"IT MAKES ME, A MINOR, UNCOMFORTABLE"

MEDIA AND MORALITY IN ANTI-SHIPPERS' POLICING OF ONLINE FANDOM

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Abstract

Anti-shipping refers to opposing a ship of two fictional characters on a moral basis. While the concept has been around for decades in fandom, the release of *Voltron: Legendary Defender* (2016) marked a significant shift in how people viewed shipping. The fandom was infamous for two reasons: the diverse fans, who were mostly women and/or queer people, and relentless campaign of harassment and cyber-aggression targeting anyone who disagreed with anti-shippers, including cast and crew of the show. My research shows that anti-shippers use language in many ways to gain support for their preferred ship while demonising fans of the rival pairing, often with the goals of turning non-fans against them as well. They garner support by framing themselves as a vulnerable minority and falsely alleging that other shippers are paedophiles and incest supporters. Their language use is marked by violence, humour, and deceptive framings of shippers and ships. This leads to a community where critically thinking about media is discouraged in favour of following groupthink. The cyber-aggressing of anti-shippers is also unique in that it not only targets individuals but also online fandom spaces, making them so hostile to other shippers as to drive them away.

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List of Abbreviations

CDA = critical discourse analysis

cishet = cisgender heterosexual

CP = child pornography

CSA = child sexual abuse

IRL = in real life

mlm = man loving man

PTSD = post-traumatic stress disorder

SJW = social justice warrior

VLD = *Voltron: Legendary Defender*

wlw = woman loving women

Ships:

bakudeku = Bakugou/Deku

billdip = Bill/Dipper

drarry = Draco/Harry

elsanna = Elsa/Anna

ereri = Eren/Levi

hannigram = Hannibal/Will Graham

J/D = Josh/Donna

klance = Keith/Lance

korrasami = Korra/Asami

otayuri = Otabek/Yurio

reylo = Rey/Kylo Ren

royed = Roy/Edward

shaladin = Shiro/paladin

shance= Shiro/Lance

sheith = Shiro/Keith

stevidot = Steven/Peridot

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1 Introduction: "your cancer should have killed you for shipping sheith"

In 2019, a fan artist I follow who is open about being a stage four cancer survivor posted screenshots of some message she had gotten. They said things like "you survived cancer only to ship sheith?", "your cancer should have killed you for shipping sheith", and "it's a shame you survived cancer only to be a paedophile". Sheith refers to the fan pairing of Shiro and Keith from the animated show *Voltron: Legendary Defender* (2016) which ended in 2018. The characters were 25 and twenty years old respectively at that point, the artist herself was at the time nineteen. What led to her getting these messages? Why would a nineteen-year-old be accused of being a paedophile for liking the relationship between two cartoon characters who were both older than her? The answer is that this is the result of a group of fans called anti-shippers and their policing of online fandom.

Media fandom refers to the community of fans who share a similar interest in popular media. The seminal work in media fandom research is *Textual Poachers* by Henry Jenkins (2013). He discusses how fans of popular media are viewed mostly as being social rejects and stupid. He argues that these negative stereotypes are false and that fans are in fact very social, seeking each other out to engage in discussions with other fans (10). Important activities in fandom are creating new art based on the source material they are a fan of, rooting for a romantic relationship between characters (called shipping or slash), and exchange ideas and interpretations with other fans. This act of shipping characters can be very important and intimate, as Williams (2011) explores in her article on shipping in the political drama *The West Wing* (1999). She finds that fans can see similarities between themselves and the relationships on screen, reflecting it back on their own lives and becoming very attached to their pairing of choice. However, just like there are fans, there are also anti-fans. These are people, mostly straight men, who strongly dislike either a specific media (usually aimed at younger female audiences) or certain other fans (often women in fandoms of media aimed at men). While anti-fans and disliking ships have been a part of fandom for a long time, a shift happened in 2016 with the release of *Voltron: Legendary Defender* (shortened *VLD*).

The fandom was characterised primarily by two things: it was incredibly diverse, consisting mostly of women and/or queer people, and it was one of the most toxic fandoms in all of history. Harassment, doxxing, and false allegations of paedophilia was rampant, all motivated by people wanting the character Keith to end up with Lance instead of Shiro. This harassment was not limited to other fans but also targeted at the cast and crew of the show. The fans responsible for this took the name anti-shippers, to communicate their moral objection to certain ships. In the case of sheith, there was significant age gap with Keith being eighteen and Shiro 25, and they thought he should instead be with the seventeen-year-old Lance. They tried policing what other fans could like and create in fandom. Part of the tactic to convince people of the legitimacy of klance, the ship name for Keith/Lance, was by using language to frame the narrative of the show, the fans, and the ships in a deceptive manner that benefitted them, aiming to sway non-fans who did not know any better. Drouin (2021) is the first to do academic research on anti-shippers, though she prefers to use the term 'antis'. Her research deals partially with the testimonies of shippers who have been negatively affected by antis, and the second half is about how antis started harassing her for trying to document their actions.

Anti-shipping did not remain confined to *VLD* but spread to other fandoms as well. What made me want to research the way anti-shippers use language was seeing the contrast in the way two other ships were being framed, namely Otabek/Yurio (otayuri) from *Yuri on Ice!!!* (2016) and Lúcio/D.Va from *Overwatch* (2016). Otabek is eighteen, Yurio is fifteen, D.Va is nineteen and Lúcio is 26. Anti-shippers objected to the pairings based on the age gaps. What I found intriging, was seeing otayuri being described as a ship "between a grown ass adult and a literal child" while Lúcio/D.Va was called a ship between "a literal teenager and a man in his mid-twenties". While neither of these statements are untrue, saying eighteen-year-old Otabek is "a grown ass adult" while the older D.Va is "a literal teenager" are clear examples of deceptive framing as vital information is left out.

My research question, based on my own fandom experience with anti-shippers, goes as follow: how do anti-shippers use language in their fandom policing and what is the effect

on online fandom? I make use of discourse analysis to look beyond the grammatical sentence and analyse how language is created within a societal, historical, and cultural context, as well as how it in turn affects that context. To study this, I gathered 500 posts from the social media site Tumblr (see Appendix 1). I set up a set of criteria for the selection of data, namely that the posts had to be fans trying to police what other fans could do with fiction within fandom. The data had to be from 2015 to 2020, as anti-shipping came to be in 2016 and I expected there to be a contrast from 2015 to 2016. What I found was that anti-shippers portray themselves as being vulnerable minorities and shippers they dislike were painted out to be privileged oppressors as well as paedophiles. As mentioned earlier, the *VLD* fandom was predominantly made up of women and/or queer people, and by extent so were anti-shippers. Previous definitions on online harassment have usually assumed that it was perpetrated by people from oppressive majorities directed at minorities, such as men targeting women or homophobes going after queer people. What is unique about anti-shippers and their victims is that they are from the same demographic, the biggest difference being that anti-shippers tend to be younger and shippers older (Drouin 2021, 1). This affects the language of anti-shippers in two way, namely they emphasise their status as minorities while downplaying or even scrubbing away that of shippers. Like this, they can make use of social justice rhetoric to make their cause appear to be activism. Anti-shippers often relied on humour, using memes and parody to mock shippers and anyone speaking out against them. This was frequently combined with very violent language, telling shippers to die or kill themselves but the added humour meant that people could easily dismiss it was shippers overreacting to jokes. They will also often try to appeal to the emotions of people in their arguments, trying to garner sympathy for themselves and claim shippers are paedophiles and incest supporters. This they also do by framing ships and shippers as being morally wrong. So, what led to this development? I will begin by explaining the context in which anti-shipping was born and how it has evolved.

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2 Context and History: *Voltron: Legendary Defender*

Trying to give an objective account of the history of anti-shipping is not without its issues. Not every fan witnessed the same events, or they saw different sides. For these reasons, the most honest and accurate way to explain the rise of anti-shipping, specifically in the *VLD* fandom, is not to try to tell 'the' story of what happened, but what I witnessed. I will focus on the early days of the fandom, as testimony regarding this period is harder to find compared to later when the toxicity had become infamous and started being documented (Caron; Sridhar; Sean Z).

I discovered online fandom around 2007, mostly on YouTube and different fanfiction sites. It was a way to connect to other people with similar interest. Various toxic behaviours have always been a part of fandom, including arguing about ships, but it was not widespread enough as to be unavoidable. Anti-shipping marked a new shift in this regard (Drouin 2021, 94-95, 113). I first learned of the *Voltron* reboot through some fanart that was shared on the social media site Tumblr early July 2016, the show having been released in June that same year. What drew my attention was the fact that it was made by people who had worked on *The Legend of Korra* (2012) because that show had ended with the female main character, Korra, in a romantic relationship with her female friend Asami (the ship name being korrasami). This was a significant milestone for queer representation in children's animation, which was otherwise non-existent, hidden with coded characterisation, villainised, or censored when a show was imported from another country (Millman; Robinson). Around the same time, *Steven Universe* (2013), another children's animation show, was also making big strides for queer representation, fighting censorship and pushback (Millman). Consequently, *VLD* faced expectations of diversity, which it tried to deliver on and was praised for when the first season was released. Princess Allura, in previous version having blonde hair and fair skin, now had dark skin. Her voice actress Kimberly Brooks, herself African American, said she cried the first time she saw Allura's new design (Francisco). Pidge was now a girl and STEM genius, and Shiro was disabled and Japanese. Later, Hunk would be confirmed Samoan and Lance Cuban. As the show proved diverse when it came to ethnic backgrounds and gender, people started speculating

about queer representation. I was not immune to this. While looking up the show on Tumblr, I found a post by the art director Chris Palmer featuring a drawing of Shiro with the caption "Shiro loves you, baby" that was tagged "#he is looking at Keith".

Image 1
Screenshot of the Tumblr post.

The original post has been deleted, but screenshots still exist (@nipnopnebula; dent-de-leon). I also saw a post by Shiro's voice actor saying that he noticed people shipping his character with Keith and offered 'sheith' as a name for the ship (joshkeaton). Seeing this support for the pairing from the cast and crew, I thought they were hinting at what would be the queer romance of the show and I started watching with this presumption.

While *Voltron* was a franchised aimed at young boys, the 2016 reboot spawned a diverse fandom consisting of a significant number of women and/or queer people (Drouin 2021, 57-61). To my surprise, the ship between Keith and Lance (called klance) became the most

popular pairing, despite the support that sheith had gotten from staff. Quickly, however, klance shippers started arguing against sheith, saying that since Shiro was the leader, it had to be abuse of power for him to date an 'underling' of his. Someone claimed that since Shiro suffered from PTSD, that meant his brain was "scrambled eggs" and he was unable to be in a relationship (arahir; vld-rage-confessions). Some thought Shiro and Keith resembled each other in appearance and assumed they must be siblings or related in some other way (they are not, not by adoption or otherwise). The promotional material at the time labelled the entire group, called paladins, as "five teenagers" and people called into question if Shiro could really be a teenager, nineteen at the oldest by that logic, despite how he looked older than the rest. People started labelling themselves as being 'anti-sheith', which was not unique to this fandom fans have used 'anti' as a prefix to ships they oppose before.

