

**“SHE’S STRAIGHT, YOU DELUSIONAL CUNT!”**  
**A Study on Bullying and Homophobia in Online Fandoms**

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Tämä kandidaatintutkielma käsittelee seksuaalisten vähemmistöjen syrjintää ja nettikiusaamisen esiintymistä internet-faniyhteisöissä. Edelliset tutkimukset kertovat nettikiusaamisen olevan haitallista ja vaikuttavan uhrien mielenterveyteen – usein jopa enemmän kuin kasvotusten tapahtuva kiusaaminen.</p> <p>Tutkielmaa varten tehty nettikysely suunnattiin “femslash”-faniryhmille. Näiden ryhmien median kulutukseen kuuluvat esimerkiksi tv-ohjelmien naishahmojen väliset (romanttiset) suhteet ja näistä suhteista puhuminen sekä eri materiaalien (kuten kuvien, videoiden ja fanifiktio) luominen ryhmien henkilöiden kesken. Kyselyn perusteella oli tarkoitus saada selville, miten yleistä näiden ryhmien kokema kiusaaminen ja homofobia on ja onko faniryhmään kuuluminen auttanut heitä seksuaalisen suuntautumisen ymmärtämisessä. Kysely oli yhdistelmä kvalitatiivista ja kvantitatiivista tutkimusta, sillä se sisälsi sekä monivalinta- että avoimia kysymyksiä. Tutkimuksen painotus oli kuitenkin tutkimuskysymyksen takia kvalitatiivinen. Vastausten, joita oli lopulta 2 286, analyysin tavoitteena on tuoda lisää tietoutta queer-(fani)yhteisöjen kokemasta nettikiusaamisesta, joka on selvästi nähtävissä kyselyn tuloksissa. Vaikka kaikkia ei kiusata henkilökohtaisesti, on hyökkäyksiä monia, ja ne vaihtelevat tappouhkauksista uhrin vähättelyyn.</p> <p>Tämä tutkielma sivuaa myös queer-identiteetin muodostusta tv-ohjelmien ja internet-faniyhteisöjen avulla. Aiempien tutkimusten perusteella tv-ohjelmilla ja jaetulla katselukokemuksella on usein suuri merkitys queer-identiteetin muodostamisessa. Tämä näkyi kyselyn vastauksissa, sillä 91% vastaajista oli sitä mieltä, että heidän faniyhteisönsä oli auttanut heitä eri seksuaalisuuksien ymmärtämisessä.</p>	
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to examine how people in majorly queer and female fan bases experience cyberbullying. The more common name for fan bases is fandoms, which is defined as communities of practice that share e.g. certain views, values, and ways of talking and doing things (Eckert, 2006: 683). One key element of fandom discourse is discussing relationships between characters, which means people belonging to sexual (and gender) minorities can have a different reading than heterosexual readers (Collier et. al, 2009: 584) who are often seen as the dominant and ideal part of a fandom (Hills, 1999: 67, as cited by Hanmer, 2003: 82). Since earlier research suggests that people supporting opposing relationships of fictional characters have been hostile towards one another due to differing sexualities (Pullen, 2000: 57), the aim of this study is to find out how prominent hate talk towards queer fandoms that support relationships between female characters is and how the members of these fandoms experience it.

This study is important because fandoms are a place where a lot of queer youth find their first safe place to come out to others and find other queer friends. People, especially adolescents, spend twice as much time online than ten years ago (Anderson, 2015). Since spending time online has a connection to the odds of being cyberbullied (Rice et al., 2015), experiencing constant or even occasional bullying can be extremely harmful to youth that is already struggling with many real life issues.

Since hate talk towards sexual and gender minorities of all ages is constant on the internet (NoHomophobes.com, 2016), people in online fandoms are bullied for things such as supporting a same-sex pairing. In fans' own terminology, supporting a pairing is called "shipping," and it is very common from television show and other fiction-based fandoms to real life person fandoms (e.g. pop band fandoms).

In femslash fandoms' (fandoms that ship two – or more – women) case, the issue is often hate talk directed at femslash shippers by heterosexual fans. Femslash shippers receive both anonymous and recognizable hate messages that vary from small attacks to orders to kill oneself.

One could argue that this is only due to the devotion to one's ship, but homophobic slurs and immense hate towards real living people reveal that the problem is rooted much deeper than that.

Hate talk runs rampant online because often there is no one to police fans who attack other people. Since femslash fandoms (from *Xena* and *Buffy* to *The 100*, *Once Upon a Time*, and several other television shows) have been growing since the 90s, it is important to acknowledge how many people still get bullied for being a fan of a femslash pairing (as opposed to a male/female pairing or even a male/male pairing).

This thesis reports of the findings of a survey that was directed at femslash shippers. The survey posted on different social media sites included different questions on people's experiences on bullying. The respondents were asked if they had been personally attacked or if they had seen other people get attacked and how often this happened. Everyone who felt like a part of a femslash fandom was encouraged to answer, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation. Examining the results of the survey should offer some insight into the cyberbullying experiences of femslash fandoms.

### **1.1 Researcher's position**

Due to the controversial nature of this topic, it is necessary to briefly describe the researcher's personal position in the fandom scene.

