"Sexually explicit fanfiction probably saved my life, because I knew that there were other people out there thinking the same thing as me": Exploring healing, community, and meaning through sexually explicit fanfiction

by

Jessica Lynn Henault

B.S., Washburn University, 2017

M.S., Kansas State University, 2019

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

School of Human Sciences

College of Health and Human Sciences

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2026

Abstract

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Approved by:

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my soul kitty, Dr. Buffy Lynn Henault. So much of my love and grief for you is intertwined with this dissertation. I miss you and look for you in every storm cloud and every sunrise. Thank you for making me promise to see this through to the end. I love you, and I will find you in every lifetime we are given. Dr. Girlies, always and forever.

Chapter 1- Introduction

Across the life course, individuals develop and negotiate their sexual selves within broader social and cultural contexts (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Morgan & van Dulmen, 2021; Moser, 2016). This process may include exploring sexual identity (Parmenter et al., 2022), sexual interests and attractions (Olmstead, 2020), sexual behaviors (Winkeljohn Black et al., 2019), and sexual orientation (Hall et al., 2021). For some, college can offer opportunities for discovery, experimentation, and personal growth through new relationships, communities, ideas, and experiences (Arnett, 2024; Gold et al., 2021; Renn & Reason, 2021). These opportunities can coexist with experiences that constrain sexual development. Sexual violence is one such experience, potentially limiting individuals' ability to explore sexuality in contexts of safety and agency. It is associated with adverse mental health outcomes (Bilips & Bates, 2021), and mental health concerns are widespread across campus populations (Lipson et al., 2022). These outcomes may be compounded for people with marginalized identities, who may also encounter discrimination, stigma, and sociopolitical conditions that affect their well-being, belonging, and developing sense of self (Conron et al., 2022; Mayo & Le, 2023; Truskauskaite-Kuneviciene et al., 2020; Williams Institute, 2020). Such experiences may remain meaningful after enrollment ends, as individuals continue to navigate sexuality, identity, and belonging across the life course.

Young women ages 18 to 24 are 74% more likely to experience sexual violence if they attend a college or university than young women who are not enrolled, and women who live on campus are three times more likely to experience sexual violence than their commuter peers (DuBois & Pedneault, 2026). This elevated risk is particularly pronounced among queer and transgender college students, who experience some of the highest rates of sexual victimization within college populations (Hindes et al., 2025). Queer and transgender students also face

heightened vulnerability to discrimination, bias, and harassment, ranging from verbal harassment and social exclusion to cyberbullying and verbal or physical threats (Yang & Stolzenberg, 2025). Hate crimes on college campuses continue to increase, with race, sexual orientation, and religion representing the most common targets (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). These safety concerns exist alongside widespread psychological distress among college students, which may be particularly pronounced among marginalized students navigating discrimination, identity-based hostility, and broader sociopolitical threats (Qeadan et al., 2022). Although these findings describe risks and experiences within college populations, their effects may remain relevant after a person's enrollment ends. For currently enrolled and formerly enrolled students alike, experiences of violence, discrimination, and identity-based hostility can affect psychological well-being and sense of belonging.

Mental health concerns continue to affect a substantial portion of currently enrolled college students and are associated with negative academic, social, and well-being outcomes. Data from the 2024–2025 Healthy Minds Study indicate that approximately one-third of students reported moderate to severe anxiety symptoms, more than half experienced loneliness, and nearly one in five reported severe depressive symptoms (Eisenberg et al., 2025). These findings offer context for the environments many students navigate, which may be marked by trauma, marginalization, uncertainty, and increasing sociopolitical tension. These experiences can intersect with ongoing processes of identity exploration, self-authorship, autonomy, and meaning-making. Although these processes are often discussed in relation to college and emerging adulthood, they are not limited to currently enrolled students or a single life stage (Arnett, 2024; Jones & Stewart, 2016). For people whose college enrollment has ended, experiences from that period may remain relevant as they continue to make sense of their

identities and lives. Trauma may alter how individuals perceive their bodies, experience desire, trust others, and understand their sexual agency and worth (Dworkin et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2022). In response, people may seek inclusive alternative spaces to process experiences, explore identity, construct meaning, and imagine possibilities beyond those available in their immediate physical environments.

Online Support Spaces

People may turn to online communities, including social media platforms and peer-support spaces, to seek information, explore identity, find connection, and make sense of their experiences. For current and former college students, these spaces may complement or provide alternatives to institutional resources such as campus counseling centers, sexual health services, and identity-based student organizations (McInroy & Craig, 2020; Tsaliki, 2022). Peer interactions extend beyond physical campuses into digital spaces where people exchange information, build relationships, and engage in collective meaning-making (Paul & Shim, 2008; Shalka, 2019, 2020). Because digital communities are not bound by campus enrollment, they may remain accessible as people move through different stages of life. Within these environments, fandom communities allow participants to create, circulate, and discuss narratives that engage with relationships, sexuality, trauma, pleasure, and alternative ways of being (Busse, 2017; Moore, 2024; Popova, 2018). Digital fandom communities are global participatory spaces formed around shared interests in media, characters, celebrities, or other cultural texts, where individuals may connect, interpret, discuss, create, or engage with fan-created content, referred to as fanfiction (Jenkins, 2018).

These communities can provide spaces for shared meaning-making, identity exploration, representation, and social connection, including through online participation (McInroy & Craig,

2018). Through reading, writing, and interacting with fan-created stories, individuals encounter representations of intimacy, identity, and relational possibilities that may challenge dominant Westernized cultural scripts and expand the range of imaginable experiences, particularly for individuals whose lived experienced are misrepresented or suppressed in mainstream media (Rowland, 2021). Sexually explicit fanfiction is one form of fan-created storytelling that engages directly with these representations of possibilities.

Sexually Explicit Fanfiction as Spaces for Exploration

Sexually explicit fanfiction includes detailed depictions of sexual activity, intimacy, or sexual experiences intended for mature audiences (Popova, 2018). For some fans, sexually explicit fanfiction can serve as more than entertainment: it may function as a resource for identity exploration, sexual learning, meaning-making, emotional coping, and affirmation (Duggan, 2022; Hedrick, 2021; Llewellyn, 2022). They may serve as safe spaces that can be more inclusive and/or accessible than help resources. This may be particularly meaningful for individuals navigating experiences of trauma and marginalization, whose meaning-making processes can be shaped by trauma-related changes in desire, bodily ownership, intimacy, and feelings of safety (Mark et al., 2023). Similarly, individuals navigating increasingly polarized sociopolitical environments may also experience disruptions to identity development, belonging, and psychological well-being, leading them to seek spaces where they can process these experiences, explore alternative futures, and cultivate community. Increasingly polarized sociopolitical environments refer to contexts characterized by heightened political division, contentious public discourse, and legislative and policy debates that increasingly place issues of gender, sexuality, reproductive autonomy, and LGBTQIA2+ rights at the center of broader cultural conflict (Fenton et al., 2024; Pettifor et al., 2024; Tebbe et al., 2024). Fan-created

narratives and communities may provide a safe and accepting space by offering opportunities to make meaning of complex experiences while imagining identities, relationships, and futures beyond those available in their immediate environments (Tsaliki, 2022).

Despite growing scholarship documenting fanfiction as sites of community formation and identity exploration, relatively little research has examined how current and previously enrolled college students use sexually explicit fanfiction to navigate experiences of trauma or respond to broader sociopolitical conditions. Given the increasing role of digital spaces in shaping how adults understand themselves, their relationships, and the world around them, examining these experiences is both timely and necessary. Existing scholarship has largely emphasized fanfiction's role in identity exploration, creativity, and community; less attention has been paid to how sexually explicit fanfiction intersects with broader processes of coping, resilience, and meaning-making. Specifically, despite the potential application of fanfiction as a coping strategy, little is known about how fans use speculative narratives (e.g., stories involving fantasy, science fiction, supernatural elements, or alternative universes) to process experiences of sexual violence or how engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction broadly may shift in response to changing sociopolitical climates. Addressing these gaps can deepen understanding of the diverse roles sexually explicit fanfiction plays in people's lives while expanding scholarship at the intersection of higher education, sexuality, trauma, and digital communities.

Literature Review

Fandom in the Digital Age

Fanfiction is a participatory cultural practice in which fans create new stories that draw from, extend, reinterpret, and transform existing media texts (Busse, 2017; Jenkins, 1992, 2012). Fans engage with popular media such as television, film, books, music, anime, and celebrity

culture and subsequently reimagine characters, relationships, plots, and fictional worlds in ways that expand upon or challenge canonical narratives (Coppa, 2017; Derecho, 2006). Fans frequently explore untold moments, alternative plotlines, and new relational dynamics, opening opportunities to creatively expand the stories they love. What was once considered a marginal or amateur practice has increasingly become recognized as a sophisticated form of participatory cultural production, through which fans assert narrative agency, critique dominant media representations, and generate alternative possibilities for identity, relationships, and belonging (De Kosnik, 2016). All of which empower individuals to process their own stories as a form of self-healing through fanfiction.

Fans come from diverse backgrounds and lived experiences and form digital communities, commonly referred to as fandoms, where they collectively construct, negotiate, and expand shared forms of storytelling (Busse, 2017; Gee, 2018; Jenkins, 2019; Pilati et al., 2025; Silberstein-Bamford, 2023). Unlike traditional literary systems that prioritize sole authorship, commercial production, and capitalism, fanfiction develops within interactive digital communities where readers and writers exchange feedback, negotiate meaning, form mentorship relationships, engage in critical discourse, and collectively shape norms surrounding relationships, representation, vulnerability, and authenticity (Black, 2009; Finn, 2017; Kustritz, 2025; Moore, 2024b). Fanfiction is therefore not simply an individual act of writing, but an inherently social and relational practice in which stories are produced, circulated, and interpreted through ongoing dialogue among community members.

Digital Fan Communities and Practices

Community engagement often occurs through commenting on stories, leaving kudos and likes, recommending works to others, participating in discussion threads, and sharing stories

across social media platforms to increase readership and visibility (Bold, 2016). Writers and readers may also engage in collaborative world-building, co-authoring stories, creating fan art, developing playlists inspired by narratives, and contributing to broader conversations occurring within fandom spaces (Booth, 2021; Geraghty et al., 2022). Through these interactions, fanfiction archives become active social spaces where creativity, relationships, and communities are built over time (Kelley, 2021). Meaning and emotional significance are often co-constructed through ongoing feedback and engagement, transforming fanfiction from a solitary activity into a collective practice of storytelling and interpretation. These interactions also facilitate what Jenkins et al. (2017) describe as *distributed mentoring*, a networked form of learning and support that emerges through everyday community engagement rather than formal educational structures. Writers frequently invite readers' feedback, suggestions, and emotional reactions; in turn, readers offer encouragement, interpretations, recommendations, and reflections on how stories affect them personally. Such exchanges provide opportunities for skill development, creative growth, emotional support, and community connection while reinforcing the participatory nature of fandom culture as a part of the discovery and healing process.

Digital fan communities can be more inclusive than physical spaces, allowing individuals to connect over interests, identities, and experiences that are typically marginalized, stigmatized, or misunderstood in their offline environments (Gonzalez-Vidal, 2026; McInroy & Craig, 2020). As a result, fandom spaces often provide safe spaces for authentic opportunities encompassing belonging, creative affirmation, identity exploration, and self-expression. Scholars have emphasized that fanfiction communities are particularly significant for women, LGBTQIA2+ individuals, people of color, people with disabilities, and others whose identities and desires are frequently excluded, constrained, or misrepresented within mainstream media (Jenkins, 2006;

Jenkins et al., 2017). Through fan-created narratives, participants can safely challenge dominant cultural narratives; rewrite heteronormative, patriarchal, and racialized assumptions; center emotional intimacy; and imagine alternative forms of identity, desire, and relational connection (Oulton, 2024; Tosenberger, 2008). Therefore, it is important to understand how fans conceptualize sexually explicit fanfiction in their everyday lives.

Identity Exploration in Fan Communities

Digital spaces support inclusive experimentation with identities, storylines, power dynamics, and relational possibilities that are often constrained, oppressed, or absent within mainstream media (Baym, 2000; Hellekson & Busse, 2006; Sapuridis & Alberto, 2022). Through these practices, marginalized fans can confidently uplift their voices, challenge dominant narratives, and reclaim representation by creating stories that reflect and validate their lived experiences while fostering authentic dialogue related to gender, race, sexuality, disability, and other dimensions of identity (Dym et al., 2019; Jenkins et al., 2017; Oulton, 2024). Fanfiction therefore functions as both a creative and social practice that facilitates connection, validation, self-expression, self-reflection, and community-based meaning-making (Gonzalez-Vidal, 2026; Jenkins, 1988; Saputri & Lammertz, 2024). Although research increasingly recognizes fandoms as a context for identity exploration and community-based meaning-making, important gaps remain regarding the unique functions of sexually explicit fanfiction, including its role in developmental processes, its potential to support survivors through speculative narrative engagement, and its use as a resource for coping and resistance within increasingly hostile sociopolitical environments.

Beyond facilitating storytelling and social connection, fandom communities have developed community-governed infrastructures to preserve fan works, protect creative

autonomy, and sustain forms of expression vulnerable to deletion, censorship, or marginalization (De Kosnik, 2016; Fiesler et al., 2016; Lothian, 2011). One of the most prominent examples is Archive of Our Own (AO3), a nonprofit, volunteer-run fanfiction platform created by the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) in 2008 to provide a community-governed alternative to commercial platforms and content censorship (OTW, n.d.). As of 2026, AO3 hosts more than 17 million fan works and over 100 million registered users (Theralmorticia, 2026). These community-created systems (e.g., fan-run archives, tagging systems, content warnings, and moderation practices) play an important role in shaping how fans produce, share, discover, and engage with stories across digital spaces. These features promote transparency, reader autonomy, and informed engagement/consent while supporting storytelling, identity exploration, belonging, and meaning-making within a global participatory fan community (Black, 2021; Shang et al., 2021), and help uphold the integrity of fandom spaces.

Sexually Explicit Fanfiction: Centering Desire, Intimacy, and the Erotic

One popular and extensively produced form of fanfiction includes content rated as Mature (adult themes that are less graphic) and Explicit (contains explicit adult content; AO3, n.d.). What constitutes sexually explicit content is subjective and may vary according to individual comfort, community norms, and platform-specific rating practices. Therefore, no single definition encompasses the full range of sexually explicit fanfiction. Drawing across scholarship on erotic fanfiction, sexually explicit online fanworks, real-person fiction, and self-insertion, this dissertation broadly defines sexually explicit fanfiction as fan-created stories containing detailed or graphic depictions of sexual activity, erotic intimacy, desire, or sexual relationships involving media characters, celebrities or public figures, self-insert characters, original characters, or combinations thereof (Anisimowicz & O'Sullivan, 2017; AO3, 2025;

Fathallah, 2018; Lehtonen, 2015; Popova, 2021). These narratives vary considerably in tone, genre, and purpose, ranging from romantic stories that incorporate sexual content to narratives in which sexuality and eroticism function as the primary focus of the story (Popova, 2021). Within fandom spaces, sexually explicit fanfiction is often sought out specifically because of its explicit content (Jacobsen & Kristensen-McLachlan, 2025), reflected in community phrases such as "porn without plot" or "plot what plot," which describe stories where sexual exploration rather than narrative development serves as the primary attraction for readers.

More broadly, sexually explicit fanfiction encompasses stories that center sexual desire, erotic fantasy, intimacy, pleasure, and emotional connection in ways that frequently extend beyond what is represented or permitted in hetero-cis-normative mainstream media (Bacon-Smith, 1991; Busse, 2017; Fathallah, 2017). These stories often explore themes of affection, vulnerability, consent, desire, power, relationships, and sexual expression through narratives that allow authors and readers to imagine possibilities that may be absent, marginalized, or stigmatized elsewhere (Mixer, 2018; Popova, 2018). Levels of explicitness vary across stories, ranging from romantic narratives that incorporate sexual content to highly erotic works focused primarily on sexual exploration and fantasy. As a result, sexually explicit fanfiction functions as more than a form of entertainment or fantasy; it represents an emotionally meaningful and socially embedded form of storytelling through which readers and writers can engage with questions related to bodies, relationships, sexuality, pleasure, and identity (Busse, 2017; Fathallah, 2017). Together, these possibilities position sexually explicit fanfiction as a meaningful context for understanding how individuals explore, interpret, and make sense of their sexuality identities.

Sexually explicit fanfiction has been particularly significant for women and queer fans, whose desires, identities, and experiences have historically been excluded, distorted, or marginalized within mainstream media representations (Jamison, 2013). Through fan-created narratives, participants can explore alternative representations of intimacy, sexuality, and relationships that may not be available through traditional media texts. For example, a queer individual may adapt an existing storyline to include queer relationships, identities, or forms of intimacy that were absent, marginalized, or left unexplored in the original text. The participatory nature of fandom further allows fans to actively seek out stories that align with their identities, fantasies, and desired forms of representation (Moore, 2024a). Fanfiction can also provide a space to critically engage with rape culture and reimagine narratives of sexual trauma (Moore, 2024a). However, gaps remain in understanding how survivors themselves engage with sexually explicit fanfiction, particularly speculative narratives, and how this engagement relates to their understandings of sexuality, pleasure, agency, and power. Platforms such as AO3 support this process through extensive tagging, filtering, and content warning systems that enable users to navigate content according to their preferences while fostering a culture that generally prioritizes transformative expression and user autonomy (OTW, n.d.). Consequently, sexually explicit fanfiction provides opportunities for readers and writers to explore and affirm personal aspects of desire, intimacy, and identity with reduced concerns about censorship, commercialization, or moral policing.

Speculative Fanfiction, Desire, and Imaginative Possibilities

Within the broader umbrella of sexually explicit fanfiction, speculative and fantastical subgenres occupy a particularly prominent position within fandom spaces. Speculative sexually explicit fanfiction refers to erotic fan-created narratives that situate desire, intimacy, and sexual

fantasy within non-realist, fantastical, supernatural, or otherwise imagined worlds (Bourdaa & Lozano Delmar, 2016). Common genres include supernatural romance, monster fiction, science fiction, fantasy, paranormal fiction, and Omegaverse narratives (Fathallah, 2017). These stories frequently feature vampires, demons, werewolves, aliens, magical beings, mating bonds, alternative biological systems, and other speculative elements that fundamentally reconfigure how bodies, relationships, sexuality, and power operate within the narrative (Popova, 2018). As a result, the social rules governing intimacy, reproduction, attraction, consent, and identity often differ substantially from those found in contemporary reality. This can be a healing and helpful process for historically underrepresented populations.

Speculative sexually explicit fanfiction emerges from a broader fan practice in which individuals engage with popular media and reimagine, extend, or transform existing fictional worlds, characters, and narratives (Coppa, 2017). By combining erotic storytelling with speculative world-building, these narratives create spaces where desire, intimacy, and relationships can be explored outside the constraints of everyday social reality. Speculative sexually explicit fanfiction creates opportunities to examine human experiences from alternative perspectives through the inclusion of non-human or hybrid characters, magical bonds, supernatural transformations, alternative reproductive systems, and imagined social structures (Duggan, 2022). These narratives allow fans to move beyond restrictive cultural assumptions tied to gender, race, ability, physical appearance, and sexuality while imagining new possibilities for embodiment, desire, and relational connection (Lehtonen, 2015). Although scholars have examined fanfiction as a literary and cultural form, including its capacity to revise existing story worlds and imagine alternative selves and possibilities (Lehtonen, 2015; Thomas, 2011), comparatively less is known about how survivors experience and make meaning of speculative

sexually explicit fanfiction in their everyday lives or how this engagement may intersect with healing and self-exploration.

Through alternative biological systems, speculative gender formations, and non-human embodiments, authors and readers can experiment with identities, bodies, and relationships that may not be possible within the constraints of contemporary social reality (Duggan, 2023; Gunderson, 2017). By distancing stories from everyday reality, speculative settings provide a flexible framework through which authors and readers can examine themes such as consent, agency, transformation, hierarchy, vulnerability, pleasure, and power while questioning dominant assumptions about intimacy, sexuality, and social organization (Fathallah, 2017; Popova, 2018). In doing so, speculative sexually explicit fanfiction functions as both erotic storytelling and a form of imaginative meaning-making that allows participants to explore complex emotional, relational, and embodied experiences through narrative. However, much of this scholarship emphasizes what speculative narratives may afford theoretically without a research grounding to support these ideas, leaving unanswered questions about how readers describe these processes in practice.

For many fans, these stories can serve as emotionally meaningful and socially embedded forms of storytelling through which pleasure, desire, fantasy, and connection can be explored (Jamison, 2013; Kim & Klinger, 2019). The speculative nature of these narratives allows participants to engage with questions of sexuality, identity, agency, and belonging from a position that is simultaneously imaginative and personally meaningful. Rather than simply escaping reality, readers and authors may use speculative narratives to reinterpret, negotiate, and make sense of their own experiences through alternative possibilities. Speculative sexually explicit fanfiction therefore functions not only as a form of erotic storytelling, but also as a

collaborative, community-driven practice of imaginative world-building through which alternative bodies, relationships, identities, and social systems can be explored (Popova, 2018). However, engaging with these narratives requires fans to navigate a wide range of themes, relationship dynamics, sexual content, and potentially sensitive topics. Despite these proposed benefits, limited research has examined how emerging adults describe using speculative narratives to navigate questions of identity, relationships, and meaning-making during this developmental period, a particularly meaningful time for identity development.

Fanfiction platforms have developed extensive tagging and rating systems that support reader choice, content awareness, and individualized engagement with stories. These systems allow fans to actively seek out narratives that align with their interests, identities, fantasies, and emotional needs while avoiding content they do not wish to encounter, creating a highly personalized environment for participation and exploration (Silberstein-Bamford, 2024). More participant-centered research is needed to foreground fans' own perspectives and experiences. Sexually explicit and speculative fanfiction serve as safe and inclusive spaces for exploring desire, identity, relationships, and alternative possibilities, making them particularly meaningful during emerging adulthood.

Identity Development, College Context, and Fanfiction

Young or emerging adulthood, particularly within college contexts, is one framework used to describe identity exploration, emotional development, and increasing autonomy among some young adults (Jones & Stewart, 2016). Research on this period highlights how young adults negotiate intersecting identities as they seek belonging, connection, and purpose within peer cultures, thereby contributing to self-authorship and meaning-making (Duran & Jones, 2019). These processes are relevant to identity development, but they do not describe every adult or

encompass the full range of participants' ages and experiences. Across adulthood, people make sense of their bodies, relationships, desires, values, and sexual selves, drawing on social relationships, cultural narratives, and other symbolic resources to explore, construct, and affirm aspects of their identities (Hammack, 2008; McLean & Syed, 2015). For some, fanfiction may be one such resource. Research has described its role during late adolescence and emerging adulthood, where it can offer narrative opportunities to explore sexuality, intimacy, relationships, and selfhood (De Kosnik, 2016). More broadly, fanfiction can contribute to how people make sense of who they are, what they desire, and how they understand themselves in relation to others.

Peer relationships can provide socialization, support, and identity validation. Among college students, these relationships may influence how people interpret sociopolitical hostility and which coping strategies feel accessible, effective, or safe (Shalka, 2019, 2020). For students with marginalized identities, identity development may unfold within social, institutional, and political systems that constrain, police, or threaten their autonomy and well-being. Opportunities for identity exploration, self-expression, and meaning-making are shaped by both individual processes and broader conditions that influence where, how, and with whom exploration can occur. For people who experience trauma while attending college, including sexual violence or hostility in the campus environment, these experiences can affect how they perceive their bodies, trust others, and understand their agency, sexuality, and self-worth (Dworkin et al., 2017; Dworkin et al., 2019; Orchowski et al., 2013). Such experiences may introduce uncertainty, stigma, fear, or disconnection into identity exploration and meaning-making. These effects may remain relevant after enrollment ends, as people continue to make sense of their identities and experiences across adulthood, including their sexual identities.

Sexual Identity Development

Within broader processes of identity formation, sexual identity development may be particularly salient for some people during the college years (Anders & Olmstead, 2019; Morgan, 2013). Sexuality is diverse and fluid, and cultural, relational, and personal experiences shape how people understand and make meaning of their sexual identities over time (Olmstead, 2020). As individuals navigate questions related to attraction, desire, intimacy, relationships, and sexual expression, they draw on a range of social and cultural influences. For some, peer interactions are an important source of learning about sexuality. Social comparison, shared experiences, peer norms, and the circulation of accurate information and misinformation can shape understandings of desire, boundaries, consent, and sexual self-expression (Bohr & Koudenburg, 2024; Shigeto & Scheier, 2025). These interactions can contribute to how people interpret their experiences and construct personal narratives about sexuality, relationships, and identity.

In contemporary digital cultures, peer-based learning also takes place online. Sexually explicit and speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, fandom communities, and other narrative-based media can provide stories, scripts, and imaginative frameworks for understanding intimacy, pleasure, relationships, and relational possibilities (Rowland, 2021; McInroy et al., 2019). These spaces may expose people to diverse representations of sexuality and intimacy that are not readily available through formal education, institutional resources, or mainstream media. For survivors of sexual violence and people who experience marginalization, sexual identity development and exploration may be complicated by trauma-related changes in desire, bodily ownership, agency, trust, and feelings of safety during intimacy (Mark et al., 2023). Such

experiences can shape how people understand sexuality, navigate relationships, and make meaning of their identities.

Survivors and marginalized people may seek spaces and resources that allow them to explore sexuality, desire, pleasure, and intimacy in ways that feel safer, more affirming, inclusive, or accessible. Institutional values, reporting systems, health services, unspoken expectations, and peer cultures can support sexual exploration and affirmation or constrain them through stigma, shame, exclusion, and misinformation (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). Legislation also shapes the conditions in which people develop and express their sexual identities by influencing access to information, healthcare, legal protections, and support services (Kosciw et al., 2022). Restrictive laws and policies can exacerbate inequities, stigmatize sexual identities and behaviors, and undermine sexual autonomy.

When college campuses and broader sociopolitical systems limit access to affirming, pleasure-centered, and inclusive information about sexuality, people may develop alternative pathways for learning, validation, and identity exploration through peer networks, digital communities, and participatory storytelling (Tsaliki, 2022). Sexually explicit fanfiction may offer opportunities to engage with narratives of desire, intimacy, pleasure, and relational possibility while navigating the developmental, institutional, and sociopolitical conditions that shape people's lives. However, limited research has examined how people use sexually explicit digital spaces to navigate potentially hostile sociopolitical environments.

Meaning-Making Within Restrictive Environments

Campus environments shape development and meaning-making through both explicit policies and implicit norms embedded in institutional structures and cultures. As sociopolitical tensions intensify, college students may experience increased surveillance, self-censorship, and

reduced access to supportive services and spaces, contributing to fear, mistrust, and psychological distress (Deng & Lee, 2025; Funari et al., 2025; Woodford et al., 2018). For students with marginalized identities, campuses are not neutral backdrops for development; they are settings where power, risk, belonging, and identity are continually negotiated (Deng & Lee, 2025). Policies, reporting systems, classroom expectations, and campus cultures can influence which students feel protected, whose experiences are legitimized, and whose needs are minimized, questioned, or ignored (Duran et al., 2022).

Students with disabilities may face accommodation gatekeeping, faculty resistance, and stigmatizing institutional cultures, requiring ongoing self-advocacy and bureaucratic negotiation that can constitute substantial hidden labor (Comeaux, 2021; Fuller, 2023; Munjanja & Hendricks, 2025). Immigrant students may navigate anti-immigrant rhetoric, restrictive policies, and surveillance through selective disclosure, trusted resources, family, activism, and educational persistence (Gonzales, 2017; Martinez Hoy & Nguyen, 2021; Valdivia et al., 2025). Institutional environments thus shape access to resources and support, as well as the conditions under which identity exploration, self-authorship, and meaning-making occur. Although scholarship shows that campus environments influence students' development and well-being, less is known about the informal strategies people use when institutional settings do not meet their needs. These experiences may remain relevant to people after their college enrollment ends.

For survivors of sexual violence, institutional structures can play a significant role in shaping how safety, healing, and self-understanding are pursued. Survivors may cite mistrust of institutional processes, such as filing a Title IX report; fear of retaliation by peers, the institution, or the person they report; and experiences of institutional betrayal, such as a mishandled report, as reasons for not reporting assaults (Bedera, 2021). Formal reporting mechanisms, including

Title IX processes, may be experienced as retraumatizing, inaccessible, or insufficient, particularly by survivors with marginalized racial, gender, sexual, or disability identities (Gameon et al., 2021). These systems can reproduce power imbalances that undermine survivors' agency, bodily autonomy, and credibility. Some survivors therefore seek ways to process harm, rebuild safety, and make meaning outside institutional frameworks they experience as punitive, dismissive, or emotionally unsafe (Linder et al., 2020). Although research has documented survivors' mistrust of institutional responses, less attention has been paid to the narrative and digital community spaces they may use to support healing, identity exploration, and meaning-making beyond formal support systems.

For people navigating hostile institutional and sociopolitical climates, meaning-making can be especially important. Survivors of violence, LGBTQIA2+ people, disabled people, people of color, and immigrant students may have to interpret harm, stigma, exclusion, and uncertainty while also developing or revisiting their sense of self and belonging (Bedera, 2021; Gonzales, 2017; Vaccaro et al., 2023; Valdivia et al., 2025). When institutions fail to affirm people's experiences or support their exploration of identity, relationships, sexuality, and well-being, they may seek other spaces to make sense of their bodies, desires, identities, and futures. Digital communities with participatory and narrative elements can offer opportunities for self-exploration through shared storytelling, peer connection, and collective meaning-making, though experiences within these spaces may vary. Despite growing recognition of digital communities as possible sites of support, relatively little research has examined how fans describe using specific narrative spaces to navigate identity, sexuality, trauma, and belonging amid hostile sociopolitical conditions.

One such space is sexually explicit and speculative fanfiction. Through stories, tags, comments, and collaborative world-building, people engage with narratives that may allow them to explore intimacy, embodiment, sexuality, identity, pleasure, and resilience alongside other fans. These meaning-making practices may offer opportunities to question dominant social and sexual scripts and imagine alternative possibilities for relationships, agency, healing, and desire, including in contexts marked by trauma, marginalization, or sociopolitical hostility (Busse, 2017; De Kosnik, 2016; Fathallah, 2017). Engagement with sexually explicit and speculative fanfiction can therefore be understood as one part of a broader landscape of meaning-making that people may turn to in response to personal needs and the constraints of institutional and sociopolitical environments.

Fanfiction as a Developmental and Social Resource

Taken together, the literature suggests that fanfiction functions as far more than a form of leisure entertainment or creative expression (De Kosnik, 2016; Jamison, 2013). Through participation in fandom communities, engagement with explicit narratives, and the use of highly individualized tagging and filtering systems, fans actively select and write stories that align with their interests, identities, experiences, curiosities, and emotional needs (OTW, n.d.; Popova, 2018). These practices occur within participatory digital environments that emphasize reader agency, community engagement, and personalized pathways of exploration (Jenkins, 1992). Rather than functioning solely as entertainment, sexually explicit fanfiction and speculative forms of sexually explicit fanfiction may provide opportunities for representation, exploration, reflection, validation, and engagement with complex questions related to sexuality, sexual agency, intimacy, relationships, identity, embodiment, pleasure, trauma, healing, and, power-balance.

Through imaginative storytelling, alternative worlds, and collaborative forms of meaning-making, both readers and writers can engage with experiences and possibilities that may be constrained, stigmatized, oppressed, or unavailable within their everyday lives. These narrative spaces may be particularly meaningful and a source of healing for individuals whose identities, desires, experiences, or needs are minimized and/or marginalized within mainstream cultural, institutional, or sociopolitical contexts (Popova, 2021). Fanfiction may serve as one of the many inclusive, cultural, and narrative resources though which positive meaning is constructed. Similarly, individuals navigating trauma, institutional barriers, hostile campus climates, or broader sociopolitical challenges may engage with fanfiction as a space for freedom of exploration, validation, connection, and interpretation of lived experiences.

