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“OUR FANS ARE GONNA GO CRAZY WHEN THEY KNOW WE ARE TOGETHER”: FANDOM IDENTITIES AND SELF-REPRESENTATION IN YOUTUBERS SLASH FICTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores slash fiction written about four gaming YouTubers: El Rubius, Mangel, Jacksepticeye and Markiplier. Slash fiction are texts that narrate fictional romantic and sexual stories between two male characters or celebrities who define themselves as heterosexuals. Through thematic analysis, this research analyses fandom self-representation, their role and identity as fans, and the portrayal of the relationship with the YouTubers. Results show that fans represent themselves positively and are acceptant of LGBTIQ+ identities, even though gaming communities are often misogynistic and homophobic. Toxic fans are presented as exceptions within the majority of the fandom. In these texts, the YouTubers appreciate slash fiction and desire to have a close bond with their audience. Fans give themselves much agency to intervene in the YouTubers' lives and expect transparency and authenticity from them.

Keywords: YouTubers ▪ real person slash ▪ fan fiction ▪ gamers ▪ micro-celebrities
▪ fan representation

1. INTRODUCTION

He closed his eyes again, smiling as he remembered when they attended the Club Media Fest Concert in Argentina a few months after breaking the news [that they were dating]. When they got out to the stage, they were received by screaming, by love, by thousands of fans holding signs with messages supporting their relationship. Fans were crying in the M&G, saying that they were proud of them.

To do something that was already written.

Mangel was happy and fulfilled as he hugged Rubius when he heard the fans say they were proud of them¹.

This quote is from a fan fiction about two YouTubers, Rubius and Mangel. Fans write fanfiction: stories based on the canonical material from previously published fiction (Mackey & McClay, 2008). The audience takes existing texts and appropriates them to respond to their interests or concerns. Fans also like to write about their favourite celebrities and explore and fictionalise their private life: musicians, actors, sports players, or internet celebrities. The texts often focus on writing about romantic and erotic relationships between two male celebrities that identify themselves as heterosexual. This type of fanfiction is called Real Person Slash (RPS). The main difference between RPS and fanfiction is that the characters are real people, not fictional characters.

This paper wants to study the self-representation of fandoms that can be found in the RPS of 'Septiplier' – which is the fictional relationship between the YouTubers Jacksepticeye (28,2M subscribers on YouTube) and Markiplier (32,5M) – and 'Rubelangel' – the fictional relationship between El Rubius (40M) and MangelRogel (6,2M). Jacksepticeye and Markiplier are friends in real life, as well as Rubius and Mangel. They all identify as heterosexual, but in the RPS, they are presented as homosexual and in a relationship. Thus, fans read queer desire in their friendship interactions and explore this desire in the texts. Furthermore, RPS allows us to see how fans introduce themselves in the narrative since the characters are portrayed being YouTubers, and often fans appear in the text.

Hence, this research aims to analyse how fans portray themselves in these texts and the representation of the relationship between fans and YouTubers. To fulfil this aim, I will use Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) on 12 of the most popular fanfics published in Archive of Our Own (AO3) and Wattpad about Septiplier and Rubelangel.

Jacksepticeye, Markiplier, Mangel and Rubius are all gamers that became popular on YouTube. Gaming communities are often toxic spaces, especially for girls, people from the LGBTIQ+ collective or non-white people (Condis, 2018; Shaw, 2012). Nevertheless, the writing of RPS is a way for girls and LGBTIQ+ fans to participate in the community, which might be hostile to them otherwise (Hoad, 2017).

All four of them have a close relationship with their fandom and encourage fans' participation in the community, as most YouTubers do (Gallardo-Hurtado & Selva-Ruiz, 2021). Rubius and Mangel have a positive and playful relationship with this content. In the past, they have contributed to it by kissing each other on camera or pretending they were jealous of each other. However, Jacksepticeye and Markiplier react in quite a different way. They have publicly stated that they do not

¹ This text is translated by the author from Spanish. All the following Rubelangel RPS quoted in this article will be translated, as they are all written in Spanish.

feel comfortable with fans creating this content and have asked many times for the fandom to stop writing and sharing RPS or any other romantic or erotic material about them.