I am a queer woman who spends relatively much time online and interacts with femslash fandoms several times a week, and I have noticed people get called names and are e.g. told to kill themselves for shipping same-sex pairings quite often. When I started to search for studies on fandoms, I could not find many studies conducted on femslash fandoms or homophobia in fandom environments. This is one of the reasons why it is important to shed some light into the experiences of people who get bullied online, especially because online platforms have lately become linked and more inclusive, so people interact more with fandom friends (and foes).

Since I wanted to avoid being biased as much as I could, I chose to study femslash fandoms in general instead of picking just certain shows and pairings I am affiliated with. I still hope that my

emic knowledge on fandom environments will help the reader become familiar with the topic this thesis concerns.

## 1.2 Glossary

### Fandom

A community of practice (Eckert, 2006: 683) whose members are fans of e.g. movies, celebrities, and bands. These fans have their own shared interests and pastimes related to e.g. a cinematic universe or a game.

### Femslash fandom

Femslash fans are fans of different types of media, e.g. television shows, movies, and books, who support a romantic relationship between two (or occasionally more) women.

### LGBTQIA+

People who are lesbian, gay, bisexual(/romantic), transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual/aromantic or from another sexual and/or gender minority. A more inclusive abbreviation than LGBT.

### Queer

The word “queer” in this study is used as a reclaimed umbrella term to refer to sexual and gender minorities. This has become widely popular in academic studies (most noticeably in queer theory; see e.g. Milani, 2014: 206-207), press, and the LGBTQIA+ community alike. It is often used when wanting to refer to the wide range of sexual and gender minorities more inclusively instead of only gay and lesbian people. Moreover, according to Milani, queer is also understood as the “skeptical stance against identity formations” (2013: 209).

### Queerbaiting

Producers teasing same-sex relationships on and off a show (so a queer fanbase would keep watching the show) but not giving any actual representation (Romano, 2014).

## 2. BACKGROUND

This section consists of two parts: one about bullying and the other one about femslash fandoms. The first half shall introduce what has already been found out about bullying among teenagers in both school and online environments. The second half should familiarize the reader with queer fanbases with the help of studies regarding femslash fandoms and an article about queerbaiting that featured several slash (male/male) fandoms and one femslash fandom.

## 2.1 Queer bullying

Cyberbullying is defined as “the willful and repeated harm inflicted [on another] through the use of computers, cell phones, or other electronic devices.” Bullying itself is violent behavior that involves different repetitive harmful actions, the goal of which is to harm the victim (Rice et al., 2015: 66-67).

Bullying causes people to feel unsafe. According to Peter and Taylor, over 60 per cent of lesbians, bisexual females, and transgender students felt unsafe at school because of bullying (the numbers were not quite as high when it came to sexual minority cisgender male students) (2013: 24). The same study shows that both homophobic and gendered language are frequent and slurs are used on a daily basis in high school settings. Queer students are twice as likely to end up verbally harassed as straight cisgender students (2013: 23), which evidently means homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia are constantly present among teenagers and have a huge impact on the victims’ well-being.

There is a connection between bullying and factors such as gender, sexual identity, and frequent internet usage and texting (Rice et al., 2015: 68). When Rice et al. studied the cyberbullying perpetration and victimization of the students of a Californian middle school, they found out that one third of the LGBQ+<sup>1</sup> students of the study had experienced some sort of cyberbullying during the previous year and they were 4.6 times more likely to be cyberbullied (2015: 70). In addition to this, over half of sexual minority middle and high school students in the USA report being a cyberbully victim, and one fifth of these victims are bullied frequently (Rice et al., 2015: 66).

Bullying has effects on a person's mental health (Peter & Taylor, 2013; Rice et al., 2015). According to the study by Rice et al., online bullying can cause depression and suicidal ideation more easily than offline bullying. They also point out that bullying can result in lower self-esteem and depressive symptoms (2015: 66).

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<sup>1</sup> Transgender students could not be included in the analysis, so the results regard only lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (as sexual orientation) students.

The study by Rice et al. suggests that online bullying is more frequent among females than males (2015: 66), which is something I expect to find out when examining the answers of my survey. Due to my frequent interactions with femslash fandoms, I have noticed that both the victims and the perpetrators in fandoms are mainly female (in most cases straight cisgender females seem to bully queer females and non-binary people). Sadly, it would be nigh impossible to get the online bullying perpetrators of fandoms to answer a survey truthfully, so the survey made for this thesis was directed solely at the victims.

The fact that both of these studies show that there is a connection between factors such as a person's gender and sexual orientation and becoming a victim of bullying suggests that queer youth (and possibly older LGBTQIA+ people) that spend a lot of time online are very likely to end up verbally harassed. One of the purposes of this thesis is finding out if people in femslash fandoms feel this way.

Rice et al. also bring up anonymity. Since cyberbullying can be carried out anonymously and it is not constrained by interpersonal interaction, it can be more subtle but also more harmful than traditional bullying (2015: 66). Hence, the respondents of the femslash survey were asked if they had been harassed anonymously or if they were aware of who the verbal attacker was.

I am using a survey to conduct this study, and I expect to find answers that are at least somewhat similar to the ones Peter and Taylor and Rice et al. received.

## **2.2 Femslash fandoms**

As mentioned earlier, fandoms are communities of practice that share e.g. certain views, values, and ways of communicating and acting (Eckert, 2006: 683). Femslash fandoms are fan groups of different types of media, e.g. television shows, movies, and books, who support a romantic relationship between two (or occasionally more) women. This relationship is often a notable part of the viewing experience shared with other fans (Hanmer, 2003; Collier et al., 2009) and femslashers create and share different types of fanworks in the celebration of these pairings.

