

**LIVE NOW: Assessing “Parasocial”
Relationships Through the Evolution of
the Dream SMP Fandom Space**

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Introduction

Before Youtube was created in 2005, the only common means of being able to see video of those you did not know was attending movies, watching media, or getting some home videos and loading them on a tape. With the introduction of a common platform to post videos of yourself doing anything and everything, there was a new possibility open to the public; to be able to see people doing things that aren't filtered through the lens of the larger film industry. This door opened further as time went on, and Youtube evolved from an individual vlogging site, mainly containing sketches from more prominent creators and more casual videos from those out of the spotlight, into a site that encompassed every corner of the internet, including gaming.

Gaming and videos revolving around gaming became increasingly popular in the early 2010s. Many creators such as Markiplier and Jacksepticeye would post multi-part videos on games that many may not have been able to physically play, or may not be able to afford. Many teenagers/preteens who were unable to play games like Five Nights at Freddy's and Undertale due to lack of a gaming system or lack of mechanical skill were able to now see all of the inner workings of the game through the viewpoint of a creator, something that kept them going back to the channel again and again for more games, or more of the same game.

Over time, these viewers created a bond with the people they were watching complete games that they had interest in, and continued to come back just for the personality of the creator. This created a fandom, akin to the fandom of the DSMP, that would constantly come back just for the personality of the creators playing the games, and not for the games themselves. This further evolved with the introduction of Twitch.tv to the online gaming sphere, a platform that allows for live streaming. Live Streaming is a live video of the game being played, including live commentary that is unedited from these creators that people had been a fan of prior.

Twitch allows for fans and creators to interact in a way that was not possible before its formation. Prior to Twitch, and live streaming as a concept, fans were relegated to commenting after the content was already created, engaging in a finished product, and not having much influence in the creation of said content itself. With the new era of live streaming, fans were able to directly interact with creators, and as such, form deeper relationships than the surface level that were provided by comments on Youtube and social media accounts. These fans were directly responding to the conversation that the creator was having, and the creator could respond in real time to the comments from fans. This complicated and muddied the dynamic between fan and creator greatly, giving more rise to fans and creators having both non-parasocial relationships, and deeply parasocial ones as well.

Due to opening the door to conversation between fan and creator being natural in a setting like Twitch, fans were able to be more fully involved in the fandoms that were revolving around these creators. Following a streamer allows you to be notified when they are live, to engage with them in dialogue through comments on the livestream as well as through notes on donations/subscriptions which they may read aloud, and the act of just watching and engaging in content at the same time that the streamer is. There are jokes that can only be truly funny in the moment, while being in the chat on the stream and reacting in real time without any possible editing or spoilers of what could happen next. Both you and the creator know the exact same amount about the game at hand, both are at the same exact point with no post-credits editing, and are experiencing in real time the same events, creating a deeper bond than allowed by other platforms prior.

With the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, and many teenagers and young adults being back into their childhood homes with no means to talk with their in person friends or

engage in any form of community, Dreamnotfound rose to fame on Youtube, amassing millions of followers and transferring these followers over to Twitch.tv rapidly. Minecraft Youtube hadn't seen a rise to fame to the same caliber since around 2012 with the rise of Captain Sparklez and Hunger Games Lets Plays, and as such, many people who used to be fans when they were in middle school also reverted back to the fanbase, as it was easy to translate past fandom experience into the new age. The ways in which people are returning to MCYT (Minecraft Youtube) spaces, as well as creators garnering new fans that are the demographic of around 12-15 years old on Twitter, and even younger on the Youtube app itself, has caused a shift in modern fandom structure, and modern understanding of engagement with creators and peers online.

On Twitter, the MCYT fanbase boomed. Fans utilized the site to create theories on DSMP (Dream Survival Multiplayer Server) lore, discuss the streams as they happened, and engage with the creators themselves in replies to tweets and via engagement in trending tabs. For a while, DSMP dominated the trending tab on the Twitter app, having frequently trending topics such as just the name Dream, phrases like "HE DID WHAT" and a variety of other phrases that related to the wars and inside jokes that happened on the server itself. These topics frequently trending led to more people looking into what was happening, and as such, the fandom continued to spread. On the other hand, the constant trending annoyed and agitated many other fanbases and people that utilized Twitter, causing the fanbase to forcibly acquire a stigma of being "annoying" and "parasocial" as they were consistently engaging with creators in a way that appeared like friends, not a fan to creator relationship.

Throughout this paper, I will expand upon the dynamics of the relationship between fan and creator and the deep and intricate relationships that the fans had with one another based on

the common thread of being DSMP fans. In order to engage fully with the structure these relationships operate under, one must understand that there is a deep history of both the server and the fandom dynamics that each individual has, and this complexity of knowledge is something that is so widespread and known among fans that it feels like an injustice to not discuss it in depth. The level of constant engagement, the theories created around these topics as well as the actual interpersonal relationships between creators, is something that cannot be explained in any way other than throwing the reader in to learn alongside me.

In saying that, there is a basis of respect that needs to be had for relationships curated online, and for fandom spaces as a whole. For years, fandom spaces online have been slated as inherently “cringe” due to their fanbases, and for the ways in which they engage with the source media. Almost all interests that teenage girls and queer people have taken up have been widely ridiculed online, from the times of Superwholock to the current discussions around Stranger Things and the DSMP. The comparison between the two is commonly made, specifically by Twitter user Karo in this statement, “the closest thing to current day superwholock cringe are minecraft youtuber stans,” comparing the older iteration of fanbases that are “loud” on the internet about their passions to the modern one (Karo). The lasting disdain and stigma against fanbases that were primarily teenage girls and teenage queer fans caused a shift in structure in later iterations of this phenomenon. Social isolation due to the interest forced fans to have a parasocial relationship- in that you needed to be deeply dependent on the creators and your relationships with them to be a true fan. There are instances of people entering fandom spaces just to cultivate material to ridicule it with, and as such, these fandom spaces have been forced to defend themselves time and time again from people who take the spaces they feel comfortable in and open these spaces of comfort to intentional public ridicule.

The work of cultivating an online presence as a prominent creator and fan makes for a challenging landscape to navigate, in that there is a certain level of anonymity that is crucial in being able to safely operate online, and yet, there is a certain pressure to be entirely transparent with your mutuals, or your friends, in both public and private spaces. In navigating this, an online persona can take any form of resemblance to the exterior presented to the world offline, and as such, there is the dichotomy of what one could consider their true self. When put into this framework, the fandom of DSMP operates in a way that other fandoms may not. DSMP fans were isolated for most of the peak of their fandom's existence due to COVID-19, and as such, never had to conflate the online and offline personas through real life interactions that may occur at a convention or a meetup with fans and creators. The two could stay entirely separate entities, and as such, commonly these fans' interest in the DSMP was seen as embarrassing and not discussed outside of the online sphere, as it was easier to separate online and offline than to conflate the two.

Throughout the work of this paper, I will be further looking into the inner fandom dynamics of the DSMP, a specific community that changed a lot of what we know about exiting a fandom and existing within one. With that, my work goes on to shift the narrative around what a teenage fandom is, how it impacts those who are in it, especially those who are engaged and are not of the target demographic, and how these impacts last beyond the staying power of the fandom itself. In order to do this, I will begin by introducing the reader to some terminology commonly utilized within the inner fandom space, so as to allow readers to be on the same playing field as fans and those working closely with the community. Shortly following will be an in depth analysis of the relevant works necessary to look deeper into the dynamics provided by the fans themselves later in the paper. Following this will be an in depth history of the actual

Minecraft server that is being discussed. This history allows the reader to be fully enveloped in the actual work that the fandom is based off of, and as such, places readers in the same situation that a fan may be in, however brief this may be in comparison. From there we will work directly with the interview data provided by those who were in the fandom themselves, ranging from discussing inner fandom politics to the friendships taken after leaving the space. This work aims to allow for a space to discuss the ways in which the participants in the study were impacted by the fandom itself, and how participants went on to further impact the entire dialogue around parasociality and what that means to those who have the term applied to them.

Parasociality as a concept does not have nearly enough work done on it in the modern era, and especially the role that it plays in fandom spaces and the way that they navigate said spaces in relationships with each other and in relation to creators they follow. The work is limited in that it does not address the relationship between fans when in these dynamics, and most of it is entirely focused on the emotional impact a parasocial relationship may have between creator and fan, not between fans themselves. In that, my work provides the narrative by fans, about each other and their relationships and how that plays into parasociality. In my research and my time working with literature on the idea of parasociality, I was only truly able to find a select handful of works that were from the modern era, and they were mainly based entirely in psychological outcomes of parasociality, not the social impact it has on communities. While the psychological impact of a relationship that could be deemed as parasocial is crucial, these relationships also operate in social spheres and as such, need to be analyzed in a sociological context.

My intervention into the field is to fit parasociality into a social lens, in that parasocial relationships in online spheres enable a common platform for community and friendship. As

such, my study goes in depth with the relationships formed in these commonly labeled parasocial spaces, and the way these relationships navigated taking distance and removing themselves from parasocial relationships, while still remaining friends in the aftermath. This also takes into account the difficulty of navigating relationships with people who are still in these parasocial spaces and relationships, and the level of distance necessary to maintain relationships with people after finding distaste in who they are parasocial with. In short, my paper discusses the engagement with parasociality, and the departure from a fandom that was entirely dependent on parasociality as a core component of being in the fanbase. This rise and fall is depicted through the words of those who were directly involved in these relationships with one another and with the community at large, and have taken relationships away from this parasocial landscape and out of the involvement with it. As such, parasociality and all of its impacts on individuals and community is discussed within this paper, providing a new perspective on parasociality as a whole and bringing it into the sociological context.

Terminology

Within this terminology section, I will provide a term and a brief definition or description of said term. I hope that this will provide a base understanding of the terminology used in the community, as well as provide context for some of the inside jokes that will be discussed.

Dteam: An abbreviation for the Dream team, which is the label affixed to Dream and his close friends Sapnap and Georgenotfound.

GNF: An abbreviation for Georgenotfound.

DNF: The ship title for Dream and Georgenotfound.

Gogy/Ogie: A nickname for Georgenotfound, commonly affixed to the end of a person's handle on Twitter to symbolize they are a fan of George.

Heatwaves: A song produced by Glass Animals. This song is also the title of a famous fanfic for DNF, which has over 2 million hits while being on private. Due to the popularity of this fanfic, the song skyrocketed in the charts, and as such, is nominated for an award. Heatwaves is commonly known among the community and nearly every person has read it, and as such, references it frequently.

MCYT: An abbreviation for Minecraft Youtubers.

SMP: An abbreviation for survival multiplayer, a means of creating a minecraft server in which it is survival based as well as a multiplayer experience.

DSMP: The Dream SMP, which is the minecraft server that brought most of the MCYTs discussed to their acclaimed fame.

POG: An emote on Twitch as seen here: . This emote is commonly used to react to streamers, and is well known just by the name of the emote. Nearly every streamer has their own

version of it for their subscribers, and it is a common inside joke among the streaming community.

OOMF: Commonly known as “One of my followers,” OOMF is utilized to talk about a follower of yours without naming any names. This commonly is used to discuss weird behavior of people you know without them explicitly knowing its about them, such as saying “OOMF just tweeted the most fucked up shit i have seen in years” and hoping that someone gets the memo that it is them. People also frequently utilize this to discuss their followers on separate accounts, such as “OOMF on main” or “OOMF on ppriv” when talking about someone from another account that they also utilize.

Mutual/Moot: Mutual or “Moot” as many call them, is when you and another person follow each other and interact with each other in some form. Moots are frequently also interchangeable with friends in this community, given many people are moots with their friends and utilize the timeline as a means of communication rather than a means of following media.

Vouching: Vouching is to verify another person’s space in your mutual’s following list. Frequently we see vouching when someone new is trying to follow a private account, and someone will screenshot said person’s profile and ask their timeline “can anyone vouch?” to which anyone who knows the person will respond with their general character and if they should let said person follow them or not. Vouching is also how I got into the community, as I had someone vouch for me as a person and as a researcher to allow me to conduct interviews.

Twt: An abbreviation for Twitter.

Subtwt: A subspace on Twitter in which a specific fandom operates. There is a subtwt for every single creator, as well as duos, such as “dttwt” or Dream Team twt, “Smiletwt” or the subtwt for

Dream specifically, or “innittwt” or the subtw for Tommyinnit specifically. These subtwts are what people ascribe themselves to to further identify under the larger MCYT category.

Privtw: An entire section of Minecraft Twitter that is entirely operated on private accounts.

Most of the community has a private Twitter, however, there is an ascribed “personality” to utilizing privtw, and the process of vouching people into these Twitters as well as utilizing these Twitters as a means of anonymous hate, or PQRTS, on other people’s public tweets.

Ppriv: A second layer of privtw, which is refined further than the initial privtw account.

PQRT: A private quote retweet, or quote retweeting a tweet without the person who tweeted it being able to see. This is often used to slander the creator of the original tweet, especially if done en mass, which you see frequently on “bad takes” or posts that are distasteful or incorrect.

Ratio/Ratioed: References the ratio of likes, retweets, quote tweets, and replies, on a singular tweet. A tweet has been ratioed when the likes are drastically lower than the qrts/replies, typically done by a group PQRTing a tweet multiple times to make it look worse. This is commonly done on takes that a majority of the subgroup dislikes or doesn't agree with.

Canon: Canon refers to the lore of the DSMP, and what is and is not in the lore officially. If something is not canon, it means that it is not relevant to the plot of the SMP, or was not written into the plot to be considered as canon. Much of what is and is not canon has been up for debate, especially regarding the exact moments of war and peace, as well as the lives system as a whole.

Canon Lives/Canon Death: There are canon lives, and non canon lives, in the Dream SMP.

Canon lives refer to the three deaths each canon character can have in the lore, so for instance, if Schlatt canonically kills Wilbur, that takes away one of his canon lives. This was implemented about halfway through the lore, and the only confirmation of if a life is canon or not is if a creator mentions it. The non canon lives refer to the characters just regularly dying in minecraft,

due to a zombie or something of the sorts. Canon lives are especially important in wars, where there are a certain amount of deaths that can just count as regular minecraft fighting, and then the deaths that are actually significant in the plot of the server.

Discs: Discs refer to the music discs that one can find in Minecraft. They are hard to obtain, only being obtainable by finding them in chests or by having a skeleton shoot a creeper. In the Dream SMP, these are especially important due to their sentimental value. Tommyinnit has a deep connection to the discs that he found when he joined the server, and they are the only thing that matter to him on the server. As such, Dream frequently holds them over his head, and utilizes them to obtain power over him. There were multiple wars fought over these discs, and they are in a sense unobtainable unless they are the “canon” discs, so the reproduction of the exact same one does not count towards the canon fight over the discs, but rather, are just an object in minecraft.

Griefing: Refers to destruction of a base or build of another person in Minecraft with no intention to fix it or refer to it as a prank, typically done with malice. This could be blowing up another person’s base, destroying their home, or anything of that level of destruction.

Literature Review: Theory

Goffman, Presentation of Self

Within the framework provided by Goffman in *Presentation of Self* (1956), we find a theory that creates a basis for analysis of society. To analyze Twitch streamers and the dynamic between them and their audience, we must extrapolate these concepts and apply them to this subgroup. Streamers are inherently actors and are playing a role that is easily digestible as a form of acting, as they continue to put on the performance of a streamer and their online persona. However, this same dynamic of acting and performance is present in discussions of how people interact with one another in the fandom subspace. This also applies to the way that a creator acts in reference to their fans, and as such, is a crucial theory to grasp in order to understand the degrees to which this community functions. In analyzing *Presentation of Self*, we are utilizing nearly every concept within to further analyze the subgroup later in the thesis, and thus, it is crucial to fully address the ideas that are presented.

The ideas presented in *Presentation of Self* are generally applicable to the thesis in that the idea of self being a performance is what all content creators, especially on the streaming website Twitch.tv, do for a job. These creators have to not “contradict the impression, that the role they are playing at the time is their most important role and that the attributes claimed by or imputed to them are their most essential and characteristic attributes,” or, they have to make sure the performance they are putting on is what appears to be their sole performance in life (Goffman, 83). If the impression of the creator goes against their daily activities, for instance, if a political streamer is outed to have a privately held viewpoint that is contrary to what they profess

outwardly, they may lose their entire career due to a single misstep from the ‘self’ that they present to this audience.

Some streamers leave Twitch.tv in order to maintain their own mental health, or for other personal reasons, and turn to either Youtube streaming, or to just making Youtube videos. This however, is not enough, given that “they find their new situation has unanticipated similarities with their old one; both involve a presentation of [a] front to an audience and both involve the presenter in the grubby, gossipy business of staging a show” (Goffman, 81). As Goffman states, changing performances still means you put on a performance for an audience of some form, and switching this performance does not mean you have abstained from the dirty work of putting on a performance at all. For creators, both on and off Twitch, there is nowhere in which they are not putting on this performance, as every conversation they have could be used to their own detriment, and even switching their career paths within the content creator umbrella still forces them to do this constant work.

Goffman also presents the idea of mentors and the impact that working alongside a mentor has on the performer themselves. “Performers often feel uneasy in the presence of a trainer whose lessons they have long since learned and taken for granted,” and in the context of streaming, this can be taken as creators that they model their own careers after (Goffman, 101). Due to how long the Youtube platform has been active prior to Twitch’s creation, many streamers are now able to interact with Youtubers they knew as children, and formulated their careers based off of. The influence these Youtubers have on the streamers of this era is evident, and the interaction between the older and newer generations of content creators can display clear unease on both sides of the matter.

