

“Emma and Regina made me realize I was gay”:

A study on LGBT identity formation in femslash fan communities

Master’s Thesis

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Tämän maisterintutkielman ensisijainen tarkoitus on selvittää, miten femslash-nettifaniyhteisöön kuulumisen auttaa LGBT-identiteetin muodostamisessa. Tutkielmasta myös selviää, onko femslash-faneilla erilaisia seksuaali- ja sukupuoli-identiteettejä internetissä verrattuna muuhun sosiaaliseen elämäänsä, millaista tukea kyseisiltä faniyhteisöiltä voi saada ja mitä vähemmistöihin liittyviä asioita näissä yhteisöissä voi oppia. Tutkielman toinen tavoite on käsitellä femslash-faniyhteisöissä tapahtuvaa ja niihin kohdistuvaa syrjintää ja ennakkoluuloja. Tämän lisäksi tutkielmassa käsitellään seksuaali- ja sukupuolivähemmistöjen mediarepresentaatioita ja niiden vaikutuksia seksuaali- ja sukupuolivähemmistöihin.</p> <p>Tutkielmaa varten tehtyyn kyselyyn vastasi 53 seksuaali- ja sukupuolivähemmistöihin kuuluvaa fania. Koska kysely sisälsi sekä monivalinta- että avoimia kysymyksiä, oli tutkimus täten sekä laadullinen että määrällinen. Laadullisiin kysymyksiin käytettiin temaattista analyysiä.</p> <p>Tutkielman tuloksissa käy ilmi, että femslash-fanien faniaktiiviteetit ovat positiivinen tekijä LGBT-identiteetin muodostuksessa ja toisilta faneilta saatu tuki on auttanut useita faniyhteisön jäseniä elämään elämäänsä autenttisemmin. Monet ovat oppineet paljon uutta faniyhteisössään. Femslash-fanit kokevat heteroseksuaalisilta faneilta tulevaa homofobista häirintää ja kiusaamista. On tärkeää huomata, että syrjintää tapahtuu myös faniyhteisön sisällä rasismien, transfobian, bifobian, ableismin ja uskontoon liittyvän syrjinnän muodossa. Asenteet LGBT-representaatioita kohtaan vaihtelevat, sillä vaikka ne ovat tuoneet monille omanarvontuntoa, toisille ne ovat olleet luotaantyöntäviä liian vähän diversiteetin ja negatiivisten stereotyyppien takia.</p>	
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CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	4
Aims, approach, and the researcher's position	4
2. BACKGROUND	7
2.1 Online LGBT identity	7
2.2 LGBT representation and the shortage of positive LGBT portrayals in the media	9
2.2.1 Heteronormativity and negative representations	9
2.2.2 The representation of sexual minorities.....	11
2.2.3 The representation of gender minorities	12
2.2.4 Diverse and intersectional representation of the LGBT community.....	14
2.2.5 Queerbaiting and the “Bury Your Gays” trope	15
2.3 Femslash fandoms	19
2.4 Discrimination in LGBT communities and online fan communities	24
2.4.1 Homophobia in fan communities	24
2.4.2 Biphobia and bisexual erasure in and outside the LGBT community.....	26
2.4.3 Transphobia in the LGBT community and online fan communities	30
2.4.4 Racism in the LGBT community and online fan communities	33
2.4.5 Ageism in the LGBT community	38
2.4.6 Ableism in the LGBT community.....	40
3. PRESENT STUDY	42
3.1 Aims and research questions	42
3.2 Data selection and collection	44
3.3 Methods of analysis	47
4. ANALYSIS	49
4.1 The respondents	49
4.2 LGBT identity in femslash fandoms and fan activities	64
4.3 The difference between online and offline	74
4.4 The importance of diverse representations	89
4.5 Discrimination in femslash fandoms and fellow fans’ support	100

5. DISCUSSION	110
5.1 The respondents	111
5.2 The effects of fandom involvement on LGBT identity and fan activities	114
5.3 Different online and offline identities, learning about LGBT identities, and disclosing an LGBT identity offline	117
5.4 Representation and media-viewing experiences	120
5.5 Discrimination in femslash fandoms	123
5.6 Fellow fans’ support for minority identities	126
5.7 The limitations of the study	128
6. CONCLUSION	130
BIBLIOGRAPHY	133
APPENDICES	146
Appendix 1: Glossary	146
Appendix 2: Femslash Fandom Survey	148
Appendix 3: A full list of the respondents’ femslash fandoms and pairings	155

1. INTRODUCTION

Aims, approach, and the researcher's position

The main purpose of this study is to find out how belonging to an online fan base helps to construct an LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and other multiple-gender-attracted, and transgender) identity. Fan bases, or fandoms, as they are more commonly called, are communities of practice (Hills, 2015: 360, 372). Communities of practice are places of social learning that share particular ways of thinking and discoursing (Wenger, 2010: 179-181; Eckert, 2006: 683). As I have mentioned in a previous study (Aalto, 2016: 4), it is common for fans of different entertainment media to converse over and analyze different relationships between fictional characters. For LGBT fans, the representations of same-sex relationships and discussing them online can become an empowering way to come to terms with their LGBT identity (Hanmer, 2010: 149; Hanmer, 2014: 613-614). Previous research has shown that LGBT fans produce discourse that aims to empower them and shapes their identities on both individual and collective levels through their internet fan activities (Hanmer, 2014: 609, 620; Hanmer, 2010: 148-149; Collier, Lumadue & Wooten 2009: 597-598; Kapurch, 2015: 438). Drawing on insights provided by LGBT studies and fan studies, this study aims at shedding more light on the process of LGBT identity formation in online fandom spaces.

More specifically, the LGBT fandoms that this study focuses on are fan bases that are centered around the pairings of women in different entertainment media. The purpose of this thesis is thus to examine how people in femslash fandoms (fandoms that are fans of female/female pairings) use their fandom environment to construct their LGBT identity¹. Hanmer (2003, 2011, 2014) studied the sexual minority identities of the femslash fans of *Xena: Warrior Princess* and Collier et al. (2009) did the same when they studied the lesbian fans of *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. More recent femslash fandom research has been done by e.g. Guerrero-Pico, Establés, and Ventura (2018), Pande and Moitra (2017), Suddeth (2017), Bingham (2016), and Kapurch (2015), although the main focus of their research was different. Since the field of LGBT

¹ This is important since slash (male/male pairing) fandoms have been of researchers' interest more due to their popularity among heterosexual girls and women (Thrupkaew, 2003; Leppänen, 2008: 159). Researching femslash gives more insight into LGBT identity formation and writing one's own narratives. More about this in section 2.3.

audience research continues to be underdeveloped (Hanmer, 2003: 80), Collier et al. (2009) and Hanmer's (2003, 2011, 2014) studies are not very recent, and fan cultures develop and change constantly, new updated research on the topic of LGBT identity construction in femslash fandoms is needed.

What is more, the interview studies of Hanmer (2003: 80-81; 2014: 608-609) and the survey study of Collier et al., (2009) mainly discussed lesbian fans of television shows. Though lesbians (such as myself) constitute a large portion of femslash fandoms, limiting the study only to them does not give a realistic image of communities where for example bisexual, pansexual, and transgender² people can find help for constructing their identities. It is clear that there are several different sexual orientations in these fandoms; this is shown in my previous study (Aalto, 2016) of 2,286 survey respondents, which confirmed that there are as many lesbian and gay members in femslash fandoms as there are bisexual, pansexual, and other multiple-gender-attracted people. In light of this fact, I decided that anyone who was LGBT³ was able to participate in this survey study.

The second main aim of this study is to find out what kinds of prejudices and discrimination people in these fandoms face because of their marginalized identities. This will be done by examining two different issues: the hate femslash fans have encountered for being fans of a femslash pairing (homophobic bullying) and the discrimination that takes place within femslash fandoms. Some examples of the latter are racism, biphobia, and transphobia. In this way, this thesis will also introduce other issues that are extremely important for LGBT fans and that need to be researched further. This study hence attempts to fill a gap in research by focusing on these communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) by taking a more intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989) look at their members. The importance of this has been highlighted previously by e.g. Pande and Moitra (2017) and Stanfill (2019).

To sum up, this research will shed more light on LGBT identity formation in online fandom spaces and LGBT identity formation in general. It will familiarize the reader with the impact of positive

² By listing transgender here, I do not mean to imply that transgender women cannot be lesbians. They can.

³ Gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual and other varied gender attractions, as well as transgender individuals from transgender male and transgender female to all non-binary (neither only male or female) identities. Non-binary people may not always identify as transgender, but some do, so they are listed under T here.

minority representation and the importance of the support that LGBT people get from their community. It will also take a look at the discrimination that takes place in fandom spaces.

Before the discussion of the approach taken in this study, it is useful to describe my emic knowledge and personal position in the femslash fandom scene. I was an active member of a femslash fandom for approximately four years, and I still regularly interact with some of the friends I made in this online environment and occasionally participate in some fandom activities. Although I have now become a very casual fan and a passive member, it was still relatively easy for me to find reliable respondents for the survey that constitutes the empirical part of this thesis via two different social media platforms, Twitter and Tumblr. With the knowledge I have gained from being a member of a femslash fandom, I have also noticed that people who are members of several marginalized groups get a different treatment from more privileged fans. It is my strong belief that such attitudes and reactions should be addressed in research as well.

2. BACKGROUND

Previous research on issues related to this thesis will be discussed in this section. The chapter starts with a discussion on how people form LGBT identities online. The second subsection deals with LGBT representations in modern Western media and their effects on people who are LGBT. We will then move on to what has been previously found out about femslash fandoms, a crucial topic to this study. Lastly, discrimination within the LGBT community and online fan communities will be discussed.

2.1 Online LGBT identity

Quite a lot of research has been conducted on LGBT identity formation online. Studies show that many people decide to come out online before they do so offline, seeking support from other LGBT people in the interwebs (e.g. Cooper, 2010: 83). Online networking sites offer social support without geographic limitations (Drushel, 2010: 62). These sites are therefore important to many LGBT people who do not have other access to information about LGBT issues and are in need of support when coming to terms with and forming their LGBT identity (Cooper, 2010: 75).

According to Cooper (2010: 78, 83), the internet helps people gather information on LGBT identity categories and resources and gives them the opportunity to find community instead of suffering in silence. Through social media, LGBT youth gain acceptance and can become part of the LGBT community (Tropiano, 2014: 48). From early on, LGBT youth can find a safer, anonymous space to practice different aspects of their LGBT life online before doing so offline (Tropiano, 2014: 48). Tropiano (2014: 49) states that many LGBT youths have more online friends than their cisgender straight peers, which implies that the social impact and the amount of relatable support that they get from other LGBT people online is remarkable.

Online spaces thus work as a place where people can find friends to confide in about concerns that they could not talk to other people in their lives about; they can discuss different topics more openly there (Grisso & Weiss, 2005: 32). For example, adolescent girls have had the courage to

ask other people about their non-heterosexual feelings online (Grisso & Weiss, 2005: 37-38), and lesbians married to men in communities characterized by traditional values have had the opportunity to be honest about their feelings online (Cooper, 2010: 75). Many of these lesbians studied by Cooper (2010: 75-83) were completely certain that they were not attracted to men and were ready to admit that to other lesbians online, but still displayed a straight identity in front of their offline social circles and their families. People can thus question their identities online, be their true selves there, and conduct conversations about feelings that differ from the norm (Cooper, 2010: 83). Berger (2010: 182) states that the internet gives an opportunity to explore one's sexuality anonymously in online environments more visibly than before.

Consequently, people negotiate their identities actively online, and, with the help of social media, they create identities and display themselves in a certain way (Cooper & Dzara, 2010: 101, 104). Many of us use the internet for finding people who are more like us to interact with so we can try out new identities without self-censoring (Grisso & Weiss, 2005: 32). It is therefore not very surprising that many have different shifting online and offline identities (Thiel, 2005: 184) and some are more comfortable constructing their identity online than offline (Tobin, 1998 and Turkle, 1995, as cited by Thiel, 2005: 198). Web 2.0 sites, such as Facebook, can be used for both constructing and hiding LGBT identities (Cooper & Dzara, 2010: 100), but, while people tend to explore alternate identities, they still often try to keep an identity that matches their offline identity (Thiel, 2005: 185).

Another important issue that should be discussed when we talk about online LGBT identities is letting other people know that you are LGBT, or, more colloquially, "coming out." The internet provides an opportunity for people to come out (Cooper & Dzara, 2010: 106) but also practice it for offline situations with others' support (Cooper, 2010: 76). People can find tips for coming out for example in the form of videos online (Alexander & Losh, 2010: 41). Many LGBT people eventually transfer the identity they have created for themselves online to offline life by self-disclosing that part of themselves to "real-life" people. There are, however, many questions regarding self-disclosure and how far one wants to take it (co-workers, conservative relatives). (Cooper & Dzara, 2010: 104-105). It should also be noted that not everyone lives in a setting where they can disclose their identity offline at all.

All in all, online LGBT spaces offer LGBT individuals support and community. People can talk about their concerns and feelings and gain information on LGBT issues online. The internet gives an opportunity to question, construct and practice one's authentic identity before displaying it offline. For some, the internet is the only place to be their true self and display their authentic identity.

2.2 LGBT representation and the shortage of positive LGBT portrayals in the media

Media representation is an important topic when we study marginalized groups of people. According to Dyer (2002: 1), the way in which a group is represented in public has an effect on how they see themselves and how other people see them and their rights. For example, according to GLAAD (2018: 26), 84 percent of Americans do not know a transgender person, which can easily mean that the way in which transgender people are represented in the media is the only information they get about transgender people. In other words, media – television, for example – not only represent reality, but they also produce and reproduce the image of how sexuality and gender are perceived (Chambers, 2009: 89, as cited by Sarkissian, 2014: 146-147). Positive – and negative – representations of the LGBT community (and other minorities) can thus have a significant impact on how they are seen in society.

2.2.1 Heteronormativity and negative representations

When discussing LGBT media representations, one must take into account heteronormativity, which complicates representational issues related to LGBT portrayals in the media. Demory and Pullen (2013: 1) state that the “heterosexual imperative” of falling in love with and marrying a member of the “opposite sex” and raising a family with them derives from classical Hollywood and is constantly present in contemporary storytelling of television and cinema. Although public attitudes towards the stories of sexual minorities have become more positive through more visibility, same-sex love stories have still been claimed to follow heteronormative conventions and

norms (Demory & Pullen, 2013: 2-4). Demory and Pullen (2013: 4) give an example of this when they state that movies like *Brokeback Mountain* are often seen as “gay movies for straight people” that continue the tradition of unhappy endings.

In addition to heteronormativity, the implications of negative representations are often overlooked (Bingham, 2016: 1). The representations of LGBT minorities have frequently been based on stereotypes. Raley and Lucas (2006: 24) point out that the gay and lesbian representations seen on television have often been presented for heterosexual audiences as jokes. Although Raley and Lucas claimed this in 2006, this is still often the case, especially in genres like situational comedies or romantic comedies. Sexual minority characters can often be the butt of the joke (Sarten, 1998, as cited by Raley & Lucas, 2006: 24); the audience laughs at them, not with them. The characters often ridicule themselves (Raley & Lucas, 2006: 31), which perpetuates negative images of sexual minorities (Hart, 2000, as cited by Raley & Lucas, 2006: 24). The way people see sexual minorities can thus be negative and based on stereotypes.

If these characters are not a joke, per se, they may be otherwise written in a way that marks them different by the way they act and reinforces negative stereotypes. Patton (1995: 4) lists cinematic stereotypes about gay men, including them being promiscuous, non-domestic, perverted, and narcissistic. Other negative LGBT clichés on television and in cinema include cheating to realize one’s sexuality, homophobic bullies being secretly gay, portraying transgender people only as victims of a crime or mockery, “queer-coding” villains, and killing off LGBT characters (PinkNews, 2020). The last two issues will be discussed in more detail in section 2.2.5.

LGBT characters can also be the token character⁴ that the creators of for example a television show included in order to do the bare minimum regarding minority representation. This does not by any means ensure good quality representation. According to GLAAD⁵ (2018: 3), it is important to ask how sexual and gender minority characters are placed in relation to other characters and

⁴ A character from a minority that is placed in the story just to tick a diversity box. They are written lazily, often stereotypically, and they do not have a real narrative function in the story.

⁵ An American non-governmental media monitoring organization. GLAAD originally stood for “Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation,” but it now goes only by its acronym as they wanted to be more inclusive of bisexual and transgender issues (GLAAD, 2019).

whose stories are actually being told in the media that we observe. It should also be remembered that even though LGBT representation is more common now, television representations ought to reflect the diversity of the LGBT community better (GLAAD, 2018: 3).

2.2.2 The representation of sexual minorities

Even though bisexual people and people who are otherwise attracted to multiple genders are the biggest part of the LGBT community, they continue to be underrepresented (GLAAD, 2018: 24; Gates, 2011; Mercado, 2017). According to GLAAD (2018: 24), bisexual characters in (American) television fall into harmful tropes too often. Some examples of these tropes are bisexuals being manipulative and using sex for manipulation, bisexuality being a temporary plot device, and portraying bisexual characters as immoral or deceitful (GLAAD, 2018: 24). Bisexuality has often been written off as a phase instead of a valid sexuality (Guerrero-Pico et al., 2018: 326), and the issues in representation have an effect on how people see bisexuality and how people who are attracted to multiple genders feel about themselves (GLAAD, 2018: 24). There is a lack of bisexual male characters on television because the group as a whole is underrepresented. There were 75 bisexual female characters and 18 bisexual male characters in American television in 2017-2018 (GLAAD, 2018: 4, 24). The already low number of bisexual men dropped from 23 to 18 in two years (GLAAD, 2018: 24). As a whole, characters under the “bisexual umbrella”⁶ make up 28 percent of the LGBT characters in American television (GLAAD: 2018: 3).

It should also be noted that most female couples in the media consist of two feminine women, when in reality there are more butch lesbians than our current media representation lets on. Ciasullo (2001: 578, 584, 585) argues that the kind of lesbian that is allowed to be seen in the mainstream media is a white, middle or upper-class feminine lesbian that is brought closer to a straight audience by using heterosexualization and hegemonic femininity. Even though many people associate lesbians with butch lesbians, they have very little cultural representation and their representation is not positive (ibid: 578, 579, 594, 599). Real-life butch lesbians have been

⁶ GLAAD uses this term in their report to refer to people who “who identify as bisexual, pansexual, fluid, queer, and more.”

feminized for magazines (ibid: 584-587), and the entertainment media almost only portray feminine lesbians that are easier for straight audiences to consume when they look like the hegemonic heterosexual woman (ibid: 585, 588-589).

Ciasullo (2001: 588) points out that even though portraying “straight-looking” women as lesbians can break some kinds of stereotypes, butch lesbians are not shown enough to actually represent the diversity of lesbians. She suggests that in a patriarchal world, where feminine looks appeal to the male gaze, the butch body is not seen as “useful” and is thus unrepresentable (ibid: 604). She also points out the history of butch lesbians as working class could contribute to their invisibility in the media (ibid: 601). Even though Ciasullo wrote her article in 2001, it is still highly relevant almost twenty years later. There are now several lesbians on our television screens (GLAAD, 2018), but positive butch lesbian representation is almost nowhere to be seen.

2.2.3 The representation of gender minorities

There are very few transgender characters in the entertainment media. Though there are positive representations of transgender people on television shows, such as Sophia Burset (*Orange is the New Black*) and Nomi Marks (*Sense8*) played by transgender actresses Laverne Cox and Jamie Clayton, transgender representation is still very much lacking. GLAAD (2018: 4, 26) states that in the television year 2017-2018, there were 17 transgender characters (nine regular and eight recurring) in American television in total (including streaming services such as Netflix). There was only one clear lead character who was transgender, Maura on *Transparent*, after two shows with transgender leads were canceled (GLAAD, 2018: 26).

A bit similarly to the representation of bisexuality, there were more transgender women than men. In 2017-2018, there were nine transgender female characters whereas there were only four transgender male characters (GLAAD, 2018: 26). GLAAD found out there were – for the first time – also four non-binary characters. Out of these 17 characters, thirteen are white American, two are African American, one is Latinx, and one is Asian/Pacific Islander (2018: 26). This means that, for

transgender people who are also a member of an ethnic minority (in America), it is much more difficult to see themselves represented in the media.

What is peculiar about transgender representation is that the people who create and write transgender characters do not often give transgender characters a sexual orientation like they would cisgender characters. Out of the aforementioned 17 transgender characters, only 11 have had sexual orientations (six of them straight, two gay, two bisexual, and one lesbian, GLAAD, 2018: 26). Omitting a transgender character's sexual orientation is odd since it is not the same as a gender identity, yet people confuse the two (GLAAD, 2018: 26). It is important that this does not continue as this misconception could easily be reinforced in real life due to fallacious television representations.

In addition, it is common to have cisgender actors or actresses play transgender roles, which evidently gives the wrong idea of who transgender people are, and it takes the roles away from actors who are actually transgender. This has been seen in Hollywood films: for example, in *Anything* (2017), Matt Bomer's character is a transgender woman, in *The Danish Girl* (2015), Eddie Redmayne plays a transgender woman, in *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), Jared Leto plays a transgender woman, in *Transamerica* (2005), Felicity Huffman's character is a transgender woman, and in *Boys Don't Cry* (2000), Hilary Swank plays a transgender man. Quite recently, Scarlett Johansson was announced to have landed a role of a transgender man in *Rub & Tug* (2019), but she ended up exiting the production of the movie after loud online criticism from transgender groups and activists (Stedman, 2018). Johansson also played a Japanese woman in *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) even though she does not have any East Asian heritage.

Often, these cisgender actors have also played negatively written transgender characters. Bingham (2016) notes this when he discusses the American television show *Pretty Little Liars* (2010-2017). The only transgender character of the show is the cyberbullying and blackmailing villainess played by a cisgender woman. Even though several members of the production team of *Pretty Little Liars* were LGBT (2016: 12), and one of its main characters, Emily Fields, is a lesbian and a Woman of Color, the representation of the transgender community is insufficient and paints them in a bad light. According to *Pretty Little Liars'* narrative, transgender people are untrustworthy, cruel, and

aggressive, and ought to live in mental institutions because it is not safe to be around them (2016: 175, 179). Moreover, Bingham (2016: 154) argues that:

[m]oreover, figuring the sole transgender character as the antagonist is particularly concerning, especially when considering LGBT+ people have been historically constructed in popular culture as paedophiles, liars, and plagued by diseases (Russo 1987; Sedgwick 1990; Doty 1993; Auerbach 1995; Benschhoff 1997; Suarez 1996; Sullivan 2003; Butler 2004; Halberstam 2005; Becker 2006)”

2.2.4 Diverse and intersectional representation of the LGBT community

It should be remembered that LGBT representation has been criticized for not showing how diverse LGBT people are in other aspects than just their sexual orientation or gender identities. Johnsson (2014: 279, 281), for example, points out how LGBT media that features LGBT People of Color is scarce and how same-sex attraction has often been linked to whiteness. Muños (1999: ix-xiv, 8-11) stated that the already lacking LGBT representation is even more lacking for LGBT People of Color and they have been exoticized and othered by white LGBT people. Even in material that is particularly directed at LGBT people, showing People of Color is infrequent (Johnson: 2014: 279). Johnson (2014: 283-284) points out that LGBT stories are often told and shown from a very generic white middle-class American angle and that this kind of narrative disregards factors such as ethnicity, income, country of residence and religious background.

The “Where Are We on TV?” report by GLAAD (2018: 14) that was used for this study shows that even though broadcast networks are making progress on more racially diverse representations, it would be worthwhile to see racial diversity also in LGBT characters. LGBT characters’ racial diversity had decreased six percent from the previous report (GLAAD, 2018: 14), and they remain underrepresented (2018: 3). Even on shows that some praise for inclusiveness and diversity, LGBT characters of color get worse treatment than white LGBT characters. This can be seen on for example *Orange is the New Black*, where Poussey Washington, a black lesbian character, was suffocated by a white man. A black lesbian and an Asian pansexual character were thus separated by death, while the white lesbian and white bisexual pairing of the show still remained alive and

together. The same season of the series featured the only transgender character of *Orange is the New Black*, who was also black, in inhumane conditions for the majority of the season.

The same goes for LGBT characters who live with disabilities; there are only few of them (GLAAD, 2018: 4, 22-23). The number of characters with disabilities does not represent reality, but the overall number had, however, gone up by 1,8 percent (GLAAD, 2018: 4, 22). The representation of LGBT seniors, in turn, seems to be so scarce that it is difficult to find any statistics about it in the first place. The representation of elderly people on (American) television in general does not seem to reflect the reality either: the images of seniors are often inaccurate and demeaning, which can negatively affect the health of real-life seniors and the images they have of themselves (Women's Health Law Weekly, 2018: 308). Hollywood is starting to embrace the representation of different groups of people, but it has not included seniors in its diverse representation (ibid: 308). Fortunately, there are some exceptions to this, for example *Grace and Frankie* on Netflix (Banks, 2016), which have rather diverse representations of seniors, including LGBT seniors.

2.2.5 Queerbaiting and the “Bury Your Gays” trope

Another issue related to LGBT representation – or rather the lack and failure of it – is *queerbaiting*. Queerbaiting is primarily a phenomenon in which the creators of a television show place suggestions of same-sex relationships between the lines so that the LGBT viewers of a show would keep watching it, but they only give implicit hints of a romance without carrying through writing explicitly LGBT characters and leave same-sex attraction only as subtext (Brennan, 2016; Romano, 2014). This, in a way, invalidates LGBT viewers' readings and sexualities and gives straight fans of the same shows an excuse to call the fans of same-sex pairings delusional and bully them online (Aalto, 2016: 8-9).

One form of queerbaiting is how a show introduces an LGBT character and then kills them off (Bingham, 2016: 145). This has become alarmingly common when it comes to lesbian and bisexual female characters (GLAAD, 2018: 3, 6; Guerrero-Pico et al., 2018; Phillips, 2017; Allen,

2017b; McConnaughy, 2016; Yohannes, 2016). This secondary form of queerbaiting has become more common as it is expected of television show writers to include more diverse characters, and as, by doing so, they tick the “diversity box” while not caring about the quality of their representation. At the same time, they can gain more LGBT viewers by creating relatable content in which LGBT audiences can see themselves. However, what often happens is that they then proceed to fail these viewers who have become invested in the show. This has been called “The Bury Your Gays” trope, “The Dead Lesbian” trope, “The Dead Lesbian Syndrome” trope (Guerrero-Pico et al., 2018) or as Bingham (2016: 145) calls it, “The Lesbian Death” trope. This is extremely harmful because killing off a significant number of LGBT characters perpetuates the idea that LGBT people cannot have “happy endings” like cisgender straight people can. LGBT fans have called out television show producers on how they include LGBT characters only for shows’ ratings, make said characters fall into harmful tropes and kill them while still commercially profiting from LGBT viewers (Guerrero-Pico et al., 2018: 237).

While there are countless television shows and movies of different genres where it is expected for the heterosexual (additionally, white, cisgender, able-bodied, and conventionally attractive) couple to end up together, LGBT viewers have started to expect that something bad is bound to happen to their pairing if it becomes actualized and the characters are explicitly LGBT. This can be seen when we compare two articles published by *Autostraddle*: Bernard (2016) listed all 198 dead openly lesbian and bisexual female characters on television whereas Hogan (2016) listed all 29 lesbian and bisexual female television characters who got happy endings. Bernard’s (2016) list has characters from different (although mostly anglophone) countries’ television shows, and the characters who were “the victim of the week” on shows such as *C.S.I.* were not included. Bernard’s (2016) list starts from 1976 and one can see from the list that when there was more representation of women who love women, there were also more deaths.

A good example of this phenomenon is the television year 2016 in the United States. According to GLAAD (Yohannes, 2016), 25 lesbian and bisexual characters died during the first 10 months of 2016, 12 of which in only 3 months’ time. 62 lesbian and bisexual female characters were killed off in two years (42 in just one year), the highest percentage since 1976 when the first explicitly LGBT character on television was killed off (Jackman, 2017; Phillips, 2017). Another source,

LGBT Fans Deserve Better⁷ (Jackman, 2017), states that 23% of all lesbian and bisexual women on television during the last decade have died. The President of GLAAD stated that:

Most of these deaths served no other purpose than to further the narrative of a more central (and often straight, cisgender) character. When there are so few lesbian and bisexual women on television, the decision to kill these characters in droves sends a toxic message about the worth of queer female stories (Phillips, 2017).