It should be pointed out that the term femslash is used in its loose definition throughout this study. Femslash is sometimes used to refer to pairings of women that are straight in the original



work, but by now it has become an umbrella term of sorts to refer to all female/female pairings, no matter if they are actually romantically involved in the original work of fiction.

It is often argued that the heterosexual part of a fandom is seen as the ideal and dominant part of it (Hills, 1999: 67, as cited by Hanmer, 2003: 82). It is certain that it can still be seen as the ideal part when it comes to many shows – the treatment of queer fandoms by heterosexual fans and producers alike is clear proof of that – but with some shows this is clearly not the case anymore. An example of this is the pairing of Root and Shaw from *Person of Interest*, where the femslash pairing and its fans have been supported by the actresses both at fan conventions and on social media and there is no dominant opposing male/female ship on the show.

In fact, even with fandoms where there is a major male/female pairing, it does not seem as if the “heterosexual fandom,” as Hills puts it, is always dominant. For many, it is certainly ideal (if angry messages about “the gays taking over all the shows” on different social media are anything to go by), but the fandom of the femslash pairing can be as big as or bigger than that of the male/female ship. A past example of this is the pairing of Xena and Gabrielle on *Xena: The Warrior Princess*, and a few current ones are e.g. the “Clexa” (*The 100*) and “Swan Queen” (*Once Upon a Time*) pairings. There are so many fans of these pairings that the opposing ships could hardly be called dominant, even though the pairing of the former recently suffered the “dead lesbian trope”<sup>2</sup> and the latter is very unlikely to happen on screen, despite the continuous queerbaiting from the writers’ part (Langfelder, 2016).

Romano (2014) sums up queerbaiting as “the way that shows like *Sherlock* and *Once Upon a Time* often entice their massive slash fanbases by teasing queer relationships on and off the show despite having no intention of making those queer relationships come to fruition.” In a way, the invalidation of queer viewers’ sexualities starts all the way from the writers’ room where hints of queer romance are inserted into the story. When these bits of subtext will never become actual text on the screen and will only be there to tease queer viewers so that they do not stop watching because of the promise of queer romance (Romano, 2014), the straight fans of opposing ships

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<sup>2</sup> Writers killing off all or most of their queer characters. Also known as the “bury your gays” trope. The trope is incredibly common on television and sends a message queer people cannot have happy endings. There has been a lot of talk and criticism on the matter, especially in 2016 after the death of Lexa on *The 100*, e.g. the “LGBT fans deserve better” hashtag on Twitter.

will find new reasons to bully the fans of queer pairings and address them with words that are not only overtly chosen to invalidate their pairing but also covertly used to belittle and mock their sexuality.

According to Hanmer, the shippers of two extreme sexualities (gay and straight) have had “heated debates or ‘battles’ over the notion of the subtext...” (2003: 85) when interacting with one another. These “debates” or “battles” as Hanmer calls them still take place almost two decades later, but according to both the survey conducted for this study and my personal experiences, the “shipping” and the hostility that comes with it does not mean that a fan of a certain ship automatically has a certain monosexual identity; people other than just lesbians are rooting for same-sex relationships as well. Femslash fandoms consist of people from various queer sexualities and genders, and cisgender heterosexual femslash shippers are not unheard of, either. It is still clear that the heterosexual shippers of male/female pairings are privileged already due to their sexuality and their ship being male/female, which in our society is already presupposed. The shippers of a same-sex relationship need to fight much harder to even be recognized or to be taken seriously, for their ship is not conventional enough. This should not be overlooked most importantly because many queer people are obviously rooting for these relationships as well and seeing their sexualities represented and recognized makes them feel valid and gives them a chance to reflect their feelings, which has a huge impact on queer people’s mental health and identity development (Collier et al., 2009: 582).

All in all, femslash fandoms are communities of practice that suffer from online bullying. There are visible power relations between the victims and the perpetrators since these fandoms comprise majorly queer members, whereas the bullies are supposedly cisgender heterosexuals. Queer and online bullying have been studied before, and previous research shows bullying has serious effects on victims’ mental health. This thesis will thus focus on the bullying experiences of femslash fandoms in online environments.

### **3. PRESENT STUDY**

This section will briefly familiarize the reader with the aims of this study and the methods chosen for it.

#### **3.1 Research question and aim**

The main research question of this thesis is how people experience cyberbullying and homophobia in femslash fandoms.

The aim of this study is also to find out how hate talk is used against people shipping same-sex pairings and if being in a femslash fandom has helped sexual minorities come to terms with their own or other people's sexualities. This thesis will concentrate solely on femslash fandoms here because slash (male/male) fandoms are inherently different – for one thing, slash fandoms mainly consist of heterosexual girls and women (Thrupkaew, 2003; Leppänen, 2008: 159) – so the power relations between the victims and perpetrators are not alike.

#### **3.2 Data**

I collected the data for this thesis using a free online survey I created on Polldaddy (polldaddy.com). For ethical reasons, the survey was preceded by a disclaimer saying,

“By answering, you agree to participate in the research study and grant permission for the data generated from this survey to be used in the researcher's publications on this topic. All respondents will remain anonymous.”

As an additional ethical precaution, I will not include open answers from people who were aged from 13 to 15. It is still important to note that open answers from adolescents would be important data in possible future research.