What really kicked off the anti-shipping movement was a video a fan had taken at a San Diego Comic-Con 2016, which took place July 21-24 ("Comic Con 2016"), where they asked staff to confirm that the ages of the characters were: for Shiro around 25, for Pidge fourteen, and Keith, Hunk, and Lance as being "not adults" but "late teens" and that those were "safe zones" ("tumblr_oaqc6uS3eF1vb9eln"). Since the statement regarding the ages for the late teens was so ambiguous, there was a lot of debate, some viewing "late teens" as meaning seventeen to nineteen, making seventeen the only plausible age as "not adults", while I have also seen people argue this meant they were as young as fifteen. With confirmation that sheith was an 'illegal' ship, the accusations of paedophilia and harassment of sheith shippers grew in intensity. Shippers pointed out that the anti-sheith klance shippers could not be motivated by morals as they singled out sheith despite all the paladins being underage, accusing antis of only wanting to discredit the ship in favour of klance. 'Anti-sheith' then became 'anti-shaladin' (Shiro/paladin) as a shorthand. When it was pointed out by both sides that this fandom was hardly the only one with problematic ships, 'anti-shaladin' become the more general 'anti-shipping' to denote opposition to any (perceived) problematic ship. Some people who argued against anti-shippers then created the labels 'pro-shipper' and 'anti-anti'.

In January 2017, the second season was released and featured an episode where Keith is put through a trial where he sees his "greatest hopes and fears", namely Shiro and Shiro abandoning him. Keith calls out to him, saying that Shiro "is like a brother" to him ("The Blade of Marmora"). Anti-shippers interpreted the "like a brother" line as confirming them being related and the ship being incest too, while shippers saw this as confirming they were not related because one does not say their actual sibling is "like" their sibling. In the summer of that year, the showrunners Lauren Montgomery and Joaquim Dos Santos did an interview where they were asked about the possibility of klance becoming canon:

> Montgomery: We're not trying to cater to or bait anyone into anything, we're just trying to do what's right for the story.
>
> Dos Santos: But we're also not trying to be overtly affected by what popular opinion might be.
>
> Montgomery: We work in animation. Our schedule is so far advanced for that. Even if people shipped Keith and Lance, we couldn't go back and change the story. There is no way to be like "and now they're in love!" ("SDCC 2017 Voltron Showrunners", 00:04:20 – 00:04:55)

Not a single anti-shipper that I have interacted with had been aware of this interview when I brought it up. A few weeks later, *The Paladin's Handbook* was released which stated that the ages were for Shiro 25, for Keith eighteen, for Hunk and Lance seventeen, and for Pidge fifteen ("The Paladin's Handbook"). Sheith shippers rejoiced at both characters being legally adults, as many of them had always interpreted them as being such or aged them up in their fan works, while anti-shippers thought that was creepy and comparable to old men waiting for underage girls to turn eighteen. Other shaladin shippers, such as Shiro/Lance (shance), felt left behind. This is when I noticed arguments on the pro-shipper side shifting from being about whether sheith was moral to saying that it did not matter if it was, because it was all fictional and people can distinguish fiction from reality. Anti-shippers retorted that it came down to framing as, in their eyes, shippers were either ignoring or glorifying problematic elements. Pro-shippers argued back that depiction was not endorsement, especially if creators tagged their works with the applicable warnings, such as "abuse" or "emotional blackmail".

Harassment and toxic behaviour were rampant in the fandom. I could not interact normally with fandom as I previously had, needing to sift through and block dozens of anti-shippers any time I wanted to look up fanart because their posts and comments were clogging up the online space. All sheith fan artists I followed were regularly receiving messages accusing them of promoting paedophilia and incest. The cast and crew were getting threats of violence, even directed at their families, as were many shippers. A small number of anti-shippers were bringing real children into the discourse, taking pictures of them if they reminded them of Keith and Lance or filming themselves explaining child pornography (CP) and have the child repeat that sheith was CP on camera, and sending images and videos of gore and CP to shippers (Drouin 2021, 14). The incident that got the most attention from outside the fandom, was when a klance shipper attempted to blackmail the animation studio of *VLD*. A fan had been on a tour of the studio, taken some picture, and posted them online. It turned out these featured some spoilers, and the studio asked them and everyone who had shared it to take it down. Most complied, but one fan tried to use the images as blackmail to make klance canon. As other fans called them out, they seemed to realise their mistake and deleted their account (huntypastellance "#LPL#discpost" and "Follow up to this").

In the sixth season, Keith ends up stranded on a planet where time moves faster, aging him two years. As sheith was now a ship between a twenty and a 25-year-old, while klance had a three-year age gap, I noticed age did not come up as often in arguments anymore. Seasons six focused on Shiro and Keith as Shiro got mind controlled and Keith had to fight him alone. Keith broke through the brainwashing by saying "Shiro, please. You're my brother. I love you." ("The Black Paladins") Anti-shippers emphasised the 'brother' part, and sheith shippers the confession. Based on my familiarity with queer intimacy in media being labelled 'familial' to avoid accusations of it being gay, for me it reinforced the textual reading of their feelings towards each other potentially being romantic. The boiling point of the fandom's toxicity came when the first episode of the seventh season was previewed at San Diego Comic Con 2018, before the full season was released a few weeks later (Drouin 2021, 119). During a flashback, the viewer can see Shiro suffering from a degenerative muscle disease when a man, Adam, walks in and starts arguing with him about the space

mission Shiro wishes to embark on, trying to keep him from going because of his illness. Adam states that if Shiro leaves, he will not be there for him when he returns ("A Little Adventure"). The scene lasts less than two minutes. Adam is confirmed to be Shiro's ex-boyfriend, making Shiro the queer representation of the show. This was met with wide praise in and outside of fandom, with people asking the showrunners what that meant for his relationship with the male character he was the closest to, namely Keith:

> LM: Fans are going to see it any way they want. Some people are going to say their relationship is just brotherly and others will say it's 100 percent confirmed that they're in a relationship. There's no getting around it for us. (Moylan)

Anti-shippers started framing Adam as Shiro's boyfriend and fiancé, ignoring that their only scene together was the breakup, and saying it was homophobic to ship sheith or shaladin because it portrayed Shiro, a canonically gay man, as preying on minors. Shipping him with other characters when he was in a 'committed relationship' was also homophobic because it would reinforce the stereotype that gay men are promiscuous and sleep around. When season seven was released, the only time Adam shows up again is when he dies during an alien invasion. The show faced accusations of queerbaiting (teasing queerness and not delivering) and burying their gays (killing queer characters) (Drouin, 119-120). Just like the celebration of Shiro being gay had spread outside the fandom, so did the outrage and people unaware of the situation joined the cause, believe a great injustice had been done. This led to one of the showrunners posting an apology. The general sentiment in the circles I frequented, was that there were people genuinely upset, pro- and anti-shippers alike, but this was being massively blown out of proportions by anti-sheith klance shippers who only cared about Adam because he got Shiro out of the way (120-124).

Before the final season was released, leaks appeared online, showing the group in front of a statue of Allura and Shiro marrying an unknown male character. Some people feared Allura would die and Shiro's romantic endgame would be without build-up. Others dismissed the leaks, saying they were too awful and ridiculous to happen. When season eight was released, the fears were proven right. Allura, after all the praise for her being a princess with dark skin, was killed off. Lance, who had been in love with her since the first episode, with them eventually becoming a couple in the last season, spent the rest of his

life mourning her. Shiro married a random background character he never interacted with, a different one from the leaks though. Keith left to do charity work. Shiro and Keith had not had a single conversation since the first episode of the previous season, meaning despite the intimate friendship shown previously, they did not talk to each other in the last two seasons. I even saw anti-shippers who liked their platonic friendship posting about how that made no sense. *VLD*'s ending was not received well, and despite the previous apology regarding Adam, there was no reaction from the showrunners (124-132). The fandom was left hurt and without answers. Some fans made a petition, others tried to contact the staff, and many speculations were put forth (132-135). I felt lost and defeated, trying to make sense of how this was the way it all ended after years of enduring the toxicity of the fandom. I indulged in the outpouring of fanart rectifying the ending, giving all the characters, especially Allura, a happily ever after. The aftermath proved frustrating, as sincere criticism of the show became mixed with outcry that klance had been queerbaited, muddying the waters. Many people outside the fandom either dismissed it as the shippers being upset again or believed that klance had genuinely been queerbaited. A show that had started with praise for its inclusivity, ended with the princess of colour dead, the gay main character side-lined, and the toxic fandom as its legacy.

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3 Theoretical Framework: Discourse Analysis and CDA

The goal of my thesis is to study the language of online policing based on morals and its effect on online fandom. The most fitting theoretical framework for this research is discourse analysis. For the term 'discourse', multiple definitions can be found. The general consensus of a pre-scientific definition is that it is a serious and lengthy discussion on a topic, in spoken or written form (Slembrouck 2020, 28). In short, within the field of linguistics, discourse can be understood to be not just language as the words spoken or written, but also the socio-historical context in which it arose. Language, after all, does not exist in a vacuum. As a concept, discourse has led to development in various field of language study. Slembrouck notes three distinct areas where it emerged.

First is the linguist project, where discourse as a term and concept started in the 1960s and 1970s. Stressing the importance of "authentic language data" and encouraging research to go further than "the bounds of the isolated grammatical sentence and the self-constructed language datum", discourse refers to the specific occurrences of language which characterise "running text and ongoing interaction" (29). This led to significant advancements in linguistics' endeavour to puzzle out the nature of language as it happens naturally in the context in which it is used. Linguistics aims to do this while also pinpointing areas in which meaning occurs corresponding to the situation in which the language was created, the goal of said language, and who it originated from (29). Some researchers focused on spoken conversations, borrowing concepts from conversation analysis and speech act theory, while others studied the written word. Either way, the focus was to go beyond the grammatical sentence and understand the context in which it occurs, who the language user is and with what purpose it was said (29).

Second is discourse's emergence in the fields of sociolinguistics and anthropology, where it played a significant role in advancing qualitative studying of the part that language use plays in social life. Attempting to understand societies and cultures can be helped by seeing language as a social action (29). Developing out of the works of researchers such as Dell Hymes and John Gumperz, as well as others, discourse also emerged in the 1960s and

1970s in these areas of research while also building upon conversation analysis, speech act theory, ethnomethodology, as well as the analysis of order of interaction by Goffman (29-30). The understanding that the use of language and interaction are integral to each other came due to these developments (30).

Third, discourse also appeared in a social theoretical context, around the same period as the previous two fields of study. It emerged as "a metaphor for understanding socio-cultural representation" (30). Post-structuralist theory brought with it questions and challenges to the human and social sciences, and discourse as a concept becoming intertwined with these. Michel Foucault presents discourse as linked to the creation of truth and power relationships. Discourse deals with the questions regarding the rules of certain social domains, what one can say in specific social and historical contexts and who gets to speak (30).

Within discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis (CDA) emerged as a way to methodically express multi-level model with the purpose of language within its grander context. CDA goes about this by uniting micro- and macro-analysis, uniting a close analysis of the text with a bigger socio-cultural analysis of the context in which the language was expressed (31). Norman Fairclough (2010) states that with CDA, he sought to work out manners of analysing language that take into account how it is involved in the mechanism of modern society, and specifically in a capitalist society as this has an effect on all facets of social life (1). He posits that CDA has three main characteristics. The first one is that it is relational, meaning that it puts emphasis on social relations because discourse itself is an intricate network of relationships, communication and the ways in which communication happen, as well as also being tied to power and institutions (3). Secondly, he views these relations as being dialectical. By this he refers to relations that are unalike without being completely unconnected. For example, Fairclough explains how a state has power due to being seen as legitimate in the realm of discourse, while also being able to enforce its authority with the military. As such, power cannot be reduced to merely being a part of discourse. The two are different aspects of the social process, but they also play a part in each other, making them not completely disconnected either. This means that CDA is

analysis of the relationship between discourse and other aspects, as well as the relations between them. These elements stem from different disciplines, such as politics and linguistics, making CDA also transdisciplinary, the third of the basic properties (3-4).