Purpose of Dissertation

Together, sexually explicit and speculative sexually explicit fanfiction function as more than leisure activities. They operate as participatory, narrative-based ecosystems through which individuals explore and (re)make meaning of their bodies, desires, identities, relationships, and lived experiences while navigating broader institutional and sociopolitical conditions and power-based harm (Moore, 2023). Scholars have increasingly recognized fanfiction as a meaningful site of community formation, identity exploration, sexual learning, resilience, coping, and meaning-making. However, relatively little research has examined how current and formerly enrolled college students themselves describe and make meaning of their engagement with sexually explicit and speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, particularly in relation to sexual violence, marginalization, stigma, and hostile sociopolitical environments. Addressing these gaps is essential for advancing contemporary understandings of identity development, sexuality, and meaning-making in digital contexts. Accordingly, this dissertation was organized around two

distinct, yet complementary, qualitative studies that examined how current and formerly enrolled college students engaged with sexually explicit fanfiction as a meaning-making practice across different lived experiences and social contexts during their emerging adolescent developmental period.

Qualitative inquiry is particularly well suited for examining phenomena that are undertheorized, complex, or not yet well understood (Guest et al., 2013). Rather than testing predetermined hypotheses, qualitative research seeks to understand how individuals interpret and make meaning of their individually lived experiences through their own voice, narratives, and perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach is especially valuable when studying marginalized, stigmatized, or emotionally complex experiences, as standardized measures may not fully capture the nuanced ways individuals come to understand and navigate their lives (Braun & Clarke, 2021). By centering participants' narratives, language, and emotional experiences as legitimate forms of knowledge (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña & Omasta, 2017), a qualitative inquiry provides opportunities to explore how individuals make sense of identity, lived trauma, personal desire, individual healing, coping mechanisms, and resilience. Across both studies, participants' lived experiences are acknowledged as the primary source of knowledge regarding individualized meanings and functions of sexually explicit fanfiction within their own lives and lived experiences. Together, these studies advanced understanding of sexually explicit and speculative sexually explicit fanfiction as meaningful digital practices through which current and formerly enrolled college students negotiated sexuality, trauma, identity, resilience, pleasure, and belonging during emerging adulthood.

Study One: Speculative Sexually Explicit Fanfiction

The first study examined how 10 current and formerly enrolled college student survivors of sexual violence understood, experienced, and made meaning of their engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, particularly in relation to sexual trauma endured and the coping, healing, re-examination of their own sexuality, and overall personal well-being. Guided by affect theory and queer theory (Ahmed, 2004; Butler, 1990; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Sedgwick, 1990; Warner, 1993), the study explored how participants navigated their own emotional experiences, bodily responses, desire, pleasure, and identity through engagement with speculative erotic narratives.

Affect theory provided the framework for understanding how emotions, sensations, and embodied experiences circulated through stories and shaped individuals' understandings of themselves and the world around them. Queer theory further supported examination of how participants engaged with narratives that challenged heteronormative assumptions regarding sexuality, bodies, desires, relationships, and intimacy. Working in tandem, these frameworks offered a lens that examined the complex emotional and relational self-work participants described when engaging with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction.

Existing scholarship suggests that fiction can support social cognition and self-expansion (Johnson et al., 2021; Wimmer et al., 2024), while narrative entertainment may facilitate coping and short-term recovery from stress (Khoo et al., 2021; Reinecke & Rieger, 2021). Comparatively little is known about how sexual violence survivors themselves interpret and use speculative sexually explicit fanfiction in relation to their experiences. Much of the literature surrounding sexual violence recovery has focused on psychological interventions (Miles et al., 2024), clinical outcomes such as depression and anxiety (Dworkin et al., 2017), revictimization

risk-reduction interventions, particularly among college women (Parks et al., 2025), and trauma symptomatology (Dworkin et al., 2023), often overlooking self-directed meaning-making and the role of pleasure, desire, and imagination in survivors' lives. Likewise, scholarship examining fanfiction has rarely centered survivors' perceptions regarding how speculative narratives may positively contribute to the healing processes. By focusing on survivors' lived experiences, this study sought to expand understanding of how speculative sexually explicit fanfiction functioned as a resource for exploring sexuality, reclaiming agency, imagining alternative possibilities for bodies and relationships, and constructing meaning following traumatic experiences. In doing so, this study addressed gaps across higher education, public health, sexuality, and fan studies while contributing to broader conversations encompassing sex-positive, strengths-based, and trauma-informed approaches to survivor support.

Study Two: Sexually Explicit Fanfiction

Study two explored how 11 current and formerly enrolled college students described their engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction and whether the meanings, functions, and uses of these narratives shifted within the context of a rapidly shifting sociopolitical environment. Guided by feminist theory and the multi-system model of resilience (hooks, 2000; Liu et al., 2017), the study examined how participants used sexually explicit fanfiction and fandom spaces to navigate broader social, political, and cultural conditions. Feminist theory provided a framework for understanding how systems of power, inequality, gender, sexuality, and social control shape individuals' experiences and opportunities for self-expression. The multi-system model of resilience complemented this perspective by emphasizing resilience as a dynamic process that emerges through interactions between individuals and the social, cultural, institutional, and community systems that surrounded them. Together, these frameworks

supported examination of how participants negotiated both personal and collective challenges through engagement with fan-created narratives and digital communities.

Although digital communities and fandom spaces have increasingly been recognized as sites of coping, identity exploration, community formation, and emotional support (Baym, 2000; Moore, 2023), less is known about how sexually explicit fanfiction specifically functions during periods of political uncertainty, social upheaval, and increasing restrictions targeting marginalized communities. Contemporary college students are navigating a sociopolitical landscape characterized by rising polarization, threats to bodily autonomy, challenges to LGBTQIA2+ rights, racialized violence, and growing concerns regarding personal safety and belonging (Deng & Lee, 2025; Funari et al., 2025; Vaccaro et al., 2023). Even still, limited research has examined how students use participatory digital cultures to respond to these conditions or how sexually explicit fanfiction may provide opportunities for agency, affirmation, emotional regulation, resistance, and hope. By centering participants' experiences within this broader sociopolitical context, study two sought to deepen understanding of how individuals use digital fandom practices to cultivate resilience, maintain connections to community, imagine alternative futures, and navigate complex social realities. In doing so, this study contributed to emerging scholarship examining nontraditional forms of coping, resistance, well-being, and meaning-making among current and formerly enrolled college students.

Relationship Between Studies

Although each study addressed a distinct research goal, both studies conceptually addressed an important gap in our knowledge around sexually explicit fanfiction as a meaning-making practice and tool for navigating development. Both studies were grounded in the understanding that fanfiction functions as more than entertainment; rather, it serves as a

participatory and narrative-based medium through which individuals actively explore identity, sexuality, relationships, emotions, and lived experiences during the emerging adulthood developmental period. Across both studies, participants described engaging with sexually explicit fanfiction within broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts that shaped how they understood themselves, their experiences, and their relationships with others. By centering participants' perspectives and lived experiences, both studies sought to better understand the nuanced ways individuals actively use storytelling and fandom spaces to navigate challenges, construct meaning, and make sense of their lives.

The studies differed primarily in the contexts through which individualized meaning-making was examined. Study one focused on survivors' experiences with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction following sexual violence, which emphasized healing, coping, sexuality, agency, and personal well-being. Study two broadened this focus by examining how sexually explicit fanfiction functioned within the context of contemporary sociopolitical challenges, including personal experiences of uncertainty, marginalization, discrimination, and collective social change. Together, these studies explored how sexually explicit fanfiction can effectively and positively operate across both personal and collective forms of adversity, illuminating the unique and diverse ways individuals draw upon digital narratives and communities when navigating difficult or complex life circumstances.

These studies were also connected through a shared emphasis on lived experiences and participant meaning-making. Although each study was guided by distinct theoretical frameworks, both prioritized participants' interpretations of their experiences rather than imposing predetermined assumptions regarding the role or function of fanfiction in their lives. This approach recognized and validated participants as the experts of their own unique

experiences and allowed for a deeper examination of how sexually explicit fanfiction was understood, used, and integrated into everyday life. As expected, across both studies, engagement with fanfiction was a dynamic process shaped by individuals' histories, identities, relationships, emotions, and social environments.

Taken together, these studies contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of sexually explicit fanfiction as a multifaceted digital practice that extends beyond leisure and entertainment. By examining engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction across both interpersonal and sociopolitical contexts, these distinct studies highlighted the role of digital storytelling and fandom communities that support exploration, coping, resilience, identity development, and meaning-making among current and formerly enrolled college students. Furthermore, examining these studies in tandem provided insight into how individuals use fan-created narratives to respond to both immediate personal experiences and broader social conditions, demonstrating the relevance, flexibility, and significance of sexually explicit fanfiction within contemporary digital culture.

Positionality Statement

Qualitative research recognizes knowledge as co-constructed and that researchers inevitably influence every stage of the research process through their identities, experiences, values, and interpretations (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than striving for an unattainable position of complete objectivity, feminist qualitative inquiry emphasizes transparency regarding researcher positionality and ongoing reflexive engagement throughout the research process (Berger, 2015). Accordingly, I acknowledged the perspectives I brought to this study and the ways they informed the development, implementation, and interpretation of the dissertation results. My program of research has consistently centered on sexual violence

prevention, college student well-being, and the ways individuals navigate systems of power, oppression, and meaning-making. These scholarly interests, coupled with my personal engagement and familiarity with online fandom communities and fanfiction, motivated my interest in examining how emerging adults described their experiences engaging with sexually explicit and speculative fanfiction. My familiarity with fandom culture provided contextual knowledge of community norms, terminology, and participatory practices that facilitated rapport with participants and informed my deeper understanding of the broader digital environments in which their experiences occurred (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Neville, 2022). At the same time, I remained cognizant that this familiarity shaped my interpretations and therefore engaged in continual self-reflection to ensure participants' narratives, not my own experiences, remained central to each study's findings.

Additionally, this two-study dissertation was also conducted during a period of substantial sociopolitical upheaval in the United States marked by increased political polarization and ongoing challenges encompassing bodily autonomy, LGBTQIA2+ rights, racial equity, academic freedom, and a myriad of issues affecting historically marginalized communities. Personally, my values are grounded in feminist scholarship and a commitment to social justice, equity, and the inherent dignity and autonomy of all individuals. I also recognize that my positionality is shaped by the coexistence of both marginalized and dominant identities (Crenshaw, 1989). As a young woman and a survivor, I have personally navigated forms of gendered oppression and deeply understand how systems of power can and do influence experiences of safety, autonomy, and belonging.

Simultaneously, I hold identities that afford me social privilege, including being white, cisgender, and often perceived as heterosexual. These intersecting identities profoundly influence

both how I engage with the world and how I interpret participants' narratives. Rather than assuming a shared understanding with my participants or presuming that our experiences overlap (Holmes, 2020), I remained attentive to the ways my own perspectives could both facilitate and constrain my interpretations. These commitments informed my interest in understanding how individuals navigated digital spaces to seek community, explore identity, process lived experiences, and cultivate resilience amid broader sociopolitical uncertainty and power-based sexual violence. Further, I recognized that I do not approach these topics from a position of political neutrality (Haraway, 1988). Instead, I acknowledged that my commitment to anti-oppressive and feminist principles, coupled with my own lived experiences and social location, shaped this dissertation.

Lastly, I recognized the varied emotions of grief, hope, and anger as not separate from the research process but as important sources of reflexive insight. Historically, women's anger has been dismissed as irrational or threatening, despite representing deeply rational responses to injustice that demand accountability and fuel resistance (Chemaly, 2018). As Ahmed (2017) argues, to be a feminist is to "challenge ordinary and everyday sexism, including academic sexism. This is not an option: it is what makes feminism feminist" (p. 5). I viewed my commitments to survivor-centered, feminist, and justice-oriented scholarship not as limitations to rigorous qualitative inquiry, but as integral to the ethical responsibility, transparency, and integrity of this research.

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Chapter 2 - Study One

"Something can be sexually explicit and still be safe": Speculative sexually fanfiction as a space for exploration, agency, and growth

Sexual violence is a pervasive public health problem across the life course, encompassing physical, psychological, technological, and structural forms of harm (Basile et al., 2014; Chesney & Citron, 2019; Henry & Powell, 2018; Hirsch & Khan, 2020). Approximately one in five undergraduate women and one in ten undergraduate men report sexual violence (e.g., Cantor et al., 2020; Cusano et al., 2023; Fedina et al., 2018). These estimates do not separately represent transgender, nonbinary, and other gender-diverse students. In the large, nonprobability 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, 47% of transgender and gender-diverse respondents reported lifetime sexual assault, 10% reported assault in the previous year, and 13% of respondents who were openly out or perceived as transgender during K–12 reported being assaulted because they were transgender (James et al., 2016). LGBTQIA2+ students, particularly transgender and gender-nonconforming students, experience disproportionate victimization; students of color, students with disabilities, and international students also face barriers to reporting and support (e.g., Campe, 2021; Coulter & Rankin, 2020; Harris & Linder, 2017; Kirkner et al., 2021).

National data further show that victimization often begins early: among adults who had experienced rape, more than 80% were first victimized before age 25, including nearly half of women and more than half of men before age 18 (Basile et al., 2022). In early adulthood, approximately one-third of adults experienced sexual harassment and one-quarter experienced sexual assault, with similar rates among people who had and had not attended college (Mumford et al., 2020). Sexual violence is associated with serious mental health, academic, and sexual well-being consequences, including depression, anxiety, self-harm, suicidality, substance misuse,

disrupted academic persistence, and difficulties with sexual self-concept, agency, pleasure, and intimacy (Bigras et al., 2017; Georgia et al., 2018; Kaufman et al., 2019; Kelly & Gidycz, 2019; Kennedy & Prock, 2018; Mark et al., 2023; Rellini et al., 2011). Together, these findings situate campus sexual violence within a broader continuum extending from childhood and adolescence through emerging adulthood. Colleges nevertheless remain important settings for prevention and support because many adults live, learn, and seek resources within them. Campus environments and institutional processes may also normalize harm or fail to align with survivors' definitions of accountability, justice, and healing (Karunaratne, 2023; McCready et al., 2022; Richards & Hayes, 2024; Spencer et al., 2024; Tyler et al., 2017; Webermann et al., 2024). These limitations affect both people harmed during college and those who enter college with earlier experiences of sexual violence, underscoring institutions' responsibility to support survivors across these experiences.

When formal support is inaccessible or insufficient, survivors may seek alternative ways to cope, make meaning, and restore agency (Bedera, 2024; Ullman, 2023). Digital communities can provide accessible and anonymous opportunities for connection and healing outside institutional settings (Andalibi, 2020; Bogen et al., 2022; Burstow, 2003; Fileborn, 2017; Mendes et al., 2019; Park, 2022; Salter, 2013). One substantially understudied tool is sexually explicit fanfiction, which may offer opportunities to explore identity, relationships, trauma, healing, and sexuality (Black, 2008; Busse, 2017; Jamison, 2013). Examining these spaces may broaden understandings of survivor coping, meaning-making, and recovery beyond formal support systems. Despite growing recognition of the transformative, positive potential of digital storytelling communities, little is known about how survivors of sexual violence engage with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction or how such engagement may function as a self-directed

coping and healing strategy. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory study was to examine how current and previously enrolled college student survivors of sexual violence understand, experience, and make meaning of their engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, particularly in relation to coping, sexuality, and personal well-being.

Erotic Media, Fantasy, and Emotional Regulation

Fanfiction is a form of digital storytelling in which fans create original works that reimagine, extend, or transform existing fictional worlds and narratives drawn from popular media, including television, film, literature, music, anime, video games, and celebrity culture (Coppa, 2017; Jenkins, 1992; Romano, 2019). As a transformative practice, fanfiction allows readers and writers to explore untold moments and alternate character developments, and to create new relational possibilities. Through these creative interventions, fans expand the meanings of canonical texts and reshape stories to reflect their own interests, experiences, and perspectives (De Kosnik, 2016; Derecho, 2006). Fanfiction is embedded within participatory digital cultures that emphasize collaboration, interaction, and collective meaning-making (Booth, 2021; Geraghty et al., 2022). The continued expansion of internet technologies, social networking platforms, and digital archives has facilitated the cross-geographic and cross-cultural growth of inclusive fanfiction communities (Jenkins et al., 2015). Existing research suggests that fanfiction communities often function as spaces of belonging, affirmation, and identity exploration, that are particularly valuable for marginalized or underrepresented individuals (McInroy et al., 2019). Women, LGBTQIA2+ individuals, people of color, and people with disabilities have frequently used fanfiction communities to explore positive and alternative representations of identity, challenge dominant narratives, and imagine possibilities beyond those presented in commercial texts (Jenkins, 1988, 1992, 2012; Tosenberger, 2008). Consequently,

fanfiction has been conceptualized not only as a form of entertainment, but also as a site of community building, self-expression, and identity development.

Speculative Sexually Explicit Fanfiction

Sexually explicit fanfiction centers sexual desire, erotic fantasy, intimacy, and sexual relationships, often depicting these experiences in greater detail or with greater emotional immersion than mainstream media (Bacon-Smith, 1991; Fathallah, 2017). One prominent yet understudied subset is speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, which situates erotic and romantic narratives within fantastical, supernatural, futuristic, dystopian, paranormal, or otherwise imagined worlds (Attebery, 2002; Moylan & Baccolini, 2003). By departing from ordinary reality, these stories create space to imagine alternative identities, relationships, and ways of being that may be constrained or impossible in the real world (Le Guin, 2024; Vint, 2021). Speculative elements, including monsters, non-human entities, magical systems, and imagined societies, offer frameworks for examining power, identity, embodiment, relationships, and social norms (Oziewicz, 2021).

Within fanfiction, these narratives often depict intimacy beyond conventional understandings of gender, sexuality, kinship, and power (Lothian et al., 2007; Woledge, 2006), allowing fans to explore desire, agency, consent, vulnerability, and intimacy (Duffett, 2013). Omegaverse, for example, uses alternative social-biological systems organized around secondary sex designations (Alpha, Beta, and Omega), to explore power, consent, embodiment, and relational dynamics (Busse, 2013; Entrikin, 2023; Popova, 2018). For survivors, these imagined worlds may create emotional and psychological distance from lived experiences while enabling engagement with themes that might otherwise feel difficult or inaccessible (Mar et al., 2009; McInroy et al., 2019; Park, 2022). This distance may support exploration of sexuality, intimacy,

pleasure, and agency as part of self-directed coping and meaning-making. Speculative forms of sexually explicit fanfiction that incorporate fantasy, science fiction, supernatural, and other non-realist elements may be particularly relevant to healing and recovery for survivors. By creating distance from reality, speculative narratives may allow individuals to engage indirectly with difficult experiences and explore alternative possibilities for agency, intimacy, and recovery (Attebery, 2002; Moylan & Baccolini, 2003; Park, 2022; Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016). Despite growing scholarship on the social, emotional, and identity-related benefits of fanfiction, little research has examined speculative sexually explicit fanfiction's potential role in survivors' healing.

Theoretical Frameworks

Queer Theory

Queer theory provides a critical framework for examining how gender, sexuality, bodies, and relationships are socially constructed and regulated through systems of power (Jagose, 1997). Rather than treating heterosexuality, binary gender, monogamy, and reproductive futurity as natural or inevitable, queer theory interrogates how these assumptions become privileged while other identities, desires, and forms of intimacy are marginalized (Foucault, 1978; Warner, 1991). Gender is understood as a socially produced and performed process rather than a fixed identity (Butler, 1990), while sexuality and desire are shaped and continually influenced by cultural scripts that privilege dominant forms of intimacy. Queer theory, therefore, invites scholars to reimagine alternative possibilities around pleasure, desire, relationships, and healing beyond dominant social expectations.

Queer theorists further emphasize that sexuality is shaped through institutions such as family, law, religion, education, and media, which regulate whose identities and relationships are

recognized, protected, or stigmatized (Littlejohn & Stone, 2025; López-Orozco et al., 2022; Rubin, 1984; Warner, 1999). Within higher education, heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions are reinforced through policies, campus climates, healthcare access, housing structures, and institutional understandings of safety and belonging (Garvey et al., 2019; Monahan et al., 2026). For survivors of sexual violence, these systems shape how consent, pleasure, recovery, and sexuality are understood, often limiting survivor-defined pathways of agency and intimacy (Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Nicolazzo, 2017). Together, these perspectives challenge the assumption that sexuality, intimacy, and recovery follow singular, normative, or predetermined pathways.

Queer theory is particularly useful for understanding speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, as these narratives frequently disrupt conventional assumptions of bodies, sexuality, reproduction, and relationships. Genres such Omegaverse, supernatural romance, and monster or alien fiction decouple desire, reproduction, and embodiment from cisgender and heterosexual frameworks (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2008). Additionally, reader-insert and self-insert fanfiction are forms of participatory storytelling that place fans within the narrative. Reader-insert stories typically use second-person narration, addressing the reader as "you," and feature a minimally defined protagonist to support reader identification. In contrast, self-insert stories feature an original character who serves as a stand-in for the author or reader, enabling immersive engagement with the fictional world (Sapuridis & Alberto, 2022; Strmel, 2014). These formats further allow both readers and writers to more freely inhabit roles and forms of intimacy that may feel inaccessible or unsafe offline (Derecho, 2006; Tosenberger, 2008). For survivors of sexual violence, these narratives provide inclusive opportunities to renegotiate consent, reclaim agency, and reimagine sexuality outside of their lived trauma-centered scripts. Speculative

sexually explicit fanfiction serves as a queer site of exploration and possibility, positioning queer theory as a valuable framework for understanding how and why participants engage within these narratives.

Affect Theory

Affect theory examines how emotions, bodily sensations, and the circulation of feeling between individuals and their environments shape experience (Ahmed, 2009; Vogler, 2021). It views thinking and feeling as interconnected processes through which people interpret experiences, navigate relationships, and make meaning (Jasper, 2018; Wetherell, 2012). Rather than merely internal states, emotions are social, relational, and embodied forces influencing desire, safety, shame, vulnerability, and belonging (Ahmed, 2004; Massumi, 1995). Affect is often understood as what is felt before it is named, the bodily sensations that shape meaning before conscious interpretation (Stewart, 2007).

Sexually explicit fanfiction, particularly speculative narratives, can evoke longing, comfort, angst, arousal, grief, and empowerment (Hautsch, 2023). Fan engagement is therefore more than a cognitive or entertainment-based activity; it is an emotional experience through which interactions with texts and communities generate reflection and personalized meaning-making (Jasper, 2018; Vogler, 2021). Speculative narratives may be especially affective because they allow readers and writers to explore intimacy, power, and vulnerability through imaginative distance while retaining emotional resonance (Ngai, 2007). These experiences may shape how survivors relate to their bodies, process emotions, and negotiate sexual agency (Kim & Klinger, 2019).

Because affect theory conceptualizes healing, pleasure, and agency as ongoing processes and recognizes trauma as both embodied and consciously narrated, it is particularly useful for

understanding survivors' engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction (Ahmed, 2009; Stewart, 2007; Wetherell, 2012). These narratives allow fans to experiment with fantasy, identity, desire, and sexual scripts beyond dominant social expectations (Doring, 2021). Affect theory therefore offers a framework for examining how these emotional and embodied experiences intersect with survivors' healing, sexuality, and agency following sexual violence.

Current Study

Despite growing recognition of the important roles that fanfiction and digital participatory culture can play in individuals' identity development, informal learning, and community formation (Dym et al., 2019; Evans et al., 2017; McInroy & Craig, 2020), little is known about how survivors of sexual violence engage with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction. Existing scholarship has identified fandom spaces for identity exploration, community-based support, and emotional coping (Anderson et al., 2021; Dym et al., 2019; McInroy & Craig, 2018). However, this research has rarely centered survivors of sexual violence or examined how speculative and sexually explicit content may shape their engagement with trauma, sexuality, pleasure, agency, and power. Addressing these gaps is vital given the increasingly central role that digital spaces play in shaping how individuals explore identity, relationships, sexuality, and personal meaning within everyday life, particularly for those following the aftermath of sexual trauma.

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory study was to examine how current and previously enrolled college student survivors of sexual violence understand, experience, and make meaning of their engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, particularly in relation to coping, sexuality, and personal well-being. This study was guided by the following three research questions:

RQ1: How do individuals describe their engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction?

RQ2: What themes and narrative elements within speculative sexually explicit fanfiction do survivors find salient or meaningful?

RQ3: How, if at all, does engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction relate to survivors' understandings of sexuality, pleasure, agency, and power?

Methods

Recruitment and Eligibility

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling across national fandom and higher education communities using social media, professional networks, and referrals (see Appendix A). An eight-item Qualtrics screening form assessed age, English proficiency, current or previous full-time enrollment at a U.S. college or university, survivor identity, current engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, and willingness to provide contact information (see Appendix B). The final sample included 10 sexual assault survivors who currently engaged with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction. This small sample size aligned with qualitative recommendations emphasizing information power, thematic sufficiency, and data adequacy rather than statistical representativeness (Braun et al., 2022; Wutich et al., 2024). Consistent with the exploratory design, in-depth interviews and reflexive thematic analysis prioritized rich, contextualized accounts over broad generalizability (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Malterud et al., 2016).

Sample Demographics

Participants ranged in age from 20 to 35 years, with an average age of 28.30 years (SD = 4.99). The sample included 50% (n = 5) who identified as cisgender women, 20% (n = 2)

nonbinary, 20% (*n* = 2) agender, 10% (*n* = 1) genderqueer, 10% (*n* = 1) transgender man, 10% (*n* = 1) transmasculine, and 10% (*n* = 1) questioning. In terms of racial and ethnic identity, 70% (*n* = 7) identified as White/Caucasian, 30% (*n* = 3) as Black/African American, and 10% (*n* =1) as multiracial, specifically identifying as White-passing, mixed-race (White, Black, and Choctaw). Additionally, 20% (*n* = 2) identified as Hispanic/Latinx, 70% (*n* = 7) indicated they did not identify as Hispanic/Latinx, and 10% (*n* = 1) preferred not to disclose. Participants could select all identities that applied for gender identity and race/ethnicity; therefore, percentages exceeded 100%. See Table 1 for Participant Demographics.

Table 1. Study One Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Degree	Age	Gender	Race Ethnicity	Sexual Orientation
Yena	Graduate	26	Genderqueer	Multiracial	Queer & questioning
Elizabeth	Undergraduate	22	Ciswoman	Black/African American	Heterosexual
Kady	Graduate	29	Ciswoman	Prefer not to disclose	Bisexual & Queer
Padme	Graduate	26	Ciswoman	White / Caucasian	Bisexual
Christine	Completed	32	Non-binary & Questioning	White / Caucasian	Queer
Benji	Previously enrolled	34	Transman & Non-binary & Agender	Multiracial	Asexual & Queer
Space Man	Undergraduate	20	Trans Masculine	White / Caucasian	Lesbian
Pixie	Completed	28	Ciswoman	Black / African American	Asexual & Bi-romantic
Falcon	Completed	35	Agender	White / Caucasian	Asexual
Jennifer	Completed	32	Ciswoman	White / Caucasian	Bisexual & Queer

Data Collection

Participant Pre-Interview Survey

After confirming their interest and scheduling an interview (see Appendix C), eligible participants completed a 23-item pre-interview survey (see Appendix D) to inform the interview questions. Items assessed demographic and educational characteristics and participants' engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, including their history, frequency, platforms, fandoms, content preferences, and positioning within narratives.

Interview

All 10 participants completed individual, semi-structured interviews (see Appendix E). Responses from the pre-interview survey were used to personalize questions and prompts. Open-ended questions explored participants' histories with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction; preferred genres, themes, tropes, dynamics, and patterns of engagement; and emotional, mental, and physical responses to the materials. Participants were also invited to reflect on whether and how their engagement intersected with experiences of sexual violence, emotional processing, well-being, pleasure, boundaries, consent, sexual agency, and perceptions of power. Individuals who completed the interview received a $40 incentive as compensation for their participation.

Analysis

Research Team Positionality

Researchers' identities, experiences, and professional backgrounds shape qualitative analysis and representation (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Reflexive attention to positionality strengthens rigor and transparency, particularly in research concerning sexuality, trauma, and survivors' experiences (Holmes, 2020). Four researchers contributed personal, professional, and disciplinary perspectives to the analysis. Primary researcher J.H. is a white, cisgender,

heterosexual U.S. citizen and doctoral candidate in health and human sciences. A longtime fandom participant, she brings more than eight years of campus sexual violence prevention experience, including developing university-wide initiatives and supporting prevention efforts at colleges and universities. These experiences inform her perspective and require reflexivity about how they shape her interpretations. K.A. is a cisgender, heterosexual, endosex white U.S. citizen with a doctorate in Child and Family Studies whose research examines sexual development during adolescence and young adulthood. She has extensive qualitative training and experience. E.S. is a cisgender, heterosexual African American scholar with a graduate degree in Gender and Development and is currently a doctoral student in Prevention Science with a research focus on sexual violence prevention in higher education. She has also served as a Policy, Research, and Prevention Specialist at a non-profit organization where she collaborated with institutions to conduct qualitative research. Neither K.A. or E.S. are involved with fandom communities, bringing "outsider" perspectives.

C.S. is a nonbinary, bisexual, white and Latine U.S. citizen and doctoral student in higher education with two graduate degrees in school counseling. Their research focuses on college access and persistence among marginalized students, while their participation in online fandoms since 2012 supported nuanced interpretations of fanfiction, pleasure, identity, and belonging. C.S. also participated in the study. Consistent with feminist qualitative inquiry and reflexive thematic methodologies, this dual role was addressed transparently rather than treated as bias to eliminate (Berges, 2015; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Hesse-Biber, 2014). Collectively, the team's diverse identities, expertise, and relationships to fandom brought multiple perspectives to the analysis.

Pre-Interview Survey

Descriptive Data

Descriptive data from the pre-interview survey were used to contextualize the qualitative findings and described participants' engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for categorical variables, including demographic characteristics, platform use, and forms of engagement; means and standard deviations were calculated for continuous variables, such as age and age of first exposure. For select-all-that-apply items, summed percentages could exceed 100%. Attention was given to participants' age of introduction, forms and frequency of engagement, length of engagement, platform use, content focus, and narrative positioning. Findings helped to contextualize participants' accounts and support the interpretation of the themes developed through reflexive thematic analysis.

Open-ended Data

To further capture the content participants most frequently engaged with in fanfiction, participants were asked to share in more detail about the fandoms, character pairings, and recurring themes or story tropes they were most drawn to. Responses were analyzed using conventional content analysis to systematically categorize textual data to identify patterns, themes, and meanings within participant responses (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2000). Responses to the question were reviewed and coded according to recurring fandom affiliations, relationship preferences, and narrative themes. Similar codes were grouped into broader categories to provide a descriptive overview of participants' engagement.

Interviews

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The 10 interview transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), an interpretive approach for developing patterns of shared meaning across a dataset (Braun et al.,

2022). RTA recognizes that themes are actively generated through researchers' engagement with the data rather than discovered as objective truths (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, the analysis involved: (1) familiarization with the data, through repeated transcript reading and note-taking; (2) generating initial codes relevant to the research questions; (3) generating initial themes by exploring patterns across codes; (4) developing and reviewing themes in relation to the coded data and the dataset as a whole; (5) refining, defining, and naming themes to clarify their central meanings and boundaries; and (6) producing the analytic account, presenting the themes in relation to the research questions and supporting them with relevant data extracts. Familiarization occurred over three consecutive weeks. During the first week, team members repeatedly read interviews 1–3 and recorded initial observations; they followed the same process for interviews 4–6 in the second week and interviews 7–10 in the third. The team then coded the full dataset and developed themes by examining patterns across interviews. Throughout the analysis, researchers moved iteratively among transcripts, codes, and developing themes, consistent with RTA's recursive approach (Ahmed et al., 2025). Team discussions supported reflexivity, consideration of multiple interpretations, and examination of assumptions. The resulting themes were developed to capture shared meaning while remaining grounded in participants' accounts.

Member Reflection

Braun and Clarke (2021) describe RTA themes as interpretive constructions developed through researchers' engagement with data rather than objective truths. Member reflection was therefore used to elaborate, challenge, or extend emerging interpretations. Following theme development, participants reviewed the codebook and commented on whether the themes resonated with their experiences, supporting reflexive dialogue consistent with Tracy (2010).

