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Problematic faves: How our morals influence our media consumption and relationships with other people.

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ABSTRACT

Social relationships with others are essential in human life and functioning. There are multiple factors that contribute to the creation of friendships such as homophily, morals, and proximity. Within the modern era, friendships have also moved into the online sphere and have created their own forms and methods of creating and maintaining these relationships. The media we consume and our interests are also a contributing factor in online relationships and communities, better known as “fandoms.” With the increase of globalization and new people and cultures interacting with each other, so has the global consciousness for inclusion and justice. Using survey research, the present study seeks to understand the connection between morals surrounding media consumption, questions of “problematic-ness” and “cancel culture,” and how it may affect the friendships we create and maintain with others. Participants were recruited through word-of-mouth and social media, and completed a self-report questionnaire regarding their interests and experiences, as well as the Moral Foundations Questionnaire, the Online Friendship Preference Questionnaire, and demographics. Results showed that online friendships and progressivism are not always a factor in ending friendships over moral disagreements in fandom. Qualitative responses shared the variety of reasons why people may or may not stay in friendships or fandoms with deemed problematic creators or celebrities such as not being in morally incongruent friendships/fandoms, not being bothered by friend’s interests, or the level of ease or difficulty in leaving fandoms or ending friendships.

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Introduction

In a modern era of technology and social media, our definitions of and experience with friendships are different than our ancestors. We are more connected than ever globally, and people are now able to share experiences, thoughts, and opinions at the tap of a finger. Proximity is now no longer a defining feature of relationship development, and aspects like shared interests carry more weight.

Friendship Formation

Homophily is the concept of humans being more drawn towards others that are similar to themselves (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Curry and Dunbar (2013) explore how people often want to surround ourselves with others who hold similar interests or personality traits to our own because it is more comfortable or allows for more conversations to create closer connections as well as influence altruism. This can be seen in things as simple as hobbies, to larger aspects of humanity such as culture and shared experiences. It is easier to develop a friendship with another person when you have something in common as a foundation. Things like having the same moral values, sense of humor, and hobbies contribute significantly to emotional closeness and altruism within relationships (Curry and Dunbar, 2013). Proximity has also been a large aspect of creating new friendships with other people. However, with the rapid innovation of modern technology, young people and adults are no longer confined to just their immediate community when creating relationships, the Internet opens up the entire world at their fingertips. Social media applications and rapid communication makes the sharing of interests and

building of rapport between people increase rapidly and friendships are able to be created without ever seeing the other person.

Another largely important part of a friendship with commonalities are the beliefs of the two parties. For some people, being friends with a person who believes different things or has a different view on the world can expand their own and create a richer friendship; but for others, this type of moral difference is a dealbreaker. Moral behavior can also help an individual socially, and help create relationships (Strauß and Bondü, 2023). We often develop our sense of right and wrong during childhood for a variety of reasons; some related to religion or family, or others innate. Another important thing about morals and relationships is that humans want to be liked and agreed with; moral stances can provide that as well as confirming someone's place in a group. People that are alike tend to interact with each other more, and this could also be creating circles where the same ideas and beliefs are just getting shared around without challenge. (Dubois and Blank, 2018). Being around like-minded individuals with similar morals and values is something that can justify a person's own beliefs while also creating a stronger connection and sense of community with others. If a person has a moral stance that is different than those in their immediate physical community or family, it can create a sense of "other-ing" or despair either from the alienation or frustration. Younger generations often make moral stances vastly different than their parents, they feel misunderstood or like they are in a hostile environment. This can lead to searching for one's community elsewhere: the Internet.

Friendship, Fans, and Fandom

Friendships created and maintained over the Internet are a newer phenomenon seen with the explosion of things like email, forums, and social media. Internet users can now open a single app and have people miles away at their fingertips who relate to their experiences and feelings.

Shabahang, Aruguete, Shim, and Mokhtari Chirani (2022) share how communication over the Internet can be beneficial for people who may struggle socially due to things like anxiety or being neurodivergent. There are even preferences in some people for online friendships over In-Real-Life friendships (IRL) (Shabahang, Aruguete, Shim, and Mokhtari Chirani, 2022). Online friendships can also be less “costing” and create longer lasting relationships due to the low level of “commitment” and “exchange” needed (Jordá, Cañedo, Bene, & Goyanes, 2021). These online communities and friendships are built around shared ideas, opinions, and hobbies that people would not otherwise have in their everyday life due to their environment.

A great example of online communities centered around those not in the same place, but with the same interests are fandoms. As Thorne and Bruner (2006) describe, “Fandom refers to a subculture of like-minded people, typified by a feeling of closeness to others with the same interest and sharing a subject-specific jargon” (p. 52). Most people have something that they enjoy, from a sports team to their favorite band or book series, these people are known as “fans.” Jenkins (2012) defines a fan as:

“... an abbreviated form of the word “fanatic,” which has its roots in the Latin word ‘fanaticus.’ In its most literal sense, ‘fanaticus’ simply meant ‘Of or belonging to the temple, a temple servant, a devotee’ but it quickly assumed more negative connotations, ‘Of persons inspired by orgiastic rites and enthusiastic frenzy’ (*Oxford Latin Dictionary*). As it evolved, the term ‘fanatic’ moved from a reference to certain excessive forms of religious belief and worship to any ‘excessive and mistaken enthusiasm,’ often evoked in criticism to opposing political beliefs, and then, more generally, to madness ‘such as might result from possession by a deity or demon’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*).” (p. 12)

