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“THERE SHOULD BE NO TOLERANCE FOR INTOLERANCE”: INTERNAL
ANTAGONISM IN ONLINE FAN COMMUNITIES

By

Michelle W. Jones

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

American Studies: Folklore

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ABSTRACT

“There Should be no Tolerance for Intolerance”: Internal Antagonism in Online Fan Communities

by

Michelle W. Jones, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2019

Major Professor: Dr. Lynne S. McNeill
Department: English

This thesis focuses on exploring cases of internal antagonism in fan communities, with a specific focus on the *Steven Universe* (2013 -) and *Undertale* (2015) communities present on Tumblr and Twitter. Internal antagonism is a phenomenon that occurs when a community targets a member within itself instead of outside itself, often as a way to mediate and regulate the community and reinforce its values. This thesis considers three case studies of internal antagonism with both physical and digital implications in order to better understand the role it plays in shaping and sustaining online fan communities as well as mediating the roles of fans and creators. Though there has been folklore scholarship on similar communities in the past, there hasn't been a strong focus on the darker, more damaging side of these communities. This research will serve to fill this gap left in fan studies and bring a more balanced view to the field. It will also give a better understanding of why this harassment happens and what folkloric function it fulfills. This research will reveal why individuals cleave to these communities and what their core values are.

The first case study analyzed is the case of Zamii070, a fanartist who faced severe harassment from the *Steven Universe* fan community due to a “problematic” piece of fanart. The second case study revolves around Jesse Zuke, a former storyboard artist on

Steven Universe, was on the end of internal antagonism because of perceptions that they were mocking queer fans. The last case study is that of a fanartist who received cookies with needles in them from a fan who disliked their fanart. This thesis discusses and analyzes the details of the incidents themselves, their results, and the reactions from the fan community using original posts related to the incidents, accounts of the incidents, and interviews with those involved in the community at the time. As context for ethnographic research, this thesis will also explore the *Steven Universe* and *Undertale* communities through public posts and interviews.

(83 pages)

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

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Michelle W. Jones

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CHAPTER I:

INTRODUCTION

In October 2015, the *Steven Universe* (2013 -) fandom was thrown into chaos. 19-year-old fan artist Zamii uploaded a controversial piece of fan art that depicted Rose Quartz, a character portrayed on the animated show as fairly rubenesque, as much slimmer. In response, some members of the fandom harassed Zamii for fat shaming, while others defended her. Despite taking down the original post and publicly apologizing, aggressive harassment continued to the point where Zamii announced her suicide. Fortunately, however, she was able to receive medical help and didn't attempt to end her life. Despite this very real physical consequence, Zamii's antagonists continued to stand by their harassment of her. This is a severe example of what I call internal antagonism, a phenomenon that occurs when a community targets one of its insiders instead of an outsider, often as a way to mediate and regulate the community and reinforce its values. This thesis considers three case studies of internal antagonism in order to better understand the role it plays in shaping, sustaining, and even harming online fan communities.

Internal antagonism is common across many online-centered fandoms and communities to varying degrees, and manifests as one of the most aggressive facets of callout culture. Call-out culture is a feature of the social internet where users feel the need to call out other users for being problematic and offensive in some way. It is often accused of oversimplifying both issues and users, being overzealous, and being

excessively performative. While internal antagonism features similar tactics to trolling, the key difference is in how personal the situation is. Trolling lacks the sincere intent of internal antagonism, which is used to regulate boundaries, and is more often used to mock and make a joke of the target. Similarly, bullying is close but not identical to internal antagonism. Bullying can be an isolated incident or series of interactions between two individuals, but internal antagonism is a collective action by the group towards their often singular target.

Internal antagonism can be further understood in contrast to the much more familiar situation of external antagonism, in which a community attacks an individual or group situated outside of the community. A prime example of the latter is the case of the Gamergate controversy in 2014 and its directed, personal attacks towards Anita Sarkeesian, Zoe Quinn, and other women involved in video games. Gamergate, despite its official-sounding name, was a loose confederation of mostly male gamers that originally united in opposition against a video game developer named Zoe Quinn who was baselessly accused of exchanging sexual favors for positive reviews. Sarkeesian, a video game analyst, became another early target for the group when she posted a video highlighting the inherent and pervasive sexism present in video games. Gamergaters disagreed with her analysis and began to send her severe death threats, culminating in the threat of a violent shooting and bombing at a Utah State University event where she was scheduled to speak. This example displays how some gamers reacted to and tried to destroy what they saw as an existential threat to their community from the outside. They saw Sarkeesian as someone who was trying to destroy their community ideals and

therefore their entire identity, rather than someone who was trying to point out problems in the community. Andrea Braithwaite (2016) describes how

Gamergaters situate themselves as the “real” victims, oppressed by calls for diversity and at risk of losing “their” games to more inclusive ones. Thus, #Gamergate is about more than games: as a set of anxieties, rhetorical strategies, and targeted hate campaigns, #Gamergate is an articulation of technology, privilege, and power (1).

Gamergaters’ core fundamental values were already established, and based off of those values, they came together and acted against people perceived to be outside actors and aggressors. Both Sarkeesian and Quinn, despite both being a part of the broader gaming community due to their involvement in video games, were never seen as a part of the group that was Gamergate due to their gender, politics, and lack of participation on sites like 4chan. In contrast to the Gamergate situation, internal antagonism is a way for communities to negotiate and reinforce their own values among themselves.

Angela Nagle identifies this and other examples of antagonism associated with the alt-right and 4chan communities in her 2017 book *Kill all Normies*. A precursor to Gamergate, the case of journalist Kathy Sierra, features similar instances of radical, coordinated online attacks that attempt to defend the values of a community against an outside actor. Nagle describes the genesis of the controversy: “The backlash against [Sierra] was sparked when she supported a call to moderate reader comments, which at the time was seen as undermining the libertarian hacker ethic of absolute Internet freedom” (16). 4chan was founded on a lack of moderation, making Sierra’s position antithetical to their community. It should be noted, however, that she didn’t have any actual power over the moderation—or lack thereof—on 4chan and similar websites. In this case, “The personalized backlash against her [Sierra] was so extreme that she felt she

had to close down her blog and withdraw from speaking engagements” (16), making this a successful attempt to silence outside opposition. These cases are just some of the many controversies that happen across the internet, causing the wariness and the popular perception that the internet is a terrible place.

External antagonism is often expressed through creating clear delineations between in-groups and out-groups. Boundary maintenance within communities, and its relationship to identity, has a robust presence within the social sciences, often focusing on in-group/out-group dynamics. Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár (2002) summarize this literature:

A number of cultural sociologists and anthropologists have been more concerned with the accomplishment of boundary-work, that is with what kinds of typification systems, or inferences concerning similarities and differences, groups mobilize to define who they are. In other words, they are more concerned with the content and interpretative dimensions of boundary-work than with intra-individual processes (171).

Lamont and Molnár also review case studies of groups building boundaries through easily visible or discernable differences they have with others in their physical vicinity-- “how fast-food workers in Harlem contrast themselves to the unemployed poor” and “how white working class people in Chicago define and defend themselves (largely against blacks) in what they perceive to be an imperiled world” (171). This is in contrast to internet subcultures (like fandoms), where boundaries, due to the abstract nature of many internet communities and interactions, are often focused around ideas rather than visually identifiable groups of individuals. Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner (2017) discuss how this delineation online occurs through “community formation, cultural exchange, and generally having a fun and funny time” (97). Despite the inherent differences, however, identity boundaries operate similarly both online and in real life.

This thesis will illustrate the role that fan identity plays when a group decides upon which values it is important to build their boundaries, as well as how they are decided upon and upheld through internal antagonism.

As with external antagonism, participation in internal antagonism is often a way to perform identity, with community members feeling the need to virtue signal to their peers or to stake a visible claim that they support one side or another. Whatever garners the strongest, most vitriolic antagonism implicitly identifies the core values of the group, as well as potentially designating values that must be debated by the group. By showing no tolerance for whatever is being attacked, participants can signal both to the victim of the harassment and to their observing peers what the consequences are for deviating from the group-determined norms. Phillips and Milner extensively discuss identity play online in their 2017 book, describing how “identity performances depend on the complex intertwine of individual needs and audience expectations” (71). In this case, the individual that participates both in the broader discussion that often accompanies internal antagonism as well as in the harassment itself is demonstrating this complexity by expressing their own personal beliefs and by signaling to others where they stand and with what values they align. This can be used to indicate publicly that one has no risk of future deviance, or to protest and oppose what is going on.

Online fandoms provide an interesting setting for studying folklore broadly and internal antagonism more specifically. They are communities that originate in a shared passion and encourage creativity in every conceivable expression, from fanart to cosplay to original songs to fanfiction and everything in between. Fandoms are often a refuge for fans from “normal” life, where other people don’t share the same interest in children’s

cartoons or low budget science fiction, and may find those who are interested in them strange or creepy. In *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins explains that fans differ from the typical media viewer by “participating in a larger social and cultural community...These fans often draw strength and courage from their ability to identify themselves as members of a group of other fans who shared common interests and confronted common problems” (1992, 22-23). Fandoms are a sanctuary where people can embrace what they can’t elsewhere; bronies, mostly male fans of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (2010 -), can embrace their sensitive side and “girly” emotions, while *Sherlock* (2010-2017) fans can fully explore their sexuality by considering erotic relationships between men, both actions important aspects of identity formation in fandoms. To some, this makes fandoms extremely important spaces for the development of personal identity, and the passion for both the original media and the community bleeds through into all aspects of the group, including conflict. Fandom wars, arguments between different fandoms, and ship wars—heated discussions within fandoms over which characters should be paired together romantically, known as shipping—are two such common examples of this passion. Studying the internal antagonism observed in these communities shows how important the fandoms are to those who participate in them. It should be noted, however, that the case studies included in this thesis stand out by being both extreme and negative in contrast to the majority of fan-to-fan and fan-to-creator interactions. In these cases, the harassment can actually make the community less robust—scaring away members or fracturing the larger community who may still align with the base values of their peers, but who find their enthusiasm for the community waning when the fandom has turned “toxic.”

Within fandoms, there can be an outsized reaction to a significant event, such as the Zamii incident, which causes the culture of these fandoms to break down and be reexamined by its members. In this circumstance, fans critically engage with the rest of the fandom, considering who gets to participate and how. Dorothy Noyes discusses the lack of consideration most people have towards their everyday folk culture, saying,

Most of human culture is background to what we recognize as significant action. It is reproduced and modified without much conscious reflection because it does what it needs to do well enough; not until it breaks down under radically new circumstances do we think it over (2014, 146).

Fandoms are often comprised of individuals who voluntarily choose to position themselves within that more conscious space, which makes them especially sensitive towards in-community transgressions and primed to engage in internal antagonism.

Fandoms are especially susceptible to these events that break down culture; when a fandom is acting as a safe space for people of color, for example, and a popular fan artist posts a racist drawing, that drawing disrupts the function of the fandom for those people of color, making it an unsafe space. Because fandom is currently often experienced online, such events are caught more quickly and punished more severely through internal antagonism.

Online communities are heavily shaped by the platform they are hosted on, and fandoms are no different. Nancy Baym highlights how the various characteristics of different technology (such as a platform) shape the interactions on it, saying, “a medium’s ability to convey social cues about interactants and context is an essential component of its communicative possibilities and constraints” (2015: 57). Emically, the same fan communities on different platforms can manifest distinctly, with occasionally disparate points of focus and modes of expression, even as they are all built around the

same media. For example, the blogging site Tumblr, one platform heavily involved in my case studies, is known for being radical, immature, and lawless, but also the best place for building back and forth conversations and shitposting.¹ Reddit, on the other hand, is less focused on user profiles, making it more anonymous, community-based, and text-heavy; rather than following specific people like it is possible to on other social media platforms, the emphasis is around specific topics or communities. Reddit also has in-group moderators that can make and enforce community rules.