LGBT Fans Deserve Better (Phillips, 2017) explains the matter by saying that the issue is not merely that LGBT characters die on television; the problem is caused by how often especially lesbian and bisexual female characters die in comparison to straight characters. For example, the death of Poussey Washington, a black lesbian, on *Orange is the New Black* (2016) was described as a slap in the face by many viewers. Washington was a very likable, well-rounded character who had just found her will to live again with her new girlfriend when she was suffocated to death by a prison officer. Washington's "I can't breathe" paralleled with the last words of Eric Garner, an unarmed black man suffocated by a police officer in New York City in 2014 (BBC News, 2019). The audience of *Orange is the New Black* was upset by this, especially when the show's take on police brutality against African Americans painted the prison officer as a likable person for whom the viewer was expected to feel sorry.

The origins of the "Bury Your Gays" trope can be traced back to the 20th century. In 1930, the president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Will H. Hays, created a code that filmmakers were forced to follow in order to avoid boycotts (Cleghorn, 2017). According to Hays code, "sex perversion or any inference to it is forbidden" (Shurlock, 1947) meaning that same-sex relationships were not allowed to be shown in film (Cleghorn, 2017). If behavior that differed from the norm was shown, it was deemed immoral and immoral characters were punished for their immorality, which justified the deaths of LGBT characters (McConnaughy, 2016). Under the same code, filmmakers began to use stereotypes associated with LGBT people in order to include LGBT characters, which led to the birth of homophobic and transphobic stereotypes (Cleghorn, 2017; McConnaughy, 2016). "Coding" characters as LGBT (including traits that were

⁷ "LGBT fans deserve better" is an online movement sparked by the death of a lesbian character, Commander Lexa (*The 100*) in March 2016. Its goal is to improve LGBT representation instead of falling into the "Bury Your Gays" trope (Guerrero-Pico, Establés & Ventura, 2018).

not considered to be heteronormative and cisnormative) became common during this era and it was used for writing villains (McConnaughy, 2016).

Later on, McConnaughy (2016) writes, gay men were portrayed to only suffer in a world that hated them. Lesbians, in turn, were fetishized by straight men and their stories could never end happily.

According to McConnaughy (2016, no page number given):

One of the most common ways for a relationship to end in these novels⁸ was for one of the two women to die and the other to return to a straight relationship. Another common ending would be for one of the women to go insane (homosexuality was still seen as a mental illness at the time). (...) Like most cultural trends, this morphed and mutated and led to the situation we find ourselves in today, in which the most common end for a lesbian or bisexual female character in a TV show is dying. Despite the fact that queer relationships are both legal and growing more and more accepted, the trend of lesbians dying in media never slowed down. If anything, it's going stronger than ever.

As mentioned earlier, representing minorities in a positive way is crucial since it affects the way minorities are seen and treated in society. At the same time, their representation has an impact on how people from said minorities see themselves. (Dyer, 2002: 1). For the purposes of this thesis, it should be remembered that people have lived their sexualities with the help of television, movies, and press for a long time (Plummer, 2003: 275). They form their identities with the help of media and how people like them are presented in the media (Gergen, 2000: 43, as cited by Collier et al., 2009: 577). People build experiences related to identity formation vicariously through media (Gergen, 2000, Gross, 1991 and Montgomery, 1989, as cited by Collier et al., 2009: 577), which, in this case, means that media representations are a way with the help of which LGBT individuals can imagine, for example, having a same-sex relationship or coming out as transgender without having actually done that.

Since LGBT representation is often scarce in mass media, LGBT viewers find LGBT content in the subtext of the media they view and are fans of (Hanmer, 2003, 2010, 2014; Kapurch, 2015; Collier et al., 2009; Suddeth, 2017). For example, it is argued by Hanmer (2010: 150) that LGBT readings of characters' relationships help LGBT viewers rethink their own identities. This is one of

⁸ McConnaughy writes about the history of the representation of women who love women here and refers to pulp lesbian novels from the 40s and 50s.

the reasons why studying LGBT audiences is important. Different forms of media, such as television, can empower marginalized groups by giving them “the opportunity of making resisting meanings of text, society, and subjectivity in its presentation” (Fiske 1989, as cited by Hanmer, 2010: 150). This is, in a way, challenging the hegemonic practices that Demory and Pullen (2013) discuss. Understandably, the poor treatment of LGBT characters by their creators is one of the reasons why LGBT fans want to take agency and write their own narratives for example in the form of fan fiction. This is what people in femslash fandoms (discussed under the next subheading) often do.

2.3 Femslash fandoms

Fandoms are communities of practice (Hills, 2015: 360, 372). The members of communities of practice share their own ways of thinking and discoursing, learn the rules of their community and form a group identity by active participation, create their own shared repertoire of resources, and come together to perform a certain activity (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998: 81; Wenger, 2010: 179-183; Eckert, 2006: 683-684). Fans’ fandom-related pastimes are the activities of a fandom’s community of practice (Hills, 2015: 361). Jenkins (1992: 278-279) states that there are different levels of fandom activity that include consumer activism, a particular mode of reception when viewing the media one is a fan of (ibid: 277-278), and adopting the reading practices, traditions and values of one’s fandom (ibid: 278-280). Fandoms’ existence has acted as a critique of the traditional forms in which entertainment content is expected to be consumed, and fandoms lay out a premise within which fans can discuss issues such as racism, colonialism, sexuality, gender, and conformity (ibid: 283).

As stated in the glossary (Appendix 1) a femslash fandom supports a romantic relationship between two (or more) women. The popularity of femslash has been explained by the lack of representation of women who love women in television (Berger, 2010: 182). Slash itself has been defined as “relationships between characters in largely mainstream television programs which weren’t portrayed or explored in the original text” (Berger, 2010: 174). More recent fandom

research defines slash as something that transgresses the original heteronormative narrative (Bingham, 2016: 6).

For the purposes of this thesis and due to my emic knowledge on (femslash) fandom terminology, I will use the term “femslash” to describe any romantic pairing that comprises women. Using “femslash” to refer to pairings that are “only subtextual” is outdated since there are now characters that are canonically LGBT in the original source text. Moreover, it is not always clear right from the beginning whether a character is straight because they might be revealed to be something else later. Hence, something that could have been perceived as a “subtextual” romantic relationship might become main text somewhere along the way. This is closely linked to Bingham’s (2016: 6) notion that there are more overtly represented, popular same-sex relationships and characters in various source texts, yet the kind of (fem)slash that is based on characters that are LGBT in the original text is underresearched for it has not been in the interest of fan scholars. I think it is worthwhile to research the fans of all kinds of femslash pairings.

What is more, I have noticed that many fans of femslash pairings have been fans of both the canon and non-canon, and the fans who fought for explicit representation can sometimes be the reason why a pairing became canon in the first place. This can be seen with for example *Emison* on *Pretty Little Liars* (Bingham, 2016), *Brittana* on *Glee* (Pande & Moitra, 2017), and the increasing amount of the pairing of Xena and Gabrielle towards the later seasons on *Xena: Warrior Princess* (Hanmer, 2014: 609; Hanmer, 2003: 85). Additionally, I do not think it is good to differentiate between canon and non-canon femslash as it can easily contribute to the creation of a hostile fandom environment that pits pairings of women and thus also LGBT individuals against one another.

Fan culture is increasingly participatory (Berger, 2010: 175). Avid fans do not only watch their favorite show, but can also rewatch the episodes, use the show to define themselves, purchase fandom merchandise, spend their time for example reading or writing texts like fan fiction, join fan communities and attend fan conventions (Collier et al., 2009: 605). According to Staiger (2005: 114), “. . . scholars describe fan activities as a mode of reception, a creation of an interpretive community, an activism, a production of new materials, an extension into the rest of living, and an

alternative social grouping.” Bingham (2016: 126) points out that fandom participation – the kind of participation that takes place online – has become more varied: fan fiction has evolved into different digital formats such as GIFs and GIF sets.

In femslash fandoms’ case, fandom’s participatory culture becomes, in a way, even more meaningful when fandom activities and interactions are used to build and accept one’s sexual and/or gender identity. According to Hanmer (2010: 150), fans use their LGBT reading of the protagonists’ relationship to “reshape, rethink, and rewrite their own changing and challenging sexual and cultural identities.” Berger (2010: 175) states that fans who wrote fan fiction “dealt with their own sexuality through providing alternative storylines to established media texts from *Star Trek* in the 1960s to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in the 1990s”. Many fans do this even today (Aalto, 2016), which shows that femslash fandoms continue to be important communities for LGBT identity development.

Since slash fandoms that support pairings that consist of two men have been the ones to be studied more in the past, studying femslash is incredibly important. Slash fandoms – fandoms whose interest is centered around a romantic relationship between two (or more) men – have been said to consist mainly straight girls and women (Thrupkaew, 2003; Leppänen, 2008: 159). Later research has revealed that there are women of other sexualities in slash fandoms as well, but them fangirling over and writing fan fiction about cisgender white men falling in love brings about the question why men who are not e.g. white are too much of “other” to write about and why these women who are attracted to women choose not to write about women falling in love (Pande & Moitra, 2017, no page number given). I think these are questions slash fandom research should focus on more.

It is also my firm belief that studying femslash fandoms is worthwhile because femslash fandom research gets to the bottom of the experiences of LGBT people who are actually writing their own narratives and whose fandom participation facilitates personal identity formation. Femslash fandoms, in a way, are thus environments that can at best empower their LGBT members and enhance their identities (Hanmer, 2014: 609). Television and popular culture in general can empower oppressed groups because they offer tools to resist the dominant practices of society (Fiske, 1989, as cited by Hanmer, 2010: 150; Hanmer, 2003: 101). According to Hanmer (2010:

156-157; 2014: 620), online fandom can give its members agency, the incentive for identification, and offer change on personal and socio-political levels.

For example, the *Xena* fandom, studied by Hanmer (2010: 149-150; 2014: 613-614), created a community that supported the fans in their everyday lives and helped them with their struggles. Lesbian fans of *Xena* were allowed to share their feelings of isolation that they had suffered from before and many coming out stories were written on the bulletin boards where the members of the community shared their thoughts (Hanmer, 2010: 149-150). Fans were able to talk to each other no matter what their position and background offline was, and to some fans, the fan community online was the only place they could be who they really were as they were forced to live their straight lives offline (Hanmer, 2010: 152).

The *Xena* fandom was able to create a community based on similar interests without geographical or physical boundaries (Hanmer, 2010: 150-151). Hanmer (2010: 147) found out that fans of *Xena* that had belonged to its online fandom had left their husbands to live with other women they had met in the fandom, so the effect a fandom – especially fandom that empowers a person like an LGBT fandom can – should not go unnoticed.

Collier et al. (2009: 575) came up with similar results when they studied *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fandoms. Their study demonstrated that the fans normalized their sexuality with the help of the internet and television. Similarly to Hanmer's (2003, 2011, 2014) studies, in Collier and her colleagues' (2009: 575) work, the fans' experiences in their online community had helped them decrease their negative feelings about their sexualities. They were not as socially isolated as they had been before joining their online community

Moreover, the study suggested that the participants' identity and how they perceived themselves were created in an ongoing engagement with their online community and their favorite show (Collier et al., 2009: 597). Their positive group identity could be used as a buffer against stereotypes, and, just like Hanmer (2014: 613-614; 2003: 102), Collier et al., (2009: 586) found out that the online community offered its members emotional and social support. Previous research has also been conducted on how important it is for LGBT individuals to have positive contacts with

other LGBT people for their identity to develop positively (Cass, 1996, Sophie, 1982 and Troiden, 1989, as cited by Collier et al., 2009: 582) and how an LGBT individual's social environment can have an impact on their LGBT identity development (Cox & Gallois, 1996, Padesky, 1988 and Sophie, 1987, as cited by Collier et al., 2009: 582).

Suddeth (2017) discusses how the fans of a popular (non-canon) femslash pairing (called *Swan Queen*) created counternarratives online as a community and rejected the heterosexist and heteronormative storylines that the television show *Once Upon a Time* (2011-2018) presented. Even though the mission of the show was to show previously unseen content about fairytales and make modern versions of said fairytales (Suddeth, 2017: 22), the creators of *Once Upon a Time* had a rather outdated and conservative idea of what a modern fairytale means. Fans have, however, discussed their romantic readings of Emma and Regina's (*Swan Queen*'s) relationship and continued to produce fan content on different online platforms even after the cancellation of the show. The pairing is still the most popular femslash pairing on the fan fiction website archiveofourown.org (Centrumlumina, 2019). The fans of Emma and Regina have counteracted the negative effects of queerbaiting and argued against the dangerous storylines that promote heterosexism and rape culture (Suddeth, 2017: 57, 58).

Fans who belong to several marginalized groups face more bullying and ostracization than those who belong to only one or two marginalized groups. Some forms of discrimination that can be seen in fandoms (and the LGBT community) are homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, racism, ageism and ableism, which we will discuss briefly in the next section. Some of these forms of discrimination were brought up by the participants of this study several times, so it is important to address them in the background literature as well.⁹

⁹ This part of the study is limited since it does not take social class into account. The respondents were not asked questions about their wealth or upbringing and no one mentioned they had seen or experienced discrimination based on social class. The background literature thus does not have a section on social class even though it is an important demographic feature that also affects fans, especially fans who go to fan conventions and fans who would like to but cannot afford it.

2.4 Discrimination in LGBT communities and online fan communities

This subsection deals with discrimination within and against the LGBT community and the discrimination that takes place in fandoms. Discrimination in fandoms here means the kind of homophobic bullying that femslash fandoms as a whole suffer from, but there are forms of discrimination, such as biphobia, transphobia, and racism that may come from other, in some cases more privileged, members of the same community (Aalto, 2016: 23). We will now take a look at each issue one by one for clarity, even though it is clear that people often have intersecting minority identities.

2.4.1 Homophobia in fan communities

As they are mainly LGBT spaces, femslash fandoms usually suffer from homophobic bullying from the rest of the fandom. This form of discrimination is predominantly carried out as cyberbullying¹⁰. This is because the interactions and activities of femslash fandoms mainly take place online – apart from offline events such as fan conventions.

It is relatively easy to attack someone verbally online since it can be done anonymously and such bullying is not restricted by the conventions of face-to-face interactions (Rice et al. 2015: 66). Sending anonymous harassment to other fans allows the perpetrators to deliver their speech as a monologue instead of trying to have a dialogue. It can give them a sense of disinhibition that moves them further away from social norms and takes away the responsibility that they would normally have in a face-to-face conversation. Anonymity emboldens many fans to harass others after they have depersonalized and dehumanized them based on stereotypes of a certain social identity. (Reinhard, 2018: 102-104, 106-107).

Moreover, fans generally rely on heuristics and stereotypes to classify one another (for example in terms of gender, sexuality, and skin color), so they may often rely on shortcuts without actually

¹⁰ Cyberbullying is defined as “the willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, or other electronic devices.” (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009: 5).

trying to communicate with each other (Reinhard, 2018: 81). A typical fan is heterosexual, white, and middle-class¹¹, a person who fits into many “unmarked” categories (Stanfill, 2011, no page number given). If the identity of a fan does not correspond with that of an “archetypal” fan, they can encounter discrimination based on their identity (Reinhard, 2018: 81). This could partly explain why homophobia and other forms of discrimination are so common in fandoms. According to Hills (1999, as cited by Hanmer 2003: 82), the heterosexual part of a fandom is seen as ideal and dominant. LGBT fans’ readings of characters’ relationships are therefore perceived as inferior to straight fans’ readings.

Fans who strongly identify as fans are more likely to have strong feelings about their object of fandom (Reinhard, 2018: 82). This is also linked to being more negative towards the outer group – people who are not fans of the same thing (ibid: 82). When we apply this to shipping, the issue becomes heightened because the fans of the “opposing ship” ship¹² a part of their pairing with someone else. When the shippers of a male/female pairing are often heterosexual and may be overtly homophobic or have underlying issues with sexual minorities, femslash shippers, in turn, are often LGBT and their pairing represents self-acceptance and liberation from heteronormativity. It is, therefore, no surprise that the arguments of these groups may become personal and vehement. The *Xena: Warrior Princess* fandom is an example of this: the groups of heterosexual fans and those who were not were often hostile against each other and debated over the meaning of (sub)text (Pullen, 2000: 57; Hanmer 2003: 85)

Even though the last episodes of *Xena* aired in 2001, I found out in my previous study (Aalto: 2016) that the situation has not changed much since then: LGBT fans still suffer from cyberbullying from cisgender straight fans. The most common insult thrown at femslash shippers is to call them delusional, which invalidates both the fan’s sexuality and their personal reading of a text that is important to them (Aalto, 2016: 14). This can be accompanied with telling an LGBT person to stop pushing their “gay agenda” (ibid: 14). It is also very common to use slurs (such as *dyke*) and generally offensive words (e.g. *bitch*, *disgusting*, *stupid*, *cunt*) when attacking a femslasher online (ibid: 14). Some are told to kill themselves or they are told that they will be

¹¹ Stanfill (2011) also points out maleness as a standard feature of a fan, but we cannot apply that to femslash fandoms.

¹² The word “ship” is used both as a noun and a verb in fandom discourse.

killed or raped (ibid: 14). Hate speech and verbal attacks are present rather constantly in femslash fandoms even though every fan does not see it daily: 13% of my BA thesis' respondents reported they saw verbal attacks daily, 32% weekly or several times a week, 29% a few times a month, and 26% hardly ever (ibid: 18).

Verbal attacks and hate speech have been discussed even more recently by Suddeth (2017: 45-49). Suddeth (2017) analyzes one specific hate message sent on Tumblr with a lot of detail, showing how an anonymous fan commits hate speech by willfully harassing and harming a group of blog owners and the rest of a femslash fan community. The anonymous message analyzed by Suddeth (2017) shows examples of some of the most common hate message types that the respondents of my study (Aalto: 2016: 14) reported. The anonymous fan uses a slur and other offensive words to describe sexual minorities, tells them that they have already ruined the show and blame them for bullying show writers, tells them to stop pushing their (gay) agenda, tells them they will not let their children watch the kind of show femslash fans want, and tells femslash fans to fuck off, curl up, and die (Suddeth, 2017: 45). The fact that these kinds of messages are common to receive even today is incredibly alarming. It also shows us that the issues these bullies have are not even related to fandom or shipping, but their homophobic ideology in general.

2.4.2 Biphobia and bisexual erasure in and outside the LGBT community

Even though bisexuality is the most common identity in the LGBT community (Gates, 2011; Mercado, 2017) and bisexuals have played a significant role in the development of LGBT rights (Marcus, 2015: 297), they face discrimination and bisexual erasure from in and outside the LGBT community (Marcus, 2015: 295; Brewster & Moradi, 2010: 451-452; Weinberg, Williams & Pryor, 1998: 177). They have struggled to have their sexuality recognized as a valid, separate sexuality in the dichotomous framework for sexuality for a long time (Haeberle, 1998: 32-33).

Bisexuals are rendered “secondary” members of the LGBT community and they face stereotypes of being confused, greedy, ingenuine, unstable, untrustworthy, immature, suspicious, and hypersexual (Marcus, 2015: 295; Hayfield, Clarke & Halliwell, 2014: 367-376). Their existence is

often denied completely by telling them that they are going through a phase before realizing they are either gay or straight (Marcus, 2015: 295, 297; Hayfield et al., 204: 367-369). Some gay men and lesbians think that bisexuals are a threat to the acceptance of the community, do not belong in the community in the first place, or should separate themselves from the community and create their own separate community¹³ (Weiss, 2004: 29). This is extremely bizarre and upsetting, especially since, as mentioned above, bisexual people have played a role in the LGBT rights movement just as much as everyone else. A lot of the discussion on bisexuality is, however, centered around these negative themes (Marcus, 2015: 297) and bisexual identities are often seen as invalid or they are not recognized at all (Gonzalez, Ramirez & Galupo, 2017: 494). This can be seen in research as well (Haeberle, 1998: 41-47). It is also worthwhile to note that bisexuals have reported that negative attitudes and the invalidation of their identity hurt the most when it comes from lesbians and gay men because their intolerance comes as a surprise while straight people's might not (Weinberg et al., 1998: 177).

It has been argued that one reason why it can be so hard to accept bisexuality as a valid sexual orientation lies within how sexuality in the West is generally perceived. The approach to sexuality is often taken from the point of view of being either gay/lesbian or straight. This dichotomous framework creates an environment where it is easy for bisexual erasure and biphobia to exist. (Morgan and Davis-Delano, 2016 and Yoshino, 2000, as cited by Gonzalez et al., 2017: 495; Haeberle, 1998: 32). People who are only interested in one gender often tell bisexuals that they should "pick a side" because not being in the straight or gay camp makes them uncomfortable (Gagnon, Greenblat & Kimmel, 1998: 100-101). Another reason found for the resentment of bisexuals in the past has come from lesbians whose "lesbianism" has been a purely political choice against the patriarchy and they see bisexual women as traitors who still "define themselves in terms of male needs" (Orlando, 1984, as cited by Paul, 1998: 131-132).

It is very important to remember that bisexuals are neither straight nor gay/lesbian (Gonzalez et al., 2017: 511) and that the sexuality of a bisexual person is not dependent on who they are currently romantically affiliated with (Marcus: 2015: 296) or if they are single. It should also be remembered that bisexual people have described their sexuality to transcend sex and gender,

¹³ Weiss (2004) discusses the discrimination faced by both bisexuals and transgender people here.

meaning that many bisexuals feel attracted to “all genders”, including non-binary genders (Gonzalez et al., 2017: 511; Rust, 2000: 52). At the same time, it should be remembered that bisexuality and sexualities in general are not (most often) a political choice or statement and a woman being bisexual does not automatically make her any less a feminist than a lesbian, even though that has been claimed in the past (Orlando, 1984, as cited by Paul, 1998: 131-132).

The fact that bisexuality has not been and still is not viewed and presented as a valid sexuality has negative effects on bisexual people. Weinberg et al. (1998) interviewed 93 bisexuals about the development of their bisexual identity¹⁴. Bisexuals who had not realized they were bisexual yet faced initial confusion when starting to realize their attraction differed from the norm. The same has been claimed to happen with gay men and lesbians, but in these bisexuals’ case, they often struggled with the fact that they could not find a word that described their feelings. They did not feel gay or straight, but many felt like they should automatically choose one of the two. For many of the interviewees of the study, becoming familiar with the term bisexual and finding out that they could categorize themselves as liking multiple genders was a turning point. Identifying as bisexual felt validating and liberating as they did not have to censor their feelings for a certain gender. (ibid: 169-173).

The unease the respondents felt about their sexuality was much due to the dichotomous framework for sexuality that was mentioned earlier (Weinberg et al., 1998: 170-173). The lack of social support and validation, especially from gay men and lesbians, had also led some of the respondents to internal self-doubt of identity (ibid: 176-177). We should thus note that the way we talk about and recreate dichotomous sexuality discourse through our words is problematic and causes people who are attracted to multiple genders unnecessary, extra distress and uncertainty that would not be there if bisexuality was discussed more and recognized better.

Furthermore, recent research shows that negative attitudes towards bisexual people affect their health. Bisexual people are more likely to have mental health issues since they face pressures

¹⁴ It should be noted that Weinberg et al. collected their data in the middle of the 80s, so quite a bit has happened since then and people have a better chance to come across with the term bisexual, especially online. Still, their study highlights the issue of bisexual erasure while also pointing out what kind of negative consequences a dichotomous approach to sexuality can have on bisexual individuals.

others do not (Petter, 2017). Bisexual people are more likely to have anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts and the reason for this is because they often feel like they do not belong to any community and face double discrimination while being invisible, invalidated and stigmatized (Petter, 2017; Allen, 2017a). Their loneliness and isolation can lead to mental health issues. To make matters worse, they do not have the same kind of access to support like the rest of the community does because they are often not recognized as a group of their own with specific needs. (Petter, 2017). It should also be noted that bisexual women have higher rates of addiction and substance abuse (Shearing, 2018; Allen, 2017a) and bisexual men face more risks of sexually transmitted diseases than gay men (Gagnon et al., 1998: 101). This is because bisexual men are closeted more often (due to heteronormativity and bisexual erasure) than gay men and do not have the same access to information about safe sex practices (ibid).

Bisexual women are also more likely to face abuse than straight and lesbian women (Shearing, 2018). Bisexuals who experience multiple oppressions (for example being transgender or having a disability) face the highest rates of sexual violence, bisexual transgender women being the most at risk. Bisexual women have the highest risk of facing rape, sexual assault, domestic violence and stalking, 75% of them having been subjected to the first two. They are five times more likely than straight women to face abuse from a partner. One reason for this is the hypersexualization of bisexual women and how their sexuality is presented to exist for the pleasure of straight men in pornography. Biphobia and negative stereotypes (that have been mentioned above) about bisexuals contribute to and normalize violence against bisexual women, as they are seen as people who are not trustworthy, which has been directly linked to intimate partner violence. (ibid: no page number given).

For these reasons, discussing the stereotypes, discrimination, and violence bisexual people face is extremely crucial when we discuss LGBT issues and the LGBT community. Bisexuality is a valid sexuality and it should be viewed as such from in and outside the community. I would also like to point out that many of the issues bisexual people face also concern other people who are attracted to multiple genders (for example people who identify as pansexual or queer), but for simplicity's sake and because of the history of the word (it has been in use longer than for example pansexuality), I referred to bisexuality when discussing these themes.

2.4.3 Transphobia in the LGBT community and online fan communities

Statistics show us that transgender people often face more discrimination and prejudice than sexual minorities (Farr, 2010: 96), sexual minorities are represented better and their issues are discussed more (Weiss, 2011: 501), and transgender people are more likely to suffer from hate crimes than sexual minorities¹⁵ (Marsh, Mohdin & McIntyre, 2019). They are often forced to hide their true gender to be accepted and to avoid violence and rejection¹⁶ (Farr, 2010: 96). Much like bisexuals, transgender people face gatekeeping from the rest of the LGBT community – this is done by assessing who is “queer enough” and who belongs into the community (Edwards, 2010: 164-165; Weiss, 2011: 499). This kind of gatekeeping is a prime example of the transphobia (and biphobia) in the LGBT community.

It should be noted that transphobia has existed in the LGBT community since its birth. This, too, is extremely bizarre because the first activists for the “gay rights movement” could have easily identified as transgender if they had been given the terms that we use to describe gender today. Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera were both prominent figures in the start of the battle for equal rights, yet both Johnson and Rivera felt like they were ignored by the movement they helped to get started because they were drag queens and transvestites. (Graves, 2018). Rivera was booed at for trying to speak at the liberation march in 1973 (four years after Stonewall) because cisgender lesbians did not want a drag queen to speak at the event. (Graves, 2018; Cox, 2014; Weiss, 2004: 40). Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, who is a transgender activist and a Stonewall veteran, confirms that these attitudes persist today and the mainstream “gay rights movement” attempts to keep transgender people and People of Color out of the community (Graves, 2018).

¹⁵ The statistics presented by Marsh, Mohdin and McIntyre (2019) concern England and Wales. The same article also points out that race/ethnicity was a factor in 76% of the reported hate crimes whereas sexual orientation was a factor in only 12%. This is not to say that there are only a few hate crimes towards sexual minorities – their amount had doubled in five years – but we should remember to view these crimes with an intersectional approach. It should also be noted that stating that transgender people face more discrimination than sexual minorities is ethnocentric and clearly shows that I live in a Western country myself. In Iran and Pakistan, for example, the situation is reversed (Equaldex, 2020; Sobel, 2018).

¹⁶This, of course, is not to say that gay and multiple-gender-attracted people do not face violence and rejection or that they are not forced to hide their true identities.

When discussing the discrimination that transgender people face in the LGBT community, it is important to note that they face hostility from radical lesbian feminists (Compton, 2019; Graves, 2018). According to said radical feminists, transgender women are not women, but men who colonize the female body for their own patriarchal interests (Graves, 2018) and harm women, particularly lesbians, and their rights (Compton, 2019). Though one could imagine that this kind of thought model would have come less popular after more information on transgender issues has emerged and the general atmosphere towards the LGBT community is more positive than ever, that is not really the case. Compton (2019) writes that the “decades-old animosity between transgender activists and “radical” lesbian feminists – who have conflicting views on gender – has reached a boiling point on social media and in real life.” In addition to hate speech and personal attacks on social media, transgender women have been targeted with hostility by trans-exclusionary radical feminists at public events such as Pride (ibid).