Slembrouck (2020) echoes this, describing discourse analysis' history as having "an accumulative dialogic engagement with social theoretical work on questions of language, representation, ideology, power, equity and identity." (31) Discourse analysis pays attention to the world outside of the simple grammatical sentence, looking at the broader developments within politics, the economy, and society in general, and is in constant dialogue with other fields of study and social theoretical work (31). For my own research, I could indeed not simply rely on linguists to understand the language of online fandom policing, I also need to consider fan studies as well as the larger social, cultural, and historical context. For example, it is necessary to consider queerness and the lack of acceptance thereof in society because much of my data deals with this topic. Without taking this aspect into account, I cannot properly understand from which positions in society the language users are speaking and with what purpose. For this reason, I opted to use discourse analysis and CDA as theoretical frameworks to research the language of online fandom policing. This will allow me to not only look at the socio-cultural context in which this language occurs, but also the effect of this language on said context.

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4 Literary Review

4.1 Fan Studies and Media Fandom

One of the most important works in the field of fan studies is *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* by Henry Jenkins (2013). It was first published in 1992 and an updated version was released in 2012. Jenkins starts by making a distinction between different types of fans, such as fans of music or sports, and he focuses on what is called the media fandom. This is a broad term that refers to fan culture that embraces multiple texts and genres. Demographically speaking, the media fandom is mostly white, mostly female, and mostly from the middle class. However, this group is also characterised by being open to people from many different backgrounds. The media fandom is defined through the ways in which it consumes media and which media it prefers (1). He finds that fan culture is "a complex, multidimensional phenomenon, inviting many forms of participation and levels of engagement." (2)

Jenkins further discusses how fans are viewed negatively by the general public. Fans are thought of as being brainless consumers, as wasting time learning irrelevant facts, as valuing unimportant media, as being socially inept, as being unmasculine and desexualised, as well as mentally being comparable to children, and unable to make a distinction between fiction and reality (10). He connects this negative image to how the concepts of good and bad taste are understood in our society. 'Good taste', appropriate behaviour and what we understand to have aesthetical value are neither universal nor are they natural. They are a result of socialisation and stem from the interests of the bourgeoisie who view themselves as the keepers of 'good taste'. Fans treat popular work in a fashion usually reserved for works from the accepted canon, threatening the social hierarchy. Ignoring taste as dictated by institutions, the fans form their own interpretations and cultural canon. By participating in fandom, they ignore the authority and intellectual property of the original creator(s). This cannot be attributed to ignorance and consequentially dismissed as most fans are educated and from the middle class. They are expected to know better than to value popular media. Jenkins considers this a conscious rejections high culture and taste as dictated by the bourgeoisie, or at the minimum, a

rejection of the line drawn between high culture and popular culture. As they cannot be dismissed as being ignorant, the behaviour of fans must be seen as a perversion of aesthetics. He further points out how sports fans and media fans have different status. He attributes this to sports fans being primarily male and dealing with 'real' affairs, while media fandom is largely made up of women and deals with fiction. This means that this hierarchy is not only based on class by also on gender (16-19).

An important part of fandom is a sense of community that is developed around a shared interest. This allows fans to get support from others who face similar problems, such as being labelled lesser or wrong by societal norms. Fans can then defend their taste in media as part of a larger group that agree with them. They cannot be dismissed as completely deviant, or their interests as an unusual feature of a single individual. A collective experience of fans is the discovery that they are not alone and that other share their passion for media as well as frustrations (23). For the media fandom does not have only uncritical love but can also experience feelings of frustration and hostility. This is due to unsatisfactory popular narratives which leave fans struggling with all the unfulfilled possibilities and directions the media did not go with. Finding a balance between the positive and negative emotions leads them to keep engaging with the texts. They make friends, discuss these popular works with fellow fans and build their own creations upon the foundations of already existing texts. These actions cause them to be more than a simple passive audience, they are active and partake in the fabrication as well as spreading of textual meanings. This leads to a complicated relationship between fans the original creator(s) as fans are aware that the original media does not belong to them and that they have no or, at best, a minimal amount of influence. To refer to this type of engagement with media, Jenkins uses the term 'poaching', first proposed by Michel de Certeau (23-24). Furthermore, fans are not only fans of one work, but rather a vast array of works, series, and genres, and they may draw comparisons and make intertextual links between a wide variety of media (36).

As Jenkins expands on this concept of poaching, he diverts from de Certeau on a few points. Fandom is a social hobby where consuming media becomes a process where

individual interpretations are formed and strengthened in dialogue with other fans. These interactions expand the experience of consuming media. Furthermore, in fandom, the line between creator and audience becomes blurry. A fan who writes fanfiction based on a pre-existing work is both consumer and creator. Through such creations, fandom becomes a culture that encourages participation by building upon the initial consumption and birthing new creations as well as a new culture and a new community (45-46). By 'new culture', Jenkins means that fandom has "its own distinct Art World" (47) which exists outside the power of the original producers and focuses on the creation of new fan works. A popular place for fans to meet up to share and buy works is at conventions (47). Fans do more than just take from popular culture, they contribute to their own culture. These creations, for example fanfiction, videos, songs, or art, do not exist in a vacuum but rather are moulded through the aesthetic conventions and the social norms of fan culture because fans desire and seek out interaction with each other (49, 75-76). Fandom also does not blindly consume the media they are fan of, but also engage in critical discourse with each other. Organised fandom can function as an institution for fans to come up with theories and discuss criticisms of both media and societal issues, though they are not officially recognised or have any social influence (86). Furthermore, fandom does not exclude opposing ideas and interpretations, but rather embrace them as it thrives on discourse. If there is nothing more to be said, interpreted or discovered about a work, it becomes less and less relevant. Fandom activity can allow a finished narrative to keep thriving (88-89).

Jenkins expands upon a few popular fandom activities in his book, such as fan writing and slash, better known nowadays as shipping. As discussed earlier, in fans there exists a balance between affection and frustration. With fanfiction, fans can rewrite the source and add their own creativity, filling 'gaps', fixing unsatisfying parts or further exploring what the original text did not (162). The fandom experience differentiates itself from the first viewing of the primary media as fans add new elements (177). An important fandom term is 'slash' which refers to the agreement to use a slash to indicate a same-sex relationship between two (or more) characters, for example Kirk/Spock or K/S (186). A subcategory of what is today more generally known as shipping, the act of pairing characters in relationships (usually romantic), slash refers specifically to male/male pairings. It started in the *Star Trek*

fandom in the early 1970s when some fan writers suggested that perhaps Kirk and Spock held more feelings for each other than the female secondary characters. Slash was met with resistance from other fans who thought that interpreting the characters this way and writing about it was a violation of the source material and questioned the masculinity of the characters (187-188). It is also a criticism of popular media with writers merely reflecting the homosocial desire that they already find present in the source material. Slash allows them to explore various aspects of relationships, such as attraction, intimacy, and commitment but also power and competition (202). The conventions of slash have evolved over the decades, in part due to criticism from fans themselves regarding certain slash tropes that are (implicitly) homophobic (220). Despite problematic elements, slash allows for dialogue regarding sexuality and the politics thereof and gives writers the possibility to explore gender as a social construct for women of different sexualities (221).

Throughout *Textual Poachers*, the negative stereotypes regarding fans are proven wrong. Fandom is a community that is more diverse, social, and complex than the stereotypes about them would lead to believe (277). As fandom is a place for theorising and criticism, it is not always liked by media producers who prefer a passive audience who do not challenge them and merely buy what is sold to them (279). Despite the negative stereotypes and outright hostility, fans have made a place for themselves in the world. Their culture is a nomadic one, moving from and between different popular media, as well as seemingly being able to expand eternally and encompass everything (223). Fandom is a place for creativity and criticism, a place to explore various parts of one's identity such as sexuality and gender and the politics and concerns thereof, as well as of other societal issues such as racism, conventional consumer culture and imposed conformity. Fans also understand that this alternative to everyday society is not one they can spend all their time in, but the good aspects make them seek it out when they can (282-283).

4.2   Loving Love: Shipping, What Is it and Why Does it Matter?

Jenkins addresses shipping, specifically slash, in *Textual Poachers*. As the online fandom policing was born out of shipping preferences, it is necessary to better understand this fandom practice. For this purpose, I will refer to the article "Wandering off into soap land':

Fandom, genre and 'shipping' *The West Wing*" (2011) by Rebecca Williams. Many fans enjoy the activity of shipping and their time spent in fandom can primarily revolve around this interest. They might re-engage with the source material by actively searching for moments and dialogue that support their preferred ship. This attention to (non-canon) romance, especially in shows where this is not the primary focus, is often looked down upon by other fans. Shipping is seen as a culturally feminine hobby because of the importance placed on emotions, love, and relationships. By extent, associations with this practice are viewed as negative and as devaluing the original media. Male fans will often try to keep shipping away from fan discourses considered more proper and culturally masculine. Even with *The West Wing* being a drama series, some fans fear that placing importance on romance and rooting for a pairing brings a 'respectable' series down to the level of a soap opera (270-271).

Comparable to Jenkins' explanation of the complex relationship between producers, fans, and the preference for casual viewers who do not critique as much, Williams coins 'authorial duality' to refer to when makers of a show wish to invite support and loyalty to the show but also warn fans to keep their expectations in check and be aware that they might be left wanting by the narrative. Creators might both confirm and deny the actions of fans having an effect. Fans navigate this duality to try and find support for their preferred pairings and claim their interpretation as superior to fans of other couples. Fans of ships with more 'evidence' in the source material or support by cast and crew may gain power within the fandom discourse. Producers like these debates between factions of fans as their encourage loyalty and consumption (276-277).

Using the pairing of Josh/Donna (J/D) from *The West Wing* as an example, Williams explores how fans connect shipping with their own self-identity. She borrows the concept of limerence from psychoanalysis, which is derived from the object-relations theories. Certain objects exist in an area between the inner and the external realms and are called transitional objects. Fans can often struggle to verbalise why they develop preferences for certain ships because they know the relationship they are invested in is purely fictional (278), but "they identify with the emotions and developments they see on the screen." (279)

Williams finds previous studies about shipping lacking and one-sided for not properly focusing on what this does for the shippers themselves. The media people consume and interact with can become linked to their identity: "people use media to validate and support specific identities, a general sense of self" (Snow 1988, cited in Williams 2011, 279). Shippers take on a certain identity within the fandom subculture as they let other fans know how they interpreted the show and (a part of) what they are invested in. Fans who have rooted for a pairing over a longer period may also create a self-narrative to communicate their bond with the characters and their stories, such as drawing comparisons between events in the show and their own lives (279). Female J/D shippers can identify with the character of Donna and use her "to negotiate issues of identity often related to gender and the role of women" while also being attracted to Josh (280).