Fan Affiliation

Dionísio, Leal, & Moutinho (2008) discuss how fandoms around sports can include people who may not have any talent within the game, but still love and enjoy it. Sports specifically create group affiliation and positive connections through vicarious feelings of loss and victory. Fan spaces have greatly involved over time and differ depending on the type of media the culture has sprung around. The Internet has given these fan spaces a centralized place to gather and discuss ideas or events that have occurred in that fandom. There can be blogs dedicated to giving updates about the production of a show, or threads of fans discussing what a group's best album is. Modern fan spaces are also full of creativity and expression from art pieces to carefully crafted writings about their media; or those who post jokes and start conversations, all are essential to the fan community. Thorne and Bruner (2006) explore how there are many positive emotions that come with collecting and representing a fandom through physical items and fan-to-fan interactions. Especially for those who are younger, these fan spaces can become all-consuming and something essential to their identity.

If fans feel a personal connection to a piece of media, it is easier for that media to become more important to them or feel like it is a part of their identity. In modern forms of media, the social influencer or content creator is becoming a more common form of celebrity. For younger generations, creators like YouTubers are a new form of famous person (Tolbert and Drogos, 2019). We love the things that give us enjoyment and happiness, especially if they got us through a difficult time in our life.

When considering fandoms around celebrities and real people, it is also important to acknowledge the reality of parasocial relationships, especially with the increased normalization of social media interactions. A parasocial relationship can be described in a myriad of ways, but

its simplest form, it is a social relationship where one party feels a close personal relationship with the other, while the other is not aware of their existence (Hills, 2015). This can create an intense feeling of being personal friends with somebody who does not know you, usually celebrities. Fans can feel entitled to another person, just because they support them and the content they put out into the world. This is why when these celebrities who are put on such high pedestals who have certain fans who believe them to be their personal friends do something deemed bad or “problematic”, said fans feel the pain as if they were finding it out about a close friend.

Morals and Social Media

These conversations and relationships are also seen on the Internet. People often use social media platforms to interact with friends and family, as well as content they want to consume. However, there have been concerns about the Internet creating a place where people only interact with and consume content that aligns with their beliefs and values- also known as an echo chamber (Dubois and Blank, 2018). With more media diversity, there is more exposure to things people do not agree with (Jordá, Cañedo, Bene, & Goyanes, 2021). Neubam, Cargnino, & Dvir-Gvirsman (2021) explore how political viewpoints and disagreements cause “unfriending” on social media. They found that unfriending is less common when the person making the statements or posts is someone who emotionally supports them. Political and moral differences can cause rifts within relationships and the removal or the consumption of their content.

Albeit on a smaller scale, this same phenomenon can be seen within fandoms and fan culture. These individuals are interacting with each other about the piece of media as fans, and not as two people with unique identities and experiences that influence their morals and ideas.

This can obviously depend on how much a person shares about themselves on the Internet and if the two parties are familiar with each other or not. People who use social media more and have more friends on those apps and platforms are also more likely to unfollow/friend people (Neubam, Cargnino, Winter, & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2021). With large groups of different people in one place sharing a community, when disagreements occur, there is going to be a wide variety of interpretations or emotions.

Holding expectations for creators are not always an unreasonable want for fans; however, this has also led to an increased atmosphere of “cancel culture” where everything a public figure has ever done is scrutinized under the public eye and conclusions are drawn about them. Cancel culture also invokes social consequences that can lead to economic consequences for the creator (Schott, 2023). Old tweets surface, or videos of slurs getting thrown around pop up and fans are at a crossroads of holding those they support accountable or defending them. These “canceled” creators have now almost completely isolated their audience due to their behavior and beliefs; this can also provide cultural definitions of problematic and allows a view of certain celebrities or issues that are deemed as problematic. This is a moral dilemma for many fans who have found themselves in these types of situations, especially if the event effected their own identity or beliefs.

Popular Culture and Identity

Media and media creation is not something that is created within a vacuum and is bound to be influenced by something socially (Gatson and Reid, 2012). It is hard for some fans to separate their identity from the content they love because it is relevant to their experiences or something that makes them happy. Race and entertainment have always been intertwined, especially within the United States, and it is relevant to the conversation about media and

identity (Gatson and Reid, 2012). Fandoms in online spaces are also transcultural and have people from different racial, ethnic, national, and religious backgrounds that are bringing their knowledge, creativity, and experiences into these platforms (Gray and Harrington, 2017). A fan is not just one type of person or identity, so when operating in fan spaces, a person is often going to interact with people who have different viewpoints and perspectives. This also means that events occurring in real life that effect their identity will often bleed into their content. Social issues and interactions exist within fandom spaces, it is not a zone that is free of social justice, discourse, and identity (Gatson and Reid, 2012). While there may be in-fighting and discourse within these communities, it can also be a place for “fan activism,” which is political and civic engagement done by fans who have a shared interest or goal (Jenkins, 2012). Oftentimes for minority members of these online fan communities, their experiences get minimized or completely disregarded, even if relevant to fan activity. Real life events and social justice issues crossing into fandoms have often become jokes or memes rather than its intended purpose. This creates a hostile environment for fans who are not white, straight, cisgender, etc. (Gray and Harrington, 2017). The difference in fan reactions in relation to serious issues causes extreme tension when disagreements about the creator/member of the media they are a fan of does something morally wrong.

