

# “Coming Out Okay”: Community Narratives for LGBTQ Identity Recovery Work

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Online communities provide support for those who are vulnerable, such as LGBTQ people while coming out. Research shows that social support and personal narrative construction are important when recovering from personal crises and traumatic events. As an online community focused on writing fanfiction and also consisting of a large number of LGBTQ members, transformative fandom provides an opportunity to examine the relationship between support, crisis, and narrative. Through an interview study with 31 LGBTQ fanfiction authors, our findings mirror Herman’s model of trauma recovery: these spaces self-organize to support recovery work through constructing “community narratives” that help LGBTQ people establish safety when exploring their identity and build LGBTQ support structures without publicly outing themselves before they are ready, challenge stereotypes, and support others through reshaping existing media that perpetuate inaccurate or harmful LGBTQ narratives. These online communities embody “selective visibility”—that is, though not specifically designed as support structures for identity work and recovery, their design allows people to selectively find and create communities of support for stigmatized issues that they might be unable to safely seek out in other spaces. Based on lessons learned, we generate insights that can inform the design of safe support spaces online.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing**; • **Social and professional topics** → **Sexual orientation**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: LGBTQ, fandom, fanfiction, visibility, trauma and recovery

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Coming out as part of the LGBTQ community can be a relief, anxiety-inducing, or even dangerous, depending on a person’s circumstances. A non-binary lesbian identified the start of their coming out process: “I realized I was definitely gay and couldn’t tell anybody...Well, I told a teacher.” This teacher at their Catholic high school replied it was fine to be gay as long as they told no one else

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and never “acted like it was an okay thing.” While there have been great strides toward achieving equality for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) people, stories like the one above are ubiquitous. Around the same time that this person (P9 in our participant list) came out, they also started “lurking” on LiveJournal in a fanfiction community, a space devoted to writing stories based on popular books, television shows, and other media. Within that community, P9 read stories about queer women and interacted with other LGBTQ people—something they could not do at school, at home, or anywhere else in their town. The only place safe enough to talk about being gay was online—and for P9, in fandom.

In this paper, we focus on the “coming out” experience of LGBTQ-identified people, particularly members of fan communities in which they can explore different narratives of what it means to be LGBTQ. Coming out, or internally processing and publicly disclosing an LGBTQ identity [60, 83], is one type of life change through which people engage in identity work [100], the process through which people re-craft their sense of self [55, 68]. Coming out is a unique case to explore identity work in which someone articulates, to themselves and the outside world, a part of their identity they had previously concealed or been unable to recognize. Because coming out can involve disapproval or estrangement from family and friends as well as broader society [61], it can also be a traumatic, isolating experience for those disconnected from local resources and/or immersed in queerphobic (prejudice against queer people) environments [40].

Today, people have access to a variety of online communities and social media platforms that can help them manage life changes [2, 22, 28, 47]. For LGBTQ people living in hostile spaces, online communities offer a place to recover [44], explore their identity [20], and contribute to community resources [106]. Simultaneously, online communities can also be invaluable sources of support, particularly for finding and connecting with others going through similar experiences [2, 3, 28, 46, 65, 99]. However, this kind of work is complicated on certain social media platforms where family and friends are present, thus introducing safety risks to disclosing personal information [18, 46, 47].

To better understand how technology platforms allow people to manage life changes and associated hardships, we closely examine one example of an online community as a site of self-exploration and recovery for LGBTQ individuals: fandom. Fandom communities are made up of fans of media properties such as television shows, films, books, and videogames. Though “fandom” is a broad term that can encompass different types of interaction [95], we focus on fandom spaces that are devoted not just to discussing media but also creating and sharing fanworks inspired by them — also referred to as “transformative fandom” [37]. Creative works within transformative fandom explore the worlds of media like *Star Trek* or *Harry Potter*, and might include artwork, remix videos, and fanfiction. The creative works themselves often include personal insights and disclosures in the form of author’s notes and commentary attached to the fanworks, strengthening social connections between community members [13]. Fandom brings people together to create and share fanworks as part of daily interactions, making it a community focused on content generation for the community itself. Though fandom and fanworks have existed since long before the internet, technology has broadened the reach of fan communities, which exist across many subcommunities and multiple platforms [19, 37]. In its current form, transformative fandom is a collection of communities that converge over different online platforms.

Transformative fandom is a space with many LGBTQ community members engaging in creative works, primarily writing. Prior work has demonstrated the benefits of creative writing for identity work and recovery. For example, psychologists have found that expressive writing, or writing about personal or emotional experiences has beneficial effects for physical health and subjective well-being [77], and it can also have a significant effect on longevity in participation in support communities [65]. We also know that fandom can be an LGBTQ-positive space [20, 32], where

many participants seek support from each other even though this is not the primary function of the community. These connections prompted us to examine fandom as a re-appropriated safe space through which people process their identities and construct new and different narratives about LGBTQ people.

Through an interview study with 31 LGBTQ-identified fandom participants, we explore how people use fandom spaces to construct these narratives while simultaneously engaging in identity work. To frame this examination, we develop a conceptual lens using Judith Herman’s [53] model of trauma recovery to describe how these processes are supported through writing new narratives about LGBTQ people together as a community—or, community narrative construction. Finally, we discuss how these spaces allow people to create counter visualities of LGBTQ identity, and insights as to how we might design safe support spaces online, particularly for communities where it may be difficult to actively seek support, which we conceptualize as “selective visibility.” In prior work, selective visibility has been conceptualized as a tool for personal safety, a set of ways in which LGBTQ people can, on an individual level, selectively present their identities across platforms [16]. Here, we broaden selective visibility as a community-level concept, something applied to an entire digital platform that determines just how visible an entire community is and how that visibility affects that community’s safety and ability to function as a support space for marginalized people like the LGBTQ community.

## 2 BACKGROUND

Our study of community narratives and support spaces for trauma recovery focuses on LGBTQ experience in online communities. In order to situate our contribution, we start by providing context for both LGBTQ representation in the media and the stresses associated with coming out. We then explore research on identity work and play, a process through which LGBTQ people can make sense of their identities in otherwise queerphobic environments. To better understand the struggles people encounter through identity work, we then introduce Herman’s framework for trauma recovery [53]. We found that Herman’s model made a clear framework for our analysis through the open coding process of interview data, and thus is necessary to thoroughly understand trauma recovery as a framework [53]. We further focus our area of inquiry by exploring relevant literature to online communities as social support spaces, considering that LGBTQ people might otherwise expose themselves to physical risk in offline spaces. We then provide an overview of work on fandom, the online community in which we situated our study.

### 2.1 The Systemic Marginalization of LGBTQ Identity in Social Spaces

People seeking support for exploring LGBTQ identity have historically been placed under threat through systemic violence against LGBTQ people [40]. Furthermore, even if LGBTQ identity is not framed as negative, it is often omitted from record, denying its existence and thus contributing just as much harm as if the identity were stigmatized. In this work, we view identity as the concept one has of oneself as a physical or social being [41], the self that a person can refer to and that others see them as. If that sense of self is not allowed to exist, or is framed as extremely negative, then a person might struggle to come into their own self-identity.

A strong sense of self-identity can give a person security in their daily life [55]. However, one’s self-identity and identity performances are influenced by normative social and cultural representations, meaning that overly negative representations that dominate an identity can form harmful representations and cultural understandings around that identity [81]. Harmful representations of LGBTQ identity have historically permeated social environments through mass media channels, school, and home environments [35, 81]. For example, Tania Ferfolja explores

how excluding gay and lesbian issues, images, role models, and histories from school curriculums enforces a narrative that LGBTQ people are absent from society [35].

LGBTQ identity is situated as a marginalized status, and therefore is an identity that is often explored later in a person's life (e.g. as a teenager or early adulthood) through the coming out process [102]. While coming out, people can experience challenges as a type of crisis of identity [34] whereby their identity comes into conflict with normative social structures that prohibit or discourage people from identifying as LGBTQ. That is, people can experience a lack of identity continuity due to broader societal negative framings of LGBTQ identity [52]. For example, homophobia–prejudice against homosexual people–can lead to identity dissonance [34] when the cultural representations an individual draws on to constitute their self-concept come into conflict with their reality.