Seeing as the Dream SMP was founded by a group of members entitled the “Dream Team,” it is natural that the commentary on team dynamics that was developed by Goffman is crucial. The Dream Team has influence on all other creators under the Dream SMP, given that the “members are so closely identified in the eyes of other people that to some degree the good reputation of one practitioner depends on the good conduct of the others. If one member is exposed and causes a scandal, then all lose some public repute” (Goffman, 106). Dream is notorious for having copious scandals, and every member of the Dream SMP has at one point had a “cancel” thread made about them. The exposing of members’ misconduct reflects poorly on the other members who may have done no wrong in that instance, because if the unrelated members do not also reprimand the member in question, they too are on the metaphorical chopping block. The close identification of these members under the umbrella of the Dream SMP, even if they are not friends with each other outside of this context, causes scandal to affect all members instead of just one.

The Dream Team specifically struggles with the concept of keeping their private life behind doors, and frequently puts their own inside jokes and experiences on display in fleeting moments, to attract the attention of the audience at hand. This comes to a head in Goffman’s work, stating that “when ‘old boys’ meet, it may be difficult to sustain backstage horse play and the dropping of one’s customary pose may become an obligation and a pose in itself,” detailing a strong parallel between the inability for these streamers to stop their backstage performances when put in front of an audience (Goffman, 103). Streaming inherently encourages performance of a “real” self for, essentially, work. With this in mind, there is a certain extent to which these experiences are too personal to share on screen, or when one shares too little of themselves, thus making much of their online persona seem to be mythical or a front.

By having a team that is led by one person primarily, the Dream SMP and primarily the Dream Team, allows the creator Dream to operate at a higher power than many other streamers under him. Some of these streamers have more experience on the platform than him and more life experience as well, however, he still is “allowed to represent the professional interests of the grouping and allowed to discipline any member who threatens to discredit the definition of the situation fostered by other members,” thus making him have complete and utter control over many aspects of the career of other members (Goffman, 106). He controls who comes in and out of the server, whether it be for scandal purposes or to add new members for more plot points, and this complete control over what could be make or break for a new creator’s career makes him truly the only one able to discipline members, or threaten the discreditation of other members in turn.

One interesting aspect of the parallels between Goffman and streaming, is the performers that are employed in the same situation having a level of companionship that sits in the inbetween of audience and team member. This is especially apparent on streaming platforms, given the copious amount of streamers that seem to know the behind the scenes of the streaming community, but do not intimately know the members of the Dream SMP. By defining colleagues as “persons who present the same routine to the same kind of audience but who do not participate together, as team-mates do, at the same time and place before the same particular audience,” we can see the parallels between his theories on society and the actual functions of the Twitch platform (Goffman, 112). Colleagues, for the purposes of this paper, can be defined exactly the same as Goffman’s definition, and by utilizing this definition we can see that the streamers present on the platform have a level of familiarity with one another, even if they have not interacted with each other directly, solely due to profession and mirrored audiences.

In this explanation of colleagues, Goffman points out that “it is sometimes felt that a colleague who is in other respects a man of lesser power or status may over-extend his claims of familiarity and threaten the social distance that ought to be maintained on the basis of these other statuses,” which is apparent when viewing the subscriber/follower count of these creators, and the need to have some form of class system based upon these follower counts and regular viewership numbers (Goffman 104). When someone with a lower number of general subscribers interacts with someone at the level of Dream, it is seen as almost disrespectful to his status, unless it is an interaction performed under the guise of “helping new creators” in some way. This over-extension of familiarity is present frequently in the streaming community, given the need to constantly network to get higher in the rankings, so that they can make any form of a job out of the Twitch platform.

The concept of competition between these performers that is posed in Presentation of Self is different in the Twitch sphere, but the concepts behind it are still quite applicable. There seems to be a certain level of general comradery between streamers, and this is mainly due to them all having to navigate changes on the platform as a unit. Hence, Goffman’s statement of “colleagues who compete for audiences may keep some strategic secrets from one another, they cannot very well, hide from one another certain things that they hid from the audience” only holds partially true, given these colleagues will share strategic secrets occasionally, but find it a lot easier to hide things from one another that they also hide from the audience (Goffman, 112). The disconnect between individual streamers is natural, given streaming encompasses many varieties of games, and someone who is streaming a first person shooter does not have much in common in terms of branding and fanbase with someone who streams farming simulators. The strategic secrets either of them hides, as Goffman stated, are kept secret from the audience, but in many

situations, are not even applicable to either side of the relationship between the streamers themselves.

The concept of audience is crucial in understanding the Dream SMP, given its nature of being primarily done for viewing pleasure and entertainment of an audience. Goffman's theories on audience are pertinent to the way that the creators interact with the fanbase, and are directly linked to the understanding of how the relationship, whether parasocial or not, between the fans and creators is formed and maintained. The concept of audience as someone to interact with, akin to the examples provided by Goffman of the doctor and patient, or the hosting of a dinner party, is most pertinent to our work on the SMP. Granted, the proposition by Goffman that "members of the audience are referred to not even by a slighting name but by a code title which assimilates them fully to an abstract category" is more accurate, given the lack of familiarity between the audience and the creator, even if it is perceived to be a friendship going both ways (Goffman, 110). Fanbases are frequently referred to as a larger quantity instead of the individuals within the community, so that these streamers can communicate directly with a larger audience, with just one term to refer to them all that feels more identifiable than just "fans," given that is too broad of a term to form a true relationship with this group of people.

There is also the element of fans becoming streamers, which happens frequently in this fanspace, and is mentioned as a part of Goffman's findings. He discusses "a final instance of aggression [that] is found when someone from the audience is officially brought into the team," a replication of this fan to streamer incident but at a grander scale (Goffman, 111). Most prominently, this is crucial in the analysis of the replication of social structure from the Dream SMP creators into the fans of said creators. The aggression is also present, mostly in the treatment of these fans turned creators in larger group events, such as "Love or Host" or in the

rare instance, the streamer actually coming onto the Dream SMP and making a name for themselves. Love or Host is an interesting example given it is a dating show hosted by prominent creators on Twitch, in which one creator, for example Dream, is given about 15 women/anyone of preference to pick from in a style akin to the “bachelor” series on tv. At the end, the women/people get to choose if they love (go on a date with) Dream, or get to be hosted by the channel, bringing in thousands of new viewers. This gives some form of agency to the people involved on if they truly want to date the creator or not, but the show also allows for a litany of creators to apply and join, some of whom may have been fans of the larger creator before joining the game. This is a completely different setting than when they join the DSMP, when they have to be coworkers, and instead, allows for the creator to try to win over Dream (or the larger creator in question) for romantic purposes instead of being coworkers.

On top of that, there is the blatant secrecy in the manner of what these people are like behind the screen, that is teased to the audience frequently, but not enough to confirm if they are similar off screen and on screen. This is seen frequently in “situations where one member of a team performs his part for the special and secret amusement of his team-mates;” or rather, performs an inside joke to entertain their friends instead of the audience, giving the audience a tease of insight into their lives when they are not live on stream (Goffman, 119). This promise of a tease of the secret behind the metaphorical mask is what keeps most of the audience invested in the performance, even when their own dignity as a member of the audience is at stake in these jokes.

Presentation of Self demonstrates the audience and creator divide, as well as how the creator functions within themselves when putting on this performance for any given audience. This performance is also perpetrated through the interactions that fans have with one another, in

that they are their own performers, and are acting on their own. Though the initial framework provided by Goffman analyzes this performance in day to day activities such as going to the doctor, this analysis of performance is exactly parallel to the structure provided by Twitch, where it is mirroring a conversation between colleagues, but on an audience and performer level.

Foucault, Discipline and Punish

Foucault presents the concept of panopticism through *Discipline and Punish* (1977), which we will utilize to analyze the inner fandom dynamics, and the constant policing of one another in spaces that have been deemed safe by those who frequent it. Through Foucault's analysis of the panopticon and the means it uses to function, we can see the mirrors it has to social media's consistent aggression towards peers for their inaction or action alike. This is translatable through the actions that one takes in the space to perpetuate this policing, such as circulating threads for action in times of need, creating threads yourself on problematic actions of others, quote retweeting to utilize ratios as a means of spreading hate, and a litany of other policing strategies to shun those who are not aligned with one's own theories. The policing is circular and has to do with the visibility of each person's thoughts and inner workings, and as such, parallels the panopticon structure, but in the online sphere.

To apply Foucault to the work of this thesis, one must think of his findings on discipline and surveillance, and apply them to the ever changing digital landscape, seeing "punishment" as almost akin to the idea of "cancellation" in the online sphere. The concept of punishment is crucial to the functionality of these inner communities on Twitter, in that "everything might serve to punish the slightest thing; each subject finds himself caught in a punishable, punishing universality," akin to the constant level of watching and policing one another that is present in

this community (Foucault, 178). This constant surveillance of one another as a means to continue to punish for what is, a crime in the community, creates hostility amongst the members, and thus, continues the cycle presented by Foucault.

The concept of power and dispersal of discipline over the masses instead of a concentrated, visible, leader, is presented to the reader through Foucault's work in his discussion of power dynamics and structure that function through the panopticon lens. When "power becomes more anonymous and more functional, those whom it is exercised tend to be more strongly individualized; it is exercised by surveillance rather than ceremonies, by observation rather than commemorative accounts," making this trend of power structures shift into a surveillance state, the direct force of the power, in this case the creators such as Dream and the more influential and popular fan "update" accounts, not truly coming into contact with those that they hold this strength over (Foucault, 193). The presence of this in the modern era is most prominent on social media sites, in which one can experience the constant police state and power dynamic of the site, and yet, not come in contact with the people that set the seeds for this hostility to grow, just coming into contact with the people following this structure.

Foucault also goes into detail about the concrete functioning of disciplinary structures, most of which mirror the current disciplinary structure of social media as a whole, and especially Twitter. In detailing this, he goes on to state:

"This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead - all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism." (197)

This explanation as provided by Foucault maps out the functioning of most of society, and is highly applicable to heavily peer-policed online spaces. Within this, the constant location and

examination of the individual is most present, in that each person's entire online history is easily accessible, and should they make one wrong move, any potentially "incorrect" statements that they may have made in their past can easily be unearthed.

Society has shifted to a means in which people in power must be highly visible, and if they are not, they will be sleuthed out by the masses in a short time. As such, Foucault's stance on the panopticon, and its transition into being the mode of surveillance in general society, still stands true. He states that "the seeing machine was once a sort of dark room into which individuals spied; it has become a transparent building in which the exercise of power may be supervised by society as a whole," and through this power supervision, the power of who is in control has been put in part back into the hands of the masses (Foucault, 207). The transparency of who is in this dark room is seen mirrored in the communities on Twitter, in that the people who hold all of the power are people that are in reach, are people that you can theoretically interact with on a daily basis on the platform. Given this, it makes it more difficult for each individual to not keep themselves in check, as you know that any person who may hold power can witness all of your criticisms and actions on the site and in the fandom, and choose to enact that power at any time.

There is also the aspect of staying in the position you hold, both present in prisons and in the online community of the Dream SMP. There are subcategories of the community based upon what creators you like, and even within those subcategories, there are people who identify on one side or the other of said category. These categories are "segmented, immobile, frozen space. Each individual is fixed in his place. And, if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion, or punishment," making these subcategories akin to the status of prisoners and those who are punished through Foucault's findings (Foucault, 195). The immobility of members of

the community is what keeps the community so heavily structured and policed, people want to stay in their spaces, and are forced to do so through accusations of betraying prior spaces by shifting to a new focus.

Within this constant surveillance and policing of one another, akin to the concept of panopticism presented by Foucault, we find that the aforementioned subgroups are complacent in the upholding of this continued state of being. From Foucault, we have the idea that “the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers,” in that they are caught within and continuing this situation of power (Foucault, 201). This is continued in the idea that “the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so,” given that there is always the chance for surveillance, but this steady eye is never guaranteed (Foucault, 201). These two concepts, paired together, paint the picture of this constant surveillance, that the power is in the hands of the creator, and yet the power is also upheld by the compliance of those within the system to play into the hands of the theoretical surveillance on them at all times, and the power that an entity unknown to them holds. This translates into the sphere of social media in that there is the idea that your actions can be brought back to you at a pivotal moment in your career or life, and that what you say could have been screenshotted and documented by anyone on the internet at any time, thus making you entirely liable for everything you state, due to the theoretical eye watching your words.

Panopticism functions as a strong means of control in the social media era, and Foucault’s thoughts on the way that discipline and punishment is offered through this structure still pertains to the way that society policies one another in the online sphere to this day. Consistent visibility of those around you in a space has led to a heightened sense of justice for the individual, making them place themselves within the panopticon to criticize and police their

peers. Within this heightened level of policing and justice, the area in question becomes hostile, and as such, parallels the prison and the theory presented by Foucault, and enables the replication of policing structures within the fandom itself. The constant policing of one another only aids to further prove the connections between Foucault and the modern online community, and the timelessness of the panopticism theory itself.

Bruno Latour, Reassembling the Social

Latour's *Reassembling the Social* (2005) is crucial to understand the way in which we will be interacting with this community at large, academically. In beginning my work with the subgroup, and in the continuation of said work, I came to find that there was no true larger overarching idea that linked them all together, other than common interest in a topic. That in itself, links directly to the Actor-Network Theory that is presented by Latour. Instead of looking at this subgroup as people directly influenced by one thing or another to be linked, we will be looking at the subgroup for where they stand within a larger network that they have linked themselves to.

The critical lens with which Latour analyzes sociology is crucial in understanding the approach with which we will take in further analysis. In saying that "society became at once what was always criticized as a fiction and what was always there nonetheless as the impassible horizon of all discussions concerning the social world," he addresses the fact that this presumed "society" can explain the exacts of each individual interaction, and furthermore, can be abstracted and specified to the needs of the given argument (Latour, 163). This application of a larger framework onto individuals functioning within the framework is where the disconnect arises; society is the product of its individual functions, and the larger abstract methods of

analysis cannot be applied to the individuals if the analyst does not take into account the inherent differences in individuals. Within this thought, we see the development of the ability for actors to speak for themselves in research, and for actors to function on a network basis with one another instead of functioning under an umbrella placed upon them by researchers holding academia as the defining line between them and those that they work with, and putting theory upon people who may or may not be aware of the theory placed upon them to explain their social relationships.

In the analysis of the DSMP fandom at large, we will be utilizing the framework of analyzing via individual connections to each other through a shared connection to a creator. These connections are enough to constitute the analysis on its own, and could be linked to some larger issue in society, and would be in the hands of another individual. Given that “no sociology can be content with ‘just describing’ associations, and nor can it simply enjoy the spectacle of the sheer multiplicity of new connections,” By working under the ANT framework, I will be providing the ability for the actors to speak for themselves through any form of analysis, and taking the word and experience of each individual actor as fact in the situation, instead of hopelessly gleaning a deeper “sociological” standpoint that they may provide, while unknowing that I am putting that framework upon them (Latour, 259). In that, giving agency to the individual in how they function within society (or what sociology defines as a society) will allow for the true functionality of these connections between individuals to show, and to shine light on the intrinsic nature of community. “As soon as actors are treated not as intermediaries but as mediators, they render the movement of the social visible to the reader,” making the reader of the thesis and the research as a whole able to also engage with these actors, and see the relationships themselves instead of through a filtered fourth lens (Latour, 128). Throughout the theory, it is

evident that the pretentiousness that comes with sociology, in that sociologists tend to feel that a large grouping of “society” can explain phenomena present in their work, is the inherent issue with the field itself, the need to create a scientific reasoning behind what exactly the work provides, instead of letting the work speak for itself on its own legs.

The redefining of social, in that social cannot be linked to specifically the interactions previously defined by theorists such as Durkheim and Foucault, is another crucial part of the theory that Latour provides. Social has too strict of a definition that does nothing but further confuse itself in its complexity and vastness of application, and as such, does not provide much in the working definition sociologists have commonly used.

“We would call ‘social’ not any specific shelf or aisle, but the multiple modifications made throughout the whole place in the organization of all the goods – their packaging, their pricing, their labeling – because those minute shifts reveal to the observer which new combinations are explored.” (Latour, 65)

To define social as the relation between all aspects relating to a specific instance, such as in this example the grocery store, is crucial in understanding online communities such as fanbases. By looking only at the way that fans interact with one another in the common definition of the social, the researcher is missing out on the engagement provided by interacting with creators, and theorizing on the creator’s actions and ways. This level of social goes unknown when looking at common definitions in the field, and is only found when looking at the social in a wider way that is provided by ANT theory.

Further in the theory, Latour addresses the linkage of objects and people, and the disregard for the social links an object and an individual can have that is currently present in the field of sociology. By utilizing the framework provided by Latour, we can see that even when treating the subjects of a fanbase as objects, such as in fanbases that are circulated around art or video production, there is still an inherent social aspect in the relationship between fans and these

“objects.” Upon further translation of the point, it is evident that every form of interaction can be deemed as social, in that they are consistently dependent on one another even if one is an object non functional without any form of outside interaction. The example provided of a fisherman and the scallops/clams that he fishes, in that they have a deeply complex relationship and dependence on one another even if one is technically an “object,” provides deeper analysis into the need to open the social up to objects and the space between objects and individual actors.

“Is there anything in the chain deployed that could be said to be non social, in the sense of pertaining to a world apart from associations, for instance a ‘material objective’ one, a ‘subjective symbolic’ one, or a realm of ‘pure thoughts’? No.” (Latour, 107)

Nothing within a chain of dependency or relation can be deemed as non social, in that they are consistently interacting with one another on some level, whether it be determining outcomes or direct causation.