Even though fanfiction writing has been widespread among fans for a while, in some fandoms writing RPS was considered unethical (Roach, 2018) precisely due to the concern that the celebrities involved might read the texts and feel uncomfortable.

Whereas the relationship between fan and producer has been widely studied (see Jenkins, 1992; Lewis, 1992; Michaud Wild, 2020; Nordin, 2019; Pearson, 2010), less research has addressed the relationship between celebrities and the practice of RPS (Hills, 2015; Popova, 2017b; Southerton & McCann, 2019) or the intra-fandom regulatory practices or self-representation (Busse, 2018; Goor, 2015; Guerrero-Pico et al., 2018; Stanfill, 2013).

This article will contribute to the current fan scholarship by addressing an under-researched topic: fandom self-representation and the dynamics between fandom and celebrity through the RPS lens. This case study will also help better understand the specificities of the female and queer fandom of gaming YouTubers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Being a fan and writing fan fiction

The practice of fan fiction is one of the most common activities among fandoms. Early fan studies scholars devoted significant attention to these practices (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; L. A. Lewis, 1992). It has been one of the practices that have drawn more attention from the fan studies field from many perspectives: fanfic writing and authorship (Busse, 2013; Herzog, 2012); textual analysis regarding issues around sexuality and queer desire (Hedrick, 2020; Popova, 2018; Spacey, 2018; Woledge, 2006); fan labour (Busse, 2015; Kosnik, 2009; Milner, 2009) or the production and distribution context of fan fiction (S. R. Black, 2020; Dym, 2018; Fiesler et al., 2016), among many others.

The practice of slash fiction – a subgenre focused on male gay relationships – has been one of the most studied subgenres, especially concerning *who* writes slash fiction. For a long time, slash was believed to be written by straight women (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Russ, 1985), and slash was regarded as a space of transgression or feminist activism. As Lucy Neville argues, “if women writing about sex is still seen as transgressive, then women writing about sex using the male body and inviting other women to enjoy these stories is doubly transgressive” (Neville, 2018b, p. 386).

However, the assumption that only straight women write slash has been contested in recent years (Duggan, 2020; Neville, 2018a). Firstly, due to the lack of recent data to support this claim. The last extensive survey about fanfic authors’ sociodemographic characterization was done in 2013 (CentrumLumina, 2013). Secondly, fan fiction writing has become a more mainstream practice and thus, its demographics

have changed (Coppa, 2006; Hellekson & Busse, 2006), and some smaller studies suggest that the fan fiction writers community is queerer than it was previously assumed (Duggan, 2020). Thirdly, more awareness has been directed to the racism and whiteness of many fandoms. Therefore, exclusionary practices were not considered when looking into the demographic of specific fan communities (Wanzo, 2015).

The question of why fans write slash fiction has also been central. It has been regarded as a subversive and transgressive practice (Spacey, 2018), feminist and queer activism (Popova, 2017a), a queering of a heteronormative media product (McCann & Southerton, 2019) or space for discovering and exploring their sexuality and desire (Haynes & Ball, 2010). However, the assumption that slash fic writing is inherently transgressive or subversive has also been contested for more nuanced approaches, although there is a radical potential in these fandoms and their practices (Massey, 2019).

2.2. Writing Real Person Slash

Regarding the writing of RPS, most of the motivations mentioned above are also present in this sub-genre. However, we must consider the specifics around the celebrity culture and the queer readings of real people. As Emily E. Roach noted, “RPF has the transformative effect of creating a more intimate (albeit fictional) depiction of the private spaces of celebrities, it can also serve to make fans feel more ownership over the actual celebrity” (2018, p. 169). Thus, this feeling of closeness with celebrities has increased due to the promises of proximity that social media platforms offer, and is not that different as “other forms of celebrity engagement that blend frontstage performance with a mediated representation of backstage life” (Fathallah, 2018, p. 4). Traditional celebrities tried to distance themselves from their audience, but micro-celebrities – such as YouTubers – depend on the audience connection and the promise of access to their private and intimate life to succeed (Raun, 2018).