These representations are also impacted by factors such as regulatory structures. LGBTQ identities have historically been classified as deviant or wrong in the United States, with homosexuality existing as a pathological diagnosis until 1973 [29]. In addition to the numerous legal battles over LGBTQ rights, people's LGBTQ identity has been used to justify violent acts against them [103, 104].

Furthermore, portrayals of LGBTQ people in media have been tightly regulated as well. The Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays Code, was a set of moral criteria that Hollywood films were required to adhere to from the 1930s to the 1960s [81]. In his book *The Celluloid Closet* [81], Vito Russo interviewed over 200 people and reviewed hundreds of films to catalog the effect of the Hays Code on the portrayal of LGBTQ people in Hollywood films. The code prohibited many visual displays, including interracial couples, depicting Catholic clergy as villainous, obscenity, and any portrayals of sex perversion which emphasized LGBTQ expressions of identity as a type of sex perversion [81]. While LGBTQ people largely existed as subtext while the code was in effect, they filtered into media as comical relief characters, irredeemable villains, or tragic characters that pay for their perverse lifestyle with death [81].

Even now, with the Hays Code disbanded, media portrayals of LGBTQ people are still shaped by the stereotypes established during these formative years. For example, tropes such as “Bury Your Gays” or “Dead Lesbian Syndrome” proliferate the popular media landscape in the form of LGBTQ characters inevitably dying before the end of a narrative arc [45]. Moreover, LGBTQ people are rarely given the chance to construct their own narratives within media [60]. Popular narratives around LGBTQ identity visualize LGBTQ characters as tragic [98], denying a narrative that LGBTQ people can lead happy, healthy lives. The harmful stereotypes in media add to the challenge of facing hostile or intolerant environments in reality. As Russo states in his analysis, “The story of the ways in which gayness has been defined in American film is the story of the ways in which we have been defined in America” [81]. The fact that popular narratives featuring LGBTQ identity so often negatively portray LGBTQ people and their lives highlights a need for narratives about LGBTQ identity that come from within the community.

## 2.2 Community Narratives for Identity Work and Recovery

The process of constructing community narratives, either through writing or other creative works, can be seen as a kind of identity work – that is, a process through which people engage in “forming, repairing, maintaining, or strengthening... their identities” [55]. Drawing from Van Maanen [97], identity work “deals with the interplay of social, personal and situational identities” and is often prompted by experiences of difference (cf. [100]). Watson elaborates that identity work involves people striving “to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity” while also attempting to “influence the various social-identities which pertain to them...” [100].

Identity work might include constructing one's personal coming out story [102] in relation to the larger LGBTQ community [76] or even “identity play,” in which people take on provisional identities as a means of understanding their own [55]. Identity play, as discussed by Ibarra, might

look like imaginative explorations of a particular role: a child might play at being a doctor, a parent, or any number of identities. Identity play differs from identity work in that it is “playful” and allows a person to enter a speculative space where they can explore facets of an identity, but have not assumed that identity. In relation to coming out as LGBTQ, this process can be helpful in exploring different spaces a person might not be ready to fully inhabit.

Much of the difficulty around coming out stems from how LGBTQ people are depicted and treated by society. Furthermore, hostile treatment, bullying, and an overall negative depiction of LGBTQ people in media can contribute to trauma [40]. Some of the central experiences of trauma are helplessness, social isolation, and the loss of agency [53]. LGBTQ-identified people regularly experience hostile environments and injustices [40, 91, 103, 104] that can create barriers to important identity work, such as discouraging people from seeking public resources or support groups. Given the difficulty and trauma that can sometimes accompany coming out, how do people recover?

When considering trauma more broadly, Herman [53] has conceptualized the process of trauma recovery as taking place across three stages: (1) establishing safety, (2) reconstructing the story, and (3) restoring connections with others. While Herman’s model describes trauma recovery as a linear process, it is important to make clear that these stages can happen in parallel. That is, while people are establishing safety, they may also be reconstructing their story, and/or developing community. We also note that not all coming out experiences can or should be framed as traumatic. However, we utilize this theory to better understand how people recover from and push against queerphobic constructs. Conceptualizing certain coming out processes as a trauma allows us to identify and uplift the digital tools by which LGBTQ people establish resilience and help their broader community. Importantly, the underlying principle of trauma recovery rests in an individual’s ability to establish safety and agency in re-constructing their identity. In the case of LGBTQ people, this includes reclaiming LGBTQ identity from negative depictions as they incorporate it into their self-identity.

The first stage entails that people establish safety in their own body or own environment. For example, in the context of LGBTQ identity, this might include finding safe spaces through which one can engage in identity work, absent from harassment and discrimination. The second stage focuses on reconstructing traumatic events and their meanings, and coming to terms with one’s sense of self. For LGBTQ people, this might look like re-imagining harmful media portrayals, or reconciling with queerphobic environments and encounters. The third and final stage involves reaching out and connecting with others, as well as taking on new engagements with the world. It is during this phase that survivors of trauma turn their attention from themselves to the larger community. For example, during this period, people who become comfortable with their identities might begin to publicly advocate for LGBTQ rights, or serve as mentors for people in their community who are also going through the coming out process.

During our research, we have found that online fandom is positioned as both a platform and community to facilitate this sort of work. Within fanfiction communities, people produce creative works that remix elements of existing media into a transformative work that alters the source material into something new and different [19]. fanfiction communities are malleable spaces, functioning as both an archive for fanworks and a space for social engagement [39]. Because transformative fandom re-imagines media through different, subversive terms [57], community members have a long history of constructing community narratives, thereby facilitating identity work and play, through the community’s everyday practices.

Because of the variety of creative work that is supported in fandom [19, 38], fanfiction communities can also support a range of activities to help LGBTQ community members while coming out, as well as engage in the identity work necessary to re-craft their sense of self. While fanfiction

is not the only way people reconstruct media to fit a different interpretation [50], it provides an excellent medium to examine people “queering” narratives as a community.

*2.2.1 Community Narratives for Support and Recovery.* When examining the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for recovery work, we find that prior HCI and CSCW scholarship has focused on people using online communities and social media during life changes, such as homelessness [24, 63, 67, 80], residential moves [89, 90], the transition from high school to college [22, 93], relationship breakups [67, 82], recovering from domestic violence [28, 67], job loss [12], and coming out as LGBTQ [20]. These studies have highlighted the important role of ICTs in helping people manage drastic life changes, enabling people to develop community and seek support.

Moreover, scholars have also examined how social media is used for identity work. Haimson and colleagues [47], through an exploration of using Facebook during gender transitions, found that access to family and friends is both a source of stress and support. Similarly, Morioka et al. [71], in a study exploring the uses of Facebook amongst college students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, find that while social media platforms support identity work, they also make it difficult to identify supportive mentors with similar experiences. Finally, in their study of fathers’ use of social media to construct parental identities, Ammari and Schoenebeck [3] show that fathers’ practice of sharing information about their children presents a stigma. These studies highlight how the pervasive nature of social media, and the presence of family and friends, can create additional trauma when people undergo identity work.

More specific to the LGBTQ community, scholarship has explored the creation and use of blogs [23], YouTube videos [44, 106], and websites specifically for the LGBTQ community [51] as methods of social support. New media can also allow LGBTQ youth to explore their sense of self and “develop important skills” in relation to coming out in progressive, urban areas [20]. Transgender people also manage blogs in addition to other social media sites to facilitate gender transitions [46]. In addition, LGBTQ parents use ICTs to navigate shifting social movements online [8]. Furthermore, LGBTQ people have voiced a need for more nuanced privacy controls, articulated as an individual kind of selective visibility, to make full use of social media platforms [16]. This prior research demonstrates that LGBTQ people leverage ICTs where their personal blogs, YouTube videos, and forums become a resource to support them through coming out. As such, ICTs can generally provide much-needed support, particularly when support structures are not available in the physical world.