The definition of an actor is something that is complicated further by the ANT theory’s working definitions. Latour provides the thought “that if an actor makes no difference, it’s not an actor” (130). This, at first, seemingly goes directly against previous statements made by Latour himself earlier in the piece, in that it deems an actor worthy of being an actor only based upon the difference it makes in what is visible to the researcher or viewer at the time. However, when looking into this further, you see that each individual actor functions as their own entity in a larger network, providing for the network individually with each action to be able to be in the network at all. Defining an actor by the outcome that you deem as acceptable is a definition that discredits what the actor may seemingly be providing on their own, and as such, Latour sees each action as defining no matter what the difference made is, as it still contributes to the larger network at hand. By classifying an actor only based upon what you believe can cause difference, you are stripping the actor of its own individuality and as such, going directly against something

that seemingly is a core component of sociology as a whole. I will be functioning under the framework that an actor is crucial in that it occupies the space and is always a catalyst in some form of social interaction, even if that social interaction is seemingly not making a concrete difference in the grander scheme of things.

Latour provides the framework ANT for further analysis of sociological conditions, and spends most of the paper critically going over every aspect of sociology and its wrongdoings. In that, we find the importance of giving actors their own agency, and looking at them through the lens of a network of individuals, instead of a society to put larger overarching labels onto. In criticizing the larger discipline of sociology, Latour provides insight into how “we, the little ants, should not settle for heaven or hell, as there are plenty of things on this earth to munch our way through,” and that a sociologist should not focus itself on the larger all encompassing statements, but rather, munch through the present and the importance that it may provide (140). I hope to continue to go against the grain with this research, and provide insight into the smaller and more important subjects, instead of making sweeping generalizations about sociology and society as a whole, and focus on the individuals that make this research so strong and possible at all.

Queerbaiting and Fandom

Through the work of Brennan, Nordin, Franklin, Schneider, Southerton and Mcann in the collection *Queerbaiting and Fandom* (2019), we find the fundamental theory behind the means that Dream, and by extension the entire MCYT trend, came to fruition. In order to gain a better understanding of why exactly this queerbaiting was beneficial to the entirety of the community, we must look in depth at the profit that comes from queerbaiting, and the ways in which queerbaiting generates fandoms at such a high volume, especially in the digital era.

The idea of gay subtexts and by extension, queerbaiting or writing in queer subplots, has existed far before the online age, and through the creation of the online world, we were able to open the door to community revolving around this offshoot of representation. Queerbaiting has historically been known as the action of producers of content, such as movies/cinema/television, to create queer appearing characters in order to lure in queer audiences, just to take away the representation when the fanbase is large enough. This ties in well with the “bury your gays” trope that is common in media, in that they will frequently kill off gay characters in media, just to say they had representation and then kill the only representation they had. These both play into the pink dollar, the common name for the gay market, as it is a large market for media creators to cash in upon, and as such, adding any form of representation allows them to cash in even briefly, before killing off gay characters and returning to heteronormative structures. In more recent cases the accused queerbaiting is typically more obvious, and more akin to the bury your gays trope. However, “gay subtext was never more than a hidden text which could only be discovered by the spectator who was sensitized to the coded messages of homosexuality,” and this still exists in full force in the celebrity queerbaiting instances that we will discuss further in this paper (Brennan, 10). One crucial appeal of Dream and by extension the Dream Team and Dream SMP, was the ambiguity provided in his identity, which will be later discussed in the analysis portion, and the subtext of said identity that could be picked up upon by members of the LGBT community. A majority of the community following him were queer and teens, as seen by their linked profiles that detailed the demographics they fell under, and many followed him did so due to the phenomenon that “if there’s even the slightest chance they’re gay, the queer community will react, discuss, and debate on social media,” leading to theories on Dream’s sexuality and his relationship with his friend, George not found, to the forefront of fan politics (Brennan, 31). By

bringing this to the forefront of the discussion, queerbaiting was something that was crucial to marketing for Dream, and is still crucial to this day.

This marketing is done in part due to the consistent uptick of impressions that comes with these creators mentioning DNF, due to the fan interest with the creators as a duo. “The reading is still serving the producers, since it keeps fans tuning in,” and thus they will continue to utilize it as a means of marketing until the shine wears off on the supposed relationship between the two men, or something comes out about the relationship that confirms or denies it (Brennan, 27). Additionally, those who have left the fandom have cited, akin to the authors of the piece, that they are “angry because we are being lured to watch with a promise of representation, only to find out that what we were hoping for never was and never will be,” in that DNF is always held on a string in front of the community, just out of grasps, and never to be fully engaged with as a serious concept, only a joke between the two (Brennan, 54). The tantalizing question of if it was ever real or could ever be real keeps the fans looped into this constant push and pull of queerbaiting, and keeps the revenue of these LGBT youth in the pockets of the creators.

In addressing celebrity queerbaiting, the idea of the pink dollar, as well as marketing explicitly towards queer fanbases, comes heavily into play. We have to borrow the concept of Gay-window advertizing, which can be described as follows:

"Gay-window advertising describes the intentional marketing strategy of injecting subtle homoerotic or homosexual cues into advertisements in the hopes of appealing to gay and lesbian consumers without being noticed by—and therefore alienating—heterosexual consumers" (Brennan, 130)

When utilizing the idea of gay-window advertising, we can see the clear parallels to modern queerbaiting amongst celebrities, in that they advertise themselves in the in between of heterosexuality and homosexuality, to broadcast to the widest network they can, while still profiting off of the intensity of the fandom that follows the Gay consumer. Within this

framework, we also see that frequently Dream's viewers further enable his possible "intention to incite questions of his sexuality, enticing audiences and fans to seek to uncover a truth that centers around his sexual orientation," (Brennan, 132) feeding into further questions about his sexuality which will be discussed later in this essay. In this light, he can be seen as utilizing the queer community, and his proximity to this community, to shield himself from further hatred from outside masses. "He was, yet again, motivated by financial or cultural capital rather than experiencing "actual" same sex desire or a desire to support the LGBTQ+ community as an ally," and instead, most of the time, seems to be fuelled by the protection that having this community behind him provides (Brennan, 138).

With this framework, Dream can be seen to utilize queerbaiting and the pink dollar to gain a fanbase that is inherently more dedicated due to perceived closeness of sexual identity, which then further allowed Dream to grow on the internet at the cost of using queerness for monetary value and further stigmatizing and ostracizing actual queer people that are in these relationships. In doing this, he also put his relationship with his fans in detriment according to those whom were interviewed by breaking their ideas of who he was fundamentally, given the fact that he constantly talked to and flirted with Georgetofound, and yet, never came out and still utilizes the DNF relationship as a means to further hide any scandals, instead of as something that is true and founded in reality.

I Tweet Honestly I Tweet Passionately

While interviewed members of the select part of the community that I worked with are mainly composed of people whom primarily use privtwt (see Methods section), there is still the aspect of an imagined audience within the private sphere, as to who out of the 50+ people you

consider close enough to have on the account will read or engage with the tweet. Tweeting honestly is what is expected in these accounts from other accounts within the community, and the writer is expected to show the entirety of themselves without barriers. This is then changed based upon which private account, for some members of the community who have multiple private accounts. Alice Marwick, a communication scholar working at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, goes in depth with the degree of separation between perceived audience and the author in social media spaces through *I Tweet Honestly I Tweet Passionately* (2010).

An interesting facet of this performance of self on Twitter is the idea of who the audience is, and the redefinition of the audience as a whole. “The “I” is constantly redefined as the “me” in response to this interactional commentary,” And the definition of who exactly the audience and the self are is always shifting to match what commentary is needed by the author at the time of writing (Marwick, 116). This translates to the way that one markets themselves in this space, stating that “participants listed favorite books, music, movies, and TV shows to construct elaborate taste performances, primarily to convey prestige, uniqueness, or aesthetic preference,” making most of this self online just one part of a larger performance of self for an imagined audience interested in the topics at hand (Marwick, 116).

Marwick goes on to prove that there is a sense of disbelief in the phrasing of the words said by Twitter users, who stated “No one & I love that. Or maybe myself five min. ago: I write the tweets I want to read.” and “I don’t tweet to anybody; i just do it to do it” when asked of their perceived audience (Marwick, 119). In response to this, users detailed how there was still an audience and it was not just a void, but that goes directly against the lived experience of those currently utilizing the platform. Due to this, I will choose to engage with the ideas that are provided by the current users of the platform, who have differed views on the idea of tweeting to

a “void” versus an audience, as detailed later in the analysis. Twitter users tweet for themselves, and the audience of themselves primarily, as stated by the interviewed users. Within fandom spaces this is made larger, in that they tweet mainly, as stated by the above user, what they want to read, or create content that they want to see. Many tweets will be made asking for some concept to happen, just for someone else to create content around that concept. The audience is what they wish to see, and there is no void to be tweeted into, rather, an anonymous mass that you know will respond.

Within the community, identity protection is utilized through moving accounts frequently, or separating accounts to have different spheres of privacy. “This approach acknowledges multiplicity, but rather than creating entirely separate, discrete audiences through the use of multiple identities or accounts, users address multiple audiences through a single account, conscious of potential overlap among their audiences,” however, the DSMP fandom separates these audiences further and further depending on comfort of the fan with each individual interest within the main account they use (Marwick, 120). Many users do this, and many do it on their main private account, tweeting about tv shows they are interested in as well as DSMP and their general lives, but there are ppriv accounts that are specifically created to formulate a new more discreet audience for anything the users themselves deem unworthy for their main private account. Specifically, in most cases, it is hate towards a creator that everyone is a fan of, or skeptical theorizing that is not approved of by “boundaries” that a creator has stated previously reside within the ppriv account. Within the larger account however, the audiences are able to mingle with one another, and create this overlap that broadens the fan community by simple interaction with the content through a friend of a friend.

The interaction between fans within the DSMP community generally goes against the norms created by social media scholars for what the usage of social media will be. They frequently tweet about incredibly personal topics, utilize accounts to cross into other fandoms and bring others with them, and will create entirely separate personas for the sole purpose to tweet a differing opinion, and yet, they continue to maintain this performance of identity and audience.

Social Media: Millennials, Brand Fans, and the Branding of Fans

Fandom in the incredibly online and vast sense that it has currently, has not always existed. There were fans far before the advent of social media, and there will be fans far after its demise, seen in the fans of sporting events, the fans of theatre and the performing arts, and a variety of other things that are seen as inherently human to do. Linden, a scholar with a focus in cultural industries management, aims to link prior fan theory to the current, and to link the new advent of fandom to ushering in a new era of being a fan not only of creators, but of brands through his work in this chapter (Linden, 2017).

There are many different reasons one joins a community online, or chooses to find a community online, and some seem paradoxical when put in comparison to others. The intention behind joining internet cultures is expanded upon here:

"it was a transformative experience, leading her to believe that most others also experienced the Internet and its networks in much the same way—instead, through her fieldwork as an academic she has realised that “most youth who go online do not look to escape their home context.””
(Linden, 191)

In that, we see that there are two sides to joining the online world, one for escapism, and one for additional networking. In the DSMP, many are joining the community, or have joined the community, during the global pandemic and the aftermath of such (to be further discussed in

analysis). In a way, it can be assumed that most joined the fandom as a means to escape the reality of living at home and in isolation, and to explore new means of community that they did not have prior. Said fans can be seen in the light that Boyd claimed herself to be in, that it was a means to escape her hometown, akin to that of those who joined the DSMP community as a means to escape their own.

Within the framework of the new era of fandom, we see creativity and self ushered in to take the place of prior understandings of retelling and sharing content already created (Linden, 198). We especially see this within the DSMP fandom, where fan creations are what bolstered them to such a high view count, including animations created of the lore segments, and fanfics written about them that are currently topping the AO3 charts. It has been made clear “that being a fan allows young people to express themselves,” and that “fandoms help people discover new things, and ultimately a fandom provides the opportunity to be a part of a community,” making it abundantly clear that the creation of individual identity within community allows for these fans to feel truly like themselves, in an online world (Linden, 196). This was especially important during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic in which many youth were relocated away from their community and forced to stay in generally isolated areas, such as at home with their parents, as was common across the experience of many people aged 14-22.

This isolation also directly benefited the DSMP creators, who knew what audience to target with their branding, so that they could have the largest viewership and maintain that for a long period of time (Asarch). For these creators, it is “important to reach and engage the “right” fans, because there is a big difference between active and popular fans (with “fans” of their own) and fans who may not be as extrovert as their more sought-after peers,” and they purposefully targeted queer teenage fans so as to gain that fanbase of popular and extroverted fans on the

internet (Linden, 199). Teenage queer/female fans are known to be a large fanbase, as seen in the Doctor Who and Supernatural fandoms, which bolstered the respective shows to massive heights in their prime. In that, DSMP creators sought to garner a fanbase that was that active, and ended up creating fans that have fans of their own (many fans even going on to become streamers, prominently Ranboo and Snifferish) who will then multiply the fanbase exponentially, given they have fans of their own (Such as Ranboo, who now surmounts approximately 3.9 million subscribers, and a fanbase of his own, and Snifferish, who is sitting at approximately 83k subscribers).

When in a large fandom setting, the collective identity that one has as a fan is crucial, that you are part of a massive community that are close knit based upon common interests. The need to engage with creators and with peers, and to keep on top of all of the information that has been published about those whom you are a fan of, leads to the intense investment that fans have into a fandom after they truly dedicate themselves to it. This allows for the inner workings of the fanbase to come to fruition, and for the depth of the content to go even further when put in the hands of the fans who morph it.

It's Bigger on The Inside

It's Bigger on The Inside, a work published by Krystal Fogle, a communications scholar, in 2015, brings the reader into how fandom commonly operates in a modern era. Though this work is done specifically for the Doctor Who fandom, the behaviors between said fandom in 2014, and the behavior of the current Dream SMP fandom, are incredibly similar, to the point that comparisons are frequently made within the community as to how they are a new iteration of Superwholock (Stella, Twitter). In that, the behavior of Doctor Who fans can be aptly applied to

the current behavior of Dream fans. The parallels between the fanbases and their age range as well as the way fans analyzed the show, and were highly dedicated to it publicly, makes the analysis apt for cross application to newer iterations of what can be deemed “teen girl fandom” spaces.

Part of this repetition can be seen in the self identification of a fan, and in their community that is formed around the identity of being a fan of a certain creator or group of creators. These people “choose to band together with other self-identified fans to construct a community based around liking a particular artifact,” and in this case, liking a particular creator or subgroup of creators under the larger MCYT umbrella (Fogle, 298). In that creation we find a group or community that is able to function separately from the media they base their community upon, in that the DSMP community operates without the guiding force of the creators that they are fans of, and instead, create outside content to engage with even when creators go silent or do not post for long periods of time. There is however, still a guiding force behind the unions within the community, and that is the consistent need for a common ground in communication and morals amongst fans. “Thus, to maintain membership, group members desire adherence to normal behavior expectations and help to maintain that which is distinctive about the group. They will partake of both typical behavior and also of “inside jokes,”” these inside jokes becoming a commonplace and a requirement for even new fans to know of to enter the community at all (Fogle, 299). In that, the inside jokes become popularized to the point that others know of them outside of the fanbase, and sometimes they become pop culture, such as the trending of the song Heat Waves.

The common knowledge needed to be a fan of a cultural product is crucial, in that the lack of such knowledge leads to fans being outcasts of their own community, not knowing the

history and relevant literature to understand the content at hand. In the DSMP fandom, prior knowledge of the play Hamilton is crucial in order to understand the lore as stated by WilburSoot, and can be seen as background knowledge for understanding the “lore” of the SMP.

In that,

“there must be a base knowledge of the story line. In a broader sense, to understand the story line of the show, viewers must have a grasp of the language used by the show as well as any historical events which are referenced in the show—both real-world events and events from the history portrayed on-screen. Additionally, fans come to view the Doctor and his companions as the heroes of the story. In order for the story to make sense and for fans to interact on a common level, this heroic nature must be understood by all group members" (Fogle, 310)

The nature of the creator, and the history that is relevant to the creator, must be known before a fan can consider themselves to truly be wholly involved in the fan base, or else they are missing entire subsets of jokes and memes due to lack of knowledge. This is what makes fanspaces such as the DSMP so all encompassing. The need to learn so much just to engage with the content, and to need to keep updating this knowledge as content continues to grow, just furthers the intensity with which fandoms such as Superwholock and DSMP take over a lot of the time and energy that an individual within them can expend elsewhere, as there is just a never ending stream of information to retain, and as such, their lives outside of these spheres feel smaller.

It is an Attitude

It is common nowadays to openly “stalk” the profile of someone who is a potential match on a dating site, a friend of a friend, or a celebrity that you don’t know much about. This is taken to a new degree in fan spaces, where it is expected that each individual has all the possible information about themselves displayed neatly on a web page. Through It is an Attitude, Gangneux, a social and political science scholar, discusses the practice of social media checking, and vouching by utilizing these checks (Gangneux, 2019). In analyzing the Dream SMP, it is

crucial to place these social relations across media on a larger framework than just the individual interactions, thus taking into consideration the typical practices of youth around the ages of those involved.