When fans handle big and divisive situations about the thing they all love and support, it causes tensions and in-fighting. The word “toxic” is often used to describe fights within fandoms, often to paint the people bringing up genuine concerns as just “haters” rather than addressing the real issues (Gray and Harrington, 2017). Some people have no trouble putting their morals over what they love, their morals and actions will always come first; but for others, their identity has been intrinsically tied to this thing or creator and it feels painful and like an

attack on their own identity to “lose” it. Some fans are able to publicly disagree with a creator, but still support their work because they’re able to separate the art from the artist. Other fans really struggle with this, however, because they do not want to financially support a person they do not agree with morally (Schott, 2023). These differences can lead to issues in fandom reaction and the addressing of an issue.

Some people use social media solely for entertainment and do not want to see anything too “serious” and can end up trivializing situations or experiences by other fans. This difference in reactions can also cause tension between those in the fandom themselves, and not just between the fan and the creator. In a study done by Jordá, Cañedo, Bene, & Goyanes (2021), unfollowing was a common response when participants saw something they did not like that another person posted, as well as muting, reporting, or blocking. What happens when the person who had been your friend that you met through fandom suddenly supports somebody hateful and grossly violates your own values? Do you have a conversation and try to explain how you feel and why what happened was wrong? Or do you go through the difficult process of ending a relationship with another person over a moral disagreement?

The uncomfortable and disappointed feeling associated with finding out somebody you believe to be a friend or love has done something wrong or against your morals is not limited to celebrities and fan cultures. It never feels good to find out somebody you care for holds a belief or acts in a way wholly against what you believe is right morally. This can be seen in politics and conversations surrounding it. Especially in countries like the United State of America, political beliefs are almost directly tied to your morals as a individual. Some people will not even entertain friendships with those of a different political party or alignment. The 2016 American Presidential election saw a new fervor and intensity to American politics due to the polarizing

candidates and their platforms. There are endless stories of people who do not speak to lifelong friends and family due to who they voted for and supported. It was a moral stance they would not concede on, even with people they may have loved and been surrounded by their entire life.

Current Research

This research looks at whether moral disagreements over fandom can have an impact on the creation of or ending of friendships. Relationships are essential, but moral development and beliefs are also important on a personal and social level. Which is more important in the end, and what factors are involved? To look at this phenomenon more closely, a survey was created with questions related to the participants own experiences within fan spaces, their friendships, and experiences with divisive creator actions or disagreements with others. Two standardized questionnaires-- the Morality Foundations Questionnaire (Graham, et. al, 2011) and Online Friendship Preference Questionnaire (Shabahang, Aruguete, Shim, & Chirani, 2022) were also used to assess participant level of progressivism and preference for online friendships.

Methods

Demographics

To examine whether or not moral disagreements over fandom can have an impact on friendships, I created an online survey using Penn State Qualtrics and recruited via social media and messaging to fellow students (refer to full survey and questions in Appendix A). In order to be eligible, participants needed to be above the age of 18 and consume at least some form of media. The study and survey were approved by the Penn State Institutional Review Board.

A total of 70 people filled out the survey, but after conducting data cleaning (removing those who did not answer all questions, those who did not fit eligibility, etc.) there were a total of 38 respondents; the median age was 20, 82% were students, and 58% had completed at least some college. The racial makeup was reported as 34.2% White/Caucasian, 26.3% Hispanic/Latino/a, 18.4% East Asian, 7.9% South Asian, 5.3% Black/African-American, 2.6% Southeast Asian, and 2.6% Biracial. The gender makeup was reported as 73.7% women, 15.8% men, 5.3% non-binary, and 2.6% agender. The sexual orientation makeup was reported as 52.5% heterosexual/straight, 23.7% bisexual, 5.3% homosexual/gay/lesbian, 5.3% pansexual, 5.3% queer, and 2.6% unlabeled.

Measures

The Morality Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ) (Graham, et. el, 2011) can be used to quantify the moral foundations of persons based on cross-cultural similarities. The ten “themes” in this questionnaire are: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, purity, equality, proportionality, liberty, owner, and ownership (Graham, et.al, 2011). In the first part of the questionnaire, participants report how relevant factors are- such as whether or not a person suffered

emotionally- when they make a decision and scale it on a 5-point scale from “not at all relevant” (0) to “extremely relevant” (5). In the second half, participants report how much they agree with a statement, such as “compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue,” and scale it on a 5-point scale from strongly disagree (0) to “strongly agree” (5). The full scale is 30 questions. Due to considerations of the time it would take to answer other questions in the survey, I chose to use the 20-question scale for ease of participants and to increase the likelihood of them taking the time to complete the survey. This scale also only measures harm, fairness, ingroup, authority, and purity. To begin interpreting, you first have to find the mean response of each question that fits under a certain theme to find the average of that category. Once you have the means of each theme, you can calculate what is known as the “progressivism score” by finding the mean of the averages of harm and fairness, and then subtracting the mean of the averages of ingroup, authority, and purity.

The Online Friendship Preference Questionnaire (OFPQ) (Shabahang, Aruguete, Shim, & Chirani, 2022) can be used to quantify the degree of which people have a preference for friendships over the Internet as opposed to friendships in real life. This questionnaire asks participants to rank their agreement with statements such as “I prefer online friends to real world friends” on a scale from 1-5, 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree.” None of the questions need recoding, so the higher a participant scores on the scale, the more likely they are to prefer online friendships to in real life friendships.