There are LGBTQ-specific sites and apps designed to connect LGBTQ people and offer support or visibility, such as dating apps or online support groups. However, these digital platforms come with their own unique challenges. For example, location-based social networks like Grindr, SCRUFF, and other LGBTQ dating apps can offer a sense of community and connection, especially in spaces where it might not be safe to be visibly gay [7, 49]. Dating apps can also contribute to a sense of loneliness and isolation [30] and introduce complications into nuanced privacy needs, especially for closeted people living in small communities [49]. The LGBTQ-specific site TrevorSpace offers support for LGBTQ youth struggling with depression, designed to help with mental health challenges and crises [54]. Beyond these outlets, there is limited digital space specifically for LGBTQ community.

To our knowledge, few studies have explored the relationship between expressive writing, support, and recovery, especially in relation to LGBTQ experiences. First, online support communities allow for further exploration of the benefits of expressive writing [65, 77]. Sharing expressive writing about a common struggle, such as experiencing harassment, can be therapeutic and cathartic [27]. Sharing personal narratives is also a way for patients to go from consumers of health information to producers of information and care [48]. In addition to existing knowledge about the benefits of

social support in online health communities [99], recent work reveals that expressive writing also has similar benefits for support and longevity [65].

Moreover, blogging is a useful means of self-expression and social support. Articulating opinions, expressing emotions, and forming and maintaining communities are some of the major motivations behind blogging [72]. More specific to recovery, other scholars have explored the blogging practices of individuals living in war zones through the lens of crisis recovery [2], where findings suggest that blogging can offer a safe outlet for individuals living in volatile environments to discuss their experiences, socially connect with others, and restructure society.

*2.2.2 Transformative Fandom for Community Narratives.* The community-constructed narratives in online fandom take this scholarship a step further—rather than personal narratives, the narratives are community centered whereby people explore fictional characters with other people that share their identity, which allows for a different kind of identity work than what we typically see around trauma and recovery. Scholarship has shown that transformative fandom is often a community for positive, supportive feedback on creative works [15]. Some fandom spaces have been designed specifically for inclusivity in mind—Archive of Our Own (AO3) is an open-source and volunteer-run platform that was created by and for fans, incorporating their existing norms and values into the design of the platform, including values around inclusivity, accessibility, and individual expression of identity [39]. Fandom is unique in that most community members use a pseudonym tied to their fanworks, meaning that the majority of people in fandom are pseudonymous, not anonymous, keeping their pseudonym closely tied to their identity as presented in fandom [13].

Since the earliest days of fandom, participants have been mostly women [4], and a majority of fandom participants also identify as LGBTQ [17, 32]. Although fandom is not by design an LGBTQ community, nor do all members identify as LGBTQ, and not all parts of fandom are equally safe spaces [86, 107], it represents a space where expressions of LGBTQ identity are normal, and even expected [25]. Most recently, fandom has been a site for queer activism [73, 74], and Tumblr as a current major platform for fandom activities is a relatively positive space for LGBTQ people [56], particularly compared to platforms such as Facebook with real name policies that can alienate transgender people whose names do not reflect their legal records [18]. Transformative fandom also provides an example of unfacilitated expressive writing [65]—that is, intrinsically motivated and not necessarily intended to be therapeutic, though typically this is personal rather than creative writing. Our research builds on this prior work, where we explore how the use of such spaces and the construction of community narratives helps people find support and manage the trauma of coming out as LGBTQ.

### 3 RESEARCH METHODS

#### 3.1 Participants and Recruitment

This paper draws on a dataset derived from semi-structured interviews conducted in summer 2018 with 31 LGBTQ-identified fandom participants. Table 1 displays participant demographics, which are typical for fandom in that a majority of participants are also white women and American [17, 32, 39]. To preserve participant privacy and safety, we only asked participants about their gender identity and sexual orientation. Some participants chose to share their ethnicity, location, and other demographics with us as well.

We asked participants about their use of ICTs in fandom, and all 31 participants use Tumblr and AO3 most regularly. Less popular but intermittently used platforms included Discord, Twitter, the blogging platform Dreamwidth, and the archive fanfiction.net. Participants used these sites to share fanfiction and other fanworks, participate in community events, and talk with other community members.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

| <b>ID</b> | <b>Gender Identity</b>         | <b>Sexual Orientation</b>              | <b>Demographics</b>                               |
|-----------|--------------------------------|--|---|
| 1         | Non-binary                     | Bisexual                               | Chronically ill, middle class, White, American    |
| 2         | Cisgender Woman                | Sapphic or Queer                       | White, American                                   |
| 3         | Cisgender Woman                | Bisexual                               | Filipino (resides in Philippines)                 |
| 4         | Cisgender Woman                | Queer or Bisexual                      | White, American                                   |
| 5         | Cisgender Woman                | Gay                                    | White, American                                   |
| 6         | Cisgender Woman                | Bisexual                               | Mixed race - White and Asian (resides in Canada)  |
| 7         | Cisgender Woman                | Bisexual                               | Polish (resides in United Kingdom)                |
| 8         | Cisgender Woman                | Lesbian                                | White, American                                   |
| 9         | Non-binary                     | Lesbian                                | White, American                                   |
| 10        | Cisgender Woman (mostly)       | Queer or Gay                           |   |
| 11        | Agender                        | Lesbian or Queer                       | Chinese-American                                  |
| 12        | Cisgender Woman                | Lesbian                                | White, British, upper class                       |
| 13        | Non-binary                     | Gay                                    |   |
| 14        | Cisgender Woman                | Bisexual and Gray Asexual              |   |
| 15        | Genderqueer                    | Lesbian                                | White, American                                   |
| 16        | Transgender Woman              | Lesbian                                | White, American                                   |
| 17        | Non-binary                     | Lesbian                                | Spanish (resides in Spain)                        |
| 18        | Agender                        | Queer or Lesbian                       | White, American                                   |
| 19        | Cisgender Woman                | Lesbian                                |   |
| 20        | Cisgender Woman                | Queer or Lesbian                       | Mixed race - White and Pacific Islander, American |
| 21        | Non-binary                     | Lesbian                                | White   |
| 22        | Transgender Man and Non-binary | Bisexual                               | White, American                                   |
| 23        | Cisgender Woman                | Bisexual or Lesbian and Gray Aromantic |   |
| 24        | Cisgender Woman                | Bisexual or Biromantic Demisexual      |   |



|    |                             |                        |                                   |
|----|-----------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 25 | Agender                     | Bisexual               |                                   |
| 26 | Non-binary                  | Asexual and Biromantic | White, Ashkenazi                  |
| 27 | Transgender Man             | Bisexual               | Russian, American (resides in US) |
| 28 | "Female-ish" or Questioning | Queer                  |                                   |
| 29 | Cisgender Woman             | Bisexual and Queer     | White, American                   |
| 30 | Genderqueer                 | Bisexual               | White, American                   |
| 31 | Cisgender Woman             | Bisexual or Queer      | White, American                   |

We recruited participants using posts on Tumblr and Twitter, requesting that people well-connected in LGBTQ fandom spaces reblog the posts. The recruitment material included a link to a Google form where participants answered simple screening questions, which filtered for participants who identify as LGBTQ, were at least 18 years old, and contributed to fandom in some creative capacity. We arranged interviews with participants via follow-up emails from the Google form. Because of our recruitment methods, our sample represents Tumblr and Twitter users over other fandom platforms.

### 3.2 Data Collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews [87] via voice or instant message depending on the interviewees’ preferences. While the majority of our interviews were conducted through telephone or Skype, text-based interviews gave our participants the opportunity to preserve their privacy if they wished to not be overheard, with prior research demonstrating that text-based interviews are acceptable alternatives [26]. Interviews lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to three hours. All participants received remuneration in the form of a 20 dollar Amazon gift card for participating in the study, and were reminded they could halt the interview process at any time.