Within the larger online community, and within most people around the age range of this community (12-24) there is a common practice of checking one another's profiles for identification of affinities in politics and other larger issues, especially given the circumstances worldwide at the moment. In that, "practices of conducting social media investigations of potential friends, in particular with regards to political and social attitudes," is employed, so as to "create social and political homogeneity that are viewed as desirable and even essential" in the modern era (Gangneux, 5). With such a large swath of ideas and ideologies present on the internet, and with no prior knowledge of other people you interact with, especially given aliases and pseudonyms are incredibly common, it is expected that each individual has some aspect of their ideologies present on their profile, both for themselves to vouch the moral value of their character, and for others to be able to engage without fear of hidden ideals. "These processes in turn shape social encounters by 'discouraging socially discordant relationships [and] encouraging well matched relationships'" thus making each individual subgroup of a community on the internet function in relative peace due to this checking process, and making ideological disagreements null and void in the modern era (Gangneux, 8). Through this, the only truly socially discordant relationships that can be formed are ones that begin on a negative page, given that mutuals on Twitter and alike platforms are more selective, and those who are not within that group are seen as inherently some form of an enemy initially.

This is especially true in the sphere of privtwt, where the process of "vouching" for one another is the only means of which mutual friends are gained. In privtwt people are more willing

to expose deeper parts of themselves, and as such, are more selective with who will view their tweets, and by extension, part of themselves. This can be seen later in the paper during the analysis section, in the bonds between individuals and the stories that they tell each other. We can understand “these practices which can be understood as ‘vouching’-- the transferring of trust via horizontal forms of surveillance,” instead of transferring the information in a hierarchical sense (Gangneux, 10). This vouching is the backbone of this form of socialization within the community, and understanding the foundations of such is crucial to understanding the community at large. In addition, vouching is done as a “means to form or confirm impressions and to get a sense of whether they will ‘get along’ with prospective friends,” and is done in the form of sharing links to carrd.co, a site in which you can create a website displaying your information, or another means of communication of identification (Gangneux, 13). Many members of the community used their privtwt to link together multiple different facets of the communities they were in, instead of just a singularization of their interests that was present on main. In that, it is even more crucial for vouching for one another, given that there are interests that do not overlap with each other for easy bonding between members, and instead, it is based on the character of the person behind the account.

The experience of vouching for one another and stalking through profiles is crucial to understand the inner fandom policing and the work that is done to keep each other safe through this policing. Stalking and checking others profiles for what and who they associate with makes the space one that is open to any form of discussion, because everyone is on the same page about what is acceptable and has been vouched through multiple other people to get to that stage. Further in the paper we will be discussing the importance of connection in community, and that

can only be found after they check each other for safety to build off of, instead of keeping themselves and others on edge until trust is proven.

Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial Relationships (2010) by David Giles provides us with the questions that outline further studies in parasociality, and thus, outlines the work that is needed in order to further analyze the Dream SMP fanbase, whom are frequently critiqued for being “parasocial.” David Giles, a prominent researcher on media psychology with a specialty in audience-celebrity relationships, situates himself as a scholar on parasociality, in a space that defines parasociality as a complex topic. The definition depends on who is discussing the topic at hand and what degree of familiarity they have with this form of relationships, as in it would change definitions based on if you asked Kpop fans, Dream fans, or a random person on the street. This complexity is due to the natural complexity of human relationships, and as such, makes it even harder to define for the thesis at hand. While this text does not address explicitly the boundaries of parasociality, it is due to the lack of research within the field at the time of publication, and the lack of cross disciplinary research done on the impacts, that has led to this questioning. My study aims to push into this understudied sphere of social relationships, and to further clarify and aid in future studies on modern iterations of parasociality. For the thesis at hand, parasociality will be defined as a relationship between two people in which one believes they have a close relationship with the other, while the other is seemingly unaware of the individual identity of the other. For instance, the relationship between a fan of a creator, in which they know the complex inner workings of their life (or so it seems), and the creator, who only vaguely knows of the existence of fans in a group setting. This definition is crucial in that it allows us to understand the

relationship between these fans and the creators they follow, and to look at this relationship with the understanding that one is seemingly unaware of the other, though they may try to profess love for each individual fan.

The depth of knowledge on the internet has opened the door for parasocial relationships, in that it “immerse(s) us in a virtual social network where we come to know faces, voices, bodies, beliefs, opinions, ways of looking at the world, sometimes to a degree of intimacy that might not even be possible with a romantic partner,” thus allowing for these relationships to form without any other basis of connection outside of this virtual world (Giles, 3). The interesting debate within the Dream SMP community is the reciprocity of this relationship however, and the knowledge on both ends of one another. “For many psychologists this kind of experience is not strictly speaking a relationship at all, because all relationship theory is founded on the assumption of reciprocity,” however, in the DSMP fandom, there is a sense of reciprocity in that Dream, and occasionally other creators, frequently engage in antics that fuel this idea that the love the fans give is reciprocated by Dream himself (Giles, 5). In an example regarding sending letters to a newscaster, Giles states that “if the e-mail I send to my favorite newscaster is responded to by my favourite newscaster, then it is no longer parasocial - it is a relationship like any other, whether ›cyber‹ or epistolary,” which goes directly against the functional definition of parasocial relationships for this paper, at first glance (Giles, 10). However, the advent of social media has caused the interactions between creator and fan to increase exponentially, without any of these interactions actually being fruitful enough for a true relationship to form.

In this, we can see a new form of parasocial relationships forming, brought together by the new age of fandom. We must “broaden the scope of parasocial interaction beyond the experiences of individuals, and explore the way in which media figures are incorporated into the

social activities of groups - as discussion material, or points of comparison, yardsticks by which other individuals are judged,” making the community around a particular relationship, fan and creator, be the primary focus of future endeavors into parasociality research (Giles, 8). This directly parallels the relationship between the fans of Dream and the DSMP, thus making these studies an inevitable further step towards parasociality being taken as a serious means of research within fandom spaces.

Parasociality may be an increasingly complex topic to handle given the definition changing and being malleable based upon who you are talking to, however, it is a crucial topic to discuss to understand the depth of the relationship between fan and creator in modern fan spaces. Almost entirely across the board there are parasocial elements present in all modern iterations of fandom, and as such, parasociality is a crucial aspect to understanding the intricacies of modern iterations of fandom spaces and the concept as a whole has cemented itself in the framework of fandom theory as we currently know it.

Literature Review: Psychology

Before continuing with the sociological analysis of parasocial relationships, I need to engage with prior literature done on the topic. Most of the work in parasociality has been done through the field of psychology with analysis under attachment theory, and how the creator and fan are related to one another in terms of attachment, mainly focusing on relationships that are entirely one sided. Within these studies there is also a focus on the individual relationships between the parasocial figures and the people engaging in the relationship with them, with most interventions into the social side being what people think of a theoretical parasocial relationship in the context of it being another person. This work is still crucial to understand where exactly parasociality as a concept is currently in the broader scope of academia, and as such, will be addressed through this section.

The ABCD of Parasocial Relationships

Within this publication, published by behavioral scientist Danilo Garcia through the journal Heliyon in September of 2022, there is an in depth discussion of the direct influence that creators have on those who consume content by them, mainly in terms of how it impacts the individual in their day to day life. Furthermore, the analysis goes in depth with the multiple different dimensions that a relationship impacts the individual, in how it is affective, behavioral, cognitive, and decisional (The ABCD).

This study looks specifically at individuals and their individual relationships with creators, and the psychological impacts that this has as well as how these psychological implications apply to daily spending habits, for instance, due to influence. In comparison, my

work deals directly with the relationships within the fanbase, and not on the individual impact of each relationship with each creator. The relationships with the creators within the realm of my thesis are seen as more communal than individual, and as such, the thesis is expanding further upon the work that is done here in taking this behavioral change and analyzing it through a community lens.

On top of this, this study, akin to many others that I have seen in its field, see parasocial relationships as inherently negative and look to treat parasociality as something in regards to mental health. When discussing the participants in my study, they may see their relationships as inherently negative and linked to mental health decline, however, there is not an aim on my part to figure out treatment for this as if it is an inherently negative quality. This is where taking a sociological lens to parasociality further differs, as I am not aiming to make parasociality as a whole into an inherently negative phenomenon or space to operate under, and instead, am looking at the community impact and the way in which individuals interact with parasociality communally through the lens of empathy.

“Leave Britney Alone!”: Parasocial Relationships and Empathy

Leave Britney Alone (2021) by Hailey Scherer et al. goes further in depth with the idea of a one sided relationship with a creator and how a fan navigates the space around discussion of a parasocial relationship with an outside party, engaging with the level of empathy needed for an individual to have a positive opinion of a parasocial relationship instead of one that is biased. This study, performed by Hailey Scherer and a multitude of other social psychologists for the Journal of Social Psychology in October 2021, goes in depth with the idea of empathy being a crucial component in a parasocial relationship, in that the individual needs to have a high level of

empathy to engage with the concept initially, something that had not been done in a study prior to this study, as it seems from their findings and where they were situated in the field.

Akin to many prior studies, this study looked into people who did not self identify as having a parasocial relationship, and still applied the terminology upon them due to answers later in the study. While this is perfectly sound for research purposes, as many may not fully engage with parasociality and feel comfortable with it, this goes directly against how I found and engaged with my participants on a deeper level, and is where my study takes a hard turn from the common trends present in parasocial studies in the psychology field.

This study provides great insight into how empathy and individual differences in understanding empathy and relationships factors into parasociality, and how an individual may function under a parasocial relationship to a degree due to their own empathetic functions under a larger scale that was applied to them. On the other hand, this study only theoretically deals with the relationship between people in regards to how they see others with parasocial relationships, and due to the fact that it is a study done through a survey, does not have the full level of engagement into that dynamic that would be required to have further findings on the deep implications of these relationships with peers while in a parasocial space.

Parasocial Relationships as Functional Social Alternatives

Within the beginning of the pandemic, as explored through this publication by communication studies scholar Bradley Bond through the “Psychology of Popular Media” publication by the American Psychological Association in July of 2022, there was a heightened level of online presence in all households due to strict isolation in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Through this, as ventured further through the aforementioned study, the line between

the parasocial and social bonds for individuals was blurred, as both social and parasocial were operating on the same field online, and most face to face interactions were limited. Parasocial relationships, referred to as PSRs throughout the publication, increased drastically during this time period due to the heightened engagement with online sources and the blurring of the line between social and parasocial.

With the work done through this publication, we can apply the functional theories behind the cause of the increase in parasociality to be due to the heightened online presence of individuals during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, and that these relationships were common outside of just fandom spaces. With that, we can further apply this knowledge to the specificity of fandom already having prior relations to these creators in a way that is different from the aforementioned social media stars, and very different from the TV characters that were listed as relationships within the publication. The concept of a TV character as a parasocial relationship is also something that differs from the Twitch.tv format of the DSMP, and as such, forces into question how applicable the data from this study would be in the situation of the DSMP fandom, especially in regards to the affinity for the person of interest in the PSR.

Methodology

Before beginning my work within the subgroup, I went through the process of gaining approval from the Mount Holyoke IRB. This consisted of providing the questionnaire as well as any additional information on how I would gain access, as detailed later in this section. That being said, my approval lasted the entire duration of research, and was crucial in my ability to provide full anonymity to all participants and prevent possible harm to those who chose to participate.

In order to gain access to the subgroup, I needed a point of entry, or someone to vouch for me as a researcher and as a person. This is due to the need for protection from outside forces as stated prior, in that it is common for outsiders to come in just to gain information to further hate on from their other accounts. Luckily I am in community with multiple people from the community from prior social engagements, and thus, already had someone to vouch for me and spread the word about me conducting interviews with past or current Dream SMP, as I was deemed as an “insider” by these people already. Through this, the study utilized a snowball sampling method, in which I started with one individual, and they continued to spread the research through word of mouth, gaining more and more possible people for interviews. I ended up having around 8 total interviews out of around 40 possible interviewees, most other interviews not being conducted due to inability to contact or lack of contact after initial contact on my end. Those who were interviewed are approximately 18-22 at the time of interview, and are a majority white and middle class. They all are queer in some way, some trans and some just at other points in the LGBT spectrum. These 8 are also all in community with one another consistently, and are a part of the same privtwt circle. They however, had previously engaged in

public accounts with the entire community, and closed themselves off to the privtwt sphere after multiple scandals targeted the DSMP public Twitter sphere, leading them to close themselves off more and as such, form a stronger smaller community. These interviews were conducted over the course of June to August 2022, and were conducted mainly through voice calls, or through my sending of the questions to the participant, and then writing out the response. The interview questions that were sent and spoken are available in Appendix A. These were sent over Discord, an application that allows for direct messaging between parties, akin to a third party texting system. The voice calls were also conducted via Discord, and any typed out responses were conducted through Twitter direct messages, and were sent in standard PDF formatting. Many written responses were due to discomfort on the end of the interviewee in calling with a stranger, and these responses were done on their own time and edited by them prior to sending the responses to me.

In analyzing the data at hand, I will be further utilizing Latour's ANT theory, as well as the theories of actor relations presented by Goffman. The paper takes a grounded theory approach, provided by Kathy Charmaz (2014), to intervene in the domain of parasociality, focusing on what is said by the actors at hand and they creators they follow, as well as the community that is formed and the history, or lore, of these communities and subcommunities. The interviews are guided based on a set of questions, and from there I open the floor to further discussion on what the participant truly wanted to talk about, creating a holistic view of how each person experienced the fandom in their own unique way. The questions were mainly focused on feelings towards creators and the bonds that they had between people within the fandom, and many of them stuck with this before delving more in depth with the individual creators they felt most strongly about. Further, in utilizing the grounded theory approach we will

be comparing and contrasting pre-existing theory and content to further analyze and understand participant data.

In gaining entry to the community, it is crucial to recognize the potential biases in this work, and flaws in research. By only interviewing and coming in from one specific subgroup, my work is only able to engage with people who think similarly, due to the functionality of the community in the need to vouch for one another's morals to become friends in the slightest. Due to this, my work is heavily biased from the standpoint of someone who was previously a fan of Dream, and due to controversies later discussed, has taken a step back from being an active part of the fandom. This is true to an extent in that they are still discussing Dream and MICYT creators whenever news happens, but they are also completely disengaged from the actual fan practice of constantly being online and waiting for these creators to show up in Twitch feeds. In acknowledging this, I hope to have worked with this subgroup in its own individual manner, and to have taken what they said as past fans of these creators as fact of the fan experience.

The people that I worked with heavily identified as past fans at the time of interview, and since have distanced themselves even further from the fanbase at large. This placed my participants in an odd location in the larger fandom, as they were all friends that met through the space, and all have since distanced themselves from it. On top of that, most of the people I interviewed were solely involved with the fandom from the Dream team angle, and were focused on information about Dream and Georgenotfound, and as such, did not know much about the other creators other than placing them in relation to the creators they focused their time in on. These fans had ample time to process their feelings on the fandom, as they had already left, and have different views than they may have had these interviews been conducted while they were still active in said fandom. This causes them to have post-fandom engagement stances on all of

the relations they had with creators, and as such, places all research done through interviews under that lens as well. This allows for the paper to be more addressing the departure from fandom and the slow demise of fandom, instead of the active engagement required to stay within.

Another crucial point to address is the age of the participants. The MCYT fandom ranges from 13-25 on Twitter, and skews younger for audiences on Youtube as well. This can be seen in the ages displayed on profiles of fandom members, as many will state “minor” or their age in their bio on Twitter, and the age demographics provided by Youtube. My participants all were over the age of 18, and most were in their early twenties. This causes the data to be skewed towards the higher end of the age range of fans of the creators, which enables more of a distance to be taken from the direct calls to action of the “hatred of teenage girls” trends that happen around large fanbases such as this one. By being above the age of being in high school and the repercussions for being interested in things that are deemed “cringe” and instead, being adults and outside of a sphere where that causes social isolation, the fans were able to take distance from the trends that were specified to direct hatred towards those that were younger and could be isolated further from being involved in the fandom. In spite of this distance many of these people were still engaged with high levels of inner fandom drama, and as such, their perspectives are as critical as that of someone within the target demographic for these videos. In addition, some of the members of this interview group were around the age of 16 when they started watching, and have since grown up and grown to dislike the DSMP creators, however, at a certain point they were exactly the age that was perceived to be targeted by the marketing utilized by the DSMP and by extension MCYT, as around 16 years old is the average age of most people that are involved in fandom spaces (PRNewsWire).

When citing the people that I conducted interviews with, I will be utilizing aliases to preserve anonymity. While everyone interviewed already uses aliases online for the most part, this added barrier enables complete anonymity even from online personas that they use. All aliases have nothing to do with the names that they provided when I interviewed them, and as such, are as separated as possible from the people that I was involved with. When citing them, I will be simply citing them as (Quote by ____). By citing them in this manner, I aim to use the entire sentences that are stated instead of using cuts of sentences and partial quotes. Most importantly, I wish to preserve what was stated to me in the most truthful way possible, and I hope to maintain the anonymity that I promised previously.

In order to go in depth with my analysis, I did not pre-interpret categories of interest at the outset. Most of the questions, as provided by the appendix of interview scheduling, were related to the individual experiences within the fandom, and were quite open-ended for the participants to go off in whatever direction they felt fit. For that reason, my analysis is pieced together from different answers to different questions at different points, as some people went in depth with parasociality for later questions, whereas others started on the first question with that engagement. A lot of the theming for analysis and how I got the answers that were included was based upon grounded theory, in how participants expressed themselves and what they felt was most important; I decided what was necessary for analysis after the interviews took place so that I could center their voices in the best way possible. In order to create a cohesive analysis I utilized thematic coding, and was able to create the themes of isolation and parasociality, fandom dynamics, community engagement, scandal and departure, and lastly reflection on fandom, which will all be explored through the analysis portion of the paper.