However, despite the complex relationship between shippers and their ship, this practice is not welcome by the whole fandom, especially the ones who prefer to place focus on the storylines about politics or might be opposed to romance plotlines altogether because it places focus on personal affairs in a political show (282-283). This shows that although fandom is a community formed around a similar interest, there are hierarchies that rank some fans above others (283). This hierarchy seems to arise based on stereotypical gender roles, which is not uncommon in fandom in general, with masculine and political readings of the show being privileged over feminine and personal interpretations (284). As *The West Wing* was coming to an end, the "anti-soap opera sentiment" (284) was not the only point argued against having a J/D romance as endgame. Fans offered different reasons for why the ship was 'wrong' with the goal of their own interpretation of the text becoming the most popular one:

> By variously suggesting that the ship violates moral and ethical boundaries, is tedious, or is nauseating (even discursively aligned with incestuous behaviour due to some fans' reading of the J/D relationship as familial rather than romantic) such fans seek to impose their textual readings and to imply that those who support J/D are misguided. (285)

As the show ended with J/D becoming canon, arguments relying on ambiguous quotes from producers could no longer be used against shippers. Despite the show ending, fans

were still invested in imposing their interpretation. Williams suggests that this might be due to how they formed an identity around the show and their ship. This could lead to instability in the identity as the object they use to reflect on themselves and to construct said identity comes to an end, moving from an active state to a dormant one. Heightened investment in having one's textual interpretation proven right might take place as fans try to reassure themselves that the time and emotions they dedicated to the show and fandom was all worth it, finding a form of closure in the end and feeling like they have been rewarded for their loyalty (285-286). While this article was about *The West Wing*, a show that ran between 1999 and 2006, there are still many similarities between fandom then and now. To many fans, especially shippers, Williams' short reference to people trying to portray certain ships as morally wrong will ring painfully familiar. Her article proves that such rhetoric has been part of fandom for decades, but in recent years there appears to have been a major surge in popularity for what would become known as anti-shipping.

4.3   The Rise of Anti-Shipping

With the release of *Voltron: Legendary Defender* in 2016, came one of the most infamous ship wars in fandom history. Renee Ann Drouin explores this in her dissertation "*Fans are Going to See it Any Way They Want": The Rhetorics of the Voltron: Legendary Defender Fandom* (2021). She opted to use the terms 'antis'. Her dissertation is divided into two parts, the first half being the results of a survey on antis and the second half deals with the targeted harassment and death threats she experienced. She begins by contrasting antis in the *VLD* fandom with anti-fans, people against a media or creator. They are frequently heterosexual men opposing media targeted at a (younger) female audience, or at women in fandoms of male focused media, while antis are predominantly female and/or queer (28-29). With the queer ending of *The Legend of Korra* and the early positive representation of gender and ethnicity *VLD* offered, a subsection of the fandom latched on to Lance, believing him and Keith would be the queer couple of the show and started harassing people with different opinions, using tactics such as death threats and falsely reporting people for possession of CP while also sending CP to people. Wanting to keep fans from shipping sheith, they made false allegations of paedophilia and incest (29-35). This fascination with Lance can be attributed to him being the everyman archetype who antis

related to, seeing his success as meaning they too would be triumphant. Lance, while occasionally having more serious moments, was primarily a comic relief character. Much of what antis hoped for Lance happened instead to Keith, such as being a prodigy pilot and becoming the leader. The ship allowed antis to see Lance as equal or even superior to Keith, meaning he evolved past the everyman character, and it would also give them Lance as the queer representation (103-105).

While her survey was open to anyone, almost no antis participated, perhaps due to the requirement of being over eighteen. Reflecting the diverse fandom, most participants in the survey were female, and the overwhelming majority queer (57-61). Everyone in the *VLD* fandom had some familiarity with antis and almost everyone believed them to be motivated by shipping (69-70). Antis can be defined in two ways, first there are universal antis who exist across the spectrum of fandoms, disliking and hating any given ship or media, and often viewing themselves as morally superior to others (70-72). Within the context of *VLD*, antis are described as "combative", "moralistic", and as believing that they engage in "social activism" through fandom and shipping by harassing people, even outside the fandom (73-76). To achieve this, they use loaded words such as paedophilia and incest to veil their ulterior motives of shipping (77-79). Antis are viewed as mainly being teenage girls, both straight and queer, though older antis also exist, as well as being predominantly American. Their behaviour is often attributed to this youth and inexperience as well as minority status. Those groups have little power in real life, so their fandom policing might be a way to assert control they otherwise lack (84-92). The consensus was that antis have had a negative effect on fandom. Most participants had not personally been targeted, but had witnessed it happening to others, describing:

> Physical trauma and confrontations offline, emotional trauma, legal recourse, feelings of depression and anxiety, reminders of child sexual assault and post traumatic stress disorder, concerns of being doxxed, stalked, raped, or physically/emotionally attacked (93)

Participants explain that antis broke fandom traditions, leading people to limit their experiences with other fans for fear for coming across an anti, and dedicating much time and effort to blocking them. Some became reluctant to make and post fanart and fanfiction.

The *VLD* fandom and the topic of shipping inspired fear (94-95). Some could testify to having been doxxed, sent violent images and gore or called racist and homophobic slurs. Harassment of the cast and crew was well-known among the participants (98-103). Survivors of child sexual abuse (CSA) shared how the casually made false allegations of paedophilia and incest had a severe negative effect on them, viewing it as trivialising their trauma, as well as making it unclear whether someone is talking about paedophilia or a ship. This is to deceive unaware non-fans, who might even join in on the harassment (106-109). Participants compared anti behaviour to moral abuse, where a victim is persuaded into believing they are a bad person and cannot function without the abuser who keeps them from being even worse (114-115). Echoing my own experiences, the participants explain how antis hijacked the controversial death of Shiro's ex-boyfriend to try to pressure the creators into making klance canon by using the language of social justice to convince non-fans to join them (119-124).

In the second half of her dissertation, Drouin discusses the harassment she was a victim of as her research became known to antis. By going against antis, she was relentlessly attacked, accused of being a paedophile, and her research and words warped to further their agenda. She believes the strong objection antis have to her research was based on the worry that their actions would finally be documented and their victims given a voice. She received death threats, was doxxed, antis spammed her survey and claimed she lied about being harassed. She details the fear for her safety and that of her students as antis threatened to find her at the university where she taught, while being met with little understanding and finding few measures to protect herself and her family (138-152).

Jenkins wrote in *Textual Poachers* (2013) that fandom encourages different interpretations as it thrives on discourse (88-89). Drouin questions how good faith factors into this, as usually fans rely on evidence to support their interpretations, but antis stood by the accusations of sheith being incest despite the cast, crew, and narrative debunking it. Consequently, antis' actions cannot be categorised as a difference of interpretation because they themselves present their opinions as facts not up for debate (161-162). Antis claimed they aimed at creating safe online spaces for minors and fight against shipping

they believed would lead to paedophilia and incest being normalised, but their primary purpose was to drive people away from a ship that was a 'threat' to theirs. They employed tactics such as targeted harassment and false allegation of paedophilia while proclaiming themselves the keepers of good morals (174). They differ from typical cyber harassment, which is mainly perpetrated by straight men targeting minorities, often women, while antis predominantly were minorities themselves and attacked anyone regardless of gender, race, or sexuality, though sexist, racist, and homophobic slurs were part of their vocabulary. Antis relied on appealing to emotions with the aim of recruiting outsiders who had no problem agreeing that paedophilia was horrible and anyone allegedly supporting it deserved what was coming to them (176-177).

4.4   Abusive Language Online: Hate Speech, Cyberbullying, and Cyber-Aggression

To understand abusive language online, I refer to three terms: hate speech, cyberbullying, and cyber-aggression. I begin with hate speech, of which there is no one definition. Davidson et al. (2017) define it as "language that is used to expresses hatred towards a targeted group or is intended to be derogatory, to humiliate, or to insult the members of the group". Waseem and Hovy (2016, 89) provide eleven characteristics of what they consider hate speech:

1. uses a sexist or racial slur.

2. attacks a minority.

3. seeks to silence a minority.

4. criticizes a minority (without a well founded argument).

5. promotes, but does not directly use, hate speech or violent crime.

6. criticizes a minority and uses a straw man argument.

7. blatantly misrepresents truth or seeks to distort views on a minority with unfounded claims.

8. shows support of problematic hash tags. E.g. "#BanIslam", "#whoriental", "#whitegenocide"

9. negatively stereotypes a minority.

10. defends xenophobia or sexism.

11. contains a screen name that is offensive, as per the previous criteria, the tweet is ambiguous (at best), and the tweet is on a topic that satisfies any of the above criteria.

Davidson et al. (2017) use the more neutral 'group' to refer to the people targeted, while Waseem and Hovy (2016) account for how not all groups of people are targeted equally by using the term 'minority' and specifically pointing out sexism and racism as hate speech (89). In terms of discourse analysis, Davidson et al. (2017) focus too much on the grammatical sentence in their definition and do not include the wider social, historical, and cultural context.

Next, based on traditional definition of bullying, cyberbullying can be defined as an "aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, *using electronic forms of contact*, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself" (Smith et al. 2008, 376). Grigg (2010) expands on this and criticises this definition, specifically the power imbalance and repetition and how they differ from traditional bullying. In the offline world, power imbalance comes in the form of age or physical strength. Online, it manifests in forms such as an in-group or knowledge of technology. Repetition comes in the form of, for example, a perpetrator sending multiple sexually explicit messages to an unwilling target. However, it gets more complicated in a situation where a bully shares a video meant to humiliate the target once, but the video is viewed multiple times, in which case how to view the repetition becomes unclear (144-146). Grigg points out that negative and abusive acts online are so broad, cyberbullying as a term fails to capture them properly. Instead, she suggests the term cyber-aggression which she defines as "intentional harm delivered by the use of electronic means to a person or a group of people irrespective of their age, who perceive(s) such acts as offensive, derogatory, harmful or unwanted." (152) These terms can of course overlap. A victim of cyberbullying may also be a victim of hate speech if the bullying features racist slurs.

The language of fandom policing does not completely fit into these definitions. Hate speech comes with a socio-cultural context of oppression towards minorities. There is a systematic and institutional power imbalance at play with people from a vulnerable minority being

attacked by people from an oppressive majority. There is no historical and institutional oppression of shippers by anti-shippers like there is in the case of queer people by a straight majority. While the language of fandom policing fits multiple criteria mentioned above (use of straw men and distorting the truth), both shippers and anti-shippers mostly seem to hail from the same minorities (Drouin 2021, 1). Cyberbullying is about a targeted victim, but this is not always the case for fandom policing which does not necessarily single out specific victims. While cyberbullying can be a part of fandom policing, such as when a fan artist gets sent multiple abusive messages, none of my corpus is targeted at a specific person, meaning it does not fit the definition of cyberbullying. The more general term of cyber-aggression appears to be the most accurate, but it is defined as "intentional harm" (Grigg 2010, 152). This intention becomes more complicated with fandom policing. While there are posts that explicitly aim their insults at certain shippers, fitting the description of cyber-aggression, other posts seem to come from a place of genuine concern and not with the aim of attacking shippers, making it questionable if that is intentional harm, and some anti-shippers would not consider what they post as harmful.

Finally, an important fact to remember is that while the focus is on online abuse, cyber-aggression does not remain secluded to the virtual world and can turn into offline harassment as well (Golbeck 2018, 1; Drouin 2021, 96-100). Drawing on my own personal conversations with fan artists who sell their art at fan gatherings, all who I talked to who sold art featuring sheith had experienced unwanted comments and/or accusations of paedophilia and incest at their booth. This was never something I specifically asked the artists about, it was when I bought sheith merchandise from them that they bring up up this verbal harassment unprompted and expressed relief at me not being an anti-shipper, and I could share my own negative experiences in return. Encountering cyber-aggression or offline harassment becomes a bonding experience.