The interviews were life histories [101], where we sought to explore participants’ use of fandom and ICTs in the context of their lives and lived experiences. Following demographic questions, we next asked about their coming out story (if they were comfortable) and experiences in that process, then about their writing practices, more generally. We then asked participants to tell us when and how they first arrived at an online fandom space, details about how they came to it, and their subsequent experiences. We also asked about the role of ICTs, in addition to fandom, in their coming out process. After each interview, we asked our participants if they could recommend others for interviews, resulting in partial snowball sample [5]. While none of our interview questions asked participants to specifically relay traumatic experiences, we found after the fact that the stories our participants told could be understood through a trauma recovery framework, especially in relation to their interactions with fandom. Our IRB protocol kept a counselor on retainer to provide support for participants if needed.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Following interview transcription, we conducted iterative and inductive analyses of transcripts using open coding and thematic analysis [10]. This process was collaborative, with the research team meeting on a weekly basis to discuss and iterate on findings. Authors discussed codes, and worked together to collapse codes through the axial coding [96] process into the themes we present in this paper. Authors conducted member checking [21] with participants multiple times during

data analysis, especially in relation to sensitive themes like trauma and recovery. Through our analysis, we identified themes related to the trauma of coming out, establishing safety, engaging in identity work, and developing new engagements with the world, which we present in our results.

### 3.4 Limitations

Because of this study's sample and the demographics of transformative fandom, our findings are able to speak more broadly to the experiences of adult women-loving-women, with trans and nonbinary individuals to a lesser extent, but not necessarily to cisgender gay men. Because the demographics of many fan communities skew white, we also find it important to note that we may be missing important non-white voices in this data [94], including fandoms for non-Western media properties. In addition to these limitations, our findings cannot speak to how current youth populations (people under 18) are coming to and interacting with fandom beyond how our participants describe interacting with younger community members as mentors. These results offer insight into a specific population's use of social media to conduct identity recovery work, and can inform how we understand the relationship between identity recovery work and online spaces.

### 3.5 Research Positionality Statement

In examining the underlying motivations through which underserved populations, such as LGBTQ people, are studied, reflexively understanding author positionality may provide deeper context for understanding the underlying motivations of a study [85]. Two authors have been active participants in fandom communities, and two authors identify as LGBTQ. The first author, both part of the LGBTQ community and different fandom communities, had long-term connections in LGBTQ fan spaces that generated a certain level of trust from research participants. In taking care of that trust, we regularly asked participants for feedback during the analysis and article writing process. All interviewees had access to mental health resources per IRB protocol, should they have needed them.

## 4 RESULTS

We describe our findings through organizing them in relation to Herman's model of trauma recovery [53], a framework which we found helped explain the type of work happening within fandom as our participants described to us. In order to fully explore different motivations for coming to and staying involved with fandom, we first report how our informants described the coming out process and traumas related to it such as struggling with internalized homophobia, experiencing rejection from family, friends, and broader communities, and struggling to find supportive LGBTQ communities. We then elaborate on how fandom provided our informants an outlet through which they could recover and learn about LGBTQ identity. We then examine how participants engaged in identity work in fandom: first by reading fanfiction and "lurking" in communities, then by engaging in personal activities like participating in role play stories or writing fanfiction for one's self. Finally, we examine what participants described to us as turning their attention to the broader community, giving back through creating resources like fanfiction and original fiction narratives, offering mentorship, and volunteering in different capacities.

### 4.1 Understanding Traumas within Coming Out

Coming out as LGBTQ comes with its own challenges. For example, thirteen of our participants talked about struggling with internalized homophobia or queerphobia, worrying it was a "sin" or "wrong" or for "other people." P15 elaborated on this struggle:

I had a lot of internalized homophobia, because I was taught that it was a sin...I didn't know what gay was until high school, but I knew at age 10 that I felt differently than my friends and that felt really isolating. (P15)

All of our participants have encountered queerphobic environments to varying degrees, with two participants having been kicked out of homes. Twenty-five described struggles related to coming out to parents, such as parents viewing a participant's gender or sexuality as a “phase.” Some participants are not even fully out yet in fear of repercussions from self-proclaimed homophobic parents.

Twenty-six participants reported living in communities hostile or intolerant toward LGBTQ people. Even if they had supportive parents, they still ran the risk of encountering hostility at work, school, or their community. As described by P8, “there's always going to be certain places everywhere that you can't be out.”

Moreover, 19 participants also reported feeling “alone” or isolated from LGBTQ community resources at some point during the coming out process, an experience that has been echoed in related LGBTQ platform research [7]. LGBTQ people become aware of their identities over time, but often report feelings of difference from a very young age [83]. Our participants reported moments throughout their youth of feeling “off” or “different” from others. Almost half of our participants were unaware of the existence of LGBTQ identities growing up, or if they were, these identities were too abstract to engage with. Several participants, not just P15, noted that they struggled with internalized homophobia, including P10:

I was initially reluctant to give myself any kind of identity in terms of being part of the queer community because I was trying work through a lot of internalized homophobia because of the conservative leanings of a lot of my classmates and just the people I was interacting with. (P10)

Living in heteronormative societies, our participants were presumed heterosexual and cisgender until they stated otherwise. Attempting to articulate those parts of their identities often resulted in negative consequences, but even for those who were able to comfortably disclose without severe consequences in their personal lives, living as an LGBTQ-identified person means navigating daily microaggressions and other challenges:

It's the little things. It's everyone assuming, “Of course you'll get married when you're older and of course you'll marry a guy.” And it's a thousand tiny little misconceptions and assumptions, and things people don't realize they're saying. (P12)

Not every experience associated with coming out leads to trauma, but our participants consistently described settings in which they were isolated from support systems. More specifically, participants rarely knew other local LGBTQ people. In the physical world, participants often encountered hostile or apathetic responses to their identity work—but they found the resources they needed within sympathetic, safe spaces online. As P27 describes, recovery could happen online in a way it could not “in real life”:

I kept viewing everything about my sexuality as a phase, because that tended to be what adults said, my mother especially. So I kind of took that as axiom and backburnered a lot of things [in real life], but not online. (P27)

Moving to those online spaces signifies the start of a recovery process, whether that be from severe actions against an individual by their own family (disownment, loss of housing) or from the oppression of broader society against LGBTQ identities. Technology gave our participants a way to recover from these experiences. Participants either described fandom as a sudden discovery or a

constant companion that they could not pinpoint a start date for. One participant described the process as gradual steps:

I was only 10 or 11 whenever I started and it was small stuff. It was E-mail listings, things like that. Whenever I started posting online...I posted enormous amounts of content...Thank God its all been lost somehow. I spent hours and hours and hours every week writing and posting chapters, and tracking who had commented on what. I distinctly remember writing, don't laugh, Harvest Moon fanfiction where I would just have everyone be friends and hold hands...I would say those were some of the first places. (P1)

Like P1, very few of our participants initially came to fandom because they sought out a queer space or queer resources (5 out of 31). Many described their "descent" as something spurred on by a desire to write or read more about media they were interested in. Another participant described discovering fanfiction as a sense of "wonder":

I felt a lot of wonder about the fact that I didn't even know that you could write about your favorite characters in a book series and write more about them. I was really excited that that could exist and so I wanted to write some of my own. And I did. And I wrote this really crap [original character] fic about a new girl going to Hogwarts and interacting with everyone. (P12)

No matter how they came to fandom, our participants all eventually found themselves involved in some form of LGBTQ community embedded within fandom, and they found these communities through fanfiction.

#### 4.2 Community Narratives for Recovery Work

It is not necessarily serendipitous that participants found themselves embedded in LGBTQ communities within fandom. Unlike many types of writing, fanfiction writing is community-centered, occurring in and for a community [19]. Transformative fandom also has a long history of engaging with LGBTQ themes, even before the community moved online [57]. For our participants, the community they found provided them resources and support unavailable in the physical world. They did not come to it as a support community, but it became one—in the case of P28, in part simply because they could be queer:

[Fandom] was a way to explore being queer without judgment. Or without any expectations attached. If I talked about it in real life, it suddenly became a big deal, a label that was attached to me without me knowing if I was really ready for it or not. (P28)

Of course, our participants used other social media platforms in their daily lives. However, as we know from prior work, platforms where family and friends are present can complicate identity work [18, 47]. For example, P2 is still closeted to their family, and worries about other consequences:

Online in general I stay quiet about my identity on my official accounts, because I do get nervous about it putting my career in danger. (P2)

Our participants spoke of similar experiences across their involvement in fandom during their struggles to find safety during the coming out process. Through our analysis, we found that these experiences largely map to Herman's three stages of recovery: (1) participants seek out online fandom, establishing safety; (2) soon after, participants actively engage in fandom, reconstructing their story and identities, and sharing it with others; and (3) once participants have established a safe space in their physical world as well as digital, they contribute to fandom by restoring or strengthening connections with other LGBTQ people in fandom.