I first sent a link to the survey privately to about 20 people I personally knew (so I could get some results that I knew were honest), after which I made the survey public and asked people on Tumblr and Twitter to answer. Especially the Tumblr post about the survey became rather popular: it got 1,060 “notes.”

I chose these two websites because I had seen people receive hateful messages and responses there, but I did not use any material found on these websites as actual data for the analysis – the survey was created for that purpose.

In addition to Tumblr and Twitter, the survey was also mentioned on other social media. A friend of mine, who has several thousand Instagram followers on her account about equal rights, offered to give the survey publicity there. In addition to this, a person I did not know beforehand told me they had shared the survey on Facebook groups dedicated to the pairings of Bering/Wells (from *Warehouse 13*) and Emma/Regina (otherwise known as “Swan Queen,” from *Once Upon a Time*). It is possible that the survey was shared by other people on more websites, but these three websites and one phone application are the only ones I am aware of.

The survey was public from January 8th 2016 to March 8th 2016<sup>3</sup>. During this time, 2 286 people took the survey. Most of the respondents (1.5k) took the survey during the first two days of it being online, after which the average pace of responses subsided.

In the survey, people (who were, on the basis of my emic understanding of the fandoms, addressed as “femslash shippers” in the tweet and the Tumblr post) were asked how they experienced cyberbullying in their fandom and how that affected them. The study consisted of eleven questions. Even though nine of the eleven questions were multiple choice, the study is mostly qualitative due to the phenomenologically qualitative research questions. There were two open questions too (one about how people had been addressed by bullies and another about their femslash ships). The questionnaire can be found on page 27.

### **3.3 Methods of analysis**

There were a few main reasons for using a questionnaire instead of e.g. observing hostile interactions on Tumblr. Firstly, since the main research question was how people experienced homophobia and bullying, it was necessary to approach the members of femslash fandoms.

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<sup>3</sup> The survey was actually public for longer, but all the statistics were collected on March 8<sup>th</sup>, and there were only five new respondents after March 8<sup>th</sup>.

Even though there are challenges related to surveys on self-reported experiences (see e.g. Hoskin, 2012), those self-reported experiences are very relevant when it comes to such a widespread phenomenon that has an effect on several people's mental health. An open question gave the people who had been bullied a chance to speak up using their own words; seeing the demeaning slurs the victims have been called will hopefully give different insight to the topic than simple statistics. Secondly, the questionnaire used for this thesis reached over two thousand people from several femslash fandoms, meaning that it gave a broader view on the victims than one could ever get by observing interactions on a specific website in such a short time. Moreover, the background literature used for this thesis could not show how people actually felt in different femslash fandoms. With this questionnaire, I attempted to find out how online fan communities, homophobia, and bullying meet.

#### **4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

This section contains analysis of the data collected from the survey. The questions were re-organized into four subsections in order of relevance to facilitate reading. The section starts with fandoms' experiences on bullying and soon moves on to features such as the frequency of hate talk and the members of femslash fandoms.

The survey was more successful than expected. Due to the vastness of the data (867 descriptions of verbal attacks), it would be impossible to include all the slurs and other insults the respondents and their friends had been called, but there were a few types of insults that were mentioned more often than others.

##### **4.1 Experiences on bullying**

Potentially, the most relevant question of the survey was the open question, *What kind of words have people used when addressing you (or your friends)?* It gave an opportunity to tap into the respondents' self-reported feelings and personal experiences. It showed that the messages (and possible real life interactions) people had received for rooting for a pairing of two female characters were often very harmful.

The most common insult in the data was “*dyke*.” It was used 210 times out of these 867 descriptions. This slur was followed by other offensive words, such as *bitch* (102 times), *disgusting* (95 times), *stupid* (88 times), and *cunt* (60 times).

The respondents mentioned different threats that were often related to violence. There were 25 people who reported they had been told to either kill themselves or that they’d be killed or they were ordered to “drop dead.” There were nine descriptions of rape threats, e.g.

“I’ll show you a real man and you’ll be cured, I’ll fuck you til the sun don’t shine, I’ll turn you into a real girl.” (aroflux, non-binary, 20-25)

This message strongly suggests the harassment came from a straight male instead of a straight female, which means the bullies are also men, not just heterosexual women. There were mentions of men becoming hostile only after a character was called lesbian instead of bisexual, because that meant the character would not have any interest in men.

In addition to these slurs and threats of violence, there were quite a few recurring themes. The following excerpt represents the common atmosphere of the data.

“the following words have been used in derogatory manners in regards to the "hater's" target, that I've witnessed: faggot, whore, lezzi, bitch, cunt, dyke, fuck, or any derivation therein. Other such harmful words and ideas expressed by "haters" to "hated" include: delusional, broken, queer (in a derogatory sense, not as a reclamation), stupid, and things of that nature that generally undermine the authenticity of the views of the hated. Oftentimes, there aren't specific derogatory words used without some allusion to threats, violence, and/or anger, and in some cases the "hate" involves demanding the "hated" stop their shipping or kill themselves.” (demisexual/panromantic, female, 16-19)

The most common insult was, not surprisingly, femslash shippers being called delusional (252 times). Some respondents claim that being called delusional can be even more hurtful than slurs because it invalidates the victim’s sexuality and their reading of the text and hence mocks them.