5 Methodology

5.1 Aca-Fan and Queer Geek Feminist

The relationship between a researcher and their field of study is one long thought to be separate from each other, allowing the researcher some objective and impartial distance. It is, however, more complicated than that. As both a researcher, a fan, and someone who has experienced negative effects of anti-shipping, I speak from the inside and try to make sense of it from that position. In the first publication of *Textual Poachers* in 1992, Jenkins brings up this tension between being a fan and an academic but does not give it a specific name. As other researchers contribute to the conversation around this complex relationship (Dotty 2000, Hill 2002), aca-fan would emerge as the conventionally accepted term. In the 2012 edition of *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins addresses that it has become standard for researchers to disclose personal ties they may have with the media and/or communities (viii). With the usage of the aca-fan concept, there are three relevant aspects. First, there is subjectivity, the acknowledgement of personal interests and emotional investment in the media being studied. Secondly, there is acknowledgement of accountability for the researcher regarding what they publish about the community they are studying. Lastly, by using this term, aca-fans also claim to belong to the group their research revolves around (xiii-xiv).

While aca-fan acknowledges the link between academic and fan, there are more facets that I need to address. While my research revolves around fandom, it also focuses on a subsection thereof, namely female and/or queer fans and their online spaces. It is not enough to define myself as an aca-fan, the intersectional perspective regarding the identity of the fans studied as well as my connection to them play a role. Lamerichs (2018) addresses these shortcomings of the aca-fan concept. As some texts have predominantly female audiences, it is not enough to study them as genderless fans but rather take their gender into account with the help of feminist theory. She begins by defining the methodology of the aca-fan as a form of auto-ethnography and participant observation. This means that the researcher does not just gather information by observing but also by being a part of the group, being an insider of the community that can rely on their background and experience to navigate it and make provisional conclusions (48-50).

However, just because an aca-fan is part of the fandom, that does not mean that they are already familiar with every part of it such as the other fans or the social media platforms. Fandom is vast, exists in multiple places and is made up of many subcategories of people. A researcher can come across new contacts and perspectives within a fandom they might already be active in (52-53).

The aca-fan model has been faced with some criticism, predominantly with interpretive bias and the worry that media ethnographers could become engulfed by what they are studying. However, all media and literature researchers are audiences of the texts consumed and become innately entailed with them. Furthermore, having affection for one's research topic is not exclusive to media studies but rather feelings that any scholar can develop towards their field. Lamerichs offers self-reflexivity as a solution to these issues a media ethnographer might face. When a researcher uses self-reflexivity, it allows them to put their authority into question, make their position clear, and build a bond of honesty and trust with the community that is the focus of their study (52-53).

A criticism she has of the term aca-fan is that she finds it to be too narrow and, in some situations, inaccurate. First, the researcher is not always a fan of the media they study. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, some researchers are also interested in combining fan and media studies with social engagement on topics such as the identity of the audience or representation in media. For these reasons, Lamerichs prefers to describe her views as 'geek feminism' which is a position that forms and is formed by social practice. Geek is a label to describe people with interests and hobbies related to popular media and gaming. It is also a term that is becoming more linked to a critical subculture, as well as it is becoming more popular and connected to female fans. By using geek feminist instead of aca-fan, the social awareness and criticism of media and fandom is more prominently communicated and more clearly encompassed (53-54). In other words, there is more attention drawn to criticism related to gender and the importance of feminism and other social issues. Due to the online spaces in my research being predominantly frequented by female and/or queer individuals, geek feminist is a more accurate label than aca-fan. However, I will also add 'queer' to the label, making queer geek feminist, to more properly

describe myself as a researcher and the position I speak from. This allows me to self-reflect on my own position, understanding that my identity as a queer man with a fandom experience that was affected negatively by anti-shippers influences my perspective and research. For transparency, I am a shipper of sheith and have a strong attached to this pairing, but I have no investment in any of the other pairings, some of which I did not even know existed.

5.2   Data Gathering

For my research, I knew I would have to gather my data on social media. With the help of my supervisor, we settled on me finding 500 posts of which I would analyse the rhetoric. While moral policing in fandom is present on all social media sites, I narrowed the choice down to either Twitter or Tumblr as those were the two where I found it to be the most active. As I had witnessed this type of cyber harassment gain traction around the summer of 2016, I limited my search to be between 2015 and 2020, over a period of six years. This was with the assumption that I would not find a lot in 2015 and could document a noticeable rise starting in 2016. Twitter and Tumblr turned out to both have upsides and downsides. Twitter has an advanced search system that allows me to limit the period of which I want to see tweets, for example between 01/01/2015 to 31/12/2015, allowing me to specifically search per year. Tumblr search system only allows one to search by 'popular' and by 'newest' so I could not limit my search to a specific year. While Tumblr has a downside with its limited search possibilities, the deciding factor was the character limit of tweets. Tweets were so short it was difficult to understand the context in which they were made as the user could only expand upon their arguments by making multiple tweets or creating a longer chain of tweets. Tumblr, on the other hand, allows for longer blog posts so everything could be contained to one post rather than be spread out over multiple. For this reason, I ended up choosing to gather blog posts from Tumblr while searching on popular.

To determine which posts to include in my data, I set up eight criteria based on my experience of fandom policing. First, the content needed to be in English, and secondly, the posts needed to be from Tumblr. Posts that were just screenshots of tweets, for example, were excluded. Third, the posts needed to be the original posts by the users.

This meant not including any replies or comments on other posts, even by the original user. Fourth, the posts needed to have been made between 01/01/2015 and 31/12/2020 as that was the six-year period I was limiting myself to. For the fifth criteria, the posts needed to be about fans and fandom. Any criticism directed at the original media or producers was left out, posts featuring both were kept. Next, it needed to be about fiction, such as a preferred ship or fan creations (fanfiction, fanart, or cosplay and so forth). Criticism of fan behaviour unrelated to their media consumption, interpretation, and creation was not included. The next to last criteria, was that it needed to contain a form of policing of what other fans can or should do, create, or ship. I came across multiple posts where users expressed issues or even opposition to a specific pairing but also stated that those were personal reasons for not liking a ship and that they thought other were free to ship it. As these were not trying to police others, they were excluded. Finally, the policing needed to be based on moral values or concerns. Posts where people said that other fans should ship their preferred pairing instead of the rival one based screen-time or better chemistry, were left out.

The next step was to figure out what search terms I would be using to find posts containing the sort of speech I wished to analyse. I opted to start with some general terms, namely 'anti shipping', 'anti shipper', and 'shipping discourse'. While scrolling through Tumblr, I made a note of which specific ships were mentioned multiple times so that I could search those individually. I already knew I needed to include 'anti sheith' and 'anti shaladin' as that was the ship that led to the rise of popularity of the anti-shipping community. For the rest, I tried to create a diverse group of ships, both problematic and unproblematic, varying in (alleged) issues (age gap, incest, and/or abuse), as well as originating from older and younger fandoms. While doing this, I was faced with a limitation. One pairing that was cited a couple of time was of the brothers Dean and Sam Winchester from the tv show *Supernatural* (2005), called 'wincest', a pun on their last name and the word 'incest'. While I knew of the show, I had never watched it, nor did I know much about the fandom. At first, I did not think this would pose a problem as I assumed I would just find some simple posts that said "don't ship incest you freaks" and variations thereof. Instead, I found that the posts would discuss characters and narratives in the show as well as events from the fandom.

These turned out to be too unfamiliar and I could not decipher deceptive framings or straight up lies from truth. With the time limit of this thesis, I could not watch the show's 15 seasons and educate myself on the fandom's long history. Therefore, I found myself needing to limit my research to media and pairings I had some familiarity with or could consume and educate myself on with the time I had.

The 500 blog posts were saved in an excel document with the content, the hashtags, and the date. For 2015 I gathered a total of 20 posts, for 2016 59, for 2017 171, for 2018 131, for 2019 64, and for 2020 55. There was a noticeable increase from 2015 to 2016, and a significant increase from 2016 to 2017, coinciding with the birth and rise in popularity of anti-shipping in the *VLD* fandom. 2017 and 2018 were the years with the most posts, with a decrease in 2019 and 2020. I believe this is linked to *VLD* ending, meaning the shipping war no longer mattered, as well as Tumblr banning all adult content on its platform in December 2018 (Romano), leading fans to migrate to other social media sites. Regarding search terms, some yielded more results than others. The following is an overview of the terms and the number of posts gathered from each:

- anti shipping: 101
- anti shipper: 4
- shipping discourse: 4
- anti sheith: 96
- anti shaladin: 66
- anti reylo: 13
- anti bakudeku: 44
- anti hannigram: 7
- anti ereri: 31
- anti otayuri: 35
- anti elsanna: 11
- anti billdip: 38
- anti drarry: 13
- anti royed: 6

- anti stevidot: 7

- anti fujoshi: 24

'Anti shipping', 'anti shipper', and 'shipping discourse' are general terms for this phenomenon. 'Sheith' refers to the pairing of Shiro and Keith from *VLD*. As discussed earlier, the main issues are the age gap and accusations of abuse of power and incest. From the same series, 'shaladin' (66) means any pairing between Shiro and the other paladins, with the problems also being the age gaps and the position of authority Shiro has over the group. The rest of the paladins are also under eighteen years old at the start of the series, adding paedophilia as another issues. By the start of season seven, a year has passed in the narrative, making everyone except Pidge over eighteen, and Keith three years older due to his solo adventure on a planet with a warped time-place continuum where he aged two years more than the rest ("The Voltron Coalition Handbook").

One pairing that stands apart from the others is 'reylo', the pairing of Rey and Kylo Ren from the *Star Wars* movies. Most pairings criticised on a moral basis are between two male characters, reylo is one of the few male/female couples. This is also one of the only two ships from the list that are canon (*Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*). This led to some problems gathering data because most of the posts were directed at the source material. The main issue is that Kylo Ren is the villain and on the side of the First Order, a fascist empire, and he tortured Rey (*Star Wars: The Force Awakens*), making the pairing abusive. Another popular pairing was 'bakudeku', the ship between Bakugou and Deku from *My Hero Academia* (Hirokoshi 2014), a manga about superheroes. The ship is deemed abusive due to this relentless bullying of Deku by Bakugou. 'Hannigram' refers to the ship between Will Graham and the serial killer cannibal Hannibal Lector from the tv show *Hannibal* (2013) which is considered abusive. This ship has received a remarkable amount of support from the cast and crew, such as actor Mads Mikkelsen, who plays Hannibal, stating in interviews that he reads erotic fanfiction of the ship and enjoys it "tremendously" (De Semlyen 2015). Showrunner Bryan Fuller is a vocal supporter of the pairing and speaks out against anti-shipping (Mason 2020), even owning 'pro-ship' merchandise (@BryanFuller 2021). This was the only pairing where I came across posts fitting the criteria from earlier than 2015, namely a few posts were from 2014. The takeaway should

not be that earlier anti-shipping criticism does not exist, but that those did not show up during my search.

'Ereri' refers to the ship between Eren and Levi from the manga *Attack on Titan* (Isayama 2009). Issues with the ship are the age gap (Eren is fifteen at the start of the series, Levi is in his thirties) and Levi holding a military rank over Eren. At one point, Eren is put on trial due to having supernatural powers, and when it seemed he would be executed, Levi beat him up to demonstrate to the judges that he had him under control. This leads to accusations of it being abusive. 'Otayuri' refers to the pairing of Otabek and Yurio from the anime *Yuri on Ice!!!* (2016). Otabek is eighteen years old and Yurio is fifteen, leading some anti-shippers to take issue with the age gap. Another point of criticism is that the main characters of the show are a canon male/male couple. Accusations against otayuri shippers is that they ignore the canon queer representation in favour of a non-canon ship.