Table 2. Recovery challenges and opportunities within offline and online spaces.

| Recovery Aspects                  | Challenges in Social Settings   | Challenges in LGBTQ-Specific Spaces   | Fandom Opportunities Supporting Recovery Work   |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Establishing Safety               | Unsafe to physically meet or associate with other LGBTQ people                                      | Person might not be ready to interact with LGBTQ content directly   | Participants can find other LGBTQ people without leaving a digital trace that references LGBTQ resources or exposing themselves to being outed in local spaces. |
| Establishing Safety               | Unable to find local resources due to lack of local LGBTQ presence                                  | Unable to engage as readily in visibly LGBTQ communities  | Online fandom is borderless, allowing participants to access a community spanning the entire globe.   |
| Re-constructing the Story         | Encountering problems in processing homophobia, internalized and otherwise                          | Modern LGBTQ-specific platforms may not emphasize processing internal narratives through community activities | RP communities and fanfiction allow participants enough distance and exposure to different ideals and identities to begin processing homophobia.                |
| Re-constructing the Story         | No access to mentors or outlets to learn about LGBTQ identity and culture                           | Lack of LGBTQ-specific spaces with formal mentorship networks   | Online Fandom provides informal mentorship networks and near-limitless access to written material engaging with LGBTQ identity.                                 |
| Restoring Connections with Others | Mainstream media depictions exaggerate or present a contorted or incomplete image of LGBTQ identity | LGBTQ-produced media outside of fanfiction requires monetary means to purchase                                | Online Fandom allows deeper exploration and reconstruction of LGBTQ identity in stories about queer people written by queer people.                             |

Table 2 provides an overview of each stage of recovery and challenges a person might face in seeking to find support. It contrasts how recovery activities can emerge across both the physical and online worlds, and it identifies challenges that LGBTQ-specific digital spaces might pose for this kind of work. Moreover, it also reveals how a specific online community (in this case, fandom) can be used to support trauma recovery and identity work in the context of coming out. Listed examples come from our participants, and are shared across multiple participants. Previously, we discussed how participants remembered arriving at fandom itself. Once participants had found fandom, they described settling into specific communities for safety.

### 4.3 Establishing Safety

Our participants used fandom as a mechanism for finding safety through both joining a community with other LGBTQ participants and gaining exposure to LGBTQ identities through fanworks. Most importantly, our participants explicitly view their communities in online fandom as a “safe space”; as P1 put it, “I needed those places of safety.” Online fandom in particular is well-suited to offer those places of safety due to its pseudonymous nature and community norms that emphasize valuing a community member’s privacy and safety [13, 31]. As we describe next, this sense of safety also comes from the security and normalcy of finding community.

*4.3.1 Finding Others: “my people”.* Participants often expressed that they first encountered other LGBTQ people online, or were exposed to ideas that helped them better understand their own identities. Out of 31 participants, 25 came to fandom before coming into their current gender identity or sexual orientation, and 14 had never heard of gender identities or sexual orientations beyond cisgender, heterosexual men and women before coming to fandom. Finding this community was an important first step in finding safety online. P13 and P27 bring up a common occurrence among participants:

Because fandom can unite so many people over so many different places, I met a lot of people and was exposed to different gender identities that I wouldn’t have been otherwise. I might not have figured out where I fit into the fray. (P13)

I’d never actually truly been aware that trans men exist...I don’t know that I would have ever found out about [a transgender actor] if not for fandom, because I would have never sought something like that out. (P27)

Similarly, P22, learned about bisexuality at age 13 by talking to someone else in fandom. When they tried to express being bisexual to their family, P22’s mother insisted there was no way they could know at such a young age. A total of 25 of our participants came to understand their identity through their participation in fandom, like P11, who said that friends in fandom were the first LGBTQ people she had talked to:

I think meeting people from all over the world who were comfortable in their sexuality helped me open my eyes. (P11)

Of course, not all online spaces are safe for LGBTQ communities [84]. However, many of our participants described fandom spaces as having a distinctly different feeling from others. While many participants described fandom simply as “safe,” some participants found that some circles of fandom were the only space where they could comfortably act “queer.” As expressed by P8:

I could be as gay as I wanted and no one batted an eye. It was great. It just felt like I didn’t have to hide anything. Like, the biggest secret you have, everyone already knows. (P8)

P15 phrases arriving at a particular fandom space as finding their own people, adding how “awesome” it was to just “nerd out with a bunch of queers.” Importantly, this informant described how finding others like them was a mechanism for establishing safety in their own body and identity:

It was like taking a deep breath and being like, okay, I found my people. I can put down my mask. I can put down my armor. I don’t have to pretend to fit in. I don’t have to pretend to be so tense. (P15)

Outside of fandom, our participants must contend with microaggressions such as being assumed straight, being misgendered, encountering homophobia, and lacking representation of themselves within the media surrounding them. Fandom’s community not only allows them a safe place to express their identity, but to also see themselves reflected in media.

*4.3.2 Reading about Others: “like the way I felt”.* Participants regularly mentioned that they found content online that they would never have access to in their personal lives. While modern media is continually diversifying, the amount of content representing LGBTQ identities as more complex and intersectional than young, gay (usually white) teenagers is still severely outnumbered by non-LGBTQ content. Participants often described searching for this content most often when they were underage and/or dependent on family for their finances and housing, restricting how readily they could purchase LGBTQ content. Furthermore, most LGBTQ roles in media are secondary or supportive, meaning that LGBTQ people rarely see themselves as stars in their own media [69]. Because of this problem, some participants simply could not find content reflecting their identity elsewhere—just in fandom:

I’m never going to find published erotica between two trans men. I’m not going to walk into Barnes and Noble and find trans male porn. Never. But I can find it really easily on AO3. (P22)

Other participants could not risk keeping media related to LGBTQ identity around their home if they were in the closet, or feared that their families might restrict what content they tried to access. In this case, fandom offered a more clandestine way to access resources about LGBTQ identity without leaving an obvious trail:

Growing up, my parents very closely watched what TV shows and movies I was watching...[but] I knew how to wipe my internet search history. It became this space that was the one area where I could do my own thing. (P5)

There was this treasure trove of queer stuff, right there, judgment free. Supervision free. There was no adult that was going to restrict my access to it. (P22)

For participants still working to understand their own feelings, those stories also helped them process or realize aspects of their identities. Having stories to read with characters to relate to provided a critical resource for people still sifting through and defining what it meant to be themselves:

[Fandom has] stuff like [wanting] two men [to be] together and that being normal and accepted...I think that helped me come to terms with my own identity. (P12)

Twenty-five of our participants shared similar sentiments, that fandom was really the only place they could go to find stories that reflected their own struggles. Those stories offered an important counter to the dominant narratives constructed in media and their social lives. By existing in a liminal space like a digital archive, fanfiction became a resource for recovery. fanfiction lacks physical barriers to access like a price tag or media subscription and does not leave an immediately identifiable trace of what is being accessed. There are no librarians or bookstore clerks to judge,

thus allowing the person viewing it to do so without any uncomfortable or threatening social interactions that might otherwise discourage a person from exploring these topics.

#### 4.4 Reconstructing the Story

When moving to the second stage of recovery, our participants began to re-construct their story and engage in identity work and play, rather than passively consuming fanworks. This next step also connects people in fandom to a broader community network, leading to developing friendships and building out a support network. Our participants use fandom as a mechanism for re-constructing their story and processing identity via role-playing and writing fanfiction.

*4.4.1 Role-play as Identity Processing.* After accessing information about LGBTQ identities and reading about different experiences, participants moved on to explore those identities in their own writing. For some participants, identity play started in low-stakes role-play (RP) communities where participants only had to write a few sentences or a paragraph at a time.

