Fanfic! in the Library: What Can be Learnt from How Readers Search for Fics?

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Introduction

This research was conducted as part of a postgraduate dissertation with a focus on how fanfiction readers search for fanfiction online and whether any learning could be taken and applied to public library services. The landscape of online fandom is vast, with fans producing massive amounts of content, from fanart to fanvids to fanfiction. One of the largest online repositories of online fanfiction is Archive of Our Own (AO3), which alone hosts over 11 million works (Scribner and Glasser, 2023) and is continuously growing. While previous research has explored the structure and functionality of AO3 (Dalton, 2012; Fiesler et al., 2016; Hill and Pecoskie, 2017), this research looks at the way users search for fics; more specifically, the language used by fans when discussing, describing and searching for fanfiction, referred to here as fanfiction-specific language (FSL). FSL forms a major part of how fanfiction readers and writers categorise and find fanfiction, often through the use of user-generated tags (Price and Robinson, 2021). The language associated with fanfiction can be incredibly specific and is created and developed by the community. This research seeks to explore whether FSL could be incorporated into public library catalogues to encourage more use by fanfiction readers.

The rationale for this research is drawn from personal experience and an identified research gap. The researcher has been immersed within online fanfiction spaces for well over a decade, forming a curiosity around how readers learn and use FSL when searching. FSL has already begun to expand out of fanfiction spaces, sometimes being used within bookshops or by self-published authors to describe their work. This has interesting implications for how FSL could be further used in literary spaces, including within public libraries.

Aim

The aim of this research is to explore how fanfiction readers learn and engage with fanfiction-specific language (FSL). Additionally, the research aims to explore if fanfiction readers would find it helpful if FSL was incorporated into public library settings, specifically into library catalogues. Two research questions were developed to meet this aim:

> Q1. How do fanfiction readers learn, use, and interact with fanfiction-specific language?
>
> Q2. To what extent, if at all, would incorporating fanfiction-specific language into library catalogues encourage fanfiction readers to engage more with library services?

The first research question is essential – in order to determine whether FSL would be useful in a library setting, it would first be important to establish whether or not FSL is widely understood by the community it serves.

Research Design
A mixed-methods approach was taken – 46 participants were surveyed using a questionnaire with 6 voluntary follow-up interviews. The questionnaire sought to identify the respondents' fanfiction reading habit and library use, and to assess how well they understood FSL terms. This was accomplished through a short word definition exercise, in which respondents were given 6 FSL terms that were all chosen from AO3's 'popular tags' word cloud (see Figure 1). Respondents were asked first if they were familiar with the term and then to provide a definition.

Figure 1: Screenshot of the tag cloud on AO3 showing the 'most popular' tags. (Archive of Our Own, no date)

The interviews went into further detail of participants' relationships with fanfiction and FSL, and their opinions on incorporating FSL into public libraries. In the interviews, participants were also asked to describe how they would discover the meaning of a new FSL term they weren't previously familiar with. The interview structure was chosen to reflect that of the questionnaire and on average lasted 40 minutes. Both the questionnaire and interview data were analysed using descriptive statistics and coded following the constant comparative analysis process.

Key Findings
The key findings of this study have been split into four categories: fanfiction readership, FSL and searching, library use and need, and fanfiction in the library.

Fanfiction Readership
All respondents were aged 18-54, with the length of readership correlating slightly with age – older respondents had been reading fanfiction for longer. Overall, however, most respondents (67.4%) had been reading fanfiction for 10+ years, followed by 6-10 years (17.4%). Respondents were also largely frequent readers,

with 60.9% reading multiple times a week, followed by 23.9% who read every day. This means that the sample population for this study is largely made up of long-time, frequent fanfiction readers, and does not represent newer readers to the same extent.

Almost all respondents (97.3%) source their fanfiction online through websites such as AO3. Additionally, a majority (93.5%) reported that they found it easy to some extent to find the fanfiction they want from those sources. Only 1 respondent reported that it was difficult to find fanfiction from their chosen sources, and this respondent had been reading fanfic for less than a year. However, ease of searching did not generally correlate with length of readership - the 1 other respondent who had been reading for less than a year found it easy to search for fanfic.