In addition to the two scales used, I also asked my own set of questions related to media, consumption, friendships, and opinions. These questions included both multiple choice scales and open response. To start, I asked participants to list things like what kind of media they consume, how they consume it, how often are they consuming it, how much money are they

spending, as well as how connected they feel to it so I could get an idea of the level of commitment participants were coming into the survey with to their interest(s). I then began to ask questions related to “problematic-ness” and “cancel culture” and how participants not only defined it, but how they felt about it and their own experience either witnessing or participating in it. The last set of my questions were regarding their own personal experience with friendship, morality, and fandom. I asked questions like if they have ever left a fandom based on the actions of a creator or if they have ever ended a friendship due to differing moral opinions in fandom. I believe that these questions, along with the previously described scales, were able to provide more details to assist in answering my research question.

Results

What will be covered in the first sections are the quantitative tests and results. I used the quantitative scales and questions to compare the correlations or frequencies of participant responses in ways that were consistent with the questions I was seeking to answer. There were a variety of methods used depending on the scale or question.

Connection to Identity

One of the most relevant questions about morality, friendship, and media asked in the survey was about how connected participants felt to their favorite piece of popular culture (scaled from “I enjoy it, but it is not a part of my identity” to “my interest(s) is a huge part of my identity or how I understand it). Based on these responses, using crosstabs in Qualtrics, I compared the strength of a participant’s connection of their favorite popular culture with whether they would end a friendship over moral disagreements in fandom, as well as how much money they spent (see Table 1). The majority of responses by those who felt their interest(s) were a huge part of their identity spent more than \$500 dollars in the past year, while those who maybe just love or feel their interest reflect their identity tended to spend money in the lower ranges.

Level of interest and connection seems to be relevant in money spent. This makes sense when considering how money spent can feel like an “investment” in an interest for participants. It also shows how much participants care about their interest(s) when they are spending hundreds of dollars, as opposed to someone who may be a more casual fan or enjoyer of a piece of popular culture.

Table 1. Connection to identity in relation to how much money they spent on their interest(s).

Connection to interest(s)	Money spent on interest(s) within the past year					
	\$1-\$100	\$100-\$200	\$200-\$300	\$300-\$400	\$400-\$500	>\$500
I enjoy it, but it is not a part of my identity	1	2	1	0	0	0
I believe I have a connection to it	2	3	1	0	0	2
I love my interest(s) and believe it reflects my identity	2	3	7	2	1	3
My interest(s) is a huge part of my identity or how I understand it	1	0	2	0	0	8

I then explored the ways in which popular culture interests are related to whether someone would be friends with somebody who was a fan of something/someone they deemed problematic. I did this by using crosstabs within Qualtrics to compare participant responses to their connection with their interest(s) and their yes or no answer to whether they would be friends with a person who was a fan of something/someone they deemed problematic (see Table 2). In response to the question of if a participant would be friends with somebody who a fan of something/someone was they deemed problematic, 59% reported that they would be friends with that person, regardless of connection to interest(s). For the other 41%, they reported that they would not be friends with that person. It does not appear that a connection to interest(s) is very relevant in this scenario, but morals may be more applicable.

Table 2. Connection to interest(s) in relation to if a participant would be friends with somebody who was a fan of something/someone they deemed problematic.

Connection to interest(s)	Would you be friends with somebody who was a fan of something/someone you deemed problematic?	
	Yes	No
I enjoy it, but it is not a part of my identity	4	3
I believe I have a connection to it	3	3
I love my interest(s) and believe it reflects my identity	12	3
My interest(s) is a huge part of my identity or how I understand it	3	6

Of the responses related to connection to identity, it appears that it is relevant in regard to financial commitment or spending on interest(s), but does not always have an impact on whether people will be friends with those who have morally incongruent interests with themselves. This represents the positive relationship between spending in fandom and how connected fans feel. On the other hand, it also shows that this connection to interest(s) is not always the most relevant aspect of friendship creation or commitment.

Moral Foundations Questionnaire

One of the scales used in this survey was the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ), which measures progressivism in participants (Graham, et. al, 2011). To use the results, I compared participants' progressivism to whether they would be friends with somebody who was a fan of something/someone they deemed problematic as well as if participants believed a person could be "problematic" or not. To accomplish this, I conducted bivariate regression analyses to test the strength of the two variables.

To test the relationship between a participant's progressivism score from the MFQ and their yes or no answer to whether they would be friends with someone who was a fan of something/someone they deemed problematic, I first recoded the values of their yes/no answers to a numerical 1 and 0, respectively. I then conducted a bivariate regression to yield results of $r = 0.29$ and a p-value of 0.08. This shows a positive, weak correlation and an insignificant p-value. What this means is that there is a weak relationship between a participant's progressivism score and if they would end a friendship over a fandom-related moral disagreement; if participants had a higher progressivism score, there was a likelihood that they would be friends with somebody who was a fan of something/someone they deemed problematic. This could potentially be explained by those who are more progressive being more willing to be around those different than them or from different backgrounds.

To test the relationship between a participant's progressivism score from the MFQ and their belief in whether a person can be "problematic" or not, I first recoded the values of their yes/no answers to a numerical 1 and 0, respectively. I then conducted a bivariate regression to yield results of $r = 0.25$ and a p-value of 0.12. This shows a positive, weak correlation and an insignificant p-value. In other words, people who scored higher on the progressivism scale had a likelihood of believing that people can be problematic. This could be explained by those who are more progressive having higher social standards for celebrities and popular media, and also being more social justice oriented.