Three participants (30%) completed the review and received $10 each. They generally found the themes resonant and offered feedback that added nuance and complexity. The team considered this feedback alongside the full dataset, analytic memos, and team interpretations when refining the final analysis.

Results

Participant Characteristics

Participants were asked to share how they engaged with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction and could select all forms of engagement that applied. All participants (100%, $N = 10$) reported reading speculative sexually explicit fanfiction. Additionally, 60% ($n = 6$) also participated in fan communities, and 40% ($n = 4$) wrote speculative sexually explicit fanfiction. Participants reported first being introduced to speculative sexually explicit fanfiction between the ages of 12 and 16 years ($M = 13.8$, $SD = 1.62$). Participants reported long-term engagement, with 60% ($n = 6$) indicating 10 or more years of involvement and an average engagement length of 7.35 years ($SD = 3.50$). Engagement frequency varied, with most participants reporting daily/almost daily (30%, $n = 3$), weekly (30%, $n = 3$), or monthly (30%, $n = 3$) participation. Archive of Our Own (AO3) was the most used platform (70%, $n = 7$), followed by Threads (40%, $n = 4$), Wattpad (30%, $n = 3$), Tumblr (30%, $n = 3$), Discord (30%, $n = 3$), and Instagram (IG; 30%, $n = 3$). Furthermore, participants engaged with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction through Google Docs or other shared documents (20%, $n = 2$), TikTok (20%, $n = 2$), X (formerly Twitter; 20%, $n = 2$), Fanfiction.net (10%, $n = 1$), and Reddit (10%, $n = 1$). All participants (100%, $N = 10$) primarily engaged with specific fandoms or media, while many also reported interests in celebrity or idol-based fanfiction (70%, $n = 7$) and character pairings or “ships” (60%, $n = 6$).

Fanfiction Engagement

Open-ended responses indicated that participants most commonly engaged with K-pop, television, and Marvel fandoms, with particular interest in found family, enemies-to-lovers, alternative universe, and supernatural tropes. When reading speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, 90% of participants (n = 9) reported engaging from an observer perspective, although many described imagining themselves as self-insert characters (60%, n = 6), or as existing characters within the narrative (50%, n = 5). Among participants who reported writing speculative sexually explicit fanfiction (n = 4), all indicated imagining themselves as one of the story's main characters.

Thematic Findings

Three overarching themes with 10 interconnected subthemes highlighted participants' experiences engaging with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction. Collectively, the findings suggested that participants engaged with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction as a space for exploration, agency, community, and personal transformation. While themes were presented separately to facilitate interpretation, participants' stories were interconnected and traversed across multiple themes. The full list of participant quotes can be found in Appendix F.

Exploration Through Speculation

Participants described speculative sexually explicit fanfiction as a generative space for engaging with difficult experiences and emotions, particularly after sexual violence. Rather than escaping reality, speculative narratives offered psychological distance from everyday expectations and consequences, allowing survivors to explore sexuality, trauma, consent, power, relationships, and identity. Together, their accounts show how *Exploration Through Speculation*

emerged through three interconnected processes: *fantasy as protective distance*, *exploring difficult realities*, and *knowing fantasy is not reality*.

Fantasy as Protective Distance. Within the subtheme *fantasy as protective distance*, participants described speculative sexually explicit fanfiction as a space where fantasy created emotional distance and made difficult topics safer to explore. Elizabeth described speculative narratives as "a way immerse myself in something that is emotionally engaging but not directly tied to my actual real life." When asked why nonhuman male characters felt safer to her, Padme explained, "Faries at least, you can imagine them in whatever way you want them. They can look like humanoids. They can look monster-y. Having it in an alternative universe felt safe." After experiencing sexual violence by man, Christine found themselves avoiding heterosexual narratives. Reading queer speculative fanfiction gave them enough distance to engage with sexual content in a way that felt self. Christine explained, "It might have been two men or two women, but, at the end of the day, it wasn't me being involved with it, so I could remove myself." Finally, Pixie described seeking out fantasy settings that felt removed from her current circumstances, "I want to read fantasy and have a completely different world to picture other than that I'm going through now." Across these accounts, participants described fantasy as creating distance from experiences and realities that felt difficult to engage with directly.

Exploring Difficult Realities. Participants also described using speculative narratives to *explore difficult realities* and questions related to trauma, consent, sexuality, relationships, and power. Falcon, a survivor of child sexual abuse, described how speculative stories shaped their relationship with sex, "It has helped me develop a healthy relationship with sex, but it's not necessarily one that I want to act on." When discussing speculative narratives that addressed difficult plot topics, Space Man described reading about sexual violence related to their own

experience without feeling compelled to stop, “The fact that I am reading something that directly relates to sexual violence I’ve experienced, but, like, it doesn’t. I don’t find it particularly triggering or euphoric. It’s a thought in my head, and then I keep reading.” For Yena, writing speculative sexually explicit fanfiction offered a way to use characters to explore difficult topics from a different perspective. They shared, “It’s just another way to play with these people as characters. It unlocks a new door of freedom to engage with things differently.” Finally, Benji described reading about characters experiencing hardships that felt familiar to them, “I like realism that’s so gnarly it’s almost realistic….The same things may have happened to me. You’re like, yep, that character’s going through it.” Together, these accounts show participants encountering difficult realities through fictional characters and narratives that resonated with their own experiences.

Knowing Fantasy Is Not Reality. Participants’ accounts also reflected the subtheme *knowing fantasy is not reality*. They distinguished reading or writing fictional content from endorsing or wanting to enact it. When asked what they wished the public understood about fans who enjoy speculative narratives. Benji said, “I wish they knew that enjoying reading something does not mean that you would wish to act upon it.” Likewise, Pixie shared,

> Something can be explored safely in fiction, without ever crossing into reality. And is it uncomfortable to think that someone might be writing pedophilia, or incest, or something of that nature? Sure, it's uncomfortable to sit with, but I would, every single time, 100% prefer someone to be writing stories about it versus trying to do anything about it in real life.

For Padme, the speculative nature of fanfiction draws a clear line between fantasy and reality,

> It's also a really freeing experience to be able to read about something that just can't happen in real life. There isn't a 7-foot blue alien with two dicks that exist in this world. So, it creates a different sensation of arousal than when I'm with my spouse. Not only am I feel arousal in my body, I'm also imagining a whole different universe.

Finally, Kady described enjoying stories about possessive men while distinguishing that fantasy from her independence in real life, "You're in this other world where it's like, 'oh my goodness, I need that.' But then you're out in the real world and I don't need anyone to save me." Rather than collapsing the boundaries between fiction and reality, participants actively maintained them; for survivors, this distinction offered opportunities to explore difficult topics, questions of consent, and relationships while retaining control over the narrative and their engagement. Together, these interconnected subthemes and findings demonstrated how participants' engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction went beyond entertainment or escapism and embodied the broader process of *Exploration Through Speculation*. This illustrated the meaningful role speculative narratives played in their ongoing meaning-making and engagement with difficult experiences.

(Re)Newing Narrative Agency

Participants described exercising agency at multiple points in their engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction: deciding what to read or write, how deeply to engage, and when to step away; navigating emotionally complex narratives; and reflecting on what those stories meant to them. Four interconnected subthemes capture these experiences: *consent beyond the story*, *reclaiming agency after constraint*, *speculative sexually explicit fanfiction as boundary work*, and *control through tropes*.

Consent Beyond the Story. Participants described using tags, content warnings, ratings, and author notes to decide whether a story was something they wanted to read. Padme intentionally filtered out stories that included non-consensual scenes, “I don't want a surprise rape scene. I'm reading to escape real life. I don't want to experience all of that again.” While Padme avoided stories that reminded her of her assault, Space Man described a different approach to consensual non-consent (CNC) stories, “For a long time I would gravitate away from CNC fanfiction. But I noticed that after I had experienced sexual violence, I wasn’t as opposed to it, and I actually started reading it and searching for it with the tags." These accounts show participants making different choices about the content they encountered, including avoiding some material and seeking out other themes. Furthermore, participants consistently reinforced that using tags and warnings were an intentional act of consent, not simply a way to choose a story. Kady spoke about how this intentional engagement was a way to decide what she was willing to let into her world:

> You’re giving consent to what you want to read [using the tagging feature], and what you want to, like, let inside you. And that is something like, whenever these warnings come that I don’t feel comfortable with, you’re just like, not consenting to let that into your world.

For survivors, agency could involve avoiding material that felt unsafe or intentionally approaching difficult themes within a controlled fictional context.

Reclaiming Agency After Constraint. In *reclaiming agency after constraint*, participants described shaping how they experienced speculative sexually explicit fanfiction from within the narrative. When asked which points of view they gravitated toward, Christine shared, “I like insert reader or y/n [your name]. I think that is the one where I'm in control. And

if it doesn't feel like me, then I create a y/n character in my head." Participants also described turning to stories with particular emotional arcs. Jennifer said, “When the world outside me feels uncontrollable in some way, I need a story to dive into where I know by the end those characters are gonna be safe.” Benji described reclaiming agency through control over both his engagement with a story and how it unfolded,

> It’s very healing and grounding, because even if the fic handles one of those very difficult topics for me, I’m completely in control. I can stop reading or can talk to somebody about what I’m reading in the fandom. I can just bitch. I can write my own version of the story that goes the way I want it to.

Together, these accounts located agency in participants’ ability to shape, pause, or rewrite their engagement with difficult material.

Speculative Sexually Explicit Fanfiction as Boundary Work. Participants described engagement with *speculative sexually explicit fanfiction as a form of boundary work*, monitoring their emotional and physical responses to decide whether to continue reading, pause, stop, or choose another story. Elizabeth explained,

> If something starts to feel overwhelming, because I get those little [physical] reactions, I'll just pause or stop, take a moment, and make sure that I'm okay, then continue. Or I switch to a different story that is safer for me and knowing that I want to explore something to cool that tension brewing from inside. So, my body is an indicator for me. It helps me figure out whether the reading experience is supportive and exploratory, or getting too close to something that is going to be uncomfortable or something I'm not ready to engage with in that moment.

Elizabeth's account demonstrated how participants continually assessed their emotional and physical responses throughout their engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction and viewed it as an intentional act of agency.

Participants also discussed stories in which characters expressed their desires and made choices. Kady described becoming more drawn to stories featuring women who exercised control as she grew older, "I want to communicate what I really want, instead of just receiving certain things... I like the stories that have women in control of things and that they...make their decisions." For Kady, these narratives presented boundary-setting as an active process of naming one's desires, communicating one's needs, and determining the conditions of an encounter. Survivors emphasized that agency rested in having the freedom to determine what felt appropriate for themselves, at all times, illustrating that boundaries were continually negotiated rather than fixed.

Control Through Tropes. Finally, participants describe control through tropes as a way to intentionally seek particular relational roles, power dynamics, and emotional outcomes within a story. Familiar tropes helped them anticipate the kinds of relationships and resolutions they wanted to engage with. Pixie, a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, described gravitating toward found-family and age regression stories,

> I gravitate towards the found family tropes because my own family dynamic is so unnecessarily complicated. With age regression stories, I can read something where someone is essentially in a scene, and they're a young child, but they're not being perceived as sexual. They can just be a child. And that's extremely comforting to me.

Falcon described intentionally seeking tropes and genres centered on meaningful connection, regardless of characters' sexual identities, "I look specifically for tropes and genres, not

necessarily with asexual characters, but like, with characters who form deep, meaningful connections."

Elizabeth spoke about choosing stories with tropes that matched the emotional connection she wanted to experience, "I've noticed that my choices are connected to what I need emotionally. I'm feeling disconnected, I look for stories that focus more on intimacy, something to bring me back emotionally." Finally, Kady described her interest in stories featuring women who make their own decisions, "I like the stories that have women in control of things, and that they just make their decisions." Participants described tropes as shaping the relational dynamics and outcomes they encountered in speculative sexually explicit fanfiction. Across these subthemes, participants described making intentional choices about how they engaged with stories and their depictions of power and autonomy. Their accounts also extended beyond the stories themselves, as participants described finding care, validation, connection, and mutual understanding through relationships with other readers, writers, and fandom communities. The final theme focuses on these relationships and their place in participants' experiences.

Finding Community

Participants described engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction as extending beyond individual reading and writing. They spoke about relationships with others who shared their interests, identities, or lived experiences. Their accounts included relationships formed through fanfiction, experiences of validation and normalization, and responses to exclusionary or stigmatizing narratives. These accounts comprise the overarching theme of *Finding Community*, which includes three interconnected subthemes: *relationships through speculative sexually explicit fanfiction*, *validation and normalization*, and *community as resistance*.

Relationships Through Speculative Sexually Explicit Fanfiction. Participants described forming *relationships through speculative sexually explicit fanfiction*, including friendships, chosen family, romantic and mentoring relationships, and broader fandom connections. Through collaborative writing, beta reading, forums, Discord servers, and other fandom spaces, they connected with people who shared their interests and, in some cases, aspects of their identities and lived experiences. When asked what they enjoyed most about speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, Yena reflected, "it's a way for me to connect with people, and I've made lifelong friends within the few months I've been in the K-pop fandom spaces." Falcon described the value of connecting with other older fans in fandom spaces where they encountered ageism, “I always enjoy forming relationships with other older fans like myself. There’s a lot of ageism within fandoms, so those connections are special.” Finally, Jennifer described fandom as a way to connect with others, particularly given her experiences of isolation,

> Being part of fandom has always really been about community for me. I was isolated as I was growing up. So getting to find something to connect with other people has always been really valuable to me, because I haven’t always been great at connecting with other people, and so fandom kind of helps pave a path where I can communicate with other people.

As participants developed these connections, they also began to recognize that they were not alone in their experiences, establishing the foundation for *validation and normalization*.

Validation and Normalization. Through stories and interactions with other readers and writers, survivors encountered individuals who shared similar questions surrounding sexuality, trauma, relationships, and identity. Rather than simply finding people with common interests, participants described finding communities where aspects of themselves that had previously felt

isolated, dismissed, or difficult to discuss were openly represented and understood. As Padme shared,

> Stories you read, you're like, am I a freak? But then you find a community, at least for me, when I found my community, I felt so safe and validated. I'm gonna explore this as much as I can. I can't be a freak if 25,000 other women on this platform are talking about the same thing.

However, for some participants, normalization involved confronting internalized beliefs that those interests were somehow shameful or wrong. As Falcon shared, “When I read fanfiction, I imagine what my mom would say if she heard...I have to actively tell myself, no one cares. You're reading this for yourself, it's fun.” This reflection illustrates that validation extended beyond reducing feelings of isolation to actively challenging internalized shame surrounding speculative sexually explicit fanfiction and pleasure, including as survivors.

Community as Resistance. Participants described finding stories and communities where questions about sexuality, trauma, relationships, and identity were discussed, leading to *community as resistance*. In Padme’s words, “smut is political. No ifs, ands, or buts about it.” Space Man described finding validation and joy in stories centered on trans male characters, “It’s so nice to read stories where my identities are uplifted and celebrated, especially with the constant attacks on trans rights in real life.” Some participants also described questioning whether their interests were shameful or wrong. Falcon shared, “When I read fanfiction, I imagine what my mom would say if she heard...I have to actively tell myself, no one cares. You're reading this for yourself, it's fun.” Finally, Yena described how speculative sexually explicit fanfiction helped them learn about sexual topics they had previously felt ashamed from, “I’ve been able to confront a lot of my personal sexual shame and say, ‘hey, there’s nothing

wrong with enjoying XYZ, this is normal and healthy.'" Together, these accounts show participants finding recognition through shared stories and communities, while the next subtheme explores how they described community in relation to stigma and exclusion.

Discussion

The present study sought to understand how survivors of sexual violence described their engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction and how this related to their understandings of sexuality, pleasure, agency, and power. Three research questions guided this study,

RQ1: How do individuals describe their engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction?

RQ2: What themes and narrative elements within speculative sexually explicit fanfiction do survivors find salient or meaningful?

RQ3: How, if at all, does engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction relate to survivors' understandings of sexuality, pleasure, agency, and power?

The three themes identified in this study, *Exploration Through Speculation*, *(Re)Newing Narrative Agency*, and *Finding Community,* suggested that survivors described speculative sexually explicit fanfiction as substantially more than entertainment or escapism. Speculative sexually explicit fanfiction is a relational, developmental, and meaning-making space through which they continually negotiated identity, agency, intimacy, and hope following experiences of sexual violence. Viewed through queer theory (Butler, 1990) and affect theory (Ahmed, 2004), these findings suggest that survivors' engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction was part of ongoing processes through which meanings surrounding sexuality, relationships, and survivorship were continually produced, challenged, and reimagined (Butler, 1990; Gregg &

Seigworth, 2010). Fanfiction, particularly sexually explicit fanfiction, has often been stigmatized or reduced to its sexual content only (Sears, 2025). These findings challenged this frame by illuminating the complex psychological, relational, and developmental self-work survivors described, consistent with scholarship that has recognized fanfiction as both an erotic and a broader literary and social practice (Busse, 2017). Together, these findings demonstrated the interconnected ways participants used speculative sexually explicit fanfiction to explore possibilities, negotiate agency, and build connection.

Exploration in Fanfiction

Exploration Through Speculation addresses all three research questions. For RQ1, participants described engaging with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction by using fictional worlds to approach material that could feel intense, vulnerable, or constrained by everyday expectations. For RQ2, they identified speculative settings and narratives involving trauma, sexuality, consent, relationships, and power as meaningful. For RQ3, their accounts show how engagement related to their understandings of these topics, including the choices they made about what to explore and how closely to engage with it. Participants described fictional settings as shifting their vantage point and allowing them to remain engaged with difficult material while maintaining emotional distance. Affect theory helps explain how context can shape emotional intensity: placing traumatic or sexually charged material within a speculative setting may reduce its immediacy without diminishing its significance (Ahmed, 2004). This finding also resonates with research on survivors' use of self-distancing techniques for physiological distress relief (Wisco et al., 2015). The subthemes further clarify how participants described this engagement: fantasy provided protective distance; stories offered ways to encounter difficult realities; and

participants distinguished fantasy from real-life beliefs or actions. Choice was central to these accounts.

Some participants described exploring emotionally complex material, while others valued knowing that they could do so on their own terms. This emphasis on choice aligns with research linking survivors' perceived control over recovery to post-assault distress (Frazier, 2003). Through a queer theory lens, participants' engagement with speculative settings and tropes can be understood as queer world-making, in which dominant norms become open to question and alternative forms of desire, intimacy, and relational life become imaginable (Butler, 1990; Muñoz, 2019). Participants' selection and reworking of tropes, power dynamics, and settings created room to consider different scripts of sexuality, consent, and recovery. Their accounts suggest that engagement related to how they understood sexuality, agency, and power, while their distinction between fantasy and reality helped them maintain boundaries around what stories meant for their own lives. Together, these findings describe a self-directed form of engagement in which participants could adjust their proximity to complex material and retain their well-being.

Agency in Fanfiction

(Re)Newing Narrative Agency speaks directly to RQ1 by showing how participants made choices before, during, and after engaging with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction. It also addresses RQ2 through the narrative features and platform tools participants described as meaningful, including tropes, tags, content warnings, and ratings. For RQ3, participants' accounts show how those choices related to their understandings of sexuality, pleasure, agency, and power. They described deciding what to read or write, which warnings to heed, how deeply to engage, which tropes to seek, and when to stop. For participants who connected these

decisions to experiences of constrained autonomy, they represented more than reading preferences; they were ways of exercising control over emotional and relational engagement.

This interpretation aligns with research linking greater perceived control over recovery processes following sexual assault with lower psychological distress over time (Frazier, 2003). Participants described agency as responsive to their desires, limitations, identities, and changing needs. It could involve curiosity, revision, refusal, disengagement, or choosing not to translate fictional exploration into lived behavior. This understanding is consistent with survivor-defined recovery goals that extend beyond symptom reduction (Sinko et al., 2021). A queer theory lens also challenges the assumption that recovery should lead to a single "normal" relationship to sexuality.

Participants' varied choices resonate with research on diverse post-assault relational trajectories, including avoidance, changing relationship priorities, and experiences of intimacy and healing (Stockman et al., 2024). Within speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, participants determined what forms of exploration, intimacy, or distance felt appropriate at a given time, paralleling survivors' use of agency to redefine intimacy and pursue sexual well-being (Saxena & Oosterhoff, 2023). Participants also described attending to emotional and physiological responses as they engaged with stories and online communities. They could pause, disengage, or choose a different narrative when an experience felt supportive, overwhelming, or too close to material they were not ready to revisit. Trauma exposure and PTSD have been associated with changes in how bodily signals are perceived and interpreted (Tsur & Talmon, 2023). Affect theory offers a way to consider how feelings shaped what became possible in each encounter (Massumi, 2021): tension, comfort, anticipation, and distress could inform participants' decisions about their boundaries in the moment.

Overall, these findings show how participants' understandings of consent extended beyond interactions between fictional characters to include their relationship with the text. Research on fanfiction reading similarly suggests that tags help readers anticipate, select, and filter narrative content (Silberstein-Bamford, 2024). Participants described tags, content warnings, ratings, and tropes as resources for making choices before and during an encounter. Through selecting, monitoring, revising, or withdrawing, they could adjust their engagement across stories and over time, without treating one way of engaging as more valid than another.

Community in Fanfiction

Finally, *Finding Community* addresses RQ1 by showing that participants' engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction also involved relationships with other readers and writers. It speaks to RQ2 through the elements participants identified as meaningful: shared interests and experiences, representation, and conversations about sexuality, trauma, and healing. It also informs RQ3, as participants described how recognition and connection related to their understandings of identity, sexuality, and belonging. Research suggests that social support is relevant to survivors' well-being: greater perceived support has been associated with subsequent reductions in PTSD symptoms, while negative reactions to disclosure have been associated with more severe psychopathology (Dworkin et al., 2018, 2019). These findings suggest that the quality of community relationships may matter as much as their availability, particularly whether people respond with recognition, validation, and nonjudgment.

Affect theory conceptualizes emotion as relational and circulating rather than contained within individuals (Ahmed, 2004, 2009; Massumi, 2021). Responses to disclosure can support survivors or contribute to further harm; perceived invalidation can intensify shame and inhibit later disclosure (Catton et al., 2023; Scoglio et al., 2022). In this context, participants' accounts

of affirming representation, creative responses, and the naming of stigmatized experiences offer insight into how community related to feelings of shame, safety, and belonging. These accounts suggest that community could shape how participants understood themselves and the connections available to them. Community also emerged as a site of representation and resistance, addressing RQ2's focus on meaningful themes and narrative elements.

Research with trans and genderqueer readers suggests that fanfiction can offer models of possible identities and lives that are underrepresented in mainstream media or offline environments (Duggan, 2022). Transmasculine *Teen Wolf* fans have also used online fandom to project trans experiences onto fictional bodies and create celebratory, reparative forms of representation, intimacy, joy, and community absent from the source text (Page, 2023). Similarly, participants in this study described writing and sharing fanfiction that made marginalized desires, relationships, and experiences visible. Through a queer theory lens, these practices can be understood as challenging assumptions about whose identities and relationships are legitimate (Butler, 2004). At the same time, participants' accounts show that representation of one marginalized group does not ensure that a community is inclusive of everyone.

Across the three themes, participants described engagement as variable and responsive to their changing needs. This finding speaks to RQ1 by showing that engagement could involve reading, writing, connecting with others, or choosing to withdraw. It informs RQ3 by illustrating how participants related these choices to their understandings of agency, sexuality, pleasure, and power. Research identifies varied recovery pathways involving avoidance, coping with memories and emotions, regaining mastery, and engaging with supportive relationships (Koutra et al., 2022). Trauma-informed practice likewise emphasizes emotional safety, choice, control, connection, coping, and responsiveness to identity and context (Goodman et al., 2016).

Participants' accounts reflect this variability: fanfiction could offer protective distance in one moment and feel overwhelming in another; community could provide validation and expose participants to exclusion. This complexity parallels evidence that sexual-assault disclosures can elicit both positive and negative social reactions, with differing implications for perceived control and post-assault outcomes (Peter-Hagene & Ullman, 2014). Participants did not describe speculative sexually explicit fanfiction as uniformly therapeutic or as a replacement for formal support. Rather, they described it as one space where consent, pleasure, identity, communication, and intimacy could be explored in personally meaningful ways.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, they reflect the experiences and meaning-making of the participants and cannot represent or be generalized to all individuals who engage with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction. Transferability may also be limited because eligibility was restricted to individuals who had attended a U.S. college or university. Although the sample was demographically diverse, most participants were cisgender, self-identified survivors of sexual violence, and long-term, active members of fandom communities. The findings may not reflect the experiences of gender-diverse people, people without histories of sexual violence, or those who have not identified their experiences as sexual trauma or feel uncomfortable discussing their experiences or fanfiction use. They may also underrepresent people who found fanfiction triggering or harmful and left fanfiction communities, as well as newer or more casual participants. Finally, the study also relied on retrospective self-report, which may have been influenced by memory and current interpretations of past experiences.

Future research should include more diverse national, cultural, gender, and experiential groups; examine varied levels of fandom involvement; and use longitudinal designs to explore how engagement and its perceived influence evolve over time. Lastly, although the interviews focused on speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, participants frequently moved between speculative sexually explicit content and other forms of fanfiction without consistently distinguishing among them. Consequently, some findings reflect experiences with fanfiction more broadly and cannot be attributed exclusively to speculative sexually explicit fanfiction. Future research should distinguish more explicitly between various forms of fanfiction to clarify which experiences and outcomes are specific to this genre.

Implications

Although these findings should be considered within the study's limitations, they highlight the complex role speculative sexually explicit fanfiction may play in survivors' meaning-making after sexual violence. Participants described using these narratives to explore consent, agency, intimacy, pleasure, identity, and relationships at their own pace, reflecting research on the importance of sexual exploration and relational connection in recovery (Guyon et al., 2020; Hitter et al., 2017). These findings challenge assumptions that sexually explicit media are inherently harmful or without value, emphasizing the importance of content, context, and interpretation (Döring & Miller, 2022). Recognizing informal digital spaces within broader prevention and recovery contexts may support a more holistic understanding of survivors' sexual and relational healing.

Institutions of higher education should also recognize that students may explore identity, relationships, and belonging through digital communities, particularly when affirming opportunities are unavailable offline. Online fandom research similarly demonstrates how these

communities can facilitate identity exploration, representation, and connection among sexual and gender minority youth (McInroy & Craig, 2020). Speculative sexually explicit fanfiction did not replace services, sexuality education, or supportive relationships but served as one complementary resource within participants' broader recovery processes. Researchers, educators, advocates, and prevention professionals should therefore approach survivors' engagement with media and fandom with curiosity rather than judgment. Recognizing these narratives' potential significance affirms survivors' autonomy and expertise (Ullman, 2023). Speculative sexually explicit fanfiction should neither be positioned as universally beneficial nor dismissed because of its content. Its significance lies in how survivors interpret and incorporate these narratives into broader explorations of agency, identity, sexuality, and relationships. Centering survivors' perspectives can strengthen research, prevention, and education while honoring the individualized nature of healing.

Conclusion

Ultimately, survivors did not describe speculative sexually explicit fanfiction as an escape from reality, but rather a space to engage with and (re)shape and (re)envision their lived realities. Through speculative storytelling, participants described exploring difficult realities, reclaiming agency, finding community, and continually becoming in ways that reshaped and redefined their understandings of sexuality, intimacy, pleasure, and hope following sexual violence. Rather than erasing the impact of trauma, survivors described speculative sexually explicit fanfiction as creating opportunities to imagine identities, relationships, and futures in which sexual violence remained present, but no longer determined the boundaries of who they could become. These findings challenge deficit-based understandings of speculative sexually explicit fanfiction by illustrating the complex ways survivors described engaging with these

narratives. In doing so, this study contributes to a growing understanding of digital storytelling as a relational context through which survivors actively negotiate sexuality, intimacy, identity, and hope following experiences of sexual violence. Listening to survivors' own narratives reminds us that healing is rarely confined to traditional spaces or linear pathways; instead, it often unfolds through the stories people tell, the communities they build, and the possibilities they allow themselves to imagine on their own terms.

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Chapter 3 - Study two:

"In a time when the world is on fire, it is more important than ever that we find community": Exploring the meanings and functions of sexually explicit fanfiction

College students in the United States are navigating sociopolitical uncertainty marked by polarization, restrictions targeting marginalized communities, and concerns about democracy (Greer et al., 2025; Panetta Institute for Public Policy, 2025). Restrictions affecting reproductive healthcare, immigration, LGBTQIA2+ rights, and higher education have been particularly consequential for marginalized students, with LGBTQIA2+ college students reporting anxiety, reduced healthcare access, and reconsideration of legal-identity decisions (Linley et al., 2026). These conditions coincide with substantial psychological distress: 37% of students screened positive for moderate or severe depression, 33% for anxiety, and 11% reported past-year suicidal ideation, with poorer outcomes among LGBTQIA2+ students in conservative states (Healthy Minds Network, 2025; Thomas, 2026). Yet definitions of student success continue to prioritize academic outcomes over well-being, belonging, and community, leaving limited understanding of how students sustain themselves amid structural harm (Rice et al., 2025; Sundararaman et al., 2025).

Digital and narrative spaces may help students process emotions, explore identities, and make sense of social realities (De Kosnik, 2016; Jenkins, 2006). For example, online fandoms allow participants to reimagine relationships, identities, communities, and futures constrained elsewhere (Coppa, 2017; Geraghty et al., 2022). Further, sexually explicit fanfiction (i.e., stories depicting sexual desire and intimate or erotic interactions) offers a participatory space for exploring pleasure, intimacy, relationships, and identity (Fathallah, 2017; Sears, 2025). These opportunities may be especially salient amid heightened uncertainty and threats to students' well-

being. However, little is known about how college students use sexually explicit fanfiction to navigate hostile sociopolitical climates.

As such, this qualitative narrative inquiry examined how U.S. current and formerly enrolled college students described their engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction, including its role in coping, emotional regulation, connection, exploration, meaning-making, and resistance, and whether its significance shifted amid an increasingly hostile sociopolitical environment. In doing so, this research addressed critical gaps in fan studies, resilience scholarship, and college student well-being literature by foregrounding the lived experiences of individuals navigating ongoing sociopolitical hostility and uncertainty.

The Increase of Sociopolitical Hostility on College Campuses

In recent years, state legislation and political intervention have increasingly restricted curricular content; diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives; and identity-based student support in U.S. higher education, raising concerns about academic freedom and institutional governance (Lange & Lee, 2024; Schachle-Gordon et al., 2025). Anti-DEI policies have eliminated offices, programs, and community spaces while restructuring how institutions support marginalized students (Goldberg, 2024; Schachle-Gordon et al., 2025). These pressures shape which identities institutions affirm and which resources remain accessible. Restricting inclusive curricula, affinity spaces, and support services can signal whose identities are recognized while contributing to fear, mistrust, psychological distress, self-censorship, and safety concerns (Abrica & Oliver Andrew, 2025; Yang & Stolzenberg, 2025). Consequently, colleges and universities increasingly serve as sites where broader political conflicts shape students' belonging, identity development, self-expression, and willingness to seek support, with particularly significant consequences for marginalized students (Beagan et al., 2021; Deng & Lee, 2025). Understanding

where students turn for identity exploration, connection, and support beyond formal campus structures is therefore increasingly important.

Responding to Hostile Sociopolitical Campus Environments

In response to hostile sociopolitical and campus conditions, marginalized college students may develop individual and collective strategies for navigating adversity, sustaining themselves, building community, and resisting exclusion (Blockett, 2017; Southwick et al., 2014). Importantly, many of these self-protective practices emerge outside formal systems, particularly when students experience campus environments or services as exclusionary, inaccessible, or unresponsive (Sharp et al., 2022). These practices may include using entertainment and narrative media to manage stress and emotions during periods of uncertainty (Eden et al., 2020; Wolfers & Schneider, 2021); writing and sharing sexually explicit fanfiction to explore desire, sexuality, and sexual preferences (Kukka, 2021); selectively limiting identity disclosure or participation in potentially unsafe campus conversations (Garvey et al., 2019); and seeking connection and support through informal online peer communities (Gordon et al., 2023). These responses reflect students' agency in seeking and creating alternative pathways to safety, belonging, well-being, and identity exploration when formal environments do not adequately meet their needs. Digital and fan spaces can support these processes by providing affirming representations, community, and opportunities to explore identities that may be less safe or visible offline (Craig et al., 2015; McInroy & Craig, 2020). As such, online media like fanfiction offer valuable contexts for understanding how digital narratives may support emerging adults as they navigate complex personal and sociopolitical issues.