The interview participants also fell into the demographic of longtime readers, and many described their relationship with fanfiction as fluctuating throughout their lives. Participants reported being heavily invested in fanfiction and online fandom in their teenage years, then drifting away from it as young adults, before returning to it later in life. This is somewhat reflected in the questionnaire results – frequency of readership was consistent across age groups, with the exception of 25 to 34 year olds.

FSL and Searching
Almost all respondents (97.8%) reported that they use fanfiction-specific language (FSL) to some extent when they search, with a majority of those (93.5%) answering that FSL made searching easier. The interview participants reflected this, speaking positively on the ability to use FSL to find hyper-specific types of fanfiction. This is self-reported, but the results of the word definition exercise in the questionnaire would indicate that the respondents knew and understood commonly used FSL terms. Most respondents answered that they were familiar with most of the terms selected (see Figure 2).
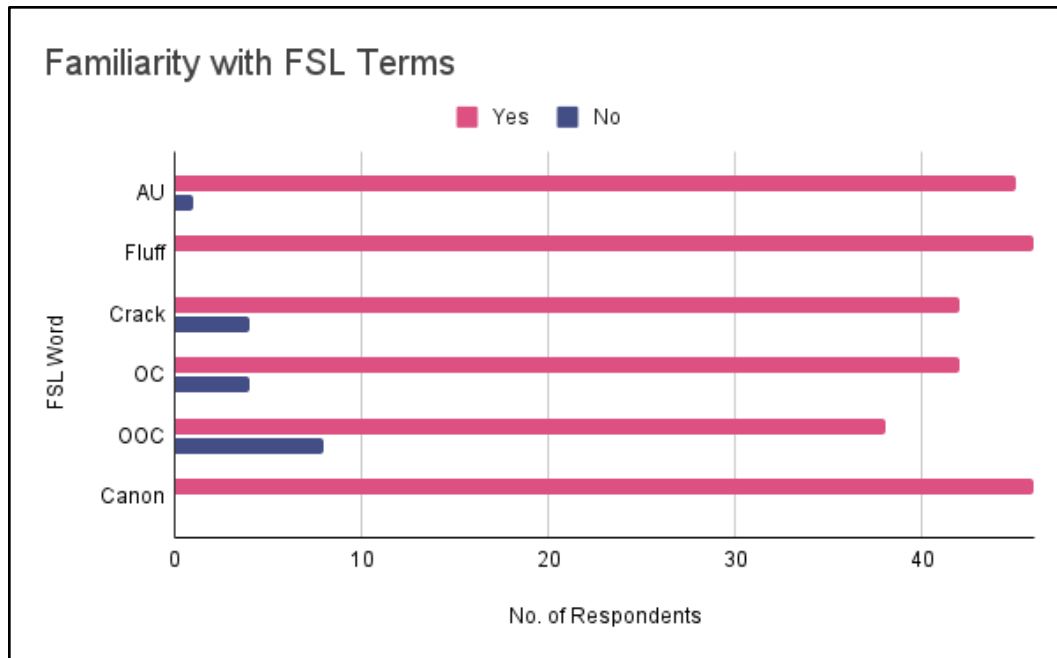
Figure 2: A graph showing whether respondents are/are not familiar with FSL words/terms.

The acronyms OC (original character) and OOC (out of character) proved to be the most difficult, potentially due to their similarity. One respondent gave a definition of OOC as "original own character", which is technically correct as this phrasing has been more commonly used in the past. Some respondents gave definitions for 'fluff' (a low-stakes, lighthearted, often romantic fanfic) and 'crack' (a satirical or silly fanfic) that were non-fanfiction definitions of the word (e.g. fluff as in fluffy texture). This highlights one issue with FSL – some of the terms associated with fanfiction have other meanings in everyday speech, which may make it more difficult to understand.