Folklore's first foray into fan studies began with Camille Bacon-Smith in 1991, who tackles the question of why women are attracted to the *Star Trek* (1966–1969) and other science fiction fan communities. She describes how fans create ownership of the show as well as their own identity as a fan via fanfiction, videos, and costuming. They use these methods to explore themselves, especially their own sexuality, in ways that would normally be taboo. She points out that some fans participate in order to create a familial relationship with other fans. She says, “Members of this latter group [those who seek familial relationships] actively work to create an ideal society for themselves and fellow community members through the medium of their work and through the social organizations they build around it” (1992, 41). Bacon-Smith doesn't go in-depth on the idea of an ideal society, but I illustrate it more thoroughly in this thesis, showing how the fans I highlight actively work to build a society that is safe for them from discrimination and upholds the values they find most important.

P. J. Falzone (2005) adds to folklore studies' work on fandoms in their work on queer *Star Trek* fanfiction between the characters Kirk and Spock. The author explores the community behind the fanfiction and why so many writers decide to queer the

narrative between Kirk and Spock. They discuss how the pairing has transcended the original realm of the show to become something owned and dictated by the fans who write them. This article highlights the possessive nature that fans can develop with their various interpretations of characters.

Expanding the literature on the oft-studied *Star Trek* fan community is Heather R. Joseph-Witham's *Star Trek Fans and Costume Art* (1996). In this short book, Joseph-Witham explores the art of wearing and creating costumes in the *Star Trek* community. She delves into how being a fan can be central to one's identity as well as the communal benefits offered by being an active member in the *Star Trek* fan community. Her work revolves around the physical realm and provides further exploration into why people choose to be a part of a fan community.

Moving to the digital sphere, Bill Ellis (2015) does a direct analysis of an online fan community tangential to the ones I will be looking at. In it, Ellis highlights the queer nature of the brony community via photoshops and fan art from and of the show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. Ellis provides a folkloric precedent for my own studies of the *Steven Universe* and *Undertale* (2015) fan communities, as *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* has similar themes to the media whose fan communities I am studying. The fan communities themselves are also similar and attract people who identify as deviant from mainstream society. Ellis also highlights the importance of visual media in fan communities, which relates back to the targets of the internal harassment in my case studies: artists.

Building on the study of fan communities online, Francesca Coppa (2017) discusses fanfiction as "folk tales for the digital age" across a plethora of communities

from a more literary perspective. She explores the values and issues important to a certain fan community through the fanfiction they write. This book acts as a useful primer on a variety of specific fan communities and tropes present across fan communities in general. Coppa argues that fanfiction is folklore due to its strong community connections and grassroots origins. Like Bacon-Smith, she posits that fans are claiming the original source material and adapting it to reflect their own values and issues.

Folklore and fandom is still being explored, with the journal *New Directions in Folklore* dedicating an entire issue to the *Star Wars* (1977 -) franchise in 2018, with the majority of its contents dedicated to exploring the modern *Star Wars* fandom. Christine J. Windmayer examines the fan response to Carrie Fisher's death on Twitter, noting the feminist tone of the tweets as well as their performative and activist nature (50-76). Jared Lee Schmidt explores the intersection between the folk and pop culture through the fan holiday May the Fourth (77-108). Anelise Farris discusses the power of cosplaying in navigating and determining identity (121-140).

Alan Dundes explores the concept of identity in folklore, saying "Folklore is clearly one of the most important, perhaps *the* most important, sources for the articulation and perpetuation of a group's symbols" (1984, 240). Internal antagonism acts as a symbolic form of communication, and offers "valuable data which is relatively free from the outsider observer's bias" (259), making a folkloristic approach especially valuable to understanding fandoms better.

In this thesis, I use a contemporary functionalist approach to analyze internal antagonism. In general, functionalism considers the cultural role that various aspects of folklore play in a given society. It operates under the assumption that all folklore exists

and is perpetuated for some socially motivated, communicative purpose, otherwise it would simply drop out of circulation. Because the reasoning behind antagonism can sometimes be seen as particularly enigmatic, functionalism yields important and clarifying information on why it occurs.

Elliot Oring explains the origins of functionalism within folklore studies, which goes back to A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski. Radcliffe-Brown's approach understands "The function of a particular social usage ... is the contribution it makes to the continuity of the social structure, that is, the maintenance of the life process of the society" (1976, 68). Malinowski, on the other hand, thought that "the functions of various aspects of culture...are the fulfillment of various biological needs" (68). Oring goes on to explain the more modern functionalist approach as used by folklorist William Bascom: "Thus functionalism emerges as an attempt to explain the continued presence of sociocultural patterns in a given social system" (71). With this understanding of functionalism, I examine why cases of internal antagonism persist in the social systems of fandoms. Internal antagonism, especially severe cases of it, seem to cause instability within a social system rather than promoting the opposite, but as with all folklore, it wouldn't exist if it were serving no purpose.

All of the case studies that I look at require a reconstruction of the events that took place in order for me to analyze them. Luckily, the internet loves to archive and document itself, so there are many screenshots and explanations that took place at the times of the controversies. Many of the posts related to the harassment are still publicly available or can be found on archiving sites such as Know Your Meme (knowyourmeme.com), which hosts an extensive image gallery that includes recent

updates and references to the controversies. Private individuals have also uploaded screenshots documenting some events to sites such as Reddit and Imgur. When I use quotes from these original posts they have been quoted verbatim, including misspellings, typos, and the unique punctuation and flair that users adopt on particular platforms at particular times in order to best capture the tone and texture of these posts. Previous scholars, linguists Lauren Gawne and Jill Vaughan (2011), have identified LOLspeak, language associated with LOLcats memes, as a form of language play that is encouraged by the internet. They suggest that “LOLspeak contributes to in-group cohesion, while simultaneously constructing a ‘cat’ identity and the identity of a savvy Internet user” (121), showing how language play is a part of interacting in and identifying with online groups such as fandoms. In addition to gathering publicly available information, I have interviewed various members of the *Steven Universe* and *Undertale* fan communities to gain a better insight of the communities as a whole as well as reactions to the controversies in question. Participants in these interviews gave me full informed consent to use their interviews, names, and relevant information in this thesis.

This research builds on the work of past folklore and fandom scholars, with internal antagonism functioning as a way to create and enforce the concept of an ideal fan society for those who come to the community as a refuge due to their need to explore or embrace certain taboo aspects of themselves, such as body type, gender, or sexuality. Much fandom scholarship presents fandom as predominantly positive, minimizing or avoiding toxic and negative aspects altogether (Coppa 2017, Joseph-Witham 1996, Bacon-Smith 1991). This research will serve to fill this gap left in fan studies and bring a more balanced view to the field. It will also give a better understanding of why certain

types of harassment happen and what folkloric function it fulfills. A folkloristic understanding of severe internal antagonism has wider implications outside of just online fan communities, and having a better understanding of internal antagonism will potentially allow others to avoid and prevent the more serious instances of it. This thesis will also explore some fairly untouched communities of media by exploring fandoms that surround children's media in particular.

The second chapter outlines the Zamii case study, highlighting a severe case of internal antagonism in an online, fandom context. This case study shows how values are chosen and debated, as well as what effects that process has on the community. The third chapter discusses internal antagonism in the context of fan/creator tensions in a shared online space through the case of Jesse Zuke, who was a creator on *Steven Universe* at the time of the controversy discussed. This chapter also brings up issues of queer representation and how it is a crucial aspect to the *Steven Universe* fan community. The case study in the fourth chapter centers around an *Undertale* fan artist who was physically injured by a fellow fan. It explores what values are the most important to that community and how they are enforced. The fifth and last chapter concludes this thesis with a minor case of internal antagonism in the online #FolkloreThursday community, highlighting why internal antagonism occurs and what can be done to regulate and lessen its impacts.

Chapter II:

REGULATING COMMUNITY VALUES IN THE CASE OF ZAMII

Steven Universe is a children's cartoon on Cartoon Network that centers around the titular character Steven, who is the son of rebel alien leader Rose Quartz and washed up rock star Greg Universe. In the absence of his mother, who died while giving birth, Steven seeks to understand his half-alien nature and powers with the help of alien warriors known as the Crystal Gems: Pearl, Amethyst, and Garnet. The show features a diverse cast of both characters and voice actors and is very LGBTQ+ friendly.



Figure 1 Left: Canon images of Rose Quartz (left) and Greg Universe (right) in episode 61, “We Need to Talk” (June 18, 2015); Right: Canon full view of Rose Quartz²

For example, both Pearl and Amethyst are voiced by Asian voice actors while Garnet is voiced by Black musician Estelle. Pearl is fastidious and graceful, and depicted as very

skinny with no curves and lighter skin. Amethyst seems more alien, characterized by a purple complexion and the ability to transform her body at will. She is also fairly short, very curvaceous, and at least in concept art, is coded as Latinx. Garnet is coded as Black, with an afro and garnet-colored skin. The show plays with typical gender roles, with the female gems acting as Steven's guardians and protectors, while his father acts more as emotional support. It deals with topics such as conflict resolution, the power of love, tolerance, and self-acceptance. While other children's shows, like *The Legend of Korra* (2012-2014) and *Gravity Falls* (2012-2016), have implied same-sex relationships, *Steven Universe* is much more explicit about its representation. Show creator Rebecca Sugar, who is bisexual and a non-binary woman, described the Gems as a way to create representation for non-binary women (Johnson 2018). Recently, in mid-2018, the show famously featured the first animated wedding between a gay couple in episode 150, "Made of Honor" (July 5, 2018). As opposed to some children's cartoons which can be more episodic, this show has a strong overarching storyline with dramatic character development.

Similar to shows like *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* and *Gravity Falls*, *Steven Universe* has inspired a large and active online fan community of more than just children—many of the fans are teens or in their early twenties. This community has produced a broad array of folkloric content such as reactions, jokes, videos, fan art, music, fanfiction, original characters, and cosplay. It can be found across social media sites, including Tumblr, Twitter, Reddit, and Instagram. The fans are attracted to the show because of its funny and entertaining episodes that still offer elements of gravity and seriousness, compelling characters, and original world building. As one fan, Trey,

said, “The stories can get pretty deep in a kids’ setting.”³ It also features music that is fun for fans to play and sing along to,⁴ which is one way that many fans can engage directly with the show. Most of all, however, the show attracts fans because of the values that *Steven Universe* represents: inclusivity, acceptance, and love. More explicitly, the show’s diversity, both in visuals and the cast of voice actors, shows an acknowledgement and respect for cultures often ignored in commercial children’s media, especially that of people of color. This diversity extends to the body types and shapes of the characters, which range from rail-thin to more thickly muscled. Many fans of the show see the fandom as providing a safe space for people to express themselves, something that they might not have elsewhere.

Faye and Aimee, two pansexual *Steven Universe* fans who recently attended Salt Lake City Comic Con, described what attracted them to this particular fandom. “Mainly for the gays,” said Aimee,⁵ and Fay agreed, explaining, “SU [common abbreviation for *Steven Universe*] is gay central...we had our first on-screen cartoon kiss [between two gay characters], which is huge.” They both expressed appreciation for the normalization of being gay: “Two of the main characters are gay and dating each other,” Faye said.⁶ These two indicated that while they considered the show itself to be good, the real driving factor in participating in the fandom was the inclusivity and validation they experienced. Another fan, Megan, described how the diversity in the character design resonated with her:

All of the characters are very relatable. Pearl especially I love, because her body type is very similar to mine. There’s not a lot of female characters you see out there who have a smaller bust, or a non-existent bust almost. It made me feel a lot more confident.