Weiss (2004: 29-30) suggests that one reason for cisgender gay men and lesbians’ discrimination against transgender people has been the fact that it is easier to get the cis-heteronormative society’s approval when one is able to say that gay people are “just like you.” Including transgender people (and bisexuals) in that battle, she argues, makes gay men and lesbians lose their leverage since it is harder to convince that transgender people, too, want to live the same middle-class life and are “just like you.” Talusan (2014) gives examples of the general disinterest many cisgender gay men and lesbians seem to have for transgender rights and how they were ready to throw transgender people under the bus in order to get better rights for themselves. Talusan (2014) points out that transgender people in the United States are dehumanized now similarly to how gay people were thirty years ago. They face lack of respect from cisgender gay members of the community, similarly to how they are not respected by cisgender straight people. An example of this is the use of the slur “tranny”, which is used casually by cisgender gay men while perpetrators of hate crimes use the same word when physically and verbally attacking transgender individuals. (ibid).

It is not possible for fans to exist in a safe space free from ideologies that manifest in expectations and stereotypes regarding certain groups of people, such as transgender people (Reinhard, 2018: 106). Bingham (2016: 162-166) gives an example of transphobia occurring in online fandom

environments when he discusses the *Pretty Little Liars* fandom. According to Bingham (2016: 159), a fan with a noticeable number of Facebook followers created discourse that perpetuated transphobic fandom environment. Bingham (2016: 163-166) presents memes and transphobic commentary that were created after a character on the show was revealed to be transgender. Memes posted by the fan portrayed the transgender identity as inauthentic and two-faced, made fun of transgender people, and called transgender women men. Bingham (2016: 164) states that the content posted on the page not only rejects the character being transgender but rejects the transgender identity in general.¹⁷ Seeing this kind of discourse would evidently have very negative effects on transgender fans following the page (or fans who would see the content without following the page).

The discrimination transgender people face affects their lives from early on: 87% of transgender students are harassed in school due to their gender expression, they miss school because they are concerned for their safety and thus have lower grades, they are not as likely to go to college as cisgender people, and over 50% of transgender teens have attempted suicide before they turn 20 (Keo-Meier & Hicks, 2015, Greytak, Kosciw & Diaz, 2009 and Orr & Baum, 2015, as cited by Putzi, 2017: 424-425). In addition to the discrimination transgender people face in their social groups, it is crucial to note that they face significant erasure in healthcare, which can often lead to mistrust and resentment of the healthcare system (LeBreton, 2013: 19). Even though gender being a spectrum is recognized in many other fields, cisnormativity and focusing on the binary approach to gender is common among healthcare practitioners. The nullification of transgenderism leads to the institutional erasure of trans people's existence that is shown through policies and documents that do not take transgender individuals into account¹⁸. This is incredibly worrying, especially because this kind of institutional transgender erasure leads to social marginalization which causes further health inequities. (ibid: 18).

¹⁷ Bingham (2016: 163) also mentions two important issues related to the character: she is portrayed by a cisgender actress and she is a villain, which makes the transgender community look bad since the only transgender representation of the show is negative. This was discussed more in section 2.2.3.

¹⁸ Le Breton (2013: 19) presents two examples of transgender patients who cannot even make it past the waiting room of a hospital because the nurse calls them in by their birthname/deadname. One of them goes into panic because she has been called in as "Mr" and thus leaves the hospital, and another patient one is told that he cannot enter the nurse's room because his gender does not match his birthname "Lily."

LeBreton (2013: 18) also points out that the number of transgender people is actually much higher than what is shown in official records. This is because many transgender people do not want to change their appearance or do not actually go to any clinic for their gender. The underestimation of the number of transgender individuals, together with different forms of erasure, can easily lead to overlooking the issues they face due to the erasure and invalidation of their gender identity. This, both personally harms trans people and weakens the healthcare system as an institution. (ibid).

All these issues related to the discrimination of transgender individuals are important to discuss when we talk about LGBT issues. We need take the hostility transgender people face within the LGBT community (and on the institutional level, for example in healthcare) seriously. The respondents of this study were thus asked whether they had seen transphobic discrimination or prejudices in fandom.

2.4.4 Racism in the LGBT community and online fan communities

In addition to homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia, LGBT People of Color face racial discrimination that comes from white LGBT people (Balsam et al., 2011; Johnson, 2014; Jones, 2016; Taylor-Stone, 2016). Even though many rights all LGBT people have today were thanks to LGBT People of Color (Jones, 2016), the LGBT community is not automatically a safe space for them. Indeed, previous research (Ferguson, 2004, Giwa and Greensmith, 2012 and Muños, 1999, as cited by Johnson 2014: 284-285) has shown that the LGBT community can be an unsafe place even for adult LGBT People of Color due to its racist and classist politics. Same-sex desire has often been equated with whiteness (Johnson, 2014: 281), and due to their intersecting minority identities, LGBT people of color can face exclusion from both LGBT and ethnic minority communities (Johnson, 2014: 284).

Balsam et al. (2011) conducted a study where LGBT People of Color disclosed that they are being looked down upon by white LGBT people and feel like they are misunderstood by them (ibid: 167). The study also revealed that they face difficulties in finding a partner because of their ethnicity (ibid: 167). In addition to exclusion and rejection because of their ethnicity, LGBT

People of Color face sexual objectification that is based on their ethnicity (ibid: 166). Balsam et al. (2011: 164) refer to previous studies that have had similar findings: Kudler (2007) and Han (2007) discuss how ethnic minority LGBT people have been denied entry to LGBT spaces, for example African Americans have been denied entry to gay bars; Ward (2008) shows that LGBT organizations often serve white LGBT people; Phua and Kaufmann (2003) reveal the racism in the dating ads of men who search for men, and Mays, Cochran and Rhue (1993) talk about how black lesbians do not want to date white lesbians due to the racism they have been subjected to by them. In addition, LGBT People of Color face both racist and heterosexist microaggressions (Balsam et al., 2011) when people belonging into only one of these groups suffer from fewer types of microaggressions. These microaggressions are sometimes hard for the perpetrators to see, but they can have a severe impact on the victims' mental health (ibid: 163-164, 171).

A more recent article by Jones (2016) deals with this as well, which shows that the LGBT community, or the white LGBT people in it, are not moving forward and will not become more accepting or aware of this serious issue. According to Jones (2016), it is essential that this problem be addressed and that white LGBT people see that even though they are part of a minority, that will not make them exempt from being discriminatory towards another minority (the members of which often have intersecting identities with the LGBT community). Similarly to Balsam et al. (2011), Jones (2016) mentions both the objectification and rejection that come with being an LGBT Person of Color and racist dating sites and applications. In addition to this, Jones (2016) writes about Chardine Taylor-Stone's *Stop Rainbow Racism* (2016) campaign that was a response to a white gay man's drag act that featured a blackface and several degrading black working-class woman stereotypes for non-black LGBT people to laugh at. Jones (2016) also discusses islamophobia in the LGBT community and how the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando gave people an excuse to portray Muslims as a threat to LGBT people when there are LGBT Muslims who would benefit greatly from being included and feeling welcome in the LGBT community.

Racism is a serious problem in fandoms as well. Firstly, the archetypal fan is white: fans are expected to be white and fans shown in the media are most often white (Stanfill, 2011, no page number given; Stanfill, 2019, no page number given). The identity of a non-white fan is not therefore archetypal – it is marked – and they may be discriminated against just for the color of

their skin (Reinhard, 2018: 81; Stanfill, 2011). They are thus easily othered in the fandom environment by more privileged, white fans (Reinhard, 2018: 107).

Secondly, as we saw earlier, the positive representation of People of Color is insufficient in the entertainment media. This can be directly seen in the way they are treated in fandoms. When there *is* positive representation, white fans start making remarks that are either overtly or covertly racist. Basti3n (2016, no page number given) brings this up in her article when she discusses, for example, the fandom of *The Flash*. The love interest of the white lead superhero of the show (Barry Allen) is a black woman called Iris West. Iris gets hated on by the racist part of the fandom constantly even though she is a likeable, beautiful character, and it does not take much to figure out why. Basti3n (2016) writes:

The attacks on her character range from obvious bigotry referring to her as a monkey to more subtle remarks about how the two love interests don't "look good together". Look through Tumblr, Twitter, or even the recaps on popular sites and you'll find an inordinate amount of hate toward Iris for things other white female characters get a pass for. The fandom for shows like this have always been intense, but the issues with Iris often seem less based in the writers not using her well enough, and more in her not being a blank slate that white fans can project their desires or identity upon. Being a woman of color and enjoying these storylines means you learn quite young to see yourself in places the creators can't imagine people like you exist. For the first time, white male audiences are asked to empathize with characters who don't look like them in properties they have intense nostalgia for.

Basti3n (2016) gives other examples of similar animosity towards people of color in fandoms: Zendaya as Mary Jane Watson in *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, the cast of *Luke Cage*, Leslie Jones getting more hate than her white co-stars when they were casted for the new all-female version of *Ghostbusters*... The list goes on. Pande and Moitra (2017) give an example that is very similar to Iris West when they discuss the *Star Trek* fandom and the subversive act of placing Nyota Uhura (a black woman) as Spock's (a white man) love interest in the 2009 reboot movie. Uhura got an exceptional amount of hate from the *Star Trek* fandom, especially from people who ship Spock and Kirk (two white men) together (ibid). Though I am not very familiar with *Star Trek* or *The Flash*, I do not find any of this surprising; I have seen this kind of behavior in fandom

environments ever since I was a teenager with e.g. Martha Jones (Freema Agyeman) from *Doctor Who*, Bonnie Bennett (Kat Graham) from *The Vampire Diaries*, Regina Mills/the Evil Queen (Lana Parrilla) from *Once Upon a Time*, and more recently when John Boyega was cast to play Finn in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*.

Pande and Moitra (2017, no page number given) give specific examples of racism in femslash fandoms. The pairings they have chosen for these examples are femslash pairings where one or both of the characters are Women of Color: *Brittana* on *Glee* (the character Santana Lopez), *Korrasami* on *The Legend of Korra* (both Korra and Asami), and *Swan Queen* on *Once Upon a Time* (the character Regina Mills/the Evil Queen). In the *Brittana* fandom's case, Pande and Moitra (2017) found out that fan fiction writers – despite putting much work into other research for their writing – often overlooked Santana's ethnicity in fan fiction. When they examine the fans of the *Korrasami* pairing, they give examples of whitewashing in fan art, placing the darker-skinned Korra as someone who needs to be tamed in alternate universes,¹⁹ and erasing ethnicity and skin color intentionally and unintentionally, which reinforces racist narratives. (ibid).

After these two fandoms, they give examples of the fandom of *Swan Queen*. The fandom has an issue with recognizing the character of Regina Mills as Latina even though she is played by a Puerto-Rican Italian actress Lana Parrilla who identifies as Latina and has stated that her character is Latina as well. (ibid). The character has been whitewashed by the fandom, fans have erased her latinidad by saying it is not canonical even though the actress is Latina, and they have refused to acknowledge the issue altogether. This, as pointed out by a Chinese-American fan in the study, is problematic because People of Color do not have the option to be treated without their ethnicity and skin color in real life, so dismissing the issue as unimportant means overlooking the hardships real people have to face. (ibid). Pande and Moitra (ibid) also give two examples of fan fiction where Regina Mills' latinidad has been acknowledged well.

¹⁹ Alternate universe here refers to a reality in a different time and/or place where the same characters exist and live, but their lives can be very different from the original source text. They can be placed into another reality that we know from somewhere else. This is common in fan fiction and different forms of fan art. The example of *Korrasami* that Pande and Moitra (2017) gave was a *Tarzan* alternate universe (which, as they point out, is racist itself) where Korra was Tarzan and Asami Jane. In this story, the darker-skinned Korra was “cast in the role of the uncivilized brute who must be tamed” (ibid).

Another recent example of racism in femslash fandoms are the interviews conducted by Stanfill (2019). Stanfill (2019, no page number given) interviewed fans of color who belonged to a femslash fandom (the above-mentioned *Swan Queen* fandom). The respondents said that they consider femslash fandoms to be more progressive than straight fandoms, but it should be noted that one respondent said that “[t]he presence of LGBTQ people in femslash fandoms gives people an excuse not to question unconscious racist ideas or beliefs” and another added that “they tend to think they're shielded from much of the criticism due to their membership in a marginalized group.” (ibid). This is directly connected to the racism that the LGBT community as a whole suffers from (discussed earlier under this subheading).

In addition to this, Stanfill’s (2019) interviewees pointed out the covertly racist way white femslash shippers dismiss interracial ships by saying they “do not ship heterosexual ships” and may attack people who do so (much like straight fans attack femslash fans for shipping femslash). They have also noticed that shows that have representation of LGBT Women of Color are automatically rejected by some white fans without them having seen the show. The interviewees have also experienced that pointing out racism and talking about race issues makes them “that difficult PoC fan” and hurting white people’s feelings becomes more relevant than the group suffering from racism. The interviewees have been told that they should be grateful with what they already have, which is evidently less than what white fans have. The respondents have also felt like the more privileged part of the fandom finds it easier to pretend that nothing is wrong instead of facing issues such as racism, transphobia, and ableism. They have also run into fetishization based on ethnicity in fan fiction. One of the interviewees, a black woman, says that fandom hates black people, but still listens to her when she talks about race and privilege, which puts her in a position where she feels both respected and targeted. (ibid).

There is one very recent example of racism in a large online fandom that should be mentioned here as well: the *Star Wars* fandom. The racism in the *Star Wars* fandom has been discussed recently by Coker and Viars (2017) and Zimmerman (2018). Coker and Viars (2017) demonstrate how John Boyega’s character Finn in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* was met by racism by a large part of the fandom. Coker and Viars (2017) also discovered that despite the fact that there were many fans who loved the three main characters of the movie – Finn (played by an actor with British

Nigerian parents), Rey (played by a white British actress), and Poe (played by a Guatemalan-American actor) – a notable part of the fandom seemed to be more interested in the white male villains who were not playing as big a part in the movie as the three aforementioned characters. What was even more worrisome was that the characters of Kylo Ren and General Hux were, as Cokers and Viars (2017) put it “actual space nazis” and the fan fiction writing part of the fandom was knowingly “writing romances about genocidal fascists.” It is more common to write slash stories about these two fascist white men than for example about Finn and Poe (the second most popular pairing of the movie. The third most popular pairing ships Rey with her abuser, Kylo Ren, which is also extremely alarming). According to Coker and Viars (2017), this is an example of the white villains fan culture where fascist white villains are valued over diverse heroes.

Zimmerman (2018) writes about a more recent *Star Wars* movie, *The Last Jedi*. The movie featured the character of Rose Tico who was portrayed by Kelly Marie Tran, an American actress of Vietnamese descent. Tran was the first Woman of Color to have a leading role in the franchise, and she emptied all her social media accounts because of the immense online abuse she was receiving from the fandom (ibid). Zimmerman (2018) writes about fans who started movements to boycott the movie, called it “anti-white propaganda,” and found different ways to throw racist insults at Tran. The *Star Wars* fandom is only one example of a fandom in which this kind of discrimination takes place, but in its case, it is easy to see how making more diverse casting choices can set off racist (and otherwise bigoted) uproar.

It is for these reasons that the racist nature of fandoms should not be overlooked; it should be discussed when other discrimination in fandom spaces is discussed.

2.4.5 Ageism in the LGBT community

Even though age is not the focus of this thesis, we should still take a look at age when studying discrimination based on demographic qualities. LGBT elders report that they are not comfortable with mainstream LGBT organizations due to their ageism, but they simultaneously feel ostracized from traditional aging services because of homophobia (Parson, 2014; Redman, 2012).

Many elderly LGBT people feel invisible in their own community where youth is seen as the norm more than in the cisgender heterosexual world. Ageism runs rampant in the LGBT scene; Robinson (2008, as cited by Parson, 2014: 9) goes as far as to say that youthfulness is more pronounced in the gay world than anywhere in the contemporary Western society. The majority of the elderly interviewees in Woody's (2014: 158) study said that they do not want to go to (generally accepting) social venues such as clubs because the culture there is so youth-oriented and they receive mean stares and comments due to their age when they go there. A butch elderly lesbian interviewed for Parson's (2014: 9) article said that she could walk into a lesbian bar with her "short haircut, and pink triangle tattoo, waving a rainbow flag" and the women at the bar would ask her if she was looking for her granddaughter

This youth-oriented culture is particularly harmful to LGBT elders because they are more likely to live alone and less likely to have children of their own to rely on than the cisgender straight elderly (Parson, 2014: 9; Woody, 2014: 158). This does not mean that LGBT elders do not have families – the concept of chosen family is very common in the LGBT community – but a lot of these families are of the same age cohort (Parson, 2014: 9). In addition, the maltreatment of the LGBT elderly in institutions frightens them: Woody (2014, 159) found out that not being able to keep their health or wealth was exceptionally distressing to LGBT elderly. Many of Woody's (2014: 152-153) participants also said people in the medical field made assumptions about them (for example expected them to have HIV) and they were so scared of rejection and abandonment that they did not want to show their true identity.

The participants of Woody's (2014) were African American LGBT elders. The findings of Woody's (2014: 157) study were similar to the ones presented earlier in this thesis: LGBT elders felt like the color of their skin could lead to isolation in the LGBT community. They had felt a sense of otherness for their whole lives, felt an aversion to LGBT labels, and faced discrimination from organized religion (ibid: 160). All this is important when we study sexual and gender minorities: the faces represented most in the media are not the ones that face most trouble for who they are.

2.4.6 Ableism in the LGBT community

Many chronically ill people from sexual and gender minorities have experienced ableism in the LGBT community. According to a survey study conducted by Jowett and Peel (2009: 461), many chronically ill LGBT people felt that in order to get support for their illness from the LGBT community, their illness had to be an issue specifically related to the LGBT community (for example HIV/AIDS and breast cancer). Just like many other minorities, LGBT people living with disabilities felt like minority within a minority (ibid: 464), which shows how important intersectionality is when discussing these issues.

Some respondents stated that the LGBT community reflected the ableism in society at large (ibid: 461). They had been left by their community, friends and partners and faced social isolation after they had fallen ill (ibid: 461, 463). With illnesses such as diabetes, asthma and epilepsy, people did not go to LGBT bars for health reasons even though they were not completely cut off from the community like people who needed more assistance (ibid: 464). Chronically ill gay men felt like they had faced a lot of ableism because the hegemonic gay man is in great shape (ibid: 462). The study by Henry, Fuerth and Figliozzi (2010) had similar results: the participant of their study²⁰ felt like the relationships in the LGBT community revolved around physical attributes instead of emotional ones and he thus had difficulty establishing dating relationships. For the purposes of this thesis, it is very important to note that the respondents of Stanfill's (2019) interviews reported that their femslash fandom environment refused to acknowledge its ableism.

In addition to being rejected by the LGBT community, many of the respondents of Jowett and Peel's (2009: 467-468) study had been on the receiving end of homophobia from healthcare professionals. Nurses and doctors had informed their vulnerable patients that they did not accept who they were and how they lived their life. Some had never shared their sexuality with healthcare professionals for they had feared how it might affect their care. (ibid: 467-468). One gay respondent pointed out their privilege as an affluent white man and said that their social status had had to do with their adequate health care, while some others pointed out that they had had positive encounters with health professionals who were also LGBT (ibid: 469). It should also be

²⁰ The participant was a gay college student with Cerebral Palsy and learning disabilities.

remembered that transgender people often face most difficulties in healthcare (LeBreton, 2013: 18-19, discussed more in 2.4.3).

On a more positive note, when a chronically ill person's partner had some kind of disability as well, it strengthened their bond (Jowett & Peel, 2009: 464). Some participants had found fellow disabled LGBT people online and they had thus gotten support there (ibid: 464). This is an important notion because this thesis deals with people with marginalized identities who have found support and community online. It should also be noted that many respondents of Jowett and Peel's (2009: 465-466) study found their illness-related support groups heteronormative and they were afraid to disclose their identity due to their fear of homophobia. These support groups were thus unappealing and did not address their needs, which makes the support coming from and specifically directed at LGBT individuals extremely important.

To sum up...

All in all, the background literature of this thesis shows that online LGBT communities are places where people gain information, experiment, and form identities with the help of others. These communities give people whose offline social circles might not accept them the opportunity to be their authentic selves. Femslash fandoms, in turn, are online communities that mainly consist of LGBT people who are the fans of the same romantic pairing of two or more women. Femslash fans find community and offer support and information similarly to online LGBT communities in general. Femslash fandoms are linked to minority representation – or the lack of it – in the media, and the fans of femslash pairings have pastimes and hobbies related to their pairings. The members of femslash fandoms have problems that run parallel with the offline world, such as bullying coming from cisgender straight people and in-community problems, such as racism faced by many members of the community. More privileged fans often tend to overlook the problems that fans with multiple marginalized identities face. This background literature and the issues discussed above are relevant to this study as many questions that the respondents were asked were related to these themes and came up in their answers.

3. PRESENT STUDY

This section describes and justifies the aims of this study and familiarizes the reader with them. After this, the methods chosen for the study will be discussed.

3.1 Aims and research questions

The main purpose of this study is to find out how being a part of an online fandom helps to construct LGBT identities. After reading this study, the reader should have a better idea of how LGBT identities are formed and minority identities are supported in femslash fandoms. Since femslash fandoms have not been researched to the same extent as many other fandoms, this study aspires to give more insight into how these communities of practice contribute to forming a positive sexual and/or gender minority identity.

Therefore, the first primary research question of this thesis is:

How does being a part of a femslash fan community help construct an LGBT identity?

More specifically, the purpose of this thesis is to find out if femslash fans have different online and offline LGBT identities, if a femslash fandom can eventually help to disclose an LGBT identity offline, what kind of effects LGBT media representation can have on LGBT people, and how femslash fans spend their time in fandom environments.

The main aim can thus be broken into four more detailed secondary research questions as follows:

1. *Do femslash fans have different online and offline LGBT identities?*
2. *What kind of support can marginalized groups of people get in femslash fandoms and to what extent do femslash fans learn about LGBT identities in online environments? Can femslash fandom involvement help to disclose an LGBT identity offline?*

3. *What are the effects of the media representation of the LGBT community on people who identify as LGBT?*
4. *What kind of fandom activities that facilitate LGBT identity formation do femslash fans participate in?*

The second main aim of this study is to find out more about the discrimination that takes place in femslash fandoms. The second primary research question is thus:

What kind of prejudices and discrimination do people in femslash fandoms face?

As shown in the background literature, people can have shifting online and offline identities (Thiel, 2005: 184) and people who are LGBT can have a more authentic identity online than offline (Cooper, 2010: 75-83). Therefore, the first secondary research question is relevant. People gather information on LGBT issues online and find community, support, and tips for disclosing their LGBT identity (Cooper, 2010: 83; Drushel, 2010: 62; Alexander & Losh, 2010: 41), which is why the second secondary research question is important. The media representations of marginalized groups are important and linked to the way how a group is perceived (Dyer, 2002: 1) and there is much work to be done to reach media representation that actually reflects the diversity of the LGBT community (GLAAD, 2018: 3). The third secondary research question is thus relevant as it deals with the effects of LGBT representations on LGBT individuals. The fourth secondary research question, in turn, is important because femslash fandom activities, such as reading and writing fan fiction, have given femslash fans ways to embrace who they are and shown them alternative ways of living (Hanmer, 2014: 609, 620).

Since my previous study on fandoms (Aalto, 2016) focused on online bullying and homophobia, the second primary research question attempts to answer what kind of discrimination people in femslash fandoms face. In my earlier study, I specifically asked the respondents about homophobia and bullying, but now the focus is on any kind of prejudices and discrimination they have experienced in fandom spaces. This decision was partly motivated by the fact that in my previous study, the respondents mentioned racism, biphobia, and transphobia, as well as lesbophobia coming from straight men. Consequently, the present study also takes a look at what the

respondents of the present study say about such issues, and whether they have been subjected to more than one type of discrimination when they have been a part of an online fandom.

3.2 Data selection and collection

Sue and Ritter's book, *Conducting Online Surveys* (2007) was used for guidelines and tips for this thesis. AOIR's guidelines for internet-specific ethical questions was followed when the survey was conducted (Markham & Buchanan, 2012: 8-11). I also made sure that the thesis followed the GDPR regulations listed on the JYU (2019) website (the survey was anonymous, and the respondents consented to participating in the survey).

For this thesis, I conducted a survey. Sue and Ritter (2007: 12-13) mention speed, economy, anonymity, and the ability to ask questions to be some of the advantages of online surveys. Since the goal was to get easily readable (and personal) data fast from several people, it was natural to choose an online survey as a research method. Even though there was a risk of losing respondents because the survey was somewhat long, there were more advantages than disadvantages in conducting a survey study.

The survey had 27 questions in total. Five of the questions were demographic (age, sexuality, gender, country of current residence, and ethnicity), and they were the last questions of the survey. 11 of the questions were open-ended and 16 multiple-choice questions. Seven of the multiple-choice questions used the Likert scale and three of them were multiple choice in a way that gave the respondent the opportunity to choose as many options as they wished. Using a certain amount of open-ended questions for this thesis was important so that LGBT individuals could answer with their self-reported feelings on matters such as television representations, LGBT identities, and discrimination. Multiple-choice questions, in turn, are easier to analyze and compare. They were hence used for countable qualities, such as age, and qualities that did not require an open-ended answer (for example, simple "Yes / No" questions and questions about the respondents' fandom activities). I also firmly believe that if all questions had been open-ended, the questionnaire would have been too tiring to fill out and many respondents would not have wanted to take the survey

because of its poor design. Having several multiple-choice questions made the survey easier to take and to analyze. The data gained from the survey are thus a combination of qualitative and quantitative data.

After coming up with some questions on my own and presenting them at the poster fair of our university, I got feedback on them from some students and staff and ended up using the Likert scale for some questions. After that, I examined the survey Collier et al. (2009: 602-609) had used for their study. From that specific survey, I got help and ideas for Questions 6, 8, 10, 11, and 17 of my survey. Collier et al. (2009) had used the Likert scale as well, and I found it useful in my research because the data would be easy to analyze and present. As the Likert scale is used internationally, it would make comparing and comprehending the results easier as well. In the discussion section of the thesis, I will explain why the data I have chosen for closer inspection are interesting in the first place. The survey used for this thesis can be found as Appendix 2 at the end of the thesis.

Even though Sue and Ritter (2007: 12) mention the ability to reach a large audience by posting a link to a survey on several web sites as an advantage of an online survey study, I chose not to do so. I did that for my Bachelor's thesis and ended up in a situation where I had to read over 2,000 responses and analyze the data that came from that. When one shares a post, a tweet, or such on a social media website, it is very easy to gain a wide audience if the person has many followers or if the content gets shared by a person with many followers. Since people with many followers shared the link to my Bachelor's thesis survey and I got many responses because of that, I could anticipate that the same might happen with this survey if I made it public. By sharing the link via private message, I avoided that.

The goal of this study was not to have too many respondents so that every response would get the attention it deserved. On the basis of the feedback that I received from my instructor and peers, I tried to obtain approximately 50 responses. Thus, 56 people were privately contacted about the survey via private message on Twitter and Tumblr. 45 of the messages were sent on Twitter, whereas 11 of the messages were sent on Tumblr. Two people did not respond, but 54 of them did and expressed their interest in participating in the study. Those 54 people were then given a link to

the survey. One of these 54 respondents eventually did not submit a response. Therefore, the survey got 53 responses. The survey was open for thirteen days: from April 29th to May 10th of 2018.

I chose these people as respondents because I knew they would fit the requirements of a valid respondent (they would be LGBT, members of a femslash fandom, and at least 18 years old). None of the answers were excluded from the final analysis as all respondents were eligible. The respondents, apart from one²¹, were all in a “mutual follow” relationship with me, meaning that we followed each other on at least one social media platform.

According to the guidelines of ethical decision-making in internet research by AoIR’s Ethics Working Committee (Markham & Buchanan, 2012: 11), not knowing the age of a respondent is an ethical issue in research. Markham and Buchanan (2012: 11) also imply that it is difficult to get parental consent for studying minors. To avoid a situation where it would not be certain that I would have the permission to use the answers by a minor as my data, I decided to only accept respondents who were at least 18 years old and who I knew to be 18 years old personally. This did not turn out to be a problem, because I knew that every person (apart from one) I asked to take part in the survey was 18 because I was in a “mutual follow” relationship with them. This was also one of the reasons why I could not post a link to the survey publicly; there would have been no guarantee that the people taking the survey were actually 18 years old or older.