During the interviews, participants were asked to describe how they would discover the meaning of a FSL term they were unfamiliar with. The three main methods identified were: figuring it out, looking it up, and asking the community. Out of those three, 'figuring it out' was the preferred method of participants, who used context and their own knowledge to determine what a new FSL term means – often, being able to do so was a point of pride for them. This was followed by 'looking it up', either on a generic search engine or on a more specific website like Urban Dictionary. Finally, some participants said that they would turn to others if they were really stuck, either asking friends or fellow fans in an online community. Alternatively, some participants were adamant about not asking others for help, finding that concept uncomfortable.

Library Use and Need

Of the questionnaire respondents, 60.9% use or had used a public library service, largely to check out books, e-books or audiobooks, or to attend events. Library use was largely infrequent, with 43.8% using one less than once a month. Of those that do use public libraries, 75.1% found it easy to find what they want from the library, and 71.4% found library catalogues easy to search. While this is less than the amount who find fanfiction easy to search for, it's still a majority. However, opinions about library catalogues were varied. Some found them easy to search only for specific titles but difficult to browse, while others reported that they were generally unintuitive to use.

Of the interview participants, 3 were library users and 3 were non-users, although the non-users still expressed an understanding of what public library services can offer. Participants' feelings towards public libraries depended on external factors such as location and the quality of their local library offerings. Opinions on library catalogues reflected those from the questionnaire results, with some participants expressing that online catalogues did not seem to be made with the end-user in mind, instead being designed more so for librarians to use.

Fanfiction in the Library

Questionnaire respondents were asked if they would find it useful if fanfiction terminology was incorporated into public library catalogues, with 71.4% answering that they would to some extent. With a majority of respondents seemingly having an understanding of FSL terms, and expressing frustration with searching library catalogues, it would be logical to assume that incorporating FSL into library catalogues would be helpful. However, this opinion was not reflected at all by interview participants. Participants expressed a discomfort with the concept, with fanfiction being perceived as a private activity, while the library is a public space. Participants also were concerned around the sincerity of FSL use – with the worry that often fandom terms are used outside of fandom spaces to poke fun at fans.

Most importantly, however, participants expressed worry over how incorporating FSL into the library would impact other users. While they would understand the meanings of these terms, there was concern around it putting off other library users who weren't familiar with fanfiction. Participants did feel positively towards the use of trigger/content warnings, and largely advocated for more use of these in libraries. One participant pointed out that this could then be used for censorship – making some types of work easier to find would make them easier to ban or remove.

While participants didn't feel that FSL would be particularly useful in a library setting, they instead expressed that the functionality of websites like AO3

could be utilised instead. Specifically, participants suggested that having more filtering options would allow them to browse specific types of works, as opposed to searching for specific titles, by combining or layering filters. For example, LGBTQ+ media is often placed in a LGBTQ+ category, which would make it difficult for a library user who wants to find works of a specific subgenre that also features LGBTQ+ characters. Participants suggested that better filtering could be achieved through moderated user-generated tagging, allowing users to 'tag' works in their own words. The benefit of providing more advanced search options is that while it becomes available for those who want it, it does not intrude on those who do not want to use it, so it doesn't itself become a barrier.

Overall, participants felt that library catalogues could be more intuitive, reflecting the types of websites library users are already familiar with. This would indicate that better user-centric design is required when designing library catalogues.

Conclusion

The participants of this study seemed to actively think about their search skills and strategies, as well as the strategies of others. The sample population largely consisted of long-time, frequent fanfiction readers, who were generally familiar with, understood, and used fanfiction-specific language (FSL) when searching. When asked if introducing FSL into library catalogues would be helpful, respondents to the questionnaire generally felt it would, while interview participants were more critical of the concept. There was concern around FSL as a potential barrier, that not only can it be a barrier to those new to fanfiction, but it could also deter other library users that are unfamiliar with fanfiction. Instead, participants felt various fanfiction search functions could be introduced to library catalogues to create a more intuitive, nuanced search. Fanfiction websites such as AO3 succeed because they are community-built and user-focused, the community's own language and practices embedded within it. Participants felt that library catalogues could benefit from a similar approach to allow users to search in a way that is more intuitive.

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