She goes on to describe how because the characters are so relatable, the show's handling of sensitive issues was particularly powerful to her:

there was one particular moment, when Ruby and Sapphire split up for the second time after the Sardonyx arc, where Steven confronts them, and is like 'is it because of me that they're fighting?' And I remember just sobbing because... as someone who had parents almost get divorced twice and thinking it was my fault that they were getting divorced, and of course learning later on that it wasn't, it was really like...it hit close to home. And if I was a kid and had seen that, it would have really helped how I thought about the whole thing.⁷

With this understanding of both the community and the show that spawned it, the case of Zamii and the harassment she faced seems especially enigmatic given how purposefully the show's fans espouse acceptance and inclusivity; harassment of a peer to the point of suicide seems decidedly out of place. However, it is important to note that prior to the Skinny Rose incident (described in more detail below), Zamii committed several perceived missteps within other prominent Tumblr fandoms that may have inclined others to judge her and her *Steve Universe* art much more harshly. In an early incident, Zamii drew an anthropomorphized picture of Fluttershy, a pony from *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, in a way many in the fandom interpreted to be a racist caricature of Native American women. The yellow and pink pony who has a special connection to animals was reimagined as a woman with pink hair clothed in beaded deerskins with a feather in her hair. In Zamii7o, one of many receipt blogs⁸—a blog devoted to cataloguing the posts and actions of a single person, emically known as “receipts,” in order to use them later to discredit or disprove the user—that was dedicated to documenting, critiquing, and mocking Zamii and her art, the blogger points out that the skin color Zamii uses for Fluttershy, while labeled “rose,” is actually a light red. While Zamii had apologized for cultural appropriation and took down the post, the hate blogger

calls the picture “a racist caricature, starting with the red skin and ending with the clothes.” They then go on to critique Zamii’s apology, which discusses her reasons for making the fan art. This apology is included here as written to preserve the nature and texture of the statement:

I thought like,, fluttershy likes animals and nature and natives are very spiritual and one with nature,,, also fluttershy is very brave and will defend her friends so i gave her a feather i dunno,,,,, i spent like 40 minuets trying to find outfits and info that where from native tribes because all of the pics were from halloween costumes and disney and i duno.. i guess i didnt do a very good job u~u



Figure 2 Drawing of Fluttershy reimagined as a Native American by Zamii070⁹

The receipt blog responded with, “stereotyping natives as purely ~spiritual uwu~ and using disney as your main point of reference even though pocahontas is a horrible whitewashed movie.” There were further instances of perceivably racist art, such as characters drawn as Japanese using yellow skin tones and slanted eyes,¹⁰ though these were less prominent in the widespread discourse surrounding the controversy.

Zamii also received pushback from the *Homestuck* (2009-2016) fandom for art that was criticized as transphobic. On top of this, she was accused of being racist for cosplaying as a *Homestuck* character who is coded as Japanese (though the character is an alien). Though many on Tumblr said she couldn’t do the cosplay because she was white, Zamii is ethnically Mexican. When this came to light, many pointed out that the character is, as receipt blog Zamii07o said, “a walking Japanese stereotype,” and so Zamii was still “very much racist” for cosplaying as her. Tumblr users also criticized Zamii for being a pedophile when they discovered that Zamii had drawn artwork commissioned by a pedophile when she was 13. Zamii redrew that art and called the commissioner her friend, but later retracted that because she hadn’t known the commissioner was in fact a convicted felon. There are many other issues that community members had with Zamii, including supporting other artists that whitewashed characters, drawing bad art, and being called ableist for making a blind joke.¹⁰ The last is particularly ironic because Zamii herself is disabled due to chronic pain. As Reddit user goldiebam, a follower and supporter of Zamii, put it,

...She's been bullied pretty mercilessly for months for literally everything that she posts. There are multiple blogs...that are set up to scrutinize every single thing she does. If she draw a person of color, she's called racist for either "over/under playing the stereotype" but if she draws a nonhuman character as white, she's accused of white washing. She's even been accused of racism for cosplaying a character from homestuck. She's accused of being ableist even though she's

disabled. She can't post anything without it immediately being dragged for racism, abuse promoting (jasperxlapis art) abelism, transphobia, ANYTHING. She also has made many posts about her emotionally abusive family, depression, anxiety, and physical pain...¹¹

Having invoked previous ire for these “offenses,” Zamii’s depiction of Rose Quartz seemed to be the last straw for the Tumblr-based fandoms she participated in. The fanart, which shows Greg, Steven, and Rose Quartz embracing each other against a white background, features the gem with a skinnier neck, arms, and an implied tighter waistline. By drawing Rose Quartz “skinny,” Zamii violated one of the core values of the fandom, body inclusivity and anti-fat shaming, and large parts of the fandom responded by calling her out publicly, harassing her, and shaming her. After allegedly receiving death and sexual violence threats (that her denouncers would later say they debunked),



Figure 3 Drawing of “Skinny” Rose and her family by Zamii070¹²

Zamii announced her suicide with a post that said, “I’m going to sleep forever. I’m sorry everyone I’m just super tired. This will be the last you’ll hear from me. I’m going to be at peace now. I’m sorry.”¹⁰ She later followed up with a video and post that discussed how she was receiving medical care and emphasized how sorry she was.

This is not the first time a fandom has acted directly against their own standards. Bacon-Smith (1992) describes one incident between a fanfiction author and the *Star Trek* fan community she failed to deliver her novel to: “She cannot meet the standard of ideal behavior in the community, nor can the community treat her lack with the ideal of tolerance its philosophy dictates” (219). As a compromise, the case study ends with members of the fanfiction community banding together to finish the novel for the original author, allowing fans who had paid in advance for the book to read the finished work. The writers were able to fulfill the positive and community-centered values of their fandom by helping each other, redirecting ire away from the original author and still ensuring other fans could get what they paid for. The Zamii incident, however, was met with much less formal organization as well as much more vitriol.

The Zamii controversy divided the *Steven Universe* fandom across platforms—but particularly on Tumblr—into different camps consisting of the vocal opposition that spoke against value violation of any kind, the vocal support which saw value violation as inoffensive, the moderate support that disliked value violation but felt the vocal opposition had gone too far, and the those that felt the fandom had become too unreasonable as a whole. While not the focus here, the controversy also caught the attention of those outside the fandom that mocked the participants for being social justice warriors (commonly known as SJWs) and a part of “the worst fandom.”

The vocal opposition made receipt blogs, call out posts, and direct responses to both Zamii and her supporters. The verity of Zamii's suicide attempt and apology was brought into question, with some claiming she faked the whole saga for attention. One such poster pointed out that she couldn't have made the apology video, which was filmed in a hospital, because electronics are not allowed in hospitals, that patients don't wear scrubs, and the lighting was off.¹³ Another Tumblr user replied to Zamii's video saying, "I hope you fucking die...LOOK EVERYONE! A PRIVILEGED LITTLE WHITE GIRL PRETENDED SHE WAS GOING TO KILL HERSELF! LET'S ALL FUCKING RUSH IN TO DEFEND HER LIKE SHE'S NOT AN OPPRESSOR!" This post went on to identify Zamii with white privilege and blame her for racially-charged gun violence.¹⁴ Others took Zamii's mental health more seriously but continued to call out her and her supporters. For example, one person, Tara, said: "all these people are mourning a racist Are you people forgetting that zamii is a literal racist? Who fucking cares if she dies, holy shit,"¹⁵ while another said, "If you support people drawing canonically fat characters as skinny or worse, whitewashing PoC representation, you can unfollow me right now cause I don't need your shit."¹⁶ Another post calls Zamii "an intolerant BIGOT with her rampant RACISM ABLEISM AND SEXISM...[who] got consequences for her actions," and goes on to say that "THERE SHOULD BE NO TOLERANCE FOR INTOLERANCE LIKE HERS."¹⁷ These posters directly point out Zamii's various perceived transgressions—fat-shaming, racism, and pedophilia—and hold her up as an example of what will not be tolerated, an important signal to the rest of the fan community.

To show their loyalty for Zamii against the vocal opposition, the vocal support drew pictures that would be considered problematic to their adversaries. Common trends in these pictures are flipping off the viewer and drawing characters as skinny or



Figure 4 Art of Skinny Rose Quartz, Tall and Skinny Amethyst, and White Garnet¹⁸

whitewashed. One artist has skinny Rose, a tall and skinny Amethyst, and a white, blonde-haired Garnet showing their middle fingers with the caption, “Fuck you, Tumblr!” (see figure 4). Another has a skinny Rose with the caption “I support Zamii.”¹⁹ Some seem to be showing support for Zamii as a victim while others are attempting to preserve fandom as a place for people to reclaim and reinterpret characters, in this case through intentionally problematic fan art. Others focused on canonical reasons that Zamii’s interpretation could be correct, with one picture showing a black, skinny Rose with the caption, “TFW your age isn’t real and your body’s an illusion,”²⁰ referring to the gems’

ability to change and shift their shape at will. As opposed to the vocal opposition, this group made it clear that bullying will not be tolerated in their fandom, albeit by using bullying tactics themselves. This faction also featured receipt blogs debunking and documenting all of the hate that Zamii has been subjected to. One such blog, *zamiihatearchive*, was last updated in October 2018.²¹

The moderate support was the least vocal of the factions. In general, they called for civility on all sides. They acknowledged Zamii's problematic position, but also recognized that one sleight should not be returned with another, especially on the scale that it was. One member of the moderate support, Faye, said, "Like, you shouldn't have drawn Rose that way, whatever, that doesn't mean you send death threats and like cause this person—you know, it was really a big mess."⁶ On the whole, they called for a return to a more universally safe fandom where everyone was welcome.

The Zamii controversy spawned because of changing ideas of what a fandom should be. The various groups that sprouted up in response to the controversy acted in an attempt to claim space in their community based on their ideal fan society. They also displayed the tension between reinterpretation and maintaining community norms, both key parts of overall fan culture. In agreement with traditional fandom scholarship, the vocal support saw fandom as an opportunity to reinterpret characters however they would like to, regardless of if these interpretations could be considered offensive. To them, fandom is a space for such experimentation, and no one has the right to tell them not to draw something a certain way. This attitude was exemplified by *Steven Universe* co-developer and supervising director Ian Jones-Quartey when he tweeted, presumably in response to the controversy, "let people draw whatever fanart they want."²² The vocal

support fully embraced this idea, leaning into “being offensive” to prove their point. By drawing whitewashed and sexualized characters as well as verbally defending Zamii, this faction took up space and showed the broader community that any and all fanart was welcome, despite the way their art went against the diversity of the show.

In contrast to media like *Star Trek* and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955), which display few overtly queer elements and therefore encourage fans to create their own diverse material, *Steven Universe* already has diverse and queer aspects, which has led to both a more diverse fandom and one that feels the need to defend that diversity. The vocal opposition used internal antagonism to show the consequences of violating the diverse norms that originally attracted them to the fan community. Rather than a community encouraged to experiment freely, the vocal opposition posited that the fandom should be a place where that experimentation was bound within value guidelines pre-set by the show. The moderate support aligned with this view of fandom, but added more core values that both vocal groups were ignoring: civility and a tolerance for those who need to be taught about their mistakes. The exasperated faction generally aligned more with the vocal support, in terms of feeling that fandom should be a place free to explore, but didn’t feel the need to defend either side of the conflict. Above all else, they believed, a fandom should be one free of drama and harassment where people can discuss, appreciate, and react to the show.

Despite the attempts of the other groups, the vocal opposition was at least somewhat successful in promoting inclusivity in the form of body positivity, racial and cultural acceptance, anti-ableism, and anti-pedophilia. While the vocal opposition positioned themselves as paragons of these values, it should be noted that many who

were not a part of this faction still believed in those same values, but didn't want to harass someone over them. Two of my informants, who both identified as being a part of the moderate support, discussed the personal effects of the internal antagonism against Zamii. Megan, who draws fanart in her spare time and whose art has previously been the target of harassment, described how the Zamii controversy made her feel exhausted and hesitant to post her own art, lest people criticize her for an unforeseen slight. As she explained, "Seeing that someone who was especially prominent and well known in the fandom getting such abuse, I was like 'dang, what will they do to a nobody like me?' they probably wouldn't see it, but if they did...I don't know what I would do in her situation."²³ Faye talked about how she wanted to cosplay as Rose Quartz, but ended up not doing so because she was worried about backlash toward her—self-described as skinny—cosplaying as someone more heavy. She also discussed how the controversy scared her off Tumblr, though she still participates in the fandom elsewhere online.²⁴ These two informants show the potential impact that internal antagonism can have on community members, with Megan not publishing her art in case she offends the community and Faye avoiding what could be interpreted as body shaming through cosplay. Reddit user yIMserious said, "Man... I took a two week break from Tumblr and missed all this drama. I'm seriously thinking about deleting my art account. This shit ain't worth it. That poor girl... I wish I could help her. She has a long way to go to get over this type of bullying. This has effected my love for this show." This user's experience showed a reluctance to be part of a fandom that engages in bullying.