Fanfiction as a Digital Community

Within digital fandoms, fans create transformative works that reimagine, extend, and reinterpret existing fictional worlds, characters, and storylines (Jenkins, 1992). Treating source texts as open archives of narrative possibility, fan authors alter plotlines, reconfigure relationships, and develop identities and experiences that may be absent or marginalized within canon (Derecho, 2006). Fanfiction, therefore, constitutes a participatory form of cultural production through which fans may challenge dominant media representations, imagine alternative identities and relationships, and develop communities (De Kosnik, 2016; Floegel, 2020). The participatory dimensions of online fanfiction extend beyond the stories themselves wherein fans interact through comments, feedback, tagging, recommendations, and other community practices. These practices can then support sustained interaction, informal mentoring, and community formation, thus positioning fanfiction as a social, relational, and textual practice (Evans et al., 2017; Ghosh & Aragon, 2024; Silberstein-Bamford, 2024). What was once characterized as a relatively passive relationship with media has evolved into an active, collective process in which stories, meanings, and emotional experiences are co-constructed (Jenkins, 2006).

Digital Fandom, Identity, and Belonging

Digital fandom spaces may be especially meaningful for sexual and gender minority participants because they provide access to representations and identities that may be limited, marginalized, or unsafe to explore offline (McInroy & Craig, 2020). Through transformative storytelling, fans can rework canonical narratives to center queer identities, relationships, and forms of intimacy excluded or underrepresented in source texts (Tosenberger, 2008). These participatory practices may also support self-expression, identity development/affirmation,

community formation, and shared meaning-making (Floegel, 2020). Accordingly, fanfiction functions as far more than entertainment; it represents a participatory digital ecosystem. While there are many types of fanfiction, some of the most active and meaningful forms of fan labor involve stories that center desire, intimacy, and erotic experiences, commonly referred to as sexually explicit fanfiction.

Sexually Explicit Fanfiction

Sexually explicit fanfiction encompasses fan-created narratives in which sexual desire, erotic fantasy, or sexual intimacy are represented in sustained or graphic detail, frequently elaborating relationships and possibilities that remain absent or underdeveloped in canonical texts (Busse, 2017; Massey, 2019). Rather than constituting a single, clearly bounded genre, erotic fanfiction occupies an overlapping generic space between romance, intimacy, and pornography (Driscoll, 2006). Due to this continuum, understandings of explicitness are shaped by textual, platform, and community conventions (Driscoll, 2006; Massey, 2019). Within this broad field, fans use sexual storytelling to imagine and negotiate pleasure, vulnerability, power, consent, and alternative relationship dynamics (Popova, 2021). Sexually explicit fanfiction therefore functions not only as fantasy or entertainment, but also as a literary and socially embedded practice (Busse, 2017; Lothian et al., 2007; Sears, 2025). This may be particularly meaningful for marginalized fans, who can use fanfiction to rework cisheteronormative media narratives and better represent marginalized identities and relationships (Floegel, 2020; Sears, 2025).

Despite growing recognition of the importance of digital communities, participatory culture, and narrative storytelling, little is known about whether and how individuals use sexually explicit fanfiction to cope with, demonstrate resilience in response to, and resist

increasingly hostile sociopolitical environments. Addressing this gap is particularly important given the role digital spaces can play in identity development during young adulthood and across later stages of life, particularly as sociopolitical pressures increasingly shape individuals' everyday experiences (McInroy & Craig, 2020). Online fandom communities may provide access to affirming representations, social connection, and opportunities to explore identities and possibilities that remain constrained or marginalized elsewhere. However, existing research has not sufficiently examined how the sexually explicit dimensions of fanfiction contribute to these processes or whether the meanings individuals assign to their engagement change in response to broader political conditions. Examining these experiences can illuminate how individuals use informal digital narratives not only for entertainment but also to interpret, navigate, and respond to the social conditions affecting their lives.

Identity Development Across Young Adulthood and Beyond

Young adulthood is an important period for exploring and negotiating intersecting identities within social contexts and systems of power, including the development of increasingly complex understandings of oneself and others (Arnett, 2024; Duran & Jones, 2020; Duran et al., 2024). These developmental processes may encompass not only academic and vocational identities, but also relationships, embodiment, desire, and sexuality (Arnett, 2024). However, identity development does not end with young adulthood. Individuals may continue revisiting and renegotiating these dimensions of themselves as their lives, relationships, and social contexts change (Fadjukoff et al., 2016). Adverse experiences and volatile environments can complicate identity development, relationship formation, and belonging during young adulthood and across later stages of life.

Hostile sociopolitical environments can produce sustained distress, anxiety, and uncertainty, particularly when public rhetoric or policies target individuals' identities and rights (Albright & Hurd, 2020; Ballard et al., 2024; Suzuki et al., 2023). Within this broader context, online fandom and sexually explicit fanfiction may offer some individuals comparatively accessible and affirming spaces for exploring identity, relationships, desire, consent, and belonging (McInroy & Craig, 2020; McInroy et al., 2021). Despite growing recognition that broader sociopolitical contexts shape development and well-being, little is known about how these contexts influence engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction or how individuals use these narratives to understand themselves and their experiences within increasingly hostile environments. As legislative, institutional, and cultural attacks on marginalized communities continue to shape everyday life, understanding how individuals seek out, interpret, and derive meaning from informal digital spaces becomes increasingly important.

Theoretical Frameworks

Guided by feminist theory and the politics of pleasure (Collins, 2009; Lorde, 1984; hooks, 2000), as well as the multi-system model of resilience (MSMR; Liu et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2020), this study conceptualized sexually explicit fanfiction not merely as leisure or escapism, but as a potential site of agency, pleasure, and resistance within structurally hostile environments. Together, these frameworks provided complementary lenses for understanding how participants made meaning of their engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction while navigating broader interpersonal, institutional, and sociopolitical contexts.

Feminist Theory and the Politics of Pleasure

A feminist theory lens treats participants' narratives as politically situated accounts shaped by intersecting systems of power, identity, and resistance (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw,

1989). Central to feminist scholarship is the assertion that personal experience, particularly those related to sexuality and pleasure, are not private or apolitical, but are produced and constrained by broader sociopolitical structures (Ahmed, 2017; Collins, 2009; hooks, 2000). Within this study, feminist theory provided a critical lens for examining how participants' identities and lived experiences shaped their engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction, particularly as they navigated hostile sociopolitical environments that regulated, surveilled, and silenced sexual expression (Fahs, 2018; Foucault, 1978; Hesse-Biber, 2014). Rather than treating participants' engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction as an individual or apolitical behavior, feminist theory situated their narratives within broader systems of power that influence whose desires, identities, and forms of pleasure are legitimized or marginalized.

Cyberfeminism frames digital spaces as sites of feminist knowledge production and sexual self-definition, where participatory cultures enable alternative narratives of desire, intimacy, and identity that challenge dominant sexual scripts and expand possibilities for self-expression (Fathallah, 2017). Feminist theory also recognizes pleasure as a site of resistance. Lorde's (1984) conceptualization of the erotic frames pleasure as a source of knowledge, self-preservation, and autonomy within oppressive systems. Accordingly, this perspective allowed the study to interpret engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction as a practice through which participants negotiated pleasure, agency, and belonging while responding to sociopolitical climates that sought to constrain sexual knowledge and expression. At the same time, these experiences were also shaped by broader interpersonal, institutional, and sociopolitical contexts in which participants were embedded, necessitating an ecological framework for understanding resilience.

Multi-System Model of Resilience (MSMR)

Resilience is a complex, multifaceted construct with no single, unified definition (Southwick et al., 2014). It has been conceptualized as a developmental trajectory (Rutter, 2012), a coping outcome following adversity (Bonanno, 2004; Bonanno et al., 2011), and an individual personality trait (Block & Block, 1980; Tarter & Vanyukov, 1999). Although each perspective has contributed important insights, resilience frameworks that emphasize recovery following adversity have been criticized for overlooking the persistence of trauma and the structural conditions that shape adaptation (Southwick et al., 2014). These limitations are particularly salient within contemporary campus and sociopolitical environments, where adversity is often ongoing rather than resolved. The multi-system model of resilience (MSMR) addresses these limitations by conceptualizing resilience as a dynamic process embedded within multiple interacting systems (Liu et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2020). Rather than locating resilience solely within the individual, MSMR emphasizes the continuous interactions between internal resources, coping/pursuit processes, and external systems. In doing so, the model recognizes that resilience is shaped by individual adaptation, interpersonal relationships, environments, and broader sociopolitical conditions.

Within this study, MSMR provided a framework for examining how engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction was situated within these interacting systems. Rather than conceptualizing sexually explicit fanfiction solely as an individual coping strategy or leisure activity, MSMR located participants' engagement within the broader ecological contexts that shaped their opportunities for adaption and resilience. Although MSMR has advanced understandings of resilience, none have applied this framework to digitally mediated practices such as sexually explicit fanfiction or examined how these practices function within increasingly

hostile sociopolitical environments. Together, MSMR and feminist theory provided complementary frameworks for examining how participants made meaning of sexually explicit fanfiction while navigating these contexts.

Current Study

Although digital communities and narrative engagement have been recognized as important contexts for identity development, meaning-making, and coping, little is known about how sexually explicit fanfiction functions within these processes, especially as individuals are navigating increasingly hostile sociopolitical environments. Likewise, limited research has examined how students understand and make meaning of their engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction in relation to their identities, relationships, and broader sociopolitical contexts. The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to explore how queer college students describe their engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction and how its meaning and function related to their experiences within an increasingly hostile sociopolitical environment. The following research goal and two research questions guided this study:

RG1: How did individuals make meaning of their engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction amid current sociopolitical climates, and what meanings or shifts in purpose emerged from these experiences?

RQ1: How did individuals describe their relationship between engaging with sexually explicit fanfiction and their identities, personal beliefs, or sense of community?

RQ2: How, if at all, did individuals describe current sociopolitical climates as shaping their engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction?

Methods

Procedure

Following IRB approval (#13616), participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Recruitment materials (Appendix G) were distributed via social media, professional networks, higher education communities, and participant referrals. Interested individuals completed a seven-item Qualtrics eligibility screener (Appendix H) assessing age, enrollment at a U.S. college or university, English-language comfort, willingness to provide contact information, and current engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction. Names and email addresses were collected to verify eligibility, deter fraudulent responses, and coordinate interviews. Eligible individuals received a confirmation page and were contacted within three business days to review consent, complete a pre-interview survey, and schedule a Zoom interview (Appendices I and J).

Sample Demographics

The final sample included 11 participants, who ranged in age from 21 to 40 years old, with an average age of 26.45 years. The sample included 72.7% (n = 8) cisgender women, 18.1% (n = 2) who identified as genderqueer, one (9%, n = 1) transgender man, one (9%, n = 1) cisgender man, and one participant (9%) who identified as questioning. Regarding racial/ethnic identities, 72.7% (n = 8) identified as White, 27.3% (n = 3) as Black, and 9% (n = 1) as multiracial. Additionally, 9% (n = 1) identified as Hispanic/Latinx. For sexual orientation, 45.5% (n = 5) identified as queer, 27.3% (n = 3) as bisexual, 18.2% (n = 2) as gay, 9% (n = 1) as lesbian, 9% (n = 1) as pansexual, and 9% (n = 1) as heterosexual. Participants could select all identities that applied for gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation; therefore, percentages may exceed 100%. Although participants represented a range of sexual orientations and gender

identities, the sample remained primarily White and cisgender, indicating moderate demographic diversity, but limited racial/ethnic representation. See Table 2 for a complete summary of Participant Demographics.

Table 2.1 Study Two Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Degree	Age	Gender	Race Ethnicity	Sexual Orientation
Yena	Graduate	26	Genderqueer	Multiracial	Queer & questioning
Barbie	Graduate	26	Ciswoman	White / Caucasian	Queer
Brand27	Undergraduate	22	Cisman	Black / African American	Gay
Fol	Undergraduate	21	Ciswoman	Black / African American	Heterosexual
Jo	Undergraduate	22	Ciswoman / Genderqueer	White / Caucasian	Lesbian / Queer
Nikki	Graduate	28	Ciswoman	White / Caucasian	Queer
Padme	Graduate	26	Ciswoman	White / Caucasian	Bisexual
Palm Tree	Graduate	40	Ciswoman	Multiracial	Pansexual
Yellow	Completed	29	Ciswoman / Questioning	White / Caucasian	Bisexual / Queer
Luna	Graduate	30	Ciswoman	Multiracial	Bisexual
The Supreme	Undergraduate	21	Transman	White / Caucasian	Gay

Data Collection

Participant Interview Survey

Eligible participants completed a 23-item, investigator-developed Qualtrics survey and informed consent before the interview (see Appendix J). Items assessed demographic and educational characteristics and participants' engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction, including their history, frequency, platforms, fandoms, content preferences, and positioning within narratives. Participants could self-describe, decline to disclose, and elaborate through open-ended responses. The survey also assessed accessibility and interview support needs. Survey responses were summarized using frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, as appropriate, and used to contextualize the qualitative interviews.

Interviews

Participants completed individual, semi-structured Zoom interviews lasting 60–75 minutes and guided by a trauma-informed protocol (Appendix J). After reviewing confidentiality procedures and confirming consent to participate and be recorded, participants were reminded they could skip questions, take a break, or end the interview at any time. Pre-interview survey responses informed follow-up questions. Open-ended questions explored participants' histories with sexually explicit fanfiction; their preferred genres, themes, tropes, dynamics, and engagement patterns; and their emotional, mental, and physical responses. Participants also reflected on whether and how their engagement related to broader sociopolitical contexts and affected their emotional processing, well-being, pleasure, or understanding of consent. The full protocol and question sequence are provided in Appendix K. Participants received $40 after completing the interview.

Analysis

Research Team Positionality Statement

Researchers' identities and experiences shape qualitative analysis and representation, making reflexive attention to positionality important for rigor and transparency, particularly in research on sexuality, trauma, and survivorship (Holmes, 2020; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Four researchers contributed distinct perspectives. Primary researcher J.H. is a White, cisgender, heterosexual U.S. citizen and doctoral candidate in health and human sciences. She has participated in fandom since young adulthood and has over 8 years of experience in campus sexual violence prevention. K.A. is a white, cisgender, heterosexual U.S. citizen with a doctorate in Child and Family Studies, expertise in qualitative methodologies, and research focused on adolescent and young-adult sexual development. E.S. is an African American cisgender, heterosexual scholar with a graduate degree in Gender and Development and is currently a doctoral student in Prevention Science with a research focus on sexual violence prevention in higher education. She has also served as a Policy, Research, and Prevention Specialist at a non-profit organization where she collaborated with institutions to conduct qualitative research. C.S. is a non-binary, bisexual, white and Latine U.S. citizen and higher education doctoral student with two graduate degrees in school counseling. Their research examines college access and persistence among marginalized students, while their participation in online fandoms since 2012 contributed knowledge of fandom norms and relationships. C.S. was also a study participant. Consistent with feminist qualitative inquiry, this dual role was addressed transparently rather than treated as bias to be eliminated (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Collectively, the team's varied identities, expertise, and relationships to fandom provided multiple perspectives for interpreting participants' narratives.

Pre-Interview Survey

Descriptive Data

Data collected through the pre-interview Qualtrics survey were analyzed descriptively to complement and contextualize the qualitative interview findings. This analysis situated participants' accounts within the broader characteristics of the sample and clarified the range of experiences represented across the interviews. The survey data served as contextual background rather than as an independent quantitative component; therefore, no inferential analyses were conducted to examine statistical relationships or test hypotheses. Given the study's small, purposively recruited sample, descriptive findings were not interpreted as population-level estimates or used to support broader generalizations. This approach aligned with the study's exploratory qualitative design and maintained its primary emphasis on participants' narratives and meaning-making.

Participant demographics, educational characteristics, and fanfiction engagement variables were reviewed using summary statistics appropriate to each type of data. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for categorical variables, including gender identity, race/ethnicity, platforms used, and methods of engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction. Additional variables included age at first exposure, frequency of engagement, preferred content, interactions with fan communities, and roles occupied within fandom spaces. Findings were presented in tabular and narrative form to identify shared patterns within the sample and inform the interpretation of themes developed through narrative thematic analysis.

Open-Ended Data

The pre-interview survey included an open-ended item asking participants to *"Please use the space below to share in more detail which fandoms, characters, pairings, or creators you*

most engage with, and any recurring themes or story tropes you are drawn to." Responses were analyzed using conventional content analysis to descriptively summarize participants' fandom interests and reading preferences (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Categories were developed inductively from the responses without a preexisting theoretical framework. After familiarization with the responses, initial codes were created to capture fandom affiliations, character relationships or pairings, creators, themes, and tropes. These codes were compared and consolidated into broader descriptive categories used to characterize participants' fanfiction interests and contextualize their interview narratives.

Interviews

Narrative Thematic Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using narrative thematic analysis, which attends to the meanings participants construct through socially situated stories while identifying patterns across narratives (Chase, 2011; Riessman, 2008). The four-member research team included the first author and principal investigator, whose positionality is described above, and three colleagues with expertise in sexual development, campus sexual violence prevention, and college access and persistence. All four team members contributed to analysis by repeatedly reviewing transcripts, taking analytic notes, coding the full dataset, and discussing interpretations and themes.
The team reviewed transcripts in groups of interviews 1–3, 4–6, and 7–11, noting initial observations and questions. Each account was considered as a whole before the team compared codes and meanings across interviews, allowing shared patterns to be interpreted in the context of participants' individual stories. Through ongoing transcript review, memo writing, and research-team discussions, the team refined codes into broader themes. These discussions supported reflexive consideration of how team members' positionalities and areas of expertise

shaped their interpretations and helped refine the themes. This approach aligned with the study's focus on how participants understood their engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction within fandom and broader sociopolitical contexts.

Member Reflection

Within narrative thematic analysis, participants' stories are understood as meaning-making accounts rather than objective representations of experience (Riessman, 2008). Themes likewise reflect the research team's interpretation of participants' narratives within their sociocultural contexts (Chase, 2011). Member reflection was not used to determine whether findings were objectively "correct," but to assess whether the themes meaningfully reflected participants' experiences and identify complexities or omissions that could strengthen the analysis (Birt et al., 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Tracy, 2010). After coding and theme development, participants were invited to review the finalized codebook and thematic summary. They were asked whether the themes resonated with their experiences, overlooked important details, or required additional context. Participants received one week to respond and a $10 incentive. Four participants (36.4%) completed the member reflection. Participants generally described the findings as meaningful representations of their experiences and complexities discussed during interviews. Their feedback was treated as an additional source of qualitative insight rather than confirmation of the analysis. Reflections were considered alongside transcripts, analytic memos, and the broader dataset, with revisions incorporated when they added context or highlighted overlooked nuances.

Results

Participant Characteristics

Participants were asked to select all the ways they engaged with sexually explicit fanfiction. Participants could select multiple engagement options; therefore, percentages could exceed 100%. All participants (100%, $N = 11$) reported reading sexually explicit fanfiction, with 36.3% ($n = 4$) also participating in fan communities and 27.2% ($n = 3$) writing sexually explicit fanfiction. Participants reported first being introduced to sexually explicit fanfiction between the ages of 11 and 39 years ($M = 16.0$, $SD = 7.97$). More than 54.5% ($n = 6$) of participants reported engaging with sexually explicit fanfiction for 10 years or more, 27.3% ($n = 3$) for 6–10 years, 9% ($n = 1$) for 3–5 years, and 9% ($n = 1$) for less than 1 year. When asked about the frequency of engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction, 36.4% ($n = 4$) of participants reported engaging weekly, 36.4% ($n = 4$) daily or almost daily, 18.2% ($n = 2$) monthly, and 9% ($n = 1$) a few times per year.

Participants could select all platforms they used to engage with sexually explicit fanfiction. Archive of Our Own was most common (72.7%, $n = 8$), followed by Wattpad and Tumblr (36.4% each, $n = 4$), X and Threads (27.3% each, $n = 3$), Reddit and shared documents (18.2% each, $n = 2$), and Instagram, Fanfiction.net, TikTok, and Discord (9.1% each, $n = 1$). All participants primarily engaged through specific fandoms or media; six also mentioned celebrity or idol fanfiction and character pairings, and two mentioned original characters within fan universes. Most participants read from an observer perspective (81.8%, $n = 9$), though many also imagined themselves as self-inserts (63.6%, $n = 7$), existing characters (45.5%, $n = 5$), or original characters (27.3%, $n = 3$). Of the four participants who wrote fanfiction, three used an observer perspective; one each wrote as a main character, a self-insert, or an original character. Across

diverse fandoms, participants described preferences for slow-burn, enemies-to-lovers, and friends-to-lovers stories, as well as queer relationships, alternate universes, canon divergence, and kink-focused narratives. They emphasized emotional intimacy and character development alongside explicit content.

Thematic Findings

Across interviews, participants described their experiences with sexually explicit fanfiction in ways that extended beyond the consumption of the content alone, instead constructing fanfiction as a dynamic and evolving practice that intersected with their identities, relationships, communities, and broader sociopolitical contexts. Although participants' experiences varied, their narratives illustrated several interconnected processes. Participants intentionally engaged with sexually explicit fanfiction and constructed meaning from these experiences. They carried these interpretations into their everyday lives while navigating broader sociopolitical contexts. Three overarching themes were developed through the analytic process (1) *Learning, Growing, and Becoming Through Sexually Explicit Fanfiction*, (2) *Negotiating Community, Representation, and Belonging*, and (3) *Imagining Possibilities Within Hostile Sociopolitical Contexts*. These themes are further explored through eight interconnected subthemes that deepen and refine the broader analytic narrative. See Appendix L for all participant quotes.

Learning, Growing, and Becoming Through Sexually Explicit Fanfiction

Learning, Growing, and Becoming Through Sexually Explicit Fanfiction captured participants' accounts of learning, exploring identity, and reflecting on sexuality, intimacy, and relationships through fanfiction. Participants described these engagements as changing over time.

The theme included three subthemes: *learning beyond formal education*, *identity exploration and affirmation*, and *engagement as a developmental journey*.

Learning Beyond Formal Education. Participants described learning about sexuality and gender through sexually explicit fanfiction, including topics not covered in formal education. Barbie described using sexually explicit fanfiction to explore her preferences,

> I have not been in a romantic or sexual relationship with anybody else. So this [sexually explicit fanfiction] is kind of my safe outlet to learn more about myself, and kind of explore what I want, what I like, and what I don't like in a very safe and controlled environment.

Fol shared a similar sentiment, reflecting on how sexually explicit fanfiction provided her a safe space for sexual exploration, "Fanfiction gives me an opportunity to learn new things, about like, sex. And it feels like a place where I'm able to be very safe in myself." Luna recalled reading a fanfiction that included a discussion of sex and disability,

> The character was having a conversation about having sex as a person in a wheelchair, and what that's like. And so it was interesting to step out of this funny fanfiction to have a real conversation about people with disabilities having sex.

Participants also noted that fictional depictions did not always reflect real-life sex. Yena stated, "Not everything you read in a fic is realistic in terms of sex…and that's okay, because I know that! Just don't use that as the marker for what sex is." Finally, Palm Tree connected reading fanfiction with her future counseling practice, describing it as a way to encounter sexual interests beyond her own by stating, "It's a good exercise for me to read things that are out of my perception of what sex and sexuality could look like." Together, participants described sexually

explicit fanfiction as a source of exposure to explore sexual topics and perspectives beyond their own, while recognizing that fictional depictions do not necessarily reflect real-life experiences.

Identity Exploration and Affirmation. Participants also described sexually explicit fanfiction as a private context for *identity exploration and affirmation*. Yellow said,

> A lot of personal exploration can happen there [fanfiction] with imagination and stuff you might not even know about, but you can kind of engage in the content, and that feels very safe, because it's not real and I don't have to talk to anyone about it…There's no real interaction involved. It can be entirely contained.

Brand27 described including his gay identity in his writing, "As a gay member of the community, I want to integrate that aspect of my life into my stories. To show that my story in real life can be made into a fictional kind of thing." Luna described reading about characters masturbating as a way to engage with sexuality without physically participating,

> My own journey with sex and sexuality used to be a place of shame. I like reading about characters who masturbate because I don't actually have to do anything. It's fun. It's a sexual experience I don't have to physically engage in and that's affirming.

Finally, Nikki described seeking stories featuring women in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields (STEM) who shared her field and were unapologetic about their sexuality, "I'm a research scientist, I want to see powerful women in the same field as me who takes no shit and has good sex." Ultimately, participants described using sexually explicit fanfiction to explore sexuality privately, represent their identities in writing, and encounter characters whose experiences resonated with their own.

Engagement as a Developmental Journey. The final subtheme, engagement as a developmental journey, captured participants' descriptions of how their engagement with

sexually explicit fanfiction changed over time. Jo began reading at age 12 and initially sought heterosexual pairings. As she grew older, she gravitated toward gay and queer pairings, which she connected to her developing identities,

> It [gay fanfiction] was my first introduction, or my way to be a part of queer community in a way, so it was impactful for me to find my own identity of being genderqueer, of being a lesbian, all these different things. I shifted into reading more gay pairings because that was what I was connecting with and what I wanted to see more of in the world.

Nikki described beginning independent sexual exploration in her mid-twenties. She explained how sexually explicit fanfiction helped her recognize that she could explore arousal on her own and decide whether to engage by stating, "This is something I can take ownership of, and something that I'm not dependent upon someone else to do…I can decide to engage with it or not."

Some participants described discovering sexually explicit fanfiction by accident and recognizing their interest in mature themes over time. Brand27 shared, "I came across fanfiction by accident…I naturally gravitated towards stories that were exploring more romantic and mature relationships." Finally, Yena recalled discovering sexually explicit fanfiction by accident, initially feeling shame, and later seeking it out intentionally, "I felt this deep shame when I started actively seeking it out…I don't feel that same level of shame that I did when I was younger." Across the three subthemes, participants described using sexually explicit fanfiction to learn about sexuality, explore and represent identities, and engage with stories in ways that changed over time.

Negotiating Community, Representation, and Belonging

Negotiating Community, Representation, and Belonging captured participants' experiences of connection, representation, and boundaries in fandom. The theme included three subthemes: *community as connection and belonging*, *representation as recognition*, and *negotiating community boundaries*.

Community as Connection and Belonging. *Community as connection and belonging* captured how participants connected through shared interests and creative exchange. Although reading and writing often occurred individually, participants described feedback and discussion as social aspects of fandom. The Supreme described the value of reader feedback,

> I understand why writers half-joke they appreciate every single kudo. I never understood just how much they meant until I started appreciating it. It feels like a validation of your life because no matter what you're writing, you're putting a piece of your soul into that writing.

Fol described shared interests as a basis for conversation and connection, stating, "Good for having interesting conversations and bond and connect more about a shared interest. We're able to make connections through personal experiences with stories." Finally, Yena described smaller fan communities as places for honest conversation and learning,

> People will create sub-communities where we connect away from the initial space to have more honest conversations and learn from each other. For me, I am so invested in being a learner...and politics and activism are so important to me and I recognize I have blind spots, so having people who are willing to take the time to correct me or have conversations has been a beautiful result of these fan spaces.

Ultimately, participants described fandom as a place where feedback affirmed their writing, shared interests, built connections, and smaller communities supported honest conversation and learning.

Representation as Recognition. The second subtheme, representation as recognition, captured participants' accounts of creative freedom and the sexual experiences they valued seeing in fanfiction. When asked for one word she associated with sexually explicit fanfiction, Padme chose "freedom" and stated,

> It's freedom, especially fanfiction that's erotic, I can write whatever I want...Sex is a subject people don't talk about, especially as a woman... reading sexually explicit fanfiction is a wonderful opportunity to take back a lot of power that is so easily stripped from women, LGBT+ people, and anyone who's like, chronically disempowered.

Padme connected writing erotic fanfiction with sexual expression and power. Nikki described valuing stories that gave attention to women's arousal and pleasure, "I'm not necessarily interested in a woman becoming wet in .2 seconds... Smut and female erotica is empowering for women to not have to see themselves in that way."

Yena connected reading stories about trans characters by trans authors with their own exploration of gender, "I'm discovering my own transness, like, seeing that on the page." Similarly, Brand27 described feeling personally connected to stories when he recognized aspects of himself in them, "It's so engaging, you become almost obsessed with it, it can become a part of you. Because I'm reading little things that could be like me." Finally, Luna described how physical details in self-insert stories affected whether she felt recognized, "…It has to be extremely ambiguous or be written with the title of plus size reader or brown reader. That's how I feel recognized." Across these accounts, participants described representation as meaningful

when stories reflected identities and experiences they related to while allowing readers to feel recognized in their bodies.

Negotiating Community Boundaries. The final subtheme within theme two, *negotiating community boundaries*, captured how participants managed their involvement in fandom. Palm Tree described avoiding certain community tags by stating, "I don't engage as much in some of the other community tags because I feel like there's a lot of trauma in some of the other [fandoms]...so I avoid those tags." Yellow described using pseudonyms and separate online identities, and usually observing rather than interacting,

> I am usually a passive observer in fandoms... I do not engage in fandom. Again, it's [sexually explicit fanfiction] very safe in my head, and on the internet, where I don't have to interact with real people about it if I don't want to.

For Luna, fandom felt solitary because she did not find spaces where she felt safe or included,

> I never really found community or safety and solace in fandom. In online spaces, I didn't feel safe and included. And in real spaces, I didn't feel that same way. Fandom has been a really solitary experience for me, for various reasons. I see that it's important for others, and I acknowledge that it's important for others, but it's never served me.

The Supreme described curating their online space, describing, "I am so liberal with the block button. I block anybody that I find mildly annoying. I curate my online space to be a place that I want it to be." Finally, Barbie described both supportive fandom communities and choosing not to engage with content that could affect her well-being,

> There are some fandoms that are really good to each other, and really work on building each other up. And there are times where I don't necessarily like something, but I know

> how to maintain my own safety or well-being on the internet, so I'm just not going to engage, and that's okay.

Together, the three subthemes captured participants' varied experiences of connection, representation, and belonging, including decisions about when and how to participate in fandom.

Imagining Possibilities Within Hostile Sociopolitical Contexts

The final theme*, Imagining Possibilities Within Hostile Sociopolitical Contexts* captured participants' accounts of engaging with sexually explicit fanfiction amid political and cultural conditions they perceived as restrictive or threatening. Participants discussed its relationship to expression, representation, pleasure, and imagined futures. The theme included two subthemes: *sexually explicit fanfiction as everyday resistance* and *imagining alternative futures*.

Sexually Explicit Fanfiction as Everyday Resistance. The first subtheme, sexually explicit fanfiction as everyday resistance, captured participants' accounts of connecting fanfiction with sociopolitical events or conditions. After the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, Barbie noticed more fanfiction featuring abortion and said, "this is the way I'm getting my anger out." Participants different in whether they viewed sexually explicit fanfiction as political. Nikki connected representations of women's pleasure with resistance,

> I can understand sexual feelings and horniness and engaging with whatever level of understanding of pleasure I want when reading. That representation, a female embracing her own pleasure, is like, almost, resistance to "the man" in a way.

Yellow had not previously considered the connection, "I didn't really think about it being political before this interview. I guess it can, in its own way? But that's not why I engage with the content," while Jo described writing queer stories and contributing to queer spaces as political action, "The queer community is being targeted and [attacked], so just solely writing

and contributing to queer spaces is a form of political action itself." Similarly, The Supreme described sexually explicit fanfiction as political because, in his view, all art is shaped by the society in which it is created,

> There is no art that exists that does not come from a political background that in some way informs what is being written. Because we all live in a political society. Art is political, and fanfiction is art.

For Brand27, he intentionally participated in fandoms where political were left out of online conversations, "What people usually discuss is just the shows, we don't care about anything else." Fol echoed similar sentiments, "I haven't really seen anything too political, maybe there's a buildup of tension in an enemy storyline, but I don't know if that relates to politics." Ultimately, participants described everyday resistance through creative expression, queer storytelling, and representations of women's sexual pleasure, though they varied in how explicitly they framed sexually explicit fanfiction as political.