“Honestly, the usual "dykes! fags!" et al aren't as bad as "delusional", "crazy" etc to me. The latter pisses me off more, as I'm almost inured of common ignorance over orientation. But to say I'm completely irrational or insane to simply like what I like and think it deserves to be seen? How belittling is that?” (gay/lesbian, female, 40+)

“Tbh, the one that hurts me the most to hear is always "delusional", which isn't necessarily from people who are committing personal attacks, but rather from people who think they're rationally explaining to anyone in general why femslash shippers are delusional for thinking we see what we do” (gay/lesbian, female, 30-40)

Calling people delusional was often accompanied with telling them to “stop making everything gay” and to “stop pushing your agenda.” The sense of uncomfortableness that arises when seeing

same-sex relationship representation demonstrates that homophobia is often the primary reason for bullying.

“Anyone shipping a femlash couple is often called gay themselves and accused of wanting to "push their agenda" or "make everything gay" and "ruin the show/book/other". A common argument is that "not everything has to be gay" and shipping two females together is seen as "creepy". I've even seen it (both the shipping and the couples in question) called "gross" and "disgusting"” (bi/pan/poly, female, 20-25)

It is important to note that a few participants pointed out that homophobic messages and posts were sometimes accompanied with racist remarks. One participant said that they had gotten more hate for race than for femslash.

“i get more hate about race than f/f. i'm pretty picky about who i follow and talk with so i don't get much...” (straight, female, 30-40)

“the only hate I've personally gotten has been for shipping nonwhite characters regardless of if it was femslash/het/or mixed, thus it was the usual 'go kill yourself, you have no talent' variety” (gay/lesbian, female, 20-25)

This should not be overlooked, especially since earlier research shows that racial hate crimes are the most typical form of bias-motivated crime in the U.S. and that increased internet access has led to a rise in racial hate crimes (University of Minnesota, 2015).

In addition to this, there were a few bisexual members of femslash fandoms that called out lesbian members of their fandom(s) on biphobia (although most mentions of biphobia referred to members outside femslash fandoms).

“The only hate I've gotten was from lesbians saying that I, as a bisexual woman, didn't belong in "their" space (including but not limited to femslash). The only specific slur I recall was "bihet".” (bisexual, female, 25-30)

Transphobia was not a foreign concept to some of the respondents, either.

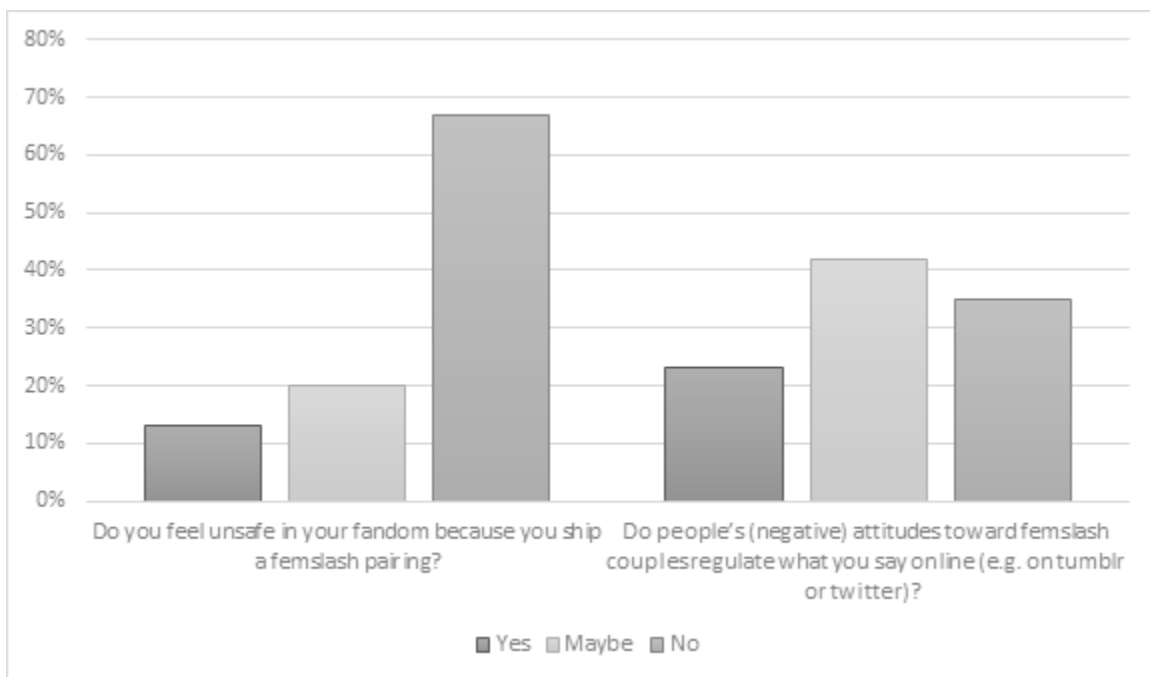
“I'm a transguy and I've been called faggot, bitch, dyke, and been misgendered” (bi/pan/poly, male, 20-25)

## **4.2 Feeling unsafe**

According to previous studies, young people – especially queer adolescents – feel unsafe because of cyberbullying (Peter and Taylor, 2013: 24). After seeing how people are treated because of something as trivial as shipping a femslash pairing, one might wonder how many people feel unsafe because of what they ship. This brings us to the next section of the survey.

67% of the respondents said they did not feel unsafe in their fandom because they ship a femslash pairing. 20% were not certain if they felt unsafe, and 13% admitted feeling unsafe.