Role-play is a type of creative writing in online fandom that involves collaborative writing between two or more participants who adopt a fictional character's point of view and pass the narrative back and forth via an online platform [36]. For our participants who role-play, being able to explore LGBTQ themes through a character proved to be a vital form of identity play, such as with P13's sensemaking:

As a non-binary person who did not always know they were non-binary, or didn't always accept it, the laundry list of male characters that I've written from the perspective of was equally evidence of a separate gender identity and an opportunity to explore a separate gender identity. (P13)

The role-play communities also connected participants to a support community, and sometimes more. For example, participants P7, P13, P19, and P24 all met romantic partners through role-play communities in fandom.

*4.4.2 fanfiction as Identity Processing.* Writing fanfiction and role-play serve similar purposes in that they provide a safe platform for LGBTQ people to explore their identities without judgment:

I think fandom is a good place for people to experiment, and for young people to express themselves in ways that they might not be able to in their non-online real lives...It's trying on the shoes of something which you might not be able to try on in real life. And you might find that they fit. (P12)

Writing fanfiction can transition from exploration into a more purposeful engagement with LGBTQ identity. Participants described writing as a way to "dig into" feelings around gender and sexuality. P8 specifically described writing "self-insert" fanfiction where the writer places themselves into the story as a character. Additionally, where participants could not access resources in their physical spaces, they used fanfiction as a resource instead:

I have not been able to access things like therapy, so I really turned to writing...I was able to explore all these [queer] aspects of characters and they weren't wrong or broken, or nasty, or tainted for wanting more with people who were like them or not. So it was kind of a journey, and that's where I started to really dig into all of this gender and sexuality stuff. (P1)

[Writing fanfiction] helped normalize the experience [of being queer]. To write things the way I like them made me feel in control of my queer identity. It made it mine. It was something I couldn't do without fanfiction. (P31)



As P10 points out, fanfiction is a form of recovery for identities that are misrepresented, and a way to reflexively accept their own identity while simultaneously revising said identities for the larger LGBTQ community:

It’s kind of depressing to watch [media where queer characters are tragic] a lot of the time...That’s one of the reasons I like fanfiction so much, because it allows me to have really self-indulgent happy content that’s about characters that I can relate to, because it doesn’t exist very much. (P10)

However, because fanfiction is situated in an online space, these individual narratives become community narratives to help others process their own identities as well. This reconstruction of existing representations becomes an important part of creating connections and helping others.

#### 4.5 Restoring Connections with Others and New Engagements with the World

The final stage of recovery in Herman’s model involves restoring connections with others and new engagements with the world. We found that people were using fandom communities as a mechanism for reconstructing misinterpretations of LGBTQ identity and therefore establishing a community narrative. Through this process, they built out resources and provided mentorship for LGBTQ youth.

*4.5.1 Creating Community Narratives.* LGBTQ identity has a long and fraught history with mainstream media depictions, much like other marginalized identities that suffer from stereotypical portrayals and typecasting [69]. Though *The Celluloid Closet’s* criticism targets media in the 1980’s [81], all of our participants spoke to a critical misunderstanding of LGBTQ identity that is still inherent in modern mainstream media. They described how when mainstream media does engage with LGBTQ identity, it often misrepresents in harmful ways that pull cues directly from tropes developed within the Hays Code era of film. Where some fans may be able to more easily shrug off bad writing or a mishandling of a character, LGBTQ people tend to invest more into depictions of their identity:

[Queer relationships in media] represent more to us than just people who are hot together or people who have interesting storylines together. And I think sometimes our identity gets bound up with them a little too much, which is why we take slights so personally. (P9)

Our participants described constructing narratives that pushed back against those harmful tropes in their own writing. fanfiction written by others become a lifeline for the community. P31 describes what fanfiction did for them and why they chose to make a career out of writing books with LGBTQ themes:

fanfiction about women in relationships with other women normalized the concept [of being queer] for me, and that there is nothing abnormal about women being attracted to other women. And that you can be happy! Which is a message that people try to discount. They say if you’re queer you are doomed to unhappiness. (P31)

The “they” that P31 refers to is broader society, whether through media or everyday conversations. One participant described writing as a form of resistance against a specific event in fandom when a queer character was killed off from a show:

It was one of my friend’s birthdays and she was like, “Write me a fic...something so sad just happened [to a queer character]. Let’s try and keep it going [instead of letting her die].” Like, resistance through happiness, through joy. (P11)

Fandom thus becomes a “narrative community” where participants work together to publicly craft a story counter to harmful depictions of LGBTQ people. The narratives found in online fandom

become a resource for new people entering fandom, and those who have been in fandom long enough want to pass their stories on to ensure those resources remain available. Furthermore, creating those narratives has since spilled over into activist movements for some participants. Participants cited the “LGBT Fans Deserve Better” movement, a non-profit group dedicated to researching LGBTQ representation in television [73] founded as a response to a series of LGBTQ deaths portrayed in television shows. One example that our participants repeatedly mentioned (P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P11, P15, P16, P18, P31) was the death of the lesbian character “Lexa” from *The 100*, described as a “huge fandom moment for us” by P11. A culmination of activist events from this character death resulted in the founding of “ClexaCon,” a convention for LGBTQ fans with a specific emphasis on queer women and non-binary people. P16 described it as such:

That has become one of the biggest fan conventions for queer fandom in the country. It started out of protest. Like, stop killing the queer characters. Like, if you’re going to give us queer characters, not queer corpses. (P16)

Fandom has become a space for activism in many different contexts including political change [58] and LGBTQ rights specifically [73, 74]. The culmination of ClexaCon and the LGBT Fans Deserve Better movement is a direct result of fans pursuing activism for the sake of their own identities and in the interest of helping other LGBTQ people. These societal-level movements stand to benefit LGBTQ people regardless of their participation in fandom. Furthermore, transformative fandom as a community has a strong history of aiding these sorts of protests and calls for activism [58].

*4.5.2 Providing Resources and Mentorship.* Participants who have since come out and found a safe physical space separate from intolerant communities described making use of offline resources and connecting with local LGBTQ spaces. However, they also recalled that fandom often served as an initial space for finding and understanding LGBTQ identity. The participants that have since come out and found community in their offline lives viewed fandom a space to give back to the LGBTQ community in ways not allowed through traditional volunteering or local community projects. Fandom was a common space that participants described as integral to their process of finding a community of acceptance and becoming empowered to participate in LGBTQ spaces elsewhere. While many of those participants also involved themselves in traditional volunteering and local community activities, our participants emphasized how important they felt it was to tell stories that someone else might need later.

I didn’t think anyone would read my fanfiction [about gender dysphoria] because it’s not a fun read. And I cannot tell you how many comments I got on Tumblr about it, “Thank you for writing this, this was like reading about me.” And I think that really drove home how much things like that had been for me. Like, where reading things like this for me, crumb by crumb, was this gathering of relevant info. Like, someone out there in this fandom feels like this, like I do. (P27)

P27 described finding “crumbs” of needed information scattered across stories, and eventually told their own story in the form of a fanfiction that others could find. The purpose of fanfiction archives is to record and keep stories so others always have access to them [25, 64]. Participants also focused their energies on directly mentoring younger LGBTQ people that were either in crisis or still in the process of coming out.

I’ve been messaging a friend I made, [and] I am the elder gay who has learned the ways of the gay and is an adult. And she is kind of on the border of moving into adulthood, and is not sure what her identity is and how she fits into the world. (P16)

Not only did participants directly mentor other people in fandom, they described the act of writing fanfiction itself as a way to assume a mentorship role for others. fanfiction became a way to reach

out to other LGBTQ people and let them know that they were going to “come out okay” as P1 described:

[My fanfiction] ended up getting 50 some odd thousand hits. And I answered almost every single comment. And I connected with people, I talked to people, I made friends with people as a result because they were saying, “This situation reminds me of what I have at home. This situation reminds me of me.” And that’s what I wanted, because I had spent so much time locked into my own self. I didn’t want other people to feel that way. I wanted to make something for me that I enjoyed, but at the same time I wanted other people to connect with it and see themselves in it. (P1)

Our participants began their journey by arriving at fandom, often with little more than a desire to explore their favorite stories. Once there, participants uncovered resources and connected with people in ways that allowed them to better articulate their identities. After establishing safety and working through their own identities, participants moved on to give back and further build their community.