Imagining Alternative Futures. The final subtheme, *imagining alternative futures*, captured participants' descriptions of stories depicting relationships and ways of living they wanted to see. As a teenager, Padme wanted a relationship with a girl but said her father opposed it. She described reading about happy queer lives as a form of protest,

> When I was in my teen years, I really wanted to be in a relationship with this girl. [I] couldn't because my dad said, "If...you don't want to eventually get married to a man, we will move you."... The biggest form of protest I could ever do [was] read about a life where [queer people] are happy.

The Supreme described enjoying stories that imagined a world without homophobia or transphobia and offered reassurance, "I enjoy fantasies about a world where homophobia and

transphobia don't exist, and I enjoy fantasies of reassurance." Yena connected sexual narratives with consent and politics,

> Smut is political. If people are engaging in romance and sex, because of the ways in which our bodies are politicized, it is inherently political...I tend to pick a lot of stories where consent is so glaringly obvious...They're like, "Can I touch you?" and I'm like, "Hot!"...To me, consent is sexy and also a political statement, to say that every single point in the process, consent is being asked for.

For Yena, alternative futures were defined not only by which identities and relationships could exist but also by relationships grounded in communication, respect, and continued attention to autonomy. Sexually explicit fanfiction therefore allowed participants to imagine alternative realities where care, consent, pleasure, and affirmation were expected rather than exceptional.

Discussion

Understanding how queer adults navigate sexuality, identity, and belonging requires attention to the informal digital spaces they use, particularly within hostile sociopolitical contexts. Although scholarship has identified fanfiction as an important site of queer expression and community, less is known about how individuals interpret sexually explicit fanfiction within their everyday lives. This study addressed this gap by examining participants' engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction in relation to sexuality, identity, community, and sociopolitical contexts. Findings demonstrated that participants used these narratives to learn and explore, affirm their identities, negotiate community and belonging, and imagine alternative possibilities within restrictive environments. Analysis identified three overarching themes: *Learning, Growing, and Becoming Through Sexually Explicit Fanfiction; Negotiating Community, Representation, and Belonging;* and *Imagining Possibilities Within Hostile Sociopolitical*

Contexts. Together, these themes portray engagement as a dynamic process shaped by personal development, community experiences, and sociopolitical conditions, demonstrating how reading and writing sexually explicit fanfiction could function as everyday resistance and create space for more affirming identities, relationships, and futures.

Learning, Growing, and Becoming Through Sexually Explicit Fanfiction

The findings from *Learning, Growing, and Becoming Through Sexually Explicit Fanfiction* suggest that sexually explicit fanfiction's educational significance extended beyond compensating for gaps in formal sexuality education. Although participants used sexually explicit fanfiction to access sexual information unavailable elsewhere (Bleakley et al., 2018; Diaz-Rodriguez et al., 2024), they also used these narratives as interpretive resources for recognizing and exploring identities, desires, embodiments, and relational possibilities. This finding aligns with research connecting online fandom participation to sexual and gender identity development and demonstrating how fanfiction can offer queer and trans fans identificatory possibilities absent from mainstream media (Duggan, 2022; McInroy & Craig, 2018). Importantly, these processes were not confined to adolescence or adulthood; participants across both periods sought representation and considered what felt recognizable, desirable, or possible for their own lives. Sexually explicit fanfiction, therefore, did more than provide information about sexuality. It furnished narrative material through which participants could develop and revise their understandings of themselves across changing developmental and sociopolitical contexts.

Participants' learning extended beyond factual information because fan narratives situated desire within relationships, emotions, consent, and power (Popova, 2021). This relational framing mattered within sociopolitical climates in which queer sexuality, bodily autonomy, and

pleasure were contested or excluded from formal knowledge. Feminist and contextual frameworks describe sexual agency as shaped by embodiment, relationships, cultural norms, and unequal power relations (Cense, 2019; Fahs & McClelland, 2016), while related research connects comfort with desire and entitlement to pleasure with both protection and pleasure (Chmielewski et al., 2020). Participants enacted this agency by clarifying their desires, boundaries, safety needs, and relational values through fanfiction.

These findings position pleasure and identity exploration as central to relational well-being, particularly when sexuality education centers risk prevention (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; Mark et al., 2021). Online fandom research similarly documents identity exploration, validation, self-acceptance, and identity milestones among sexual and gender minority youth (McInroy & Craig, 2018, 2020), while fanfiction scholarship identifies spaces for normalizing trans, genderqueer, and queer identities and relationships (Duggan, 2022; Llewellyn, 2022). Extending this research beyond youth, participants showed that affirming representation remained meaningful into adulthood. Within hostile sociopolitical climates, these narratives preserved queer desire, affirming intimacy, and self-recognition constrained elsewhere.

The multi-system model of resilience (MSMR) conceptualizes resilience as emerging through individual capacities, coping and interpersonal processes, and socioecological resources (Liu et al., 2020). Applied here, fanfiction operated across these systems: engagement supported knowledge, reflection, sexual self-efficacy, and awareness of desires and boundaries, while narratives and fandom communities modeled consent, communication, intimacy, and care. Fanfiction was one resource participants selectively accessed amid knowledge gaps, identity suppression, underrepresentation, and hostile sociopolitical conditions. Consistent with social-ecological research, its value depended on both availability and participants' ability to negotiate

culturally and environmentally meaningful resources (Ungar, 2011). Its significance therefore varied across development, identity, and context, enabling participants to learn, question, imagine, and become on their own terms.

Negotiating Community, Representation, and Belonging

The findings from *Negotiating Community, Representation, and Belonging* show that fandom was neither automatically safe nor cohesive. Participants built belonging through relationships, affirming representation, and decisions about privacy, trust, and participation, yet also encountered judgment, exclusion, and emotional strain. Viewed through a queer feminist lens, this unevenness reflects how digital spaces can challenge dominant sexual and gender norms while reproducing broader hierarchies involving race, disability, gender, and sexuality (Pande, 2018; Rouse et al., 2024). Fandom's value, therefore, depended on participants' ability to engage critically and retain control over their exposure.

The subtheme *community as connection and belonging* aligns with research showing that online fandom can offer sexual and gender minority youth support, validation, anonymity, and relationships (McInroy, 2020; McInroy & Craig, 2020). Connections ranged from friendships and private networks to kudos, comments, and familiar usernames, supporting quiet or gradual participation as legitimate forms of community engagement (Ghosh & Aragon, 2024). The multi-system model of resilience (MSMR) locates resilience not within individuals alone but in interactions among personal capacities, relationships, and socioecological resources (Liu et al., 2017, 2020). Participants enacted resilience by combining boundary-setting, trusted connections, and accessible fandom spaces; platforms alone did not create belonging.

The subtheme *representation as recognition* further shows how fanfiction supported resilience by making queer possibilities visible. Participants sought more than identity labels;

they valued portrayals of marginalized people as capable of pleasure, intimacy, and relational complexity. Writers also created representations absent elsewhere, turning recognition into a collaborative practice (Black et al., 2019). Yet fan-created narratives could reproduce exclusions related to race, disability, gender, and sexuality (Pande, 2018; Rouse et al., 2024). By evaluating harmful norms and creating alternatives, participants protected their self-understanding and preserved affirming possibilities within an uneven media environment.

Participants used pseudonyms, separate accounts, selective disclosure, blocking, and withdrawal to manage that unevenness. These practices parallel "strategic invisibility," through which sexuality-related creators regulate exposure to surveillance, harassment, and unintended audiences (Stegeman et al., 2024), and demonstrate that online safety must be actively cultivated (Clark-Parsons, 2018). Within the current sociopolitical climate, such practices were not simply withdrawal; they enabled queer participants to maintain access to sexually explicit fanfiction, pleasure, representation, and community while limiting harm. Across individual, interpersonal, and socioecological levels, sexually explicit fanfiction both fostered and enacted resilience by helping participants regulate visibility, sustain affirming relationships, and preserve alternative narratives under restrictive conditions. These resources remained unevenly available; for example, participants who could locate identity-affirming stories and trusted communities had access to forms of recognition and support that were less available to those encountering limited representation, exclusionary community norms, or restrictive platform policies. Participants should not, however, bear sole responsibility for navigating harms produced by these broader community inequalities and platform structures.

Imagining Possibilities Within Hostile Sociopolitical Contexts

The findings from *Imagining Possibilities Within Hostile Sociopolitical Contexts* demonstrate how participants situated sexually explicit fanfiction within struggles over sexuality, gender, reproductive autonomy, and LGBTQIA2+ rights. Although participants did not uniformly describe their engagement as political, these narratives became meaningful for some because the identities, bodies, and rights represented within them were contested. Political meaning therefore emerged through both deliberate activism and everyday creative practices that preserved marginalized expression. The subtheme *sexually explicit fanfiction as everyday resistance* resonates with Tan's (2024) concept of slow resistance, which recognizes that feminist and queer resistance may be gradual, dispersed, context-dependent, and not always publicly visible. Explicit slash communities can influence participants' knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding LGBTQIA2+ issues (Neville, 2018), while queer slash fanfiction can reorient cisheteronormative narratives despite structural constraints (Floegel, 2020). The findings extend this work by showing how participants viewed the continued creation of queer and sexually explicit narratives as resistance when these forms of expression were under attack. Resistance did not depend on participants adopting an activity identity, but it could also reside in sustaining access to stories, desires, and futures that hostile conditions sought to restrict.

One participant's account of abortion fanfiction following the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* illustrates how political events entered fan-created narratives as both subject matter and emotional experience. Stories about obtaining abortions or crossing state lines transformed anger into narratives of care, access, and solidarity. Her challenge to abortion stigma and articulation of alternative reproductive futures align with scholarship positioning abortion storytelling as a feminist imaginative practice (Berny, 2024). Their attention to travel, legal access, and uneven

constraints also reflects a reproductive justice framework, which situated bodily autonomy within material, social, and political conditions (Ross & Solinger, 2017). Fanfiction could not restore the protections participants understood to have been lost, but it offered space to process that loss and imagine narratives beyond existing law. Participants also discussed "smut" itself as political because writing queer people as desiring subjects challenged their expected silence or invisibility. This interpretation aligns with scholarship linking sexually explicit queer representation to struggles over queer visibility and rights (Strub, 2015).

The subtheme *imagining alternative futures* can likewise be understood through civic imagination, or the capacity to envision alternatives to existing cultural, social, political, and economic conditions (Jenkins et al., 2020). In resistance of the current sociopolitical climate, in these alternative futures, queer people could live openly, trans people could be affirmed by partners, and relationships could center care and consent. These possibilities are presented as ordinary, where participants experience them as contested or unavailable. Participants' use of storytelling to make affirming queer futures imaginable aligns with research on speculative composing and participatory digital archiving as practices that challenge limiting narratives and sustain queer futurity, care, and transformation (Burkholder et al., 2025; Coleman, 2021).

These findings challenge interpretations of sexually explicit media as either inherently harmful or uniformly liberating. Instead, the significance of fanfiction varied across time and circumstances according to participants' purposes, interpretations, and access to resources. Beyond entertainment, fanfiction offered narratives through which participants could examine themselves, connect with others, and consider possibilities unavailable elsewhere. These processes were shaped by families, education, religion, relationships, fandom experiences, and political contexts. Attending to these influences recognizes participants' active meaning-making

while accounting for the conditions enabling or constraining their engagement. Ultimately, sexually explicit fanfiction did not eliminate hostile conditions or replace political action; it offered one resource through which participants processed anger, preserved marginalized sexual expression, and imagined futures organized around autonomy, care, pleasure, and recognition. In doing so, it helped keep alternatives to restrictive conditions visible and imaginable.

Limitations

Several limitations warrant consideration. This qualitative study included a small, self-selected sample of 11 predominantly White and cisgender participants who may have been invested in fandom, comfortable discussing sexuality, or inclined to view their engagement as meaningful. Those who experienced harm, left fandom, or felt uncomfortable discussing explicit material may be underrepresented; therefore, the findings illustrate possible meanings rather than generalizable experiences. Future research recruitment strategies should consider additional ways to engage more racially and gender-diverse participants, former fandom participants, and individuals with negative or ambivalent experiences of sexually explicit fanfiction. Retrospective self-reports may also reflect participants' current identities and interpretations of earlier experiences. Longitudinal research following participants over time could reduce reliance on retrospective accounts and examine how engagement and its meanings change across developmental periods.

Because accounts were collected amid rapidly changing debates over LGBTQIA2+ rights, censorship, and access to sexually explicit material, this context may have heightened themes of refuge, representation, resistance, and community. Comparative studies conducted across geographic regions and sociopolitical contexts, as well as studies repeated across different political movements, could clarify how these conditions shape participants' engagement and

interpretations. Variation across fanfiction content, platforms, communities, and participation may not be fully captured by the broader themes. Platform, genre, and participation specific studies could more closely examine how particular content, community norms, and forms of engagement produce distinct experiences. Taken together, these limitations position the findings as contextually situated rather than representative of all individuals who engage with sexually explicit fanfiction. Within these boundaries, participants' accounts still provide important insight into how these narratives can shape learning, identity exploration, community, and imagination under restrictive sociopolitical conditions.

Implications

These findings have implications for prevention science, sexual-health education, and digital-media research. Participants described sexually explicit fanfiction as a self-directed space for exploring consent, communication, identity, relationships, emotional regulation, and belonging, consistent with research on digital media's role in coping, connection, and identity development (Craig et al., 2015; McInroy & Craig, 2020). Sexual and relational learning therefore occurs not only through formal education but also within existing digital and cultural environments. Rather than treating this informal learning solely as a response to inadequate sexuality education, prevention approaches should recognize pleasure, representation, agency, and imagination as components of sexual well-being. Educators and practitioners can support critical media literacy by helping individuals evaluate sexual scripts, distinguish fantasy from interpersonal expectations, recognize consent and communication, and make choices aligned with their boundaries and values.

Beyond its educational significance, sexually explicit fanfiction may function as a self-directed coping resource during periods of sociopolitical hostility and uncertainty. Imagined

worlds did not eliminate the restrictive conditions participants faced, but they could provide a temporary distance from those conditions while preserving and affirming understandings of identity, relationships, embodiment, and the future. Through these narratives, participants could envision queer joy, bodily autonomy, supportive communities, and equitable relationships that were difficult to locate in their immediate environments. This interpretation is consistent with research suggesting that narrative entertainment can facilitate coping, recovery from stress, and self-expansion (Khoo et al., 2021; Reinecke & Rieger, 2021). These practices should not be framed as treatment or assumed to benefit every individual. However, counselors, educators, and student-support professionals can respond without judgment when individuals identify fanfiction or other narrative media as part of their existing coping practices and help them assess whether particular content and communities feel supportive, distressing, or both.

Engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction may also carry political significance even when participants did not describe it as activism. Reading, writing, sharing, and preserving narratives centered on queer pleasure, bodily autonomy, consent, and alternative relationships can challenge dominant sexual and relational scripts by maintaining possibilities that hostile cultural and political conditions attempt to restrict or erase (Ahmed, 2017; Fiesler et al., 2016; Lothian, 2011). In this sense, refuge and resistance can remain connected without being treated as identical: a private narrative practice may sustain the capacity to imagine otherwise without becoming a public political act. Fanfiction's potential nevertheless depends on its community and platform contexts. Affirming representation, relationships, tagging systems, and moderation may support agency and belonging, whereas harassment, exclusion, censorship, and restrictive conditions may constrain participation (Pande, 2018; Stegeman et al., 2024). Researchers, practitioners, institutions, and platform designers should therefore consider how privacy, content

access, community norms, and moderation structures shape who can safely access, create, and participate in these spaces. For prevention science, the broader implication is that protective and meaning-making practices may already be developing within the informal spaces people use; support efforts should strengthen individuals' access, agency, and safety without appropriating or pathologizing those practices.

Conclusion

This study explored how adults made meaning of sexually explicit fanfiction across their development, identities, relationships, fandom experiences, and sociopolitical environments. Rather than producing uniform effects, its significance depended on the stories participants encountered, their reasons for engaging, and the conditions of their lives. Participants used fanfiction to learn about sexuality, explore desire, boundaries, and identity, and imagine relational possibilities. It could also foster connection, provide an outlet within restrictive environments, and raise concerns about trust, privacy, exclusion, and safety. Sexually explicit fanfiction was neither inherently empowering nor a substitute for sexuality education, supportive relationships, inclusive communities, or political action; it could also reproduce inaccurate representations, dominant hierarchies, and exclusion. Its value as a meaning-making resource depended on participants' critical interpretation, agency, and access to responsive stories and spaces. By selecting, rejecting, revising, and creating narratives, participants used fanfiction to learn, connect, resist, and imagine possibilities on their own terms.

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Chapter 4 - Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation was to examine how current and formerly enrolled college students made meaning of their engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction across two different yet interconnected qualitative studies. The first study centered on the experiences of survivors of sexual violence and explored how their engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction related to coping, sexuality, and pleasure. The second study broadened the analytic frame by examining how individuals narrated their engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction in relation to their personal circumstances and an increasingly hostile sociopolitical environment. Results from this dissertation demonstrated that sexually explicit fanfiction and speculative narratives were not merely experienced as erotic media or passive entertainment. Rather, across both studies, 21 participants passionately described fanfiction as a self-directed, deeply personal and inclusive narrative environment. Participants individually selected and negotiated consent, explored difficult experiences on their own time, and re-learned language for their reframed versions of healthy sexuality and relationships. Furthermore, they developed and affirmed identities, found community, and imagined possibilities beyond interpersonal and structural constraints.

Across both studies, participants described sexually explicit fanfiction and speculative narratives as meaningful resources for exploring sexuality, exerting agency, building community, and imagining possibilities beyond their immediate environments. Study one found that survivors engaged with speculative narratives through three themes: *Exploration Through Speculation*, *(Re)Newing Narrative Agency*, and *Finding Community*. These findings demonstrated how participants intentionally used speculative distance, narrative choices, boundaries, and fandom relationships to navigate pleasure, safety, and power all on their own

terms. Additionally, study two generated three themes: *Learning, Growing, and Becoming Through Sexually Explicit Fanfiction*, *Negotiating Community, Representation, and Belonging*, and *Imagining Possibilities Within Hostile Sociopolitical Contexts*. Together, these findings demonstrated how participants expressed using sexually explicit fanfiction to develop their sexual knowledge, explore identity, find affirmation, respond to political hostility, and envision futures grounded in autonomy, care, and recognition.

Digital Engagement and Prevention Science

The findings do not suggest that sexually explicit fanfiction and speculative fanfiction uniformly produce healing or prevention outcomes. Rather, they identify a sub-set of interrelated individual-specific, prevention-relevant processes that participants perceived within their digital engagement, including autonomy, boundary negotiation, emotional regulation, meaning-making, relational learning, representation, belonging, and the imagination of alternative futures. Prevention science has historically sought to identify risks and prevention factors to understand how developmental, relational, and environmental processes shape health and well-being (Catalano et al., 2012). The present studies extend this scholarship by examining an understudied informal digital narrative context and generated insights that may inform future prevention efforts for sexual violence survivors and individuals navigating hostile sociopolitical contexts that restrict their safety.

Prevention science and related adolescent and emerging adult-health scholarship have often acknowledged digital engagement through a risk-oriented lens, and thus, examined its association with depression, anxiety, psychological distress, body-image concerns, increased loneliness, and other forms of interpersonal harm and violence (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Keles et al., 2020). In contrast, findings from the present studies have challenged this risk-

oriented framing and have demonstrated how participants used digital narrative communities as positive and inclusive resources for agency, identity exploration, connection, meaning-making, and resilience within the context of sexual victimization and restrictive social environments.

This is not to say that digital communities are without risk. Digital environments can and do reproduce, and sometimes intensify, existing social pressures, interpersonal harms, and health inequities (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). However, recognizing these risks does not require conceptualizing digital engagement as uniformly harmful. Risks and benefits coexist within the same platforms, communities, and individuals, making it necessary to examine not merely whether people engage digitally but how, why, where, and under what social conditions the engagement occurred. Digital environments have become sites of positive civic participation, collective action, and resistance (Jenkins, 2006, 2012). Digital platforms can allow individuals, particularly those whose experiences have been historically excluded from dominant narratives to transform personal experiences into shared narratives, name systemic harms, organize around collective concerns, and challenge the norms that permit those harms to persist (Wilf & Wray-Lake, 2024). These possibilities are important for prevention science as they position digital participants not solely as people who may be exposed to risk, but also as knowledge producers and agents capable of contesting harmful narratives by reshaping the social conditions in which violence and inequity initially occurred.

Digital Communities and Fandom as Prevention Contexts

Digital environments can be especially significant for queer and LGBTQIA2+ individuals who have limited access to affirming relationships or resources in their immediate offline environments. Online communities can provide opportunities for positive peer connection, identity exploration and management, access to affirming information, and social support while

offering spaces that counter the heteronormative and cisnormative expectations individuals may encounter elsewhere (Berger et al., 2022; Haimson et al., 2021). Importantly, these protective possibilities do not erase queer individuals' disproportionate exposure to online discrimination and harassment. Instead, they further illustrate why digital environments should be understood as contested spaces in which marginalization, resistance, harm, affirmation, and belonging may operate simultaneously.

Fan studies have long documented many of these productive and socially meaningful dimensions of digital participation. Foundational scholarships have challenged portrayals of fans as passive or pathological consumers, instead described them as active meaning-makers who create, reinterpret, and circulate cultural texts within participatory communities (Costello & Moore, 2007). Subsequent research has shown that fandom can facilitate social connection, collective identity, creative expression, psychological well-being, and opportunities for individuals to explore aspects of themselves that may not feel safe or possible elsewhere (Laffan et al., 2022). Online fandom communities can function as spaces for identity development, belonging, and the exploration of alternative possibilities for gender, sexuality, relationships, and hope (Dym et al., 2018; McInroy & Craig, 2018). Integrating these insights into prevention science would broaden the field's current understanding of digital engagement beyond exposure and pathology, allowing researchers to examine how active participation, creativity, collective meaning-making, and community membership may operate as protective processes within the healing processes of sexual victimization and reclaiming individual agency amid navigating restrictive physical environments. Such integration does not require romanticizing digital environments; rather, it supports a more critical and complete account of how power, exclusion, agency, resistance, risk, and care are negotiated within them. The present studies contributed to

this shift by demonstrating how participants actively and intentionally use digital and online fan communities to negotiate identity, cultivate belonging, access support, exercise agency, and engage with broader social issues, thereby extending prevention science beyond a predominantly risk-centered understanding of digital participation.

These findings showed that prevention-related knowledge and protective processes may be encountered and practiced not only within formal programs, institutions, or face-to-face relationships, but also through self-directed participation in digital storytelling worlds and the communities organized around them. An overarching interpretation is that sexually explicit fanfiction functioned as a curated narrative ecology of agency and possibilities. Ecology emphasized that meaning arose through the intentional interaction of texts, platforms, communities, identities, histories, and current contexts. Curated emphasized that participants selected, filtered, approached, avoided, revisited, and interpreted content rather than receiving it passively. Agency identified the capacity to determine the terms of personal engagement. Possibility captured the prospective function of exploring identities, relationships, communities, and futures beyond present limitations.

This contribution was especially important because contemporary prevention science increasingly recognized that adaptation and well-being emerge through interactions among individuals and their social ecologies rather than through isolated individual traits (Ungar & Theron, 2020). Participants' narratives reflected this layered organization. At the individual level, they described choice, self-reflection, emotional refuge, and identity exploration. At the relational level, they encountered varied models of consent, communication, care, trust, and mutuality. At the community level, they negotiated belonging, representation, conflict, and collective norms. At the societal level, they situated pleasure, queer identity, bodily autonomy,

and creative expression within current political conditions that often felt restrictive or threatening. The two studies therefore moved the discussion of sexually explicit fanfiction and speculative genres beyond the question of whether a particular text is "good" or "bad." Instead, they revealed dynamic narrative ecology in which the meaning and potential function of engagement is dependent upon content, context, timing, individual needs, platforms of affordance, and community conditions. The two studies translated the findings into practical implications for sexual violence prevention, sexuality education, survivor support, student affairs, and digital platform design.

Integrating Findings Across the Two Studies

Across the findings from study one and study two, sexually explicit fanfiction and speculative genres emerged as intentionally navigated narrative environments rather than a static type of media. Participants used stories, speculative narratives, platform features, tropes, and fandom relationships to regulate how they approached difficult topics and experiences that resonated with their own lived realities. This included the ability to explore sexuality, consent, identity, and relationships. Sexually explicit material also provided the space to establish boundaries and to imagine forms of belonging and social life that were not consistently available in their everyday environments. Importantly, these findings emerged across participants with diverse and intersecting lived experiences, including sexual violence survivorship and LGBTQIA2+ identities represented across both studies. The studies therefore illuminate related processes under different conditions of constraint: interpersonal violation in study one and broader social and political hostility in study two.

Both studies described a connected set of mechanisms operating at different levels. Study one showed how speculation created protective distance, how the reader-text relationship

organized around consent, and how narrative selection supported renewed agency after autonomy had been constrained. Study two showed how engagement became a developmental practice through which participants learned beyond formal education, affirmed identities, negotiated community boundaries, and imagined alternatives within restrictive sociopolitical climates. Across both studies, individual meaning-making extended into collective life through community, which offered recognition and connection while requiring participants to make ongoing decisions about trust, participation, and accountability.

Narrative Engagement as Participant-Controlled Practices

A central cross-study finding was that the significance of fanfiction rested partially in participants' control over the conditions of engagement. In study one, this process was explicit in the theme *(Re)Newing Narrative Agency*. Participants used tags, content warnings, ratings, author notes, trope knowledge, and the ability to discontinue a story and determine what they encountered and when. These features supported consent beyond the story because the reading or writing experience itself became subject to permission, revocability, and personal limits. In study two, agency appeared less as a discrete theme and more as a process distributed across learning, development, and community negotiation. Participants adjusted their engagement as their identities, relationships, careers, educational experiences, emotional needs, and political surroundings changed. They also selected smaller and more trusted communities when broader fandom spaces became harmful or misaligned with their values.

Taken together, these findings shifted the focus from passive media content to active engagement practices. Based on participants' responses, a sexually explicit narrative did not carry one predetermined meaning. Its meaning and function depended on what the individual participant sought, what information the platform made available, how closely the narrative

resembled their lived experience, what boundaries the participant established, and whether community interaction was desired. Meaning-making was therefore relational: it emerged between the participant, the story, the platform, and the surrounding social environment. This helped explain why the same trope or type of content could be experienced as comforting, challenging, dismissing, or irrelevant for different participants at different times. Consequently, Fiesler et al.'s (2016) analysis of Archive of Our Own's platform design was useful as agency, inclusivity, participation, and pluralism were values deeply engrained and reflected in the archive's design. Study one demonstrated how digital design features associated with those values became personally consequential after experiences of constrained autonomy. Likewise, Silberstein-Bamford (2024) described tagging as part of a fanfiction reading paradigm in which readers expected unusually detailed information about narrative content.

The present studies extend this work by showcasing that metadata and filtering practices were not merely organizational conveniences. They were tools through which participants anticipated emotional demands, made choices, and established the terms of their participation. This participant-controlled framing also shows that participants actively fashioned uses from a variable and sometimes contradictory environment. Platform affordances enabled choice, but those affordances did not guarantee safety. Community norms could support consent and accountability, yet the same environments could also contain discrimination, conflict, or content that participants considered harmful. This cross-study contribution lies in identifying curation as the process through which participants attempted to manage this variability.

Speculation as Protective Distance and Inquiry

Across both studies, participants used sexually explicit fanfiction to create distance from immediate realities, allowing them to explore difficult experiences and imagine alternatives to

personal and sociopolitical constraints. Study one's theme *Exploration Through Speculation* established that fantasy was not simply decorative content to enrich plotlines. Alternative worlds, supernatural systems, nonhuman characters, and queer speculative settings created a protective buffer between participants and emotionally charged material. This distance made it possible to approach trauma, violence, sexuality, consent, relationships, and power without confronting an exact reproduction of lived experience. Survivors recognized a problem's emotional or relational structure while remaining removed from its literal circumstances. Protective distance therefore did not necessarily signify denial. This distance altered the conditions under which different realities could be considered. The subthemes *exploring difficult realities* and *knowing fantasy is not reality* deepened this phenomenon. Participants used speculative narratives to ask questions and consider perspectives that did not have simple answers. At the same time, survivors-maintained distinctions between fictional exploration and real-world values or intentions. Desire, curiosity, and narrative interest were not treated as equivalent to endorsement or enactment of story content. The findings challenged interpretations that either pathologize fantasy as evidence of hidden intent or dismiss it as meaningless escape (Lehmiller & Gormezano, 2023).

Study two broadens this mechanism from protective distance to developmental and sociopolitical possibility. Although speculation was not the organizing concept of study two, participants similarly used fiction to explore identities, bodies, relationships, consent, and healthier forms of community that felt constrained in everyday life. The theme of *Imagining Possibilities Within Hostile Sociopolitical Contexts* shows that fan stories made alternative relationships and futures cognitively and emotionally available. Fictional worlds operated as spaces for both reflection on difficult realities and rehearsal of different possibilities. Research on fiction as social simulation helped explain this pattern. Mar and Oatley (2008) argue that

narrative fiction simulates social experience, allowing readers to engage with motives, emotions, relationships, and consequences outside immediate real-world demands. Research on self-distancing also suggests that psychological distance can facilitate meaning-making while reducing emotional reactivity (Kross & Ayduk, 2011). These studies provide conceptual support for understanding how distance can coexist with meaningful engagement rather than functioning only as avoidance. In study one, some participants intentionally approached difficult content while others chose to avoid it; both strategies were grounded in the ability to set their own boundaries. In study two, some participants connected sexually explicit fanfiction directly to political concerns, whereas others primarily sought refuge from them. No single level of closeness constituted the correct response. The meaningful capacity was the ability to change proximity according to personal need, context, and readiness.

Informal Learning, Identity, and Developmental Belonging

Across both studies, participants described sexually explicit fanfiction and speculative narratives as an informal developmental resource for learning about sexuality, understanding themselves, and finding belonging with others. Study two's *Learning, Growing, and Becoming Through Sexually Explicit Fanfiction* theme identified engagement as a developmental process. Participants described learning about consent, healthy communication, boundaries, emotional intimacy, sexuality, psychology, and relationship dynamics outside formal educational settings. The information learned from these digital narratives was integrated into their interpretations of relationships and self. Identity exploration included sexuality, gender, religion, disability, and relationship preferences, while engagement changed across educational transitions, careers, relationships, and other life stages. The meaning of sexually explicit fanfiction, therefore, developed alongside participants rather than remaining fixed. Study one complemented this

finding by showing how learning can occur through speculative inquiry and boundary work. Participants examined consent, power, violence, relationships, and sexuality from a safer vantage point, distinguished fantasy from behavioral endorsement, and used trope selection to explore relational structures aligned with their needs and values. Study one demonstrated how self-knowledge and relational judgment emerged through controlled encounters with difficult or desired possibilities, particularly after experiences of diminished autonomy.

Digital sexual literacy is more than access to sexual health information. It includes the capacity to interpret diverse perspectives, reflect critically, communicate, and understand the social and relational dimensions of sexuality (Power et al., 2024). That framework closely matches participants' descriptions of comparing story scenarios, evaluating in-text communication, considering power dynamics between characters, and identifying personal boundaries. Sexually explicit fanfiction was not a verified curriculum, and fictional portrayals could be incomplete or inaccurate, as described by participants. Its educational significance lay in provided material for inquiry and reflection where formal sex education had often been limited. Study one contributes to scholarship on sexual violence by expanding how post-assault sexuality and meaning-making are currently understood. Research on survivors' sexual experiences has often centered distress, avoidance, dysfunction, or risk (Stockman et al., 2023; Van Berlo & Ensink, 2000). Although these experiences remain important, the findings demonstrated that survivors' engagement with sexuality may also involve curiosity, fantasy, pleasure, agency, relational exploration, and the possibility of future intimacy. A critical-literacy perspective is necessary because learning from narrative is selective and evaluative. Participants' accounts should not be read as evidence that all sexually explicit fanfiction models healthy relationships. Participants also sought aggressive or nonconsensual dynamics, reflecting how

fantasy can provide a controlled space for survivors to revisit and renegotiate difficult material without endorsing it (Gewirtz-Meydan & Opuda, 2023; Lehmiller & Gormezano, 2023). From a feminist perspective, this discernment helped participants clarify which power dynamics they accepted, questioned, rejected, or reimagined. This fantasy-reality distinction in study one reinforced this point.