Online vs. Real Life Relationships

One of the scales used in this survey was the Online Friendship Preference Questionnaire (OFPQ) (Shabahang, Aruguete, Shim, & Chirani, 2022). I used the OFPQ to assess whether or not a participant would be friends with somebody who was a fan of something/someone they

deemed problematic and to see if preference for online friendships was relevant in the ease of ending them. To accomplish this, I conducted a bivariate regression analysis to test the strength of the two variables.

To test the relationship between a participant's OFPQ score and whether they would be friends with somebody or not, I first recoded the values of their yes/no answers to a numerical 1 and 0, respectively. I then conducted a bivariate regression to yield results of $r = -0.18$ and a p-value of 0.28. This shows a negative, weak correlation and an insignificant p-value. This suggests that the lower participants score on the OFPQ, the higher their chances of being friends with somebody who was a fan of something/someone they deemed problematic. This could be explained by a difficulty in ending real life relationships as opposed to over the Internet.

Online vs. In Real Life (IRL) Confrontation

In addition to the OFPQ, I used two scales I created in order to record the level of confrontation of friends over the Internet vs in real life. The two self-made scales used in this survey were related to the confrontation of friends when met with conversations/posts they have made, and how participants interacted in those situations, either IRL or over the Internet. Over the Internet, participants reported not caring as much about other people's interests and what they are posting about in relation to media they deem problematic. Many participants also noted that they would see these posts and feel upset, but either not say anything, or just unfollow without having a conversation (See Table 3). This could potentially relate to a friend's interest not being relevant for participants, or the acceptance of those different from them.

Table 3. Participant's response to when they see a person they have a relationship with post about or enjoy a piece of media they deem problematic.

Where do you fall on this scale when seeing someone you have a relationship with post about or enjoy a type of media you find "problematic?"	
I keep scrolling, someone else's interests don't bother me	12
I see it and feel upset, but don't do or say anything	11
I see it and quietly mute/unfollow	10
I reach out and try and start a conversation	4
I block the person and don't contact them again	1

I took the same questions used for the online scale, and slightly reworded them to make sense in a real-life scenario. I asked participants the same question- this time just about their reactions in person (See table 4). There were still many participants who answered that their friend's interest(s) do not bother them, but what was interesting here was that participants were more willing to start a conversation IRL. The willingness to try and "save" these relationships through conversation could be because they do not want their friends to support media they find problematic, or they are just more willing to fight for those relationships IRL as opposed to on the Internet. Consistently participants report not being bothered by other people's interests, but in discussions of confrontations in real life, more participants are willing to confront the other person about the interest rather than just staying quiet or unfollowing like they reported being more willing to do over the Internet.

Table 4. Participant’s response to when they see a person they have a relationship with in-person talk about or enjoy a piece of media they deem problematic.

Where do you fall on this scale when seeing someone you have a relationship with in-person talk about or enjoy a type of media you find “problematic?”	
I don’t care, someone else’s interests don’t bother me	10
I feel upset, but don’t say anything	4
I don’t say anything, but quietly distance myself from them	9
I try to politely start a conversation	14
I don’t talk to that person ever again	1

Cancel Culture

In addition to the quantitative responses I received on the survey, I asked open response questions regarding different themes; 38 participants answered these questions. I first asked about cancel culture. I analyzed these responses by reading through each answer and sorting based on common themes reported by participants. In the question prompting participants to share their opinions on cancel culture, I described it as “social/economic consequences for deemed immoral behavior/beliefs.” Several themes emerged. I have included responses that summarize common themes seen in the answers to the questions:

Personal Consequences for Person Being Cancelled

The first theme that emerged was personal consequences for being cancelled. Several people noted that they believed cancel culture was often taken too far. For example, one participant shared that, “Sometimes people go [too] hard on creators and forget that they’re human. I understand there are consequences with [people’s] actions but sometimes viewers go

too much with death threats and don't realize how that affects a creator's life and mental health" (21-year-old Hispanic/Latina straight woman). This is showing that people are often aware of the inappropriate lengths that some of the consequences cancel culture creates. There is a focus on the creator as a person and not as much about their actions. This could be due to an increased focus on mental health within society or the intensity of backlash a creator is getting, such as the example used by the participant of death threats.

Bandwagoning and Ambiguity

Another theme noted by participants in the case of cancel culture was that not all accusations or hate come from a place of truth. Fans not being able to trust the reasoning why a creator may be getting canceled can make them more sympathetic to the hate a person may be receiving if they believe it is unfounded. Participants share that they see many people just jumping on a bandwagon of hate towards a person rather than finding the facts of a situation, which sometimes come to light after the fact:

I think cancel culture is terrible. In most cases that I've seen it been used it usually gets taken back as people prematurely call for someone/something to get cancelled without having all the details. The masses having that power with the amount of insufficient evidence is appalling. A lot of sources for reasons why someone is being pushed to be cancelled would be a screenshot of something someone else said, but that someone else is just a random online person. That's not a valid factual source. Cancel culture can severely impact someone's income and ruin their reputation just on the accusations alone. Most situations are not just black and white either. They're usually different shades of gray. Unless someone is explicitly breaking the laws, what gives us the right to be the one

voice that determines their moral compass and their future. It's okay to stop supporting in a financial sense as that's a personal choice but cancel culture not only attacks the person being cancelled but anyone who doesn't hop on the 'yes let's cancel the[m]!' [t]rain also gets a lot of hate and slander. O[f] course there are instances in which it is correctly applied but most of the time it is not (28-year-old East Asian straight woman).

