work for you? Did you ask questions or did your senpai tell you what to do without asking?
10. Do all members have a responsibility?
11. By using an online website, do you think everyone is equal in their position?
12. How does someone become an admin or a moderator and what do they do once they have got that role?
13. Would the fan site ever be able to become a non-*yaoi* website and change focus to community?
14. How did you learn about the rules of the site?
15. Did you read them all or did you learn through participation?

## B. Script of Preliminary Survey Questions

This list of questions was posted online to *AarinFantasy* before conducting the interviews and was used in order to have a basic understanding of the fan community.

1. Sex at birth?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Other:
2. How old are you?
3. What is your sexuality?
4. What is your race? E.G. White, Black, Asian, Hispanic etc
5. What is your nationality? E.G. American, British, Spanish
6. What is your primary language?
7. What is your level of education?
8. What is your occupation?

### Questions about Manga

1. How often do you read manga?
2. Have you read any *yaoi* manga (in any language?) in the past 30 days?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Unsure
3. How did you become interested in *yaoi* manga?
4. At what age did you start reading *yaoi* manga?
5. What in your mind is *yaoi*?
6. What are some of your favourite manga (any manga, in any language, from any country)? List as many as ten. Please include the name(s) of the creator(s) if you can. Leave blank if you have no favorites. (If the title is not English, please write the title in the Latin alphabet and provide an English translation if you can. If the title is Japanese, there is no need to translate. This form cannot accept non-Latin characters.)
7. Can you tell me about an experience with *yaoi* manga that was particularly significant for you?

8. Are you able to relate to *yaoi* manga characters? [i.e. how real do they seem]
9. Does it bother you when an original manga is altered? [edited, made into live-action]. If so, can you tell me a little about why?
10. When you read *yaoi* manga, do you sometimes put yourself in the place of the protagonist, or do you always read objectively?
11. Please can you list some key words that best describe Japan before you read any manga?
12. Please can you list any keywords that best describe Japan since you started reading manga?
13. How did you first encounter the *yaoi* genre of manga?
14. What leads you to continue to write or draw or read *yaoi*?
15. Would you like to read manga in its original Japanese? Are there any reasons why?
16. Is there anything in manga you read that you find difficult to understand? How did you deal with this?

#### Manga online

1. Is it important to you that others understand your interest in manga?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Other:
2. Is manga more of private experience for you, or do you prefer to watch with other fans? Do you spend time communicating with fans online or offline?
3. Which sites do you like to use the most?
4. Do you participate with other fans regarding manga? (on-line chats, drawing, reading fanzines, etc.)
5. Do you try to interest others in manga?
6. What in your mind is the internet's role in your experience with *yaoi*? What has the internet helped you do?

#### Language and Culture

1. When you read *yaoi* do you think of it as a distinctively Japanese product?
2. Unless otherwise stated, do you think that the characters in *yaoi* manga are Japanese? Can you explain your reasons for this?

3. Do you think it is important to know about Japanese culture and to understand it in order to read manga? How much Japanese would you suggest is good enough to understand?
4. Do you feel reading manga affects your knowledge about Japan? If you think it has, can you give some examples?
5. Do you feel that you've learned something about Japanese culture by reading manga? If you think it has, can you give me some examples?
6. How much do you think you can learn about Japanese life by reading manga?
7. Do you think that manga reflects Japanese culture? If so, how? Do you think it is an accurate representation?
8. Are you interested in other aspects of Japanese culture?
9. Have you ever taken a class on Japanese culture? If not, would you like to? If so, what class?
10. What are your goals related to learning about Japan and Japanese life?
11. People have many ideas and stereotypes about what Japan is like. Do you believe that reading manga has changed your impressions of Japan and Japanese society in general? If you do, can you give me some examples?
12. Have you ever been to Japan? Would you like to go?
13. What kind of contact have you had with Japanese people?