'Elsanna' is the incestuous ship between the sisters Elsa and Anna from the Disney movie *Frozen* (2013). While other male/male fan pairings were referred to more often than elsanna, it was the first and only female/female pairing that I came across during my search. 'Billdip' is the pairing between the trillions of years old dream demon Bill and the twelve-year-old human boy Dipper from the animated tv show *Gravity Falls* (2012). Anti-shippers object to the pairing based on the age gap and Bill abusing Dipper and his family. 'Drarry' is the ship between Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter from the *Harry Potter* series (Rowling 1997). Due to Draco being a bully and joining the villains, the ship is deemed abusive. 'Royed' is the name for the pairing between Roy Mustang and Edward Elric from the manga *Fullmetal Alchemist* (Arakawa 2001). Roy finds Edward as a child and recruits him to the military, making the issues the age gap and Roy being Edward's military superior. 'Stevidot' is the pairing of Steven and Peridot from the animated tv show *Steven Universe* (2013). Steven is a thirteen-year-old boy, sixteen by the end of the show, and Peridot is from an alien race of long-living rock people called 'gems', herself being thousands of years old. The gems are neither male nor female, but they all use female pronouns, except for the half-human half-gem Steven. This also makes the ship unique as

it is between a boy and a non-binary person, the only such pairing I came across. The issue anti-shippers have with stevidot is the age gap.

One surprise during my search was the prevalence of calling shippers 'fujoshi' and general anti-fujoshi criticism. Fujoshi is a Japanese word to refer to female shippers of male/male pairings, fan-created content (often called yaoi), and readers of Boys' Love manga (Galbraith 2011, 218-220). The literal translation is 'rotten girl' and started as a sexist and homophobic insult direct at girls and women for having queer sexual fantasies outside of what traditional heteronormative gender roles dictate is acceptable (212, 215). The term was reclaimed by Japanese female shippers, embracing the fact that they and their interests are considered abject by society and other fans. Fujoshi are comparable to female slash shippers as Jenkins described them (2013, 186) and some female fans of male/male pairings outside of Japan also identify with the word. Like slash shippers, fujoshi and the fan-made content they create is subject to criticism of homophobia within their circles. In the early nineties, a debate started in Japan when a gay man and activist published a letter to female yaoi fans, complaining that their stories and characters had little to do with actually gay men and that they were co-opting them for their sexual fantasies while having little concern or even awareness for homophobia. Some yaoi fans argued back that yaoi was for them to escape the sexism of everyday life, a place where they could be the active subjects with sexual fantasies instead of the passive objects desired (Vincent 2007, 71-72). Another criticism brought up, is that the relationship dynamic often portrayed in many yaoi is the same as in the most stereotypical heterosexual romance: a younger, often virgin, and naive pretty boy being pursued by an older, taller, and more masculine man (73-74). The debate around fujoshi sparked some positive change, such as gay men trying to see it from the perspective of women navigating a sexist world, and fujoshi realising the struggles of gay men and their need for positive representation (76). Similar discussions about whether fujoshi are feminist or homophobic is echoed in Western English-speaking fandom. Some gay men critique yaoi and its fans, feeling like it reduces them to a sexual object for a straight audience. However, there are also gay men who enjoy reading yaoi and engage in fandom activities with other yaoi fans (McHarry 2011, 187-188). Use of the term 'fujoshi' was noticeably frequent in anti-shipping discourse, which made it necessary

to search 'anti-fujoshi' on its own. However, a significant amount of the criticism was directed at the behaviour of fujoshi regarding real queer men (such as asking invasive questions regarding their sex lives) and not at the fiction they consume and create and thus had to be left out.

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6 Analysis

In Drouin's (2021) research, all participants believed antis in the *VLD* fandom were motived by shipping (69-70). One tactic they employed, was to recruit outsiders who did not know the allegations of paedophilia were merely to silence fans with different ship preferences (176-177). Even after *VLD* ended, anti-shipping has remained rampant across numerous fandoms, reusing the same tactics in new as well as old ship wars, and reaching fans who are not motivated by a favourite pairing but have sincere criticism of the existence of problematic fiction in fandom. While Drouin's research is primarily non-anti-shippers sharing their experience with antis, I analyse their speech directly. First, I will look at various names for anti-shippers, followed by how anti-shippers portray themselves and shippers. Secondly, I will look at the use of humour, followed speech containing forms of violence. Next, I will discuss how they weaponize the language of social justice and use strawmen. After that, I will show how a significant amount of anti-shipper arguments rely on appealing to emotions as well as deceptively frame shippers and their ship. Finally, I will conclude with what the effect of anti-shipping has been on contemporary fandom.

6.1 Defining Anti-Shippers and Shippers

To begin, I will discuss a few prominent names used for anti-shippers. 'Anti-shipper' and 'anti-shipping' refer to fans being opposed to certain pairings in fandom based on moral concerns, having evolved from 'anti-sheith' and 'anti-shaladin'. The most common name is the shortened version 'anti', as Drouin uses, but this term is ambiguous and some anti-shippers will change it to mean 'anti-paedophilia' or 'anti-incest', removing the fiction and fandom context, aiming to frame pro-shippers as being for those things:

> they're not "anti antis" or "pro-shippers", they're enablers. enablers of grooming, abuse, sexualization of children, fetishization of rape, incest, abuse, paedophilia and dehumanizing, sexualizing and fetishizing the LGBT community, especially mlm.
> we're not "anti shippers", we're anti-enablers, anti-fetishization, we're people with common fucking sense. anti-sex freaks who want nothing more than to get off to children, abuse, rape and incest, fictional or otherwise. (77)

To keep it short but within the context of fandom, the term 'fanti' was created, a portmanteau of 'fan' and 'anti', but this term is less popular. In an attempt at being both humorous and insulting, some pro-shippers started using the emoji of an ant, in combination with the suffix -s for plural: 🐜s. Another term is 'fandom frollos', a reference to *The Hunchback of Note Dame* (1996) where the villain Judge Claude Frollo views himself as above everyone else and incapable of doing wrong, while also struggling with his sexual feelings for Esmerelda. Some find anti-shippers to resemble Frollo because of the self-righteous condemnation of others and holier-than-thou attitude. As anti-shippers try to police other fans, the name 'fandom police' was given to them, shortened to 'fanpol'. This is not without controversy as many oppose any association with real-life police because of the prevalence of police brutality, especially against minorities. Some have embraced it though:

> to all the shippers who think im a cop because im against incest, pedophilla, and abuse
>
> youre right, and here's my badge:
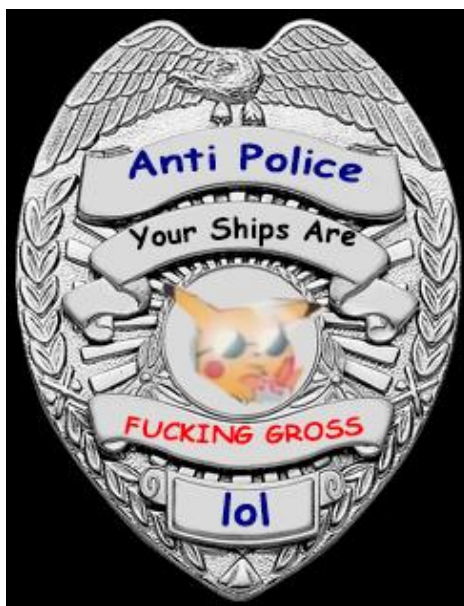
(69)

Image 2

A police badge photoshopped to be about ships.

Some people also draw comparisons between the arguments of anti-shippers and conservative puritans (curlicuecal), resulting in the nickname 'conservaqueers', a

portmanteau of conservative and queer. As the general image of anti-shippers is that they are predominantly teenagers, 'puriteens' became another name for them, a combination of puritan and teen. These last two terms remove the fandom context, making them useful for discussions around a general rise in puritanism among young queer people, but not for when fandom and shipping are essential elements. I find 'anti-shipper' the most accurate to refer to the fans, and 'anti-shipping' and 'fandom policing' the most applicable to refer to the actions of these fans, so these are the terms I will be utilising.

To understand how anti-shippers portray themselves and pro-shippers, I find it necessary to give a brief overview of arguments on both sides based on my experience. One must keep in mind that neither side is a monolith and opinions will vary from individual to individual. I am also not an unbiased source and have more familiarity with the pro-shipper side but aim to present both as in a fair manner. It is important to remember that those arguing in good faith, ultimately, want to keep people safe in online fandom, especially minors, but disagree on how to achieve this.

Anti-shippers tend to have the opinion that problematic art on the internet will be consumed by people too young to have the critical thinking skills to distinguish what is okay in real life versus in fiction, so it is best either not created at all or created in private. Some worry that making or reading about problematic content will lead people to want to do those things in real life, to paedophiles feeling validated, and that it could be used by abusers to groom their victims. Some find it is inappropriate to portray trauma in (erotic) fiction if the actions of the perpetrator are not explicitly condemned, and some think that no such fiction should be created at all. On the topic of survivors of CSA using problematic fiction as a coping method, there is disagreement, with some finding that an understandable exception, some saying it is okay but should only be done in private, and some opposing it completely. Many also believe in community policing by publicly naming and shaming alleged predators through doxxing and call out posts.

Pro-shippers tend to hold the opinion that fiction is not constrained by real-life moral judgements and laws. For them, fiction affects reality, but it is complicated and not all fiction

is created the same. They believe the average adult can safely explore taboo fantasies, sexual or not, in fiction without wanting to replicate it in real life. They tend to hold the opinion that people can create and posts such art in internet spaces meant solely for adults who consent to viewing it. Should a minor willingly enter a space explicitly marked 18+, they see the responsibility as lying with the child for violating the boundaries set in place and the parents for not properly following their child's internet behaviour. They emphasise using tools to curate one's internet experience, such as blocking people, blacklisting terms which will hide content containing them, and tagging problematic content with warnings. Some argue that survivors can benefit from reading and writing about their trauma and sharing it with others. Pro-shippers often make the argument that anything can be used to groom people (like candy and video games) as the goal is to gain the victim's trust, so singly out problematic fiction is not tackling the issue at hand and pushing the blame away from the abuser. They also point to mainstream pornography and published books featuring the same problematic content not being held to the same standards. A common worry is that queer content will be disproportionately targeted by censorship. They oppose calling fictional depictions "literally paedophilia" as they fear this leads to cry wolf situations. They tend to believe that people do not deserve harassment and death threats. Should someone be breaking the law and/or endanger another person, especially a child, the right course of action is to report them to the proper authorities so legal action can be taken. They do not oppose community policing through call out posts, but think it should only be reserved for real-life predators as a way to spread awareness.