Although the vocal opposition's success came in the form of discouraging fandom participation through fear rather than encouraging non-problematic participation through

education, it was still successful in preventing potential issues. Ironically, by attempting to make the fandom more inclusive, the vocal opposition made the *Steven Universe* Tumblr fandom more exclusive. Overall, the formerly robust *Steven Universe* fan community was fractured, with many people leaving Tumblr for other social media sites and others leaving the fandom or stepping back from it. Megan noted this change, saying:

I guess they did kind of win, because people are a lot more careful trying to make sure they're staying true to character, true to form and not being offensive, which I guess in some ways is nice that some people are more aware of it, but at what cost? Almost at the cost of someone's life.²⁵

Faye noted, however, that many people eventually came back to the fandom after a Zamii controversy-induced break, and cited this as a victory over the vocal opposition.²⁶

While fighting for the ideal nature of the fan community is a reasonable enough motivation for users to have engaged in the controversy, there are more motivations. The various expressions of their position were performative methods of virtue signaling, not only to those who held different views than them, but also to those who had the same beliefs. All of those who participated in the controversy were both performing and virtue signaling in some form or another. For example, one aforementioned member of the vocal opposition, Tara, discussed how Zamii should garner no sympathy because of her racist tendencies. On Tara's Tumblr blog (colloquially known simply as "a Tumblr"), they describe themselves as a "22yo genderfluid bisexual and proud feminist looking for friends :) shoot me an ask if you want to hang out or touch butts ;)."²⁷ Tara's description clearly indicates that they are using Tumblr as a way to reach out to new people, and their Zamii hate post is one way of accomplishing this. By using tags, other users who feel similarly about Zamii and the nature of the community they wish to cultivate on Tumblr can find and reach out to Tara. Just as Tara's description of themselves as a feminist signals

a certain amount of tolerance and liberalism, their Zamii hate post does the same thing symbolically. This signaling also serves to deflect people from the community by showing the high amount of commitment required to be a part of the fandom. Richard Sosis and Eric R. Bressler (2003) highlight this phenomena in the context of religion, saying “the significant time, energy, and financial costs involved in imitating such behavior [ritual practices] serve as effective deterrents for anyone who does not believe in the teachings of a particular religion” (213). Similarly, fans in any faction were showing others the high emotional cost and commitment required to a part of the community, thereby deterring those who, though they may enjoy *Steven Universe*, were not ready for that amount of social commitment.

Though Zamii does come off as young, naive, and uninformed through her various interactions with upset fandom members, she doesn’t seem to be malicious or to have ill-intent. Rather than allowing her to learn from her mistakes, which she at least implied she was willing to do by taking down offensive pictures and apologizing for them, Zamii was alienated and antagonized. As the victim of harassment, Zamii was the subject of “identity hijacking,” a term introduced by folklorists Phillips and Milner (2017) in their book on ambivalent interaction on the internet. Identity hijacking is when a person’s “entire life is distilled down to one singular moment or decision, and treated as if this singular moment or decision represents the totality of that person’s existence” (89). Phillips and Milner describe several examples of identity hijacking, with one example being Antoine Dodson and his interview that was the source material for “BED INTRUDER SONG!!” (2010), to show how a person’s identity can be subsumed by a single instance. This reductive flattening is exemplified in Zamii’s treatment: she was

reduced to her worst, most prominent actions, with the skinny Rose fan art being the entirety of her work according to her critics. Most seemed unaware of the entirety of her work, including both offensive and inoffensive art. If they had looked further, for example, they could have seen another drawing of Rose Quartz as fairly show-accurate or found other insensitive artwork. She became an oppressor and a scapegoat that anger could be projected onto. Despite the fact that she is a disabled pansexual woman of color, she was reframed as a privileged white woman guilty of everything from transphobia to faking her suicide to racially-charged gun violence. This flattening enabled the vocal opposition to be as scathing as they were, ignoring Zamii's mental illnesses, race, chronic pain, and humanity.

In conclusion, the Zamii controversy stands as a prime example of severe internal antagonism being used as a tool to reinforce and regulate community values and output in order to create the “ideal society” that Bacon-Smith mentions. Zamii, as a prominent member of the community, acted as a convenient target because of her visibility and shaky track record. The internal antagonism shaped and signaled, both internally and externally, what is important to the fandom and what the potential consequences are for deviance. Far from generating consensus, this example had numerous groups warring over what the shared values of the community actually are. I believe that those who had more to lose from a compromised *Steven Universe* fandom—for example those whose safe space was being threatened rather than those who were more simply just enjoying the show—felt the need to fight the most for that safe space, and at least partially succeeded. Despite its seeming hypocrisy, the antagonism served to discourage racism, body shaming, and pedophilia and at least somewhat successfully excised these issues

from the community, as seen from the experiences of my informants. The antagonism did have the effect of shrinking the community overall, at the cost of civility and the true inclusivity and understanding that the show encourages. Though a harmful and alarming aspect of the *Steven Universe* fan community, internal antagonism has played a significant role in shaping and modifying the fandom that is important to understand.

CHAPTER III: JESSE ZUKE, QUEERBAITING, AND SHIPWARS

In August of 2016, Jesse Zuke²⁸, who was at the time a writer, storyboard artist, and storyboard revisionist on *Steven Universe*, deleted their Twitter account with a final string of tweets, included here as written:

i decided i dont want to be accessible to thousands of people who think because i work on a tv show that i owe them myself all the time...i dont have control over everything, i like lapis and peridot theyre cool, shoutout to people who enjoy the show or criticize it too...remember youre tweeting at a literal human being (thats what i am btw) and life exists outside of steven universe...²⁹

Across the fandom, people speculated about the reasons behind the deletion, tracing it back to frustration surrounding episode leaks and the harassment Zuke received on Twitter over “queerbaiting” and promoting a certain ship, or romantic pairing of characters. Just three months later, Zuke left the staff of *Steven Universe* because of disability “due to or exacerbated by the animation work environment” (2018). This incident, as well as others between *Steven Universe* fans and creators, prompts this discussion over who has ownership over the show and the fandom, what a creator’s role should be when attempting to operate in and respond to both, and how internal harassment mediates this role.

Accusations of queerbaiting were a central fan response to Zuke’s tenure on the show. Fan studies and media researcher Judith Fathallah defines queerbaiting as

a strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the attention of queer viewers via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then emphatically denying and laughing off the

possibility. Denial and mockery reinstate a heteronormative narrative that poses no danger of offending main-stream viewers at the expense of queer eyes” (2015, 491).

While in some cases the denial and mockery may be open and explicit, in others it is more of a perception of the creator’s intent seen implicitly through the lack of a canon resolution of the couple or through their interactions with fans. A classic case of queerbaiting (and an example of the former) is the BBC television show *Sherlock*. The mutual loyalty between Sherlock Holmes and his companion John Watson, showcased in the program, can be interpreted as romantic, and this idea is further supported by Watson’s devastation over the loss of Holmes and the jealousy Holmes displays towards Watson’s romantic interest. Though this interpretation can be easily argued for, there was never any canon fruition of the relationship, and the creators of the show openly denied any queer relationship between the two leads. This phenomenon can overlap with the “Bury Your Gays” (also known as “Bury Your Queers”) idea, another common trope found in media that contains LGBTQ+ characters, where these characters end up dead a disproportionate amount of the time. An example of this intersection is in the TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), when Willow, who is bisexual, and Tara, a lesbian, finally end up together after a rocky relationship, only for the latter to die two seasons later, denying the couple the happy ending fans thought they deserved. Fans consider both Bury Your Gays and queerbaiting to be problematic for several reasons. First, they allow creators to check a box of representation without engaging with the identities of the characters in a serious, thoughtful, and fulfilling way. Second, they communicate how queer characters (and especially queer relationships) are considered to be disposable, unwanted, or deadly, sending a negative message to the viewers of the show. Lastly, they invalidate their queer audience by leading them on, or “baiting” them.

These are valid and concerning problems across entertainment, and often only come to light through criticism from fans and reviewers.

In the context of Jesse Zuke and *Steven Universe*, the accused queerbaiting happened between two secondary characters, Lapis Lazuli and Peridot. Before delving into the details of this controversy, some understanding of the two characters and their reception by the fandom is important. Both characters, like all gems, present as female. Peridot is a light green and yellow gem and her hair shape has been affectionately



Figure 5 Canon images of Lapis³⁰ (left) and Peridot³¹ (right). Not to scale.

compared to a Dorito by the fandom. She is highly analytical and skilled at technology but can also be naive when it comes to life on Earth, and is easily frustrated with things

she doesn't understand. Peridot is fairly small, about the size of a child, and has a very a-gendered shape. Lapis Lazuli, generally referred to in-show as Lapis, is more traditionally feminine in shape and has the powerful ability to psychically control water. She struggles with PTSD and depression from being imprisoned in a mirror for thousands of years and being in an emotionally abusive relationship, and has a tendency to avoid dangerous situations. Both characters were originally introduced as sympathetic but active villains in the series who were eventually won over by the charms and empathy of the main character, Steven. Both, however, had trouble adjusting to their new lives and roles until they were able to meet and move in together as roommates. Together, Lapis and Peridot lived in a barn where they created "meep-morps," sculptures through which they could channel their feelings, cultivated a large farm, and adopted a dog.

Lapis and Peridot exhibit a natural chemistry, making them an easy and attractive ship for fans. Lapidot (the portmanteau ship name for Lapis and Peridot) living together as roommates, helping each other adjust to a new environment and bonding as a result is a classic plot scenario in fiction. In fanfiction, this trope most often manifests as a device to pair the characters together romantically, making the amorous implications of such a scenario in the show stronger in the fan community, where fanfiction tropes are popular and familiar. To further reinforce the pairing, the show is littered with references as to Lapidot's true feelings for each other, all of which have been fastidiously noticed and recorded throughout the fandom. For example, the fan-run *Steven Universe* Fanon Wiki notes such details as "In 'Too Short To Ride' [(episode 87, July 20, 2016)], Peridot encounters an advertisement for 'cute roommates' on her tablet. She presses the decline option repeatedly saying that 'she's already covered,'" or "In 'Beta'[(episode 100, August

8, 2016)], Lapis is seen to be repeatedly smiling at Peridot.” The fact that the wiki calls them “Show and Plot hints,” displays the intentionality the fandom perceives the creators have behind every character interaction. With this view of creator intentionality and Lapidot’s budding—or arguably fully realized—romance in mind, it’s easier to see how it could be potentially interpreted as queerbaiting. This issue is especially concerning to the fandom because of the reputation *Steven Universe* has for queer representation; the bar for avoiding problems associated with LGBTQ+ issues is higher than for other media.³²

Criticism was specifically applied towards Jesse Zuke primarily because of their involvement as the storyboard artist and writer on “Beta” (episode 100, August 8, 2016), an episode rife with Lapidot “hints.” Some fans saw the interactions between the two gems as queerbaiting, recognizing that the ship was unlikely to come to fruition (which, as of March 2019, it hasn’t). Other fans, however, saw the episode as Zuke showing preference for one ship over another, in this case Lapidot over Amedot (Amethyst, another gem, is often shipped with Peridot based on canon interactions that could also be interpreted as romantic). This theory was reinforced because of non-canon art Zuke posted on Twitter featuring Lapis and Peridot together, albeit in a way that wasn’t explicitly romantic. Zuke’s art also reinforced the idea that they were queerbaiting because Lapidot shippers saw it as a mockery of their ship. About a year and a half after Zuke deleted their Twitter account, they posted on Tumblr about their intentions when writing about Peridot, Amethyst, and Lapis, revealing that they did write Lapis and Peridot in a “growing queer relationship” while they wanted Peridot and Amethyst’s relationship to mirror a “first time crush.”³³

Though little of the original harassment that occurred on Twitter is still available, there are critical reactions to Zuke's Tumblr post about their intentions when writing for *Steven Universe*. On Reddit, where the Zuke's post was featured, user Subzero008 saw Zuke's actions "as if someone hijacked the show to make their own ship canon, which would definitely bother non-Lapidot shippers and even some Lapidot shippers."³⁴ This observation highlights the lack of credibility Zuke has among the community as a creator. User PrimeName said,

While having more Queer relationships for representation reasons is a good thing, I find how Lauren is trying to make one is quite bad...Again, more rep never hurt anyone, but a forced Queer relationship just to get representation for queer people? That's going to hurt how I view the characters and the overall way the show's themes work.³⁵

Many others discussed how the post proved that Lapidot was not a team decision involving the show's creator, but instead a personal decision made by Zuke, harming the cohesiveness of the show. Still others attacked Zuke's drawing style in the episodes that they storyboarded. In the same thread, user Minotorro sums up both the burden of being a creator in a fan realm and how complicated Zuke's situation had gotten: "She really shouldn't have posted this. None of the team should share these kinds of posts. They just cause friction and fights among fans. But it's a double edged sword for her to make such posts. Damned if she does, damned if she doesn't."³⁶ Though these posts are relatively civil, they are still a place where Zuke's role as an author and fellow social media user are debated. Similar discontent over Zuke's influence over Lapidot was also expressed on Tumblr. User whalesharks said, "lauren zuke i am hate watching your episodes and will not help you with your lapidot fanfic,"³⁷ directly calling out Zuke by name.