In this context, RPS tries to “bridge the divide between the real and the fictional” (Popova, 2021, p. 94), and fanfics try to build a canon regarding that celebrities’ life that might be used to write the RPS and share a common ground for all the readers. Fanfic based on existing media fiction has a clear and defined canon from which to draw the fanfics. However, in RPS, the canon is built from celebrity media appearances, social media posts and activity, interviews, etc. Then, the canon of a celebrity is communally constructed based on traits and events incorporated with the fandom’s consensus (Hagen, 2015). This canon helps to connect the altered reality of the fan fiction and the celebrity itself (Winter, 2020) and helps us to see what elements are included or excluded, what traits are emphasised or reduced, or how the canon is constantly being negotiated based on the celebrity life and events (Brennan, 2019; Popova, 2021).

Fans get involved in discussions about the “true” meanings or subtexts of the original fiction, and they engage in debates around authorship or hierarchies between

creator and audience (Franklin, 2019). However, sometimes celebrities are accused of queerbaiting, and then the discussion about the “true” meaning of a text is constructed around the celebrity’s sexuality and private life (Brennan, 2019). These debates about what is “real” and what is not in a celebrity life emerge and often disrupt heteronormative paradigms (Southerton & McCann, 2019).

2.3. Insider and outsider fan perception

We have seen some differences between fanfic writing based on a fiction media text and RPS writing, particularly regarding the “source text”, the canon building, and some of its motivations. Another big difference that we must consider is the perception of these practices, both inside and outside the fandom.

Fans have generally been stereotyped and portrayed negatively by the media, creators, and general audiences. Being a fan had a stigma associated for a long time since they were portrayed as pathological, overly enthusiastic, and weird. As Joli Jenson identified, fandoms are often portrayed under one of these two categories: “the obsessed individual and the hysterical crowd” (Jenson, 1992, p. 9). However, fandom is more popular nowadays and deeply entwined with the cultural and media industries. Hence its perception has changed and improved and is no longer considered a stigma (Bennett & Booth, 2016, p. 2). Nevertheless, some of these negative representations are still mainly directed towards specific fandoms, fans, or their practices. But the stereotyping and negative representation is not only perpetuated by traditional media or general outsider audiences, since inside the fandoms we find fan hierarchies and policing of behaviours considered “good” and “bad”.

RPS is very controversial among many fandoms. Even though the fandom does not contest fanfic writing, RPS is perceived differently. As Bronwen Thomas points out, “it seems that a boundary is crossed when the stories impinge on the ‘real lives’ of actors or personalities in the media, particularly where this involves casting aspersions on their sexuality” (2014, p. 173). Thus, many fans participating in the RPS are often criticised within their fandoms, and the reasons used to criticise them are aligned with the stereotypes associated with fandom by outsider accounts: they consider their behaviour is “immature, obsessive, or extreme” (Thomas, 2014, p. 174). This reaction inside the fandom could answer to the aim of avoiding negative public representations, thus the alignment between the intra-fandom criticisms with the outside ones (Proctor, 2016).

In the case of RPS, this criticism intensifies because it is girls and LGBTIQ+ fans who primarily practice it, and we must consider how this intra-fandom policing is often heavily gendered. Some fan practices that are accepted among men are considered inappropriate when done by women (Busse, 2018, p. 75). Hence, female fans are more stigmatised, “especially due to the “feminine” characteristics ... such as hysteria, oversentimentalism, aloofness and lack of criticism” (Yodovich, 2016, p. 291). This criticism grows when female fans express their sexual desire or construct their

erotic fantasies because they are perceived as “crazy” or “embarrassing”, and therefore they are policed both by the fandom and the outside (Neville, 2018a, p. 18).

However, even though many female and LGBTIQ+ fans might face these criticisms and reticence from other people inside their community, fandom is still an essential part of their life (Busse, 2018, p. 88). Furthermore, no matter how hostile the fandom might be to girls or queer fans, the writing of RPS allows these fans to explore their interests and sexual desire (Neville, 2018b) as they engage with the objects of their enthusiasm “in ways that may disrupt the dominant ideologies of a subculture” (Hoad, 2017, p. 10).