6.2   How Anti-Shippers Portray Themselves

Demographically, anti-shippers often define themselves by their status as a minority or group in need to protection. They will often bring up their young age and the inherent vulnerability thereof:

> Imagine thinking that CHILDREN on the internet who voice the fact that they're uncomfortable with something are trying to manipulate you, an adult into never making content again. Couldn't be me ❤️ (129)

The argument they are making is that as the characters are closer in age to the anti-shippers, that gives them more of a say over what fans can do with them. Anti-shippers

emphasise that a significant number of them belong to the queer community and face oppression and that this influences their fandom experience:

> stop fetishizing gay couples ya nasties we are not objects! we are not your play pieces! we deserve the same respect you give het couples! we deserve representation that's not just for your personal fantasies! wild concept that we shouldn't yknow just be fetishized (👀 shallies) or placed in heartbreaking situations for your entertainment (👀 k/l angst) (383)

This anti-shipper does not only take issue with certain ships, but also oppose depictions of klance in angsty scenarios, claiming it to be queer suffering for straight people to enjoy. Some even define being queer as an inherent part of being an anti-shipper: "being anti otayuri is lesbian culture" (24). They often present CSA survivors as wholly agreeing with or being anti-shippers:

> i love how people who ship pedophilic ships are like "i have the right to want to see art and read fiction depicting an adult having sex with a child or teenager and then talk about how adorable it is!" and it's like yeah and survivors of pedophilia have the right to tell you that doing that is extremely disrespectful and disgusting lmao (114)

This last anti-shipper follows up this in their post by saying they are "anti pedo/incest/abuse ships (yknow like a normal person)" (114), explicitly stating that they are the normal ones in the shipping discourse. This is echoed by another who describes anti-shippers as "people with common fucking sense" (77). They often present themselves as intelligent and having more understanding than others, such as one who said "most antis: *well thought out points, compelling aruguments, sources galore *" (230). Consequently, they view themselves as the keepers of good morals in fandom and educators of those they deem as knowing less:

> things you can do when someone ships harmful ship:
>
> educate them
>
> things you absolutely SHOULDN'T do:
>
> send them death threats (164)

As this post demonstrates, this can also include calling out other anti-shippers. They describe their arguments as "legit criticism" (44) and view themselves as being courageous

for fighting against problematic fiction: "I hope the people who are brave enough to call out toxic representation in media or fandom have a good day today" (375).

6.3   How Anti-Shippers Portray Shippers

While anti-shippers describe themselves in a positive manner, the way (problematic) shippers are portrayed is overwhelmingly negative. Many ways of referring to shippers evoke feelings of disgust, calling them "nasty" (206), "disgusting" (131), "weirdos" (123), "freaks" (407), "total failure" (126), "Super Icky!!!!" (229), and "pathetic, cartoon shipper millenial loser, failure at life, disappointment" (459). Anti-shippers also use loaded terms such as "sick and a pedophile (...) [e]ven if you're not a pedo, you'll become one" (445) and "abuse apologist" (144). While they present themselves as intelligent and on the side of CSA survivors, they say shippers are "brainwashed" (308), "so. fuckin. stupid." (311), "will never listen to actual logical arguments or read sources" (109), and "really have no idea how to emphatise with victims of trauma, especially csa" (131). There is frequent speculation about the sex lives of shippers, painting them as sexual deviants, saying that they "jack it to fictional cp/abuse/other questionable content" (152) and wondering if they "cream" themselves (339) or are "getting off" (346) to their ship.

Comparisons in demographics between shippers and anti-shippers is often brought up, especially regarding age, calling them "nasty, 20+ year old" (5). In combination with age, shippers are described as primarily being female, for example "middle aged women" (23) and occasionally with sexist insults like "bitch" (407). This is done to contrast with anti-shippers predominantly being teenagers: "it's funny that 'fandom moms' approaching their 40s are on this app harassing minors" (137). In many cases, their gender is emphasised to draw attention to how they are demographically different from their male/male pairings:

> Here's the difference between me, a gay man who's gone through sexual abuse; and you, a cis woman writing fic that involves a mlm character going through sexual abuse.
>
> When I write it, it is an extension of myself, my story, and my life. I'm writing it to express the trauma I've been through and to show myself that it is possible to recover from these things.

When you write it it is from an outsiders lens. (...) It is not your place. You are not part of the mlm community. You have no right to our stories or our pain. You need to stay in your god damn lane. I'm tired of foujoshis stealing mlm content and making it about themselves. Cishets have an abundance of content, let mlm have /something/ that doesn't involve our rape or murder or sex lives.

We are not a way for women to express their sexualities. We deserve to write our own stories. (8)

This poster also portrays shippers as being heterosexual and cisgender, in other words not queer, and brings up the decade long debate between queer men and female fans by calling shippers 'fujoshi'. Anti-shippers do this because fujoshi are seen as being inherently straight and homophobic: "If you're a fujoshi that means that you're homophobic. Just,,, dont sexualize us minors and lgbt please" (399). The image of fujoshi is that they consume male/male content without supporting the LGBT+ community in real life, as one poster puts it while parodying: "fujoshi voice OH OK so ur a gay man and you ship gay ships, but when i, a straight woman, start drooling over gay ships and calling it yaoi without supporting real gay people its homophobia? sounds like misogyny. blocked." (415) However, there are some anti-shippers who discuss queer fujoshi:

you can still fetishize gay men as a queer person, you can still be just as unhealthy and toxic as a straight girl as a queer person. (...) you aren't a gay man. you aren't the ones affected by this, or demonized and oversexualized because of this. fujoshi culture benefits you, you do not know how it feels. you do not get to talk over the gay men that do. (420)

The attitude towards fujoshi is almost completely negative, though one post showed nuance and understanding towards young girls discovering sex and the complexities thereof while still criticising fujoshi who are homophobic:

I can definitely see why young girls latch onto mlm fiction, especially explicit fiction. Young teenagers can often be curious about sex while not wanting to engage in it, especially when the heterosexual versions are often so violent or dehumanizing, and the lesbian versions are nearly nonexistent. (...) This doesn't excuse any of the fetishizing behavior that straight fujoshis exhibit. Nor does it excuse them of homophobia. (434)

Shippers are primarily portrayed as being heterosexual and cisgender. When anti-shippers acknowledge that (some) shippers are queer, it is often with the message that anti-shippers are more queer or better queers than shippers, saying "gays who like bakudeku are honorary cishets (...) #sorry! us real gays dont want you anymore!" (272) and:

B*kud*kus: "yOu jUSt haTe iT bECAuse It iS gAy"

Me: (295)

Image 3

Screenshot from a TV series used as a reaction image.

One anti-shipper made a compilation of some of these traits attributed to shippers into a humorous bingo card:

bakudeku shipper bingo

"anti anti"	normalizes abuse	doesnt care about izuku's trauma	straight	consumes nsfw of minors
conveniently forgets bkg told izuku to kill himself	mitsuki apologist	18+	creates nsfw of minors	fujoshi/ homophobe
cis	"fiction =/= reality"	free space - bad person	ignores bakugou's abuse	overhaul apologist
also ships hawksdeavor	argues w/ minors	cries about pride flag edits	"not every character has to be trans!"	thinks "pee ur pants" means "kill urself"
edgy villain deku stan	cries over fan recolors	endeavor apologist	doesnt care about abuse survivors	thinks being called ugly makes them oppressed

(280)

Image 4

A bingo card with common traits anti-shippers ascribe to bakudeku shippers.

One post summarises how anti-shippers view identity in connection to shipping discourse the clearest:

Klance is a ship for LGBT+ teenagers in this fandom

Sheith is a ship for straight white women in their 20s and 30s in this fandom (378)

This emphasis on ascribing a specific identity to shippers (older/adult, straight, cisgender, and female) is rooted in the idea that those whose identity most closely matches the characters' have the most say and authority over what can be done with them. The issue with this is that besides age, both shippers and anti-shippers are primarily female and overwhelmingly queer (Drouin 2021, 1). I propose that this is not done out of ignorance but with the goal to create a profile of an acceptable victim of harassment. By positioning

themselves as a community primarily made up of vulnerable minorities and shippers as privileged oppressors, they frame their actions in the grander socio-cultural history of oppression and try to garner sympathy from outsiders. Pro-shippers have proposed the term 'identity scrubbing' to refer to this act of intentionally scrubbing away someone's identity, specifically minority status, to create an one that garners less sympathy from outsiders, and so by extent is deemed as more acceptable to target for harassment.

6.4　"wejust wannt to „svexualizze t;;tehse gays": Humour

As already seen above, anti-shippers often make use of humour, which takes primarily three forms: memes and reaction images, irony and sarcasm, and parody. One example of a meme is:

> "Reylo is abusive," I say into the mic.
>
> The crowd boos. I begin to walk off in shame, when two voices speak & command silence from the room.
>
> "She's right," they say. I look for the owners of the voices. There in the 5th row stands: Adam Driver and Daisy Ridley themselves. (262)

The format of the meme is that the speaker says something 'unpopular', with the audience booing them, only to be interrupted by a figure of authority who agrees with the speaker. In this case, the poster makes the joke that the actors who play the two characters for the ship reylo would agree with them. A similar concept is found in another meme:

(52)

Image 5
A common meme based on a Bible story of Jesus.

Here, Jesus makes the claim that "Otayuri is pedophilia" and he is said to be hated because he was speaking the truth. In both memes, the anti-shipper view is seen as unpopular and hated, but with figures of authority either on the media or on morals agreeing with them.

(265)

Image 6

A common meme.

In the above meme, a character mistakes something obvious for something else, portraying shippers as being too stupid or uneducated to see the difference between abuse and love.

Anti-shippers often make use of irony and sarcasm, for example regarding ereri:

> Adorable, a 35 year old man beating the shit out of a fifteen year old boy. Real OTP material right there. All the death threats and power plays later really makes the shipper in me jizz all over my Levi Ackerman body pillow.
>
> *sarcasm* (344)

Some also use sarcasm joke about how inappropriate they think certain ships would be in real life:

> I can't believe I'm a serious adult now that I'm 18! !! wow!! and I can go out with people that are clearly a lot older than me and have a relationship with them just because I am legally an adult!!
>
> thanks for clearing things up for me sheith shippers (184)

While the poster is being sarcastic, what they said is true because as an eighteen-year-old can date anyone older than them legally. This is an example of the anti-shipper argument that just because something is legal, they do not think it is moral.

Another popular form of jokes within the anti-shipping community is the use of parody, specifically of conversations between anti-shippers and shippers who they believe to have victim complexes:

> someone: incest and pedophilia are bad
>
> shippers: wow,,,,,, do you see the harassment we have to deal with? we are getting bulliEd......by the evil antis yet again :((3)

Parodies of how they think shippers are misinterpreting the dynamic of their pairing is also common:

> bakugou: i hate you and looking at you makes me sick!
>
> deku: i've been following you for so long but you make me feel awful and i hate it
>
> bkdks: OH MY GOD!! theyre SO IN LOVE :0 my little cute gay babies !!! god im such a sinner THEYRE SO PERFECT FOR EACH OTHER (278)

Often, the speech they write for shipper will be using 'uwu-speak', a type of speech meant to be excessively sweet and cute. Misspelling is a common characteristic of uwu-speak, though not always present, for example: "shaladins: we par,e not Bmad people oowo!! wejust wannt to ,,svexualizze t;;tehse gays" (397). This type of speech got its name from the use of the emoticons 'uwu' and 'owo' and variations thereof: "Some ppl: Keith's mature for his age cuz he's an orphan uwu, so shipping him with an ADULT is fine òwó" (403).

The use of humour has multiple purposes. For one, anti-shippers simply like to make jokes like any other group of people. Humour can also be a way to spread one's opinions as people share their jokes around by reblogging it to their own Tumblr blog. It also makes a mockery of people they dislike, turning shippers into a group undesirable to be a part of so that people would avoid publicly siding with them. Humour is often present in the language of anti-shippers, especially in combination with threats of violence.