History

The lore was a unifying factor across the entire fandom, as many were engaged with it regardless of the level of dedication they had to these individual streamers outside of the space of the lore relevant streams. Lore was consistently being fed through every single stream that a creator did, whether it be subtle and small like the pet wars, or be preparation for larger battles and monologuing evil villain arcs. This all led to the DSMP, and the plots that were happening, to truly take up a lot of time of the people that were dedicated to the lore. This is best depicted through a graph, detailing the overlapping arcs and the important dates all in the span of approximately two years, which can be found at Appendix B.

There is no way to discuss the Dream SMP without having the reader on the same page of understanding just how much the lore alone took up the time of the viewer, and how much knowledge each individual had to hold to be able to engage with the fandom and comment on what was happening at the time. This history is the platform that all of the fans unified upon, making theories as to what would happen in the next war, the underlying meaning behind what someone said in a stream, piecing together small 20 second clips from 4 hour long streams to fill everyone that may have missed it in, or to further analyze what was said. For this reason, it is crucial for readers to have even a brief knowledge of what happened in the SMP itself.

Parasociality is aided by the complex lore of the server, as it requires the individual to engage fully within the space and to understand the depth of the characters, forcing further bonds to these characters via empathizing with the characters and the individuals portraying them. In reference to the psychological studies on the matter, the lore can be seen as the same way in which people will refer to a TV character as a parasocial relationship, and the level of

engagement and empathy required to fully form that relationship and connection. With this level of connection, it causes it to be even more difficult for an individual to leave, as stated by the participants in my work, because of the knowledge that needs to be held to engage in the space in the first place, and the commitment that was taken to continue to engage with it.

In brief, the Dream SMP is a multiplayer server that began as just friends playing, and with the introduction of TommyInnit, became more of a roleplay based server. The server went through a multitude of arcs, but most importantly, was the liberation of the city of “L’Manberg” and its relation to the larger “Dream SMP” area of the map. This liberation led to a war, L’Manberg winning the war, a re-election, the president losing the re-election, an exile and a rebellion under said rule, and all of this resulted in the bombing of the city to the point that it was just a hole in the ground after that many wars and battles for dominance. This was the most prominent aspect of the lore, as TommyInnit, Wilbur Soot, and Dream were the most prolific characters on the SMP, and were all involved heavily with this plotline. On top of that were other streamers and characters that worked in the shadows during those arcs, and as such, involved every single viewer in these massive battles such as “Doomsday” and the “Red Festival,” where all streamers were on at the same time with the same event making it incredibly popular, some preparation streams such as Technoblades even garnering 4.5 million views (Youtube).

It was near impossible to not fully invest in the lore when they were streaming relevant information nearly 24/7 during the peak of the DSMP, as seen in the graph with the multitude of different plot points and arcs all occurring at the same time over a short period of time. The lore and these relevant streams were all encompassing, as you could not miss a day without being severely behind in the smaller plot points. Towards the end, the engagement with lore dwindled as less people were involved in the server and the more TommyInnit/Dream involved lore ended

(as Dream was imprisoned for approximately 3 real life months) and as such, the fans of the lore started to move to be fans of the specific creators.

Isolation and Parasociality

In the modern iteration of parasociality and the idea of being parasocial, we see the intense connection between fan and creator that is typically fostered or allowed to grow in online spaces. The DSMP fandom in particular had the ability to form deeper parasocial connections because of the way that they were labeled from an outside lens, as parasocial and crazy, by even other creators on the Twitch platform. Creator Jawsh directly called out parasociality within this fanbase, and caused the idea of what parasociality was in this context to become more mainstream, further allowing for the term to be known outside of the sphere closely associated with the DSMP. This application of the terminology of parasocial is also due to the fact that many people got into the DSMP during the time period of COVID, when forced isolation was in place, and as such, had a deep relationship with the creators as a means of substituting friendships in person, as said later by participants. Throughout this section we will discuss the idea of parasociality in the words of fans, and the way that they got into the fanbase through the time of strict isolation and how that affected their relationships with the creators at hand.

The timeline of the rise of Dream and by extension the DSMP also coincided with the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, when many people were isolated from other forms of society and as such, had to fulfill the lack of social interaction with forms of media. “It was the constant barrage of content that sucked me in because during the pandemic, I was very bored. And I hated school. So I needed something to distract me,” and the DSMP was an unending stream of content to distract from the life around whoever was engaged with it (Quote by Mila). This also opened the doors to more of the parasocial element of getting into the fandom, in that it was easier to feel the one on one connection with these creators when the creators themselves are appearing like they are your friend, are active at the same time as you, and are acknowledging you as a fan and

as an individual. This is more intense during the peak time of the pandemic due to the increased viewership and the increased level of content, as viewers and fans are constantly engaging with these creators at a rate that was not possible when they were out at school or at their jobs, instead of being isolated from these social spheres and forced to stay at home.

“Knowing both I and the content creator are partaking in the same thing at the same time makes me feel like I'm hanging out with them, and once you add a fandom environment to that, every day that someone is live kind of feels like an event that you're all attending and get to talk about. During the height of the pandemic, this was hugely important because I had just lost all of my budding friendships from freshman year of college, and I was unable to see any friends in my hometown with quarantine.” (Quote by Hunter)

The fanbase that was primarily engaged with the fandom at the time were those that would be facing issues such as the one above, specifically locating the fanbase in an age range that is constantly in motion between two places, and/or are stuck in their childhood homes with no other means of communication with friends and family afar. In furthering this, members of the SMP created stream-trains on most days, in which they forwarded fans from one stream to the next on an unending stream of content, enabling viewers to stay solely engaged with content for hours on end. The parasocial dynamic is furthered by the constant engagement that the fans would have through stream-trains, in that they were not left to their own devices for more than an hour at a time, and could be in constant community with the creators and other fans via the chat function at any time that they wished. This availability, and the engagement that they would have with chat during these times, made the idea that the viewer was their friend significantly stronger, in that it felt like you were essentially always occupying the same spaces as these people and essentially always talking to them. By continuing to foster the imagined relationship between these streamers and the fans as one of constant friendship and entertainment, it further enables the content to be fully invested in on the stake of creating friendships with creators, and those who are in chat are essentially your peers in said friend group that is formulated across the

fan/creator boundary. This then continued to be strengthened by games such as jackbox games, that utilized fan and viewer interaction and engagement, and as such, allowed for fans to truly be a part of the content being created.

While the impact of Covid-19 on the community is undeniable, the other aspect that furthered the idea of parasociality was the forced label of “parasocial” that was placed on the entire fanbase at large. Dream has historically embraced the parasocial label, encouraging it and joking about how he and his fans are parasocial. He tweets things that bolster this as well, such as a late night video talking about how he loves each of his fans individually, and in a series of tweets, tweeting “love u guys, in a parasocial mood 🥰 u guys mean a lot to me!!! I am so blessed to be where I am and I owe it all to you. I wouldn’t trade it for the world and I am so incredibly grateful. I will spend every minute doing my best to earn and spread the love that you guys give me every day” (Dreamreposts). In tweeting out his love as an acknowledgement of parasociality, he puts the label of parasocial on his relationship with fans, and as such, seemingly feeds these thoughts on the fan’s end. Even the fans on reddit commented on this post stating thing such as “He’s manipulating me and its working >:(“ and “Oh fuck he got me Help” in response to this sappy post ([DELETED USER]). Forming such a deep relationship with fans enables fans to be dependent on his viewpoints and their views on how deeply they know him. These views are that they believe that they know him deeper than outside viewers or even others within the fandom itself, and this allows them to have the benefit of the doubt in their own conscious, especially in situations in which he gets into scandals, instead of basing opinions upon the common knowledge and facts provided through screenshots and other pieces of evidence.

The relationship that these fans made with Dream and by extension the DSMP was different to other creators during the pandemic, which then further enabled the defensive stance

that many stans had during any controversy surrounding him, which will be discussed later in the paper. While the need for socialization online was not isolated to just this one fanbase, DSMP fans were fed such intensely high amounts of content that parasociality between fans and creators seemed almost inevitable. Due to the fact that these fans were at home and

“Needed something to distract me. And they provided that service very, very well, because there was always something happening. There’s always a stream. If there wasn’t a stream, there was drama, constant infighting.” (Quote by Mila)

The constant feed of information that fans were given, whether it be social media presence or on streams itself, kept these fans in an endless stream of content that provided a pseudo-social sphere. This pseudo-social sphere enables fans to create a deeper bond with both creators and other fans within the fandom, as there is the need to fully engage and discuss what was happening with others that were equally as invested as you were. Consistent interaction on the level in which the viewer feels they are creating an individual relationship with the streamer and their streams, separate from the identity that one professes away from the stream, is what causes the intense level of parasociality that is defined by the viewers of these streams and channels.

The intentionality behind parasocial relationships is contentious in the space that these fans occupy. While it is obvious that parasocial relationships benefit creators greatly, in that they are able to expand their content and monetarily benefit from these relationships, there is the question of what the creators actually do to enable these relationships, or if they enable them at all. Some fans “think that like streamers and just content creators who make stuff that does create parasocial relationships aren’t like, well, today I will manipulate the teenagers of the world into thinking I’m their friend” (Quote by Zion). The initial intent of creating content for these creators was just to create content, as they stated in early streams on the DSMP, they just wanted to have a space to hang out with their friends in a minecraft server. However, there is the possibility that after their channels experienced rapid growth because of the formed relationships, there is a level

of feeding into this parasociality that they are operating under. Dream frequently tweeted about accepting parasocial relationships, how he loves his fans, and a copious amount of other tweets along those lines, such as his tweet from December 28th, 2020, in which he states that “I’m being genuine every time I say it. I love you and care about you” (Editingrandomly). In that, it could be seen as him feeding into and enabling these relationships, while others on the same platforms as him (Twitch, Youtube, and Twitter) were actively tweeting the harms of parasocial relationships and how they cause harm to everyone involved. This can be seen most evidently in the Youtube video Ludwig made on the topic, in which he goes on to detail how he is not the viewer’s fan, and that they are not close, as well as the tweets by Jawsh that were referenced previously in this paper (Ludwig). To be actively pro-parasociality in a sphere in which it is heavily shunned can be seen as engaging in the thought of making fans into their friends, and can be taken even further when paired with the verbiage that Dream has used as stated prior in the paper, to further enable the friendship between fan and creator to be curated.

Parasociality being acceptable generally in a fandom leads to a strong positive connotation with the terminology not portrayed in spaces where this is not acceptable or widespread. There is the idea that each individual is close with the creator, which leads to a dynamic that is unique to this fandom solely, and the way that fans may identify creators based on their own thoughts on what they are “really like” behind the screen. This leads to even more intense inner fandom politics and dynamics, and as such, a more complex means of entering and exiting the fandom for everyone involved.

Fandom Dynamics

Most of the people that I talked with through interviews had been in prior fandoms before entering the DSMP fandom, and many had been in ones that could be deemed as prominent online. With prior knowledge of how fandom politics work and operate, this audience was easily able to adapt to this new fanspace as they knew how it is expected to engage with others on these platforms and in these spaces. Though, every fanbase does not operate in the same way, and as such, each individual had to adapt to this new fanbase differently. One participant pointed out the necessity of how to make something able to gain a fandom, that “in order to make a fandom like fandom-able and obsessive. The source material kind of has to be bad. Yeah, it has to be shitty” (Quote by Nova). For the audience, this means that the material is something that has to be interpreted into something more tangible and “good” through outside forces. This can be seen in the way animatics are crucial in understanding the plotlines, how many people created fan fiction within the DSMP cinematic universe, and how it generally was only known what exactly happened in a plot drop after approximately 4 theorists went through point by point. This applies to a multitude of fandoms that were listed prior to the DSMP fandom, as many of them have been labeled as generally bad media, or media that is only good through fan interpretation, akin to the DSMP. Fan interpretation allowed for a wider audience to engage with the source material of the DSMP, in that the fans were able to translate fragments of plotline into easily digestible content like 2 minute animated videos and fan art. This further allowed the DSMP to be marketed towards a general audience, as it was more easily accessible to understand past and future plot points than analyzing 3 hours of streams.

Fandom is something that you tend to stumble into, and it never is truly intentional when you begin to like something you may or may not find on the internet. If the interest is there naturally, one joins the fandom and may come and go. The relationships formed within these fandom spaces are ones that transcend the space that is commonly held for fandom, and instead, create deeper bonds that are not translatable into the common social standards we hold for in person relationships.

“It could have been anything like I could have been a cooking page. I could have been, I don’t know just like a normal ass person. And I believe we still would have clicked, it’s just that minecraft happened to be the place where we (met).” (Quote by Mila)

The common thought that friendships online cannot go past the common interest or the shared thought of an online sphere is one that subcultures such as the Dream SMP consistently go against, in that they maintain friendships over the content. Fandom is just a common ground for these people to meet, for the relationships to flourish and grow, and from there truly deep bonds form. Its akin to any of your friends that you know in real life, you come together on one topic and follow each other through all the twists and turns in interests and life circumstances because you have a truly deep bond and connection with one another.

In order to obtain a more long term audience, creators need to utilize marketing tactics specified to their target audience, and retain said audience by following the trends of demands from the audience at hand. Viewers said they were drawn to Dream’s content initially due to his skill set in Minecraft, as many respondents answered that they found him through other people telling them about his videos, stating that “I knew enough about Minecraft to like watch the like manhunt videos and be like, oh, this is impressive,” and as such viewers stated that his ability to draw in audiences with even limited amounts of knowledge was imperative to Dream’s success (Quote by Zion). Because of how impressive his plays in the game are, many people were

enamored by him, saying “Oh my God, this guy’s so cool. He’s kind of sexy. He’s so good at minecraft” (Quote by Zion). The attraction of playing a game well loops people in, and his approachability in videos is what allows for people to feel like they can share this content with others, given that viewers saw his personality as one that attracts a wide audience, and an even wider audience when in a video with his friends. In diversifying the characters that are presented to the audience, filtering them into three succinct personality archetypes as seen in the three members of the Dream Team, the scope of what fans could be deeply into widened, allowing for even more fans to feel a deep attachment to creators surrounding Dream. Through the Dream Team, fans then reached a network of creators that are linked to the group, through both the affiliated accounts on Youtube, and the cross compatibility on Twitch.

The Twitch platform’s cross compatibility was crucial in attracting fans to watch streams from outside fan bases and the larger gamer-sphere. Some people interviewed learned of Dream through his streams with other more prominent streamers on the game Among Us, a hit multiplayer investigation based game that was incredibly popular in 2020. With the ability to have up to 12 people in a lobby at any given time, it allowed for a multitude of streamers to interact that would not have prior due to outreach streams. This caused Dream to be in lobbies with creators such as Corpse Husband, Sykkuno, Valkyrae, Poki, and others that had found success on the platform prior to Dream’s presence on it. This cross platform engagement is interesting due to the individual performances that happen on each channel, and how they play a role in a game while also playing the role of “self” for their independent viewers. The gaze of the viewer that does not know them also needs to be taken into consideration, given the fact that this cross streamer unification is how many streamers garner new audiences and as such, boost their own following count for further sponsorships or subscribers. By presenting oneself as a creator

and using peers and friends as not only friends but as potential advertisers, there is an inherent divide in what is deemed as friendship for true relationships, and what is friendship that is solely performed to be beneficial in an economic standing. With that being said, there is also an entirely different performance taken on within the DSMP itself, as the lore requires a character completely separate from the performances related to advertising oneself, and instead, requires true acting of a role to fulfill a storyline.

Lore complicates the idea of individual actors performing their own role within a social framework. Each character in the lore is heavily based on the personality of the creator, however, there is a distinct distance from the creator that differentiates the character from the creators themselves. A prominent example of this would be Wilbur Soot, whose character started out as a revolutionary that built a country from a drug van, and then died and was revived into a new character entirely. Dream specifically complicates this in that his “character” is one that is seen as inherently evil, by not only the viewers but by the members of the SMP itself as well, due to the fact that his character is a malicious God in some ways. Many members have redeemable qualities, but it is well known that Dream’s character does not.

“But I remember like watching it in real time being like, Oh, wow, like this guy can really play a villain in kind of a like you can tell he’s having fun. And I don’t think that’s a sign that someone’s like a bad person that they have like fun playing a villain. But it is kind of funny looking back and being like yeah, he is just kind of an asshole.” (Quote by Zion)

The performance of an actor in this space is one that is more multifaceted than the working definition provided by Goffman and Latour, in that the actor is performing a character that is in a way, an extension of self in an idealized manner. This performance provides a deeper look into the way that performing the best part of self works, and the duality of performance in online spheres, when a standard of performance is already expected. When dealing with a character that

is meant to depict a story that also is inherently an extension of an already filtered self, there is a dynamic not yet explored; the duality that can be enacted through multilayered performance.

In making the initial content of the DSMP be just friends on a minecraft server, and then furthering that into lore with “characters” that are separate from the person portraying them, there is an odd line of what exactly the performance is in this space, and makes analysis of the person outside of the character even more convoluted, especially in the case of Dream. Portraying such a complex villain on the server led to more and more fans later in their experiencing doubting the level of performance that he was putting on, especially in comparison to his peers who were performing almost a parallel to themselves, or were very clear in the distinction. Dream’s character was seemingly almost the same as Dream, so when Dream was then further exposed for having a problematic past, the character was perceived by viewers as even closer to his actual personhood. As stated previously by Zion, it was seen as the fact that he is just an asshole, and so the character was almost equally as similar to self as a character like TommyInnit’s may have been. As such, Goffman’s ideas of performance are easily translated to the actor taking on too many roles and conflating them together, leading to their own demise in the end, as it just opened Dream to further analysis of his character in relation to the scandals he frequently involved himself in. His performance of his best self was, in the eyes of fans after leaving the fanbase, too similar to his actual self, and as such, even the performance aspects of this were seen as just extension of self when placed in context with all of his other actions. Where other actors had distinctly separated roles, such as Wilbur Soot who very clearly had his role of lore Wilbur and streamer Wilbur, the two having entirely different personalities and taking on different tonality of the voice, Dream utilized nearly the exact same tonality and the exact same verbiage for his character that he did for his own self, and as such, conflated the two

characters in the eyes of viewers, making it difficult to justify the actions the character was performing when it was so close to the individual performing said actions to the viewer.