Sue and Ritter (2007: 22-24) discuss three issues related to ethical research: consent, anonymity, and ethical interpretation and reporting of results. The guidelines stated by Sue and Ritter were followed, and the nature of the survey and the thesis was clear on the information page that preceded the actual survey. The respondents were assured that the answers they would give to the survey would only be used for research purposes and that they would remain completely anonymous for the duration of the study and in the published thesis. It was made clear that by submitting their answers, the respondent would give me their consent to use their answers in the thesis. In order to report findings safely and avoid singling out one respondent when dealing with

²¹ This respondent was a friend of one of the respondents I had contacted personally. The respondent I contacted personally offered to share the survey with their friend (who was an eligible respondent).

open-ended questions, not all statistical information about said person was unveiled. This guaranteed better anonymity.

Webropol 3.0 was used for the survey because it is more secure than e.g. Google Docs. Sue and Ritter (2007: 18) point out how important survey security is. Webropol 3.0 has many of the desirable survey platform options that Sue and Ritter (2007: 15-17) mention in their book: it was free and easy to use, it had several response options, question formats and unlimited questions, and good reporting and analysis options.

Before sending the questionnaire to all respondents, I sent it to three “beta respondents” who gave me feedback on the questionnaire. Because of their feedback, two questions were made clearer and the wording of various questions was altered. This was all done on April 29th, the publication date of the survey.

3.3 Methods of analysis

As mentioned above, this study is a survey study and the survey used for this thesis had both open-ended and multiple-choice questions. The answers thus produced both qualitative and quantitative data. When analyzing the quantitative data, the number of respondents for each question will be listed, as well as the percentages and the popularity of different options. After that, conclusions will be drawn from the numbers that the answers produce. The same approach will be used for demographic open-ended questions.

As for the qualitative parts of the data, thematic analysis will be used. Braun and Clarke (2006: 4) state that thematic analysis is a foundational method of qualitative analysis. With the help of thematic analysis, different patterns in the data can be interpreted with enough detail (ibid: 7). The framework of thematic analysis can be used for “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (ibid: 6). This will be done with the qualitative part of the answers. Answers will be identified by their content and sorted into categories that depict typical answers to a certain question. Themes can be seen by observing these categories. For example, the respondents were

asked what they have learned in their fandom. By examining the answers, it came clear that the participants had learned more about issues such as compulsory heterosexuality and intersectionality.

The open-ended responses will be analyzed one by one without analysis software. Software could have been used if there had been hundreds or thousands of responses, but in this case, it is best to categorize them manually. This way, they will also be analyzed with enough detail and their context will be clear, which is important in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke: 2006).

4. ANALYSIS

In this section, the survey questions will be discussed under five thematic subheadings. All the questions will be presented separately and the answers the respondents have given will be discussed afterwards. The quantitative data will be presented in a form of charts that include percentages and numbers of respondents. Open-ended demographic questions will be shown in charts as well. The qualitative data will mostly be presented with the help of quotations of typical answers that present a certain theme.

4.1 The respondents

In this subsection, we will take a look at the respondents. This is important because the purpose of this study was to study femslash fandoms intersectionally; I wanted the participants to be from more than one country and ethnic group and have different sexualities, genders, and ages. The issue has been somewhat overlooked in some of the previous research.

The following seven survey questions related to demographic information about the respondents will be discussed in this section:

Age

Sexual orientation

Gender

Country of current residence

Ethnicity

Which femslash fandoms do you consider yourself to be a part of/have you been a part of? You may describe your fandom history if you wish.

Are these fandoms based on media (e.g. a television show) that is from the country you live in? (1- Yes, all of them; 5 - No, none of them are from the country I live in.)

Firstly, the respondents' age was asked about to find out how old the (adult) members of online femslash fandoms are and if there is anything unexpected about who can be a fan. Since one of the

requirements for a respondent was that they be 18 years old or older, the options started from 18-21. This was for ethical reasons; all respondents had to be adults.

The next option was 22-25 and the one after that 26-30, both young adults. People who were in their 30s had two options to choose from. After 40, there were more ages in one option as I presumed that most people taking the survey would be under 40 years old, somewhere between 18 and 30. Since I thought most people would be placed somewhere in the beginning, it seemed rather pointless to make sections such as “50-54” and “55-59” when there most likely would not be any people to pick those sections.

The ages below are presented as they were in the original survey, from younger to older.

23. Age

Table 1: The respondents' age

Age	Number	Percentage
18-21	11	20,75%
22-25	17	32,08%
26-30	17	32,08%
31-35	6	11,32%
36-40	1	1,89%
41-49	1	1,89%
50+	0	0%

Most respondents, 34 out of 53 (64,15%), were aged from 22 to 30. There were 17 people (32,07%) who had picked the 22-25 option and 17 people (32,07%) who had picked the 26-30 option, meaning there was an even number of respondents from both age groups. The third most common option was 18-21: there were 11 respondents (20,75%) who were aged from 18 to 21. I personally do not think that there are fewer femslash fans in the earliest years of adulthood, but these numbers can be altered by the fact that I am 27 years old myself and I have therefore come to spend time with people who are closer to my age in fandom.

Six respondents (11,32%) were aged 31-35, there was one respondent (1,89%) who was 36-40 and one (1,89%) who was 41-49. This proves that fandoms are not spaces that are only populated by children and teens. The respondents who are somewhat older than the rest of the fandom have, according to my knowledge, usually been there for a while and created the premises for future fans who enter fandom in their teens or early adulthood. They can often be, for example, very talented writers, as they have had years, even decades, of practice. All in all, the statistics about the participants' ages show that they were from several different age groups, even though some were more common than others.

Secondly, due to the nature of this study, it was necessary to ask about the sexual orientation of the respondents. "Lesbian," "gay," and "bisexual, pansexual, or otherwise multiple-gender-attracted" were listed in the terms (on the first page) of the survey. "Questioning" and "straight" were added later, as well as "other." The term "other" was primarily added for people who were multiple-gender-attracted in some other way but did not want to tick the actual box for it. The original order of the options can be found in Appendix 2 of this thesis; the chart below has the options in the order of popularity.

24. Sexual orientation

Table 2: The respondents' sexual orientation

Sexual orientation	Number	Percentage
Bisexual, pansexual, or otherwise multiple-gender-attracted	23	43,4%
Lesbian	20	37,73%
Other, please specify	8	15,09%
Gay	1	1,89%
Questioning	1	1,89%
Straight (you can choose this only if you are transgender)	0	0%

As we can see, the most common sexual orientation was bisexual, pansexual, or otherwise attracted to multiple genders (n=23; 43,4%). This is an important notion especially because previous research on femslash fandoms has mainly focused on solely lesbians' experiences and largely ignored the fact that other same-sex-attracted people are members of femslash fandoms as well. This is not to say that lesbians are not a notable and important part of these fandoms, but that people attracted to multiple genders need more visibility as they are just as important.

Lesbians were the second largest group, almost as big as people attracted to multiple genders. There were 20 respondents out of 53 (37,73%) who identified as lesbian. There was one (1,89%) who had chosen the "gay" option instead, although their gender was female, which most likely meant that they just do not want to use the label "lesbian" but prefer to use "gay" instead. One person (1,89%) was questioning their sexual orientation, and none of the respondents were straight.

There was one respondent (1,89%) who described their sexual orientation as “perpetually undecided.” Three respondents (5,66%) had written “queer” in the box, which most likely implies multiple-gender attraction or not wanting to put a certain label that comes with expectations on their sexuality. One respondent (1,89%) had filled out the box with “Non binary Queer”, which included their gender identity. One respondent (1,89%) had written “queer asexual” in the box, meaning that they were romantically attracted to their gender. Another respondent (1,89%) had written “queer dyke” in the box, which implies attraction to only women since it is not considered socially acceptable for people who are not lesbian to call themselves dykes.

There was one respondent (1,89%) that seemed a bit unsure as to how they wanted to label their sexuality. They filled out the “other” box like this:

Example 1

Homoflexible would be the best way to describe me I think, I usually pick lesbian for simplicity’s sake but I’m sometimes aesthetically/sexually attracted to men as well (1)

All in all, there are people of different sexual orientations in femslash fandoms. There are straight fans as well, as my previous study (Aalto, 2016) showed, but this thesis focuses only on fans who are LGBT.

After indicating their sexual orientation, the participants were advised to disclose their gender identity. There were two options for both male and female (four for those two in total), since it is relevant to this study to see how many transgender respondents there were.

In addition to transgender and cisgender female and male identities, there was naturally an option for non-binary gender identities. It was explained in brackets that this option would be applicable to any and all non-binary identities (e.g. agender and bigender) so that the percentages would be more concise and as easy as possible to sort.

There were also options in the questionnaire to choose “questioning” and “other.” It is important to give the respondents the chance to choose “questioning.” Especially in communities that are LGBT, many people might be in the middle of questioning their identity and labeling it differently.

The order below is different from the survey; the original order can be found in Appendix 2.

25. Gender

Table 3: The respondents' gender

Gender	Number	Percentage
Female (cisgender)	45	84,91%
Non-binary (any non-binary identity)	5	9,43%
Male (transgender)	2	3,77%
Questioning	1	1,89%
Female (transgender)	0	0%
Male (cisgender)	0	0%
Other, please specify	0	0%

Most respondents, 45 out of 53 (84,91%), were cisgender women, and there were no transgender women who took the survey. There were two transgender male respondents (3,77%) but no cisgender males. This is not particularly surprising because during the time I have been in femslash fandoms, I have run into one – and no more – cisgender male femslash fan.

There were five non-binary people (9,43%) who took the survey. This might imply that the most common gender identity after cisgender female within femslash fandoms are non-binary identities. There was one person who was questioning their gender (1,89%) and none of the respondents

ticked the “other” box. Ultimately, the majority of the respondents (n= 45; 84,91%) were cisgender women.

Next, the respondents were asked about the country of their current residence. This was to show that there are femslash fans in various locations. It was the easiest to make the question open-ended since it would have been difficult to list all the countries in the world.

The countries below are listed in the order of frequency in the data.

26. Country of current residence

Table 4: The respondents’ country of residence

Country of residence	Number	Percentage
The United States of America	25	47,17%
The United Kingdom	11	20,75%
Canada	4	7,55%
Mexico	2	3,77%
Finland	2	3,77%
Brazil	1	1,89%
Germany	1	1,89%
Honduras	1	1,89%
Morocco	1	1,89%
The Netherlands	1	1,89%
Peru	1	1,89%
Puerto Rico	1	1,89%
Prefer not to say	1	1,89%
Sweden	1	1,89%

25 out of 53 participants (47,17%) lived in the United States of America. This is not particularly surprising since most fandoms that the respondents belonged to were centered around American media. Had the study been conducted on LGBT fandoms of for example anime (something I do not have much knowledge of), the countries above would have probably been different.

There were, however, people from other parts of the world as well. Eleven fans (20,75%) lived in the United Kingdom. Two of these fans had specified that they came from England and one said that they came from Scotland. There were four fans (7,55%) from Canada. Most of the respondents thus lived in English-speaking Western countries. It could be beneficial to make a quota for these respondents in future research so that there would be more fans from other countries as well.

Two of the participants were from Mexico (3,77%) and one from Honduras (1,89%). One respondent (1,89%) lived in Peru and one in Puerto Rico (1,89%). There was one respondent from Brazil (1,89%). This implies that femslash fandoms are also popular in Latin America.

There were two respondents from Finland (3,77%). There was one respondent from Morocco, the only respondent living in Africa (1,89%), one from the Netherlands (1,89%), one from Sweden (1,89%), and one from Germany (1,89%). All this shows that femslash fandoms are not tied to just majorly English-speaking countries and more research could be done with and about fans who come from countries other than the United States (or the United Kingdom). In addition, though I tried to find respondents from different countries, the respondents lived only in North, Central and South America, Europe, Africa, and possibly one more continent if the respondent who preferred not to say their country of residence lived somewhere else than in Europe, Africa, or America.

27. Ethnicity

This demographic question, just like the previous one, was open-ended. My original idea was not to make the respondents feel constricted by a multiple-choice question in case the options offered would not offer a suitable option for their ethnic identity. This, however, led to one problem. While I assumed that most respondents would understand ethnicity as a concept that is tied to the culture and often the country one lives in or has ancestry in, many participants took the ethno-

racial approach to this question with a big emphasis on the racial part (e.g. they answered solely “white”). Nevertheless, the respondents answered this section in the following ways:

Table 5: The respondents’ ethnicity

Responses to “ethnicity” (in alphabetical order)	Number of respondents	Percentage
African-American	1	1,89%
Afro-Caribbean	1	1,89%
Arab	2	3,77%
Ashkenazi Jewish	1	1,89%
Asian	2	3,77%
Black/Puerto Rican	1	1,89%
Black	1	1,89%
Caucasian	5	9,43%
Chinese	1	1,89%
Filipino/a	1	1,89%
Filipino-American	3 (two of whom specified mixed race)	5,66%
French Canadian	1	1,89%
Greek	1	1,89%
Hispanic	1	1,89%
Hispanic/Latina	1	1,89%
Indian	1	1,89%
Latina	3	5,66%
Malaysian	1	1,89%

Minority	1	1,89%
Not white	1	1,89%
Turkish	1	1,89%
White New Zealand European	1	1,89%
White	21	39,62%
<i>Total</i>	53	

I clearly should have given the respondents examples of how I wanted them to answer this question. Despite the fact that many people over-simplified their ethnicity or saw ethnicity and “race” as synonyms, there were still multiple different answers to this open-ended question. If nothing else, this gives us a good idea how the respondents themselves saw their ethnicity.

The most common answers were White (n=21; 39,62%) and Caucasian (n=5; 9,43%). If we want to take a similar ethno-racial approach to ethnicity as many of the respondents, then about 41,51% - 56,61% of the respondents could be considered white²², though who is considered white and who is not is of course partly tied to culture and where one is positioned geographically. With this small a respondent number, it is hard to estimate if the percentage comes even close to what it actually is on a larger femslash fandom scale, but it at least gives an idea of the participants of this study.

After White and Caucasian, there were most Latina (n=4; 7,55%) and Filipino (n=4; 7,55%) respondents. There were several ethnicities that had only few respondents, which implies that there are people from diverse ethnic groups in femslash fandoms (although some are more common than others). It should also be noted that over 40% of the respondents wrote a response that could not have been classified as “white” (n=23; 43,4%), which is important as issues such as racism came up in the open-ended responses to Question 22.

The following open-ended question was more transparent than the previous one:

²² White (n=21; 39,62%) plus White New Zealand European (n=1; 1,89%) plus (possibly) Caucasian (n=5; 9,43%) plus (possibly) French Canadian (n=1; 1,89%) plus (possibly) Greek (n=1; 1,89%) plus (possibly) Hispanic (n=1; 1,89%)

18. Which femslash fandoms do you consider yourself to be a part of/have you been a part of? You may describe your fandom history if you wish.

When studying something like femslash fandoms, it was necessary to ask the respondents which fandoms and pairings they are a part of and interested in. The respondents were given the opportunity to list both their current and previous fandoms. As the question was open-ended, the participants were also prompted to describe their fandom history.

After closer inspection, three distinct types of answers emerged in the data. The first, and the shortest type of answer to this question was the respondent simply writing the name of a pairing or a few and nothing or not much else in the box. 33 respondents out of 53 (62,26%) answered the question in this manner. For example:

Example 2

SwanQueen, Korrasami

Example 3

Many

Example 4

With varying levels of involvement: Swan Queen (my predominant fandom), Bering & Wells, Diana/Akko (Little Witch Academy), Paris/Rory (Gilmore Girls), Jetra, Hicsqueak, Sanvers, Supercorp, Overwatch (various pairings - mostly Pharmarcy and Symmarah)

The second type of an answer was a short answer that had some descriptive text in addition to the name of the pairing. As a result, this kind of answer did not quite qualify for a short answer. It was typical of these respondents to mention why the pairing was important to them or which pairings were their old ones and which ones their new ones. There were eight respondents (15,09%) who answered this way.

Example 5

The first pairing I was a fan of was Faith and Buffy (BtVS), then Xena and Gabrielle. I was also a big fan of Swan Queen and Clexa but both shows have disappointed me to the point I don't care anymore. Now my latest obsession for the last couple years or so has been Supercorp (Lena and Kara)

Nine respondents (16,98%) wrote lengthier descriptions of their pairings and fandom history. These answers did not only show what the respondents' favorite pairings were, but they also talked about their viewing experiences and their motivations for watching television. In some cases, they also mentioned their fandom experiences and how their pairing had had an effect on their identity. Two good examples are these answers:

Example 6

Swan Queen - Once Upon A Time Bering & Wells - Warehouse 13 Rizzoli & Isles Otalia - Guiding Light Jetra - Jane The Virgin Petramos - Jane The Virgin Nyssara - Arrow Avalance - Legends of Tomorrow Shoot - Person of Interest There are probably more but I forget sometimes. I ship a lot of f/f couples, generally I will watch all f/f couples storyline at least once because it's the only kind of enjoyment I get out of shows now when theres a ship I like on there even if it's not canon or if there is actually a canon gay ship on there, it makes the storyline so much more interesting when it's someone who is like you.

Example 7

First it was Pitch Perfect, mostly Bechloe, but I was definitely a multishipper so I kind of shipped everyone with everyone. I'm not as much in that fandom anymore. Now, it's mostly just Swen, and I think this one's probably stuck with me/ will stick with me for a long time. I'm considered pretty new to the fandom. I think I joined about a year ago, but I always like to think about how I watched OUAT when it first came out (before I came out), and when I first heard about Swan Queen, I thought it was the weirdest ship ever. Then I went through my whole identity crisis and stopped watching the show entirely. I randomly decided to rewatch it all a little over a year ago, back when I was in another pit of internalized homophobia, I saw the chemistry and really fell into it. I haven't had any identity issues since.

The respondents came up with over 60 femslash fandoms and pairings in the responses of this question. Since this list is evidently rather lengthy, the full list can be found in Appendix 3. This shorter table (of 28 pairings/shows) includes the pairings and shows that were mentioned more than once.

Table 6: The respondents' pairings

Pairings (listed in alphabetical order)	The media in which the pairing appears or the media that was mentioned without any reference to a pairing	Number of respondents
Alexandra Cabot/Olivia Benson (Cabenson)	<i>Law & Order: Special Victims Unit</i>	2
Alex Danvers/Maggie Sawyer (Sanvers)	<i>Supergirl</i>	2
Beca Mitchell/Chloe Beale (Bechloe) / Pitch Perfect multiship	<i>Pitch Perfect</i>	2
Buffy Summers/Faith (Fuffy)	<i>Buffy the Vampire Slayer</i>	2
Buffy rarepairs	<i>Buffy the Vampire Slayer</i>	2
Callie Torres/Arizona Robbins (Calzona)	<i>Grey's Anatomy</i>	2
Carmilla Karnstein/Laura Hollis (Hollstein)	<i>Carmilla</i>	3
Clarke Griffin/Lexa (Clexa)	<i>The 100</i>	8
Cosima Niehaus/Delphine Cormier (Cophine)	<i>Orphan Black</i>	3
Emma Swan/Regina Mills (Swan Queen)	<i>Once Upon a Time</i>	48
Glinda/Elphaba (Gelphe)	<i>Wicked (the musical)</i>	3
Grace Hanson/Frankie Bergstein	<i>Grace & Frankie</i>	2
Hecate Hardbroom/Pippa Pentangle (Hicsqueak)	<i>The Worst Witch</i>	3
Jane Ramos/Petra Solano	<i>Jane the Virgin</i>	3
Jane Villanueva/Petra Solano (Jetra)	<i>Jane the Virgin</i>	4
Jane Rizzoli/Maura Isles (Rizzles)	<i>Rizzoli & Isles</i>	6
Kara Danvers/Cat Grant (SuperCat)	<i>Supergirl</i>	5
Kara Danvers/Lena Luthor (Supercorp)	<i>Supergirl</i>	6
Korra/Asami Sato (Korrasami)	<i>The Legend of Korra</i>	4
Miranda Priestly/Andrea Sachs (Mirandy)	<i>The Devil Wears Prada</i>	2
Myka Bering/H.G. Wells	<i>Warehouse 13</i>	4
Nomi Marks/Amanita Caplan (Nomanita)	<i>Sense8</i>	2

Peggy Carter/Angie Martinelli (Cartinelli)	<i>Agent Carter</i>	2
	<i>Steven Universe</i> (without a pairing)	2
	<i>The Fosters</i> (without a pairing, presumably Stef/Lena)	2
Waverly Earp/ Nicole Haught (Wayhaught)	<i>Wynonna Earp</i>	5
Willow Rosenberg/Tara Maclay	<i>Buffy the Vampire Slayer</i>	2
Xena/Gabrielle	<i>Xena: Warrior Princess</i>	6

What should be remembered here is that this list does not represent all femslash fandoms. This list represents the respondents of this study, which was conducted with people (most of whom) I was in a “mutual follow” relationship with. The effects of my fandom presence can hence be seen for I was an active member of the “Swan Queen” (Emma/Regina) fandom for a few years when the television show *Once Upon a Time* was airing and I hence made fandom friends in that fandom environment.

The most popular pairing was, quite unsurprisingly, the pairing of Emma and Regina (mentioned in the background literature when the studies of Suddeth, 2017, Pande and Moitra, 2017, and Stanfill, 2019, were discussed). 48 respondents out of 53 (90,57%) mentioned it in their responses. After that, the most popular pairing was the pairing of Clarke and Lexa from *The 100* (mentioned in the background literature when the study of Guerrero-Pico et al., 2018, was discussed). Shortly after that came the pairings of Kara and Lena from *Supergirl*, Jane and Maura from *Rizzoli & Isles* and Xena and Gabrielle (studied by e.g. Hanmer, 2003, 2010, 2014 and Collier et al., 2009) from *Xena: Warrior Princess*. The television show *Jane the Virgin* and its femslash pairings were mentioned seven times. These seven mentions all included the character of Petra Solano with two different women, Jane Villanueva and Jane Ramos, and people often seemed to ship her with both Janes. Interestingly, the show’s first (and canonically established) femslash pairing of Rose and Luisa was not mentioned.

To sum up, many respondents had several pairings they considered themselves to be a fan of. This was not the case for all respondents, as many of them answered with only one or a couple of pairings. What can be said from these results is that people have different experiences and different

kind of fandom participation when it comes to ships. Some find many romantic relationships that are dear to them while others find only one or two and nothing else compares to those favorite pairings.

In addition to asking the respondents about their country of current residence, they were asked whether their fandoms were based on media that was from the country they lived in. This was to show that even though many popular femslash pairings come from television shows and other media originated from the United States, people do find these pairings online or on television even if they are not American and they are just as passionate fans regardless of national borders.

19. Are these fandoms based on media (e.g. a television show) that is from the country you live in? (1- Yes, all of them; 5 - No, none of them are from the country I live in.)

Table 7: Which national media the respondents' fandoms were based on

Scale	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Number	14	9	7	5	17	52
Percentage	26,92%	17,31%	13,46%	9,62%	32,69%	

What is clear here is that the answers are very different from one another. For 14 of the respondents (26,92%), all of their fandoms were based on media that originates from their country of residence. This country was, in most cases, the United States because of the previous statistics. For nine fans (17,31%), most of their fandoms were based on media from the country they live in.

There were seven participants (13,46%) who chose the most neutral option, according to which they had equal amounts fandoms that were and were not from their home country. Only five respondents (9,62%) disclosed that most of their fandoms are not from their country of residence, but some of them are. The last option, "No, none of them are from the country I live in." was chosen by the highest number of respondents, 17 out of 52 (32,69%). This implies that many

people are fans of media that originates from abroad. Because of the popularity of the pairings that originate from American media, it can be suggested that many respondents who are not American are interested in American entertainment media.

4.2 LGBT identity in femslash fandoms and fan activities

The purpose of this section is to investigate the responses given in relation to the first primary research question of the study, “How does being a part of a femslash fan community help construct an LGBT identity?” Another focus in this section is how invested femslash fans are in their fandom and what kind of activities fans participate in in their fandom environments. Answers to these questions will be provided by analyzing five of the 27 survey questions. As one can see, these questions are all related to LGBT identity and fandom activities:

Have your femslash fandom activities had an influence on your LGBT identity and how you identify as LGBT? (1 - Yes, it has had a strong influence; 5 - No, it has not had any influence at all)

How invested are you in your femslash fandom(s)/pairing(s)? (1 - I consider myself a hardcore fan; 5 - I consider myself a very casual fan)

What types of social media do you use for fandom?

What are your fandom activities?

How often do you approximately use social media for fandom?

The first question of the survey was very close to the first primary research question of this thesis. The Likert scale was used for it since it gives a more nuanced picture of the respondents' experiences than a simple “Yes / No” question.

1. Have your femslash fandom activities had an influence on your LGBT identity and how you identify as LGBT? (1 - Yes, it has had a strong influence; 5 - No, it has not had any influence at all)

Table 8: The influence of fandom activities

Scale	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Number	28	9	8	5	3	53
Percentage	52,83%	16,98%	15,09%	9,43%	5,66%	

As we can see, most of the respondents (n=28; 52,83%) thought that their fandom involvement has had a strong effect on their LGBT identity. This, of course, was not the case for everyone. The numbers decline afterwards so that 9 participants (16,98%) thought their fandom involvement had had a somewhat strong influence on their LGBT identity, 8 participants (15,1%) thought it had had an average influence on them, 5 participants (9,43%) thought that it had not had much of an influence and 3 participants (5,66%) thought it had not had any influence at all. The responses to Question 1 thus tell us that most femslash fans' participation in their fandom is strongly related to LGBT identity formation.

A more indirect question to measure the importance of a femslash fandom / pairing was Question 10. The participants estimated how important their fandom involvement was for them, which shows how important their pairing and fandom identity is to them. The Likert scale was used to make measuring the level of involvement easier.

10. How invested are you in your femslash fandom(s)/pairing(s)? (1 - I consider myself a hardcore fan; 5 - I consider myself a very casual fan)

Table 9: The respondents' investment in their pairings

Scale	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Number	32	7	8	3	3	53
Percentage	60,38%	13,21%	15,09%	5,66%	5,66%	

As many as 32 participants (60,38%) felt like they were hardcore fans of their pairing. The numbers decline after this so that 7 participants (13,21%) did not feel like a hardcore fan but more passionate than an average one, 8 participants (15,09%) felt like an average fan, 3 participants (5,66%) thought they were a bit more passionate than a casual fan, and 3 participants (5,66%) felt like they were very casual fans. What we can conclude here is that most of the respondents are passionate femslash fans and that the answers to this survey come from people who have spent quite a lot of time in their fandom environment. We can also conclude that many people consider their pairing a very important aspect of their life.

Another question to measure the way femslash fans are active in their online environments was to ask what types of social media they use for their fandom activities.

11. What types of social media do you use for fandom?

With the help of my emic knowledge, I listed nine social media websites and phone applications as the options from which the respondents could select the ones they use. I knew some of them were bound to be more popular than others, but I listed all of them all the same. I also gave the option “other” in case someone could not find all the platforms they used for fandom. The original order of the websites and applications can be found in Appendix 2; they are listed in the order of popularity here.

Table 10: Types of social media

Website/ Application	Number	Percentage
Archiveofourown.org	52	98,11%
Tumblr	48	90,57%
Twitter	47	88,68%
Fanfiction.net	30	56,6%

YouTube	27	50,94%
Instagram	14	26,42%
Facebook	10	18,87%
Reddit	4	7,55%
DeviantArt	3	5,66%
Other	2	3,77%

It is clear that the fan fiction website archiveofourown.org, Tumblr, and Twitter were the most popular types of social media for these respondents. 52 respondents (98,11%), so every respondent apart from one, used archiveofourown.org. 48 participants used Tumblr (90,57%) and 47 participants (88,68%) Twitter. What is interesting here is that most of the participants were contacted on Twitter, but more people used Tumblr than Twitter. Most respondents, however, seemed to use both.

Fanfiction.net, the second fan fiction website in addition to archiveofourown.org, was used by 30 respondents (56,6%). It was hence used by a bit over a half of the respondents, but it did not reach the popularity of archiveofourown.org. This is not to say that there are not active writers and readers on fanfiction.net. It could, for example, be suggested that more people who are over 18 use archiveofourown.org than fanfiction.net. The popularity of archiveofourown.org and fanfiction.net imply that fan fiction is a noticeable part of these respondents' fandom experience. I did not send any messages on either fan fiction website, but the percentages of these websites were still very high.