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper aims to analyse the fandom self-representation and the representation of the fan-celebrity relationship to understand the nuances and specificities of RPS and YouTubers’ fandom. The specific research questions that guided the analysis were:

1. How does fandom represent itself in Rubelangel and Septiplier RPS? What practices are coded as a “good” or a “bad” fan? Is RPS writing considered popular among fandom?
2. How is the relationship between the fandom and the YouTubers portrayed in the Rubelangel and Septiplier RPS? How do the YouTubers perceive their fandom and the RPS?

I will use thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to answer these questions. This methodology is used to identify and organise patterns of themes and meanings. Thematic analysis has been used in previous fandom and fan fiction research (e.g. Barker, 2002; R. Black et al., 2019). Thematic analysis allows us to use a deductive and inductive hybrid approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), i.e., some themes and topics were previously established during the literature review and based on previous research about fandom representation, while some other concepts and themes emerged during data coding and analysis (Gibbs, 2007). The data collection and the analysis were happening simultaneously, and the coding process was iterative, since different levels of analysis and coding were conducted. The texts were coded with the qualitative analysis software Nvivo.

The sample consists of 12 RPS of Rubelangel and Septiplier posted on Archive of Our Own and Wattpad. Half of the samples (6) are Rubelangel RPS, and the other half (6) are Septiplier RPS. The RPS come from Wattpad and Archive of Our Own, two of the most popular fan fiction websites. AO3 is exclusively devoted to fan fiction work, whereas Wattpad also hosts original fiction (Ramdarshan Bold, 2018).

To determine the sample, I established the following criteria: the RPS must be finalised and at least be 3000 words long; the RPS must have at least 10 thousand reads, and the Septiplier or Rubelangel ship must be the main one in the text. In addition, fans must appear in the story, whether they are referenced or have an active role and presence in the RPS. Some works were excluded from the sample if they fell

into specific fanfic genres, such as *omegaverse*, fantasy or sci-fi. These genres were excluded because, firstly, as they were primarily situated in alternate and fantasy set-ups, the characters did not work as YouTubers and, therefore, did not have any fans. Secondly, genres such as *omegaverse* have particular rules and conventions; thus, the fandom presence in the RPS was also lower.

These RPS are published on public websites, intended for public consumption, and written under pseudonyms. This goes to the core of the ethical considerations when doing internet research: are this RPS posted in public or private websites? Is informed consent needed? Even if the websites and their materials are publicly accessible, people might have expectations or perceptions of privacy (Franzke et al. 2020, 22).

In the case of RPS this issue is more sensitive since the practice of RPS is controversial outside and inside fandoms, and many of these stories have much sexual content. Thus, many of the authors might have posted them with a perception that Wattpad or AO3 are more closed and private spaces or might be worried that these stories are shared in other platforms as where they were published initially (Dym & Fiesler, 2020; Freund & Fielding, 2013).

However, since it is very hard to contact the authors of the RPS (many are not active in the platforms) to obtain informed consent, an established practice among fan scholars is to not attribute the person's name or pseudonym to the works (Dym and Fiesler 2020, para. 5.11; Hedrick 2020, 6). To protect the authors' identities and reduce the risk of these stories being traceable to their source and harm the authors, I will not attribute quotes to the author's usernames, pseudonyms or quote the titles of the RPS. Thus, the RPS will be identified with "S" for the Septiplier RPS and "R" for the Rubelangel ones, followed by a number (1-6) to identify each one.

Rubelangel stories, as they are written in Spanish, will be translated and, therefore, hard to trace back to their source. Concerning Septiplier stories, written in English, some words of the direct quotes will be altered – keeping the meaning and the original sense of the sentence – with the same purpose. These measures will assure that the quotes in this article cannot be entered in Wattpad, AO3 or any other search engine to trace back the original RPS.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Fandom self-representation

In the RPS analysed, fandom always appears in the story as a character or referenced by the main characters. In two stories (R1, R6), the fandom has a close relationship with the YouTubers. In 6 stories (R3, R5, S1, S2, S3, S6), fandom participates and has an active role in the story: mostly through interactions at YouTube conventions or in events such as concerts. In the rest of the stories (R2, R4, S4, S5), fans are only mentioned or appear through online interactions (such as comments on videos, Twitter messages...).