When this answer is compared to another similar question, however, one can see some internal inconsistency. 23% of the respondents were certain people's negative attitudes toward femslash pairings regulated what they said online (even though only 13% admitted feeling unsafe), and 42% were not sure. Only 35% said that other people's negative attitudes toward femslash pairings did not have an effect on what they said online (even though 67% said they did not feel unsafe).



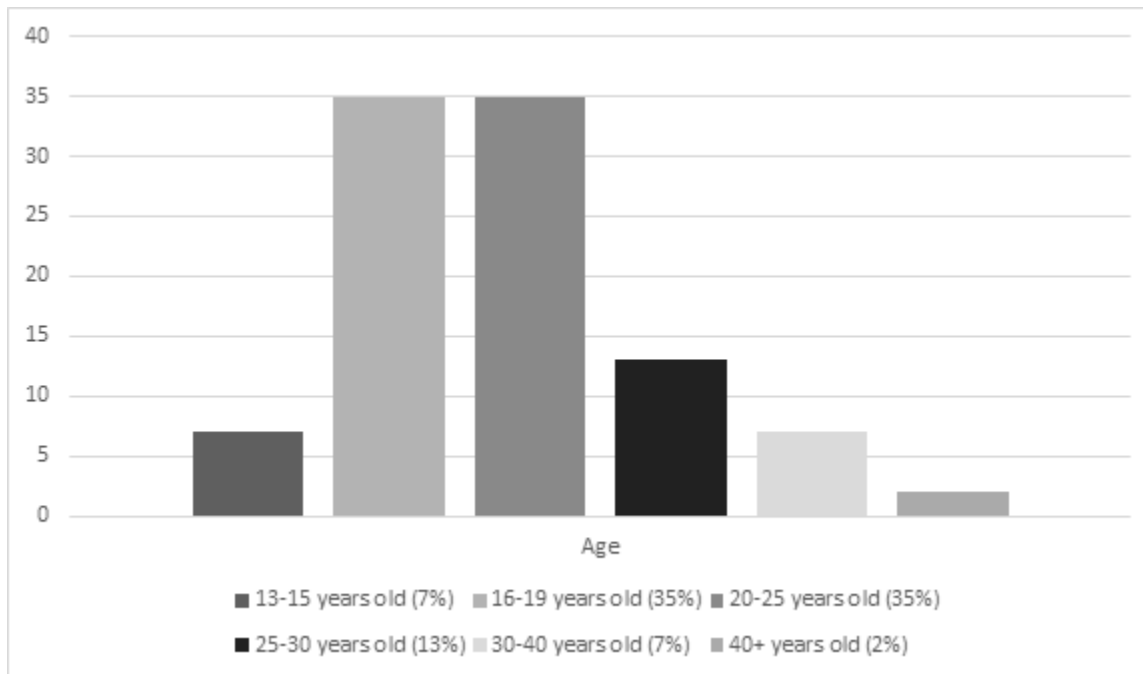
In sum, the answers were not completely consistent regarding feeling safe in femslash fandoms.

#### 4.3 The victims and the frequency of hate talk

The majority of the participants were either in their late teens or early twenties. The statistics suggest that the youngest teens are not quite as involved in these fandoms as older ones, which goes against my original hypothesis. There can of course be other reasons for this, too, e.g. the



younger members of the fandom(s) not being interested in participating in this kind of survey. All in all, the results show that people from several age groups took the survey.



The open question, “What femslash ships/fandoms did you think of when answering these questions?” showed that people from several femslash fandoms took the survey. More than 150 different pairings were mentioned in the responses, although there were some ships that appeared more often than others. The most frequent mentions were the pairings of “Hollstein” (from the web series, *Carmilla*, mentioned over 300 times), “Clexa” (from *The 100*, mentioned over 500 times), “Korrasami” (from *The Legend of Korra*, mentioned over 400 times), and “Swan Queen” (from *Once Upon a Time* mentioned over 900 times). The *Xena* fandom (that was mentioned earlier) was mentioned 87 times.

The fact that the respondents were from this many fandoms needs to be regarded with caution and critique. There were obviously fandoms that were mentioned more often than others, which means these fandoms had more respondents and these statistics cannot apply to all femslash fandoms because the treatment of different fandoms by both fellow fans and showrunners differ greatly; not all femslash fandoms are completely alike. Moreover, according to my own experience, the treatment of the shippers of Hollstein (from *Carmilla*, a web series featuring a lesbian vampire and her friends) compared to the pairings of Clexa and Korrasami, or

alternatively Swan Queen, could not be called the same because, for one thing, there is no opposing male/female ship on *Carmilla*. Some respondents who were members of more than one femslash fandom described different amounts of hate depending on their ship.

“I’d say that the superhero femslash fandom is treated slightly more different than saying programmed shows. I think a lot to do with that, is bc the superhero genre lacks a lot of female in general, while there is loads of males. So people who like the white m/m ships, tend to hate on the f/f shippers, from what I’ve personally seen.

I mean, Clexa and Swan Queen are probably the worst treated f/f fandoms i’ve seen. Like, the treatment from the hetero shippers gets violent, and very toxic. I think the only case i’ve seen that for the superhero fandom is hate towards the harley quinn/poison ivy ship, bc loads of ppl love the joker and feel like ivy gets in the way. But it’s actually okay. Carinelli used to get hit with a lot of heteronormativity though, like, that was a drag.” (bi/pan/poly, female, 16-19)

The question “*How often do you see someone get (verbally) attacked because they ship a femslash couple?*” proved that hate talk is present all the time, although it is not a daily occurrence to everyone. 32% of the respondents said they saw hate talk weekly or more than once a week; 29% said they saw it a few times a month, 26% said they saw it hardly ever, and 13% said they witnessed it daily.