## 5 DISCUSSION

Our participants re-appropriated online fandom to conduct identity work around coming out and living as LGBTQ. That appropriated space also allowed participants to develop a community narrative about LGBTQ identity that pushes back against stereotypes. Some participants directed their identity work outward, transforming that community narrative into a resource for others. Through generating creative works for fandom, participants contribute to community-level narrative construction, benefiting all LGBTQ people in the community. The activities that people can participate in and contribute to within this community are dependent on its position as a subversive online space that is both visible to those who need it and invisible to harmful outsiders, complicating the ways in which we might consider the growth and discoverability of digital spaces like this for others in need.

### 5.1 Crafting New “Visualities” of LGBTQ Identity

We have conceptualized the identity work and play happening within fandom as a type of narrative construction. However, our analysis points to a broader, societal-level project that pushes against and counters the dominant and stereotypical depictions of LGBTQ people. These narratives encourage community members to “visualize” their identity as something more than what dominant social and media depictions allow people to see.

To further explore visualizations of LGBTQ identity, we draw on Nicholas Mirzoeff [70] who uses the theoretical concept of dominant visualities to contextualize how certain ways of perceiving and being perceived are made acceptable whereas others are not. While the stereotypical image of an LGBTQ person can differ between people, social perceptions and media depictions of LGBTQ people serve to create an overall “visuality” of LGBTQ identity that is subjugated underneath the dominant cisgender, heteronormative lens through which most people understand their world view. For example, if a cisgender man were to wear a feminine dress, he has a much greater chance of encountering hostility than if he had dressed in jeans and a shirt [14]. To perceive a visuality that sits outside the scope of what is normative is to witness something that counters the dominant visuality. By going against the dominant visuality, Mirzoeff argues that a person can create a “counter visuality,” or a perception that seeks to reconstruct or push against that dominant perception. For example, community narratives in online fandom act to push against dominant perceptions of LGBTQ identity.

Dominant visualities are important to recognize in media-rich environments because they can maintain a status quo and exercise power over marginalized people, much like the Hays Code did by banning the portrayal of Catholic clergy as villains and any positive depiction of LGBTQ people. Our participants frequently discussed how media representations of LGBTQ identities are inaccurate or intended for other audiences, presenting these characters as an exotic artifact or fetish [33, 75]. Participants often referenced the negative history of LGBTQ representation in film [81] and other media as actively harming their own perception toward LGBTQ identity and their own place in the world. This perspective speaks to how a dominant visuality actively suppresses those subjugated within it.

Because dominant media and social conceptions suppress healthy understandings of LGBTQ identity, our participants had to first undo what dominant visualities told them about LGBTQ identity. This process emerged in the identity play our participants described—role-playing characters with different identities and reading LGBTQ fanfiction and exploring new narrative possibilities. Next, participants would construct their own narratives through writing fanfiction, engaging in identity work and beginning the process of making their own counter visuality to push against dominant visualities they had encountered elsewhere. Finally, participants described coming together as a community, either through activism, mentorship, or celebrating one another's works to expand that counter visuality into a community narrative that can reach a broader audience.

A critical part of reconstructing and reclaiming marginalized identity is through generating and making available these counter visualities that push against dominant structures. Our participants leveraged transformative fandom as both a platform and community to conduct this work. However, digital platforms can also perpetuate dominant visualities and enforce hegemonic structures of power, more often than not [3, 18, 88]. In this context, then, how might we consider methods to support not only LGBTQ communities, but also other marginalized communities that work against similarly damaging dominant narratives? And how might we support digital safe spaces for these communities?

## **5.2 Narratives as Recovery Work: Creating a counter visuality for the self, community, and society**

Our findings demonstrate that transformative fandom communities enabled participants to construct new narratives around LGBTQ experiences. Narrative is the core mechanic our participants engaged with to conduct identity work, and is the primary mode of social engagement for transformative fandom. Therefore, we find it critical to unpack how narrative directly ties into the broader societal change fandom communities encourage. These narratives, or counter visualities, led to participants conducting identity recovery work — the process through which people dualistically recover from challenges tied to coming out while engaging in identity work. Transformative fandom provided a space through which people could routinely and reliably re-craft conflicting narratives around their identities and invent better visions for themselves, their community, and their futures.

Participants described an absence of positive portrayals of LGBTQ people and the lives they might lead. When participants had no access to media or real-life examples of LGBTQ people, they remained unaware of LGBTQ identities until they were able to discover those identities within fandom. The dominant visuality of LGBTQ identity our participants described is one that punishes LGBTQ people for their existence or removes LGBTQ identity as even a possibility. These depictions are not that far removed from the stereotypes generated and enforced under the Hays Code in Hollywood film [81], demonstrating the power that visual media holds over both individual and social perceptions of people.

The absence of strong narratives to normalize LGBTQ experiences complicates normal, everyday tasks our participants might try to perform. Because identity recovery work in fandom occurs

in a communal environment, it is a process that takes place at the individual, community, and societal level. That is, we believe that through the habitual practices of fanfiction writing, people are leveraging fandom to construct narratives that reclaim and normalize their identities for themselves, their community, and for society. By empowering other marginalized communities to claim their own spaces and build their own narrative communities, we can support more opportunities for not only identity recovery work, but also for community advocacy that transforms external spaces.

*5.2.1 Narratives for the Self: Reflexive Identity Recovery Work.* When first arriving at fandom, our participants almost never came in search of LGBTQ resources. Because LGBTQ identity is systemically marginalized, our participants talked about processing internalized homophobia as they came to accept their identity. Transformative fandom allows people struggling with their identity to slowly approach those challenges rather than confronting them directly. This kind of approach sits in contrast to other LGBTQ resources that topically address issues about identity [20, 23, 44, 47, 51, 54, 106]. Whether through role-play or writing fanfiction, these creative outlets allowed relatively low-risk identity exploration, circumnavigating privacy risks inherent to LGBTQ platforms like dating apps [49]. Moving forward, we can better support marginalized communities by considering the sensitive nature of support spaces for people who wish to avoid disclosing information that may not necessarily be viewed as stigmatized, such as LGBTQ identity [16]. As our participants expressed, that information can have dangerous consequences in the wrong hands.

*5.2.2 Narratives for the Community: Community Recovery Work.* Once LGBTQ people in fandom are able to move past those internal struggles, they face external barriers such as isolation or limited access to mentors that can teach LGBTQ youth about queer culture and identity. People coming to fandom both read about and wrote reconstructions of queer identity that provided them the narratives they needed to see. P11 described writing something positive for a friend who felt sad about a queer character’s death on a television show. While P11 wrote for a friend, the act is situated in the context of a broader community that also benefited from this reconstruction. The narrative became part of a larger effort to construct a counter visibility.

*5.2.3 Narratives for Society: Reclaiming LGBTQ Identity.* The narratives encapsulated within fandom’s counter visibility are transformative, both for our participants and the people they discussed interacting with. Within fandom, people can reclaim and rewrite those tragic narratives to encompass a broader, more authentic range of queer experiences. Those narratives form a community based on a counter visibility that push against dominant and harmful depictions of LGBTQ people. Many factors blend together to allow this kind of work to happen within this community. Unlike digital platforms such as Facebook [18], Twitter [73], or LGBTQ-specific dating apps [49], this community centers its work on AO3, a volunteer-run archive constructed by primarily women volunteers [39]. Additionally, fandom has a long history of divorcing itself from digital practices that encourage overlap with a person’s offline life, thus allowing for the community to maintain a certain level of safety [13, 18]. Transformative fandom allows its LGBTQ members to collectively recover from the injustices enacted upon their identity and reclaim narrative space unavailable in mainstream spaces.