This illustrates an interesting perspective on cancel culture that discusses the groupthink and lack of education in deemed problematic situations. Some individuals may be more likely to take whatever they see on the Internet at face value rather than doing their own research, and it can lead to serious cases of cancel culture where there are social and economic consequences. Not all situations are black or white or have clear answers as to who is in the wrong, but sometimes all people care about is jumping into the conversation regardless.

Severity and Context

Another theme seen in participant responses was that sometimes cancelling a person is not an unreasonable thing to do. In a modern age, this can be seen as a way of holding a person accountable outside of the law. Participants note that sometimes these celebrities do need to have social consequences for actions, especially if they are continuously harmful to other people or communities:

I think it depends on the context and the issue. 'Cancelling' someone after they've been convicted of a crime (especially a sexual crime or a crime involving children), I feel is reasonable. 'Cancelling' someone after continued problematic/immoral actions, and them refusing to be educated/educate themselves, and refusing to apologise for their actions, to me, seems reasonable. However, cancel culture itself can be, and often is, inherently

toxic, with people being ‘cancelled’, sometimes for things that are out of their control (20-year-old White aromantic/sexual agender participant).

What this shows is that while there may be times the culture around cancelling people is dangerous and out of hand, there are instances where cancel culture can be an appropriate tool. Overall, participants displayed a variety of opinions on cancel culture that ranged from it being dangerous and inappropriate, to something that is valid in certain situations. While there was no consensus from the group, I believe the responses illustrate how differently people feel regarding the topic and the reoccurring themes within the conversations such as fandom toxicity, hate being too intense or uncalled for, bandwagoning, and how sometimes it may be a good thing.

Moral Disagreements with Friends over Fandom

Participants reported themes like how they describe “problematic,” opinions on cancel culture, and their own personal experiences with leaving fandoms/friendships based on morality. Participants were able to be primed with figures they deem problematic and their own definitions of the word such as, “In my opinion someone is problematic when they hold bigoted views toward a certain marginalized group” (20-year-old White lesbian) and, “Creators who are racist, sexist, and/or often stir up drama with others. Ex: Andrew Tate, Shane Dawson, Dream, etc.” (19-year-old Hispanic/Latina aromantic/asexual woman).

This helped me understand the point of view participants were in when coming into this survey and sharing their responses and experiences. It was interesting to me that even if participants had a definition or understanding of “problematic-ness,” that it did not always matter in relationships with others. It appeared to be a scale of those who felt that the interest(s) of their friends had nothing to do with their friendship, to those who would end friendships over fandom or moral disagreements regarding interest(s).

The main research question in this project was regarding if participants would be friends with people they had moral disagreements within a fandom. To address this, I asked two open-ended questions (“Would you be friends with a person who was a fan of something or someone you deem problematic?” and “Have you ever ended a friendship or fought over a moral disagreement regarding an issue in fandom? Why? Was there any reconciliation after?”). These questions were open-ended so participants could share as much as they felt comfortable with, and so I could see differences or similarities in their experiences. I have included common responses to summarize noted themes in the following sections.

Friendship as Separate from Fandom

A very common theme seen in responses from participants was that fandom and friendship should be kept separate. What friends are consuming is seemingly not relevant for some of the participants and some even share that it is not even a factor when creating friendships. For example, an 18-year-old White straight woman participant shared, “You shouldn’t dictate a friendship based off fandom.” This could be because for some people, those moral guidelines are not as salient or important to them within friendships. Fandom and interests could also be seen as less important to people, if it is something that they do not find as essential to themselves and their identity, then it seems it is also not as relevant for them within friendships.

Participants Are Not Experiencing Morally Incongruent Friendships

Another theme in this category of response is that participants are not in morally incongruent friendships originally. Participants reported that they would never end a friendship over fandom moral disagreements because they do not create friendships with those who believe differently in the first place, “No. Never gotten that deep. Or such people aren’t friends in the

first place.” (21-year-old South Asian straight man). The idea that fandom is something separate or not as serious as relationships with others can be seen here in this example, as well as illustrating that participants often felt they were not friends with those who shared different moral values which is consistent with the research. For example, another participant shared that, “[I] tend to not associate myself with people who hold different morals, simply because my morals represent basic human rights. [S]upport someone that [I] disagree with means that they’re support someone who doesn’t support basic human rights” (21-year-old Hispanic/Latina bisexual woman).

In a similar vein, some participants explained how they are comfortable having disagreements or conversations with friends. It was a common idea that friendships are not perfect and there may be times where friends disagree, but in a healthy relationship this will not be the end. This could be explained by a mindset that comes with increased age or maturity, or again, a focus on the person rather than their interest(s). For example, a 28-year-old East Asian straight woman shared that:

Yes. People get defensive over things they care about. I haven’t specifically ended a friendship due to it, if a friendship ended with someone I disagree with like that it’s mostly because there are a lot of other issues that we have other than that and it’s just one of the many issues. But disagreeing is normal in long term friendships at times. As long as we’re both open to having an honest conversation about it and are willing to listen to each side’s facts and change our opinion based on said presented facts then it’s a healthy friendship that I’m willing to reconcile and continue pursuing.