Community Engagement

Online spaces have an inherent political structure, and the DSMP fandom is not an exception. The politics of the space are tied in with the idea of privacy and right to opinion, in that many opinions have to be hidden between layers of privacy to even be posted or discussed, and as such, the politics of what can be seen by who is at play. This is crucial in understanding the parasociality of the fans, that they have to have a seemingly deeper connection with the creators than others by expressing opinions in highly private spaces instead of engaging deeper with the larger community on these opinions, as they are different based on how the fan perceives their relationship with the creator. The operation style of the Twitter fanbase is one that is performative in public accounts, and more outwardly aggressive in private accounts, utilizing the private quote retweet function to signal that a tweet was “bad” by ratio-ing them. In this, it creates a form of shame for the original poster, encouraging them to delete the tweet if it goes against the opinions of the person QRTing the post. There is an expectation that when someone is “ratio-ed” they will delete the tweet, go on private, or begin to block those that comment on it, as it is a form of protecting oneself from an onslaught of hatred and unwanted attention.

In addition to the usage of ratio-ing and QRTing to signal, there is also the perceived necessity for all players in the space to engage in the exact same side of the political spectrum. It is expected for all users to retweet any kind of leftist news that can help people, twitlongers and threads that signal boost, and a variety of other post types to engage with leftist politics. This is complicated by the fact that most members of the community are minors. As such, these minors are continuing to spread information to further radicalize each other politically, while having no ability to perform concrete political action other than circulating posts and spreading word about

these incidents. This space is inherently leftist in nature due to the fact that a majority of fans are queer, and as such, circulation of leftist posts allows for these people to further speak on spaces that they may occupy outside of the online sphere. However, in these spaces there is a common thread of thought that cancellation of actors on the opposing side of the political spectrum, and causing disruption online, is a form of concrete action. In a paradoxical nature however, there is little to no action done to reform creators after being canceled, unless the creator is one that many feel deeply for, in which case a simple “sorry” is normally enough to sedate any worries about their moral character. In order for a creator to be eligible for a “sorry” instead of a cancellation, there needs to be a massive amount of fans that defend them and “feel parasocially” towards them, and as such, can use this as a defense to continue to remain their fan. This dichotomy of accepting actions when performed by the people they are a fan of and not accepting anyone else being a fan of creators that portray the same actions is one that is so inherently paradoxical that it is near impossible to understand. This however, is a common thread in parasocial relationships. Because these fans feel that they are close to the creators they follow, and think of them as an extension of self or a friend in a way, and as such think highly of these creators and think of these apologies as true and from the heart, no matter how awful they are. Apologies that may just be seemingly copied and pasted, as stated by interviewed participants, were deemed as truthful, even though they were consistently posted an hour after a controversy hit and were similar across multiple creators. While apologies cannot really differ much when written out in an online format, these were nearly carbon copies with some tonal inflections different, and as such, were very clearly not deep from their heart with a truthful apology. This is furthered by the fact that nothing would change after the apology, and as such, it was not embodied by the creator. These were accepted solely due to the fans thinking that their creators

that they were in these parasocial relationships with believing in their ability to change, and as such, the controversy was swept under the rug with a simplistic and frequently reposted apology.

Despite this dynamic of push and pull based on what apologies you accept and who you stan, friendships form easily in these online spaces, especially due to the idea of “mutuals” and the need to share information about the creators you follow. Many people made friends with mutuals on their public account, and then pulled who you deemed as “cool” or a friend to the first layer of your private accounts. In the private account circle is where you see the true friendships form, as many people interact significantly more with mutuals on private accounts. From there we see true friendships form, some stating “I do feel like I have found people who I’m like, Oh my gosh, I think this person is awesome. I think this person is amazing. And I really want to be their friend” (Quote by Nova). From these friendships is where deeper bonds on common opinion forms, and the true inner workings of the fandom are present.

Private Twitter was the foundation of most of the bonds of people that I interviewed, as well as where they were able to express themselves in their true state in regards to reacting to and talking about what happened within the fandom. The relationships that these people had with each other were created and furthered through the Twitter platform, moving from replying to each other on their public Twitter accounts, to being in community on private accounts and replying and interacting on the timeline and through DMS. Most of these relationships are solely on Twitter with occasional discord calls for watching movies together or consuming media as it is easier on that platform, but the foundations of the relationship continue to be on private Twitter. The shift to private Twitter generally is due to the fact that public Twitter had a certain stigma of never being negative towards creators, “because people criticizing Dream were getting dogpiled on stan Twitter a little bit. And I was like, I want a place to sort of talk about my

criticisms, and to talk a little bit more openly” (Quote by Zion). The ability to talk openly was something that was specified to private Twitter spheres, and even pared down more to be in layers of privacy through layers of Twitter accounts, such as a ppriv for an added layer of security and to encounter less people that were not close friends of the fan in question. This was also due to the fact that private Twitters were still in some ways public, as a lot of the people on this private account were just associates, and not close friends, “I remember the first thing when I went private, I remember being like, oh my god, I can say my real beliefs now. I hate Philza Minecraft and I think that guy’s nasty. And like, losing 60 followers” proving the degree of performativity that is still present in a space that is inherently labeled as “private” (Quote by Nova). Privacy and the idea of performance is one that is incredibly layered in this space, and performance continues even into spaces that are deemed private and safe. The first layer of privacy, a priv account, provides a layer of privacy from the outside lens in that there is the actual act of locking your account to outside viewers that may stumble upon a tweet. These first priv accounts tend to have people that may just be friends of friends or people you know vaguely in the community, and as such, there is still a need to perform in a way that is acceptable in the eyes of the community. Further than this is the ppriv account, where it is solely close friends and those that the interviewed interact with on a daily basis, and as such, there is even less of a need to perform. In the first layer of priv accounts there is the chance that friends will abandon you as stated prior (The 60 followers lost), because there is less screening, however in the ppriv the only people that leave tend to be because of something larger than just disagreements on liking or disliking creators.

When discussing the creators in these multiple layers of performance, the lore aspect of the DSMP also naturally comes into the discussion, given the close ties that creators have with

the characters they portray. The lore further tied the community together, in that “once I did get into the lore I found the story really interesting, and I thought it was pretty cool that so many people were making amazing art like drawings or animations etc. inspired by a minecraft server,” making the art side of the community more crucial in understanding the lore, and tying multiple facets of one larger community together (Quote by Kayden). Animation based videos created from the lore have upwards of 28 million views, and are widely recognized by creators as being the canonical depiction of what happens in the lore, including plot progression and exact movements of characters and deaths of characters. The lore comes with a lot of confusion due to having everyone on the server have a say in it (or supposedly having a say in it), so an animatic made by a fan that can analyze all of these complex plots allows for the lore to be explained in a more concrete way, and clarifies any remaining questions that fans may have after the stream is complete. By engaging the fans in the actual creation of the lore and the accurate depictions of the lore, it allows fans to feel truly present in the creation of the server and the relevant plotlines. Reviewing what happens in streams and piecing together bits and fragments of other streams to lead to the possible ending of that lore arc allows fans to be the ones who change the narrative, making some aspects more important than others based entirely upon what the fans deem as entertaining and engaging. This can be most prominently seen in the importance that every single Tommyinnit Exile stream had, as he was communicating directly with the viewers as if they were the inside of his thoughts while he was in solitary confinement, engaging the fans in a way that truly placed them within the server and the lore. This enabled parasociality further by really truly engaging the fans in the creation of what they are a fan of, making them more important than prior.

The DSMP's lore allowed for the staying power of many fans, given the ability to theorize on what will happen in the future, and the ability and encouragement to analyze the past of the SMP as well. The lore was so expansive and intricate that it caused fans to have to recap before they entered, some stating "I remember watching hours of summary videos on Youtube trying to catch up on lore from the very beginning," marking the lore as a starting point for Youtube popularity and cross platform content creation (Quote by Ivy). There has been upwards of 100+ hours of lore posted on Youtube and in clipped Twitch archives, allowing a new fan to have hours upon hours of content to watch and catch up on, as well as a multitude of loose ends to theorize upon. These loose ends furthered the ability for fans to connect with one another, they were forced to engage with the community in order to further their understanding of character arcs and the accepted truth about each individual involved in the lore at hand. The humor provided by the lore also proved to be crucial in fan relations, "there was just enough of the like, roleplay element, even though it was very silly, and they weren't taking it seriously in the way that like, Wilbur did," making the entire community the ability to engage in the lore to the degree that they see fit, whether it be only the comedic lore or the wars and political entanglements that also came with the server (Quote by Zion). In that, multiple sides of the fanbase were able to coincide on the ideas provided by the plot, and allowed for further relationships to form in the act of rewriting and theorizing upon the possibilities that were provided in the content. Providing the viewer with the ability to pick and choose what lore to be invested in allowed for a wider scope of viewers to be interested in the SMP, further enabling the community to expand and accept new members in on the basis of necessity of engagement to understand the plot and lore that may have looped them into the DSMP fanbase in the first place.

In addition to this, there is also the characterization of these real people into the mold that they fit in the audience's mind outside of their characters, and outside of the self they present when streaming. "I was kind of like, yeah, I'm treating them like fictional characters because, like, for me at least, you can never really know them," and that form of fictionalization was easier to stomach than the idea of not truly knowing a person (Quote by Zion). This led to the development of fan theories of the lives of creators outside of streaming, which was especially evident in the DNF fanbase and the private Twitter sphere, in which they speculated on Dream and George's relationship as well as George's personality outside of the screen. This disconnect causes issues:

"And like, as a result, you're in love with this fantasy version of them that you've invented through the lack of transparency. And that's kind of what the social, the parasocial relationship, I guess for me, is about. [It's about] Finding this creator and projecting everything you've ever wanted on this person who may not be that person [that you formed]." (Quote by Nova)

Through the creation of this second self, the fantasy version of these creators, the viewer makes the most idealized version of a person, not a character, and as such can be more inclined to take their side in negative situations, as well as defend them due to their perceived knowledge of the "true" attitude these creators have. This coincides with the idea that watching the interactions between creators allows viewers to further understand how they interact in a space, akin to analyzing an actor based on the performance he gives with peers.

"It makes me feel like I'm learning more about them as people, like "so-and-so has these tendencies and he feels a certain way when so-and-so does such-and-such." and to be brutally honest, I used to gossip about their friendships and how maybe x did something y and z, due to certain people's reactions stuff like that," (Quote by Hunter)

This is a common thread in the fanbase, in that the gossip around the relationships between creators is a driving factor in creating private Twitter accounts for most fans, as they can keep their more "hot takes" behind the privacy that that account provides. The most popular usage of a

privtwt was to discuss DNF, or Dream Not Found, the combination of Dream and Georgenotfound, and their supposed relationship that garnered a high amount of fan involvement and attention. Theorizing on these relationships and what the creators are like outside of the self that they present, making them into an easily malleable character, further aids the concept of parasociality. It enables the fan to feel that they have a deep bond with the creator that they have characterized, because they are the only one who has characterized them in this way, and as such, they know them in a deeper way than others may. In that, we see deeper and deeper levels of parasociality as we continue into the relationship that many may have imagined between Georgenotfound and Dream, as they feel they have a deeper understanding of the parties than others may.

With that, the performance that is displayed by Georgenotfound and Dream is one that requires a slightly different approach. The way in which these two men perform queerness in the eyes of fans, specifically with one another, to seemingly appeal to their queer audience according to said fans, is reminiscent of a multitude of other performers looking for the pink dollar in the market space. Queer fans are well known as being dedicated to their fanbase in a way that many others cannot be, in creating constant fanworks and buying into fanbases in a large way. Fans were able to opt into the phenomenon of this couple due to their perceived queerness and the fact that they consistently provided possible content to theorize further on (Fogle, 299). Part of the appeal that George provided was his complexity in presentation, “My obsession with George really came from me being like, he’s a lab rat for me to like, unpack, like the potential of him, maybe being closeted, or something like he might be closeted and seeming like. You could figure out what was going on in his head” (Quote by Zion). The ability to theorize on what his sexuality was and who he was behind the mask enticed people, in that viewers believed he presented

himself as a private person and yet was consistently perceived to be flirting with and being flirted with by this seemingly extroverted man. In that, the flirting was further defined as flirting by the fans who fed into the various created theories, except for situations in which it was clear that the two creators were making reference to their “ship dynamic” or the fact that people ship them. This ship was sometimes what drove fans into creating accounts to interact with the media, thinking “When he jokes about like kissing his best friend, even if he doesn’t mean it, like consciously, I feel like he might mean it subconsciously. And that like kind of sparked it all” (Quote by Zion). The prevalence of this ship as something to drive a fan to create an account for speculation purposes further pushed the engagement with the content, and as such, further pushed profits. The creators were, from the fan’s perspective, fully conscious of the pull that the speculation had on fans, and as such, utilized it to cover any possible issues by diverting attention.

The most complex topic to me was the idea of “boundaries” that creators set that would not be able to be crossed, even for valid criticisms. The act of setting a boundary in regards to perception of self online is interesting, in that they are allowing for discussion around topics that were previously labeled as taboo, and then putting a label of it being acceptable on top of said taboo subject. A strict boundary that is discussed a lot is Ranboo’s in which he states that no one is allowed to discuss his friends and his relationships with his friends (Smp-Boundaries).

“It’s actually especially funny given the like, boundaries tweets that you see about these people. And it’s like, oh, you have to respect their boundaries. You can’t talk about this versus like, the boundaries will be like, Don’t talk about my friends not liking me. And I’m like, okay, well, I hate to break it to you but people are going to talk about that anyways.” (Quote by Nova)

The boundary discussed prior is one discussed frequently due to perceived drama between Tubbo and Ranboo, and is just an example of a boundary that comes into discussion frequently as a prime example of the oddity of boundaries in general. Boundaries are especially present within

the specific relationships of the Dream Team as well, especially in the idea “that they did this psychopath move of being like, Please ship us, please draw me fucking my friend in the ass,” which was an explicit boundary from Dream himself (Quote by Zion). This egged on shippers and allowed Dream to like explicit art on his public account, because it was under the guise that it was a boundary, without having to publicly come out and state that he enjoyed/appreciated fan art of him and his friends having sex. When leaving the fanbase this boundary becomes more odd to look back upon, given the fact that it is explicitly allowing people to draw porn of your friends. “I feel like him being like “it’s okay to draw me in gay porn” is not as much of a slay boss moment, as like, we may have thought. I don’t know. I feel like the outside world can totally see that. He’s like, totally pulling those strings,” and utilizing boundaries that creators set as a further way to endorse the queerbaiting side of his marketing methods (Quote by Nova). The performance of the act of enabling people to engage with this side of his public identity, in that it was Dream actively liking fan art of him having sex with his friends on his art account, pulled in more fans on the part of continued queerbaiting.

Frequently Dream and Georgenotfound would joke about DNF, Dream tweeting “BUY MY NFT” with a screenshot of the word DNF, or tweeting “all these people that hate on the dteam community for having toxic shippers, like. I am the toxic shipper. It’s me. Hello I joke about shipping myself with my friends. I’m also toxic. It’s ME. eat shit but also you’re perfect the way u are you little munchkin hater ily” (Smith). The consistent bolstering of the fan theories of their relationship with tweets about said fictional relationship allowed for further theorizing, and as such, allowed for the duo to profit more about theory on their livelihood and relationship with one another. Dream continued to tweet a variety of tweets regarding their relationship, all circulating around the ship name DNF, or their corresponding colors of blue and green, which

from the perspective of interviewed participants, was a means of further using the dynamic to boost audience engagement. These all led to the word of DNF being spread outside of the sphere of specifically fans, and became a crucial form of marketing to get new fans into the fandom, as DNF would trend on Twitter, and people would circulate Tiktoks about the colors blue and green together. “I asked J why they (Dream and George) were popular, and I specifically asked if they were gay (literally “why are they popular? Are they gay?”), to which she responded “yes, sort of,”” which was a common tactic of getting potential fans into the topic, as the questioning associated with queerbaiting drew in many people from similar fanbases (Quote by Hunter). DNF generally and their relationship to one another was something that transcended the fanbase, and as such, was utilized by fans as a means of pushing the negative commentary on Dream to the wayside, and to pull people back into the fanbase even after what was believed to be egregious actions on the part of the creators.

After the cyclical nature of content and scandal made itself evident, interviewed fans expressed that it became clear to the audience that what was given to them was mainly done for marketing tactics, and it was not genuine action on the part of the actors at play. “In the days after that, he had been like, making a bunch more content seeming in a big mood, and in a big, good mood,” which was a common thread that immediately after any scandal, a stream of content would come out to cover the ending bits of the fallout from said scandal (Quote by Zion). In a particularly strong absence of content and lack of communication upon when said content may possibly come out, the viewer is left with only the theoretical relationships, making the viewer feel that instances that seemed to be queerbaiting and content dumping were significantly more egregious. The audience then believes that they are less close to the creators than previously thought, that these creators are just making a profit and not being transparent about it,

and as such, the exit from the fandom becomes an easier and more obtainable thing for each individual to strive for.