Research on LGBTQIA2+ fandom also supported the interpretation of sexually explicit fanfiction as a context for identity exploration rather than identity causation. Research shows the relationship between online fandom participation and the timing and complexity of sexual and gender minority identity milestones and that fandom can serve as a safe space for identity development activities (McInroy & Craig, 2018, 2020). Duggan (2022) similarly found how genderqueer and trans adolescents used sexually explicit and speculative fanfiction to encounter contingent gendered possibilities. The present studies extend this scholarship by connecting identity exploration to sexual and relational learning, boundary-setting, and changing sociopolitical conditions.

Community, Representation, and Negotiated Belonging

Community is the most direct thematic convergence across the two studies. Study one's *Finding Community* included relationships formed through sexually explicit fanfiction, including subthemes of *validation and normalization*, and *community as resistance*. Many participants discussed the role of fan fiction beyond the stories, often describing friendships, romantic partnerships, mentoring, collaborative writing, beta reading, Discord groups, and wider fandom networks. Across both studies, shared experiences and identities reduced isolation, while queer participants found recognition in narratives and discussions that were marginalized elsewhere.

Study two's *Negotiating Community, Representation, and Belonging* similarly

emphasized connection, shared emotional investment, and the recognition made possible by diverse portrayals of identities, bodies, relationships, disability, and intimacy. Both studies also showed that community membership exceeded visible production. Study two explicitly established that reading, observing, recommending, or quietly sharing investment in stories could support a legitimate sense of belonging. Study one likewise included relationships among readers, writers, friends, partners, and collaborators. This finding challenged models that equate participatory culture only with public posting or content creation. Participation could simultaneously be affective, interpretive, and productive.

Representation functioned as recognition rather than simple resemblance. Participants did not only value seeing an identity category reproduced. They valued narratives that made marginalized experiences understandable, affirmed varied bodies and relationships, and expanded what could be imagined. Representation therefore connected intrapersonal and social processes. It supplied material for identity reflection while signaling that other people could understand or share that experience. Recognition reduced isolation and helped convert private meaning into a possible basis for community. This finding may be especially meaningful for survivors. Research indicates that survivors seek online spaces for clarification, validation, support, and opportunities to help others, while group-based research describes recovery as occurring in the company of other survivors (Gorissen et al., 2023; Meyrick & Anning, 2025). Although fandom participation did not necessarily involve disclosure, shared narratives offered similar opportunities for recognition and connection. Fandom communities can support LGBTQIA2+ identity recovery through community narratives, selective visibility, safety practices, and the reworking of harmful narratives (Dym et al., 2019). The current findings extend that account to readers and observers as well as writers. McInroy et al (2022) likewise

conceptualize online fandom communities as networked counterpublics that can improve access to LGBTQIA2+ counternarratives while still reproducing exclusion. This duality is evident in both studies: belonging and harm were not mutually exclusive features of fandom.

Participants reported in-group discrimination, conflict, harassment, exclusion, and interpersonal tension. Study one explicitly noted that *validation and normalization* coexisted with discrimination. Study two described participants' responses through community boundary negotiation, including the cultivation of smaller and more trusted spaces. These negatives cases are important because they prevent an idealized portrayal of fandom. Community was a potential resource, not an inherently safe condition. This integrated finding is best described as negotiated belonging. Participants continually evaluated whether a community's practices aligned with their identities, values, and emotional needs. They could remain attached to stories while withdrawing from specific social spaces, or they could sustain connection by changing the scale and visibility of participation. Boundary-setting therefore did not necessarily oppose community; it was a way participants made community more livable. This linked study one's narrative agency with study two's community negotiation at a broader social level.

From Community Resistance to Alternative Futures

Resistance appeared in both studies, but on different scales. In study one, *community as resistance* emphasized collective challenges to exclusion, censorship, and normative expectations. Participants valued queer inclusion, creative freedom, and the capacity to represent complex or controversial experiences, while also insisting that resistance did not eliminate responsibility. In study two, *sexually explicit fanfiction as everyday resistance* situated reading, writing, and community engagement within hostile sociopolitical conditions. Queer representation, bodily autonomy, feminist values, and narratives of consent challenged dominant

cultural scripts even when participants did not describe their actions as overt activism. The findings therefore broaden resistance beyond public protest. Feminist theory helped connect these scales by locating power within intimate relationships, cultural narratives, and everyday practices, not only within formal institutions or overt political action (Lorde, 1984). Everyday resistance involved sustaining a marginalized identity, refusing shame, circulating a counternarrative, creating a small affirming community, or preserving the imaginative possibility of a relationship organized around mutual respect.

Study two's *imagining alternative futures* made the prospective dimension especially visible. Participants envisioned healthier relationships, affirming communities, bodily autonomy, queer joy, and more equitable futures. Study one's use of tropes and speculative settings connected to this prospective work by allowing participants to choose supportive power dynamics, found family, queer relationships, and nontraditional partnerships. Study one focused more directly on control and exploration; study two named alternative futures. Together, they have demonstrated how narrative choice could become future-oriented. However, this future-oriented potential did not mean that participants necessarily understood their engagement as explicitly political. The significance of imagining otherwise often emerged through private practices of pleasure, self-recognition, and emotional relief rather than overt collective action.

Participants in study two differed in whether they used sexually explicit fanfiction primarily as refuge or viewed it as political. Narrative engagement could temporarily reduce exposure to hostility while preserving the capacity to imagine life beyond it. In that sense, refuge could support resistance without being identical to activism. A feminist lens also avoided requiring every private or pleasure-centered practice to become visible activism before it can carry political significance (Ahmed, 2017). Participants used fanfiction communities to sustain

marginalized voices and possibilities, but they also had to negotiate accountability, discrimination, and trust. Resistance was therefore unfinished and internally contested. This reflected a feminist understanding of resistance as relational, ongoing, and shaped by the same unequal power structures it seeks to challenge.

Contributions

This two-study dissertation contributed to scholarship on fanfiction, digital participatory culture, sexual violence, sexuality education and higher education by examining an understudied form of narrative engagement through participants' own meaning-making. Both studies demonstrated that sexually explicit fanfiction's significance was shaped by participants' histories, identities, current environments, selected narratives, platform practices, and relationships with fandom communities. This participant-centered approach offered a more nuanced understanding of sexually explicit fanfiction and focused not only on what participants engaged with but also on how, why, and under what conditions that engagement became personally meaningful.

Study One: Reframing Post-Assault Sexual Meaning-Making

Participants used speculative sexually explicit fanfiction to approach difficult questions about trauma, consent, power, relationships, and sexuality without confronting an exact representation of their lived experiences, consistent with research distinguishing fantasy from real-world desires or behavior (Lehmiller & Gormezano, 2023). By centering these experiences, study one responded to calls for more sex-positive scholarship by offering a more expansive account of survivors' sexual lives: one that recognized exploration and pleasure without minimizing the effects of violence (O'Callaghan & Lorenz, 2024). Study one also introduced a broader understanding of narrative agency by demonstrating that consent operated beyond what

occurred between characters. Tags, warnings, ratings, trope selection, and the ability to pause or discontinue engagement allowed participants to determine the conditions under which they encountered fictional content.

These practices transformed digital reading and writing into online spaces of ongoing boundary work through which participants could identify, test, and revise what felt comfortable, distressing, intriguing, or off-limits. The study therefore contributed to the concept of *consent beyond the story*, illustrating how consent can organize the relationship between a person and a narrative as well as the relationships represented within it. Importantly, this finding does not establish fanfiction as a therapeutic intervention. Instead, it identifies a participant-directed narrative environment in which survivors described exercising forms of choice and control after experiences in which their autonomy had been constrained.

Study Two: Connecting Narrative Engagement to Sociopolitical Context

Study two contributed to scholarship on higher education and digital culture by situating sexually explicit fanfiction within participants' ever-changing developmental and sociopolitical environments. The findings demonstrated that the meaning of fanfiction engagement was not fixed but evolved alongside participants' identities, relationships, education, career, emotional needs, and experiences of political hostility. For some participants, sexually explicit fanfiction offered emotional refuge from environments they experienced as restrictive or exhausting. For others, engaging with narratives centered on queer identities, bodily autonomy, consent, feminist values, and marginalized relationships represented a subtle form of resistance. Narrative refuge provided temporary distance from hostility while also sustaining individual identities, values, and possibilities threatened within each participants' everyday environments.

Collective Contribution: A Curated Narrative Ecology

Together, the studies offered a multilevel account of how sexually explicit fanfiction became personally meaningful under varying conditions of constraint. Study one centered interpersonal violation and the reclamation of narrative agency following sexual violence, whereas study two centered developmental change and broader sociopolitical hostility. Placing these studies in conversation connected individual, relational, communal, and structural dimensions of engagement. Participants' experiences with sexually explicit fanfiction were shaped simultaneously by personal histories, narrative content, platform affordances, community climates, and wider political conditions. This integration demonstrated that the meaning of sexually explicit fanfiction cannot be in explicit content alone. This dissertation therefore contributed to a conceptual understanding of sexually explicit fanfiction as a curated narrative ecology. Within this ecology, participants used stories, speculative settings, tropes, tags, warnings, platform tools, and community relationships to continually regulate their proximity to difficult material, explore identities and relationships, negotiate boundaries, and imagine alternatives.

The term curated emphasizes participants' active selection and interpretation, while ecology recognizes that these choices occurred within social and technical environments that could both support and constrain agency. This framing moved beyond treating fanfiction as a singular media object and instead positioned engagement as an evolving practice shaped by the interaction of participants, narratives, platforms, communities, and contexts. Neither study portrayed fandom as uniformly safe or affirming. Participants encountered exclusion, discrimination, conflict, unwanted content, and uneven representations alongside connection, learning, recognition, and possibility. Preserving these tensions avoided both pathologizing

sexually explicit fanfiction and romanticizing it. This dissertation's broader contribution is therefore a shift away from asking whether sexually explicit fanfiction is inherently "good" or "bad" and toward examining how people make meaning through it, what needs it may help them address, and which personal, social, and technological conditions shaped those experiences.

Practical Implications

Implications for Campus Sexual Violence Prevention

Across both studies, an important and immediate practical implication is that campus prevention and support programs should more fully integrate agency, pleasure, relational skills, and critical narrative engagement. Existing sexual violence prevention strategies emphasize changing norms, teaching skills, creating protective environments, and supporting victims/survivors (Basile et al., 2016; DeGue, 2022). This dissertation's findings suggested ways prevention efforts could be strengthened. As technology continues to advance and integrate into students' everyday academic, professional, and personal lives, education should emphasize that consent and agency extend beyond physical interactions and intentionally include digital environments. Participants' descriptions of entering, pausing, revisiting, filtering, and leaving narratives offer a useful conceptual vocabulary for discussing how consent changes over time and how individuals monitor their own responses, including within digital spaces and narrative content. Therefore, prevention programs should also include positive models of intimacy, mirroring attendees' identities and lived experiences.

Prevention programs should also include positive models of intimacy, as students need opportunities to discuss what mutuality, trust, repair, emotional safety, and pleasure can look like, not solely how coercion or assault is defined. Pleasure-inclusive approaches are not incompatible with risk reduction and can, in fact, enhance effectiveness. Evidence suggests that

incorporating pleasure can improve the effectiveness and outcomes of sexual health programming (Zaneva et al., 2022). Within violence prevention, a positive relational frame can help students identify not only the threshold at which behavior becomes unacceptable, but also the practices that make intimacy affirming and equitable. This approach may be especially important for survivors, queer, transgender, and non-binary students, disabled students, and others whose relationships are often absent from standardized scenarios. Furthermore, prevention educators can use narrative analysis without requiring students to disclose personal experiences or consume sexually explicit content. Educators might present fictionalized, developmentally appropriate scenarios that unfold across time and ask participants to identify moments of choice, uncertainty, communication, boundary revision, and care. Students could compare how the same interactions are framed across different genres or perspectives, identify which information is missing, and rewrite a scene including nuance and to increase agency or mutuality.

Such discussions could also acknowledge the existence of consensual non-consent (CNC) and other forms of power-negotiated fiction without treating interest in these narratives as evidence of a desire to experience these sexual interactions in real life. CNC has been conceptualized as a form of erotic power play in which the apparent suspension of consent occurs within a consensually established framework, distinguishing the fantasy or role-play from actual sexual violence (Tsaros, 2013). For some individuals, CNC fiction can offer a space to explore vulnerability, control, fear, trust, or surrender within the boundaries of fantasy, consistent with research demonstrating the roles of power, dominance, and submission within sexual fantasy (Hawley & Hensley, 2009; Zurbriggen & Yost, 2004). When approached thoughtfully, these narratives can help participants distinguish between fantasy desires and real-world consent practices while developing language and personal capacity to discuss negotiation,

limits, safety, trust, and aftercare. Educators might therefore invite participants to consider what contextual information, such as prior negotiation, established boundaries, or opportunities to withdraw consent, would be necessary to understand a fictional encounter as consensual role-play rather than interpersonal violence. These activities would draw on the contextual and reflective strengths participants found in narrative while preserving participant choice and avoiding the stigmatization of fantasies that do not translate into desired real-world experiences (Critelli & Bivona, 2008).

Campus prevention programs should also acknowledge that students already learn about sexuality through informal digital media ecosystems (Shigeto & Scheier, 2024). A dismissive stance toward fanfiction, romance, pornography, or online communities may discourage honest discussion and reinforce shame. Practitioners do not need to endorse every form of content to ask useful questions that encourage participants to reflect on sexuality and power. This educational approach teaches students as interpreters capable of critical reflection rather than as passive recipients who must be protected from narrative influence. Finally, prevention programming should be co-designed with students and survivors. The findings repeatedly emphasize self-determination and heterogenous preferences. Some participants intentionally approached difficult content; others avoided it. Some survivors sought an active community; others found meaning through private reading or writing. Participatory design can help ensure that content options, warnings, facilitation practices, examples, and referral pathways reflect the needs of the people expected to use them.

Implications for Sexuality Education

The findings also support comprehensive, inclusive, and pleasure-affirming sexuality education. Participants described formal education as insufficiently attentive to emotional

intimacy, queer sexuality, communication, disability, diverse relationship structures, and the practical language of boundaries and aftercare. These absences left informal narratives to fill gaps. Research similarly indicated that young people frequently described school-based sexuality education as overly biological and risk-focused, with insufficient attention to relationships, communication, pleasure, sexual diversity, and the realities of their sexual lives (Pound et al., 2017). Pleasure-inclusive approaches may also strengthen sexual health programming, with systematic review and meta-analytic evidence linking the incorporation of pleasure to improved sexual health outcomes (Zaneva et al., 2022). Sexuality education cannot and should not attempt to control every source of sexual knowledge, but it can better prepare learners to critically consider and evaluate what they encounter. Curricula should pair facts with relational competence, beginning at a young age, given that most participants reported engaging with sexually explicit fanfiction between the ages of 11–13. This education should be rooted in developmentally appropriate conversations and build upon topics as individuals age. This approach is consistent with comprehensive sexuality education frameworks that conceptualize sexuality education as an age- and developmentally appropriate process that extends beyond biological knowledge to include relationships, values, rights, communication, consent, and interpersonal skills (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). This includes recognizing power differences, communicating changing desires, setting and respecting boundaries, repairing misunderstandings, and identifying when fantasy and real-world practices require ethical considerations.

Representation is equally important. Participants described recognition of queer identities, transgender experiences, disability, varied bodies, and nontraditional relationships as affirming and possibility-expanding. Inclusive examples should not be confined to a special unit

or presented only through risk. They should be organically integrated across discussions of desire, relationships, communication, and pleasure. This integration is particularly important for LGBTQIA2+ young people, who have consistently reported that conventional sexuality education frequently excludes or inadequately represents their identities, relationships, and sexual health needs (Hobaica & Kwon, 2017; Proulx et al., 2019). Research on queer and trans engagement with fanfiction likewise indicates that transformative stories can provide identity models and imaginative possibilities that are scarce in mainstream texts (Dym et al., 2019). Formal education can reduce that scarcity by presenting diverse lives as ordinary components of sexual and relational health.

Implications for Survivor Services and Clinical Practice

For survivor services, the findings encourage a strengths-based recognition about the narrative and digital practices survivors may or may not already use. Advocates, counselors, and clinicians may ask open-ended questions about whether fanfiction, books, games, art, music, or online communities play a role in comfort, reflection, identity, or connection. The purpose is not to label these practices as treatment, assess whether an individual is using media "correctly," or direct survivors toward sexually explicit material. It is to recognize that coping and meaning-making often occur outside clinical encounters, and that survivors may already have carefully developed strategies for managing content and emotion. These findings invite future exploration of survivor-selected narrative engagement as an optional between-session practice, like how sex therapists use structured at-home exercises such as trauma-informed sensate focus (Gewirtz-Meydan, 2025). Rather than prescribing particular content, clinicians could help survivors identify boundaries, monitor their responses, and determine whether narrative engagement supports their individual goals.

Research on meaning-making following sexual abuse similarly demonstrates that recovery can involve multiple processes and modalities extending beyond formal treatment and methods. This includes reframing experiences, drawing on social and community resources, development of self-understanding, and engaging in deliberate acts of self-care (Gale et al., 2026). The concepts of protective distance and narrative agency may be particularly useful during the healing process. Some survivors may find it easier to discuss a character's experience, a fictional relationship, or a speculative world before connecting that material to their own lives.

Narrative approaches have long recognized that stories can support meaning-making and identity reconstruction (Kaminer, 2006). Research with survivors of sexual abuse specifically suggests that constructing and reconstructing narratives can facilitate new understandings of traumatic experiences, including movement from powerlessness toward greater agency and the reconstruction of identity (Harvey et. al., 2000). However, any clinical use must remain survivor-led. A practitioner should not assume that fanfiction can be difficult, triggering, or therapeutic, encourage exposure outside an evidence-based treatment plan, or interpret a fantasy as evidence of a real-world desire. Study one participant's explicitly distinguished fantasy from endorsement and differed substantially in whether approaching or avoiding difficult content that felt useful (Lehmiller & Gormezano, 2023). Services can also learn from participants on narrative consent.

Clear information about what an appointment, group, workshop, or reporting process will involve; meaningful options to decline; opportunities to pause; transparent explanations of confidentiality; and control over disclosures all operationalize the same principles participants valued in digital environments. These practices closely align with established principles of trauma-informed care, which emphasize safety, trustworthiness and transparency, collaboration,

empowerment, voice, and choice (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). Trauma-informed practice is weakened when "choice" is nominal but unavailable in practice. The findings underscore that agency is experienced through repeated procedural details, not merely stated as an institutional value.

Implications for Student Affairs and Campus Climate

Student affairs professionals should recognize fandom and other affinity-based communities as potentially meaningful components of campus belonging. Participants formed friendships, shared creative work, developed trusted subgroups, and found identity affirmation through these digital spaces. These connections may be particularly significant for students whose identities or interests are stigmatized in physical environments. Social support and perceived responsiveness are associated with well-being in both online and offline contexts. Recent research with college students reinforces the importance of these connections, finding that social support is associated with greater psychological and emotional well-being, life satisfaction, and resilience, as well as lower levels of stress and psychological distress (Ruihua et al., 2025). Importantly, both online and offline forms of social support can contribute to student well-being, suggesting that digitally mediated relationships can complement rather than simply replace in-person sources of connection (Ruihua et al., 2025). Campuses can support student-led creative and affinity spaces without surveilling the content of private communities or requiring students to translate their interests into institutionally acceptable language. Support should be paired with attention to exclusion and harassment. Participants' accounts show that fandom communities can reproduce racism, transphobia, ableism, interpersonal conflict, and other forms of harm. Research on digital social environments demonstrates that their effects are not uniformly beneficial or harmful; outcomes depend in part on how individuals engage, and the

forms of connection and support those environments provide (Godard & Holtzman, 2024). Institutions should provide accessible mechanisms for digital safety education, conflict support, and reporting when campus-affiliated spaces are involved.

The goal is not to institutionalize or police fandom, but to ensure that students can access broader resources when online conflict affects their safety or well-being. Campus climate must also address the structural conditions that make refuge necessary. It would be a misuse of findings to celebrate marginalized students' resilience while leaving hostile policies, discriminatory practices, or representational absences unchanged. Multisystemic resilience perspectives emphasize that adaption depends on the availability of resources across social and institutional environments. Rather than locating resilience solely within individuals, this perspective conceptualizes adaption as dependent on interacting psychological, social, and environmental resources and processes (Ungar et al., 2021). Institutions therefore have a responsibility to create conditions in which LGBTQIA2+ students, survivors, disabled students, and other marginalized groups do not have to rely exclusively on private digital spaces for recognition, safety, or relational possibility.

Implications for Digital Platform and Archive Design

Across both studies, agency was identified as a central thread connecting narrative engagement, sexuality, and well-being. Participants exercised agency not only through the stories they chose but through the ways they interpreted, negotiated, rejected, revisited, and shared them. Digital architecture mattered to these processes. Tags, content warnings, filters, blocking tools, and community practices provided information participants could use to make decisions about engagement. These systems were imperfect, but they demonstrate how seemingly small features of digital environments can create opportunities for choice. Agency, in this sense, was

not an abstract individual characteristic. It was continually facilitated, constrained, and negotiated through relationships, technologies, communities, and social environments. Therefore, these tools and resources have implications for digital design. These features can support informed and revocable engagement by helping users anticipate content and shape their experiences. Research on AO3 demonstrates that tagging does more than categorize content; tags facilitate forms of "informed" reading in which readers use metadata to anticipate what they will encounter and make decision about whether and how to engage with a work (Silberstein-Bamford, 2024). Similarly, Fiesler and colleagues (2016) identified agency, inclusivity, diversity, and empowerment as values embedded within AO3's design, illustrating how platform architecture can reflect community priorities around user choice and control.

Platforms that remove digital metadata or make filtering difficult may reduce user control, particularly for people managing trauma-related triggers or seeking identity-specific representation. Designers should therefore consider autonomy and emotional safety as usability concerns, not operational extras. However, at the same time, the findings do not establish that any specific tagging system is universally sufficient. Tags may be inconsistent, content warnings may be incomplete, and moderation systems may reproduce bias. Indeed, AO3's own warning architecture reflects the limits of metadata as a universal safety mechanism: its required warning system is intentionally limited, while more detailed content information provided through additional tags remains voluntary (AO3, n.d.). Platform governance should be developed with affected communities and should distinguish between providing information, enforcing rules, and censoring lawful creative expression.

Participants from these studies valued both creative freedom and community accountability. Design and governance must negotiate that tension transparently rather than if

either unrestricted content or maximal removal automatically creates safety. Platform design involves decisions about how values are translated into technical features and governance practices (Fiesler et al., 2016). Digital literacy initiatives can also teach users how platform architecture shaped what they see. Search tools, recommender systems, popularity metrics, and moderation practices influence exposure and visibility. Algorithmic literacy scholarship increasingly conceptualizes understanding how recommender systems select, prioritize, and present content as an important component of informed and autonomous digital engagement. This includes not only recognizing that algorithmic curation occurs but also developing the capacity to assess, reflect on, and respond to how these systems shape one's media environment (Sotero et al., 2026). Prevention-relevant digital literacy should therefore include not only evaluating content but also understanding the systems that organize it. Such knowledge may strengthen users' ability to curate deliberately, recognize when a platform is narrowing their options, and seek alternative communities or resources.

Limitations

Several limitations are necessary when interpreting the combined findings. First, both studies were qualitative and exploratory. They were designed to understand how participants' narratives made meaning of their experiences, not to estimate population prevalence, compare outcomes between fans and nonfans, or test casual effects. Statements that fanfiction supported agency, coping, learning, or hope refer to participants' perceptions and interpretations. The studies cannot determine whether engagement caused changes in well-being, reduced risk, improved relationship behavior, or increased resilience outside of what participants reported. Second, participants self-selected into studies about sexually explicit fanfiction. Individuals willing to participate have been especially reflective, invested in fandom, willing to discuss

sexuality, or likely to view their engagement as meaningful. People who experienced substantial harm, disengaged entirely, or did not identify their experiences as relevant may be underrepresented. The findings should therefore not be generalized to all survivors, fans, or fandom communities.

Third, retrospective narration is shaped by present identity, memory, and meaning. Participants often described engagement across many years and reinterpreted earlier experiences through later knowledge. Retrospective reconstruction was part of the studies' phenomenon, particularly within themes of individual growth and becoming. However, the accounts cannot establish precisely what participants understood at an earlier developmental stage or how their interpretations changed in real time. Furthermore, "fanfiction" and "fandom" encompass heterogeneous content, platforms, communities, and practices. The findings should not be collapsed into claims about a uniform medium. Speculative sexually explicit fanfiction may operate differently from realistic stories; private reading may differ from public writing; a trusted Discord group may differ from an open social media platform; and detailed archive tags may differ from algorithmically recommended. Additionally, while participants engaged in various fandoms, K-pop fandoms remained the dominant group. There may be differences in engagement and perception of safety and community in other fandoms. Future work must preserve these distinctions.

The two studies also demonstrated that positive and negative experiences coexisted. Participants described validation and exclusion, restoration and distress, useful scripts and misconceptions, freedom and community conflict. This complexity is theoretically important. Digital environments should not be categorized as either protective or harmful without examining for whom, under what conditions, through which practices, and with what

consequences. Media coping research likewise cautions against assuming uniform effects from broad categories of use. Finally, this dissertation centered participants' accounts of their own engagement rather than analyzing the content of stories or observing behavior. It therefore cannot determine whether narratives objectively portrayed consent, whether participants applied ideas in relationships, or how community interactions unfolded outside the interview. The findings are strongest as evidence of meaning, interpretation, and perceived functions. Their value to the field lies in identifying an overlooked context and generating testable pathways.

Conclusion

This dissertation began with a recognition that sexually explicit fanfiction occupies a complicated position within conversations about sexuality, media, and well-being. Sexually explicit media are often approached through questions of risk, exposure, and potential harm, while fanfiction is frequently dismissed as trivial, private, or peripheral to the experiences that shape people’s lives. These perspectives can obscure the active and intentional ways individuals engage with sexually explicit narratives and the meanings they construct through those experiences. Across two qualitative studies, this dissertation centered those experiences, examining sexually explicit fanfiction not simply as media content but as a narrative, relational, and digital context through which participants explored sexuality, negotiated boundaries, developed understandings of themselves, and connected with others.

Taken together, the findings demonstrated that engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction is neither inherently beneficial nor inherently harmful. Instead, its meaning is made through the interactions among individuals, narratives, digital environments, communities, and broader social contexts. Further, participants were not passive recipients of sexually explicit content. They selected stories, interpreted narratives through their own experiences, used tags

and warnings to establish boundaries, approached or avoided difficult material, reflected on fictional relationships, communicated with others, and continually reassessed what felt useful, pleasurable, affirming, uncomfortable, or unwanted. Importantly, participants also distinguished fictional exploration from real-world encounters. Fantasy created possibilities for curiosity, experimentation, and imagination without necessarily representing what participants wanted to experience outside fictional spaces.

Study one made these processes particularly visible among survivors of sexual violence, Through *Exploration Through Speculation*, *(Re)Newing Narrative Agency*, and *Finding Community*, participants described using speculative sexually explicit fanfiction in ways that allowed them to negotiate proximity to difficult emotions, experiences, and themes while retaining meaningful control over their engagement. Agency was not limited to confronting difficult material or overcoming avoidance. It could also involve stopping a story, filtering a tag, refusing narratives, returning to content at another time, or deciding that something was simply not useful. These findings reinforced the importance of understanding survivor agency as flexible, fluid, and self-defined rather than prescribing what recovery, coping, or engagement should look like.

Study two expanded this understanding by demonstrating how sexually explicit fanfiction can become embedded within broader processes of learning, exploration, identity development, and community participation. Through study two's *Learning, Growing, and Becoming Through Sexually Explicit Fanfiction; Negotiating Community, Representation*, *and Belonging;* and *Imagining Possibilities Within Hostile Sociopolitical Contexts*, participants described encountering information and possibilities that were often absent from formal sexuality education or their immediate social environments. Stories provided opportunities to encounter

different identities, bodies, relationships, desires, and ways of understanding intimacy. At the same time, fandom communities created opportunities for friendships, recognition, creative participation, and belonging. However, these spaces were not universally safe or inclusive. Participants also encountered exclusion, harassment, prejudice, conflict, and representations they found harmful. The coexistence of these experiences underscores the importance of resisting efforts to characterize digital communities as either uniquely protective or uniquely dangerous.

These findings have implications beyond fanfiction itself. Prevention, sexuality education, survivor services, student affairs, and digital platforms should move beyond approaches focused primarily on avoiding harm toward those that also strengthen individuals' capacities to interpret, question, negotiate, and make informed choices within sexual and digital environments. This requires recognizing that sexuality, relationships, identity, and consent are also understood through informal spaces. For participants, sexually explicit fanfiction sometimes provided language, representation, connection, pleasure, or possibilities unavailable elsewhere. These findings do not suggest that sexually explicit fanfiction should replace formal education, services, or institutional resources, but demonstrated the importance of recognizing the narrative and digital environments people already use for additional sources of meaning-making.

These spaces can also function simultaneously as refuge and resistance, particularly when other environments fail to provide representation, safety, or opportunities for exploration. Yet celebrating these possibilities without addressing the conditions that make refuge necessary risks placing responsibility on marginalized individuals rather than the systems that marginalize them. Ultimately, this dissertation calls for approaching sexually explicit fanfiction, and those who engage with it, with curiosity rather than assumption. Fans bring their lived histories, identities, boundaries, and agency to stories, continually negotiating what those narratives mean within

their own lives. Moving beyond whether sexually explicit fanfiction is positive or negative allows us to ask more meaningful questions about what people do with stories, what possibilities they make imaginable, and what conditions allow individuals to engage on their own terms.

At its core, this dissertation is more than about sexually explicit fanfiction. It is about the ways people use stories to explore possibilities, understand themselves, connect with others, and negotiate the worlds they inhabit. Sexually explicit fanfiction provides no simple roadmap for living, nor should it. but stories can give people space to wonder, question, refuse, reconsider, imagine, and choose. Sometimes, imagining what is possible is part of learning what we want, what we will not accept, and what kinds of worlds we might create for ourselves and others.

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Appendix A - Recruitment Flyer

ENGAGING WITH SEXUALLY EXPLICIT FANFICTION: FANTASY, OMEGAVERSE, & HEALING

HELP IMPROVE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE INTERSECTION OF FANTASY, OMEGAVERSE, AND HEALING FROM SEXUAL TRAUMA.

COLLEGE STUDENT SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT ARE INVITED TO JOIN A CONFIDENTIAL PAID RESEARCH.

Qualifications :

-Above age of 18

-Current full-time college student in the United States

-Engage with fantastical sexually explicit fanfiction

-Self-identify as a survivor of sexual violence

Earn $40 in compensation for completing a 10-minute digital survey and participating in a 60-75 minute Zoom interview

If you or someone you know may be interested, scan the QR code or email Jessica Henault at semproject83@gmail.com



This study has been approved by K-State Institutional Review Board #13593. This work is being supervised by Dr. Kristin Anders.



Appendix B - Eligibility Screening Form

Engagement with Speculative Sexually Explicit Fanfiction Research Study Interest Form

Thank you for your interest in this study! This project explores how survivors of sexual violence who are currently attending or have previously attended college in the United States understand, experience, and make meaning of their engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction. If you choose to participate, you will first complete a brief set of eligibility questions. Individuals who meet the eligibility criteria will be invited via email to schedule a Zoom interview and complete a short pre-interview survey. Participants who take part in the study will receive $40 as compensation for their time. Any participants who do not meet the eligibility criteria will have their information deleted and will not be used for any research purposes.

Q1 I am 18 years or older

- o Yes, I am above the age of 18 (1)
- o No, I am below the age of 18 (2)

Q2 What is your current age

Q3 Have you ever attended a college or university in the United States (including currently enrolled or previously enrolled)?