YouTube was used for fandom purposes by 27 of the respondents (50,94%) and Instagram by 14 respondents (26,42%). Here, it should be taken into account that the messages about participation

were sent on Twitter and Tumblr, which automatically alters the responses a bit. These results do not mean that there are no active femslash fandoms on for example Instagram. Had I been involved with fandom on Instagram, which I have never been, I would have gotten different results.

The options that were chosen the least were Facebook (by 10 participants, 18,87%), Reddit (by 4 participants, 7,55%), and DeviantArt (by 3 participants, 5,66%). Even though there are people who use Facebook for fandom purposes (as can be seen in the dissertation of Bingham, 2016), I personally think it is far more common to use for example Tumblr or Twitter for one's fandom life, especially if one does not want to link it to one's offline life. I do not have much knowledge about Reddit, but what I can say based on these results that neither do the people I have associated with in fandom on Tumblr and Twitter. DeviantArt, an online artwork website, was not used by many, which could imply that people who spend their time on websites such as Twitter and Tumblr do not branch out much and probably associate with artists on their respective social media websites. There are still some who also use different websites for fan art, possibly to promote their own art there or to support the original creators of fan art.

There were two respondents (3,77%) who had ticked the "other" box. One of them had filled it with "plurk, dreamwidth", a networking website and a fork website of LiveJournal. This shows that people use other websites and applications than the most common ones for fandom purposes. The other respondent who had elaborated their answer in the free text field had stated that they "used to use Tumblr."

All this shows that these fans use different websites and applications for their fandom activities. Most fans use multiple places for their activities instead of just one website or application. Some websites and applications were more popular than others, but the way in which the data were collected had an effect on that. What one can conclude from the results, however, is that fan fiction websites seem to be important to femslash fans.

Fandom involvement was also measured with a question about fandom activities. The activities that fans have in their fandom are important as they show how people in fandoms actually spend their time there and create their fan culture. According to Jenkins (1992: 279), fandom has specific

forms of cultural production, which is an important aspect of a fandom's activity. Activities such as writing fan fiction and creating fan art were therefore important to include as options here, especially because reading and writing fan fiction has helped femslash fans embrace their sexual minority identities (Hanmer, 2014: 620). Jenkins (1992: 280) also mentions how one level of fandom activity is that fandom works as an alternative social community, which is why it was important to include social practices fans often have (such as participating in conventions, cosplaying, watching a show with other fans, and commenting on other people's fanworks). I did my best with my emic knowledge to include all the activities I could think of. The original order of the activities can be found in Appendix 2; they are listed in the order of popularity here.

17. What are your fandom activities?

Table 11: Fandom activities

Fandom activity	Number	Percentage
Reading fan fiction	50	94,34%
Spreading other people's fanworks, e.g. by reblogging on Tumblr or retweeting on Twitter	47	88,68%
Commenting on other people's writing	46	86,79%
Actively voting for your pairing on polls (e.g. Zimbio March Madness)	40	75,47%
Watching e.g. your show/movie with other fans and discussing it with them	35	66,04%
Commenting on other people's art or videos	32	60,38%
Writing fan fiction	29	54,72%

Purchasing fandom merchandise	24	45,28%
Creating e.g. fanart, GIFs, or videos	23	43,4%
Participating in conventions	17	32,08%
Cosplaying	3	5,66%
Other, please specify	3	5,66%

It was possible for the respondents to choose as many activities as they saw fit here. The most popular activity, quite unsurprisingly, in line with the results of the previous question, was reading fan fiction (50 respondents out of 53, 94,34%). There were quite a few people who also wrote fan fiction (29 out of 53, 54,72%), but it can be seen from these figures that not every fan who reads fan fiction writes it. 46 respondents (86,79) – so most of the readers – also commented on their fellow fans’ writing, which shows dedication and is considered a part of fandom etiquette. I do not, however, believe that the percentage of commenters or “reviewers” would actually be over 60% if a more scattered survey with a public link across fandoms were conducted; I am aware that I have spent and still spend a lot of my fandom time around people who are writers and have writer friends, which makes commenting on fan fiction (and, of course, writing it) more likely.

23 out of the 53 respondents (43,4%) created visual fan works, such as fan art, GIFs, or videos. These fan works were spread on social media websites by retweeting or reblogging (the way to spread an artists’ work without stealing it or taking the credit for it) by 47 participants (88,68%). 32 participants (60,38%) commented on other fans’ art and videos as well. All this shows that fans hold visual fan works in high regard and that they are a very popular fandom creation alongside fan fiction. Even though not everyone creates fan works, most people spread them and several people comment on them. The importance of this should not be overlooked as other fans’ positive reactions to one’s fan works often encourage one to create more.

A very popular fandom pastime among the respondents was voting for one's pairing on polls. 40 fans out of 53 (75,47%) disclosed that they had, at least at some point, actively voted for their pairing on a poll where they were against several other pairings and voted in rounds to win a tournament. This shows that the fans' dedication to their pairing has a competitive side.

Another popular activity was, not surprisingly, watching one's favorite television show or a movie with other fans and discussing it with them. 35 fans (66,04%) said that this was one of their fandom activities. With the help of my emic knowledge, I suspect that the respondents interpreted this so that both watching the show offline with your fandom friends and online simultaneously while an episode was first airing counted. People often "live tweet" or "live blog" about an episode while they are watching it. This means that everyone tweets or blogs about the episode at the same time and can consequently have a shared viewing experience with other fans on an online platform.

Other fandom activities were purchasing fandom merchandise, participating in conventions, and cosplaying. 24 out of 53 (45,28%) respondents disclosed that they had purchased fandom merchandise, which makes it quite popular but not something every fan does. 17 (32,08%) had participated in a fan convention at least once. Three (5,66) cosplayed, but this number might have been slightly higher if I had had more respondents from different groups. The reason why the number of cosplayers is lower than the one of convention-goers' is likely to be because cosplaying often takes place at conventions, but not every person who goes to a convention cosplays there. It should also be remembered that one's ability to participate in conventions depends on one's economic background and location; reading fan fiction is free and is not usually limited by geographical borders²³, but that is not the case with conventions.

Three respondents (5,66) ticked the "other" box. One said (1,89%) that they used to roleplay and one (1,89%) said that they currently roleplay on Twitter. One person (1,89%) disclosed that they used to write fan fiction. This shows that roleplaying should have been included as one option on

²³ "Usually" because websites can be blocked by the government. For example, fanfiction.net is blocked in Indonesia and Malaysia (Tam, 2017).

the list and that people find their old fandom activities that they do not participate in anymore still worth mentioning.

Consequently, fans have several fandom pastimes. The average amount of fandom activities for one person was 5,77 activities, meaning that people do not usually have only one activity that they participate in in their fandom. Creating fandom works is popular, but it is even more popular to consume works created by other fans, spread them, and comment on them. Many fans like to watch their favorite show with other fans and discuss it with them and purchase fandom merchandise. Quite surprisingly, it is also very common to actively vote for a pairing in a poll, which shows that fans are incredibly passionate about their pairings and they can become competitive about their fandom participation, a bit like sports fans. Participating in conventions and cosplaying are not as common as many other activities, which could be linked to economic and geographic limitations.

Lastly, the respondents were asked how often they used social media for their fandom activities. The time used online shows level of involvement and dedication to one's fandom life. The list started from the option "several times a day" as many fans are almost constantly online and can even tweet from offline social situations. After that, options for more seldom online times were presented. The options are in the same order as they were in the survey because the responses decline in an even manner (apart from the option "other", which got two responses instead of one).

20. How often do you approximately use social media for fandom? (Choose the option that is closest to the truth, please. If none of the options is applicable, you can specify your answer by choosing "other.")

Table 12: Frequency of social media use

How often	Number	Percentage
Several times a day	37	69,81%

Once or a few times a day	8	15,09%
A few times a week	3	5,66%
Weekly	1	1,89%
A few times a month	1	1,89%
Once a month or more seldom	1	1,89%
Other, please specify	2	3,77%

37 out of 53 respondents (69,81%) said that they used social media for fandom purposes several times a day. This aligns with the responses to Question 10 where 32 participants (60%) considered themselves to be hardcore fans of their pairing. These results imply that fandom is almost constantly present in these fans' lives. Being online several times every day is an important part of many fans' life and their fandom involvement.

The results, once again, decline in order after this. Eight respondents (15,09%) reported that they use fandom-related social media once or a few times a day (which is still rather often and ensures a daily presence of fandom in these fans' lives). Hence, 45 respondents out of 53 (85%) use social media for fandom purposes daily. This is a very high number. Three respondents (5,66%) disclosed that they use social media for fandom purposes a few times a week, which still makes fandom involvement a several-times-a-week occurrence for them.

One respondent (1,89%) chose the "weekly" option, one "a few times a month" and one "once a month or more seldom." The social media aspect of fandom does not hence seem to be very present in these fans' lives and they might be casual fans or at least casual with their online interactions and social media presence.

Two respondents (3,77%) chose the “other” option because none of the options above could describe their use of social media for fandom purposes. They explained their choices like this:

Example 8

I use social media in spurts. Sometimes I will be on it for hours a day, sometimes I take a break for months at a time. But I am always connected to the fandom in some way, if only by reading fanfiction.

Example 9

Used to be online for hours every day. Occasionally keep in touch with fandom friends through other social media.

The first person seems to be connected to their fandom life in different ways depending on the time, but they still feel like fandom is constantly present in their life, even if their fandom activities are less social, like reading fan fiction. The last person seems to have gone from a very active member of a fandom to a passive one. What one can see here is that even if one stops being an active member of a fandom, they might still stay friends with the people they met while being an active member.

Overall, these responses show that most respondents use social media often for fandom and it has a daily presence in their lives. This is not the case for everyone, however, as some people only check their social media accounts once a month or have stopped being an active member of a fandom. Some former active fans seem to check up on their old fandom friends on their social media accounts instead of using it for fannish activities.

4.3 The difference between online and offline

This section deals with the different identities that people display depending on their environment. It is important to discuss this since people who are LGBT might often hide their true identity in different situations. Learning about LGBT issues online will also be discussed briefly.

Previous research shows that many people have been forced to hide their LGBT identities because of the place they live in: for example, Cooper (2010: 75-83) writes about lesbians who are certain of their true lesbian identity, but are unable to show it offline because they are trapped in marriages to men and live in traditional-value communities. It is thus relevant in this study to ask people who are LGBT and participate in LGBT community discourse online whether the sexual and gender identities they display online are different from their identities offline. Previous research also shows that people who belong to sexual and gender minorities learn a great deal about their minority identities online and often experiment with them there before “coming out” offline (Cooper, 2010: 83; Cooper & Dzara, 2010: 104; Tropiano, 2014: 48). Fellow LGBT support is also an important factor in online LGBT identity formation (Cooper, 2010: 75-76, 83). It is therefore important to find out if people in femslash fandoms learn new things about themselves and the other members of their community while participating in their LGBT fandom discourse.

The survey questions discussed in this section are:

Is your LGBT identity different online than it is offline? (1 - Yes, it's completely different; 5 - No, I am as "out" offline as I am online)

If it's different, can you describe how so?

Have you found information on LGBT issues or learned something new about LGBT identity formation thanks to your participation in online fandom activities? (1 - Yes, I have learned a lot; 5 - No, I do not think I have learned anything new)

If you answered yes (1-4), briefly describe the information you have gained, please.

Has your online fandom had an influence on your ability to disclose your sexual and/or gender identity to any of the following

- Family*
- Offline friends*
- Co-workers and/or fellow students*
- Other _____*
- No, it has not helped me to disclose my LGBT identity offline*

If yes, feel free to specify how it has influenced you and your ability to disclose your identity.

The first question related to LGBT identity in online contexts used the Likert scale. People have naturally very different experiences when it comes to identity, so the Likert scale presents those experiences in a more nuanced way than a simple “Yes / No” question.

2. Is your LGBT identity different online than it is offline? (1 - Yes, it's completely different; 5 - No, I am as "out" offline as I am online)

Table 13: Difference between online and offline

Scale	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Number	5	9	19	11	9	53
Percentage	9,43%	16,98%	35,85%	20,76%	16,98%	

It was clear that most of these respondents did not live a complete double life: only five respondents out of 53 (9,43%) replied that their online and offline LGBT identities were completely different from one another. It should still be remembered that, even though most respondents did not pick this option, five respondents still did. This implies that their genuine LGBT identity is shown only online.

19 respondents out of 53, so 35,85%, chose option number 3. This was the most common answer for this question, and the average response for this question was 3,2. These respondents presumably displayed the same LGBT identity as online in about 50% of their offline interactions and relationships. This implies that it is common to show the same authentic identity as online to certain offline audiences, but many are selective about it.

Nine respondents (16,98%) disclosed that their online LGBT identity was different from their offline identity often, but not in all situations and contexts. 11 respondents (20,76%), on the other hand, disclosed that their online LGBT identity was mostly the same as their offline identity, but

not always. Their self-disclosure, similarly to the people who chose option 3, is most likely to be context-dependent. The respondents from each of these groups show pieces of their identity offline to varying degrees but do not disclose the same details about their identity in every social situation.

For nine respondents (16,98%), the place and the situation they were in offline did not matter; they stated that they displayed their LGBT identity offline as authentically as they did online, no matter the situation. This is different from the majority of the respondents who, to varying degrees, displayed a different sexual or gender identity online as they did offline.

Because the results above do not give us direct answers as to why and how people have different online and offline identities, the question was followed by:

3. If it's different, can you describe how so?

This question required an open-ended answer. The participants explained the ways in which their online and offline identities differed. They gave multiple reasons for why they had a different identity online than in all or some of their offline social environments. It was not mandatory to answer the question, but people whose online LGBT identity differed from their offline identity were prompted to do so. 41 respondents (77,36%) wrote an answer to the question.

There were different types of answers to this question. One type of answer was that the respondent was honest about their LGBT identity online, but they were more careful and more reluctant to reveal their sexual or gender identity offline. There were 15 (28,3%) respondents who answered the question like this. Typical examples of this type are the two answers below. They go into detail as to why it is easier to be more open online.

Example 10

Being online, where you don't face automatic scrutiny, is a lot easier to deal with than that in real life. One on one conversations with a close friend can feel more awkward in reality as opposed to online because they may not have the knowledge on topic regarding lgbt+ issues.

Example 11

Online I can openly say and express as non binary and use queer as my sexuality. Offline both those things are hard to accept as they aren't really know in the community i live. So I end up not speaking or expressing myself about it. In the better cases I use bisexual to let people know I'm not only interested in one gender.

There were respondents who specified that their social community was the reason why they could not be their authentic selves offline. Four people (7,55%) said that the country or society that they live in is the reason why they cannot disclose their LGBT identity offline. Two people (3,77%) said that they could not do that because of their religious community and the religion they practice. One (1,89%) person said that they could not be honest about their sexuality because of their job.

Example 12

I'm not as comfortable being openly bisexual in my day to day life as I am online. My country is very homophobic and I don't always feel as safe being open with my sexuality.

Example 13

The religion I grew up in and which I continue to practice prevents me from being as out offline as I am online, and even online I am not often very vocal about my own identity. I don't advertise my sexuality under any label, though I do have a pretty strong sense of it for myself. I consider it a private matter, and my close friends know (though I never made a point to specify it or come out in any sense at all); I don't often find occasion to announce it publicly to anyone I don't know well.

Example 14

Offline I am more circumspect about who knows about my identity and the natural assumption is straight (thanks heteronormativity!) I also live in a conservative country and work in a job not conducive with me being as open about my sexuality as I can be online.

Three participants (5,66%) thought that their sexuality was a private matter and hence did not want to disclose their true identity offline. One respondent (1,89%) specified that they wanted to avoid the awkwardness that "coming out" brings and some others implied it between the lines.

Example 15

I'm more private offline, though I am not opposed to being more 'out' offline- I just kinda think it's none of anyone else's business

Example 16

I'm not out at all. But it's not because i fear it and more so because i don't see the point and want to avoid the awkward conversation. But my sister is out so there's that. (...)

Thirteen respondents (24,53%) mentioned their family in the responses to this question. One (1,89%) mentioned their family in a positive light and said that their immediate family were, in addition to their closest friends, the only people they had come out to offline. Two respondents (3,77%) were rather neutral about their family and simply mentioned that they were not a group of people who knew about them being LGBT. Some, however, had difficulties with being their true selves around their family. Two of these respondents (3,77%) specified that they had not come out to their extended family, whereas four stated that they had not come out to any of their family. Four (7,55%) specified that they were out to their friends but not to their family. A common theme was that family played a part in why some respondents needed to be wary of being their authentic selves.

Example 17

I haven't come out to my extended family and I tend to downplay my "queerness" around my family and straight people in a way that I don't bother with in online spaces.

Example 18

It is different in that I am out at my job and to certain friends, but not to (most) family or my church.

Three respondents (5,66%) said that their outness was tied to the situation they were in in their life. One of them, for example, stated that them being single and not having much of an offline social life was the reason why they were not disclosing their sexual orientation to other people.

Example 19

I'm not currently dating or having much of a social life offline at all so I'm mostly not talking about it

According to these responses, the participants had many differing social circles and situations where they wanted to restrict displaying an LGBT identity. There was general reluctance to disclose an LGBT identity offline as people might not react well to it. There was, specifically, the fear of the reaction of one's family from some respondents. Some participants restricted displaying their identity because of society, religion, or job. Some simply did not think it was relevant to mention or other people's business. All in all, it was clear that for many, online spaces felt less restricting than offline social circles.

Previous research (e.g. Cooper, 2010, Hanmer, 2003) suggests that online communities are an excellent way for LGBT individuals to gain information about LGBT issues that they would not otherwise familiarize themselves with. Guided by these findings, the respondents were asked, with the help of the Likert scale:

4. Have you found information on LGBT issues or learned something new about LGBT identity formation thanks to your participation in online fandom activities? (1 - Yes, I have learned a lot; 5 - No, I do not think I have learned anything new)

Table 14: Gaining information on LGBT issues

Scale	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Number	34	11	4	2	2	53
Percentage	64,15%	20,76%	7,55%	3,77%	3,77%	

It is clear that most respondents thought they had gained a large amount of information about LGBT issues while being in their fandom. 34 respondents out of 53 (64,15%) thought that they had “learned a lot.” Eleven respondents (20,76%) thought that they had learned quite a bit as well. 84,91% of the respondents hence felt like they had gained a good amount of information thanks to their fandom participation.

Four respondents (7,55%) thought they had learned an average amount of new things about LGBT issues. Two respondents (3,77%) claimed they had not learned too much, but still some things. Two other respondents (3,77%), on the other hand, were of the opinion that they had not learned anything new while being in a fandom. In comparison to other survey questions that included the Likert scale, this one had an average score much higher on the scale. This means that most people thought their fandom participation had been beneficial regarding gaining information.

Because the responses to the previous question do not explain what kind of information people have gained exactly, the question required a follow-up question that was open-ended.

5. If you answered yes (1-4), briefly describe the information you have gained, please.

50 respondents (94,33%) listed various types of information that they had gained due to their fandom involvement. Nine people (16,98%) mentioned the range of sexualities or the nuances of sexuality and gender. Six (11,32%) people said that fandom involvement had given them more perspectives on other people's sexualities and gender identities. Some said they had learned more about harmful stereotypes in their fandom environment. One of them mentioned that it had taught them to respect others, and one said that it had taught them that other people struggled with similar issues.

Example 20

My fandom involvement has allowed me to embrace non-straight identities and get a closer look at what they mean, outside the textbook information we're often given online. Without fandom involvement, same sex relationships and other gender identities would still be completely foreign and abstract to me

Example 21

I've gained a lot of perspective on other sexualities and identities, and learned how to be more respectful toward others in the community. For example, I learned the history of the word "queer" and how different sectors feel about it.

Example 22

My online activities are - and always have been - almost exclusively fandom-related. When I began to delve into femslash fandoms, I started to learn a lot about the LGBT community I didn't know before. Having grown homeschooled up in a very conservative Midwest town, I didn't exactly have a large knowledge base to begin with, so, honestly almost everything I know about the LGBT community I learned through fandom or fandom friends.

Comments like these show that LGBT fandoms are truly helpful to many. Just as previous research about online LGBT communities shows, femslash fandoms can often be places where people learn about their own and fellow LGBT people's identities. As the third comment above shows, people who come from conservative communities might get most of their knowledge on LGBT issues via fandom and the people they have met in fandom environments.

Three (5,66%) respondents mentioned compulsory heterosexuality.

Example 23

I learned more about how compulsory heterosexuality could impact me as a then-closeted lesbian. Also has given me more insight on transphobia and the ways it manifests

From this response one can see that fandom can give LGBT individuals important information on themselves and tools to figure out their sexuality. It is hard for many same-sex-attracted people to realize their same-sex-attraction due to compulsory heterosexuality. For gay men and lesbians, it can mean never realizing that they are actually not attracted to the “opposite gender.” Learning about issues such as compulsory heterosexuality early on ought to make gay people’s lives easier as they are not as prone to end up trapped in heteronormative marriages like the lesbians in Cooper’s (2010) study. One respondent even stated that their participation in fandom had made them realize their sexual orientation.

Example 24

I have learned so much about LGBTQTIA+ issues and identities by getting to know other queer folks, by being exposed to fictional and nonfictional queer content and resources, and by gradually realizing I was queer.

Six people (11,32%) specified that they had become more educated about transgender issues and learned more about transphobia because of their online activities. Three of them said that transgender issues and identities were the one thing that they had learned best in femslash fandoms.

Example 25

I think I know a lot more about issues like transphobia because of fandom! (...)

Example 26

I must admit I wasn't very informed about issues that concern the transgender community or what it means and how its feels to be someone who doesnt identify as the sex they are born with as I never had anyone in my life who is familiar with them and I still can't fully claim to comprehend everything but I've learned a lot and I have more insight since I've read about the experiences of people online.

These respondents (3,77%) stated that fandom had given them a great deal of information about transgender issues. The last respondent above states that they now have more insight because of the experiences they have read about online. This is very important, and it shows that people are willing to listen and want to learn more about people who are different from them and will do so online. As there is less television representation for transgender people as there are for lesbian, gay, and bisexual members of the community (GLAAD, 2018: 8, 12), it is important that the part of the LGBT community that is not transgender still hears their stories and struggles and learns to understand them (especially those who do not know any transgender people in offline contexts).

Five people (9,43%) mentioned the importance of representation and four (7,54%) the importance of intersectionality when looking at LGBT issues.

Example 27

I learned a lot of nuance and representation. I knew intersectional representation was extremely important before, but seeing how other fans react to diversity (both positively and negatively) helped open my eyes to see just how much we truly need it.

Example 28

Before fandom/femslash ships, I always felt kind of outside of the loop, I guess. Being in fandom taught me that each person's journey to their identity is different, and it doesn't have to stay stagnant. I've also learned that even within our community, there are those who don't accept others (biphobia, lesbophobia, transphobia, etc.). What's beautiful about our community is that we have different types of communities that make up ours (race/ethnicity/background/etc.), and it's important to understand the intersectionality of it, and realize that some members have different/additional struggles than others.

As these extracts show, learning about the importance of intersectionality and representation has been an important lesson that fandom has taught to many. This is crucial as it has been argued that more privileged LGBT people do not often see their privileges (Jones, 2016), but learning about intersectionality can change that, make people think more, and make them more considerate. Learning about representation, in turn, can teach people to reject toxic narratives, acknowledge them and, for example, demand better television representations.

Three respondents (5,66%) said that their fandom circles also worked as a news source for them and showed how LGBT rights and communities are in different parts of the world. Two

respondents (3,77%) said that it had taught them LGBT history, and one (1,89%) mentioned sex education.

Example 29

The sites where I'm most active fandomwise also provide news from the world about LGBT people. Just being aware how it is for people in other countries, about the history of our people

Example 30

How LGBT communities elsewhere look, the problems we face around the world, HIV awareness, sex education

All of this shows that for many people, fandom does not only work as a place for fannish activities. For these respondents, fandom has helped them learn about themselves and others. The participants had learned about issues such as intersectionality, LGBT history, sex education, representation, and harmful stereotypes. This is all extremely important and gives a good idea how much information femslash fans actually gain while participating in their fandom.

According to Hanmer (2003: 98), many lesbian fans of *Xena* had found the courage to leave their heteronormative lives behind because of the support net of their fandom. Many had “come out” thanks to the advice and support their fandom friends had given them. This is why the respondents were asked:

6. Has your online fandom had an influence on your ability to disclose your sexual and/or gender identity to any of the following

- Family*
- Offline friends*
- Co-workers and/or fellow students*
- Other _____*
- No, it has not helped me to disclose my LGBT identity offline*

The chart below has the answers in the order of frequency. The original order of the options can be seen above and in the appendix.

Table 15: Disclosing identity offline

Option	Number	Percentage
Offline friends	33	62,26%
Family	26	49,06%
Co-workers and/or fellow students	18	33,96%
No, it has not helped me to disclose my LGBT identity offline.	15	28,3%
Other	3	5,66%

As we can see, for most participants, being a part of an online fandom had helped them to disclose their LGBT identity offline. The most common group of people that the respondents had been able to talk about their sexual orientation or gender identity were offline friends. 33 respondents out of 53 (62,26%) had been able to disclose their sexual orientation and/or gender identity to offline friends with the help of fandom. This is over a half of the respondents, meaning that the positive effect of fandom should not be belittled.

26 respondents (49,06%) had found fandom helpful when it came to disclosing their LGBT identity to family members. This is almost half of the respondents, so the number is very high here as well. The option “co-workers and/or fellow students” was a bit less popular; it was chosen by 18 (33,96%) respondents. It should be noted that it is not as common for co-workers and people who are considered simply fellow students (but not friends) to know personal matters about one another; it is not at least as common as good friends and family, so this number was expected to be lower than the previous two.

Three respondents (5,66%) had chosen the option “other.” It gave the respondents the chance to specify who else they had told about their LGBT identity. One of them had written “partner” in the field and another respondent “myself.” The third person who had ticked the box had a longer explanation:

Example 31

I don't know if this counts so just in case, I also clicked the no option, but I have talked to someone (though, via text) about my sexuality and they were very accepting. Though tbh since they were one of the two irl friends who followed me, she didn't think much of it because she already knew based on my tweets alone I wasn't straight lol

Even though fandom had helped these people disclose their LGBT identity in other contexts, it should be remembered that this was not the case for everyone. 15 respondents, so a percentage as high as 28,3, had not been helped by their fandom. This could imply that either fandom is the only place they can truly be themselves or they did not need help from fandom to disclose their identity offline.

As the numbers do not tell us everything, the previous multiple-choice question was followed by an open-ended question.

7. If yes, feel free to specify how it has influenced you and your ability to disclose your identity.

The question was answered by 32 people (60,38%). The words the respondents mentioned the most here were ‘confident’ (eight times) and ‘confidence’ (six times). Being part of a fandom had given many the confidence to be honest about their LGBT identity in a myriad of ways. Five people also mentioned finding acceptance for themselves in fandom. This shows that femslash fandom participation can help its members to create a positive image of themselves and make them more confident.

Example 32

The way fandom interacts with coming out narratives has given me more confidence and also the knowledge that I'm not the only one struggling with these things

Example 33

I was already really out, but LGBTQ fandom helped me be more confident and less apologetic

Example 34

Made me feel more confident using and saying the word lesbian.

Example 35

I felt more confident coming out as trans.

In addition to confidence, fandom had encouraged its members: four (7,55%) participants mentioned the word ‘courage’ and one ‘encouragement.’ There were other responses that were also courage-themed even though the words ‘courage’ or ‘encouragement’ were not specifically mentioned. The participants talked about how their fandom had given them strength and enforced their abilities to tell people about their true identity offline.

Example 36

I think they gave me courage, I met a lot of important people in my life through fandoms, relating to them, seeing me in them and in characters, made me realize the life I wanted to have, and how I wanted to be honest with myself and others

In addition to friends (mentioned by six respondents, 11,32%, although the word ‘fandom’ was used to describe friends as well), the respondents talked about family and how their fandom involvement had made it easier to talk honestly to family members. Six respondents (11,32%) mentioned the word ‘family’, two ‘mom’, one ‘parents’, and one ‘sisters.’