Nevertheless, all these stories share the same trait: the fandom appears passionate, enthusiastic, and excessive. Passion is one of the main characteristics of a fan. They engage and relate with media products and celebrities through passion and enthusiasm. This is often perceived as negative or inappropriate conduct since it is a transgression of the “aesthetic distance Bourdieu suggests is a cornerstone of bourgeois aesthetics” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 18).

However, even though this passion and excessiveness are present in the analysed RPS, it is not portrayed as a bad attitude. Instead, it is represented as a usual and meaningful way of engaging with the YouTubers' content. In R1, a fan says: “I don't really think there's anything wrong with remembering the people who taught me so much all my life... And I'm not ashamed to ask for an autograph or a picture”. This way of engaging is often represented through the practice of drawing fanart (“He liked seeing fanart of he and Mark being cute together” [S1]) or cosplaying (“Not long after they got there, a small group of cosplayers ran up to them, excited. “Markiplier!”, the leader of the group cried” [S1]). There are a lot of interactions between fans and YouTubers, where they show their enthusiasm to them: “I'm Celeste and you're my favourite youtuber ever! Can you sign my teddy bear?” (S2).

Fans also portray themselves as being unconditional and attached to the celebrities in their content for long periods. In some of the RPS, the main characters leave YouTube and social media for a while, sometimes for years, but fans are still waiting for them to get back, as we can see in S2: “Even though you haven't posted in ages I'm still subscribed to your channel!” or in R1: “Apparently, they loved you a lot. There are millions of comments that say that they miss you and that they hope that you get back one day”.

In one of the Rubelangel RPS (R6), Rubius has been away from YouTube for almost 20 years. He has a teenage daughter who starts to date a boy, who recognises him because his parents have been showing El Rubius and Mangel's videos: “I haven't seen all your videos, but my parents are true *criaturitas*². It's thanks to them that I've seen your videos. They told me that when they were young that they watched your videos with their friends for fun”.

Nonetheless, fans are not always represented in this positive light. This enthusiasm and passion are sometimes coded as toxic and disrespectful to celebrities. Thus, RPS usually understand passion as a positive and emotional way to relate with the YouTubers, but sometimes it can be too extreme and result in harmful behaviours:

When he started to be famous, he had to get away from it all. He couldn't leave the house from the constant harassment from his fans, blinded by the idea of getting a picture of him. He couldn't even walk down the street like a normal person. (R4)

² “Criaturitas del Señor” (“Creatures of the Lord”) is how El Rubius refers to his fans and always starts the YouTube videos greeting them with this phrase.

However, these fans are always presented as isolated individuals within the whole fandom, and their behaviour is never portrayed as mainstream. Other fans reject these behaviours coming from other fans: “They were stopped a couple of times by fans, but others understood that they had somewhere to be and asked the others to back off” (S1).

The fandom is mainly portrayed as a community that supports LGBTIQ+ rights and that has no problem with the YouTubers being in a gay relationship. For example, in S3, Jacksepticeye and Markiplier come out of the closet during a YouTube convention. The fandom's reaction is the following: “Mark and I... have been dating... for 2 years, Jack said, closing his eyes and scrunching his face, awaiting the roars of screams from the audience. The crowd was yelling and screaming and even crying”.

Fans often position themselves as a supportive community within a homophobic society and thus as a space where the YouTubers can feel comfortable with their sexuality. In S6, Jack and Mark are going to get married, and they are very excited to share it with their fandom, as they feel they will accept it and be happy for them. They oppose it to the receiving it might get from people outside the fandom: “They recorded the video for the channel. ‘We’re engaged! Marryplier, guys. It’s a thing now! And who cares what people not in the community think. We’re happy and we believe you’ll be too!’. We see the same idea in R2; Mangel and Rubius have to kiss in the camera as part of a challenge. However, Rubius is afraid to show the kiss publicly: “I didn’t like to show myself too much, other than to my fans. I always receive a lot of critics, the ‘what will they say’, the typical comments from haters and homophobes, they wait for the first opportunity to attack and destroy you”.

There are some exceptions: in S1, the RPS portrays a very bad encounter with a fan who first approaches Mark in a friendly manner, but he suddenly gets angry with him because he genuinely likes a video created as a parody.