By saying that disagreeing is normal and there are probably other factors effecting an argument like this in a friendship, this participant implies that conversations about differences or

disagreements related to fandom are not always black and white morally. It also suggests that there is a potential common ground to be found through conversation and honesty that can lead to the friendship continuing regardless of the original situation. This can be parallel to the idea of talking things out after a fight or disagreement normally, but also in the context of fandom and interests.

Dependent on the Situation, Person, and Context

One of the last themes I noted from this section were responses from participants that did not land on either end. Participants reported that each situation was different, and their responses would vary depending on the situation, person, and context. For example, a 20-year-old White queer woman shared that, “Depends to what level the thing is problematic and how into the person is/do they defend the problematic thing” in response to the question of if they would be friends with somebody who was a fan of something they deemed problematic. This could be explained by people more willing to extend grace to friends even if it is against their morals, or that not every situation is black or white and there is a degree that their moral incongruence can stretch in order to keep friendships.

Discussion and Conclusions

Summary of Quantitative Findings

While the quantitative results regarding Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ) progressivism scores and Online Friendship Preference Questionnaire (OFPQ) means were not significant in relation to ending friendships, I believe that they still provide another perspective on the question and topic. Since the relationship between a participant's progressivism score and whether they would end a friendship of fandom moral disagreements were not significant, I believe it illustrates the idea that maybe progressivism is not a relevant factor when it comes to this discussion, and that committing to or ending a friendship has more strength in other factors. When tying back to the study done by Neubam, Cargnino, & Dvir-Gvirsman (2021) regarding unfriending on social media due to political opinions, it seems progressivism has higher stakes in other moral decisions such as political affiliation rather than fandom. I do believe that their finding of participants struggling to unfriend people the stronger emotional support said person provides for them is still relevant in this case when considering the many open-ended responses from this study's participants sharing how friendship is more important or relevant (Neubam, Cargnino, & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2021).

Regarding results from the OFPQ, I had originally hypothesized that the larger the preference for online friendships, the easier time participants would have ending those friendships over moral disagreements. However, what the results yielded was that participants did not have this preference in the first place, and in fact the lower they scored on the OFPQ, the more likely they were to be friends with somebody who was a fan of something/someone they deemed problematic (these results were weakly correlated with an insignificant p-value). I

understand this as participants are not creating or committing to as many online friendships as they are in-real life (IRL) ones, and that adds to the difficulty of ending IRL friendships. This finding also supports the results of the scale I provides regarding online confrontation (see Tables 3 and 4). Participants are more willing to start conversations and work through disagreements IRL and I believe that, coupled with the fact this they had a lower preference for online friendships, could be an explanation. I also believe that this assists in being able to point research specifically back at IRL friendships as opposed to focusing on online ones or trying to compare both.

Summary of Qualitative Findings

The open-ended responses from participants pointed to relevant conversations and answers regarding my research question about whether morals have an effect in the ending of friendships over deemed problematic behavior or support within fandoms. Responses from participants, particularly when answering the question of “would you be friends with somebody who was a fan of something/someone you deem problematic?” illustrated the idea of homophily and how we tend to create and attract relationships of those similar to us (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Many participants felt as though they would not be in the situations described because of how they create connections with others and the people they have in their lives that reflect their own beliefs and values. However, homophily was not observed as strongly when applied to participants leaving fandoms as a whole due to moral disagreements with a creator. This could be due to a larger amount of people who disagree morally or the fact that there might not be personal relationships in those spaces, but whether a person leaves a fandom seems more contingent on the connection to interest rather than other fans. This also ties back to the idea of commitment to an interest, and how that intersects with how connected to your

identity you feel your interest is. When considering how those who felt their interest was a part of how they understood their identity spent more money on said interest, it emphasizes how there are tangible ways people commit themselves to their interest that does not necessarily involve others (see Table 1).

A common theme throughout the question of leaving fandom based on deemed creator problematic behavior was the level of difficulty. It illustrates this idea that for some, close connection or nostalgia to a piece of media can make it extremely difficult to leave a fandom or denounce the work, even if your personal moral code does not agree with it. This is consistent with literature about fandom, specifically regarding fan unrest in fandoms like *Harry Potter*. Fans are coming into the spaces with different multicultural backgrounds and values, and it can be a place to grow and learn, but also to be exposed to ideas and posts morally incongruent to your own.

Overall, there seems to be a wide variety of ideas and thoughts regarding this topic that can range from not having morally incongruent friends in the first place, to not caring about other people's interests, to really caring and taking note of what you and your friends enjoy as a way to stay consistent with your values. The responses here in this survey seem to be consistent with previous research and relate multiple factors for why people may interact with fandom, friendships, and morality differently. It also provides additional insights as to why certain measures may not be as relevant in the moment, and different ways to analyze and discuss this topic moving forward.

I do believe that there are aspects that could be done differently for future research in this phenomenon within fandoms and the development of friendships. In the future I would want to see responses to this on a larger scale with more participants from a variety of backgrounds and

experiences, both in and outside of fandom. After using quantitative scales such as the MFQ and OFPQ, I think the difference in responses from participants lends itself to more qualitatively focused research, and more time would probably be spent hearing from those taking the survey about personal experiences and beliefs. While I originally hypothesized that level of preference for online friends would be relevant in the ease of ending friendships due to the lack of physical engagement, the participants frequently scored low and online friendships or preferences were not as prevalent. I also believe that the MFQ was maybe too broad in understanding what values people have around fandom and media, and there are more important morality factors to participants in this specific case.