Example 37

Watching the positive outcome and acceptance of some characters on several fandoms after coming out to their parents and the normalisation of it has inspired me and made it easier for me to be able to talk about my sexuality and the person i like with my mom

Example 38

It has made me more comfortable with myself and I've thus been able to tell about my bisexuality to for example some of my friends and sisters to whom I didn't dare to tell before.

One respondent (1,89%) talked about how they had not been able to disclose the sexuality to their family yet, but how being in a fandom had made them think about it and consider it.

Example 39

Being in the SwanQueen fandom has helped me be more confident in my own sexuality, I'm proud of it now and will talk about it openly. With family I'm more closed off, logically I know they'd be fine with it but I'm still struggling with how to tell them, however a major difference is that now I've considered telling them, I never thought I would but now I can picture having that conversation with them so maybe one day.

Two respondents (3,77%) said that their activities in fandom had even made them realize that they were not straight. The fan community around them had thus given them the tools for constructing their identity and supported them when they were disclosing it.

Example 40

My activities in online femslash fandom were what made me realise that I was a lesbian and it was through this realisation and the community that I formed with my online friends that I was able to find the courage to come out to my immediate family and close friends

Example 41

Online fandom helped me realize I was queer and gave me the safety net of queer friends I needed to come out to my family and others. I might have gotten there on my own eventually, years from now. But online fandom gave me role models and the encouragement I needed to live openly and authentically. I wouldn't be who I am today without my fandom and my friends.

In addition to making many respondents feel more comfortable with themselves, fandom had even given this respondent the courage to speak up about both sexuality and gender assumptions in work contexts.

Example 42

It's made me feel more comfortable in my identity when talking with my friends, and more confident in speaking up about sexuality and gender assumptions coworkers make

For three respondents (5,66%), fandom had given them the knowledge that there are other people like them in the world and they are not as alone as they seem to be in their offline communities. This shows that for some fans, their fandom and the fellow LGBT friends they have made there give them solace and a sense of belonging somewhere.

Example 43

It's just kinda given me that knowledge that even though where i am there's not a lot of LGBT+ people (or there are and I don't know it) there's a whole plethora of LGBT+ in the world

There was one person who mentioned coming over internalized homophobia. Another respondent implied the same by saying that they had been embarrassed and shameful about their sexual identity but were not anymore because fandom had become a support group that had taken away some of that shame. This is very similar to the five respondents who said that fandom made them feel like their sexuality was valid and acceptable.

Example 44

(...) I had lots of internalized homophobia and even some internalized sexism, and being a part of the fandom, reading fics, seeing characters I could relate to, making LGBTQ friends and ultimately writing fics, was the first step I needed to start embracing being a lesbian, realizing that there was nothing wrong with my identity and battling all the internalized homophobia. (...)

All in all, being a part of a femslash fandom had helped the respondents to disclose their identity in a myriad of ways. It had given them confidence, courage, and a sense of belonging, all of which have either helped in identity disclosure or general well-being. Online LGBT community had helped them battle internalized homophobia and accept who they are. For a few respondents, fandom was the place where they had realized they were not straight (and I believe the percentage would be higher if they had been asked about that directly).

In addition to this, many participants said that they have gotten support for their minority identities online. This will be discussed further in section 4.5.

4.4 The importance of diverse representations

It is crucial to take a look at LGBT representation in the media. Femslash fandoms are strongly linked to minority representation and it would be ill-judged to study them without any consideration of how they are represented more generally. One of the secondary research questions was thus:

What are the effects of LGBT media representation on people who identify as LGBT?

As a result, the survey included four questions that could be categorized as representational questions. Two of these questions were multiple-choice and used the Likert scale; the other two were open-ended and prompted the respondents to extend the answers that they had given to the Likert scale questions. The questions regarding representation looked like this:

Has the way in which LGBT people are represented in the media (e.g. television shows and movies) had an effect on your LGBT identity? (1 - Yes, it has had a strong effect; 5 - No, it has not had any effect) If yes (options 1-4), how would you describe the effect LGBT representation in the media has had on you?

Do you have any specific television or movie viewing experiences that have influenced your self-perception as a person who is LGBT or LGBT identities in general? (E.g. Has a character who "came out" on a show or in a movie been meaningful to you? Has a character or a pairing for one reason or another made it easier for you to realize that you're LGBT?) (1 - Yes, I have many important experiences; 5 - No, I do not have any)

If yes, feel free to specify it here.

The Likert scale was chosen for the question below since it would have been very difficult to answer it with simply “Yes” or “No.” The Likert scale gave the respondents more options to choose from and it gives us an idea of how strongly people have been affected by media representations, if at all.

8. Has the way in which LGBT people are represented in the media (e.g. television shows and movies) had an effect on your LGBT identity? (1 - Yes, it has had a strong effect; 5 - No, it has not had any effect)

Table 16: The effects of LGBT media representation on LGBT identity

Scale	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Number	16	8	8	8	13	53
Percentage	30,19%	15,09%	15,09%	15,09%	24,53%	

As we can see from the results, the respondents' experiences on the effects of LGBT media representation on their LGBT identity varied quite a bit. What is interesting here is that most respondents were either strongly affected by LGBT representation (16 respondents, 30,19 %) or felt like they were not affected by it at all (13 respondents, 24,53 %). Together these percentages make up 54,72% of the respondents.

This means that 45,28% of the participants had chosen a scale point somewhere in the middle (2-4), an option that was more neutral. There were eight respondents (15,09%) who had been somewhat strongly affected by LGBT representation in the media, eight respondents (15,09%) who felt like they had been affected, but just an average amount, and eight respondents (15,09%) who thought they had been somewhat affected, but not very much.

There were several respondents for each option. "Yes, it has had a strong effect" was the most popular option, but only barely. This shows how everyone has different experiences with the media that they consume, even if they come from the same community. The answers also demonstrate why it was wise to use the Likert scale when asking this type of question: people's feelings on the matter were more nuanced than a simple "Yes / No" question could have conveyed.

As said above, this question by itself does not give us enough information on representation and how femslash fans feel about LGBT representation. The question was thus followed by:

9. If yes (options 1-4), how would you describe the effect LGBT representation in the media has had on you?

This open-ended question was answered by 36 respondents (67,92% of the participants). They described their experiences with LGBT representation and pointed out both the good and the bad in it. There were some who concentrated on the positive and how much LGBT representation had given them, and there were others who brought up negative representations (for example LGBT characters dying and LGBT representation not being intersectional enough to be relatable).

These two answers are typical examples of positive experiences of how LGBT people have been represented:

Example 45

Positive representation reassures me that it's okay to be who I am, and that expressing myself isn't something to be ashamed of. Having character in films/shows ect helps as a way of talking to people during classes and my job to show to them the different gender and sexual spectrums there are (if they have been shown in the media that is) because so many people consume media too, making it easier to communicate how it is I feel if a fictional character has gone through the same.

Example 46

When Elena from “One Day At A Time” come out her her mom, I cried for a while afterwards because that was the first time I’ve ever felt seen in media. Elena’s story is very similar to my own, and just seeing that portrayed and done so beautifully on TV healed me in a way I can’t explain. Seeing any kind of queer characters in media takes away some of the ‘otherness’ from being queer, and validates queer people’s existence and identities.

For these people, seeing positive media representations of themselves has shown them that it is okay to be who they are. It has made them feel like their identity is valid and their story can be shown on television just like anyone else’s story. The emotion in these answers should not go unnoticed – the importance of positive media representation is clear when we look at the reactions of those who are not used to it.

The respondents who saw LGBT representation positively mentioned other reasons for it as well. They pointed out that seeing LGBT representation had given them the chance to be more outspoken about their identities offline, it had made them feel “normal and less alone”, it had given them a sense that there are other people like them, and helped them gain confidence. It had given some respondents validation and confirmed what they wanted in life. One respondent mentioned that seeing LGBT representations in the media had shown them that one should not necessarily live according to the heteronormative expectations of society:

Example 47

Showed me there was an alternative life to the traditional marriage to a man I'd always thought I'd grow up to end up in.

Some respondents said that seeing LGBT representations in the media had worked as an

awakening for them. This respondent pointed out that they had not realized their sexuality until they had felt a connection to a television show couple:

Example 48

I didn't realise I was a lesbian until I felt a strong connection to a (non-canon) couple on a television show. It was through my love for them that I learned more about myself and my sexuality became more apparent to me.

The way in which minorities see themselves represented has thus a big effect on them. Simply the fact that there is positive television representation at all is very important to LGBT individuals. If an LGBT individual lives a very sheltered life in a conservative community, an LGBT character on television or LGBT friends online might be a way for them to realize that there might be other options in life, like the penultimate respondent above stated.

The respondents who that did not feel particularly affected by the way in which LGBT have been represented gave several reasons for it. Some said that the lack of representation made them close themselves off and that it caused frustration. The same respondent said that they did not have access to information or anyone to relate to. One respondent said that they had been more influenced by fandom friends than LGBT portrayals on screen.

A few respondents made it abundantly clear that the current state of LGBT representation had made them want better representation for their identities. One respondent mentioned that there is not what they would call positive butch or gender non-conforming lesbians' representation in modern media, which goes hand-in-hand with what Ciasullo (2001) stated in her essay. Some of the people who mentioned the lack of intersectionality noted that the predominantly white LGBT representations in the media were not something that they could relate to.

Example 49

Not really - I still don't see any representation that even comes close to my own personal experience with not being straight. Most LGBT representation in the media today deals with white privileged characters and/or coming out narratives, neither of which really speak to me.

A few people mentioned that LGBT representations in the media they had seen concentrated on narratives that did not have happy endings, which made them themselves feel bad. This is all too

familiar to LGBT fans when we look at issues such as “Bury Your Gays” and the “Dead Lesbian trope” (from section 2.2.5).

Example 50

Seeing LGBT characters helped me realize that I'm gay, but watching them die or otherwise end up miserable and alone has actually been fairly traumatic.

One respondent brought up bisexual erasure which is an unfortunately widespread phenomenon even in LGBT-heavy shows with bisexual leading characters (for example, *Orange is the New Black* and *How to Get Away with Murder*). The respondent disclosed at the end of the form that they identify as bisexual, and this answer represents well the issues that bisexual erasure in LGBT representation cause.

Example 51

I actually think the lack of bisexual representation that had characters actually call themselves bi made it a harder identity for me to access. And since I never had any doubt that I was attracted to men, I spent a long time not realizing that I was queer because there was no representation I could see anywhere that could give me the vocabulary for what I felt.

One respondent said that even the positive LGBT relationship representations that are shown on television are not done as thoroughly as the representations of heterosexual couples. They said that they would like to have television shows that would have similar slowly built LGBT relationships as heterosexual viewers of television have.

Example 52

(...) more slowly built pairings like there are with heterosexual pairings on shows such as *Bones* or *Castle* with their leading characters. I want it to feel natural and I don't feel that with most shows, the lack of proper representation has had a larger impact on me in the way it makes me feel like a weird outlier (...)

For two respondents, the lack of good LGBT representation had inspired them to work for television industry so that they could write better stories for their community.

Example 53

The lack of good representation onscreen made me realize I want to be in the television industry when I finish college.

Example 54

Since forever, I've always wanted to write, and in the back of my mind somewhere, I've always wanted to write for film or television, but never really had reason to actually go for it. Seeing LGBTQ representation in media, and even more, witnessing queerbaiting and the negative impact it has on everyone in LGBTQ oriented fandoms, gives me that reason. I want to be someone who can make a difference in media because we deserve better. While I'm not exactly close to making that happen, my long term goals are to get there, and that's definitely the biggest way LGBT representation in the media has impacted me and will continue to impact me.

To sum up, LGBT individuals are affected in different ways by LGBT portrayals in the media. Some find them very helpful and validating, whereas others have found negative representations incredibly hurtful. Some have not found themselves fully represented at all, and others were not happy with the representations they were getting as they do not get television pairings that they could enjoy the same way straight people do.

As the previous question did not always answer whether the respondents had had any specific meaningful media-viewing experiences, the following two questions were supposed to answer that. The second Likert-scale question regarding representation was:

15. Do you have any specific television or movie viewing experiences that have influenced your self-perception as a person who is LGBT or LGBT identities in general? (E.g. Has a character who "came out" on a show or in a movie been meaningful to you? Has a character or a pairing for one reason or another made it easier for you to realize that you're LGBT?) (1 - Yes, I have many important experiences; 5 - No, I do not have any)

Table 17: Meaningful media-viewing experiences

Scale	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Number	17	9	12	3	12	53
Percentage	32,08%	16,98%	22,64%	5,66%	22,64%	

The average response for this question was 2,72. This meant that, once again, the respondents had different media-viewing experiences. The most popular response was “Yes, I have many important experiences”, which was chosen by 17 respondents (32,08% of the respondents). There were, however, enough responses to make it clear that not everyone has had very many of these specific experiences; 12 respondents (22,64%) claimed not to have any.

Nine respondents (16,98%) answered that they had quite a few important experiences, but not enough to tick the option “many experiences.” 12 respondents (22,64%) thought that they had an average amount of important television viewing experiences as an LGBT person. Three people (5,66%, the lowest number of respondents to this question) had few important media-viewing experiences, but unlike those 12 respondents who chose option number 5, they still claimed to have had some.

These statistics are interesting. One might think that people who are passionate fans of an LGBT pairing and fictional characters would have many important LGBT viewing experiences. These statistics, however, show that 22,64% of the respondents do not think so at all and only 32,02% think that they have many important viewing experiences.

Luckily, this question was followed by an open-ended question, the purpose of which was to give more insight into the multiple-choice question that was just discussed. It provides us with qualitative data on meaningful media-viewing experiences of the participants.

16. If yes, feel free to specify it here.

People mainly listed positive media-viewing experiences as a response to this question. Had the question been designed better, the respondents could have also been asked why they did not think their media-viewing experiences were meaningful to them. 36 respondents out of 53 (67,92%) wrote an answer to the follow-up question.

The overall impression of the responses in this section was that LGBT pairings and characters had helped people to identify in a certain way and it had been an important experience to see oneself

represented on one's television screen. Both being a lesbian and being bisexual were mentioned, as well as simply "attracted to girls." Laverne Cox's transgender character, Sophia Buset (*Orange is the New Black*) was also brought up. Various characters and relationships were mentioned, and many gave explanations for why something had been particularly meaningful to them.

A few respondents mentioned the fandoms of *Xena* and *Buffy* that Hanmer (2003, 2010, 2014) and Collier et al. (2009) had researched previously, but various new characters and relationships in other television series were also mentioned. Two very popular choices were the character of Elena Alvarez from *One Day at a Time* and the pairing of Emma and Regina from *Once Upon a Time*. Some other pairings were the pairing of Stef and Lena from *The Fosters* and Korra and Asami from the series *Legend of Korra*. Two bisexual women, Rosa Diaz from *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* and Callie Torres from *Grey's Anatomy* (and other Sara Ramirez's roles) were mentioned, as well as lesbians such as Emily Fields from *Pretty Little Liars*, Santana Lopez from *Glee*, and Alex Danvers from *Supergirl*. Several characters of different sexualities from the BBC America show *Orphan Black* were listed. One respondent also brought up comics and how reading about women who love women had been a positive experience for them.

Example 55

Growing up with comics, characters like Kate Kane/Harley Quinn from the DC Comics franchise have been big influences on my identity as they are continuously shown to be open about their sexual identity, and it's been shown on paper that they are attracted to women - in which I can relate.

A few respondents said that it had been very important to them to see a family unit that had two mothers on screen, a point that has also been made by Suddeth (2017: 31).

Example 56

the fosters really affected me. seeing a married lesbian couple on tv just existing without the trauma of homophobia or coming out stories really touched me. it's not a story that's usually told. usually it's coming out or homophobia stories so it was nice to see lesbians just existing.

Example 57

I watched *Once Upon a Time* and really related to Emma, Regina, and Henry as a family unit. It helped me realize that I could have a family as well, even if some believe LGBTQ people shouldn't.

One respondent disclosed that it had been meaningful for them to see a character that had been assumed to be straight to be bisexual in the end.

Example 58

In terms of canon LGBT, *The Legend of Korra* brought me a lot of joy and hope in seeing a main female character (who many assumed to be straight) end up with another woman.

Another respondent mentioned a pairing from their youth and talked about its meaningfulness. They also mentioned that a character who had most likely been bisexual had never been directly addressed as bisexual in the show's writing, which once again demonstrates the bisexual erasure on television series.

Example 59

When I was really young, I watched *Degrassi*. There was a ship called *Palex*. Paige and Alex were 2 girls who started out not understanding each other at all because they were complete opposites but somehow they ended up best friends and then eventually more. Paige figuring out she was maybe bisexual (although she didn't ever use that word) helped me realize that was even an option.

One respondent talked about how transgender people are represented and about their visibility in fandom spaces. The fact that just one transgender character on a popular Netflix show had started a lot of discussion shows how important LGBT representation is and how important it would be to get more transgender representations.

Example 60

Laverne Cox's character on *Orange Is the New Black* did a lot for trans visibility, tho i had already been in the trans community for years by the time that happened, it did start a lot of fandom discussion about trans characters in ways that i'd never seen before.

Even though most respondents underlined the importance of positive minority representation and normalizing their identities on screen, for one respondent it was easier to relate to characters that were not explicitly LGBT in the original text.

Example 61

It's a little weird, but I've found it easier to accept my identity through characters who have not come out, and are not canonically represented as LGBTQ. A bulk of my examples are from OUAT. Even just seeing Emma and Regina interact make me feel positively about being a lesbian, and I think it has something to do with their relationship (both canon and fanon) is so unconventional, but it makes so much sense. That's kind of how I've felt about being gay for a while, so just seeing something that I never expected to make sense click like that really made a huge difference for me.

Elena Alvarez, who was mentioned earlier, resonated with some respondents particularly well because she is not white. This speaks for the fact that more intersectional LGBT representation is needed and it is extremely important.

Example 62

Elena's coming out in the first season of *One Day at a Time* was particularly resonant with me as it really represented the anxieties around what it's like to come out to a non-white family.

The pairing of Clarke and Lexa from *The 100* was mentioned in both the good and the bad. A few people said that they had found the story of Clarke and Lexa fulfilling while it had lasted, but the death of Lexa had worked as a slap in the face and gave the viewers the idea that they could not have happy endings.

Example 63

Lexa dying, that was kind of negative so it always reminds me that people will hate me just because I exist.

Although many respondents were strongly affected by the representations that they saw on their television screens, one of them explained why that had not been the case for them.

Example 64

Not really? Especially not coming out ones because they are rare. But I have come to really appreciate the rare times when a character does talk about their sexuality. Or when they display it, like it's a normal thing (e.g Sarah Manning on *Orphan Black* kissing a man and a woman at the same time).

All in all, LGBT characters, pairings, and family units with same-sex parents had been meaningful to many respondents, and they had influenced viewers' self-perceptions of themselves or LGBT

people in general. People mostly listed specific LGBT characters that were LGBT in the source text, but pairings of characters (who were and were not canonically romantic couples in the source text) were mentioned as well. Issues such as bisexual erasure, the lack of transgender characters and the importance LGBT characters of Color also came up, which shows that equal intersectional representation is incredibly important and needed.

4.5 Discrimination in femslash fandoms and fellow fans' support

As it was already pointed out in Section 2, fans who belong to minorities often face discrimination from more privileged fans. Femslash fans have pointed out how they have faced for example homophobia, racism, biphobia, and transphobia coming from other fans (Pande & Moitra, 2017; Stanfill, 2019; Aalto, 2016: 15). This should not go unnoted when studying fandoms, especially when studying minorities within fandoms and doing more extensive research. Hence, this section attempts to answer the second primary research question:

What kind of prejudices and discrimination do people in femslash fandoms face?

There were four questions in the survey that were related to prejudices and discrimination. There were only four questions regarding this topic because the research question above was initially a secondary research question. Two of the questions required an open-ended answer and were follow-up questions to two multiple-choice questions. This time, it was not appropriate to use the Likert scale, so the multiple-choice questions had a few options to choose from and the respondents could choose whichever option suited them best. The four questions were:

Have you encountered prejudices or bullying in fandom spaces when you've participated in a femslash fandom?

If yes, what kind of prejudices or bullying have you encountered?

Have you found support for your minority identity/identities in your fandom?

- *Yes, for my LGBT identity.*
- *Yes, for my LGBT identity and another minority identity (for example a religious or an ethnic MINORITY identity).*

- *Yes, other minority identities, but not my LGBT identity.*
- *No.*
- *I'm not sure.*

If you answered yes, what kind of support have you gotten?

The first question was rather direct, and it gives us a good idea of what kind of experiences the respondents have generally had about prejudices and bullying in fandom. The options in the chart below are in their original order and in the order of frequency as the two were the same.

21. Have you encountered prejudices or bullying in fandom spaces when you've participated in a femslash fandom?

Table 18: Prejudices and bullying in fandom spaces

Options	Number	Percentage
Yes, and it has been directed at me at least once.	29	54,72%
Yes, but I have not personally experienced it.	22	41,51%
No, I have not.	2	3,77%
I am not sure.	0	0%

Only two respondents out of 53 (3,77%) had not encountered bullying or prejudices in fandom spaces. The remaining 51 respondents (96,23 %) had either been the victim of it themselves or witnessed it second-hand. This number is incredibly high since almost all respondents – whether they considered themselves hardcore fans or not and whether they spent most of their time online or not – had encountered some form of bullying or prejudice.

29 respondents (54,72%) had been the victim of bullying and prejudices during their time in fandom. This is over a half of the respondents. 22 respondents (41,51%) had witnessed prejudices

and bullying directed at someone else or a larger group of people, but not at them specifically. These numbers are incredibly worrying and show that bullying and prejudices are a notable issue in fandom spaces. It can also be noted that none of the respondents chose the “I am not sure” option, which means that everyone had a strong opinion on whether they had encountered prejudices and if they had experienced it themselves.

Since this question and its answers only provide us with numerical information, the follow-up question was open-ended and shows what kind of prejudices and bullying the members of femslash fandoms face.

22. If yes, what kind of prejudices or bullying have you encountered? This can be prejudices coming from outside your femslash fandom/pairing (e.g. the shippers of an opposing m/f ship) or inside fandom (racism, ableism, biphobia, transphobia, islamophobia, antisemitism etc.)

As I discovered in my previous study (Aalto, 2016), it is very common for heterosexual fans of a television show to send hateful messages to people who are fans of a femslash pairing. In the present study, 49 respondents (92,45%) replied to the question above, and the answers were partly very similar to the ones I got in 2016. 20 respondents (40,82%) mentioned either the word ‘homophobic’ or ‘homophobia’, but there were other responses that talked about homophobic discrimination without mentioning the word. In total, there were 42 respondents (85,71%) who talked about homophobia, homophobic attacks by ‘opposing shippers,’ and hate directed at femslash fans for shipping two women together.

Example 65

Homophobia, mostly. I've received anons from people telling me how wrong it was to ship the characters I were shipping because they were "straight", messages that included homophobic slurs, called me dirty... I've received death threats and messages from people telling me to kill myself.

When discussing homophobic attacks, the respondents often mentioned the word ‘delusional.’ The word was brought up by eight respondents (15,09%). The word was used to attack femslash shippers for shipping two women together.

Example 66

I've been called delusional by m/f shippers because my preferred pairing was not canonically shown as romantic on television, despite the clear queer subtext. I've been told it's wrong to live this "lifestyle", that loving a lesbian pairing is "gross", and that I should be satisfied with whatever random LGBTQ pairing the writers decide to write.

As I discovered in my previous research, many femslash fans found being called delusional crueler than for example slurs as it invalidated their sexuality and their reading of the text. It was the most common insult that had been directed at the 2, 286 respondents that took the survey in 2016 (Aalto, 2016: 12, 14). Therefore, it is not surprising that the word came up in 16,33% of the answers of this more recent survey, showing that the fandom environment has not changed much in that regard during these few years.

Although some respondents mentioned only homophobic attacks toward femslash fans, there were many who brought up other more specific attacks toward LGBT fans and their identities. While the homophobic attacks reportedly came from outside the femslash fandom, from the shippers of opposing m/f ships or straight people who were otherwise homophobic, there were other kinds of bullying and prejudices that came from fellow femslash shippers. One respondent who disclosed that they are a non-binary lesbian mentioned that they run into transgender exclusionary radical feminists on a regular basis and hence see a lot of transphobia. The discrimination of transgender people was mentioned by 10 respondents (18,87%). In addition to transphobia, the word 'biphobia' came up 10 times (also by 18,87% of the respondents). Again, this is incredibly worrying and shows the gatekeeping and discrimination that takes place within the LGBT community between its different groups.

As we saw earlier in section 2.4.4, fandoms are infested with racism and LGBT individuals who are People of Color often face racism in the LGBT community. According to the respondents, the most common type of discrimination in femslash fandoms (after homophobia that comes from outside the fandom) is racism. Racism was mentioned by 19 respondents (38,78%).

Example 67

There has definitely been prejudices from outside the pairing. That's the most common one. However, I've also seen racism and biphobia from inside the femslash fans, as well. And just because I haven't seen much else, doesn't mean I don't know it's out there.

Example 68

Early days in Swan Queen fandom involved a lot of racism and denial that Lana, and therefore Regina, is Latina. The OUAT fandom in general has a huge racism problem. Lots of homophobia from the C\$ fandom. There was some biphobia that cropped up in the early days of OQ when some Swan Queen shippers started shipping that as well

Example 69

I have had hate directed at me from shippers from an opposing m/f ship and i have had people dismiss my opinions on racism from within my own femslash fandom as white femslash fans tend to overlook issues of race and ethnicity

The fact that racism is clearly a serious issue in femslash fandoms, while it was mentioned only by 19 respondents (38,78%), implies that white femslash fans indeed tend to overlook the issues mentioned by the last respondent above. This coincides with what Pande and Moitra (2017) and Stanfill (2019) stated in their studies. In addition to racism as such, anti-blackness was mentioned once (2,04%) and anti-latinx sentiments were mentioned twice (4,08%). Xenophobia was mentioned once (2,04%). Islamophobia (4,08%) and antisemitism (4,08%) were both mentioned twice. The fetishization of a Latina character and thus the fetishization of her culture and ethnicity also came up (n=1, 2,04%).

Example 70

Anti-latinx sentiment, white-washing of a latina character, fetishizing said culture and ethnicity.
Casual anti-semitism

Example 71

lots of homophobia and biphobia, i've also witnessed quite a bit of racism and islamophobia and anti-semitism, plus some stuff that isn't quite transphobia as much as it's...idk microaggressions?

Example 72

racism, lesbophobia, transphobia, misogyny, misogynoir (gendered racism against black women).
I've seen it all r.i.p.

Ableism was mentioned by five people (10,2%). Although this study does not focus on this form of discrimination much, it should be still noted that it is definitely a problem with which many people in fandoms struggle. Ableism in fandoms is an important topic that could be studied further in future research.

Example 73

there's been a lot from outside fandom, both homophobia and ableism because i often stan characters who are seen as having mental illnesses. but also ableism and transphobia from inside fandom. most of the bullying i've seen inside fandom has been racism that my friends have had to deal with

Example 74

some femslash shippers are transmysogynist, some are racist, ableism is everywhere etc

When looking at these numbers, it should be noted that about 13 answers were so short that the respondents might have thought of the first thing that popped into their head and did not bother to write a lengthy response of the different types of prejudices they had seen. If the question had been multiple-choice and there had been different options for different kinds of discrimination, the numbers might have been different. Some respondents answered that they had seen and faced discrimination, but they did not elaborate what kind of discrimination they were talking about. For example, consider the following responses:

Example 75

I have a popular Tumblr blog and because of that, get hate for being open about what I believe.

Example 76

(...) Sadly, yes, I have seen instances of other prejudices within my fandoms, though I am lucky in that none of them have been directed specifically at me.

If the question had been a multiple-choice one, it would have taken away the opportunity to discuss the respondents' self-reported feelings and would have required another question for that. However, these responses show that there are several kinds of discrimination and prejudice that people in femslash fandoms face. The most common one seems to be homophobia coming from outside the femslash fandom, but after that, fans who are People of Color face racism. Bisexual members face biphobia and transgender fans transphobia, and there is also ableism and religious discrimination in fandom spaces.

In addition to being asked about the prejudices and discrimination people face because of their marginalized identities, the respondents were asked what kind of support they have received for their minority identities. There were two questions on this topic, one of them multiple-choice and

another open-ended. The multiple-choice question below had five options and each respondent could choose only one of them.