There are also plentiful reactions to this harassment from other sections of the fandom. These conversations surround the validity of the accusations, with some defending Zuke because of their status as a queer individual, reasoning that a queer person cannot queerbait. Others points towards the presence of the canon LGBTQ+ pairing between Ruby and Sapphire, who fuse--physically joining together--to make up one of the main characters, as a way to refute the idea of queerbaiting. They claim that because the show already has a canon queer relationship that is explored to a reasonable extent, they can't be queerbaiting with Lapidot, regardless of if it is a canon ship or not. One user points this out by saying, "Queerbaiting is a real thing, but on a show where both of the main relationships are between characters of the same gender, it's more like 'queerforshadowing'."³⁸ Another user, cosmogyral1 said, "People just want something to complain about. No matter how much LGBT representation you put in a show, people are still gonna complain."³⁹ Still others criticize Zuke's detractors as using the accusation of queerbaiting as an excuse to criticize Zuke for not writing Lapis and Peridot in the way that they want, or for not pairing Peridot with Amethyst instead, rather than it being an actual issue of queer representation. Informant Megan, for example, said, "A large portion of that argument [that Zuke is queerbaiting] comes from lapidot shippers, and their frustration in that not being a reality (yet), but getting upset at a storyboard artist/writer over a ship not being canon sounds petty, so people deemed it queer baiting."⁴⁰ This vocal support saw the opposition as immature bullies who were creating drama over not having their ships fulfilled; they were seen as putting their own personal shipping preferences over the fidelity of the fandom, ironically similar to what Zuke's opposition saw Zuke as doing.

Similar to Zamii's moderate support, Zuke's case invoked responses of people not necessarily agreeing or supporting their position, but still calling for civility from their fellow fans. For example, Tumblr user luccie-eclair lists off what someone who is considered to be a fan does: "Do fans bully and harass others because they don't share the same opinion? No. Do fans call people names and threaten others or wish them to be dead? No. Why am I bringing this up? Because people apparently need a guide on how to be decent."⁴¹ Shortly afterwards, she goes on to write a fairly long post about why she doesn't support Zuke's creative decisions. Another Tumblr user, kantoskies, discusses more broadly that although he doesn't agree with every creative decision on the show, he still believes the rest of the fandom has gone too far in calling out *Steven Universe* creators, especially Zuke.⁴² Such fans support constructive feedback and discussion within the community, but see openly attacking and hating on creators as going too far.

In this case, internal antagonism was seen both among the fans and between parts of the fandom and Zuke. Zuke, as someone operating in the same communities on the same platforms and posting similar non-canon content (which can debatably be classified as fan art) as the *Steven Universe* fandom, can be defined as someone within the fandom with a higher profile than many members, in a fashion similar to Zamii. Here, the internal antagonism allowed fans to dictate what the role of a creator should be in a fandom. Zuke's detractors were unhappy with Zuke's role in supporting one ship over another. Perhaps, because Zuke was active in the fandom, this removed the authority they had as a creator—no longer were they someone whose creative choices were a valid way to shape character and plot, instead they were a fan trying to force their own fanfiction and ships into the canon, someone who was abusing their power as a creator. Indeed, there are

instances of fans referring to episodes authored by Zuke about Lapis and Peridot as fanfiction. Zuke's detractors forced Zuke to choose their role as either a creator or a fan through the pressure of internal antagonism. The fans who harassed Zuke saw their involvement as an avenue to have control over *Steven Universe*, an ability to shape it, despite Zuke noting their limited personal ability to influence the show. This pressure finally proved to be too great, with Zuke choosing to step away from the fandom, enforcing the view that creators should be distanced from their fandom. While Zuke's final departure from the *Steven Universe* crew was not attributed directly to the harassment they faced, the negative aspects of the fandom likely contributed to their stressful work environment.

With many animators coming from an internet background, the lines between creator and fan are increasingly blurred. This is in contrast to interactions on the Bronze, a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fansite that was in service from 1997 to 2001, where the fans who controlled the site were able to create a clear delineation between them and the VIPs (creators of the show), going so far as to make them leave the site when they began fighting amongst themselves. Stephanie Tuszynski (2006), who studied the Bronze, said, "The response to the outside attacks and the VIP infighting show a strong willingness on the part of the group to stand up against outsiders and even members of the show's crew in order to defend the virtual social space against disruption" (168). Because the fans who ran the Bronze had the technological ability to dictate and define their site as separate from the creators, they were able to both maintain fan/creator boundaries and control what went on in their community. In *Steven Universe*, however, the fandom is spread across a number of social media sites over which fans have limited control and through

which many creators participate alongside the fans. While sites like Reddit and Wikia allow for moderation, Twitter and Tumblr don't have community leaders who can control the fandom's boundaries, leading to a much more lawless existence reliant on internal antagonism and the host site's native policies about harassment.

Rebecca Sugar, the *Steven Universe* show creator, is a good example of this blurred line. Before starting *Steven Universe*, Sugar had a Tumblr account where she posted fan art. She is notorious for posting not safe for work (explicit content commonly known as NSFW online) fanart of characters from *Ed, Edd n' Eddy* (1999-2009) and other cartoons years before she began to work for Cartoon Network on *Adventure Time* (2010-2018). Sugar still maintains her Tumblr and Twitter accounts, where she posts her own non-canon art, promotes *Steven Universe*, and reacts to fanart. While much more professional on both platforms than Zuke, there is a similar element of availability that Sugar has for her fans. When *Steven Universe: Art & Origins* (2017), an art book based on early drawings from the development of the show, was released, fans leveraged the accessibility of Sugar to address what many saw as a racist caricature in the book. The drawing in question was of Concrete, a non-canon character created in a drawing exercise. Concrete was described as unable to read and was drawn in a way that many saw as racist towards Black people. Just a few days after the book came out and in response to the controversy, Sugar and two of her colleagues all publicly apologized for the racist implications of the drawing, though it was the colleagues and not Sugar who were responsible for it. Sugar even went as far as having the book redesigned and reprinted to omit the offensive picture.⁴³ The sincerity and immediacy of Sugar's

apology, which was made on Twitter, was impressive, and shows the high degree of accessibility and responsiveness Sugar offers to the fan community.

This responsiveness acts as an interesting contrast to Zuke's interactions with fans. Despite Sugar coming from the same place as many other people on fandom social media, when she engages with fans now she acts as a show creator rather than a fellow fan. Sugar's apology was formal and gracious and used correct grammar, while Zuke's tweet before they deleted their Twitter account was informal and full of grammatical errors typical of informal, unprofessional writing on the internet. While Zuke certainly didn't have to apologize to their harassers, the difference in how the two approached *Steven Universe* fans is clear. Because of both the in-group perception of the status that Sugar has maintained in the community and the access to resources such as public relations officials, she was able to address and quell the Concrete controversy quickly and effectively. Zuke, on the other hand, engaged with their aggressors on a fan-level, and so could not address their concerns as effectively as Sugar. Much of the language disgruntled fans directed at Zuke referred to them as being more of a fan rather than a creator, "hijacking" the show to fulfill their own fanfiction. In the context of current internet fandoms, having that personal connection to the community while working for the institution of *Steven Universe* (rather than the more distant and formal connection to the fandom that Sugar has) was a liability for Zuke, enabling fans to see them as a target. Fans saw their official status not as something that made them separate from the community, but something that made them a bad member of the community. There was the perception that Zuke wanted to both have their own personal canon (Lapidot) while still working on the show, two things that were incompatible in fans' eyes. Even when

Zuke took precautions with a private Tumblr account, they were still open to attack from fans because of their connection to the show. As one fan noted earlier, Zuke was operating in a difficult position; the system seems rigged against any fan who wants to achieve official status within the institution they love. By achieving that status, they are expected to give up their fan appreciation of the material.

In these cases, internal antagonism was a way for fans to express their feelings about the various ships they did or did not support, both to each other and to creators, who are increasingly a part of fan communities. Discourse over shipping can often turn hostile, and is frequently referred to as “ship wars,” or discourse over preferred ships that turns passionate and vitriolic. Within *Steven Universe* alone, there are many controversial ships, with both Lapidot and Amedot being among them. Though shipping preferences can sometimes be simplified to which pairing people prefer more, it often involves a lot more depth. Through internal antagonism and ship wars, fans can explore problematic issues within relationships, and concerns they have over depictions in the canon. The Zuke incident allowed people to talk about the emotional maturity of characters, abusive behaviours, and how those are handled and discussed within the context of a romantic relationship. In a Reddit thread on the Zuke incident, user NoxiousSludge said, “I wasn't a fan due to not being a fan of Lapidot AND feeling that we missed out on some character development since Lapis previously loathed Peridot's very existence,” sparking a discussion on the character development in question, and whether it should happen on or off screen.⁴⁴ Another fan on Tumblr said,

Why is everyone just okay with the fact that Lapis Lazuli and Peridot are just - completely okay? Not just ‘completely okay’ even, ‘insultingly perfect’. Like, that’s the most flawed/awful the storytelling on this show has been and everyone just accepts it. They just jumped from Barn Mates to Beta/Gem Harvest in an

instant. No realistic development or tension or growth just 'okay so we're best friends now we watch our Degrassi equivalent and make sculptures, we have Steven over for sleepovers and want a dog! Are you happy fandom, we're Steven's gay aunts in a barn! Squee!'⁴⁵

Both users made sure to disclaim that they weren't upset with Zuke personally, but used the incident as a jumping off board to discuss their opinions on the ship. Though these issues can sometimes be lost in the more vitriolic ship war discourse, fans can also help the community determine what the acceptable boundaries are within possible ships.

Next, fans were able to discuss queerbaiting by targeting Zuke, bringing the issue to the forefront. While they were far from unified in their interpretation of the term, they could still mediate what it can mean, who can do it, and what it actually looks like. The majority of fans seemed to come to the conclusion that because Zuke was queer themselves, it meant that Zuke couldn't be queerbaiting, enabling the fans to instead highlight the problematic aspect of their fellow fans advocating too hard for their ships.

Lastly, internal antagonism allowed parts of the fandom to try and make the fandom more inclusive and supportive of the *Steven Universe* crew, and especially Jesse Zuke, through discussion and performative alignment. Similar to during the Zamii incident, fans expressed their outrage over the behavior of their fellows in a variety of contexts, including Twitter, Tumblr, Reddit, and news sites. By publicly vocalizing their explicit support for Zuke or disgust towards their harassers, fans were able to help shape the fandom to be more inclusive and tolerant. Later, when Zuke fell upon hard times after leaving the show, they reached out to the *Steven Universe* fandom for help paying their rent. Fans quickly swooped in and donated to the gofundme, showing that many of them still supported Zuke in spite of, or even because of the issues Zuke had with the fandom.

This case of internal antagonism is heavily shaped by the platform it occurred on, and allows us to highlight the differences and similarities between both Twitter and Tumblr and the cases of Zami and Zuke. Both Tumblr and Twitter lacked a strong reporting system for harassment at the time, leaving both of them open for more radical cases of internal antagonism as the community attempts to regulate itself. Tumblr posts are generally easier to find, with people having the ability to reblog and contribute to the post without the original context being lost. Twitter, conversely, is more ephemeral, with tweets being harder to locate and conversations not necessarily being linked to what they are discussing, instead often occurring outside the original piece of content. The conversational limitations of Twitter is a part of why the fan response to Zuke's harassment was more widely mediated outside of the medium in which it originally started.