Scandal and Departure

Exiting the fanbase was a slow process, a buildup of reasons mainly circulating around the creators that fans followed. This has caused Dream's views to drop from around 56-31 million per video in early 2022, to 3.6 million on his most recent video in 2023, with his tweets generally getting lesser engagement overall in likes and retweets in comparison to his earlier tweets (Youtube, Dream). Dream was a central driving force behind most of the people I interviewed leaving, as he continued to accumulate offensive charges, from cheating in a minecraft speedrun to grooming minors. I will take some time here to detail the litany of issues that Dream had, before listing how they impacted the fanbase and what were the driving points of leaving.

Dream frequently faced scandal, for the entire duration of his career so far. This came with a standard set of responses, coming from within the fanbase where fans would defend, some fans would separate themselves from the situation, and some would "wait on Dream's response" until they made a decision. In this, the response depended mainly on what he was accused of, as cheating in minecraft did not garner the same type of response from fans and outside sources as his racist actions or grooming of minors. All of this then led to the longform apology issued on one of his side accounts, either in the form of multiple tweets or a screenshot of a notes app post. Fans frequently took his side after the issued apologies, as in their eyes he was seemingly genuine that it would not happen again, given most of the especially awful accusations were from his past and not his current state, and time and temporality is a crucial component as it gives the idea of change from past actions. His apologies tend to follow the same framework as stated above, as fans could analyze and claim that he had moments of "growth and change."

As time proceeded, creators were forced into the spotlight mainly due to the constant occupation of the trending tab on Twitter, where the fanbase had a tweet trending near daily (CantadoraR). This spotlight also forced controversy into the public, and those who may have aligned with the LGBT fans due to shared identity and values were now able to take stances against Dream, and as such, against the entire fanbase. “It’s not fun staning someone who is the enemy of the side of the internet that cares about how other people/how minorities specifically are treated,” and that caused great rifts in the way people were able to present themselves online due to being behind a creator that was so commonly hated (Quote by Hunter). The internet would stand against Dream even when he was in the shadows and not as well known for the actions that he was seen to perpetuate, given the stigma that was placed upon him and his fanbase due to their demographic. In opposition to the demographic of people going against Dream solely for the stigma placed upon his fans, were the people that went against him due to his political beliefs not being in line with the leftist side of Twitter, as seen most prominently in his debate with Hasanabi, a prominent leftist Twitch streamer. Fans, who were predominantly leftist and queer, were ostracized by the community they align with most by defending Dream, and as such had defense of Dream being their only alignment within a community. One of the defining moments of this was when Dream streamed with HasanAbi, a leftist political streamer who frequently discusses politics on his Twitch streams, and is well known for how vocal he is against many republican ideologies.

“Not only someone smarter than him, but also like, a man who’s older and smarter and more masculine than him, who’s also more progressive than him was also very interesting. Because Dream was always getting scolded by his teenage girl fans who are more progressive than him. And I can imagine mentally, it was very easy for him to not take those opinions very seriously.” (Quote by Zion)

The HasanAbi stream allowed viewers to see Dream in a context he had not been in prior, one where he was being actively interviewed by an outside source. (HasanAbi’s stream, as cited in

the works cited, is one of the earliest direct interviews that Dream has. This is also one of the first interviews he did on a topic that was controversial, such as racism and political ideology. Since revealing his face, the amount of interviews has increased greatly, as he now does in person events.) In the situation at hand, when on Hasanabi's stream, he was placed in the position of the one being interviewed and questioned, instead of the one taking over the conversation at hand. This goes against the perception of the fandom in that Dream would frequently lead his friends and lead the conversation at hand, as he could edit and shape the conversation in the way that he wished. Many times that he was featured on another stream it would be on the stream of someone he essentially employed through the Dream SMP, and as such, had the power to be the "smartest person in the room." By being the smartest in the room, fans were able to feel that he was correct and feel closer to him in moments that they may have been uncertain about a situation, as they could believe Dream because of his perceived intelligence on all topics. Zion detailed this in the interview I conducted with them, in which they went further into detail with how he was perceived to be consistently the smartest person in the room because he could be, and that this was not tested further with any form of legitimacy by any of his friends. Fans believed that the comments that they made directly to Dream about his political ideologies and what he professed online could change his opinion, and that the views that he garnered from Twitter could change his mind. This felt more true over time to fans, due to his Pride merch releases and his variety of tweets professing allyship made fans believe they were inherently closer to the creator than others as they were able to influence him away from his past of being a Republican in Florida, and as such, furthered perceived parasociality.

The linkage between Dream's lack of improvement politically and the decrease in viewership also was deeply linked to the way that viewers felt about him on Twitter and in larger

social spheres. His actions translated to everyone who even knew his name, given that he trended frequently on Twitter for whatever he was doing, good or bad, and as such would give other people rise out of what he was doing and if it was largely acceptable. In that, he continued to do the same things that he did when he was being deemed highly problematic, as fans stated that they “feel like you changed a little bit, but definitely not enough to like, make me believe that he’s not making those jokes behind the door, that we don’t see. Like the moment he gets off stream that he’s not making jokes at all of our expenses” (Quote by Nova). The lack of trust in him to be a good human being, and to respect the identities of his fanbase, led to the fans having a diminished ability to defend his perceived actions. When faced with a continuous stream of problematic behavior from past and present, it becomes less and less believable to a fan that the creator is actually learning from all the apologies that they are issuing, and that dynamic impacted Dream’s credibility greatly. In that, many fans that were actually looking deeply into what he was doing were immediately affected by the way that his actions constantly contradict themselves in both past and present. This, paired with the fact that his content was declining and more people were able to leave the house and socialize, caused the demise of the peak of this fandom as seen by the numbers that dropped drastically on both Twitter and Youtube.

To go further in depth on his responses to any form of political commentary made about his past, we must address his apologies and the repetitive nature that they took on over time. Apologies tended to be a few paragraphs on pastebin, issued about 12 hours after the fact of the initial drop of a scandal. That was standard, and for fans the continuous apologies seemed to be ingenuine as time continued.

“Because with hindsight you realize that Dream’s, and sort of the Dream Team’s, constant apologies were not really genuine. Because at the time I would have felt like oh, these guys are getting called out for stuff but they’re making excuses for themselves, and

they're not apologizing for everything and they're ignoring some of the things they're being called out for" (Quote by Zion)

When issuing apologies for a wide reach of associated scandals, the consistent reissuing of nearly the same apology became more apparent, and said apology became muddled by the amount of situations in which the apology was being applied to. While analysis of these apologies was common in the wider community, given they were apologies that were issued due to the fact that a prominent creator had done something deemed problematic by fans, the apologies were taken at face value until after the fact for most. The more complex matter, and one that was even obvious while these fans were active fans of Dream and his extended MCYT circle, was the cyclical nature of content creation after a scandal dropped.

"In that following week, all of Dream's emotionally exploitative and manipulative patterns as a content creator became so obvious. Fury, deflection, distractions and lovebombing? Like clockwork, he'd carefully repeat the excuses MCYTwt anxiously made up for him while they were waiting, like they were the truth." (Quote by Hunter)

His constant regurgitation of the "excuses MCYTwt anxiously made up for him" was something that was jarring for me as a researcher to witness. Utilizing the consistent excuses made by the audience caused fans to feel further engaged in parasociality with Dream, as he was truly listening to them and reflecting on what they say in issuing these apologies. This, after the fact, was seen as laziness on the part of Dream by fans, given the fact that it appeared that he utilized the same exact excuses that the fandom made for him instead of truly reflecting. By utilizing their verbiage and their responses, fans were brought closer in on his performance as an actor in the space, and were seemingly backstage with him for a time in his reflection and learning period after the exposing and scandal. This, in combination with his increased engagement generally after a particularly bad scandal, led to even further parasociality on the side of the fan.

Within the fandom there is also the divide of whether or not leaking information, or leaktwt, is valid to interact with or gain information from. Many people are divided on this, as

the true identity of and information surrounding the anonymous user “Manatreed” came solely from Leaktwt information but was a crucial part of the revealing of Dream’s actions and his sheltering of an abuser. The Manatreed scandal was a scandal in which it was revealed that Dream had housed a perpetrator of sexual assault in his house, and the information for this was done entirely in the subtwitter of Leaktwt, and then spread to the larger fandom when proven true. Information included court documents and Dream’s legal address, and as such, many fans discredited it due to where the information came from. Due to the controversial stance that leaked information, especially government documents and anything that could be associated with locating Dream or what his face looked like, had in the overall fandom, fans saw this information as invalid as it was coming from a place of people who seemingly did not take the boundaries of Dream into mind when coming about this information in the first place. Leaktwt is shunned in public Twitter spaces, but private Twitter is more open to information that comes from that side of the fanbase, as it is okay to engage in heavier levels of discourse on private accounts than public accounts. This subtwit is comprised of people who seek out private information on these creators, such as addresses, and prior to Dream’s face reveal, what he looked like alongside other masked creators such as Ranboo. On the topic of face reveals and the reaction of fans post reveal, I believe that there should be some future work on the topic to fully engage with the responses from fans. My work was placed before the face reveal, though my writing and analysis was done after, and as such, I do not have much from the fans themselves to work with in the post reveal state. With that being said, the goal of many involved in leaktwt was to create a deeper level of understanding, and is akin to going backstage and seeing the other side of the persona that the creator is putting on. “Now that I’m like, I’ve been part of this community, I’m like, Holy shit, I totally get it. It’s about the knowledge having, like why would leaked even

exist? Because that's the one step further" – the step further that enables a connection that is perceived to be "deeper" than Dream's relationship with many other fans, because said person truly knows more about a creator than any other fan could possibly know (Quote by Nova). The space between what is real and what is fake in leaktwt is a space that cannot be adventured within the bounds of my research, as none of those interviewed were explicitly within leaktwt, and only engaged with information from that subsect during times of intense pressure in scandal. From the information gained through leaktwt that was then pushed to the public, some of the most prolific scandals that Dream was in came to be, and as such, it opened the doors to general Twitter knowing about his past in depth with evidence, and led to more people joining a mass exodus from the fandom.

The multitude of scandals that Dream was seen to be involved in, or scandals that were dragged up from his past, is the driving force behind the exodus that all the fans I interviewed had from the community. Due to the community being predominantly female/queer fans, many of these events hit directly at the identity and aligned identity that these fans had. Within the Manatreed discourse, there was a layer of not engaging with leaktwt, and as such, following the description and explanation provided by Dream.

"There's other people who said, no, I don't fucking want to give up my moral pretense. Like, its not real... this is like a ploy by leaktwt to make us join them. Because... in order to verify this is real you have to give up your morals and say that you're going to join leaktwt and look at all their shit." (Quote by Nova)

Leaktwt is a common thread amongst the issues that are present in the fanbase around leaving and where evidence against Dream comes from. While we may have already addressed leaktwt directly in how it functions in relation to the larger Twitter community, the idea of boundaries and the way that it operates in each subsection is something that needs to be addressed to fully encompass how those who engaged with leaktwt navigated these spheres. As leaking information

about creators is almost always explicitly listed as not acceptable in their boundaries, engaging with leaktwt in any way is a means to get yourself entirely shunned from most of the community. The Manatreed incident changed the way many think about leaktwt however, as “manatreed was the one thing I absolutely did not anticipate. And it was fucking crazy. That was so egregious that I just could not overlook it” (Quote by Mila). The degree of accusations made against him caused people to have to look into leaktwt, and as such, to find what they perceived to be the truth about this creator. In going against boundaries in any way, these fans were entirely separated from the fandom regardless of if they wished to rejoin again after this scandal, though many did not wish to rejoin after learning of what Dream had done.

In addition to these constant scandals, Dream and his associates (The Dream Team) continued to have dwindling amounts of content. For months on end none of his closest friends would make any kind of Youtube videos, and Dream himself never streamed, “And if you’re not in constant interaction with the person who you’re parasocial with, I guess you start, like, you stop idealizing them, you start seeing like the rest of like, what everyone else is seeing” (Quote by Nova). The lack of content that is produced from creators leads viewers to a different form of interaction, and instead forces fans to interpret what they are doing based on tweets and interactions sourced from outside sources, like “DTUPDATES” accounts, which update fans on any kind of interaction these creators have, whether it be liking a post or appearing in the background of a video. With such an intense lack of content, fans were forced to take a step back from the intensity and constant occupation with people whom they were parasocially connected with that came with the early stages of the fandom, and to look back upon it with either a critical lens or fondness. Depending on what they did during this content drought, there could be an intense distance from the creators that these fans previously felt close to. The distance from the

creator creates a level of tension within the fanbase that is palpable, in that the fanbase is divided amongst people who have faith the creators will continue to upload and hold themselves to the standard that is expected of them after something so dramatic as the multiple scandals they went through, and those who believe they are just doing the same repetitive standard they did before. Within this, you see camps of people who begin to doubt everything these creators did, banding together to convince friends and peers of the same thoughts they may have come to, and as such, creating an exodus of sorts.

An additional aspect of the exodus from the fandom was seen to be, by participants in the study, the lifting of a lot of protocols that prevented people from leaving their social isolation. Mental health was marked as a strong cause for many people's level of engagement with these creators, given that the Dream SMP was seen to profit on the decreased level of socialization in the pandemic, and the increased level of mental health issues that came alongside that. In making themselves and their content consistently available, these creators were perceived to create a net profit on the need for people to have some form of interaction, even if it is one-sided through a chat on Twitch, and made these chats feel like conversation.

“Once I was back at school, and now back in my parents house, and was more on top of my mental health... I wasn't able to be like you know what, fuck this guy, until I was in a good place with my mental health because when you're in it, it's like, it's sort of a lifeline.” (Quote by Zion)

The lifeline-like nature of the relationship makes Dream, and by extension all other creators within the Dream SMP, more difficult to separate from as they were such a strong force keeping people grounded and around during this time period, and getting rid of that level of friendship you seemingly have with a creator is difficult to do. When fans were able to get back on their own two feet in terms of mental health, the separation was made easier, especially when that timeline was hand in hand with the timeline of the increasing accusations towards Dream of

multiple different problematic things. “The times that like, Dream fucked up big time, I literally had like, breakdowns,” and these breakdowns were fuelled by Dream’s continued scandals that felt inexcusable, and the way that he navigated them socially in the larger sphere of the internet was almost embarrassing to be associated with for fans (Quote by Zion). In that, fans were seemingly forced to defend Dream’s actions, and as such, were forced to put themselves on the lines of the internet wars that came up, which are traumatizing to have to defend yourself and a creator through.

Exiting the fandom leaves fans in an awkward position, of knowing they defended the experiences that they had and the relationships they had, but also having space to critically analyze their past experience. Fans expressed this divide being difficult to navigate especially when past friends are still within the fandom, and as such, making it even more difficult to fully disengage with the content even if the fan is jaded on the time that was spent within the fandom. Fans expressed taking the people they cared about over the content and the parasocial relationships, and as such, took with them the deeper relationships that they experienced, becoming able to further analyze parasociality with their peers who also experienced the same phenomenon. This ability to analyze is what makes the past fans of the DSMP so important, they come with a lens of leaving parasociality and still keeping relationships that were seemingly based entirely in the community of parasociality. This lens enabled fans to take on different stances in future relationships both with each other and with creators, in that they were able to distance themselves from a creator if they felt that there was a parasocial relationship forming, or were able to recognize said signs and acknowledge them for their benefits and flaws at the time. They also have the ability to share in the inside jokes about parasociality, and the way that that is

navigated, especially in making jokes about their “parasocial” relationships to one another, constantly engaging in the work of undoing the parasocial bounds that were placed upon them.

Reflection on Fandom

All of the people I was able to interview were either fully out of the fandom, or attempting to fully exit the fandom and separate themselves from the creators. At the time of writing this, post yet another and significantly larger scandal, all of them have fully left and do not associate themselves with any of the creators that are relevant to the DSMP.

“Right now I pretty much hate every content creator I loved from the Dream SMP, with a few exceptions, but I used to really love them as if they were family. Yes, I felt like I knew them personally or that I understood them better than the average person. I felt like I could read their minds or imagine what was going through their head. I’ve realized now that’s just not true.” (Quote by Ivy)

The parasociality of the relationship and being able to recognize the negative effects that it had was something that was common among everyone I interviewed. As feelings on the creators changed, many of them realized that this parasociality, this idea of knowing the creator as if they are friends, was something that felt less true even after the amount of time dedicated to it. Fans expressed that creators changed over time in the way that they presented themselves to fans, being more transparent about what happened behind the scenes and adapting to new environments as their careers grew outwards instead of upwards, such as founding or joining companies, as creator Sapnap did with the E-Sports team NRG. On top of that, the time since the beginning of the DSMP has marked a time in which many are now able to socialize significantly more, as the strict isolation of the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic have stopped, and as such, people are able to socialize outside of the circle of their house and online friends.

Online friends were able to form easily within the fandom due to the way that they interacted with one another, and the frequency with which they did so. Fans typically were online nearly 24/7, especially when school was at home and not in person, and if they were not online

they were easily contactable via text or DM. Many fans would share tweets about what was happening in their lives on their private Twitters, sharing any litany of opinions, and would engage with their mutuals on a regular basis. The most prominent example of this would be that I interviewed someone who had conversations with their friend nearly every hour in multiple ways, and shared almost all thoughts on the platform with upwards of 26 thousand tweets on their account. Much of the friendships were isolated to Twitter, and only went over to discord occasionally when it was necessary for sharing streams of movies or media in some form. Due to the fact that the group is primarily friends on Twitter, the continuity of engagement with one another is entirely dependent on the participant's usage of Twitter, as if one party leaves the platform a divide would be created in some ways due to the departure.