### 5.3 Selective Visibility

The HCI and CSCW community has shown an interest in understanding what makes support communities successful, including what factors increase engagement [99], the benefits of social support [11, 105], and how we might design to mitigate challenges such as protecting community members’ privacy [79] and maintaining balance between givers and seekers of support [65, 78]. However, much of this research has been conducted in the health space, which means that most of

these support communities share an important property: people are specifically there to seek or give support, often for a specific, already diagnosed condition. These spaces are highly visible.

Today people have a range of ICTs through which they can seek support and disclose parts of themselves as they engage in the coming out experience. However, much like how people are aware of those with whom they are interacting in face-to-face contexts, people using public social media spaces are cognizant of their audiences and are often trying to control how they present themselves to others [9]. Marwick and boyd [66] observe how Twitter users tend to collapse multiple audiences into a single context. In this view, a person's perception of their audience can influence whether or not they choose to make visible specific identities, such as their LGBTQ identity. Researchers have identified various strategies people employ when thinking about whether or not they choose to make visible certain parts of themselves, e.g. self-censorship [1], selective sharing/grouping through various mechanisms [62], and not posting altogether [32, 92].

In the context of public social media spaces, such as Facebook and Instagram, support-seeking often emerges in the form of disclosure. From Goffman, we know that in order for someone to successfully engage in identity work and assume a public facing identity, it is important that people connect with sympathetic others—that is, people with shared experiences [43]. However, connecting with others can be complex because these spaces host a diverse public, including family and friends, which can introduce safety risks to disclosing personal information [18, 46, 47]. For example, Birnholtz [6], in his exploration of Instagram use by gay and bisexual Instagram users, found that shirtless selfies present an interesting self-presentation dilemma whereby users are at once producing images that are normatively appropriate while simultaneously outing their identities to friends and family before they are ready.

In building on this work, scholars have found that that LGBTQ-identifying individuals have the opportunity to become visible at their own discretion by controlling their level of participation and disclosure [16], or coming out when they are ready [46]. For example, Haimson [46], in exploring the uses of multiple social media by people undergoing gender transitions, found that users have agency in controlling their disclosure across social media platforms. Specifically, the author finds that people undergoing gender transitions often engage in identity work in less visible spaces, such as blogs, whereas public spaces such as Facebook serve as an end point when people are ready to disclose their gender identity more broadly. Similar research emphasizes the need for individual control over privacy and disclosure across social media platforms, specifically for LGBTQ people in the process of coming out, forming a kind of selective visibility on a personal level [16, 18]. Building on this research, we explore the relationship between visibility, trauma, and platform-wide mechanics that affect a community's level of visibility and how that plays into processes of recovery, coming out, and community building.

For our participants, fandom generates support structures that may be absent for someone living in a queerphobic environment or is isolated from physical resources. However, our participants came to fandom not necessarily because the community they joined advertised itself as an LGBTQ space—rather, it was the visibility within these spaces, or lack thereof, that made them appealing. Fandom communities were not mainstream spaces for our participants. They fell into them through searching for specific spaces for discussing special interests, not by visiting sanctioned media pages or large, public social media spaces.

Participants used transformative fandom to engage in a dualistic process of identity exploration and coming out. Informants' stories suggest that if these fandom spaces had been explicitly advertised as LGBTQ, those still closeted might have never made use of the resource—like P27 who never would have been exposed to a transgender man if it weren't for fandom, and P5 who would not have directly searched for LGBTQ support because their parents checked their search history. Whether due to risk of being outed or internalized queerphobia that would prevent a participant

from deliberately choosing to enter an LGBTQ space, online fandom clearly functions as a support group because it does not advertise itself as one. These spaces were initially visible to participants for other reasons.

Our work demonstrates the value of *selective visibility*. While it might be supported by selective sharing mechanisms [59] and has been previously conceptualized as an important means of personal control over privacy for the LGBTQ community [16], we seek to broaden the understanding of selective visibility as something made possible and enacted by an entire community. A community that is selectively visible does not manage its visibility through platform-specific privacy tools, though some people might manage individual content that way [16]. Rather, the community uses socially-driven mechanisms to ensure the platform can be a social support space while remaining safe. Transformative fandom can serve as a support community because it is a semi-public space that has selectively visible layers of participation. The community therefore might be damaged by attempts to popularize it. Fandom was not designed as a support structure for identity work and recovery. It became one through the work of the community, something that can happen on community-driven platforms [105]. Fandom’s socially-driven design allows for communities to provide support toward issues that people might be unable to safely seek out elsewhere.

Participants found fandom not because it was an LGBTQ support group, but because they were drawn in through some other avenue of participation and then were able to explore their LGBTQ identity further by selecting to move into those community support spaces. However, selective visibility might also serve to hide these support spaces from other LGBTQ people that might be in serious need of them, complicating this design space.

The ability to both see and be seen in specific, controlled spaces is a powerful social feature that this community grants. We as researchers and designers can explore ways to pass on the social controls inherent in transformative fandom to other spaces, considering possible places that allow for people to structure their own narratives separate from their offline lives and maintain some control over the different levels of visibility within those spaces, not just at an individual level, but at a community-wide level. When designing community spaces to support this kind of work, we might consider (1) placing a greater emphasis on individual privacy, separating offline identity from online, (2) emphasize affinity first, so as to not draw unwanted attention based on marginalized identity, and (3) support malleability for online spaces so that they can be re-appropriated to suit a community’s needs (e.g. fandom appropriating sites like Tumblr for social interaction while using AO3 as a central archive).

Fandom encourages people to adopt pseudonyms, allowing them to play with and explore provisional identities [55] independent of their “real name” or legal identity [13]. The pseudonymous nature of fandom also encourages a separation of online and offline lives that supports identity work. These pseudonyms turn what would otherwise be a public platform into a semi-public space, layering visibility. For people seeking to explore LGBTQ identity despite their queerphobic physical context, designing spaces such that people can build an identity within a community while maintaining control over privacy is critical. A site like Facebook that requires people use their legal identity online is counteractive to the kind of identity work we have described here as it enforces a hard connection between a person’s life offline and their online activities, thus threatening a person’s privacy when exploring contentious topics online [13, 18].

In designing a space that supports affinities first, we note that people arrived at fandom because they were fans of a media property, not necessarily because they identified as LGBTQ. As a result, people’s fandom interests, or affinities for a certain media [42], dictated how they arrived in fandom. In an effort to design spaces for identity work, encouraging community formation around a shared love for something, rather than identity, allows for people to approach a space without necessarily attaching tenuous aspects of their identity to the work happening in those spaces. The support

space's distance from a difficult topic allows people to control when and how they engage in that identity work.

However, the most revolutionary aspect of this community was our participants' dedication to putting forward work that would continue to help others. Participants described publishing their own works, fanfiction or otherwise, mentoring LGBTQ youth, and participating in activist events like *LGBT Fans Deserve Better* and attending ClexaCon. The malleability of fandom as a semi-public space allows for a range of activities to take place that might be outside of any one platform's intended use. Participants who had reached a certain level of safety were able to participate in highly visible activities (such as authoring books and organizing non-profit work) while still maintaining access and availability to the community. Our participants were already broadening their community's reach and resources when we spoke with them. What we might consider, then, is how we can encourage others to do the same. These efforts were largely organized in the online spaces our participants described, demonstrating just how powerful online communities can be toward affecting change in the physical world. We hope that by illuminating this community's efforts, we can encourage inquiry into how we might better empower similar efforts online.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Identity work is sometimes a community effort. In the context of fandom, people come together to collectively process and make sense of their identities. In supporting these online spaces, we can consider the ways people might come together to engage in collective support even when that may not be the primary function of the space.

The creative aspects of online fandom gave our participants the opportunity to recraft misrepresentations of LGBTQ identity and imagine more authentic narratives for themselves. These community narratives move beyond fandom, translating to real-world actions and advocacy through constructing a counter visibility. Meanwhile, the selective visibility inherent to this community helped participants find safety and explore their identities without putting themselves at further risk. Moving forward, we might consider investigating other marginalized populations using selectively visible online resources. Our participants come from a specific, contextualized population of users, and in demonstrating how they leverage this digital space for important work, we see lessons for how other marginalized populations might successfully empower themselves through technology.

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