The Zuke incident and Concrete controversy both further illustrate just how important racial and queer inclusive values are to the fans, coming from both the show itself and its creators, which are both held to a higher standard than shows that are not as centered around such values, like *Gravity Falls*, which had a similar fandom to that of *Steven Universe*. The show was created by Alex Hirsch, who is white, male-presenting, and in a heterosexual-presenting relationship. While the show featured some diverse characters, it was not nearly to the same extent as *Steven Universe*, and the fans were much less critical towards both show and creator. Hirsch maintained an active Twitter account while the show aired but didn't have to field the same negative reaction from his fans that Zuke and Sugar did—and still do, in Sugar's case. YouTube media and culture critic Sarah Z. made a video (2019) on this phenomenon, saying, "Time and time again

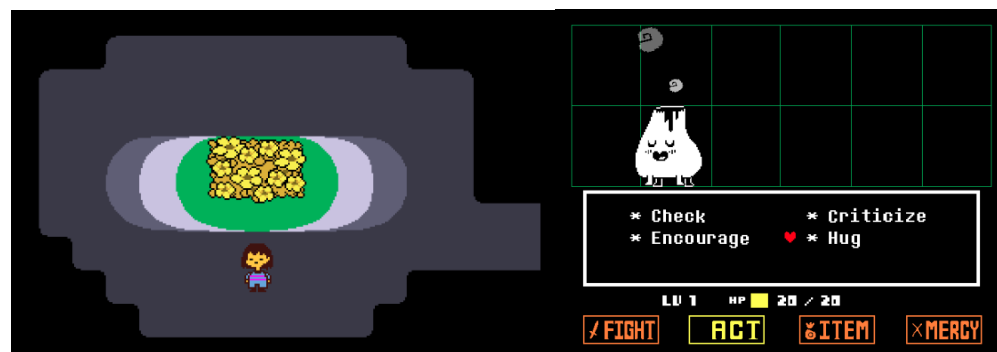
we crucify diverse creators for things that more powerful non-marginalized creators barely get any notice for...this is especially true when it comes to stories that are in some ways autobiographical.” Both Sugar and Hirsch have discussed how aspects of their life and experiences heavily influenced their respective shows, but Hirsch has not been under the same level of scrutiny, despite potentially offensive depictions of marginalized groups being present in *Gravity Falls*.

As of March 2019, Sugar has been accused of being a fascist because of how the latest season of *Steven Universe* ended. The main character, Steven, reconciled with White Diamond, the overarching villain of the series and the same fascist, planet-destroying overlord that Steven’s mother originally rebelled against. Fans saw the humanizing and redemption of White Diamond as Sugar implicitly excusing and minimizing their admittedly horrific impact. These fans are operating under the base idea of internal antagonism: intolerance cannot be tolerated in a tolerant society if it is to continue to be tolerant. White Diamond should not have been welcomed by Steven as a friend and family member because this sends the message to fans that morally abhorrent people should be befriended rather than excised.

By its nature, internal antagonism within a fandom is a fan-to-fan phenomenon. In Zamii’s situation, she was being harassed by fellow fans, who were then also met by opposition from other parts of the fandom in an attempt to negotiate and reinforce their values. In this case, however, Zuke was opened up to this antagonism despite being a creator because of their ambiguous position and lack of formality online.

CHAPTER IV: ANTAGONISM ONLINE AND OFFLINE

Originally released in fall of 2015, *Undertale* is a role-playing video game that focuses on a child's journey through a monster-riddled underground. As the player progresses through the game, they can take either a path of violence by fighting and defeating their various opponents, or a pacifistic route that involves befriending those same opponents by dodging their attacks and eventually gaining their love. Depending on the route taken, the player will receive one of three endings: the Pacifist ending, the Genocide ending, or the Neutral ending. This feature allowed players the option to subvert traditionally violent video games, instead seeking out and shaping their own path. The game features a classic, pixelated 8-bit style and fairly simple gameplay, making it accessible to a wide audience. *Undertale* quickly gained popularity after its release, gaining a robust fandom across the internet, and particularly on Tumblr.



*Figure 6 Images of Undertale gameplay*⁴⁶

Like the *Steven Universe* fandom, the *Undertale* fandom has produced a variety of physical and digital fan content, including artwork, fanfiction, and cosplays. These creations often revolve around the most popular monsters that the player meets: skeleton brothers Sans and Papyrus, and the lesbian couple Undyne and Alphys. The game presents similar themes as that of *Steven Universe*: LGBTQ+ representation and acceptance, friendship, the power of personal agency, and focusing on the future rather than the past. One fan, Aimee, described how *Undertale* contained the first positive presence she had encountered in mainstream media of a lesbian couple in the game and helped to normalize LGBTQ+ romance and clarify her pansexual identity. Faye, who currently identifies as a fan of the game, but no longer as a part of the fandom, recalls the more positive early days of the online community:

Undertale personally brought all of my friends together and made me more comfortable with myself. [In my opinion, the] fandom, personally, [is] absolute trash--just don't acknowledge that part, and the game's beautiful. If you [don't] acknowledge the fandom, like the ten million different Sanses or whatever, the base game and the original fandom for the first two weeks, that was the good stuff. Like, everyone just crying over Azriel, and people being like, "Alphys and Undine are my lesbian wives!" and it was a good time...It made me live.⁴⁷

Despite the unity over queer representation and other positive themes, the fandom rapidly devolved into being what is known as a "trash" fandom--one that is full of people and fan output that is seen as morally reprehensible or too obsessed.⁴⁸ Generally, people don't want to become a part of a trash fandom and use the term negatively, but those who are already in it instead embrace their trashiness and remain in the fandom. In the *Undertale* fandom, this manifested as pornographic and fanon (a portmanteau of fan and canon—the canon created by the fans) interpretations of the characters, including Sans

the skeleton with both his brother, Papyrus, and various versions of himself. Faye describes their personal experience with the trashier side of the fandom:

It feels like Undertale, the fandom at least, kind of lost what the main point of the game was. They're more focused on what their fanon of the characters are and focusing on ships. The official Undertale Tumblr posted, "hey, post your porn on this different tag," remember when that happened? ...no one listened to that. No one. And I remember, me and my friend would go on dares to go into the Undertale tag to see how long we could stay with it before we go too disgusted. I think I got to a part where there was incestual skeletons and a lot of Flowey things, and I was just like "phfff" [noise of displeasure].⁴⁹

Aimee adds her experience of being in the exact situation the official *Undertale* Tumblr account was worried about:

I remember looking up Sans because I really wanted to draw him at one point, when the game first came out, and I was like, you know what, Sans is a neat character and he looks like something I could draw. So I went to look up a picture, and I found stuff that I didn't want to see. And I immediately had to close out of that. That was a fun experience [said sarcastically].⁵⁰

Shipping in the *Undertale* fandom differs from that of *Steven Universe* because it is often seen as more inappropriate and non-canon. Rather than ship together two characters who are or could plausibly be in a romantic relationship, like Ruby and Sapphire or Lapidot, the *Undertale* fandom favors decidedly non-canon ships like brothers Sans and Papyrus, or iterations of the same character, such as Sans. Aimee articulates this difference:

It's like all the ships for Steven Universe are pure, like, it's just purely fluff most of the time. Like, you'll never come across porn for most characters. It's always pure "I wanna cuddle" kind of stuff for characters that they ship. And the ships are understandable kind of thing...they have realistic ships where everything that could happen makes sense.⁵

Even accounting for the drama and contention present in the *Steven Universe* fandom, it is still seen as safer and less offensive for the average fan than the *Undertale* fandom, which is more of a wild west. Despite all of this, the *Undertale* fandom still has a lot to

offer. One fan, Megan describes the “fun, dorky, wholesome stuff,” including a fanon alternate universe where Sans has to go to PTA meetings for Frisk. She goes on to say:

It’s super fun and I’m so here for that. I love all of the after stuff. And sometimes you’re there for the angst... and I’m there for that. It’s all of the little bits that weren’t explored in the game. And that’s what fandoms are for, to explore all of the avenues, those backroads.⁵¹

This fandom features an interesting case study that shows how internal antagonism reacts to an already-established community boundary, in this case how physical attacks are never okay, even in the context of extreme value offenses such as pedophilia. Rather than investigating and testing boundaries like in the other case studies, internal antagonism was used instead to just reinforce a boundary. In early 2018, Taiwanese *Undertale* fan artist Avimedes was gifted cookies that contained needles in them from a teenage fan at a convention. The artist only realized the cookies’ contents when she bit into one and pierced her tongue.⁵² It’s interesting to note that this attack ostensibly mirrors the classic legend that describes needles placed maliciously in Halloween candy to maim and kill hapless trick-or-treaters. It’s hard to say that the incident was inspired by this legend, but the parallels clearly resonated with English-speaking fans who heard about the attack.



Figure 7 Canon art of Frisk⁵³ (left) and Sans⁵⁴ (right)

Luckily, Avimedes didn't ingest one, and was able to receive medical attention for her injured tongue. She also filed a report with the police, but there is no further record of if the report led to anything.⁵⁵ This incident is much less well-documented in English than other cases of internal harassment due both to language barriers and the physical nature of the event, making it harder to trace the motivations of the aggressor. Several have speculated, however, that the motivation behind the attack was a dislike for Avimedes's art, particularly the adult art shipping Sans and Frisk, a common pairing in the fandom.⁵⁶ Frisk, the player character, is explicitly depicted as a child in the game, with a clear storyline centered around finding a family. With this in mind, ship art of Frisk with Sans



Figure 8 Fanart of Sans x Frisk in which both characters are of an ambiguous age⁵⁷

brings up concerns of pedophilia and is often considered to be problematic, though this can be complicated if Frisk is depicted as a consenting adult rather than a child. This distinction is unclear in at least some of Avimedes's art (though it is unclear which piece of art, if any, spurred the attack), making it hard to determine exactly how problematic the art is.

Although the internet allows easier access to fan content, it also eliminates the protective barriers that earlier fans appreciated. Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) discusses how writing in different genres, under pseudonyms, and limiting access to their writing allowed women *Star Trek* fans in the 80s to curb the risk associated with writing fanfiction, especially slash. Further, she notes how "Male-male friendship and homoerotic fiction, by eliminating the female character with whom the writer or reader may identify too closely, offers a greater metaphoric distance from which the writer can work out her questions" (219). In this case, Avimedes may not have intended her attacker to see the art that provoked the attack, but unlike with the fan community Bacon-Smith documents, the artist couldn't prevent the fan from seeing it. While there are tags that can denote material that may not be suited for the entire fandom, these tags are not always followed, and a determined youngster could easily find or stumble upon adult content, like Aimee did. Modern fan artists and writers also don't always have the luxury of anonymity. When a fan creator is dependent on income from their art, they have to (or want to) reveal personal details about themselves, either through attending cons, running a Patreon, or through opening an Etsy store.

This case of internal antagonism strays over the border of online fandom into the physical, with the attack having more direct physical implications in addition to the

mental and psychological ones. In contrast to the other case studies discussed, the reaction to this incident is universally negative—the consensus is that it's never okay to physically attack someone, even over pedophilic art. As Reddit user Bright-Spark said on a thread discussing the attack,

SansxFrisk may not be my cup of tea, but - and I am disappointed that this has to be said - I would never even once seriously consider harming anyone over things that actually matter, let alone something this petty and minor! ...This is not a rational response, and if someone thinks about defending their action: Please remember that this was a potential murder attempt about a drawing someone didn't like.⁵⁸

Another, planoboy8, points out the hypocrisy present between the attack and the game itself:

It's a fandom of a game that has one of the main themes of "Forgiveness, Peace, Empathy, and Mercy", and yet so many of the fandom either harasses/sends death threats to others for whatever they draw (CP [child porn] is the exception, but even then the person who draws CP should be reported, not really harassed), or whatever theories/views they have in the game. People can see the game differently, you can debate/argue with them, but you do NOT have the right to threaten them over something as trivial and hypocritical as a game which promotes peace and mercy.⁵⁹

Though they do explicitly call out pedophilia within the fandom, it is still in the form of a more measured, institutional response rather than one that should be regulated with internal antagonism. I could find no reaction to the event that supported the actions of Avimedes's aggressor.