Hey! Markiplier!” [...] “I love your Flappy Fedora video. I’m glad that one of YouTubers I am subbed to shares my intellectual views”.

Everyone within earshot either chortled, laughed, or snorted. Mark shook his head a bit. “You know that was a spoof, right? I don’t actually think that way.”

The man appeared confused. “What?”

“Yeah, man. That’s a really gross way of thinking. I wouldn’t want anyone subjected to that”. Now the creep was angry. (S1).

This fan is presented as an outsider of the fandom that does not properly know how to “read” Mark’s content. A while after this incident, the fan tries to stab Mark, and Jack tries to protect him from the attack and ends up receiving the hit. When the fan is stabbing him, he calls them “fags”. Thus, the attack is not only prompted by the dissonance regarding Mark’s content but is also a homophobic attack. Then, the assaulter is quickly kicked out of the fandom by the rest of the fans since “he has no space in our community”.

We previously stated that RPS is controversial among many fandoms, and particularly, Septiplier fans are often conflicted about this practice. However, in the analysed fanfics it is portrayed as a common practice and not censored by most fandom, quite the opposite. In S2, Jacksepticeye reads the responses to a tweet he has posted with a picture of him and Markiplier, not engaging in any romantic activity: “Septiplier awaaay!’, ‘I ship it!’, ‘They are very cute together!’, ‘Lol finally!’”. If it is referenced that not the majority of the fandom, it is nonetheless portrayed as the majority of it: “I guess it doesn’t matter if people don’t like us going out. The septiplier shippers are gonna go crazy though, you realise that?” (S2).

Rubius and Mangel have a more positive relationship with the fanfics and encourage this practice. Thus, in the Rubelangel RPS, we find more references to fanfic writing as a common practice, becoming more aligned with the “source text” than in the Septiplier case. For example, as we see in R3: “We are trending topic!’, said Rubius. He showed Mangel the laptop with all the tweets and links to fanfics. They had posted a video a couple of hours ago, and everyone was shipping them. Again”.

Many of the RPS explore homosexual desire that emerges from homosocial bonding. Hence, the interactions can be understood as heterosexual male bonding between two friends or as homosexual desire and love (Sedgwick, 1985; Woledge, 2006). For example, in S4, we see how Mark describes an interaction between Mark and Jack in the following terms: “They had been play fighting, just being cute for the cameras: two friends rough-housing each other, nothing unusual about that”. These interactions are picked up by fans, who read them as romantic interactions and use them to build fanfics.

As fans feel very close to the YouTubers and spend lots of time consuming their content, they build themselves as agents able to sense romantic interactions between them:

“Well... Then we will be together. As a couple. Rubelangel is real” He laughed, he couldn’t believe it yet. “It feels weird to say it out loud”.

“Why?” [...] “Rubelangel has always been real. They always knew.” (R1)

But fans can go further than just ‘deciphering’. They also depict themselves as being able to “predict” and sense the attraction between the two YouTubers, even when they are oblivious. Then it is thanks to the fandom and their interaction through social media, that they become aware of their feelings for each other. In R1, this breakthrough moment is narrated this way:

Thanks to the comments, they knew that some fans had started to ship them. Some said it was because they made a fantastic couple. Some others said it because of the magnetism and thought they could really get along...

As a couple.

They called them Rubelangel.

And Rubius had started to like it! Damn, he was even smiling in front of the computer when he saw a comment talking about it. Mangel was smiling too...

Thus, fans are not only engaging in a fantasy imagining the life of the celebrities or guessing what might be going on. In some cases, the fans create and stimulate feelings, making the YouTubers fall in love and start to date each other. In S5, Mark is reading the comments fans have left in Jack's video, where he explains that he is moving to Los Angeles and will share an apartment with Mark. Not as a couple, just as friends. Mark is having fun reading the comments that are shipping them, but he suddenly starts questioning if he would like it to be true:

The septiplier fans have gone crazy in the comments. Many of them say that even if the move isn't for romantic purposes, he and Jack will almost certainly fall madly in love ... That'll never happen, both have made it clear that they have no romantic interest in the other. He can't help but wonder though... Nope, we're not even going there!