In the future, a more specific, focused, and qualitative survey could be launched to receive more information about personal experiences and reasoning as to why fans may be affected by deemed immoral behavior by creators and how it interacts with relationships with others. Both are increasingly important aspects in modern culture and should continue to be examined closely.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

- Eligibility

1. Are you over the age of 18? (yes/no)
2. Do you regularly consume forms of popular culture? (watching TV, listening to music, going to the movies, etc.) (yes/no)

- Fandom Involvement Questions

1. In no particular order, list your three favorite pieces of media. (artist, book, movie, sports team, etc.)
2. What type of media do you participate in fan culture for? (what do you make posts about, go to live events for, consume content about)
 - Television
 - Movie
 - Video Game
 - Book
 - Musical artist
 - Sports Team
 - Youtuber/Streamer
 - Actor
 - Other (list)
3. Do you post or create content related to your fandom? (write, art, post theories, etc.) (yes/no)

4. How often are you participating in fan spaces? (scrolling, interacting with other fans, going through tags, etc.)
 - Likert Scale from “Not at all” to “Every day, multiple times a day”
 5. What social media platform do you most often use to engage with your fandom?
 - Instagram
 - Twitter
 - Tumblr
 - Reddit
 - Facebook
 - Other (list)
- **Connection to Interests (“Favorite” as mentioned in question 1)**
1. How connected to your (favorite) interest do you feel? (Likert scale)
 - Likert Scale from “I enjoy it, but it is not a part of my identity” to “My interest is a huge part of my identity or how I understand it”
 2. Have you spent money on your interest? (Merchandise, live show tickets, etc.).
(yes/no)
 3. If yes to the previous question, about how much have you spent within the past year?
 4. If at all, in what ways does your personal identity affect how you interact in fan communities? (race, sexuality, nationality, etc.)(open ended)
 5. Do you feel your interest reflects aligns with your values? Why or why not?

- **Morals and Fandom**

1. Are there certain creators or pieces of media you deem “problematic”? Why or why not?
2. If yes to the previous question, what is problematic about them?
3. What is your opinion on “cancel culture”?
4. Morality Scale
 - Part 1: Scale (1-5, not relevant-extremely relevant when considering whether something is right or wrong)
 - Whether or not someone suffered emotionally
 - Whether or not some people were treated differently than others
 - Whether or not someone’s action showed love for his or her country
 - Whether or not someone showed a lack of respect for authority
 - Whether or not someone violated standards of purity and decency
 - Whether or not someone was good at math
 - Whether or not someone cared for someone weak or vulnerable
 - Whether or not someone acted unfairly
 - Whether or not someone did something to betray his or her group
 - Whether or not someone conformed to the traditions of society
 - Whether or not someone did something disgusting
 - Part 2: Scale (1-5, strongly disagree-strongly agree)
 - Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue.
 - When the government makes laws, the number one principle should be ensuring that everyone is treated fairly.

- I am proud of my country's history.
- Respect for authority is something all children need to learn.
- People should not do things that are disgusting, even if no one is harmed.
- It is better to do good than to do bad.
- One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal.
- Justice is the most important requirement for a society.
- People should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong.
- Men and women each have different roles to play in society.
- I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural.

- **Friendship & Fandom**

1. Would you be friends with a person who was a fan of something or someone you deemed problematic? Why or why not?
2. If you have left a fandom space due to moral disagreements with other fans, or the actions of the creator, what happened? Did you find it easy or difficult?
3. Have you ever ended a friendship or fought over a moral disagreement regarding an issue in fandom? Why? Was there any reconciliation after?
4. Where do you fall on this scale when seeing someone you have a relationship with post about or enjoy a type of media you find "problematic"?
 - I keep scrolling, someone else's interests don't bother me.
 - I see it and feel upset, but I don't do or say anything.
 - I see it and quietly mute/unfollow.

- I reach out and try to start a conversation.
- I block the person and don't contact them again.
- Other (explain)

5. Where do you fall on this scale when seeing someone you have a relationship with talk about or enjoy in person a type of media you find "problematic"?

- I don't care, someone else's interests don't bother me.
- I feel upset, but I don't say anything.
- I don't say anything, but quietly distance myself from them.
- I try to politely start a conversation.
- I don't talk to that person ever again.
- Other (explain)

- **Online vs Irl Friendships**

1. How do you interact with your friends?

- Likert scale from "Internet only" to "In real life only"

2. Online Friendship Preference Questionnaire (1-5, strongly disagree-strongly agree)

- I prefer online friends to real world friends.
- I would rather search for a friend on the Internet than in the real world.
- I count more on my online friends than real friends.
- If I have something important to say, I'm more likely to tell online friends than real-world friends.
- My online friendships are warmer than my real-world friendships.
- I enjoy spending time with my online friends more than friends in real life.

- I feel more intimate with my online friends than I do with my friends in real life.
- I feel closer to my online friends than my friends in real life.
- My online friendships tend to be deeper than friendships in the real world.
- I believe online friends can more truly be friends than real-life friends.
- I feel more comfortable expressing myself to online friends compared to real-world friends.
- I prefer to pursue friendships via the internet instead of face-to-face interaction.

- **Demographics**

1. Age (18+)
2. Race
3. Gender
4. Sexuality
5. Religion
6. Occupation
7. Education