In contrast to the Zamii and Zuke incidents, it seems like the pushback against child porn⁶⁰ would be stronger—is art that fat shames really worse than pedophilic art? It is important to consider, however, the shift in mediums that has taken place from television show to video game. While *Steven Universe* is a show whose various characters may be relatable to its viewers, *Undertale* allows characters to embody the

player character, creating an immediate and powerful identification with them. Research from Nick Yee, Jeremy N. Bailenson, and Nicolas Ducheneaut (2009) has shown that player behavior is influenced by avatar characteristics, a phenomenon known as the Proteus effect. The authors come to the conclusion that “neither the virtual nor the physical self can ever truly be liberated from the other. What we learn in one body is shared with other bodies we inhabit, whether virtual or physical” (309). With Frisk acting as the literal avatar for players, this changes the view that they have towards other characters, and the player brings these views outside of a video game context. Rather than just seeing them as interacting with Frisk, they are also interacting with the player themselves. This is compounded by Frisk’s lack of a clear gender and how the player can give a name to Frisk at the beginning and be referred to as such throughout, allowing the player to project their own traits and identity onto Frisk. With this context, Frisk’s role as the player can extend beyond the game into fanart and other content, making shipping Frisk a potential way for fans to insert themselves into the ship. Bacon-Smith documents a precedent for fans using characters as proxy in fan creation, saying “the homoerotic fiction writer can deal with personal needs that carry a high-risk lading for her in a genre that removes the woman from the direct experience about which she writes” (245-246). For some, Frisk/Sans is a way for fans to explore that pairing (in whatever way it manifests) while still maintaining a layer of separation from the potentially pedophilic implications of the art. Fan Megan discusses this idea more directly, “I’ve honestly seen WAY more self-inserts than Frisk/Sans, and a lot of times they replace Frisk, so maybe Frisk is more of a filler, or seen as like, a Link [the player character from *The Legend of Zelda* franchise (1986-2018)] where they just embody the player.”⁷ While fanfiction as a

medium facilitates stories where the reader can “self-insert,” or put themselves into the story, fan art, does not allow this same self-insertion as easily, which is perhaps why Frisk, as the player’s avatar, is such a popular pairing for Sans.

Sans, as a character, represents a unique problem for fans. As Megan notes, “Sans is the only eligible bachelor in the whole game, he’s the only single guy”⁶¹ aside from Papyrus, who is seen as too naive to be shippable. As part of their exploration of identity and sexuality, fans love to ship characters together, but with Sans, there was no clear choice on who he should be shipped with. That left three options: his brother Papyrus, the player character Frisk, or himself. Similar to the infamous case of the Once-ler from *The Lorax* (2012), a character infamously known for being shipped with increasingly absurd alternate versions of himself⁶², fans began shipping alternate universe (AU) versions of Sans together. AUs are another common fan creation, allowing fans to reposition, reinvent, and further explore characters in different situations and contexts from their source material, and shipping AU Sanses together is a further application of this tendency. To some, however, self-cest is as uninteresting as incest, which helps to explain why the Sans x Frisk ship is so popular among fans.

Another important difference in this case is the lack of a clear identity claim tied to the value transgression. With the cases of Zamii and Zuke, *Steven Universe* and its fan community were self-reportedly integral to fans’ identity formation, making the values that were being violated more personal, more easily interpreted as a direct attack on that same identity. In contrast, while *Undertale* and its fan community are still important to identity formation, the violation of pedophilia is less of a direct attack on the player’s

(who often is are not as young as Frisk is) sense of self, instead being something that most would find offensive or despicable rather than existentially threatening.

This case brings up an interesting discussion of the differences between the physical realm and the digital realm in fandoms. Conventions act as the bridge between on- and offline fandoms, enabling members of a community who only ever interact online to come together in the physical world, in a space that attempts to replicate the creative and interactive nature of the online fan community. It was in this liminal space that the needle-filled cookies were exchanged. The fandom saw the attempt to physically harm someone via the cookies as both an alarming escalation of online harassment and something to be immediately demonized. This is in contrast to the Zamii case, which was met with skepticism and victim blaming (albeit in a different but similar fandom) despite the real emotional and mental harm that Zamii experienced. The Zamii case also bridged the physical and digital when Zamii's vocal support contingent doxxed members of the vocal opposition, reporting at least one of them (who was underage) to local law enforcement for online harassment. The reaction to the doxxing followed similar paths as the original controversy, with those in the vocal opposition seeing this as a going too far, while the vocal support saw the physical consequence as just desserts for someone who caused physical harm.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

In October of 2018, prominent folklore Twitter accounts associated with #FolkloreThursday called out other Twitter users, specifically Carolyn Emerick (@Folkishright) and Trevor the Giant (@Trevorttg), for racism and misrepresenting what the folklore Twitter community was all about. #FolkloreThursday is a hashtag predominantly populated by European folklore enthusiasts and professional folklorists, who share interesting tidbits of folklore, ranging from folk tales to material culture and everything in between. It is generally inclusive but apolitical, with users seeking to highlight intriguing information rather than make a partisan statement. The hashtag's official companion website reflects this philosophy, saying, "We try to make #FolkloreThursday a friendly place where everyone feels comfortable to come to read, share and learn about folklore" ("FolkloreThursday"). Emerick, however, is known for tying folklore to racial memory and ethnonationalism, using it to justify racism, as one of her tweets illustrates: "Attention liberal cry babies who think they own #FolkloreThursday. Folklore is literally Racial Memory. Folklore cannot be severed from the #FOLK. It is inherently tied to ethno #Nationalism..."⁶³ Her Twitter account had previously been deleted twice for white supremacy, and the spread of her ideology through #FolkloreThursday inspired users to push back by blocking, reporting, and condemning her viewpoints on #FolkloreAgainstFacism. Here, users tweeted about their stance on the issue, and discouraged racist accounts from following them. One such tweet

from Folklore Film Fans (@Folklorefilmfes) said, “If you are a fascist, or support fascism or bigotry or any form of racism/sexism - don't bother following this page; you will be blocked immediately. #FolkloreAgainstFascism.”⁶⁴ Another, from The Secret Isle (Folklore and Short Stories) (@TheSecretIsle) echoed this sentiment, “If you harbour far-right beliefs and think it’s okay to be a racist, xenophobic, sexist, homophobic, fascist or bigoted in anyway, you’re not welcome here. If you think you can crash #FolkloreThursday you are wrong. We are watching you. We see you. #folkloreagainstfascism.”⁶⁵ Similar tweets can be found throughout the hashtag from other contributors to #FolkloreThursday.

This case is prime example of internal antagonism, with one vocal group reacting against a prominent member who is transgressing community values, in this case by being racist. Though this case bears similarities to the Zamii and Zuke incidents, it differs in the level of physical effect that the internal antagonism had. Despite this, this incident serves to reiterate how internal antagonism online can still positively function to regulate and enforce community values regardless of the level of physical effect. The community succeeded in pushing the primary transgressor out of using the hashtag, with Emerick instead creating the alternative hashtag #VolkloreThursday, whose retweet page explains that it “keeps the #Folk in #Folklore,” clarifying that “#FolkloreThursday is run by Marxists.”⁶⁶ Through #FolkloreAgainstFacism, the vocal group sent a message to others



Figure 9 Screenshot of @volklöre, the Twitter page for #VolkloreThursday⁶⁷

in their community about their stance on the issue, validating themselves as members who don't transgress their shared values, as well as to both the transgressors and to others who may potentially align with them. Though these tweets contain nearly the same language as some posts from the Zamii incident, they refrain from using the same level of vitriol. This may stem from the ability of the community to act through formal channels by reporting Emerick and her tweets as violating the user guidelines of Twitter; because they had the ability to report her account to an outside authority (Twitter) who could intervene and help to manage the makeup of the community, the need for harassment was not as pressing. This is in direct contrast to Tumblr, where these avenues were not

considered to be effective. The general center-left nature of the community also lends itself to a less radical view than that of fan communities, which are often more aggressively liberal. Additionally, #FolkloreThursday, while obviously important to those participating in it, is not as vital to the identity of those in the community as the people involved in the other case studies, which is a key difference.

The internal antagonism found in the case studies explored here operates under philosopher Karl Popper's paradox of tolerance, which states that "unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance" (2013). In order for a tolerant society to continue exist, it has to be allowed to suppress those members who are intolerant, lest those members gain control and remove the tolerant members (Popper 2013). As one member of the vocal opposition in the Zamii case said in a post calling out her intolerant behaviours, "THERE SHOULD BE NO TOLERANCE FOR INTOLERANCE LIKE HERS."¹⁷ In the case of #FolkloreThursday, the normally inclusive and welcoming members decided that in order to maintain the fidelity of their community, they had to actively exclude, report, and speak against Emerick and her views. For many in fan communities, where deeply held elements of personal identity are being negotiated and expressed, engaging in severe antagonism is worth preserving the tolerant nature of the fandom, even necessary to it.

Fandoms (and fandom-centered platforms such as Tumblr) are an interesting microcosm through which to analyze internal antagonism. Fandoms thrive because of their shared passion and values, and this passion extends to the conflicts they experience, turning a disagreement over values into a fandom-wide case of extreme internal antagonism. These heightened forms are ideal for analyzing the broader functions of

internal antagonism, and can be applied to smaller, less radical cases. In any community with shared values, internal antagonism is likely to arise to mediate and enforce those values. The size, severity, and consequences of this internal antagonism depend on how important the community is to its members' sense of self. In the case of #FolkloreThursday, for example, the community is important to its participants, but not a key part of their identity. As such, the reaction to a values infraction was firm but not radical. This response is also heavily dependent on the platform in which the antagonism occurs, and if members have an opportunity to excise unwanted members through official reporting or moderation.

Going the other way, looking at internal antagonism within fandoms brings to light the importance they are to their members' identity by identifying the causes of the internal antagonism, and how the fandom splits over the issues. Beyond just individual identity, fandoms are valuable to their members as an ideal society, one that is accepting of their often deviant passions and values. Further examples of extreme internal antagonism used to moderate values is seen in the Tumblr-based cases of the xkitguy and clownnames, in which the two prominent users were both baselessly accused of being pedophiles and ended up leaving the site due to the resultant harassment. In this digital age, identity and a values-based community can transcend a single fandom and instead be based around the entire platform the sub-fandoms exist on.

Regardless of how fandoms address value violations, looking at them through the lens of internal antagonism reveals just how important fandoms are to their fans in terms of identity and identity formation, especially those members who are younger. With this in mind, fandoms should be more seriously considered academically and by the public for

how influential they are to their members. Fandom member Megan, who spent her formative years involved in fandom, says that “I think it’s important to remember that there are a lot of young people in these fandoms, and so to really not allow room for growth is the opposite message of the show [*Steven Universe*]...We need to be patient. Not necessarily tolerant, but patient.”⁶⁸ In situations where the platform hosting the community supports a functional and well-known reporting and removal process (such as Twitter currently) or the presence of moderators and clear community guidelines (like on Reddit), internal antagonism can function at a less extreme and harmful degree, even at the heightened response level that fandoms experience, ensuring both that the community values can be maintained without scaring off or damaging its existing members.

An interesting contrast to these cases is that of the Bronze, the fan-run *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fansite. When issues between those involved in the show arose on the Bronze, they could be resolved more simply because of the fan-run element of the site—rather than leaving them to fall victim to extreme internal antagonism, the moderators simply removed those who were causing problems. Reddit follows a similar model, with each subreddit having moderators and pre-established rules of conduct their members must follow or risk getting banned or having their posts deleted. One risk, however, is that the subreddit’s moderators may not be active or too lax, still allowing internal antagonism to exist at a more severe level. On Twitter, a reporting and banning mechanism exists on a platform, rather than community level. This mechanism was effective in the case of #FolkloreThursday and Caorlyn Emerick, who was banned multiple times, but was less effective in the case of Jesse Zuke and their antagonists. Twitter’s system is easily manipulated by trolls or antagonists, who can intentionally

cause someone to be banned not for breaking Twitter's rules of conduct, but because they are unliked by their opponents. Similarly, there have been many documented cases of reported accounts going unpunished, despite clear violations of Twitter's rules of conduct. Tumblr lacks both effective community and platform moderation, making it a prime platform for extreme antagonism.