- o Yes (1)
- o No (2)

Q4 Because the interviews will be conducted in English and involve discussion-based questions, participants must be able to speak and understand English comfortably. Are you comfortable communicating in English for this interview?

- o Yes (1)
- o No (2)

Q5 Because this study includes a follow-up interview component, we ask for your name and email address. This information is used to confirm eligibility, schedule your interview, and connect your survey responses with your interview data as part of the research process. You may

provide any email address you regularly check. Your name and email will remain confidential and will only be used by the research team for communication and study purposes if you meet eligibility criteria for this study. Providing this information is required to participate in the interview portion of this study. If you do not meet eligibility criteria, your responses will be immediately deleted. Your responses will never be shared publicly in a way that identifies you.

- o I agree to provide my name and email address (1)
- o I do not agree to provide this information (2)

Q6 Please type your full name and email address (e.g. Jessica Henault, semproject@gmail.com

This study explores how survivors of sexual violence engage with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction. For the purposes of this study, **sexual violence is used as a broad umbrella term** to describe any non-consensual sexual experience. This may include, but is not limited to: physical, psychological, emotional, technological, or structural forms of sexual harm, such as contact or non-contact acts, coercion, image-based abuse, digital or AI-facilitated exploitation, and/or institutional practices that enabled or compounded harm.

Q7 Based on this description, do you personally identify as a survivor or sexual violence?

- o Yes, I identify as a survivor of sexual violence (1)
- o No, I am not a survivor of sexual violence (2)

For this study, we seek to understand your experiences engaging with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction. Sexually explicit fanfiction includes fan-created stories that describe sexual or erotic scenes in detail and take place in imagined or non-realistic worlds. These stories must include real people (celebrities, musicians, idols, etc.) and/or media-based characters (cartoons, anime, tv, movies, etc.), sometimes alongside additional fictional or supernatural characters or "self-insert" reader characters. Sexually explicit fanfiction can range from romantic and sexual to explicitly erotic in nature, and also include fantasy or supernatural elements like monsters, non-human characters, or magical abilities (see below for examples). "Engagement" with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction can include reading, writing, or participating in online fandom communities, interacting with creators, or participating in digital spaces organized

around speculative sexually explicit fanfiction. Examples of speculative sexually explicit fanfiction (These are examples only and are not meant to cover every possible type):

- A fan-created story where a real-life musician, actor, or idol is written as a vampire, witch, etc., and the story includes romantic or explicit sexual scenes;
- A reader-insert (you) story where the reader is placed into a speculative world and has sexual or romantic interactions with celebrities, idols, media-based characters, etc. who are portrayed as supernatural or non-human;
- A story featuring celebrities, idols, media-based characters, etc. who are placed in a fantasy or supernatural world, and the story includes romantic or explicit sexual scenes.

Q8 Based on this description, do you currently engage with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction?

- Yes, I engage with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction (1)
- No, I do not engage with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction (2)

Display this question:

If I am 18 years or older = Yes, I am above the age of 18

And Have you ever attended a college or university in the United States (including currently enrolled... = Yes

And Because the interviews will be conducted in English and involve discussion-based questions, parti... = Yes

And Because this study includes a follow-up interview component, we ask for your name and email addre... = I agree to provide my name and email address

And Based on this description, do you personally identify as a survivor or sexual violence? = Yes, I identify as a survivor of sexual violence

And Based on this description, do you currently engage with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction? = Yes, I engage with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction

Thank you for your interest in this research study. Based on your responses, you are eligible to participate. Jessica Henault, a graduate candidate at Kansas State University who is conducting this study, will contact you within three business days with next steps. Her email will come from her institutional email address, jhenault@ksu.edu, so please check your junk or spam folder if

you do not see it. If you have any questions or decide that you do not wish to proceed, please contact Jessica or Dr. Kristin Anders, Associate Professor at Kansas State University and the faculty supervisor for this study at kanders8@ksu.edu.

Appendix C - Email to Participate in Study

Greetings [Name],

Thank you for confirming your information. If you are still interested in participating in this study we can proceed forward with scheduling an interview. The interview will take approximately 60–75 minutes. As a thank you for your time and participation, you will receive $40 in compensation following the completion of the interview.

Please use my scheduling link to select a time that works best for you. If there a specific day/time frame you're looking to schedule that you do not see currently available, please let me know as I may have availability: https://calendly.com/jhenault/30min

Once your appointment is confirmed, you will receive a calendar invitation. I will also follow up with an email that includes the Zoom meeting link and additional details.

Before the interview, please complete this brief pre-interview survey (less than 10 minutes). Your responses will help me better understand your engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction prior to our conversation:
https://kstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0rEa0Dq2hFWZkqy

Please also review the following important information, which is in place to support the integrity of the data collection process. If you are uncomfortable with any of the requirements below, you may choose not to participate at this time.

- At the start of the interview, you will be asked to confirm a few brief verification questions, and you will be required to keep your camera on during this. Once the recording begins, you can turn off your camera if you would prefer. While the session will be recorded, only audio will be retained for research purposes.

- Participants will receive $40.00 in compensation for their time and contributions. There are three ways to receive this compensation, and you may select which option you prefer 1) direct deposit, 2) digital gift card, and 3) a physical check mailed to your address. For direct deposit, you will be asked to provide your full name, mailing address, birth month,

and email address. For the digital gift card and physical check options, you will need to complete a w-9 form.

Please let me know if you have any questions. Thank you again for your interest in this study and I look forward to connecting!

Appendix D - Pre-Interview Survey & Informed Consent

PROJECT TITLE: Speculative Sexually Explicit Fanfiction and Healing Among Survivors **PROJECT APPROVAL DATE/ EXPIRATION DATE:** March 1, 2029 **LENGTH OF STUDY:** 10-minutes for pre-interview survey; 60-75 minutes for Zoom interview **PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR/CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):** Dr. Kristin Anders **CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:** Jessica Henault, jhenault@ksu.edu; Kristin Anders, kanders8@ksu.edu, 785-532-5510 **IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION:** For the subject should he/she/they have questions or wish to discuss on any aspect of the research with an official of the university or the IRB. These are: Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224, rubin@ksu.edu; Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224, comply@ksu.edu. **CONTACT INFORMATION:** For the subject should he/she/they have questions or wish to discuss on any aspect of the research with an official of the university or the IRB. These are: Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224, rubin@ksu.edu; Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224, comply@ksu.edu. **PROJECT SPONSOR: N/A PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:** The purpose of this study is to explore how survivors of sexual violence who are currently attending or have previously attended college engage with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, and how they make meaning of reading or writing this material. Examples of speculative fanfiction can include, but is not limited to, omegaverse (A/B/O), alternative universe (AU) that features fantasy elements, magical bonds (e.g. scent match, mating bonds, psychic links), and non-human beings (e.g. monsters, demons, vampires, fae). Speculative sexually explicit fanfiction features explicit sexual content between characters. Examples of common fanfiction tags associated with these works can include, but are not limited to, “smut,” “porn without plot,” “eventual smut,” “fluff and smut,” “explicit sexual content,” and “porn with plot.” The study aims to better understand what this engagement means to survivors, particularly in relation to coping, sexuality, pleasure, agency, power, and personal well-being. While much research has focused on formal support services, less is known about informal, self-directed coping strategies such as creative and digital

storytelling. Information from this study may help researchers, educators, and support professionals better understand these experiences and inform future efforts to support college student survivors. Research from this study will be conducted and presented as part of a doctoral dissertation. **PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:** If you choose to take part in this study, you will complete a short 10-minute online survey that asks about your background and your experiences with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction. After completing that survey, you will take part in a one-on-one interview with the researcher that will last about 60 to 75-minutes and will take place on Zoom. During the Zoom interview, you will be asked questions about your experiences engaging with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, including when and how you began engaging with this content and how your engagement may have changed over time. Questions will also explore your personal motivations for engagement and personal meaning you derive from speculative sexually explicit fanfiction. You may also be asked to reflect on emotional, cognitive, and bodily experiences during engagement, as well as perceived connections to coping, well-being, sexuality, consent, or experiences of sexual violence. The interview will be audio-recorded so the researcher can accurately capture what you share. This interview may also include video recording; however, you may keep your camera off if you prefer not to be recorded visually. You may skip any questions you do not want to answer and may stop participating at any time. If you complete the survey and the interview, you will receive a $40.00 incentive for your time. You will also be invited to review the results of the study to see if it accurately captures your experience. Those that choose to review the results will receive an additional $10.00 incentive. **ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES OR TREATMENTS, IF ANY, THAT MIGHT BE ADVANTAGEOUS TO SUBJECT:** There are no alternative procedures or treatments for this research study. Participation is voluntary and choosing not to participate or to withdraw will not affect access to any services, resources, or support available to you. Individuals who do not wish to participate may choose not to take part without any penalty. **RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:** Some of the questions in this study may feel personal or sensitive. Talking about experiences related to sexual violence, sexuality, or emotionally meaningful media may bring up uncomfortable feelings, memories, or emotional distress. These risks are expected to be no greater than those experienced in everyday conversations about personal experiences. You are not required to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable, and you may skip questions or stop participating at any time without

penalty. Support resources will be provided at the conclusion of the Zoom interview, and in a follow-up email in case you experience discomfort, and you are encouraged to reach out to trusted support systems or professional resources if needed. However, you may be removed from the study without your consent. These situations would be due to you not being honest about your identity (i.e. lying about attending College in the United States). **BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:** You may not experience direct personal benefits from taking part in this study. However, some participants may find value in reflecting on their experiences and sharing their perspectives in a confidential and supportive setting. If you complete the required study components, including the survey and interview, you will receive a $40.00 incentive for your time. Participants will also be invited to review the results of the study to see if it accurately captures your experience. Those that choose to review the results will receive an additional $10.00 incentive. The information gained from this research may also help researchers, educators, and support professionals better understand how survivors engage with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction and may inform future research and support practices. **EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:** All electronic data, including survey responses and the separate survey collecting participants' names and email addresses for interview scheduling, will be encrypted and secured on a password-protected computer. Contact information (names and email addresses) will be stored in a separate, password-protected file that is not linked to survey responses or interview transcripts. Email addresses will be used solely for scheduling and follow-up communication related to the interview. Once the interview has been completed and any necessary follow-up communication has concluded, identifiable email addresses will be permanently removed from the dataset and deleted from the contact file. At that point, interview data will be fully de-identified and maintained only under participant-selected pseudonyms. To further protect participant identity, pseudonyms will be utilized in place of real names. At the end of the interview, participants will be invited to select a pseudonym of their choosing. Providing participants the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym supports autonomy and aligns with trauma-informed research practices. The selected pseudonym will be used in all transcripts, analytic documents, reports, presentations, and publications. During transcription, any accidental mention of a participant's legal name or other identifying information will be removed and replaced with the selected pseudonym. Any temporary document linking participants' real names to their selected pseudonyms will be stored separately in a password-

protected file and will be deleted once transcription and any necessary follow-up communication are complete. Any physical data forms will be shredded upon completion of this project. All reports will provide summary data to ensure that participants' identities cannot be discerned from the information provided. The information that will be collected as part of this research, after being identified, could be used for future research studies or distributed to other investigators for future research studies without additional informed consent. Last, all identifiable information will be destroyed five years after project completion. I**S COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS:** No Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled. **Terms of participation:** I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I acknowledge that I have reviewed this form and understand this consent form and voluntarily agree to participate in this study under the terms described. By clicking "I consent" and "Next," I acknowledge that I have reviewed and agree to this consent form.

- o Yes, I consent (4)
- o No, I do not consent (5)

Q1 Please type your full name and email address (e.g., Jessica Henault, jhenault@ksu.edu

Q2 What is your gender identity? Select all that apply.

- ☐ Cisgender woman (1)
- ☐ Cisgender man (2)
- ☐ Transgender woman (3)
- ☐ Transgender man (4)
- ☐ Non-binary (5)
- ☐ Agender (6)
- ☐ Genderfluid (7)
- ☐ Genderqueer (8)
- ☐ Two-spirit (9)
- ☐ Questioning (10)
- ☐ Prefer not to disclose (11)
- ☐ Additional: (12)

Q3 Describe your race/ethnicity. Select all that apply.

- ☐ Black/African American (1)
- ☐ White/Caucasian (2)
- ☐ Asian or Asian American (3)
- ☐ Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (4)
- ☐ Native American or Alaskan Native (5)
- ☐ Prefer not to disclose (6)
- ☐ Additional (7)

Q4 Do you identify as Latinx or Hispanic?

- o Yes (1)
- o No (2)
- o Prefer not to disclose (3)

Q5: What is your sexual orientation? Select all that apply.

- ☐ Heerosexual (1)
- ☐ Gay (2)
- ☐ Lesbian (3)
- ☐ Bisexual (4)
- ☐ Asexual (5)
- ☐ Pansexual (6)
- ☐ Queer (7)
- ☐ Questioning (8)
- ☐ Additional (9)
- ☐ Prefer not to disclose (10)

Q6 Which of the following best describes your college or university enrollment status?

- o Currently enrolled as an undergraduate student (full-time) (1)
- o Currently enrolled as an undergraduate student (part-time) (2)
- o Currently enrolled as a graduate/professional student (full-time) (3)
- o Currently enrolled as a graduate/professional student (part-time) (4)
- o Previously attended college or university but am not currently enrolled (5)
- o Other (6)
- o Prefer not to disclose (7)

Q7 Which region best represents where your college or university is/was located?

- o Northeast (1)
- o Midwest (2)
- o South (3)
- o West (4)
- o U.S. Territory (5)
- o Other (6)
- o Prefer not to disclose (7)

Q8 Please check all that apply to your college or university

- ☐ Public/non-profit/non-religious (1)
- ☐ Private/non-profit/religious (2)
- ☐ Private/for profit (3)
- ☐ Historically Black college or university (HBCU) (4)
- ☐ Minority-serving institution (5)
- ☐ Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) (6)
- ☐ Tribal college or university (TCU) (7)
- ☐ Additional (8)
- ☐ Unsure (9)
- ☐ Prefer not to disclose (10)

Q9 What degree are you currently pursuing or were most recently pursuing?

- o Bachelor's degree (1)
- o Master's degree (2)
- o Doctoral degree (3)
- o Professional degree (e.g., JD, MD) (4)
- o Certificate or other program (5)
- o Prefer not to disclose (6)

Q10 Which best describes your current or most recent stage in your program?

- o First year (1)
- o Second year (2)
- o Third year (3)
- o Fourth year (4)
- o Graduate or professional student (5)
- o Completed degree/program (6)
- o Withdrew or did not complete program (7)
- o Prefer not to disclose (8)

Q11 How long has it been since you were last enrolled in a college or university?

- Currently enrolled (1)
- Less than 1 year ago (2)
- 1-2 years ago (3)
- 3-5 years ago (4)
- More than 5 years ago (5)
- Prefer not to disclose (6)

For this study, we seek to understand your experiences engaging with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction. Sexually explicit fanfiction includes fan-created stories that describe sexual or erotic scenes in detail and take place in imagined or non-realistic worlds. These stories must include real people (celebrities, musicians, idols, etc.) and/or media-based characters (cartoons, anime, tv, movies, etc.), sometimes alongside fictional or supernatural characters or "self-insert" reader characters. Speculative sexually explicit fanfiction can range from romantic and sexual to explicitly erotic in nature, and also include fantasy or supernatural elements like monsters, non-human characters, or magical abilities (see below for examples). "Engagement" with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction can include reading, writing, or participating in online fandom communities, interacting with creators, or participating in digital spaces organized around speculative sexually explicit fanfiction. Examples of speculative sexually explicit fanfiction (these are examples only and are not meant to cover every possible type): A fan-created story where a real-life musician, actor, or idol is written as a monsters or non-human characters (vampire, alpha, omega, beta, witch, etc.) and the story includes romantic or explicit sexual scenes; A reader-insert (you) story where the reader is placed into a speculative world and has sexual or romantic interactions with celebrities, idols, media-based characters, etc., who are portrayed as supernatural or non-human; A story featuring celebrities, idols, media-based characters, etc. who are placed in a fantasy or supernatural world, and the story includes romantic or explicit scenes between these characters

Q12 How old were you (approximately) when you were first introduced to speculative sexually explicit fanfiction?

Q13 How do you engage with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction? Select all that apply:

- ☐ I read speculative sexually explicit fanfiction (1)
- ☐ I write speculative sexually explicit fanfiction (2)
- ☐ I participate in fan communities to discuss content (3)
- ☐ Additional (4)

Q14 How long have you engaged with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction?

- ○ Less than 1 year (1)
- ○ 1 - 2 years (2)
- ○ 3 - 5 years (3)
- ○ 6 - 10 years (4)
- ○ 10+ years (5)

Q15 How often do you currently engage with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction?

- o Daily or almost daily (1)
- o Weekly (2)
- o Monthly (3)
- o A few times a year (4)
- o Prefer not to disclose (5)

Q16 On which platform(s) do you most often engage with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction?

- ▢ Archive of Our Own (AO3) (1)
- ▢ Wattpad (2)
- ▢ Tumblr (3)
- ▢ X (formally Twitter) (4)
- ▢ Reddit (5)
- ▢ TikTok (6)
- ▢ Instagram (IG) (7)
- ▢ Threads (8)
- ▢ Fanfiction.net (9)
- ▢ Discord (10)
- ▢ Google Docs or shared documents (11)
- ▢ Private or invitation-only servers/spaces (e.g., Patron) (12)
- ▢ Additional (13)
- ▢ Prefer not to disclose (14)

Q17 When engaging with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, what do you most often focus on? Select all that apply:

- ☐ Specific fandoms or media (e.g., TV shows, books, movies) (1)
- ☐ Celebrity or idol-based fanfiction (e.g., K-pop idols, musicians, actors, influencers) (2)
- ☐ Specific pairings or 'ships' between characters (3)
- ☐ Original characters within fan universes (4)
- ☐ Additional: (5)
- ☐ I don't keep track or gravitate towards specific things (6)
- ☐ Prefer not to disclose (7)

Display this question:

If When engaging with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, what do you most often focus on? Sel... = Specific fandoms or media (e.g., TV shows, books, movies)

Or When engaging with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, what do you most often focus on? Sel... = Celebrity or idol-based fanfiction (e.g., K-pop idols, musicians, actors, influencers)

Or When engaging with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, what do you most often focus on? Sel... = Specific pairings or 'ships' between characters

Or When engaging with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, what do you most often focus on? Sel... = Original characters within fan universes

Or When engaging with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, what do you most often focus on? Sel... = Additional:

Q18 Please use the space below to share in more detail which fandoms, characters, pairings, or creators you most engage with, and any recurring themes or story tropes you are drawn to.

Display this question:

If How do you engage with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction? Select all that apply: = I read speculative sexually explicit fanfiction

Q19 When you read speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, how do you most often imagine or position yourself within the story? Select all that apply:

- ▢ I imagine myself directly in the story as a self-insert or 'y/n' reader character (1)
- ▢ I imagine myself as one of the story's main characters (2)
- ▢ I imagine myself as a new or original character interacting with the main characters (3)
- ▢ I experience the story from an observer or third-part perspective (not as a participant) (4)
- ▢ Additional (5)
- ▢ Prefer not to disclose (6)

Display this question:

If How do you engage with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction? Select all that apply: = I write speculative sexually explicit fanfiction

Q20 When you write speculative sexually explicit fanfiction, how do you often imagine or position yourself within the story? Select all that apply:

- ▢ I imagine myself directly in the story as a self-insert or 'y/n' reader character (1)
- ▢ I imagine myself as one of the story's main characters (2)
- ▢ I imagine myself as a new or original character interacting with the main character (3)
- ▢ I experience the story from an observer or third-party perspective (not as a participant) (4)
- ▢ Additional (5)
- ▢ Prefer not to disclose (6)

Interviews for this study will take place via Zoom. Accommodations can include, but are not limited to, options like closed captions, breaks, flexible scheduling, or using chat instead of audio for parts of the interview. You do not need to share any medical or personal details, just what would help you feel comfortable participating.

Q21 Would you like any accommodations or support to participate comfortably in an online interview?

- o No, I do not need or want any accommodations (1)
- o Yes, I may need accommodations or support (2)
- o I am not sure, but I would like to discuss this with the researcher (3)
- o Prefer not to disclose (4)

Display this question:

If Would you like any accommodations or support to participate comfortably in an online interview? = Yes, I may need accommodations or support

Or Would you like any accommodations or support to participate comfortably in an online interview? = I am not sure, but I would like to discuss this with the researcher

Q22 Please describe any accommodations or supports that would help you participate comfortably (e.g., captions, breaks, flexible scheduling)

Q23 Thank you for your time and for contributing to this research. Your insights and participation are deeply valued. Is there anything else you would like the research team to know about your participation in this study?

Appendix E - Zoom Interview Protocol & Questions

Hi PARTICIPANT: Thank you so much for meeting with me today. As you know, my name is Jessica and I am a PhD candidate at Kansas State University studying Prevention Science in the College of Human Development and Family Sciences. I appreciate your willingness to share your experiences and perspectives for this study. The purpose of this study is to examine how college student survivors of sexual violence understand, experience, and make meaning of their engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction. Before we start, I want to remind you that you have already reviewed and signed the consent form, but please let me know if you have any questions before we begin.

I'll be recording the interview so that I can accurately capture what you share. Everything you share today will be kept confidential and at the end of this interview, you will have the opportunity to select a pseudonym. Your name and institutional email will not appear in any reports, publications, or presentations; your responses will be de-identified; and pseudonyms will be used for any quotes. It is my hope that this will feel like a conversation; I'll ask open-ended questions, and you're welcome to take your time, reflect, or share stories that feel meaningful to you.

Some of my questions invite reflection on whether and how your engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction may intersect with your experiences of sexual violence. You may skip any question, ask for a break, or stop the interview entirely at any time. Your comfort is my priority; you only need to share what feels most comfortable and safest to you. If you need to pause or stop entirely, please let me know. Do you still consent to proceeding forward with this interview and it being recorded?

****IF YES: Begin recording to the CLOUD*****

Before this interview, you completed a brief survey that included questions about your demographic information, your institution, and your engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction. I'll use that information to help guide our conversation. As a reminder, the questions I'll be asking focus specifically on speculative sexually explicit fanfiction. This can include, but is not limited to, Omegaverse, ABO dynamics, fantasy, paranormal, supernatural, and monster genres.

You indicated that you read a variety of fanfiction genres, but as you reflect on my questions, please focus specifically on the fantasy stories you noted engaging with.

Before we move forward, is there anything from the survey that you'd like to clarify, change, or feel needs more context? **Pause for participant response and take notes if necessary.**

Okay, we'll go ahead and get started. First, I would love to know a bit about your history with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction.

1. Tell me about your experience engaging with sexually explicit fanfiction. You mentioned being introduced to sexually explicit fanfiction in 2016. What was that discovery like for you?
2. What were your first initial reactions to discovering speculative sexually explicit fanfiction?
3. What draws you to or sparks your interest in speculative sexually explicit fanfiction?
    a. <u>Follow up question:</u> What aspects of speculative sexually explicit fanfiction do you find especially appealing or unappealing?
4. You mentioned enjoying a variety of pairings, tropes, and themes when you engage with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction- can you tell me more about what stands out to you?

a. Follow-up question: Do you notice patterns or trends when or why you choose to read speculative sexually explicit fanfiction? If yes, tell me about these patterns.
b. Follow-up question: Are there certain times you find yourself gravitating away from certain trends or types of fantasy sexually explicit fanfiction.

The next few questions I'm going to ask relate to your experience with sexual violence. Please let me know if you would like to pause at any moment or stop asking the questions entirely.

5. Have there been moments when engaging with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction felt emotionally grounding, affirming, difficult, or triggering in relation to your assault experiences? This could be related to story tropes, pairings, certain scenes, etc.
6. In what ways, if any, do you see your experiences with sexual violence connecting to your engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction?
7. What role, if any, does engaging with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction play in how you process emotions or navigate your well-being?
8. How, if at all, has engaging with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction shaped the way you think about things like pleasure, boundaries, consent, or sexual agency?
9. Do you find that engaging with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction creates space, if at all, or revisit or think differently about aspects of sexuality or pleasure? What does that look like for you?
10. Can you walk me through what emotional, mental, or physical responses are like when you engage with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction?
    a. Do those responses change depending on the type of story, theme, or dynamic?
11. What stands out to you about how power, consent, and boundaries are portrayed in speculative sexually explicit fanfiction?

12. Are there particular dynamics you find yourself drawn to or avoiding? What about them stands out to you?
13. What do you wish more people who don't read or write speculative sexually explicit fanfiction understood about it?
14. What do you wish the public knew about fans who read and write sexually explicit fanfiction?
15. What advice would you offer to someone who is interested in engaging with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction but experiences hesitation or uncertainty about doing so?
16. What else haven't I asked you that you think is important for me to know or capture in this interview?

Thank you so much for taking the time to share your experiences with me today. Your openness and insights are truly invaluable. Within the next 24-hours, I'll send you a follow-up email with the next steps, including how you will receive your $40.00 compensation for your time. There will be three options to receive your payment. I also recognize that some of these questions may have been triggering. Therefore, I will include a list of national free support resources in the chat shortly. I will also include them in the follow-up email. You are also encouraged to reach out to confidential resources available at your own college or university, which may include counseling or mental health services, campus sexual assault or survivor advocacy centers, Title IX or sexual misconduct support offices, and/or campus health centers.

You have the option to choose a pseudonym for your confidentiality. An example if I were choosing one would be Future Dr. Smut. Would you like to choose one, or have the research team create one for you? **(WRITE DOWN NAME IF CHOSEN)**. Additionally, do you have a preference of the pronouns we use when referencing your pseudonym? **(WRITE**

DOWN IF SO). Once the preliminary results of this study have concluded, you will be given the opportunity to review a short summary and provide feedback. You will have one week to participate in this process. It is not required to participate in this process, but if you choose to do so, you will receive an additional $10.00 for your participation. I'm going to put the resources in the chat that I mentioned, earlier. Do you have any final questions or things I can clarify? Thank you again and I look forward to being in touch with you shortly.

Appendix F - Study One Participant Quotes

Theme *Sub-theme*	Quotes
Exploration Through Speculation	
Fantasy as Protective Distance	"A way to immerse myself in something that is emotionally engaging but not directly tied to my actual real life." (Elizabeth)
	"Faries at least, you can imagine them in whatever way you want them. They can look like humanoids. They can look monster-y. Having it in an alternative universe felt safe." (Padme)
	"It might have been two men or two women, but, at the end of the day, it wasn't me being involved with it, so I could remove myself." (Christine)
	"I want to read fantasy and have a completely different world to picture other than what I'm going through now." (Pixie)
Exploring Difficult Realities	"It has helped me develop a healthy relationship with sex, but it's not necessarily one that I want to act on." (Falcon)
	"The fact I am reading something that directly relates to sexual violence I've experienced, but, like, it doesn't. I don't find it particularly triggering or euphoric. It's a thought in my head, and then I keep reading." (Space Man)
	"It's just another way to play with these characters. It unlocks a new door of freedom to engage with things differently." (Yena)
	"I like realism that's so gnarly its almost realistic…The same things may have happened to me. You're like, yep, that character's going through it." (Benji)
Knowing Fantasy is Not Reality	"I wish they knew that enjoying reading something does not mean that you would wish to act upon it." (Benji)
	"Something can be explored safely in fiction, without ever crossing into reality. And is it uncomfortable to think that someone might be writing pedophilia, or incest, or something of that nature? Sure, it's uncomfortable to sit with, but I would, every single time, 100% prefer someone to be writing stories about it versus trying to do anything about it in real life." (Pixie)

	"It's also a really freeing experience to be able to read about something that just can't happen in real life. There isn't a 7-foot blue alien with two dicks that exist in this world. So, it creates a different sensation of arousal than when I'm with my spouse. Not only am I feeling arousal in my body, I'm also imagining a whole different universe." (Padme)
	"You're in this other world where it's like, 'oh my goodness, I need that.' But then you're out in the real world and I don't need anyone to safe me." (Kady)
(Re)Newing Narrative Agency	
Consent Beyond the Story	"I don't want a surprise rape scene. I'm reading to escape real life. I don't want to experience all of that again." (Padme)
	"For a long time I would gravitate away from CNC [consensual non-consent] fanfiction. But I noticed that after I had experienced sexual violence, I wasn't as opposed to it, and I actually started reading it and searching for it with the tags." (Space Man)
	"You're giving consent to what you want to read [using the tagging feature], and what you want to, like, let inside you. And that is something like, whenever these warning come that I don't feel comfortable with, you're just like, not consenting to let that into your world." (Kady)
Reclaiming Agency After Constraint	"I like insert reader or y/n [your name]. I think that is the one where I'm in control. And if it doesn't feel like me, then I create a y/n character in my head." (Christine)
	"When the world outside me feels uncontrollable in a way, I need a story to dive into where I know by the end those characters are gonna be safe." (Jennifer)
	"It's very healing and grounding, because even if the fic handles one of those very difficult topics for me, I'm completely in control. I can stop reading or can talk to somebody about what I'm reading in the fandom. I can just bitch. I can write my own version of the story that goes the way I want it to." (Benji)
Speculative Sexually Explicit Fanfiction as Boundary Work	"If something starts to feel overwhelming, because I get those little [physical] reactions, I'll just pause or stop, take a moment, and make sure that I'm okay, then continue. Or I switch to a different story that is safer for me and knowing that I want to explore something to cool down that tension brewing from inside. So, my body is an indicator for me. It helps me figure out whether the reading experience is supportive and exploratory, or getting too close to something that is going to be

	uncomfortable or something I'm not ready to engage with in that moment." (Elizabeth) "I want to communicate what I really want, instead of just receiving certain things…I like the stories that have women in control of things and that they…make their decisions." (Kady)
Control Through Tropes	"I gravitate towards the found family tropes because my own family dynamic is so unnecessarily complicated. With age regression stories, I can read something where someone is essentially in a scene, and they're a young child, but they're not being perceived as sexual. They can just be a child, and that's extremely comforting for me." (Pixie) "I look specifically for tropes and genres, not necessarily with asexual characters, but like, with characters who form deep, meaningful connections." (Falcon) "I'm kind of specific about what I'm looking for. I've also noticed that my choices are connected to what I need emotionally. Like, if I'm feeling disconnected, I look for stories that focus more on intimacy, something to bring me back, like, emotionally." (Elizabeth) "I like the stories that have women in control of things, and that they just make their decisions." (Kady)
Finding Community	
Relationships Through Speculative Sexually Explicit Fanfiction	"It's a way for me to connect with people. I've made likelong friends within the few months I've been in the K-pop fandom spaces." (Yena) "I always enjoy forming relationships with other older fans like myself. There's a lot of ageism within fandoms, so those connections are special." (Falcon) "Being part of fandom has always really been about community for me. I was isolated as I was growing up. So getting to find something to connect with other people has always been really valuable to me, because I haven't always been great at connecting with other people, and so fandom kind of helps me pave a path where I can communicate with other people." (Jennifer)
Validation and Normalization	"Stories you read, you're like, am I a freak? But then you find a community, at least for me, when I found my community. I felt so safe and validated. I'm gonna explore this as much as I can. I can't be a freak if 25,000 other women on this platform are talking about the same thing." (Padme)

	"It's so nice to read stories where my identities are uplifted and celebrated, especially with the constant attacks on trans rights in real life." (Space Man)
	"When I read fanfiction, I imagine what my mom would say if she heard…I have to actively tell myself, no one cares. You're reading this for yourself. It's fun." (Falcon)
	"I've been able to confront a lot of my personal sexual shame and say, 'hey, there's nothing wrong with enjoying XYZ, this is normal and healthy.'" (Yena)
Community as Resistance	"I like writing stories about people who do not usually have representation in those stories, like male pregnancy." (Benji)
	"Some cisgender people have started, like, saying stuff now [advocating within fandom spaces about trans rights], which I really appreciate, because I don't want to be the only person doing all the work all the time, especially as a survivor when I'm already dealing with the trauma after effects." (Christine)
	"Encouraging people to not talk about smut and sex is like encouraging people to not advocate for a better system in which people have more sexual agency." (Padme)
	"As a survivor, negative fandoms can feel very unsafe for me, and it makes it harder to engage openly or even enjoy the content as much as I want to." (Pixie)

Appendix G - Recruitment Flyer

DO YOU ENJOY SEXUALLY EXPLICIT FANFICTION?