Therefore, in these RPS, the fans give themselves a lot of agency and capacity to influence the real lives of the YouTubers and position their creations as actors that impact reality.

4.2. Representation of the celebrity – fandom relationship

In the previous section, we saw that fandom portrays itself as passionate, excessive and unconditional. But how do the YouTubers receive this passion in these RPS?

In general terms, the celebrities receive it with thankfulness and appreciation. They are grateful that they have a supportive community that will back them no matter what: "you know that our fans will do anything to see us happy" (R5). In R6, Rubius has not posted for years. He does not want to come back because his life is very different, but he explains to Mangel what is the thing that he misses the most about being a YouTuber:

I'd like to say "hello criaturitas del señor!" [Creatures of the Lord] one more time... To see their comments, which are always so funny. Their millions of "thank you" that they sent me every day. Their letters... Their drawings... The support they gave me. I'd like to live this again, just one more time.

Hence, he does not miss the job, the money, or the fame: he misses the fandom and the bonds built around it. In all the RPS, many scenes describe where the main characters read the comments left by the fans. For example, in S6, Mark and Jack spend a whole afternoon reading comments and crying: "He was always amazed at how we have touched so many lives. He always got emotional when he heard their stories".

They do not only expect to receive comments on their videos or social media, but they also sometimes even actively look for it on platforms such as AO3 or Tumblr: “I was just on Tumblr.’ Sean³ couldn’t help but laugh at that; ah, Tumblr, of course” (S1). This activity of searching for texts or images about them is always fun and positive, often done by the couples, as we can see later on S1: “They liked seeing fanart of him and Mark being cute together”. Consuming these stories is portrayed as a romantic activity with their partner to remember how their relationship was born.

However, in some RPS the relationship of the YouTubers with fan productions is portrayed with a lack of understanding or with mockery: “They’ve always laughed so much with all the pictures, the novels, the videos and the nonsense that the fans created about them” (R1). In some cases, this is received with rejection or disapproval: “Sometimes he got upset with all the fans insisting and sending them these drawings or writings. It especially bothered Mangel” (R6). However, this is later connected to the idea that it was bothering because they were pointing out the attraction between them: “Then he realised that maybe Miguel was upset because both Mangel and the fans knew it wasn’t a joke after all. But I was clueless”.

In general, the YouTubers enjoy reading comments, receiving fan art..., to feel close to their fandom. The relationship between YouTubers and fandom is portrayed as being very close and often as a dependent relationship. The YouTubers feel very thankful for all their support: “We had a lot of fun at the convention, meeting you guys, getting gifts; we apologise for not being there Sunday ... Thank you so much for watching and being here, as always” (R4).

When they talk about their relationship with the fandom, they often do it in terms of being in “debt” or “owning” things to them. For example, in S6, Mark explains this feeling: “He’d do anything for his community, no matter how large it is, because they’ve done everything for him”. Thus, a correlation is established between what the YouTubers give the fandom and what the YouTubers receive, creating a more equal or balanced relationship.

Whenever there is a development in their personal lives, they need to disclose it to their audience: “We gotta do a livestream vlog to explain this” (S2) or “we oweit to the fangirls, they would never forgive us if we didn’t deliver with a video of us kissing” (R2). This idea connects with the imperative of being true and authentic with the audience and generating a sense of intimacy (Hou, 2019; Lovelock, 2017; Marwick, 2016; Raun, 2018).

This imperative to be authentic to the audience is especially acute when related to the “coming out” of the closet. In many RPS, when the main characters confess their attraction for each other and thus start a relationship, one of the first things they think about is telling it to their audience. For example, in S2, shortly after they agree to start dating, Jack asks Mark, “What should we do? How are we going to tell our

3 Sean is Jacksepticeye real’s name. However, most of the time he calls himself Jack and in most of the RPS the other characters also call him Jack. In some ocasions, though, in intimate situations, his real name is used.

fans that we are together?”. We can also see it in R3, where Mangel tells Rubius “We have to tell them [the fandom] about our thing”, to which Rubius answers saying, “Yes, they must know, but not yet. Let me process it first!”.