13. *Have you found support for your minority identity/identities in your fandom?*

- *Yes, for my LGBT identity.*
- *Yes, for my LGBT identity and another minority identity (for example a religious or an ethnic MINORITY identity).*
- *Yes, other minority identities, but not my LGBT identity.*
- *No.*
- *I'm not sure.*

Table 19: Support for minority identities

Options	Number	Percentage
Yes, for my LGBT identity.	29	54,72%
Yes, for my LGBT identity and another minority identity (for example a religious or an ethnic MINORITY identity).	14	26,41%
I'm not sure.	7	13,21%
No.	3	5,66%
Yes, other minority identities, but not my LGBT identity.	0	0%

Most people (n=43; 81,13 %) had found support for their minority identity in their femslash fandom. 14 (26,41%) of these 43 people had found support for both their LGBT identity and another minority identity, whereas the remaining 29 people (54,72%) had found support only for their LGBT identity. It is clear that when the responses are examined more thoroughly, some of these 29 people did not identify with another minority identity and some others had only experienced support for their LGBT identity, but not their other minority identities. An example of

this is a response from a participant who later in the survey disclosed that they are Ashkenazi Jewish:

Example 77

Femslash fandom is very LGBT-friendly! I dithered about checking off other minority identity tbh but ultimately decided not to because what I see as support is mostly just 'most people are cool and somewhat tolerant' and that seems.....not much support after all.

There were 7 people (13,21%) who were not sure whether they had gotten support for their minority identity (or identities) in fandom. There could be several reasons for this, one of which might be that people did not know where to draw the line on this and they were hence not sure what qualified as support. There were 3 people (5,66%) who said that they had not received any support for their minority identity (or identities) while in fandom. This is very sad and shows that even though most people find a support net in fandom, that is not the case for everyone.

As expected, no one chose the option “Yes, other minority identities, but not my LGBT identity.” This implies that if a person who is LGBT gets support for only one minority identity in a femslash fandom, that identity is most likely their LGBT identity.

Since the question above only provides us with statistics, the respondents were also asked a follow-up question:

14. If you answered yes, what kind of support have you gotten?

The question was answered by 39 respondents out of 53 (73,58%). This means that four respondents who answered yes to the previous question, did not want to elaborate on it and write an open-ended answer. The respondents who wanted to elaborate on the matter listed several ways in which they had found support in their fandom.

The most common answers featured friendship and the support and validation online friends can give when one is uncertain about one’s identity and does not necessarily get support offline. 24 respondents out of the 39 respondents who answered this question (61,54%) said something related

to this theme. 20 respondents (51,28%) used ‘support’ or ‘supportive’ in their answers. Six people (15,38%) mentioned the word ‘accepting’ or ‘acceptance’ and five (12,82%) ‘valid’ or ‘validation.’

Example 78

When I was a baby gay in fandom, I had a very strong support system of older LGBT women who helped get me through the difficult aspects

Example 79

Just having people to talk to who understand has been a huge support. Plus, the night I came out to my parents was very harrowing and the support I got from everyone helped me get through it.

Example 80

Everyone was great when I came out as a trans man and supportive during the early days of my transition.

Example 81

The support in general is mostly just connecting to people who identify similarly or people who found their way to acceptance in a similar way as I did. These connections/similarities are extremely validating.

Thirteen respondents (33,33%) mentioned feeling less alone and knowing that there are people out there that are like them. Three respondents (7,7%) said that they had found help or support when disclosing their LGBT identity offline (although the actual number could be significantly higher since 29 respondents stated that they have gotten support for their LGBT identity). Two people (5,13%) mentioned being able to talk about LGBT dating with their fandom friends. One respondent (2,56%) mentioned that their online friends are the people who support them in everything, not just LGBT-related issues.

Example 82

I’ve been able to freely and openly talk about the way I identify, I’ve found that there are other people who are just as confused as I am about what label they exactly fit under and that it’s ok to not know.

Example 83

Everyone in fandom has been accepting, very open and kind. They have helped me educate myself, helping me figure out my identity and clarify my doubts and questions about my sexual identity. It has helping me know im nlt alone.

Some respondents mentioned that they had gotten support for more than one intersecting minority identity. Three respondents (7,7%) said that they had gotten support for their LGBT identity and their identities as Women of Color. One respondent (2,56%) said that they had gotten support for their LGBT identity and Jewish identity. Two respondents (5,13%) said that they had gotten support for their LGBT identity, religious minority identity, and ethnic minority identity.

Example 84

So many LGBT Jewish ladies that iI had never been able to be around before

Example 85

knowing that other gay filipinas exist and sharing that experience (...) also knowing that its possible to be a thriving lesbian lmao

One respondent (2,56%) mentioned that they had found friends who also had chronic and mental illnesses and got support in that way.

Example 86

i have made a few really close friends with others who have chronic illnesses/pain and mental illnesses and disabilities who have taught me a lot about what i'm going through and been supportive in ways that i haven't been able to get outside of that context

All in all, for many, LGBT fandoms work as a place where they find solace and support in several aspects of life. Above all, they find acceptance and validation for their minority identities from fellow people who belong to the same minorities. It should also be remembered that fandom involvement can help fans in their personal and offline life.

5. DISCUSSION

The main purpose of this thesis has been to find out how belonging to a femslash fandom helps to construct an LGBT identity. The first primary research question of the thesis was:

How does being a part of a femslash fan community help construct an LGBT identity?

This question was accompanied by more detailed secondary research questions that were related to the primary one:

1. *Do femslash fans have different online and offline LGBT identities?*
2. *What kind of support can marginalized groups of people get in femslash fandoms and to what extent do femslash fans learn about LGBT identities in online environments? Can femslash fandom involvement help to disclose an LGBT identity offline?*
3. *What are the effects of the media representation of the LGBT community on people who identify as LGBT?*
4. *What kinds of fandom activities that facilitate LGBT identity formation do femslash fans participate in?*

The second key aim of this study has been to examine what kinds of discrimination people in femslash fandoms face because of their marginalized identities. The second primary research question was thus:

What kind of prejudices and discrimination do people in femslash fandoms face?

These issues were studied in Section 4 of the thesis and will now be discussed further, particularly with reference to previous research in the field of LGBT studies and fandom studies.

A survey was conducted to find out what femslash fans themselves thought of their involvement in their respective fandom spaces. A survey study was chosen because it would be fast and give easily readable, comparable data from several people. It would also give a chance to study LGBT

fans' self-reported feelings. The survey gave both quantitative and qualitative data that was analyzed earlier. The qualitative data was presented in the form of charts and the qualitative answers were discussed with the help of thematic analysis and it included some charts as well. The survey was answered by 53 femslash fans who were LGBT and at least 18 years old. They were chosen because I knew them to fill the requirements of an eligible respondent as they were, apart from one, in a "mutual follow" relationship with me.

5.1 The respondents

This section deals with demographic information about the respondents. This kind of information is, of course, relevant when we study marginalized identities. The respondents were asked to indicate their age, sexual orientation, gender, country of current residence, and ethnicity. Besides gaining basic demographic information about the respondents, this information also gave an idea of what kind of experiences on issues such as discrimination and identity formation would be personal to the respondents. In addition to this, the respondents were asked which femslash fandoms they considered themselves to be a part of and if those fandoms were based on media that was from their country of residence.

The people who took the survey were all at least 18 years old, most of them (n=34; 64,15%) aged from 22 to 30. What could be noted from the respondents' age was that people who are over 30 and 40 years old can be members of femslash fandoms and fandoms are places for people from later stages of life as well. It was very common for the respondents to be in their 20s, but this could have been slightly altered by the fact that I, the person who conducted the survey, sent it to people I already knew. I, too, am in my 20s.

There are thus femslash fans from several different age groups and not all of them are in their teens – many are adults. This should be remembered in future research; the assumption that fandoms around media such as television shows (and the pairings that consist of television show characters) are a place only for teenagers is incorrect. The fact that many adults take quite a bit of time out of their lives to participate in and devote themselves to their fandom also implies that they get much

out of their time in fandom, probably more than a person who has not been in a fandom might think.

When we talk about adults' participation in fandom, it is important to note that there is a clear double standard when it is discussed: women who participate in fandom that is generally perceived as a female space (e.g. fandoms of pairings or boy bands) are considered embarrassing and there is a negative stigma around the female fans of these communities. (On the other hand, women who are fans of for example sports groups or science fiction – fandoms that are generally seen as male spaces – may face prejudices and gatekeeping and have their motives for being a fan questioned.) When male fans of for example football or ice hockey are discussed, their over-the-top participation is considered completely normal and acceptable, no matter how extreme it is. It is manly, it is considered right by hegemonic male standards, there is no such thing as a man who is too interested in and devoted to their manly sport team. These rules do not apply, of course, when we look at a male fan of e.g. *Star Trek*, who does not necessarily look like the hegemonic male nor is he a fan of a hegemonic male practice. It is even worse if the man is a devoted fan of *One Direction* – he does not follow the standards of what is acceptable for him and he is a fan of something that is considered to be of interest of women and girls. A lot of negative stigma in fandoms thus arise because of what men have decided to be acceptable and manly enough to be respected and what kind of fan should be taken seriously.

As for the respondents' sexual orientation, the most common sexual orientation was bisexual, pansexual, or otherwise attracted to multiple genders (23 respondents, 43,4%), closely followed by lesbian (20 respondents, 37,73%). There were also six people (11,32%) who mentioned some form of "queer" in their open-ended answer, one of them queer asexual, and one person who was questioning their sexuality. This implies that femslash fandoms are not solely a place for lesbian audiences, even though previous research has often concentrated only on that, but people of different sexualities who all experience some form of same-sex attraction. Femslash communities seem to reflect the proportions of sexualities of the LGBT community as a whole, at least to some extent, since bisexual is the most common identity in the LGBT community (Gates, 2011; Mercado, 2017).

The most common gender for the respondents was cisgender female (45 respondents, 84,91%), and after that, non-binary (5 respondents, 9,43%). There were also two transgender men (3,77%) who took the survey, and one respondent (1,89%) who was questioning their gender. These percentages are strikingly similar to the results of my previous study (Aalto, 2016: 21) even though this study had 53 respondents and the one from two years earlier had 2, 286. In addition, this survey was sent to potential respondents privately and the previous one was spread via a link that was posted publicly. These numbers could, to some extent, thus reflect the gender distribution of femslash fans. It is clear that the members of these fandoms are mostly (same-sex-attracted cisgender) women, but other gender identities in femslash fandoms should in no way be overlooked. These percentages imply that non-binary identities are rather common, both in femslash fandoms and the LGBT community, despite them being discussed less in public than some other identities. In addition, the results insinuate that femslash fandoms are a place where transgender individuals can find a meaningful community, and, as one of them stated in the open-ended replies, people support their transgender friends. It should be, however, remembered that none of the transgender respondents identified as straight, so this study does not reveal the importance of femslash to heterosexual transgender individuals, if there is any importance in the first place.

The respondents lived in 14 countries, most of them in the United States (25 respondents, 47,17%). Even though this was expected and was also seen in the fandoms and pairings people listed (most media were American-based), future research could be conducted on fans who do not live in the United States (or the second most popular option, the United Kingdom). The participants from these countries could, at least, have a quota when we want to take a more international approach to online fan communities. It was a limitation of this study that I did not use a quota for American and British participants, or other over-presented groups, for that matter.

Using a quota and making sure that there are more respondents from countries whose femslash fans have not been studied as much would be important especially because of a certain result of this study. For over a fourth of the respondents (14 respondents, 26,92%) none of the media they were a fan of originated from the country they lived in. This might mean, especially when we look at the most popular pairings that originated from American media, that foreign (=American) media has a big impact on many non-American people's identity and pastime activities. This could have

further implications regarding, for example, Americanized worldviews and values and the approach that people take to their LGBT identity and other minority issues. In addition, the erasure of other (especially non-Western) countries and fans may be related to the fandoms being based around American media. These issues ought to be studied more.

Most respondents took an ethno-racial approach to ethnicity and often saw ethnicity synonymous with race. The most common ethnicity, or race, as the respondents ended up reporting it, was white, which was approximately 41,51% - 56,61% (probably closer to 56,61%) of the respondents. Had a quota been used for over-presented groups, there should have definitely been a smaller sample of people from this group. The most common responses after white were Latina and Filipino/a. There were 23 ways in which the respondents answered this question. It was hard to draw precise conclusions from the data as some of the respondents had responded with ethnicity and some race. In future research, it could be useful for the researcher to specify more clearly what they are looking for with an open-ended question on ethnicity. This would ensure clearer statistics that are easier to analyze and draw conclusions from. Moreover, it would give the respondents a common understanding as to what is being asked.

5.2 The effects of fandom involvement on LGBT identity and fan activities

The respondents were asked about their fandom involvement and the effect of this involvement on their LGBT identity. Majority of the respondents (28 respondents, 52,83%) felt like their fandom involvement had had a strong effect on their LGBT identity, and only three respondents (5,66%) thought that it had not had any effect. It should be noted that the number of strongly affected respondents (n=28, 52,83%) was quite a bit higher than with media representation: 30,19% (n=16) had been strongly affected by LGBT media representations and 32,08% (n=17) had had many specific media-viewing experiences that had affected their self-perception or their perception of LGBT identities in general. These numbers (more can be found in sections 4.2 and 4.4) suggest that fandom involvement has had a stronger effect than media representations on many of these fans.

Femslash fandoms had almost always had some effect on the LGBT members' LGBT identities. It thus seems that many fans' LGBT identity is formed in these communities with the help of fellow fans and with the help of their readings of fictional characters. This was similar to what the respondents of Collier et al. (2009: 596, 598) reported. In their study, the pairings that the participants were fans of had had a positive effect on their sexualities and they had given them hope (Collier et al., 2009: 596). The fans' identity development in femslash fandoms had greatly benefited from the acceptance and support of fellow fans who were also from a sexual minority (Collier et al., 2009: 598).

The respondents were also asked how invested they felt as fans. This question was inspired by the question by Collier et al. (2009: 605). They asked the fans of *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* how invested they were as fans by using the Likert scale. The scale started from casual viewer (1), moved on to devoted viewer (3) and ended with avid fan (5). As the respondents of my survey had to be at least casual fans in order to be eligible, the present scale started with hardcore fan (1) and ended with a very casual fan (5). In this study, 32 participants (60,38%) considered themselves to be a hardcore fan of their pairing, which implies that the fans who took the survey consider their fandom and pairing an important part of their lives. This was also seen in the responses to Question 20: 37 out of 53 participants (69,81%) checked their social media for fandom several times a day while 8 participants (15,09%) checked it at least once or a few times a day. This shows that these fans' pairing and fandom in general is an important aspect of their life. For these devoted fans, their fandom is constantly present as they enter their fandom space several times a day via their phones or other electronic devices and see their fandom friends and fandom-related content no matter where they are. This, once again, highlights the importance of these communities of practice.

To find out more about the fans' pastime activities, they were asked about their fandom activities and the types of social media they use for fandom. The study by Collier et al. (2009: 605-606) was again the inspiration for the question about fandom activities, but their options were changed as new options were needed because some of the old ones were outdated²⁴. Interestingly, reading fan

²⁴ Collier et al. (2009: 605-606) listed videotaping the shows and keeping the tapes as well as visiting message boards and chat rooms as fandom activities. Since uploading episodes online (and downloading them for editing purposes) and watching them on streaming websites and services have become popular, the first question, especially the part

fiction was already a popular activity when Collier et al. (2009) conducted the study, and it was the most popular activity among my participants, too. The message boards, chat rooms, and fan clubs from Collier et al.'s study (2009: 605-606) were replaced with a question about different types of social media the respondents used. The respondents used eleven different social media websites or applications for fandom, but their popularity should not necessarily be generalized as websites such as Twitter and Tumblr were bound to be used by several respondents; Twitter and Tumblr were, after all, the websites where the participants were contacted about the study. What was interesting, however, was the undeniable popularity of fan fiction websites. This is not particularly surprising as femslash fans get to write their own narratives through fan fiction, explore and normalize their identities, feel empowered, and read about their favorite characters and pairings free of charge and without the same worry (as for example with television) that something will go terribly wrong. The importance of fan fiction for femslash fans has already been stated a long time ago by for example Collier et al. (2009: 589) and Hanmer (2003: 85; 2014: 609, 620).

What could have been added on the list was communicating with the shows' creators and cast, as this has become more common in the era of the internet and social media (Guerrero-Pico et al., 2018). Jenkins (1992: 278-279) even mentions fandom as a base for consumer activism and fans' relationship with the producers of media. This should have been taken into account when studying fans' pastimes. Fans often point out if something has been written badly, whether it is a character acting "out of character," meaning that the writers have not been successful in well-grounded characterization, or if the writing of their favorite show reinforces harmful stereotypes and tropes. An example of this is the *LGBT Fans Deserve Better* movement (Guerrero-Pico et al., 2018; Jackman, 2017; Phillips, 2017) that was born to spread awareness and demand better LGBT representation that would not continuously fall into using the "Bury Your Gays" trope. Another example of such fan activism online is the *#OnceUponARaceFail* hashtag on Twitter with which some fans of *Once Upon A Time* tried to point out the show's racist writing choices and poor treatment of characters of color (Twitter, 2020). Efforts to change one's favorite show for the better – and the reasons behind it – should thus have been considered when conducting this study. This is clearly a limitation of this thesis.

about using video tapes, was not relevant anymore. Message boards and chat rooms, in turn, are not as popular anymore after the rise of social media applications and websites such as Tumblr.

5.3 Different online and offline identities, learning about LGBT identities, and disclosing an LGBT identity offline

As discussed in detail in Section 2, previous research has shown that people who are LGBT seek out fellow LGBT people and their help online and decide to come out online before they do it in other contexts (Cooper, 2010: 83). The online support from fellow LGBT people can eventually help LGBT individuals disclose their identity offline (Cooper, 2010: 76). This information suggests that the LGBT members of a femslash fandom might have different online and offline identities. They were hence asked if their online and offline LGBT identities differed from one another.

Despite the fact that there is previous research (Cooper, 2010) that has dealt with lesbians who are completely closeted in their offline life and can be their true selves only online, most respondents of this study did not live a complete double-life on the internet. Even though only five respondents (9,43%) were just as “out” offline as they were online, as many as 44 respondents (83,02%) were at least partly open about their LGBT identity in offline contexts. The most popular option was the most neutral option (35,85%, 19 respondents), which implies that it was most common for the respondents to be open about their sexuality and/or gender in some situations, but it was just as common for them to keep that part of themselves hidden. Most thus seem to be selective about who they display their authentic identity to. In the open-ended part of the question, the respondents explained that it was easier to be open online and that their offline communities would not have accepted them, had they come out. For some, it was simply a private matter, which did not seem to have much to do with their offline communities as such. The responses to this question still imply that for most participants, one’s social communities and communities’ attitudes were the main reason for not displaying one’s LGBT identity in offline contexts. At the same time, we should remember that the reasons and especially the nuances regarding social communities varied quite a bit between respondents and we should not assume that there is only one reason for keeping one’s authentic identity hidden. The fact that people even need to “come out” in the first place is due to the cis-heteronormativity of our society.

It should also be noted that the percentage of people who always kept their identity a secret offline (16,98%, nine respondents) might have been higher if there had been more younger respondents. Teens who are interested in femslash often enter a fandom when they are about to form their LGBT identity. Having teens among the respondents could thus have meant more people who might not have disclosed their LGBT identity offline yet, because they were only forming it and trying it out online. However, having respondents in their early- and mid-teens was not possible because, as stated in Section 3.2, minors could not participate in this survey study for ethical reasons. Having people from more countries could have given a different answer, too, since being LGBT is considered far more negative in some places than others²⁵. This, once again, brings us to why it would have been important to have a quota for participants who came from over-presented groups.

Most respondents (n= 38; 71,7%) felt like their fandom had had an influence on their ability to disclose their LGBT identity offline. 33 respondents (62,26%) had found their fandom participation useful when disclosing their identity to offline friends, 26 respondents (49,06%) when disclosing it to their family, and 18 respondents (33,96%) when disclosing it to co-workers or fellow students. These percentages imply that it might have been the easiest for the respondents to disclose their sexuality to their friends, most likely even to friends who do not participate in fandoms. It should also be noted that in the open-ended answers of the same section, the respondents stated that their family was in their thoughts often when they thought about displaying their authentic identity. These numbers might thus suggest that even in different contexts, friends and family are the people that LGBT individuals think about the most when coming to terms with their identity and it might be easier for them to disclose their identity to friends instead of family or other people in their lives.

²⁵ On the institutional level, this means for example legislation. Different countries have different laws considering LGBT issues. For example, same-sex marriage and adoption for same-sex couples can be legal in some countries whereas having sex with a person of the same sex can be punishable by death or incarceration in others. Another example of LGBT legislation is the possibility to legally live as one's true gender, being able to change one's legal documents to support it and having access to e.g. hormones. It should be noted here that the institutional level and legislation affect the opinions of the general public and vice versa.

In addition to offering social support nets, the interwebs work as a place in which LGBT individuals can seek information on LGBT issues (Cooper, 2010: 83). The findings of this thesis coincide with this claim and suggest that most femslash fans gain at least some information on LGBT issues thanks to their fandom participation. 34 participants (64,15%) thought they had gained a great deal of new information on LGBT issues while in fandom, and only 2 respondents (3,77%) thought they had not learned anything new thanks to their fandom participation. In the open-ended answers, the respondents claimed that they had learned more about sexuality and gender, stereotypes, compulsory heterosexuality, and transgender issues. For some, their fandom also provided them with LGBT news and taught them LGBT history. Some other important issues that the respondents had gained a better knowledge of were media representations and intersectionality.

This implies that femslash fandoms also work as learning environments where their members acquire information about different issues and norms that affect their and other marginalized people's lives. It is important that these LGBT individuals learn about the kind of nuances of identity that help them understand themselves and others better, as well as what kind of effects for example stereotypes, compulsory heterosexuality, and negative media representations have on them. Learning and thinking about these issues can help them become happier with who they are and become better-informed on issues that affect those who are less privileged than them. Femslash fandoms generally seem to be full of political discourse as many learn about LGBT history and social justice, and many fans get their news intake via platforms that they primarily use for fandom purposes. Some of these people might not have learned about any of these issues without their fandom involvement and without meeting people whose marginalized identity differed from theirs online. What can be said for certain is that femslash fandom participation makes people more conscious about the socio-political issues around them, and this should not be overlooked when femslash fandoms are discussed.

5.4 Representation and media-viewing experiences

As mentioned in the background literature, the media produce and reproduce the image of how sexuality and gender are perceived (Chambers, 2009: 89, as cited by Sarkissian, 2014: 146-147). The way in which a group is represented in public has an effect on how they see themselves and how other people see them (Dyer, 2002: 1). Guided by such observations, the respondents of the present study were asked if the way in which LGBT people are represented in the media has influenced their LGBT identities.

It turned out that the responses to this question varied quite a bit between respondents. Even though 16 respondents (30,19%) thought LGBT portrayals in the media had had a strong effect on them, 24 respondents (45,27%) did not feel as strongly about the matter, and 13 respondents (24,53%) did not think media portrayals had had any effect on their LGBT identity. The respondents whose experiences with LGBT representations had mainly been positive said that seeing media representations that they could relate to made them feel happy, validated, and confident. For some, LGBT representations took away some of the shame that they had regarding their identity. These people were helped by these representations and thought it was easier to communicate their feelings when they had seen the same on television. Media images had shown them that there were non-heteronormative ways of living and they knew better what they wanted in life thanks to LGBT characters in the media. This is all incredibly relevant: seeing characters that are similar to oneself can have a noticeable impact on one's well-being. Television representations can change someone's life by not only adding self-acceptance and self-love, but by showing that there are alternative ways to (cis-hetero)normative living in the first place. This shows how big an impact positive minority representation can truly have when it is done right.

It should, of course, be remembered that not everyone's experiences with LGBT representations were positive. Some respondents who had critical or negative opinions on representational matters felt like they did not have any characters to relate to because the LGBT characters in the media were not diverse enough, regarding for example ethnicity and gender-expression. One respondent had been more affected by their friends than media representations. Others said that adverse representations had mainly caused frustration and continuous negative LGBT representations had

had a negative influence on them. These responses show that we should not generalize the way in which minority individuals feel about representation and what they find important. In addition, LGBT individuals need representations where everyone can see themselves in and relate to. Everyone deserves to be seen positively in the media they consume. For example, there should be more butch lesbian representations and representation of LGBT People of Color. LGBT individuals would also benefit from fewer unhappy endings and otherwise negative representations, for example, the writers abandoning harmful tropes, such as the “Bury Your Gays” trope (GLAAD, 2018: 3; Bingham, 2016: 145, Guerrero-Pico et al., 2018) and the negative representations of bisexuals (GLAAD, 2018: 24) and transgender people (Bingham, 2016: 154).

As many femslash fans find the representations of LGBT individuals and their relationships meaningful, the respondents were also asked if they had any specific media-viewing experiences that had influenced their self-perception as an LGBT individual or LGBT identities in general. The percentages were similar to the previous question’s: the respondents’ media-viewing experiences and how they rated them differed from one another quite a bit. The respondents were prompted to specify if there had been a specific character’s coming out that was meaningful for them or if a pairing had helped them realize that they are LGBT. The respondents specified meaningful fandoms, characters, and experiences and explained why they were meaningful, similarly to Collier et al. (2009) and Hanmer’s (2003) respondents.

It had been an important experience to many to see themselves represented on their television screen. There were a few specific media-viewing experiences that should be mentioned here. Similarly to what was stated by Suddeth (2017: 31), some fans had found it incredibly important to see a family unit with two mothers on television. Seeing the possibility of forming a family with someone of the same gender without heteronormative expectations can thus be very meaningful to people who belong to sexual minorities and want to become parents. It should be noted that this kind of representation is also important to children whose parents are a same-sex couple – not just because it shows them a family that looks like theirs on television and validates them, but also because it shows it to other children and teaches them that it is perfectly fine if their peers have a family that has two mothers or fathers or some other kind of parenting unit that differs from the norm.

There were other important, specific experiences in addition to seeing a family unit with two mothers. The character Elena Alvarez, a Cuban-American teenager who comes out as a lesbian in the first season of *One Day at a Time*, had resonated particularly well with some respondents because she is not white and she came out to a Cuban family. For some respondents, seeing characters who were attracted to multiple genders, especially those who explicitly stated that they were bisexual, had been important. Then again, displaying sexuality without it being made into a huge issue was important to some. A transgender respondent, in turn, pointed out that Laverne Cox's character Sophia Burset on *Orange is the New Black* had started the kind of discussion on transgender issues that they had not seen before in fandom spaces. One character or a television show can thus have a remarkable impact on several people's self-perception and perception of a group of people.

It should be remembered that even though the participants were asked about meaningful media-viewing experiences and characters, some of the respondents had listed negative experiences. The respondents mentioned the issues of bisexual erasure, the lack of transgender characters and the lack of LGBT characters of Color in their answers, which implies that these issues have had a strong negative impact on them. The "Bury Your Gays" trope and its negative effects on the respondents' self-perception came up in the answers too. Negative representational issues such as these have thus had a noteworthy negative impact on the participants, an impact many of them see worth mentioning when they are asked about meaningful media-viewing experiences. These replies hence demonstrate the importance of diverse *and* positive representation. Media producers should hence give more thought to the images and narratives they want to enforce with their writing – positive representations can have significant positive effects on people, but negative representations can make matters worse for many and affect their well-being and the way they see themselves (and how others see them).

5.5 Discrimination in femslash fandoms

Previous research shows that fans who belong to minorities often face discrimination from more privileged fans (Aalto, 2016: 14-15; Bastián, 2016; Coker & Viars: 2017; Hanmer, 2003: 85; Pande & Moitra, 2017; Reinhard, 2018: 81-107; Stanfill, 2019; Zimmerman, 2018). Heterosexual fans of a television show are often seen as the ideal part of a fandom (Hills, 1999: 67, as cited by Hanmer, 2003: 82, 85). They can belittle LGBT fans' LGBT-readings of television shows (Aalto, 2016: 22) and stereotype them based on a certain social identity (Reinhard, 2018: 106). This can lead to the bullying of LGBT fans; fans who belong to sexual and gender minorities have received hateful messages that have included even death and rape threats (Aalto, 2016: 14; Suddeth, 2017: 45).