The open questions gave some insight into why some people didn’t really witness or receive hate even though they knew it existed. There were a few common reasons mentioned, such as not being popular/known enough to receive hate and staying away from any blogs or “tags” that could include it. The former could explain why this phenomenon is harmful to so many despite the fact that two thirds of the femslash shippers who took this survey had not been attacked personally.

“I unfollow at the first sign of bigotry, and go out of my way to remain in LGBT-positive online spaces. My answers should not indicate that this abuse does not exist. Rather let them highlight the level of effort I must maintain to avoid it.” (asexual/aromantic and bi/pan/poly, female, 20-25)

“I’m not popular enough/active enough to receive hate mail online; I have received some criticism irl for shipping lesbian couples, but not in a personally attacking way. But just because I personally haven’t received hate doesn’t mean I’m not affected by the hate I’ve seen in the fandom.” (graysexual and polyromantic, non-binary, 25-30)

64% of the respondents had not been personally attacked, but 31% of the respondents had received anonymous hate. 21% of the respondents had been aware of the username of the person that had attacked them at least occasionally, which suggests that receiving hate anonymously is a



bit more common than receiving hate from a person whose username is visible. It needs to be taken into account that on websites such as Tumblr, it is possible to send anonymous messages, but the same is not possible on e.g. Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram (unless one makes an account just for the purpose to send hate or spread false information about a group of femslash shippers in order to make them look bad, which I have witnessed myself several times). Hence, it is very likely that if the question had regarded only Tumblr, the percentages would have been higher for the anonymous option.

We must also take into consideration that some respondents took the survey even though they were not really a part of a femslash fandom. One respondent wrote that they were not a part of a femslash fandom but took the survey because they did not have anything against femslash fandoms. If a lot of people who saw the link to the survey thought like this, it could have potentially changed the percentages a bit, as well as possible sabotage or dishonesty.

#### 4.4 Queer fandoms

As Collier et al. (2009: 593) and Hanmer's (2003) studies suggest, being in a femslash fandom has helped people accept their sexualities. The sixth question of the survey, "*Has being in femslash fandom(s) helped you come to terms with yourself/your sexuality/other people's sexualities?*" got an affirmative response from 91% of the participants, meaning that the majority of femslashers has learned more about their own sexuality, become more tolerant towards other people's sexualities, or even both, thanks to their fandom.

I gave my respondents an option to choose more than one option when it came to sexual and romantic orientation. It is important to acknowledge both orientations in studies where gender and sexuality are relevant since many people, especially asexual individuals, do not have the same romantic and sexual orientation (Richards & Barker, 2013: 124–127). I did not want to make the participants who had different sexual and romantic orientation to feel torn or invalidate their sexual or romantic identity, so I chose to use pose the question this way.

There were two problems that arose because I designed the questionnaire this way. Firstly, one cannot see whether or not people who had chosen e.g. "heterosexual and/or heteroromantic" had also chosen a queer sexual/romantic or gendered identity in addition to a heterosexual or a heteroromantic one. Secondly, and more importantly, despite the fact that the use of the word "homosexual" is very common in academic texts (e.g. the background literature used for this thesis used the word frequently) and it is very common in the romantic vs. sexual orientation discourse (The Rainbow Hub, 2013), there were five respondents that pointed out that I should not use the word in a survey nor in this thesis since it can be easily perceived as a slur due to the former illness classification and the negative stigma the word still has (GLAAD, 2016). I will therefore avoid using the word.

When we take a look at the results, the majority of femslash fandoms appears to be a part of a sexual (and/or romantic) minority. 5% of the respondents chose the option "heterosexual and/or heteroromantic" (which technically leaves space for a romantic or sexual orientation that is not straight and a gender identity that is not cisgender). 36% of the respondents were gay, lesbian, or

otherwise monosexual or monoromantic with same-sex/gender attraction, and 33 % of the respondents had chosen the “bi, pan, or poly” option. 12% of the respondents were either asexual or aromantic or both. 4% of the respondents chose the “other” option, which they specified e.g. as queer, demi, preferring the term lesbian over “homosexual and/or homoromantic” which was the term used in the original survey, graysexual, and different combinations of all the options.

In addition to these orientations, there were a few more ambiguous ones. 9% were questioning their sexuality and/or romantic orientation, which suggests that fandoms are a place where many people can experiment and talk about their feelings with people who have similar experiences. This goes hand in hand with what Collier et al. discovered when interviewing Xena and Buffy fans – sexual minority identities are constructed through engagement with internet communities (2009: 597) and people in the process of sexual identity formation seek information and validation, which often brings them into social contact with other people experiencing something similar (2009: 582).

There is a problem with ambiguity regarding gender. It is impossible to tell whether or not some of the people who chose “female” or “male” as their gender were cisgender or transgender, so the numbers of queer respondents who were heterosexual and heteroromantic and at the same time MtF (male to female) trans or FtM (female to male) trans could actually be high, but we just would not know about it because it is not visible in the survey unless the participant has specified it in the “other” option. The only gender options in the survey were *female*, *non-binary*, *male*, *questioning*, and *other*.