Sometimes this dependency and closeness are coded with fear, particularly fear of disappointing the fandom or letting them down. For example, in R6, when Rubius is thinking about coming back, he expresses his fears:

He was amazed that his criaturitas [little creatures] were still waiting for him. He started to feel bad since he had abandoned them, he had disappointed them, that's why he couldn't watch his old videos ... He guessed it was fear, fear of them hating him for leaving, fear of being rejected.

Following this fear of disappointing them, the YouTubers always warn their audience whenever they are going to be away from the cameras for a while, and they apologise in advance: “We’re on our honeymoon! Yay! But Mark and I won’t be uploading for a bit, so sorry. We need a little bit of a break from recording. We hope it’s ok” (S2). In R5, Rubius and Mangel feel that they must quickly record a video for their audience: “We can do it when we get home. Then they’ll be satisfied, and we’ll have a little bit of time for us”. This duty with the fandom is not perceived as a load, but as giving back what the fandom has done for them.

5. DISCUSSION

Rubelangel and Septplier RPS offer us an opportunity to see the representation of fandom in the fanfic and, at the same time, to understand the imagined relationships with the YouTubers. The 12 analysed RPS have allowed us to see how fans insert themselves into the text to fulfil their desires.

We have seen that fans mostly portray themselves positively and present the bad behaviours as isolated incidents perpetrated by individuals but not representative of the fandom. Even though fans are represented as enthusiastic and sometimes excessive, it does not have negative connotations as it usually does when portrayed in mainstream media. Instead, it is presented as a meaningful way of engaging with the YouTubers' content. In the same vein, celebrities are represented as being grateful for all the fandom engagement and the RPS production. In these fanfics, fans who ship the YouTubers or write RPS are portrayed as a majority, whereas in their fandom inside the YouTube gaming community, they are smaller groups.

We have seen how this RPS sometimes are presented as “predictions” of what will happen or as the trigger for the YouTubers to acknowledge their feelings. Thus, fandom attributes itself a lot of agency and power over the lives of the celebrities, therefore reverting the unequal and unbalanced relationship between fan and celebrity. Fans not only stay away from the passive consumer role, but they can influence the private life of the YouTubers through their RPS.

This is especially relevant in the Septiplier and Rubelangel fandom, where the female and queer writers of the RPS might sometimes feel excluded from the fandom. Gaming communities are highly hypermasculine and hyperheterosexual, and these fans reclaim their space as RPS writers, even though it might be considered a “wrong” way of being a fan (Busse, 2018; Yodovich, 2016). However, through the writing of these RPS, these fans position themselves as important actors in the YouTubers' life, and they also imagine how their idols might receive this practice and that their reading of the celebrities' private life is the correct one.

In the Rubelangel case, there is a correspondence between what Rubius and Mangel have expressed about the RPS – positive and encouraging – and what we see in the RPS. But in the Septiplier case, where they publicly said they do not like this kind of content, the correspondence link is broken. In the RPS, both Jack and Mark are happy to read this content and are often depicted actively looking for it. This connects with one of the main tensions of RPS; the building of the canon. Which events or traits does the fandom incorporate in the texts, and which are left out? In this case, the RPS writers consistently ignore the requests and feelings of discomfort of the YouTubers and exclude them from the fanfic.

The YouTubers are also portrayed as feeling in permanent debt to their audience and having to be transparent and available to them or apologising when they are going to be away from the social media platforms. It connects with the imperative of being transparent and authentic with the audience since the fandom demands this constant availability (Guarriello, 2019) from the celebrities. It becomes especially acute when disclosing their personal life, mainly coming out of the closet. The YouTubers feel the obligation to communicate to the fandom their relationship as quickly as possible to give back and maintain the bond with their audiences.

Future research should address this self-representation in other fandoms and fanfics. Analysing the micro-celebrities public responses to this kind of content would help better understand the relationships and hierarchies with fans and connect it with authenticity and transparency promises.

This article has contributed to the current scholarship on RPS and fandom relationship with the celebrities and fandom representation. By analysing these RPS, this article has shown how these fanfics can become spaces of resistance for female and queer fans in masculine and heterosexual environments and how they use the RPS to reinforce their bond with the YouTubers and their belonging to the fandom from which they are often excluded.

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