According to the respondents of this study, discrimination and prejudices are very common in femslash fandoms. Only two respondents out of 53 (3,77%) had not witnessed bullying or prejudices during their participation in femslash fandom(s). 29 (54,72%) of the respondents had been a victim of it, whereas 22 (41, 51%) had witnessed bullying, but had not personally experienced it. The most common form of discrimination in femslash fandoms, according to the respondents, is homophobia. This did not come as a surprise since my previous study from the year 2016 (Aalto, 2016) showed that homophobic attacks toward the fans of femslash pairings are very common. This implies that the internet enables a fandom discourse where hate speech and bullying is allowed (much like e.g. Reinhard's, 2018, book shows) and this is incredibly harmful to people who are already struggling with forming a positive identity.

It should be remembered that there are many other types of discrimination than homophobia that concern femslash fandoms. Even though femslash fandoms suffer from bullying coming from cisgender straight fans who do not ship the same pairing, that does not make them exempt from intra-fandom discrimination such as racism, biphobia, and transphobia. It thus comes as no surprise that after homophobia, the most frequent form of discrimination that the respondents reported was racism. It was mentioned by 19 (38,78%) respondents. They disclosed that racism in fandom came from both femslash fans and fans who were not a part of their femslash fandom. This is deeply worrying, especially because it shows that LGBT fans who are People of Color are not

safe from racial discrimination in their LGBT fandom, much like they are not safe from it in the LGBT community in general (Balsam et al., 2011; Johnson, 2014; Jones, 2016; Taylor-Stone, 2016). What is more, one respondent pointed out fetishization based on ethnicity, something that is a problem in the LGBT community at large (Balsam et al., 2011: 166) and came up in the answers of Stanfill's (2019) interviews as well. According to Pande and Moitra (2017, no page number given) racism in fandoms has been overlooked by much of fandom research and it should not be ignored anymore. Femslash fandoms have been shown to be places where both representational issues of People of Color and their actual real-life issues are often overlooked by more privileged white fans (Pande & Moitra, 2017; Stanfill, 2019). The open-ended answers of this thesis coincide with these earlier findings and highlight the importance of what the aforementioned researchers have already said: more attention needs to be paid to this in fandom research.

The respondents also stated that transphobia (mentioned by 10 respondents, 18,87%) and biphobia (10 respondents, 18,87%) came from both the fans of their pairing and fans who were not femslash fans. The fact that femslash fans encounter biphobia and transphobia in their (femslash) fandom(s) implies that it comes from fans who are cisgender and gay/lesbian and who have biphobic and/or transphobic attitudes towards the other members of the LGBT community (who they do not necessarily see as the members of the same community as they may think of their own community as the "gay community"). This is similar to Edwards' (2010: 164-165) notion about how some people assess who is "queer enough" and who belongs into the community. It is thus clear that femslash communities do not differ much from the LGBT community at large when it comes to biphobia and transphobia. This is incredibly worrying as this kind of intra-group discrimination has very negative impacts on these people's mental health, self-acceptance, and being accepted by the rest of society (Petter, 2017; Allen, 2017a; Weinberg et al., 1998: 176-177; Talusan, 2014).

In addition to these most common forms of discrimination that the respondents mentioned, there were others that should be listed here as well. There were mentions of ableism (five respondents, 10,2%), which is definitely a problem in the LGBT community as LGBT people with chronic illnesses have stated that they feel like a minority within a minority (Jowett and Peel, 2009: 464) and they have faced social isolation and trouble in dating life because of their illnesses (ibid: 461, 463; Henry et al., 2010). Stanfill's (2019) femslash fan interviews suggest the same: femslash fans

run into ableism in their fandom environment. It is sad but of utmost importance to note that these fandoms suffer from the same ableism problem as the LGBT community as a whole does.

Though mentioned fewer times, discrimination based on a marginalized religious group was mentioned as well and should not go unnoticed. Both islamophobia and antisemitism were mentioned twice (4,08% and 4,08%). This shows that, in addition to all the other kinds of discrimination, femslash fandoms are not exempt from prejudices based on religious minority identities either. The fact that femslash fandoms are not a safe space for LGBT individuals who are Muslim or Jewish is awful; they face the same prejudices based on their identity in their femslash fandom as they do offline. Their fandom is thus not a safe space for them.

On a more positive note, the respondents did not mention being discriminated because of their age. Even though today's LGBT culture is very youth-oriented (Woody, 2014: 158; Parson, 2014: 9), the respondents of this survey did not feel like their age was an issue worth mentioning when they were asked about discrimination they had witnessed in fandom spaces. It should, of course, be taken into account that none of the respondents were anywhere near the elderly, the oldest respondent being in their 40s. Still, I do think it is possible that some of the respondents may have received odd stares (metaphorically speaking) and comments from the younger members of the fandom because they are adults. These kinds of attitudes, however, do not seem to bother the respondents enough for them to seriously qualify and report it as discrimination like the above-mentioned types of discrimination. There may be various reasons for this: for example the fact that most people find closer community in those who are at least somewhat close to their age and adults may not have time and energy to take teenagers' accusations about them being online at a certain age as seriously and personally as for example homophobic and racist attacks.

To conclude, femslash fandoms are spaces that suffer from bullying that comes from more privileged fans and different kinds of discrimination take place within femslash fandoms. If one has a marginalized identity, then they have probably been either personally subjected to discrimination based on that identity or at least seen discrimination based on it in their fandom. This is worrying and shows that these fandoms are far from safe spaces where one can simply make friends, have fun, and spend one's pastime on one's interests. The kind of discrimination that

takes place within (femslash) fandoms and minority communities in general should be examined further as no group is homogenous, some fans are more privileged than others, and people belonging to different minorities have intersecting minority identities. The need for this approach has been articulated earlier by Pande and Moitra (2017) who pointed out that fandom and femslash research tends to overlook racism within fandoms.

5.6 Fellow fans' support for minority identities

Despite there being discrimination in fandom spaces, most respondents had fortunately also found support for their minority identities. 43 respondents (81,13 %) felt like they had found support for their minority identity in their fan community. More specifically, 29 respondents said they had found support for their LGBT identity and 14 had found support for their LGBT identity and another minority identity. Sadly, this does not give us exact statistics on how many of these 29 people who had only found support for their LGBT identity identified with another minority identity. Some of them had most likely chosen the option because they did not belong to another minority, whereas others chose the option because they did not feel like they had gotten support for any other minority identity than their LGBT one.

This question could have been improved by dividing the option into two separate alternatives. One of them would have been for people who had only found support for their LGBT identity and who did not have any other minority identities. The other option would have been for people who had only found support for their LGBT identity but not the other ones they had. What we can conclude here is that femslash fandoms seem to be spaces where it is relatively easy to get support for one's LGBT identity. Simultaneously, it should be noted that some respondents (at least one for sure, because they mentioned it in the open-ended answers) had kept from checking the box with "another minority identity" in it because they felt like femslash fandoms were LGBT-friendly spaces but they did not receive support for their other minority identity/identities there. This coincides with statements from previous research (for example Pande & Moitra, 2017; Stanfill, 2019) that more privileged femslash fans (e.g. white fans, cisgender fans) tend to look over the

issues that do not concern them personally (e.g. racism, transphobia). There are thus clear double standards in femslash fandoms as to what kind of support one gets there.

The open-ended follow-up question gave a better idea of the kinds of support that people who belong to femslash fandoms can get from their fandom friends. The respondents mentioned support, validation, and acceptance several times. Fandom worked as a place of community for many; they felt less alone and found comfort in the fact that there were so many other people who are also LGBT in the world. This is not surprising, since the participants of Collier et al. (2009) and Hanmer's (2003) studies found this kind of supportive community online years earlier. It is also important to consider that the respondents of this study got help for their offline issues – that often were but sometimes were not related to LGBT issues – in their fandom. This implies that femslash fandoms work as so much more than simply a platform where one can talk about their favorite pairing to other fans. That is a part of it, of course, but its importance as a community of acceptance and support is undeniable and should not go unnoted. Fans find lifelong, supportive friends who they can talk to about anything in these communities.

It is also crucial to discuss those who did not find their fandom a supportive environment. There were three people (5,66%) who did not claim to have gotten any support for their minority identities in their fandom(s). As much as seven respondents (13,21%) were not sure if they had gotten support. One reason for this could have been that some people in fandom may not find a group of friends that would support them. Another one could have been not knowing what qualifies as support. For these reasons, the results of this question remain a bit unclear. The fact that some respondents do not experience having gotten support in their fandom should still not be overlooked since not having a group of friends to talk to in fandom or finding a place where they feel like they belong may be a serious problem for some fans. Loneliness in fandoms and its effects could be studied in the future.

5.7 The limitations of the study

Though most of them have been mentioned earlier in the study, here is a short list of the limitations of this thesis. Since I began working on this thesis in the late fall of 2017, some of the statistics used for it (most importantly the *Where Are We on TV* report by GLAAD, 2018) are not up to date and the numbers of LGBT television representation have evidently changed. The same applies to the lists of the 198 lesbian and bisexual female characters who died on television (Bernard, 2016) and 29 lesbian and bisexual female characters who got happy endings (Hogan, 2016).²⁶

As mentioned earlier in the thesis, another limitation of this study was that it did not have a quota for over-presented groups. Additionally, though I attempted to find respondents from all over the world, most respondents still lived in Western (and more specifically, anglophone) countries. This was partly inevitable as I sent messages to people I already knew and they were thus fans of the same shows, but it is still a limitation that should be taken into account. The group of 53 respondents cannot hence speak for all femslash fandoms and they do not globally represent femslash fandoms. The study in general was rather Western- and more specifically US-centric, especially regarding media representations.

In addition, social class was not considered when the survey was created. It could thus not be studied on basis of the participants' responses. Similarly, the participants were not asked about consumer activism even though it is an important part of fandom involvement (Jenkins, 1992: 277-278), even more now that online platforms offer an easy way to contact show creators. The question about ethnicity could have been designed better since it was hard to draw concise conclusions from the respondents' answers: they had taken different approaches to what ethnicity meant and sometimes saw it synonymous with race. The question about support in fandom could have been worded better as well because there were, most likely, two very different reasons for choosing the option *Yes, (I have received support) for my LGBT identity*. The respondents'

²⁶ For example, the American television show *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* ended its four-season run in 2019 with the female/female couple of Valencia Perez and her fiancée Beth engaged. The same happened with *Jane the Virgin*, also in 2019, with the characters of Petra Solano and Jane Ramos getting back together in the finale of the show.

answers do not therefore give a clear idea how many people had a non-LGBT minority identity that they did not get support for.

It is also not clear whether femslash fandoms are places where heterosexual transgender individuals feel like they can find community since all the transgender respondents of this study were lesbian/gay or multiple-gender-attracted (and femslash fandoms are based on romantic relationships between women). There were also no transgender women who participated in the study, so their personal experiences regarding for example media representations and discrimination in fandom spaces could not be reported.

6. CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this thesis was to find out how belonging to a femslash fandom helps to construct an LGBT identity. The findings of this thesis show that femslash fans' fandom involvement is a factor in positive LGBT identity formation – many fans think that their fandom activities have had a strong effect on their identity. Femslash fandoms are social online spaces where people build community based on their shared interest for a pairing. Since they are mainly LGBT spaces, fandom friends work as a community of support regarding for example LGBT-identity-related issues. Fans thus get support from fellow fans in fandom environment and many find help for being their true selves on the internet. In addition, femslash fans gain information on LGBT and other socio-political issues thanks to their fandom participation. The importance and complexity of these communities of practice that have often been overlooked by previous research should thus not go unnoticed.

Femslash fans are often strongly invested in their fandom and their pairing, which is a prominent factor in identity formation. Since they are devoted to their pairing(s), femslash fans spend a lot of time on their fandom activities. Activities such as discussing one's favorite show and its characters with other fans, reading and writing fan fiction, making visual fan creations, going to fan conventions, cosplaying, and voting on polls are meaningful to fans. Technology has enabled fan activities and creations to become more versatile in the recent years: making GIFs and fan videos, for example, have gained popularity among fans. Using social media for fandom, whether it is for some of the aforementioned activities or simply for chatting with fandom friends, is very common. Several different types of social media are used for fandom these days, but fan fiction websites are the most popular ones, at least for the respondents of this study. Writing and reading fan fiction, according to this study, thus continues to be the most popular femslash fan activity. This is not very surprising since writing and reading fan fiction gives agency to LGBT fans and empowers them. Through fan fiction, they get to write their own narratives, normalize their identities, and read stories about their favorite characters and pairings free of charge and without worrying about the "Bury Your Gays" trope. It is thus clear that these fandom activities are meaningful to femslash fans and they facilitate positive LGBT identity formation.

Another issue that was examined in relation to the respondents' LGBT identity formation was LGBT representations in the media and meaningful media-viewing experiences. Though one might think that all LGBT people have similar experiences and opinions on LGBT representation, this study shows that different LGBT individuals' attitudes towards LGBT representation vary quite a bit. While some have found LGBT representation validating and helpful, others remain critical and unhappy. Some reasons for this are the lack of diversity in media portrayals and different media continuously falling into harmful tropes. These have had a bigger effect than positive portrayals on some fans. It should still be noted that many individuals have had positive media-viewing experiences that have influenced their view on themselves or LGBT people in general. What can be concluded here is that LGBT representation easily caters to the more privileged and seen individuals of the community and the rest of it is scarce. Television and movie producers should thus spend more time on thinking about whose stories are being told – and how – when they write minority characters. A lot of work still needs to be done for everyone to see themselves positively represented on television. The importance of this work should not be downplayed since it is clear from the respondents' answers that both positive and negative media representations have a strong impact on minorities.

This study also attempted to answer what kinds of discrimination and bullying people in femslash fandoms face because of their marginalized identities. It is clear from the respondents' answers that femslash fandoms suffer both from bullying that comes from people who are not fans of their pairing and discrimination that takes place within femslash fandoms. According to the statistics of this thesis, homophobic attacks that come from outside the femslash fandom are the most common form of bullying and discrimination. This suggests that the tensions between heterosexual and same-sex-attracted fans have not, sadly, changed much over the years. The respondents also mentioned racism, transphobia, biphobia, ableism, islamophobia, and antisemitism in their answers. What is important here is that the first three of these (the most common forms of discrimination after homophobia) clearly came from both inside and outside the respondents' femslash fandom. (What is even more worrying is the possibility that the last two might have come only from their femslash fandom.) This means that femslash fandoms, though centered around pairings of women, are not a safe space for many minorities. While some LGBT fans easily find community and support in these fandom spaces, many members with intersecting minority

identities may not find the same kind of support and acceptance as they simultaneously face discrimination based on some other parts of their identity. It is incredibly worrying that so many fans have been subjected to racism and several other forms of discrimination by their fellow femslash fans. Based on these findings and earlier research, discrimination in femslash fandoms should be studied and addressed more in future research.

To conclude, this thesis shows that femslash fandoms help their members in constructing a positive LGBT identity. Fans find information, support, and a chance to show their authentic LGBT identity in fandom, which is incredibly important for positive LGBT identity formation. Fans' pastimes and social relationships in fandom are a meaningful part of their fandom participation and further facilitate forming a positive image of their identity. The responses of this thesis also imply that femslash fans' fandom is a significant part of their daily life. Another important finding of this thesis is that femslash fans face discrimination coming from more privileged fans, some of whom are members of the same fan communities. Femslash fandoms are thus complex communities of practice that ought to be studied more.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Glossary

Fandom

Fandoms are communities of practice (Hills, 2015: 360, 372; Lave & Wenger, 1991) whose members are fans of for example different media, people, sports, or music. Fandom can be described as a “social and cultural environment” (Harris & Alexander, 1998: 4, as cited by Hanmer, 2003: 80). Fans have common values, views, and pastime activities that are related to the phenomenon they are fans of, which is typical for communities of practice (Eckert, 2006: 683). Online fandoms give people around the world the opportunity to share their interests with other people with similar interests without geographical limitations (Hanmer, 2010: 150-151).

Femslash

Femslash fandom supports a romantic relationship between two (or more) women. These fandoms are generally fans of for example movies, television shows, and books. According to Berger (2010: 182), the sub-genre was born in the 80s, but it is more popular now online, possibly due to the lack of representation of women who love women in television.

LGBT

This term in this study is used to refer to people who are lesbian, gay, attracted to multiple genders (bisexual, pansexual, otherwise multiple-gender-attracted), and transgender (this includes MtF transgender (assigned male at birth, but their gender is female), FtM transgender (assigned female at birth, but their gender is male), and different non-binary identities that are not tied to the gender binary). In other words, this study concerns people whose attraction to other people differs from the heterosexual norm and whose gender identity differs from the cisgender norm. Even though, like many other researchers (e.g. Milani, 2013: 209), I used the word “queer” as an umbrella term in my previous study (Aalto, 2016: 6), and although it has gained popularity in the academia (e.g. *queer theory*, Morland & Willox, 2005), I now refrained from any unnecessary

use of the word because of its debated nature (it is still used as a slur) and the feedback I got from some of my BA thesis respondents.

Person of Color, People of Color

“A person who is not white or of European parentage” (*Oxford Dictionaries*, 2019). Even though the term is mainly used in the United States and the West in general, the fandoms studied in this thesis, even though they can be accessed by anyone who has access to the internet, are often of Western media. This means that the racism that will be discussed in this thesis is likely to be from a very Western point of view and hence the terminology is from there, too.

Appendix 2: Femslash Fandom Survey

The purpose of this survey is to find out what the members of femslash fandoms think about their fandom and the effect a femslash fandom can have on an LGBT identity. The information collected through this survey will be used as research material in my MA thesis in English at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

I would be very grateful if you could take the survey. Your answers will be used for research purposes only. As a respondent, you will remain completely anonymous and unrecognizable for the entire duration of the study as well as in the published MA thesis.

To participate in this study,

- you must be at least 18 years old.
- you need to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, otherwise attracted to multiple genders, or not cisgender (MtF trans, FtM trans, any non-binary identities)
- you need to be at least a casual fan of a femslash pairing and be somewhat familiar with at least one femslash fandom.

By clicking “submit” on the last page, you agree to the terms listed described above. You can quit answering the survey questions at any point if you do not wish to continue.

If you want to know more about my study, please contact me at emanaalt@student.jyu.fi or on Twitter/Tumblr where I sent you the link to this survey.

Thank you very much for your help!

Emmi Aalto

1. Have your femslash fandom activities had an influence on your LGBT identity and how you identify as LGBT? (1 - Yes, it has had a strong influence; 5 - No, it has not had any influence at all)

1 2 3 4 5

2. Is your LGBT identity different online than it is offline? (1 - Yes, it's completely different; 5 - No, I am as "out" offline as I am online)

1 2 3 4 5

3. If it's different, can you describe how so?

4. Have you found information on LGBT issues or learned something new about LGBT identity formation thanks to your participation in online fandom activities? (1 - Yes, I have learned a lot; 5 - No, I do not think I have learned anything new)

1 2 3 4 5

5. If you answered yes (1-4), briefly describe the information you have gained, please.

6. Has your online fandom had an influence on your ability to disclose your sexual and/or gender identity to any of the following

- Family
- Offline friends
- Co-workers and/or fellow students
- Other _____
- No, it has not helped me to disclose my LGBT identity offline

7. If yes, feel free to specify how it has influenced you and your ability to disclose your identity.

8. Has the way in which LGBT people are represented in the media (e.g. television shows and movies) had an effect on your LGBT identity? (1 - Yes, it has had a strong effect; 5 - No, it has not had any effect)

1 2 3 4 5

9. If yes (options 1-4), how would you describe the effect LGBT representation in the media has had on you?

10. How invested are you in your femslash fandom(s)/pairing(s)? (1 - I consider myself a hardcore fan; 5 - I consider myself a very casual fan)

1 2 3 4 5

11. What types of social media do you use for fandom?

- Tumblr
- Twitter
- Ao3
- Fanfiction.net
- YouTube
- DeviantArt
- Instagram
- Reddit
- Facebook
- Other _____

12. With whom do you spend time in your fandom(s)? (E.g. with friends/acquaintances you've made online on a certain website, people you go to conventions/cosplay with, people you knew offline before joining your mutual fandom online...)

13. Have you found support for your minority identity/identities in your fandom?

- Yes, for my LGBT identity.
- Yes, for my LGBT identity and another minority identity (for example a religious or an ethnic MINORITY identity).
- Yes, other minority identities, but not my LGBT identity.
- No.
- I'm not sure.

14. If you answered yes, what kind of support have you gotten?

15. Do you have any specific television or movie viewing experiences that have influenced your self-perception as a person who is LGBT or LGBT identities in general? (E.g. Has a character who "came out" on a show or in a movie been meaningful to you? Has a character or a pairing for one reason or another made it easier for you to realize that you're LGBT?) (1 - Yes, I have many important experiences; 5 - No, I do not have any)

1 2 3 4 5

16. If yes, feel free to specify it here.

17. What are your fandom activities?

- Creating e.g. fanart, GIFs, or videos
- Writing fan fiction
- Reading fan fiction

- Commenting on other people's writing
- Commenting on other people's art or videos
- Spreading other people's fanworks, e.g. by reblogging on Tumblr or retweeting on Twitter
- Participating in conventions
- Cosplaying
- Watching e.g. your show/movie with other fans and discussing it with them
- Actively voting for your pairing on polls (e.g. Zimbo March Madness)
- Purchasing fandom merchandise
- Other, please specify _____

18. What femslash fandoms do you consider yourself to be a part of/have you been a part of? You may describe your fandom history if you wish.

19. Are these fandoms based on media (e.g. a television show) that is from the country you live in? (1- Yes, all of them; 5 - No, none of them are from the country I live in.)

1 2 3 4 5

20. How often do you approximately use social media for fandom? (Choose the option that is closest to the truth, please. If none of the options is applicable, you can specify your answer by choosing "other.")

- Several times a day
- Once or a few times a day
- A few times a week
- Weekly
- A few times a month
- Once a month or more seldom
- Other, please specify _____

21. Have you encountered prejudices or bullying in fandom spaces when you've participated in a femslash fandom?

- Yes, and it has been directed at me at least once.

- Yes, but I have not personally experienced it.
- No, I have not.
- I am not sure.

22. If yes, what kind of prejudices or bullying have you encountered? This can be prejudices coming from outside your femslash fandom/pairing (e.g. the shippers of an opposing m/f ship) or inside fandom (racism, ableism, biphobia, transphobia, islamophobia, antisemitism etc.)

23. Age

- 18-21
- 22-25
- 26-30
- 31-35
- 36-40
- 41-49
- 50+

24. Sexual orientation

- Lesbian
- Gay
- Bisexual, pansexual, or otherwise multiple-gender-attracted
- Questioning
- Straight (you can choose this only if you are transgender)
- Other, please specify_____

25. Gender

- Female (cisgender)
- Female (transgender)
- Non-binary (any non-binary identity)
- Male (transgender)
- Male (cisgender)
- Questioning

- Other, please specify _____

26. Country of current residence

27. Ethnicity

Appendix 3:

A full list of the respondents' femslash fandoms and pairings

Pairings (listed in alphabetical order)	The media in which the pairing appears or the media that was mentioned without any reference to a pairing	Number of respondents
1. Alex Danvers/Maggie Sawyer (Sanvers)	<i>Supergirl</i>	2
2. Alexandra Cabot/Olivia Benson (Cabenson)	<i>Law & Order: Special Victims Unit</i>	2
3. Ava Sharpe/Sara Lance (Avalance)	<i>Legends of Tomorrow</i>	1
4. Bea Smith/Allie Novak (Ballie)	<i>Wentworth</i>	1
5. Beca Mitchell/Chloe Beale (Bechloe) / Pitch Perfect Multiship	<i>Pitch Perfect</i>	2
6. Buffy rarepairs	<i>Buffy the Vampire Slayer</i>	1
7. Buffy Summers/Faith (Fuffy)	<i>Buffy the Vampire Slayer</i>	2
8. Callie Torres/Arizona Robbins (Calzona)	<i>Grey's Anatomy</i>	2
9. Cara Mason/Cahlan Annell	<i>Legend of the Seeker</i>	1
10. Carmilla Karnstein and Laura Hollis (Hollstein)	<i>Carmilla</i>	3
11. Clarke Griffin/Lexa (Clexa)	<i>The 100</i>	8
12. Cosima Niehaus/Delphine Cormier (Cophine)	<i>Orphan Black</i>	3
13. Diana Canendish/"Akko" Atsuko Kagari	<i>Little Witch Academy</i>	1
14. Doctor Who femslash	<i>Doctor Who</i>	1
15. Emma Swan/Regina Mills (Swan Queen)	<i>Once Upon a Time</i>	48

16. Gail Peck/Holly Stewart (Officer Lunchbox)	<i>Rookie Blue</i>	1
17. "Chenzel"	RPF	1
18. Glinda/Elphaba (Gelphe)	<i>Wicked (the musical)</i>	3
19. Grace Hanson/Frankie Bergstein	<i>Grace & Frankie</i>	2
20.	<i>Guiding Light</i> (without a pairing)	1
21. "Gwen" Guinevere Pendragon/Morgana Pendragon	<i>Merlin</i>	1
22.	<i>Harry Potter</i> (without a pairing)	1
23. Hecate Hardbroom/Julie Hubble (Mumbroom)	<i>The Worst Witch</i>	1
24. Hecate Hardbroom/Pippa Pentangle (Hicsqueak)	<i>The Worst Witch</i>	3
25. Jane Ramos/Petra Solano	<i>Jane the Virgin</i>	3
26. Jane Villanueva/Petra Solano (Jetra)	<i>Jane the Virgin</i>	4
27. Jane Rizzoli/Maura Isles (Rizzles)	<i>Rizzoli & Isles</i>	6
28. Jemma Simmons/Daisy Johnson (Skimmons)	<i>Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.</i>	1
29. Kat Edison/Adena El Amin (Kadena)	<i>The Bold Type</i>	1
30. Kara Danvers/Cat Grant (Supercat)	<i>Supergirl</i>	5
31. Kara Danvers/Lena Luthor (Supercorp)	<i>Supergirl</i>	6
32. Keriette	"From a German soap"	1
33. Korra/Asami (Korrasami)	<i>The Legend of Korra</i>	4
34.	<i>Legend of the Seeker</i> (without a pairing)	1
35. Leverage femslash	<i>Leverage</i>	1
36. Margot Verger/Alana Bloom (Marlana)	<i>Hannibal</i>	1
37. Miranda Priestly/Andrea Sachs (Mirandy)	<i>The Devil Wears Prada</i>	2

38. Morgana Pendragon/Morgause	<i>Merlin</i>	1
39. "Morrilla"	RPF	1
40. Mulan/Aurora (Mulora)	<i>Once Upon a Time</i>	1
41. Myka Bering/H.G. Wells	<i>Warehouse 13</i>	4
42. Naomi Campbell/Emily Fitch (Naomily)	<i>Skins</i>	1
43. Nico Minoru/Karolina Dean (Deanoru)	<i>Runaways</i>	1
44. Nomi Marks/Amanita Caplan (Nomanita)	<i>Sense8</i>	2
45. Paris/Rory	<i>Gilmore Girls</i>	1
46. Peggy Carter/Angie Martinelli (Cartinelli)	<i>Agent Carter</i>	2
47. Pepa Ramos/Silvia Castro León (PepSi)	<i>Los Hombres De Paco</i>	1
48. Piper Chapman/Alex Vause (Vauseman)	<i>Orange is the New Black</i>	1
49. Rachel Berry/Quinn Fabray (Faberry)	<i>Glee</i>	1
50.	<i>Raven's Home</i> (without a pairing)	1
51. "Root" Samantha Groves/Sameen Shaw (Shoot)	<i>Person of Interest</i>	1
52.	<i>Rwby</i>	1
53. Sam Carter/Janet Fraiser	<i>Stargate: SG1</i>	1
54. Sara Lance/Nyssa al Ghul (Nyssara)	<i>Legends of Tomorrow</i>	1
55. "SNSD Femslash"	<i>Girls' Generation/RPF</i>	1
56.	<i>The Fosters</i> (without a pairing, presumably Stef/Lena)	2
57.	<i>Steven Universe</i> (without a pairing)	2
58. "Taeyeon/Tiffany rpf DON'T LOOK AT ME"	<i>Girls' Generation/RPF</i>	1
59.	<i>Wanted</i> (without a pairing)	1
60. Waverly Earp/Nicole Haught (Wayhaught)	<i>Wyonna Earp</i>	5

61. Willow Rosenberg/Tara Maclay	<i>Buffy the Vampire Slayer</i>	2
62.	"Worst Witch in general"	1
63. Xena/Gabrielle	<i>Xena: Warrior Princess</i>	6