In order to avoid internal antagonism operating on a damaging level, an ideal fan community would have strong and fair mechanisms for moderation, like the Bronze. Another possibility is for a more robust tagging system, such as the system on fan-created and run fanfiction hosting site, Archive of Our Own (AO3).

¹ Shitposting is an intentionally low effort form of posting, with humor deriving from the perceived bad quality of the post. The posts are often related to absurdist memes, and occasionally including an apology or acknowledgement of how “shitty” the post is. While the term originated in flooding forums with useless posts intended to alienate and annoy other users, it is now used more broadly on sites like Tumblr to describe this variety of consequence-free content.

² *Rose Quartz*. Picture. Accessed March 23, 2019. https://steven-universe.fandom.com/wiki/Rose_Quartz?file=Rose%20Quartz%20-%20Weaponized.png.

³ Trey (*Steven Universe and Undertale fan*) in discussion with the author, September 8, 2018.

⁴ *Steven Universe* fans across various platforms post instrumental and vocal covers, remixes, mashups, animatics, and animated music videos featuring these songs. One such popular cover artist is Anna on Youtube (channel name Annapantsu).

⁵ Aimee (*Steven Universe and Undertale fan*) in discussion with the author, September 8, 2018.

⁶ Faye (*Steven Universe and Undertale fan*) in discussion with the author, September 8, 2018.

⁷ Doman, Megan (*Steven Universe, Undertale, and Homestuck fan*) in discussion with the author, March 24, 2019.

⁸ An example of a prominent receipt blog on Tumblr is that of sixpenceeeharms, a blog dedicated to calling out popular user sixpenceee and their “problematic” posts.

⁹ Zamii070. *Fluttershy*. Digital fanart. Accessed October 3, 2018.

<https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1035381-zamii070-harassment-controversy>.

¹⁰ Zamii070. Screenshots of Tumblr posts. Accessed October 3, 2018.

<https://imgur.com/a/USROb>.

¹¹ goldiebam. Comment. 2016.

https://www.reddit.com/r/OutOfTheLoop/comments/3q49jp/what_happened_to_zamii070/

¹² Zamii070. Digital fanart. Accessed October 3, 2018.

<https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1035386-zamii070-harassment-controversy>.

¹³ yosakois. Screenshot of a Tumblr post. Accessed October 3, 2018.

<https://imgur.com/a/USROb>.

¹⁴ matriarchalmuffin. Screenshot of a Tumblr post. Accessed October 3, 2018.

<https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1035180-zamii070-harassment-controversy>.

¹⁵ Tara. Screenshot of a Tumblr post. Accessed October 3, 2018.

<https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1036691-zamii070-harassment-controversy>.

¹⁶ GamblingDementor. Screenshot of a Tumblr post. Accessed October 3, 2018.

<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/zamii070-harassment-controversy/photos/page/4>

¹⁷ nerdyflowerpowergirl. Screenshot of a Tumblr post. Accessed October 3, 2018.

<https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1035357-zamii070-harassment-controversy>.

¹⁸ *Fuck you, tumblr!* Digital fanart. Accessed October 3, 2018.

<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/zamii070-harassment-controversy/photos/page/4>.

¹⁹ Capricornicis. *I Support Zamii*. Digital fanart. Accessed October 3, 2018.

<http://capricornicis.tumblr.com/post/132086641571/i-support-zamii>.

²⁰ Sitslove. Digital fanart. Accessed October 3, 2018.

<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/zamii070-harassment-controversy/photos>.

²¹ zamiihatearchive. Tumblr page. Accessed March 25, 2019.

<https://zamiihatearchive.tumblr.com/>.

²² ian jq. Tweet. October 25, 2015. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/zamii070-harassment-controversy/photos/page/3>

²³ Doman, Megan (*Steven Universe, Undertale, and Homestuck fan*) in discussion with the author, March 24, 2019.

²⁴ Faye (*Steven Universe and Undertale fan*) in discussion with the author, September 8, 2018.

²⁵ Doman, Megan (*Steven Universe, Undertale, and Homestuck fan*) in discussion with the author, March 24, 2019.

²⁶ Faye (*Steven Universe and Undertale fan*) in discussion with the author, September 8, 2018.

²⁷ Tara. Screenshot of a Tumblr post. Accessed October 3, 2018.

<https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1036691-zamii070-harassment-controversy>.

²⁸ Formerly known as Lauren, including when they were working on *Steven Universe*, Zuke announced that they were non-binary in October of 2016 and trans in 2018. Though

in 2016 they didn't specify which pronouns they prefer, the part of the fandom most aware of Zuke's current identity refers to them using they/them pronouns, which is what I do here. Some members of the fandom, however, still use she/her pronouns, which is reflected in some of the comments included here. Zuke's last name is Zakauskas, but shortens it to the nickname Zuke.

²⁹ Zuke, Lauren. Screenshot of Twitter thread. Accessed January 15.

<https://i.gyazo.com/9146a56fa435141e9958ab53662d4e71.png>.

³⁰ *Previous Lapis*. Digital art. Accessed January 15. https://steven-universe.fandom.com/wiki/Lapis_Lazuli?file=LookBeckyItsLapis.png.

³¹ *Previous Peridot*. Digital art. Accessed January 15. <https://steven-universe.fandom.com/wiki/Peridot?file=Peridot%20previous.png>.

³² This also applies to the other types of representation the show strives for--racial and body type.

³³ laurenzuke. Screenshot of a Tumblr post. January 25, 2017.

https://www.reddit.com/r/stevenuniverse/comments/5q71kt/lauren_zuke_on_queer_relationships_in_the_show/.

³⁴ Subzero008. Reddit comment. Accessed January 15, 2019.

https://www.reddit.com/r/stevenuniverse/comments/5q71kt/lauren_zuke_on_queer_relationships_in_the_show/.

³⁵ PrimeName. Reddit comment. Accessed January 15, 2019.

https://www.reddit.com/r/stevenuniverse/comments/5q71kt/lauren_zuke_on_queer_relationships_in_the_show/.

³⁶ Minotorro. Reddit comment. Accessed January 15, 2019.

https://www.reddit.com/r/stevenuniverse/comments/5q71kt/lauren_zuke_on_queer_relationships_in_the_show/.

³⁷ whalesharks. Tumblr post. August 8, 2016.

<http://whalesharks.tumblr.com/post/148660510574/lauren-zuke-i-am-hate-watching-your-episodes-and>.

³⁸ dlgn13. Reddit comment. Accessed January 15, 2019.

https://www.reddit.com/r/stevenuniverse/comments/4xg58j/lauren_zuke_just_deleted_her_twitter/.

³⁹ cosmogyral. Reddit comment. Accessed January 15, 2019.

https://www.reddit.com/r/stevenuniverse/comments/4xg58j/lauren_zuke_just_deleted_her_twitter/.

⁴⁰ Doman, Megan (*Steven Universe, Undertale, and Homestuck fan*) in discussion with the author, March 24, 2019.

⁴¹ Luccie-eclair. Tumblr post. May 17, 2017. <http://luccie-eclair.tumblr.com/post/160760009214/my-only-statement-about-lauren-zuke>

⁴² kantoskies. Tumblr post. Accessed March 10, 2019.

<http://kantoskies.tumblr.com/post/157676973320/dont-get-me-wrong-there-are-quite-a-few-things-i>.

⁴³ Sugar, Rebecca. Tweet. 15 July, 2017.

<https://twitter.com/rebeccasugar/status/886298820459483136?lang=en>

⁴⁴ NoxiousSludge. Reddit comment. Accessed January 15, 2019.

https://www.reddit.com/r/stevenuniverse/comments/4xg58j/lauren_zuke_just_deleted_her_twitter/.

⁴⁵ beach-city-mystery-girl. Tumblr post. October 19, 2016. <http://beach-city-mystery-girl.tumblr.com/post/152027759529/i-try-to-be-relatively-quiet-yknow-publicly>

⁴⁶ *Undertale*. Game screenshots. <https://undertale.com/about/>.

⁴⁷ Faye (*Steven Universe and Undertale fan*) in discussion with the author, September 8, 2018.

⁴⁸ Perhaps the most famous trash fandom is that of *Homestuck*, an interactive flash webcomic epic that spread decades. These fans have championed the idea that they are trash, often being the first to point out their garbage-like status among both other fandoms and regular people. One *Homestuck* fan, Megan, referred to the fandom as “The Mother of Trash.”

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Aimee (*Steven Universe and Undertale fan*) in discussion with the author, September 8, 2018.

⁵¹ Doman, Megan (*Steven Universe, Undertale, and Homestuck fan*) in discussion with the author, March 24, 2019.

⁵² Avimedes. Plurk post. Accessed October 25, 2017. <https://www.plurk.com/p/m80zjc>.

⁵³ *Frisk*. Pixel art. <https://undertale.fandom.com/wiki/Frisk?file=Frisk.png>.

⁵⁴ *Sans*. Pixel art. <https://undertale.fandom.com/wiki/Sans?file=Sansanimated.gif>.

⁵⁵ Avimedes. Plurk post. Accessed October 25, 2017. <https://www.plurk.com/p/m80zjc>.

⁵⁶ BabyCharmanderK. Accessed October 25, 2017.

https://www.reddit.com/r/Undertale/comments/6akpsc/a_fan_literally_tried_to_murder_a_fanartist_over/.

⁵⁷ ink-ami. *FRANS WEEK: d7: Valentines!* Digital fanart. [https://ink-](https://ink-ami.tumblr.com/post/170873809100/frans-week-d7-valentines-happy-valentines-day)

[ami.tumblr.com/post/170873809100/frans-week-d7-valentines-happy-valentines-day](https://ink-ami.tumblr.com/post/170873809100/frans-week-d7-valentines-happy-valentines-day).

⁵⁸ Bright-Spark. Accessed February 25, 2019.

https://www.reddit.com/r/Undertale/comments/6akpsc/a_fan_literally_tried_to_murder_a_fanartist_over/.

⁵⁹ planoboy8. Accessed February 25, 2019.

https://www.reddit.com/r/Undertale/comments/6akpsc/a_fan_literally_tried_to_murder_a_fanartist_over/.

⁶⁰ Emically, both the phrases “child porn,” “child age porn,” and “pedophilia” are used by fans who are against pedophilia to describe such art, though those making the art use tags like “Frisk x Sans sin.” Fan art containing Sans is often tagged with “glowing magic dick” and “skeleton dick.” More broadly, pornographic or sexual images containing any character across fandoms is commonly tagged with “smut,” “nsfw” (meaning “not safe for work”), “nudity,” and “sexual content.”

⁶¹ Doman, Megan (*Steven Universe, Undertale, and Homestuck fan*) in discussion with the author, March 24, 2019.

⁶² The Once-ler shipping frenzy was due to the lack of another charismatic shippable character in the film. Interestingly enough, this instance actually avoids the potential pedophilia that Sans x Frisk risks, as the other two main characters in the film are children.

⁶³ Simon Roy Hughes. Tweet. October 20, 2018.

<https://twitter.com/hashtag/FolkloreAgainstFascism?src=hash&lang=en>

⁶⁴ Folklore Film Fans. Tweet. October 29, 2018.

<https://twitter.com/FolkloreFilmFes/status/1056878930572070912>.

⁶⁵ The Sacred Isle (Folklore and Short Stories). Tweet. February 22, 2019.

<https://twitter.com/TheSacredIsle/status/1098856476595179520>.

⁶⁶ Volklore Thursday. Tweet. October 26, 2018.

<https://twitter.com/FolkishRight/status/1055910140187164672>.

⁶⁷ Volklore Thursday. *Volklore Thursday Twitter Home Page*. Screenshot.

<https://twitter.com/volklore>.

⁶⁸ Doman, Megan (*Steven Universe, Undertale, and Homestuck fan*) in discussion with the author, March 24, 2019.

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