While it is easier to create friendships and bonds within a fandom due to shared interest, it is difficult to translate these friendships past the borders of these fandoms when there is such a divide amongst who stays within and who leaves said fandom. With the DSMP fanbase, a barrier of post engagement friendship was the level of support you offered creators after the massive scandals they were in, in that if you continued to support these creators after awful actions then there was a high likelihood that you would not continue to be friends with those you met within the fanbase. The difficulties of separating yourself from a fandom and separating yourself from people that you have become friends with are immense, especially when they are still entirely entrenched in something you deem problematic.

“But like, with people I see like, I still have a number of people on my private twitter who are stans to a degree that I find hard to watch, and sometimes I just have to mute them for days at a time. But I like them enough that I keep them around, because I don't like losing that.” (Quote by Zion)

While it would be easier to just entirely cut someone off, the bonds that are created among the people in this fandom are not as easily separated. These people have known each other for years

now, and have seen each other through highs and lows especially in the dependency that may have been created on these creators. On the other hand, there is an intense bond of the people who all collectivized to leave, in that they all bonded together to leave as a unit, and decided the friendships they formed were more important than anything else within the fandom.

“But I still have that connection a little bit, just because every one of my friends online, we all have that shared moment where we all at one point in the Dream fandom. And all of us at the same moment decided fuck, we’re out of here. So we’re kind of connected a bit.” (Quote by Nova)

The combined decision from the group to leave and keep each other in their lives caused them to continue to grow closer and ultimately have closure even when the creators did not provide it to them, in that they still were able to figure out their feelings as a group and what was their version of the truth of the situation they were in prior. Right now, we see that the friendships and bonds that were practiced during the time that I was interviewing and prior are still all in tact, and they still communicate near daily with one another. The bonds have restructured to be mainly around their own individual lives and interests, however, they remain equally as strong as they were post leaving the fandom and while they were in it as well.

There is also an aspect of anger that can circulate when those you associate with are ruined by the fanbase, and ruined by the content they consume, in a way that makes them unable to associate with you outside of that space ever again. The anger that is associated with calling out a creator and having people you care about defend an, essentially, anonymous person, over your own thoughts and feelings on the matter, is prominent in the stories of leaving people behind and feeling the loss of those relations.

“That motherfucker seriously ruined people’s relationships with each other!?! Some of my own relationships w interesting people fell through because of this floridian fuck??? It’s still unbelievable. And the amount of time that was wasted on these schmucks... insane.” (Quote by Hunter)

The pain that comes with friend-breakups is more intense in online spaces, as you truly will never see or know about said person again unless you intentionally seek them out, and even then, you will never truly know them any deeper than what they present online again unless you become close with them in the way you were before. These mutuals breaking, due to the creators at hand, caused immense pain, as many people lost close friends all due to a creator's own actions that they were seen to force and manipulated fans into defending. The relationships were deeper than the surface level provided by being fans of a common source, and as such, the pain that is caused from separation is deeper than what could be typically expected from fandom relationships.

“I lost like three friends in that incident. Like people who I talked to on discord... and helped me through my breakup. Just because they were mad at me for saying fuck this bitch” (Quote by Nova)

The level of dedication to a creator that was commonly deemed problematic that some fans had, and the way that they wished to continue to engage with him even if what he was doing went directly against the politics they staunchly believed in, caused the disconnect between friends and as such, the complete severing of some relationships. The grief and loss that comes with this is something that is not addressed nearly enough in modern fandom literature, and the intensity of grieving a relationship that you may not have the chance to discuss outside of the situation is something that is too complex to put into a succinct paragraph.

The friendships that were lost due to the dedication that said fan had with the creator were ones that were mourned, in a sense, due to the closeness of the community and the seeming inability to get people out of these relationships. Losing friends over matters that are, on surface level, difficult to explain to an outside source, are inherently difficult to come to terms with when it is so hard to explain the reasoning behind the loss. This also furthers the ties between the fans

after leaving, as they can only truly understand one another and the depth that they experience in the relationships they are in, as it is not something that someone outside of the community could truly grasp, in their eyes. These losses were unavoidable in some senses, because “it just made me sad seeing how deluded they were. And I want them at the end of the day to come out of it,” but coming out of it at this point has to come on their own terms, and not by outside influence of peers (Quote by Mila). This idea of “delusion” complicates it further, in that some post-fans see those that are still within the community as delusional, making the relationship even more strained as time goes on if they continue to remain within the fandom. There is a difficult line for past-fans to navigate with friends still involved in the fanbase, and navigating this depends mainly on the depth of the relationship they had before departure.

“Obviously I am invested in my friends' lives, but I don't think I was ever really given the opportunity to choose one over the other while I was in the fandom, it felt like we were all in it together? At least, until I stopped engaging with MCYT. Then the content didn't matter at all, all that mattered were the connections I made.” (Quote by Hunter)

The ability to take connections, instead of taking the content and the memories of the content with you, is crucial in being able to separate oneself from the intensity of the fanbase and the social situation surrounding it. Commonly, the thread that ties people back to fandom after they leave is the social connections that they make, and many of those interviewed agreed upon that fact, that the people that they associated with were what they took, due to the way that connections flourished in these online spaces.

Upon the departure from the fandom that many, if not all, of the people that I interviewed had, there is a certain reawakening to the level of “delusion” and “parasocial brain worms” that were needed to engage with the fanbase on a day to day basis. Distance from creators caused bonds to form between people that left, in that they were able to theorize on how these creators engaged with fanbases to a degree they were not able to while they were actively in the fandom.

“You just kind of have to assume that every single time that they’ve tried to like, you’ve given them the benefit of the doubt, It’s that they’ve been like... He lied. He lied about everything. And I don’t know, you don’t know exactly what he lied about. But you gotta assume that the lied about everything, you know?” (Quote by Nova)

A common thread among those interviewed was that distance from creators opened doors to investigating into the behavior that the creators engaged in, which fans were not able to further analyze while actively within the fandom due to parasocial relations. While it is difficult to space oneself from a creator that you rely on for entertainment and joy at a day to day basis enough to engage with the content critically when in that space, it is very easy to look back upon something that you deem as “cringe” and analyze it from an “outside perspective” in some ways. A common bonding factor within this subgroup was analyzing past behavior when in the fandom, such as how they engaged with creators and peers, whether that be via hate towards those outside the fandom, or obscure memes that in retrospect were only bonding because of the state they were in.

With reflection and the clarity it brings, there is a sense of finally putting to rest the experiences that fans thought would follow them forever. While many people who were in the fandom will remember the rollercoaster of a time that they had while active, there is still the ability to move past the state of parasociality that fans were engaged with and see more of the opposing side of the situation. There is a lack of discussion around the grief that comes with disconnecting oneself from a parasocial relationship with a creator. The space that it takes to separate from what you may consider a friend and a peer, while also grappling with the fact that you do not have the ability to directly talk to and with this person, complicates the entire experience of separation and loss. The grief present is one that is closely tied to the performance that the actor takes, and that fans that exit the fanspace are grieving what their perception of the creator is, as there is not a “true self” presented by the creator in these instances. That just further

complicates the ability to detach oneself from these spaces, especially as this also goes hand in hand with the way that one loses actual concrete community upon exiting a fandom. The depth to which many fans know each other, and the complicated relationships they have with one another that are nearly untranslatable to an outside lens, makes leaving the space that was their primary means of knowing one another even more difficult, especially after helping each other through increasingly troubling times. The bonds that were formed is what fans stated that they took, more than anything else, when leaving. These bonds and friendships transcend the common ground of fandom, and continue to show the public that these spaces must be taken seriously as a means of socialization and community.

Conclusion

Relationships that are formed online, especially in fandom spaces, transcend the barriers that an online social sphere is assumed to create. These relationships may feel stronger than ones with in person friends, bound by the interest that they share and the drama that they experience together, and that most of their thoughts exist on the timeline for everyone to read. As seen in the complexity of the relationship between fan and creator, fans are able to bond over said complexity and the inherent unification of the group on the matter of these creators and the relationships and drama that they present. In times of peril, such as the multitude of scandals that Dream in specific was in, there were moments of intense bonding in defense of a person that individuals thought was a friend at the time. In times of joy, such as the wars that were present on the server and the streamathons that creators provided, there was bonding in the joy that these creators would provide, and the laughs that were always abundant. Bonding in a fandom comes in waves of good and bad, the scandals that come with fame and the content that provides laughs and inside jokes to last a lifetime, making the bonds between the people involved able to withstand a litany of outside pressure due to the drastic highs and lows.

The knowledge of being in a fandom is not easily translatable to outside sources, and as such, these fandoms become insular in that the interests are not spread outside of people who wish to know more about the fandom or people that are still within the fandom itself. On that, when leaving the fandom, this knowledge of the inner workings of the fandom seem like facts that are obvious to the outside world, and yet, these facts are not known by many. That experience is one that causes the cyclical nature of fandoms, the way that people will go back

into one after leaving, especially in the case of the repeated drama surrounding Dream, and how people proclaimed leaving just to return a month later when the drama had died out. This also translates to how people who were previously in fandoms frequently operated under the DSMP, as they had prior knowledge on fandom and how to interact with the space that could be translated to this new iteration. The translation of interaction is present in the way that “PQRT” and “ratioed” are utilized across many fandoms on the Twitter platform, and as such, can be translated from one fandom to another as an important means of engaging with people that go against the ideals of you or your subsection of the fanbase. Many fans that I spoke with had experience prior to the DSMP with other fandoms, and seemingly had similar experiences in similar fandoms, such as a couple from Homestuck and other entities that were popular during the peak of tumblr, and many also coming from Kpop Twitter.

The ability to translate experiences from one fandom to another fandom is also important in the dynamic that is cultivated when fans leave the space but still occupy the social sphere that they did when within the fandom. The performance and way that these groups cultivate their sense of self online are intrinsically tied to the content that they had previously engaged with, and that can be especially seen when looking at the way that people who were previously in kpop Twitter engaged with the creators and continue to engage with their friends from the fandom. There is an easy translation from Kpop Twitter to DSMP Twitter, as they share many of the ways that they interact with the content in common, from parasociality and edits of creators to terminology and usage of the app generally. Within that, the translatable nature of fandom experiences allows for people to then take these ideas onto the next media they engage with, if they so choose to.

Leaving a space and taking people with you is constantly something that is difficult to navigate, and even more difficult when these relationships are formed upon what you are leaving. Fans that I talked to that left the DSMP behind were commonly united by seeing friendships and relationships with other fans over the content they consumed by the end of the time they were in the fandom itself. Valuing the people around you and the community formed is how you continue to translate these relationships past just the content, and seeing the people you are talking to as multifaceted and not just an extension of the content, is how these groups have continued to prosper post leaving a fandom. There is no limit to the interests being in common as seen in other fandoms, and that is inherently beneficial for them in the long run, as these relationships are able to be translated into another sphere.

The level of transparency in regards to creators' relationships with fans, and what they owe to fans in times of trouble within the fandom, has changed dramatically since the time that I began this research. With the reveal of Dream's face, and the demise of the actual server that the DSMP operated on, the standard for what content was put out and what level of engagement was maintained shifted. Now fans are able to operate on the basis of knowing what Dream looks like and seeing him frequently posting on snapchat when there is a drought of content, and his interactions with fans are hidden behind private accounts and snapchats more often than public facing. This creates a new dynamic of parasociality, which should be discussed more in future literature on the topic, that when a face is revealed there is a new rekindling of what you expect out of a person you previously did not know the identity of.

Combining the practice of parasociality, the marketing tactics utilized of queerbaiting the general public and consistently feeding content to viewers, Dream and by extension the Dream Team became a monolith for at least two years via Twitch and Youtube content, in which they or

their peers would always dominate the charts in terms of viewership live and in the re-released recordings of their life actions. A monolith operating on a platform that pushes content that already has high viewers just continued to push this content bigger and bigger, until the bubble burst with the amount of controversies and scandals that happened within the fandom itself. These controversies involved every single creator, and most of the time were issued apologies that are equivalent to the notes app apology that many know, that was structured in a format of apologizing for what was said, acknowledging lack of knowledge on the subject that caused said controversy, and promising to change and do better in that order. Leaving this large of a fandom was near impossible unless there was a mass exodus due to the fact that the fandom was so widespread and reached almost every corner of the internet for the target age range and demographic and as such, many fans are left to continue the cyclical nature of getting into what was progressively seen as queerbaiting gets them back in, leave upon a more dramatic controversy, and return when the queerbaiting/content streams are back again.

Much of the observable action of leaving the fandom consisted of viewers beginning to feel that they were in a way, being profited off of or taken advantage of for profit on the side of the creator. They did what was expected of them to increase profit on their channels, and to mitigate damages from potential fallouts. Months after leaving the fandom, the large scandal of grooming allegations against Dream came about, and as such, many people who had previously left the fandom during the Manatreed incidents were able to reflect even further and continue to have conversation with the people that they left with about the tactics utilized against them. In these conversations, we see the need for community in fandom spaces and a deep analysis in regards to the media that viewers consume and the communities that they are integrated into.

Online spaces and the performativity that takes place in them differs from person to person, but the general basis of the people that I was working with was that the online persona was a means of displaying even more of oneself than you could in public spheres. Online spheres have the level of anonymity that many other aspects of life are unable to provide, as it is separate from your employer or family's gaze, and as such, you may perform the version of yourself that feels most genuine and comfortable. This works strongly in tandem with the faceless nature of the community at large, this standard set by Dream himself not showing his face for most of the duration of his career. There's a level of anonymity that not showing your face provides fans in these situations, and allows them to be more open and honest about their thoughts. In that, there is the entirely separate entity that is the popular creator operating in an online space, and how they must perform a self that is palatable to the people who see him as genuine due to his presence online. This dichotomy makes the discussion between the two and the parasociality quite difficult, and as such, enables further relationships that could be defined as parasocial due to his tweets and interactions.

There is nothing I can do but express love to the community that allowed me to know more, and delve deeper into the spaces that they occupied. I cannot finish on any other note than an outpouring of love towards a community that opened its doors to me, even when I am in the space as a researcher. The doors that they opened allowed for me to further understand the ways that parasociality impacted them when placed upon them as a standard, and how they were able to navigate it in their peer relationships and in their relationships with the creators that they followed. The continuous work that these people put into taking down the narrative placed upon them around parasociality and the debilitating aspects of it are only the start of what fan studies can create and develop to benefit fans and fan spaces. In the dismantling of the narrative placed

upon them, the narrative that the fans are parasocial and that this can only be seen in a derogatory light, they continue to provide more work to the study of parasociality and the relationships formed from it. Thank you, to the Dream SMP fandom, for letting me share space with you.

With that, there is the need for future work on the topic of parasociality and the relationships formed out of it. In the future, I hope more work is done directly on how controversies and scandals impact the relationships fans have with one another and with the creator, and how that relationship shifts over time with the flux of content coming in and out of the space. On top of that, I hope that the Dream SMP is looked into further for how it set a social standard for discussion of fan relationships and parasociality across the board for other fandoms, and how their work on dismantling that narrative is crucial in the larger picture of fan politics and media analysis. A sociological lens on parasociality is crucial in understanding the relationships that form out of it, and I feel that this lens, as it may be ventured forth in the future, could really shed light on the way that relationships generally work online, especially in the heightened form of online performativity that we are seeing in day to day life as of late. With that being said, future work should further aim to find some balance between the psychological and sociological implications of parasociality, as they do deeply impact one another in this subset of both fields, and can be beneficial in finding the intricacies in these relationships when working in tandem. I hope to see further work on parasociality done in the future, and I hope that this work aids in providing terminology and space for those who are in these relationships.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

The following interview questions were the set of questions that I had written out for any participants who chose to write answers instead of participating in a call. In the in person/via phone call interviews, some of the following questions were skipped due to the participants already elaborating on them prior, though they were still given the questions that were skipped if they wanted to answer them again.

1. Have you been in any fandoms prior to the DSMP fandom? What level were you engaged with these fandoms at? Are you still involved in them?
2. How did you first interact with the fandom? What was the moment/video that made you invested in the fandom?
3. What aspect of the Dream SMP was most alluring to you? Was it the lore/tv style of the lore drops, or the audience engagement? What POV did you most frequently watch?
4. Who was your favorite creator and why?
5. Did you choose to join stan twt? If you were in stan twt, how did you use it? Did you create original content/tweets or mainly reblog/like others?
6. Have you engaged with any other forms of the community? (IE: Discord servers, group chats off of twitter, youtube comments, etc)
7. Did you make friends in the community? Did you bring some of your previous friends into the community?
8. Did the people you met in the community take precedent over the content that you were consuming?
9. How do you feel about the content creators you followed?

10. Do you feel close to these creators, as in you believe you know them to a certain extent?
11. What caused you to leave the fandom, if you did?
12. If you would like to, here's a space to go over/explain/talk about how you felt during the following events: Manatreed, Dream's tweets around April 11th (Our community is a pride parade tweets), the spring of 2021 reddit posts, the cheating scandal, ETC.
13. If you feel comfortable/have felt passionately about it, here is also a space to elaborate on IRL shipping culture, the "boundaries" that Dream Team have put in place for that, or any of your opinions on the matter.
14. Anything else that you feel I should ask others, or any other commentary that you feel I did not cover?
15. Anything that you feel is crucial in me understanding the fanbase at large, like any events you feel were important in the space or any specific videos/tweets that you are aware made a large change in the space?

Appendix B: History Graph