As I expected before creating the survey, femslash fandoms consist mainly of females and people who are not cisgender. 83% chose the option “female” whereas 3% chose the option “male” (which could both include transgender respondents). 9% of the respondents were non-binary, 3% questioning their gender identity, and 3% chose the “other” option. People had different reasons for choosing the “other” option, such as: wanting to choose the option “trans guy” instead of male, not seeing agender, bigender, genderqueer, genderfluid, or demigirl as one of the non-binary identities, and not wanting to label their gender. There was also one respondent who claimed their gender was “evil.”

## 5. DISCUSSION

According to both this thesis and previous studies, fandoms are a place where many power relations come to play. As stated in a study by Smith and Sharp (2006: 2), bullying is systematic abuse of power that takes place when power asymmetry exists between a bully and a victim from a minority group. It is very clear that in this case the supposedly mainly heterosexual fandom is the privileged group that has power over the queer fandom and systematically abuses their power in the form of e.g. slurs and death threats that cause their victims to feel unworthy and unsafe.

Since this is very harmful (Peter & Taylor, 2013: 24), it is important to realize this power imbalance exists, it is hurtful for sexual and gender minorities of all ages, and it reinforces power relations further. The results of this study show (alongside the studies by Hanmer (2003) and Collier et al. (2009)) that being in a femslash fandom has given many people a safety net and set them on a journey to self-discovery of their sexual identity. This is why it is incredibly unfortunate that some members of femslash fandoms – communities that are and have been helpful to so many – have left the fandom because of the constantly present homophobia and thus negative self-perceptions and sense of unease the bullies have inflicted upon femslash fans.

“Especially the Once Upon a Time fandom where hate towards the ff shippers dominates the experience of blogging about it. That is also why I stopped watching the show entirely and stopped blogging about it. I was tired of being threatened every day just because people didn't like what I shipped.” (questioning, female, 16-19)

Since even negative representations of minorities have an effect on how they perceive themselves (Collier et al., 2009: 583, 598), the importance of television shows and other media should not be overlooked. Moreover, we should remember issues such as queerbaiting exist and inflict feelings of unworthiness on queer fans and simultaneously give privileged groups of heterosexuals more reasons to belittle queer people's readings of media (this could be seen with e.g. the word choice “delusional”). Since e.g. television shows are often related to identity formation (Collier et al., 2009: 581-582), the invalidating treatment from producers and other fans alike can be very hurtful.

On a more positive note, Hanmer points out that “popular culture can play a significant part in enabling oppressed groups within contemporary society to resist dominant practices” (2003: 102). This shows the importance of e.g. femslash fandoms and queer people rewriting their subjectives and creating positive representations of themselves and their sexualities when they are ambiguous or absent in the source text (Hanmer, 2003: 102; Collier et al., 2009: 586, 588, 597). It is important to note that several people have found a place to explore their sexual/romantic orientation in femslash fandoms; according to this study, 91% of femslash shippers have come to a better understanding of their own and/or other people’s sexualities after joining their fandom.

In conclusion, the findings of this thesis show that hate talk is directed towards femslash fandoms. It is not aimed at everyone personally, but there are different factors, such as popularity and being more outspoken, that raise the risk of becoming a victim of bullying. The open answers of this study show that many people who are not directly bullied are still affected by the hate talk they see. The respondents also pointed out that the treatment of all femslash fandoms is not the same. One third of femslash shippers has received hateful messages because of their shipping choices. These messages have a strong effect on how many people experience being in a fandom and how bullies justify their actions. All in all, the results suggest that cyberbullying in femslash fandoms, as well as fandom spaces in general, should be studied more in the future. Future research ought to be more intersectional, especially since some participants mentioned experiencing racism, transphobia, and biphobia in their femslash fandoms.

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## THE SURVEY

1. How often do you see someone get (verbally) attacked because they ship a femslash couple? \*  
with femslash couple I mean any f/f ship, canon or not.
  - daily
  - weekly or maybe a couple of times a week
  - monthly or a few times a month
  - never or hardly ever
  
2. Have you been verbally attacked for shipping a femslash couple? \*
  - Yes
  - No
  
3. Do people's (negative) attitudes toward femslash couples regulate what you say online (e.g. on tumblr or twitter)? \*
  - Yes
  - No
  - I'm not sure/Maybe on some level
  
4. Do you feel unsafe in your fandom because you ship a femslash pairing? \*
  - Yes
  - No
  - Maybe
  
5. If you have been attacked for shipping a femslash ship, has the attacker been \*
  - anonymous or
  - have you been aware of what their username is or
  - both?

You haven't gotten any hate ever.

6. Has being in femslash fandom(s) helped you come to terms with yourself/your sexuality/other people's sexualities? \*

Yes

No

7. What kind of words have people used when addressing you (or your friends)?  
e.g. names people have called you when "sending hate"

8. Sexual (or romantic) orientation \*

If you don't have the same romantic orientation as sexual orientation, you can pick more than one.

(Edit: I've been informed I should use another word for the option "homosexual and/or homoromantic" so I'll do that in my thesis, but I can't change the survey so much at this point.)

asexual and/or aromantic

bi, pan, or poly

homosexual and/or homoromantic

heterosexual and/or heteroromantic

questioning

9. Gender \*

female

non-binary

male

questioning

10. Age \*

13–15

16–19

- 20-25
- 25-30
- 30-40
- 40+

11. What femslash ships/fandoms did you think of when answering these questions? \*

You can list as many as you want