INDIVIDUALS CURRENTLY ATTENDING OR PREVIOUSLY ATTENDED COLLEGE IN THE UNITED STATES ARE INVITED TO JOIN A CONFIDENTIAL PAID RESEARCH STUDY ABOUT FANFICTION, SEXUALITY, AND WELL-BEING.

Qualifications :

-Above age of 18
-Currently attending or previously attended college in the United States
-Engage with sexually explicit fanfiction

Earn $40 for completing a 10-minute digital survey and participating in a 60-75 minute Zoom interview

HELP IMPROVE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF HOW SEXUALLY EXPLICIT FANFICTION FITS INTO PEOPLE'S LIVES.

This study has been approved by K-State Institutional Review Board (#13613). This work is being supervised by Dr. Kristin Anders.



If you or someone you know may be interested, scan the QR code or email Jessica Henault at semproject83@gmail.com

Appendix H - Eligibility Screening Form

Q10 Thank you for your interest in this study! This project explores how individuals engage with sexually explicit fanfiction as a way to cope, grow, and build resilience during challenging social and political times. If you choose to participate, you will first complete a brief set of eligibility questions. Individuals who meet the eligibility criteria will be invited via email to schedule a Zoom interview and complete a short pre-interview survey. Participants who take part in the study will receive $40 as compensation for their time. All responses will remain confidential and will be used for research purposes only.

Q1 I am 18 years or older

- o Yes, I am above the age of 18 (1)
- o No, I am below the age of 18 (2)

Q2 What is your current age?

Q3 Have you ever attended a college or University in the United States (including currently enrolled or previously enrolled)?

- o Yes (1)
- o No (2)

Q4 Because the interviews will be conducted in English and involve discussion-based questions, participants must be able to speak and understand English comfortably. Are you comfortable communicating in English for this interview?

- o Yes (1)
- o No (2)

Q5 Because this study includes a follow-up interview component, we ask for your name and email address. This information is used to confirm eligibility, schedule your interview, and connect your survey responses with your interview data as part of the research progressm. You may use any email address you regularly check. Your name and email will remain confidential and will be used only by the research team for communication and study purposes if you meet the eligibility criteria. Providing this information is required to participate in the interview portion of this study. If you do not meet the eligibility criteria, your responses will be immediately deleted. Your responses will never be shared publicly in a way that could identify you.

- o I agree to provide my name and email address (1)

o I do not agree to provide this information (2)

Q6 Please type your full name and email address (e.g., Jessica Henault, semproject@gmail.com

T2 For the purpose of this study, we seek to understand your experiences engaging with sexually explicit fanfiction . Sexually explicit fanfiction refers to fan-created stories that include detailed or descriptive depictions of sexual acts, erotic situations, or sexual themes. These stories may explore intimacy, pleasure, fantasy desire, or relationships between fictional characters, celebrities, musicians / idols, cartoon / anime characters, or "self-insert" (reader) characters, among other dynamics. Sexually explicit fanfiction can range from romantic and sexual to explicitly erotic in nature. "Engagement" with sexually explicit fanfiction can include reading, writing, or participating in online fandom communities, interacting with creators, or participating in digital spaces organized around sexually explicit fanfiction .

Q7 Based on this description, do you currently engage with sexually explicit fanfiction?

o Yes, I engage with sexually explicit fanfiction (1)

o No, I do not engage with sexually explicit fanfiction (2)

Display this question:

If I am 18 years or older = Yes, I am above the age of 18

And Have you ever attended a college or University in the United States (including currently enrolled... = Yes

And Because the interviews will be conducted in English and involve discussion-based questions, parti... = Yes

And Because this study includes a follow-up interview component, we ask for your name and email addre... = I agree to provide my name and email address

And Based on this description, do you currently engage with sexually explicit fanfiction? = Yes, I engage with sexually explicit fanfiction

Q12 Thank you for your interest in this research study. Based on your responses, you are eligible to participate. Jessica Henault, a graduate candidate at Kansas State University who is conducting this study, will contact you within three business days with next steps. Her email will come from her institutional email address, jhenault@ksu.edu, so please check your junk or spam folder if you do not see it. If you have any questions or decide that you do not wish to proceed,

please contact Jessica or Dr. Kristin Anders, Associate Professor at Kansas State University and the faculty supervisor for this study at kanders8@ksu.edu. **Please make sure to click the arrow at the bottom of this page to submit your responses. If you do not click the arrow, your responses will not be submitted.**

Appendix I - Email Invitation to Participate in Study

Greetings [Name],

Thank you for confirming your information. If you are still interested in participating in this study we can proceed forward with scheduling an interview. The interview will take approximately 60–75 minutes. As a thank you for your time and participation, you will receive $40 in compensation following the completion of the interview.

Please use my scheduling link to select a time that works best for you. If there a specific day/time frame you're looking to schedule that you do not see currently available, please let me know as I may have availability: https://calendly.com/jhenault/30min

Once your appointment is confirmed, you will receive a calendar invitation. I will also follow up with an email that includes the Zoom meeting link and additional details.

Before the interview, please complete this brief pre-interview survey (less than 10 minutes). Your responses will help me better understand your engagement with speculative sexually explicit fanfiction prior to our conversation:
https://kstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0rEa0Dq2hFWZkqy

Please also review the following important information, which is in place to support the integrity of the data collection process. If you are uncomfortable with any of the requirements below, you may choose not to participate at this time.

- At the start of the interview, you will be asked to confirm a few brief verification questions, and you will be required to keep your camera on during this. Once the recording begins, you can turn off your camera if you would prefer. While the session will be recorded, only audio will be retained for research purposes.

- Participants will receive $40.00 in compensation for their time and contributions. There are three ways to receive this compensation, and you may select which option you prefer 1) direct deposit, 2) digital gift card, and 3) a physical check mailed to your address. For direct deposit, you will be asked to provide your full name, mailing address, birth month,

and email address. For the digital gift card and physical check options, you will need to complete a w-9 form.

Please let me know if you have any questions. Thank you again for your interest in this study and I look forward to connecting!

Appendix J - Informed Consent and Pre-Interview Survey

PROJECT TITLE: Exploring College Individuals Use of Sexually Explicit Fanfiction to Navigate a Hostile and Politically Charged Sociocultural Environment

PROJECT APPROVAL DATE/ EXPIRATION DATE: March 15, 2029

LENGTH OF STUDY: 10-minutes for pre-interview survey; 60-75 minutes for Zoom interview

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR/CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Dr. Kristin Anders

CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS: Jessica Henault, jhenault@ksu.edu; Kristin Anders, kanders8@ksu.edu, 785-532-5510

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION*: For the subject should he/she have questions or wish to discuss on any aspect of the research with an official of the university or the IRB. These are:* Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224, rubin@ksu.edu; Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224, comply@ksu.edu.

PROJECT SPONSOR: N/A

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

This study explores how individuals who are currently attending or have previously attended college experience engaging with sexually explicit fanfiction (fan-created stories that include intimate or erotic content based on existing fictional characters or worlds). The study seeks to understand what reading or writing these stories means to students, how their engagement may have changed over time, and whether broader social or political contexts influence these experiences.

Participants will complete a brief screening survey to determine eligibility. Eligible participants will complete a short demographic survey and participate in a 60–75 minute recorded Zoom interview. Interview questions will focus on experiences with sexually explicit fanfiction, motivations for engagement, and connections to identity, emotions, community, and well-being.

Participation involves minimal risk and is similar to everyday conversations about personal experiences. Participants may skip any question or stop participation at any time. Participants who complete all required components will receive $40 in compensation, with an additional $10 available for optional participation in a follow-up review process.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED: If you choose to take part in this study, you will complete a short 10-minute online survey that asks about your background and your experiences with sexually explicit fanfiction. After completing that survey, you will take part in a one-on-one interview with the researcher that will last about 60 to 75 minutes and will take place

on Zoom. During the Zoom interview, you will be asked questions about your experiences engaging with sexually explicit fanfiction, including when and how you began engaging with this content and how your engagement may have changed over time. Questions will also explore your personal motivations for engagement and personal meaning you derive from sexually explicit fanfiction. You may also be asked to reflect on emotional, cognitive, and bodily experiences during engagement, as well as perceived connections to coping, well-being, and sexuality.

The interview will be audio-recorded so the researcher can accurately capture what you share. This interview may also include video recording; however, you may keep your camera off if you prefer not to be recorded visually. You may skip any questions you do not want to answer and may stop participating at any time. If you complete the survey and the interview, you will receive $40 compensation for your time. You will also be invited to review the results of the study to see if it accurately captures your experience. Those that choose to review the results will receive an additional $10 in compensation.

ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES OR TREATMENTS, IF ANY, THAT MIGHT BE ADVANTAGEOUS TO SUBJECT: There are no alternative procedures or treatments for this research study. Participation is voluntary and choosing not to participate or to withdraw will not affect access to any services, resources, or support available to you. Individuals who do not wish to participate may choose not to take part without any penalty.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED: Some interview questions may feel personal or sensitive, particularly those related to sexually explicit content, identity, emotional experiences, or current social and political climates. Reflecting on these topics may cause temporary discomfort, stress, or emotional reactions. These risks are expected to be no greater than those experienced in everyday conversations about personal experiences. You are not required to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable, and you may skip questions or stop participating at any time without penalty. Support resources will be provided at the conclusion of the Zoom interview, and in a follow-up email in case you experience discomfort, and you are encouraged to reach out to trusted support systems or professional resources if needed. However, you may be removed from the study without your consent. These situations would be due to you not being honest about your identity (i.e. lying about not living in the United States or engaging with sexually explicit fanfiction).

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED: You may not experience direct personal benefits from taking part in this study. However, some participants may find value in reflecting on their experiences and sharing their perspectives in a confidential and supportive setting. If you complete the required study components, including the survey and interview, you will receive $40 in compensation for your time. Participants will also be invited to review the results of the study to see if it accurately captures your experience. Those that choose to review the results will receive an additional $10.00. The information gained from this research may also help researchers, educators, and support professionals better understand how individuals engage with sexually explicit fanfiction and may inform future research and support practices.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY: All electronic data, including survey responses and the separate survey collecting participants' names and email addresses for interview scheduling, will

be encrypted and secured on a password-protected computer. Contact information (names and email addresses) will be stored in a separate, password-protected file that is not linked to survey responses or interview transcripts. Email addresses will be used solely for scheduling and follow-up communication related to the interview. Once the interview has been completed and any necessary follow-up communication has concluded, identifiable email addresses will be permanently removed from the dataset and deleted from the contact file. At that point, interview data will be fully de-identified and maintained only under participant-selected pseudonyms. To further protect participant identity, pseudonyms will be utilized in place of real names.

At the end of the interview, participants will be invited to select a pseudonym of their choosing. Providing participants the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym supports autonomy and aligns with trauma-informed research practices. The selected pseudonym will be used in all transcripts, analytic documents, reports, presentations, and publications. During transcription, any accidental mention of a participant's legal name or other identifying information will be removed and replaced with the selected pseudonym. Any temporary document linking participants' real names to their selected pseudonyms will be stored separately in a password-protected file and will be deleted once transcription and any necessary follow-up communication are complete.

Any physical data forms will be shredded upon completion of this project. All reports will provide summary data to ensure that participants' identities cannot be discerned from the information provided. The information that will be collected as part of this research, **after being identified,** could be used for future research studies or distributed to other investigators for future research studies without additional informed consent. Last, all identifiable information will be destroyed five years after project completion.

IS COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS:
No

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I acknowledge that I have reviewed this form and understand this consent form and voluntarily agree to participate in this study under the terms described. By clicking "I consent" and "Next," I acknowledge that I have reviewed and agree to this consent form.

- o Yes, I consent (4)
- o No, I do not consent (5)

Q1 Please type your full name and email address (e.g., Jessica Henault, jhenault@ksu.edu)

Q2 What is your gender identity? Select all that apply.

- ☐ Cisgender woman (1)
- ☐ Cisgender man (2)
- ☐ Transgender woman (3)
- ☐ Transgender man (4)
- ☐ Non-binary (5)
- ☐ Agender (6)
- ☐ Genderfluid (7)
- ☐ Genderqueer (8)
- ☐ Two-spirit (9)
- ☐ Questioning (10)
- ☐ Prefer not to disclose (11)
- ☐ Additional: (12)

Q3 Describe your race/ethnicity. Select all that apply.

- ☐ Black/African American (1)
- ☐ White/Caucasian (2)
- ☐ Asian or Asian American (3)
- ☐ Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (4)
- ☐ Native American or Alaskan Native (5)
- ☐ Prefer not to disclose (6)
- ☐ Additional (7)

Q4 Do you identify as Latinx or Hispanic?

- o Yes (1)
- o No (2)
- o Prefer not to disclose (3)

Q5 What is your sexual orientation? Select all that apply.

- ☐ Heterosexual (1)
- ☐ Gay (2)
- ☐ Lesbian (3)
- ☐ Bisexual (4)
- ☐ Asexual (5)
- ☐ Pansexual (6)
- ☐ Queer (7)
- ☐ Questioning (8)
- ☐ Additional (9)
- ☐ Prefer not to disclose (10)

Q6 Which of the following best describes your college or university enrollment status?

- o Currently enrolled as an undergraduate student (full-time) (1)
- o Currently enrolled as an undergraduate student (part-time) (2)
- o Currently enrolled as a graduate/professional student (full-time) (3)
- o Currently enrolled as a graduate/professional student (part-time) (4)
- o Previously attended college or university but am not currently enrolled (5)
- o Other (6)
- o Prefer not to disclose (7)

Q7 Which region best represents where your college or university is/was located?

- o Northeast (1)
- o Midwest (2)
- o South (3)
- o West (4)
- o U.S. Territory (5)
- o Other (6)
- o Prefer not to disclose (7)

Q8 Please check all that apply to your college or university

- ☐ Public/non-profit/non-religious (1)
- ☐ Private/non-profit/religious (2)
- ☐ Private/for profit (3)
- ☐ Historically Black college or university (HBCU) (4)
- ☐ Minority-serving institution (5)
- ☐ Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) (6)
- ☐ Tribal college or university (TCU) (7)
- ☐ Additional (8)
- ☐ Unsure (9)
- ☐ Prefer not to disclose (10)

Q9 What degree are you currently pursuing or were most recently pursuing?

- o Bachelor's degree (1)
- o Master's degree (2)
- o Doctoral degree (3)
- o Professional degree (e.g., JD, MD) (4)
- o Certificate or other program (5)
- o Prefer not to disclose (6)

Q10 Which best describes your current or most recent stage in your program?

- o First year (1)
- o Second year (2)
- o Third year (3)
- o Fourth year (4)
- o Graduate or professional student (5)
- o Completed degree/program (6)
- o Withdrew or did not complete program (7)
- o Prefer not to disclose (8)

Q11 How long has it been since you were last enrolled in a college or university?

- o Currently enrolled (1)
- o Less than 1 year ago (2)
- o 1-2 years ago (3)
- o 3-5 years ago (4)
- o More than 5 years ago (5)
- o Prefer not to disclose (6)

For this study, we seek to understand your experiences engaging with sexually explicit fanfiction. Sexually explicit fanfiction refers to fan-created stories that include detailed or descriptive depictions of sexual acts, erotic situations, or sexual themes. These stories may explore intimacy, pleasure, fantasy desire, or relationships between fictional characters, celebrities, musicians / idols, cartoon / anime characters, or "self-insert" (reader) characters, among other dynamics. Sexually explicit fanfiction can range from romantic and sexual to explicitly erotic in nature. "Engagement" with sexually explicit fanfiction can include reading, writing, or participating in online fandom communities, interacting with creators, or participating in digital spaces organized around sexually explicit fanfiction.

Q12 How old were you (approximately) when you were first introduced to speculative sexually explicit fanfiction?

Q13 How do you engage with sexually explicit fanfiction? Select all that apply:

- ☐ I read sexually explicit fanfiction (1)
- ☐ I write sexually explicit fanfiction (2)
- ☐ I participate in fan communities to discuss content (3)
- ☐ Additional (4)

Q14 How long have you engaged with sexually explicit fanfiction?

- o Less than 1 year (1)
- o 1 - 2 years (2)
- o 3 - 5 years (3)
- o 6 - 10 years (4)
- o 10+ years (5)

Q15 How often do you currently engage with sexually explicit fanfiction?

- o Daily or almost daily (1)
- o Weekly (2)
- o Monthly (3)
- o A few times a year (4)
- o Prefer not to disclose (5)

Q16 On which platform(s) do you most often engage with sexually explicit fanfiction?

- ☐ Archive of Our Own (AO3) (1)
- ☐ Wattpad (2)
- ☐ Tumblr (3)
- ☐ X (formally Twitter) (4)
- ☐ Reddit (5)
- ☐ TikTok (6)
- ☐ Instagram (IG) (7)
- ☐ Threads (8)
- ☐ Fanfiction.net (9)
- ☐ Discord (10)
- ☐ Google Docs or shared documents (11)
- ☐ Private or invitation-only servers/spaces (e.g., Patron) (12)
- ☐ Additional (13)
- ☐ Prefer not to disclose (14)

Q17 When engaging with sexually explicit fanfiction, what do you most often focus on? Select all that apply:

- ☐ Specific fandoms or media (e.g., TV shows, books, movies) (1)
- ☐ Celebrity or idol-based fanfiction (e.g., K-pop idols, musicians, actors, influencers) (2)
- ☐ Specific pairings or 'ships' between characters (3)
- ☐ Original characters within fan universes (4)
- ☐ Additional: (5)
- ☐ I don't keep track or gravitate towards specific things (6)
- ☐ Prefer not to disclose (7)

Display this question:

If When engaging with sexually explicit fanfiction, what do you most often focus on? Sel... = Specific fandoms or media (e.g., TV shows, books, movies)

Or When engaging with sexually explicit fanfiction, what do you most often focus on? Sel... = Celebrity or idol-based fanfiction (e.g., K-pop idols, musicians, actors, influencers)

Or When engaging with sexually explicit fanfiction, what do you most often focus on? Sel... = Specific pairings or 'ships' between characters

Or When engaging with sexually explicit fanfiction, what do you most often focus on? Sel... = Original characters within fan universes

Or When engaging with sexually explicit fanfiction, what do you most often focus on? Sel... = Additional:

Q18 Please use the space below to share in more detail which fandoms, characters, pairings, or creators you most engage with, and any recurring themes or story tropes you are drawn to.

Display this question:

If How do you engage with sexually explicit fanfiction? Select all that apply: = I read speculative sexually explicit fanfiction

Q19 When you read sexually explicit fanfiction, how do you most often imagine or position yourself within the story? Select all that apply:

- ▢ I imagine myself directly in the story as a self-insert or 'y/n' reader character (1)
- ▢ I imagine myself as one of the story's main characters (2)
- ▢ I imagine myself as a new or original character interacting with the main characters (3)
- ▢ I experience the story from an observer or third-part perspective (not as a participant) (4)
- ▢ Additional (5)
- ▢ Prefer not to disclose (6)

Display this question:

If How do you engage with sexually explicit fanfiction? Select all that apply: = I write speculative sexually explicit fanfiction

Q20 When you write sexually explicit fanfiction, how do you often imagine or position yourself within the story? Select all that apply:

- ▢ I imagine myself directly in the story as a self-insert or 'y/n' reader character (1)
- ▢ I imagine myself as one of the story's main characters (2)
- ▢ I imagine myself as a new or original character interacting with the main character (3)
- ▢ I experience the story from an observer or third-party perspective (not as a participant) (4)
- ▢ Additional (5)
- ▢ Prefer not to disclose (6)

Interviews for this study will take place via Zoom. Accommodations can include, but are not limited to, options like closed captions, breaks, flexible scheduling, or using chat instead of audio for parts of the interview. You do not need to share any medical or personal details, just what would help you feel comfortable participating.

Q21 Would you like any accommodations or support to participate comfortably in an online interview?

- o No, I do not need or want any accommodations (1)
- o Yes, I may need accommodations or support (2)
- o I am not sure, but I would like to discuss this with the researcher (3)
- o Prefer not to disclose (4)

Display this question:

If Would you like any accommodations or support to participate comfortably in an online interview? = Yes, I may need accommodations or support

Or Would you like any accommodations or support to participate comfortably in an online interview? = I am not sure, but I would like to discuss this with the researcher

Q22 Please describe any accommodations or supports that would help you participate comfortably (e.g., captions, breaks, flexible scheduling)

Q23 Thank you for your time and for contributing to this research. Your insights and participation are deeply valued. Is there anything else you would like the research team to know about your participation in this study?

Appendix K - Interview Protocol and Questions

Greetings NAME: Thank you so much for meeting with me today. As you know, my name is Jessica and I am a PhD candidate at Kansas State University studying Prevention Sciences in Human Development and Family Sciences. I appreciate your willingness to share your experiences and perspectives for this study. This study explores how college students describe their experiences engaging with sexually explicit fanfiction, and whether its meaning or function has shifted over time. I'm interested in learning about your experiences in your own words, and there are no right or wrong answers. Before we start, I want to remind you that you have already reviewed and signed the consent form, but please let me know if you have any questions before we begin. I'll be recording the interview so that I can accurately capture what you share. Everything you share today will be kept confidential.

Your name and institutional email will not appear in any reports, publications, or presentations; your responses will be de-identified; and nicknames will be used for any quotes. It is my hope that this will feel like a conversation; I'll ask open-ended questions and you're welcome to take your time, reflect, or share stories that feel meaningful to you. You may skip any question, ask for a break, or stop the interview entirely at any time. Your comfort is my priority, so if you need to pause, please let me know. Do you still consent to proceeding forward with this interview and it being recorded?

****IF YES: Begin recording to CLOUD*****

Before this interview, you completed a brief survey that asked about your demographic information, your institution, and your engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction. I'll use that information to help guide our conversation. Before we move forward, is there anything from the survey that you'd like to clarify, change, or feel needs more context? **[pause for participant**

response and take notes if necessary]. Okay, we'll go ahead and get started. As a reminder, sexually explicit fanfiction refers to fan-created stories that include detailed or descriptive depictions of sexual relationships between fictional characters. These stories may explore intimacy, pleasure, fantasy desire, or relationships between pairings and characters and the self-insert reader, and this can range from romantic and sexual to explicitly erotic in nature.

1. Tell me about your experience engaging with sexually explicit fanfiction. You mentioned being introduced to sexually explicit fanfiction at X years old. What was that discovery like for you? What were your first reactions to discovering sexually explicit fanfiction?
2. When did you start writing sexually explicit fanfiction / have you shared it with others?
3. What draws you to or sparks your interest in sexually explicit fanfiction?
4. Follow up question: What aspects of sexually explicit fanfiction do you find especially appealing or unappealing?
5. How, if at all, do aspects of your identity or personal experiences shape the kinds of stories you're drawn to?
6. What does engaging with sexually explicit fanfiction mean to you, if anything?
7. How do the stories or fandoms you engage with connect, if at all, to your own life or sense of self?
8. When you're reading and / or writing sexually explicit fanfiction, what kinds of emotions tend to come up for you?
9. Can you think of a time when engaging with a particular story had a noticeable impact on you? What about the story made it impactful?
10. How has your engagement with sexually explicit fanfiction changed at different points in your life, if at all?

11. What has your experience with fandom communities been like?
12. What role, if any, have fandom communities played during difficult times in your life?
    a. Can you tell me more about what support from other fans looks like for you in those spaces?
    b. How would you describe the kind of support or connection you experience with other fans in digital spaces?
    c. What do you tend to get out of engaging with fandom communities, if anything?
13. In your own words, how would you describe the current sociopolitical climate in the United States?
14. In what ways, if any, do laws, policies, or political conversations feel personally relevant to you?
15. What kinds of connections, if any, have you observed between fanfiction communities and social or political issues?
16. How do you feel when you see social or political issues show up in fanfiction spaces or stories?
17. How are social or political topics typically discussed or handled within the communities you're part of?
18. What do you wish more people who don't read or write sexually explicit fanfiction understood about it?
    a. What do you wish the public knew about fans who read and write sexually explicit fanfiction?
    b. What advice would you offer to someone who is interested in engaging with sexually explicit fanfiction but still feels hesitant or uncertain about it?

19. Is there anything I haven't asked you that feels important to your experience?

Thank you so much for taking the time to share your experiences with me today. Your openness and insights are truly invaluable. Within the next 24-hours, I'll send you a follow-up email with the next steps, including how you will receive your $40.00 compensation for your time. There will be three options to receive your payment. I also recognize that some of these questions may have been triggering. Therefore, I will include a list of national free support resources in the chat shortly. I will also include them in the follow-up email. You are also encouraged to reach out to confidential resources available at your own college or university, which may include counseling or mental health services, campus sexual assault or survivor advocacy centers, Title IX or sexual misconduct support offices, and/or campus health centers.

You have the option to choose a pseudonym for your confidentiality. An example if I were choosing one would be Future Dr. Smut. Would you like to choose one, or have the research team create one for you? **(WRITE DOWN NAME IF CHOSEN)**. Additionally, do you have a preference of the pronouns we use when referencing your pseudonym? **(WRITE DOWN IF SO).** Once the preliminary results of this study have concluded, you will be given the opportunity to review a short summary and provide feedback. You will have one week to participate in this process. It is not required to participate in this process, but if you choose to do so, you will receive an additional $10.00 for your participation. I'm going to put the resources in the chat that I mentioned, earlier. Do you have any final questions or things I can clarify? Thank you again and I look forward to being in touch with you shortly.

Resources to put in chat:

The Trevor Project

- Call 866-488-7386

- Text START to 678678

Trans Lifeline

- Call 877-565-8860
- Website: https://translifeline.org/

Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN):

- 24/7 Confidential hotline: 800-656-HOPE (4673)
- Online chat: rainn.org

Appendix L - Study Two Participant Quotes

Theme *Sub-theme*	Quotes
Learning, Growing, and Becoming Through Sexually Explicit Fanfiction	
Learning Beyond Formal Education	"I have not been in a romantic or sexual relationship with anybody else. So this [sexually explicit fanfiction] is kind of my safe outlet to learn more about myself, and kind of explore what I want, what I like, and what I don't like in a very safe and controlled manner." (Barbie)
	"Fanfiction gives me an opportunity to learn new things, about like, sex. And it feels like a place where I'm able to be very safe in myself." (Fol)
	"The character was having a conversation about having sex as a person in a wheelchair, and what that's like. And so it was interesting to step out of this funny fanfiction to have a real conversation about people with disabilities having sex." (Luna)
	"Not everything you read in a fic is realistic in terms of sex…and that's okay, because I know that! Just don't use that as the marker for what sex is." (Yena)
	"It's a good exercise for me to read things that are out of my perception of what sex and sexuality could look like." (Palm Tree)
Identity Exploration and Affirmation	"A lot of personal exploration can happen there [fanfiction] with imagination and stuff you might not even know about, but you can kind of engage in the content, and that feels very safe because it's not real and I don't have to talk to anybody about it…There's no real interaction involved. It can be entirely contained." (Yellow)
	"As a gay member of the community, I want to integrate that aspect of my life into those stories." (Brand27)
	"My own journey with sex and sexuality used to be a place of shame. I like reading about characters who masturbate because I don't actually

	have to do anything. It's fun. It's a sexual experience I don't have to physically engage in and that's affirming." (Luna)
	"I'm a research scientist. I want to see powerful women in the same field as me who takes no shit and has good sex." (Nikki)
Engagement as a Developmental Journey	"It [gay fanfiction] was my first introduction, or my way to be part of the queer community in a way, so it was impactful for me to find my own identity of being genderqueer, of being a lesbian, all these different thing. I shifted into reading more gay pairings because that was what I was connecting with and what I wanted to see more of in the world." (Jo)
	"This is something I can take ownership of, and something that I'm not dependent upon someone else to do it…I can decide to engage with it or not." (Nikki)
	"I came across fanfiction by accident…I naturally gravitated towards stories that were exploring more romantic and mature relationships." (Brand27)
	"I felt this deep shame when I started actively seeking it out…I don't feel that same level of shame that I did when I was younger." (Yena)
Negotiating Community, Representation, and Belonging	
Community as Connection and Belonging	"I understand why writers half-joke they appreciate every single kudo. I never understood just how much they meant until I started appreciating it. It feels like a validation of your life because no matter what you're writing, you're putting a piece of your soul into that writing." (The Supreme)
	"Good for having interesting conversations and bond and connect more about a shared interest. We're able to make connections through personal experiences with stories." (Fol)
	"People will create sub-communities where we connect away from the initial space to have more honest conversations and learn from each other. For me, I am so interested in being a learner…and politics and activism

	are so important to me and I recognize I have blind spots, so having people who are willing to take the time to correct me or have conversations has been a beautiful result of these fan spaces. (Yena)
Representation as Recognition	"It's freedom, especially fanfiction that's erotic. I can write whatever I want…Sex is a subject people don't talk about, especially as a woman…reading sexually explicit fanfiction is a wonderful opportunity to take back a lot of power that is so easily stripped from women, LGBT+ people, and anyone who's like, chronically disempowered." (Padme)
	"I'm not necessarily interested in a woman becoming wet in .2 seconds…Smut and female erotica is empowering for women to not have to see themselves that way." (Nikki)
	"I'm discovering my own transness, like, seeing that on page." (Yena)
	"It's so engaging, you become almost obsessed with it, it can become a part of you. Because I'm reading little things that could be like me." (Brand27)
	"It has to be extremely ambiguous or be written with the title of plus size reader or brown reader." (Luna)
Negotiating Community Boundaries	"I don't engage as much in some of the other community tags because I feel like there's a lot of trauma in some of the other [fandoms]…so I avoid those tags." (Palm Tree)
	"I am usually a passive observer in fandoms…I do not engage in fandom. Again, it's [sexually explicit fanfiction] very safe in my head, and on the internet, where I don't have to interact with real people about it if I don't want to." (Yellow)
	"I never really found community or safety and solace in fandom. In online spaces, I didn't feel safe or included. And in real spaces, I didn't feel that same way. Fandom has been a really solitary experience for me, for various reasons. I see that it's important for others, and I acknowledge that it's important for others, but it's never served me." (Luna)
	"I am so liberal with the block button. I block anybody that I find mildly annoying. I curate my online spaces to be a place that I want it to be." (The Supreme)

	"There are some fandoms that are really good to each other, and really work on building each other up. And there are time where I don't necessarily like something, but I know how to maintain my own safety or well-being on the internet, so I'm just not going to engage, and that's okay." (Barbie)
Imagining Possibilities Within Hostile Sociopolitical Contexts	
Sexually Explicit Fanfiction as Everyday Resistance	"This is a way I'm getting my anger out." (Barbie) "I can understand sexual feelings and horniness and engaging with whatever level of understanding of pleasure I want when reading. That representation, a female embracing her own pleasure, is like, almost, resistance to 'the man' in a way." (Nikki) "I didn't really think about it being political before this interview. I guess it can, in it's own way? But that's not why I engage with the content." (Yellow) "The queer community is being targeted and [attacked], so just solely writing and contributing to queer spaces is a form of political action itself." (Jo) "There is no art that exists that does not come from a political background that in some way informs what is being written. Because we all live in a political society. Art is political, and fanfiction is art." (The Supreme) "What people usually discuss is just the shows, we don't care about anything else." (Brand27) "I haven't really seen anything too political, maybe there's a buildup of tension in an enemy storyline, but I don't know if that relates to politics." (Fol)
Imagining Alternative Futures	"When I was in my teen years, I really wanted to be in a relationships with this girl. But I couldn't because my dad said if they ever four out I had sex, or that I don't eventually want to get married to a man, they would love me across states. So, reading [gay fanfiction] is the biggest

form of protest, because I'm reading about a life where [queer] people are happy." (Padme)

"I enjoy fantasies about a world where homophobia and transphobia don't exist, and I enjoy fantasies of reassurance." (The Supreme)

"Smut is political. If people are engaging in romance and sex, because of the ways in which our bodies are politicized, it is inherently political…I tend to pick a lot of stories where consent is so glaringly obvious…They're like 'can I touch you?' and I'm like 'hot!'…To me, consent is sexy and also a political statement, to say that every single point in the process, consent is being asked for." (Yena)