6.5 "bkdk shippers die by my blade 🗡🗡": Violence

While none of the posts in my corpus is targeted at any individual person, there were still posts aimed at certain groups of people that contain aggressive language: "shaladin shippers can fucking choke lmao i hate each and every one of them so fucking much" (256). "Choke" was the most popular threat, often expressed as a wish but not necessarily as an act the poster would go through with in real life: "not to be one of those ppl but if u write rape fics and u havent experienced rape + u paint it as sth romantic i hope u choke" (382). Violent language was often combined with humour, such as in this example where the poster's wish was eventually fulfilled: "earlier today i saw someone refer to the scene where kyle knocks rey unconscious and abducts her as 'the bridal carry' and in this essay i'll discuss why we, as a species, need another plague" (268). One way humour occurs with these threats is using misplaced politeness, such as when a user said "fujoshis and abuse/incest/pedo shippers WIll choke, thanks" (432). Another way was by using emojis: "bkdk shippers die by my blade 🗡🗡" (286). As seen earlier, the use of memes and reaction images is a popular way of communicating on the internet, and this also occurs with the threats of violence:

> literally everyone in my notifs: trying to defend an abusive ship

my current mood: (312)

Image 7

A screenshot of an anime character with a gun.

In this example, the poster is complaining about people in their notifications defending a ship they deem abusive, and they express how that makes them feel through an image of the Deku from *My Hero Academia* looking upset and photoshopped to be holding a gun.

A common thread across these threats of violence is how deniable any suggestion is that they would commit acts of aggression in real life. One example from my own experience, was when people on Twitter were talking about wanting to break the wrists of *VLD* showrunner Lauren Montgomery because they felt the narrative was not treating Lance right. On Tumblr, I saw discussions about this, with an anti-shipper asking some concerned pro-shippers if they knew what a joke was and if they really believed anyone was going to commit assault. As a result, anti-shippers create an unwelcome online fandom space where shippers they do not like repeatedly see violent threats aimed at them, while anti-shippers downplay the aggression and mock people who express concern over 'jokes'.

6.6 "literally pedophilia": Weaponizing the Language of Social Justice

As discussed earlier, antis weaponized the language of social justice after Shiro's ex-boyfriend Adam was killed off to rally outsiders into pressuring the showrunners into making klance canon. They did this by using deceptive language to frame their cause as a grave homophobic injustice to the queer community, garnering support from people who did not know any better (Drouin 2021, 119-124). Two prominent ways in which they sold their

narrative was by using buzzwords and framing who and what they do not like as homophobic.

A buzzword is defined as "an important-sounding usually technical word or phrase often of little meaning used chiefly to impress laymen" ("buzzword"). Anti-sheith klance shippers started calling sheith "literally pedophilia" (179), relying on the loaded word to dominate the narrative around *VLD* and shipping. As the campaign to paint sheith as paedophilia proved successful, other important sounding words gained popularity in the shipping discourse: "retraumatization through media is not a healthy coping mechanism and exposing yourself to something that idealizes, sexualizes, and/or romanticizes your trauma is not exposure therapy" (2). This anti-shipper strings together a series of technical sounding words while talking about a type of therapy within psychology that most people are not going to have the necessary understanding of. Common buzzwords and phrases are "[n]ormalizing relationships between minors and adults" (185), "romanticizing abuse" (236), "romanticism of toxic relationships and sexualising the kids and sexualising power imbalance and toxic relationships" (301), and "mlm/wlw fetishist (...) #over sexualization of gay ppl" (348).

Posts elaborating on what they mean are a minority, most anti-shippers expect the reader to project their own interpretations on the buzzwords: "Shipping wlw and mlm ships doesn't make you a bad person, even if you aren't wlw or mlm. Fetishizing those ships makes you a bad person" (421). The user does not give any explanation beyond that. Ironically, the post that explains fetishization the clearest does not use that word at all:

> sure: a straight person reading a gay romance because it's a fun love story that just so happens to be gay
>
> fucking stop: a straight person reading a gay romance because it has gay characters, and therefore hot because of a "forbidden fruit" complex, while calling "it sinning" (416)

One post also offered an example of sexualisation of queer men when expression frustration at how shippers portray male/male pairings, asking if they know that "queer men arent either shy anxious bottom and strong masc top right?" (429).

As shown by the Adam example, anti-shippers claim to be fighting against homophobia, so they frame people opposing them as homophobic, despite shippers being overwhelmingly queer too. In reference to otayuri, an anti-shipper said "shipping a gay ship with an adult and a minor is inherently homophobic because it perpetuates the notion that all gay people are pedophiles it's really not that difficult of a concept" (19). Multiple anti-shippers expressed frustration at otayuri taking attention away from the two male main characters being a couple:

> What really annoys me about Ota/yuri is the fact that we have a canon, healthy gay relationship within that anime! Like I've never seen such a well developed, realistic, not rushed and happy gay relationship on TV, let alone in anime and manga culture. But instead of being happy about that, focusing on that little flicker or positive representation, the fandom latches on to a fifteen year old (...) (47)

After the reveal that Shiro was canonically gay, one anti-shipper levied this against sheith shippers by accusing them of promoting homophobic stereotypes, pushing the responsibility of homophobia unto a primarily queer group of people:

> now that shiro has been confirmed a gay man as well as an instructor at the garrison, she/th is nastier than ever before. in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, many anti-gay laws and propositions (such as prop. 6 in california) were focused on keeping gay men and women out of the workforce. to create panic and appeal to middle class families, these laws were often advertised as ways to keep kids safe from the 'influence' of homosexuals in their life that may 'groom' or 'prey' on them. namely teachers
> if you ship shiro--a gay teacher who is an adult--with keith, a kid shiro raised and taught at the garrison from age 12/13, you are promoting the homophobic narrative used 50 years ago and even today that adult gay men can influence young kids and have romantic and sexual relations with them (363)

Another anti-shipper claims that queer men hate the sheith: "the assertion that gay men see their experince reflected in Sh3ith makes me sick. I know so many gay men who'd be livid about the idea that a grown man falling in love with the boy he helped raise is somehow telling to their experience" (377). One incident from my own experience that contradicts this statement, is when an openly gay male writer for a video game tweeted about wanting Shiro and Keith to kiss, and then some female teenagers attempted to explain to him, a

gay man, how bad the ship was for gay men. This also extends to other social justice causes, such as racism. Many anti-shippers take issue with reylo as they think shippers neglect the black main character Finn in favour of the white villain Kylo Ren:

> kylo ren is the prime example of white male villains whose awful actions are excused by white fangirls in order to faun over him because he's "tragic" and "tortured", instead of focusing on the black character (finn) who is actually tragic and tortured, and instead of becoming a monster, went against everything that he ws programmed to be and became a good guy (258)

Homophobia and racism are issues in both media and fandom, and there is sincere criticism and frustration at this, however, it can also be weaponized against groups of fans, blurring the lines. One post clearly sums up this and previous points:

> Voltron isn't my cup of tea, but I 100% love Keith/Lance and how its inspiring and enjoyable to so many gay men & I would fight anyone who ships Keith with Shiro to the death lmao . Thanks for contributing to homophobic stereotypes that gay men are pedophiles and predators!!! ♡♡ (163)

The person admits to not being in the *VLD* fandom, but still repeats anti-sheith klance shipper talking points, demonstrating how outsiders join the ship war, believing they are contributing to social justice activism.

6.7   "it makes me, a minor, uncomfortable": Appeal to Pathos

Aristotle complained of people relying on emotions instead of facts to sway the opinion of judges, while also discussing appeal to pathos, emotions, to persuade people (Brinton 1988, 207-208). Thousands of years later, emotions are still a fashionable rhetorical device. For anti-shippers, it comes predominantly in three different varieties: emphasising a strong identification with a character (sometimes connected to trauma), concerns about children, and shaming people. First, anti-shippers will bring up how they or someone they know resemble a specific character, and then explain how this means people cannot do something with the character that they disapprove of: "the sexualization of yurio freaks me the fuck out. i have a younger brother who is 15 right now and the mere idea of adult women in their 20s thirsting for someone at that age. it freaks me out so much." (18) As stated earlier, there is a popular belief among anti-shippers that those who most closely

resembles a character have the most say over it: "One of my problems with Shi3th lies within the fact that it makes me, a minor, uncomfortable" (203). A complementary belief is that what people do with fictional characters is a personal afront to others:

> Me and my sisters interact in a lot of the ways elsa and anna do- like i hold hands with my sisters when we're walking. And we hug alot.. yknow.. like sisters. And the fact that elsa and anna doing those things is always being interpreted as romantic by so many people in the fandom is so frustrating. It makes me nervous to do things I normally do with my sister because now I think it could be interpreted as romantic and I dont want that. (91)

This poster worries that how people interpret fictional characters is how people will interpret them and their sibling. Another anti-shipper describes their relationship to their slightly older friends, and they are concerned that because people ship otayuri, that means that people see them and their friends the same way they interpret fictional characters:

> when i see yu//rio being shipped with ot//abek (...) it scares me. in these two characters, i see a clear reflection of my own relationship with older gay teens. not only in the way that the two of them interact, but in the way that other people, and especially straight people, interpret it. i see it every time i rest my head on an older friend's shoulder, or hold their hand while i cry. you can't comprehend the idea that gay people have a community and a family that has nothing to do with sex, because that's the only part of our relationships you've ever wanted to see. you only care about the relationships between gay people when you get something out of them too. so yeah, fuck that. let us have our friendships. they've never been yours to take. (26)

Another way anti-shippers appeal to emotions, is by comparing their own trauma to the characters, accuse shippers of using their specific trauma for their fan works, saying "me @ incest/pedophilia/abuse shippers: why do you think my abuse is hot??" (65) and "I'm uncomfortable with people sexualizing my trauma" (149). By emphasizing a strong connection to a character or past trauma, anti-shippers try to evoke emotions in people to get them to agree with their opinions.

'Think of the children' is also a common argument. Anti-shippers claim that children will become more susceptible to abuse because of shippers normalising problematic relationships in their fan works: "shipping paedophilic ships, whether you say theyre legally classified as paedophilic or not, normalizes paedophilia and automatically gives paedophiles a platform, validates their worldviews and gives them room to groom/otherwise harm children IRL." (76) What is interesting about this is the vagueness around "legally classified as paedophilic or not" as it allows anti-shippers to call any pairing they wish paedophilia. One anti-shipper presents an ultimatum: "Ok, you have a choice. You can only choose one. Let abuse victims feel safer and more comfortable in fandoms or continue to ship incest/abuse/pedophilia" (124). One recurring concern is that young fans will see content they do not have the critical thinking skills and maturity to understand: "I'm not talking about bloody Keith & shiro when I say this I'm talking about the YOUNG FANS who are gonna see this and think it's okay." (193) and "a susceptible 14 yo on this site consuming media WILL find your content and it WILL validate that power difference within relationships for them" (402). In response to pro-shippers making a comparison of this argument to the 'video games cause violence' assertion, one anti-shipper claimed that it was different because children do not imitate video games, only tv shows:

> Children know that violent video games are games, they know that it's not real. Violent video games don't make kids violent because they know what will happen in real life vs what happens in video games wil be different. But with tv shows or movies, they often look up to the characters. They try to relate to the main character. If the tv shows something as good, the children will think it's good. (246)

On the other hand, anti-shippers often argue that content of problematic ships will be used by abusers, saying that shippers "are creating propaganda for pedophiles" (155) and that they "directly support pedos" (141). The argument is that the intent of shippers does not matter, as their fan work will be used be used and that is their responsibility: "If you write, draw, edit, or make any other content for a Pedophilic / incest / lolicon ship, you are likely providing an abuser content to further the abuse." (425) The reasoning behind these arguments is that if all problematic content is removed from fandom, it will keep young fans safe and make it harder for predators to groom and abuse victims.

A final way in which anti-shippers appeal to emotions, is by trying to shame shippers into capitulating to their views. They attempt to do this by accusing shippers of committing heinous crimes: "y'all realize that age of consent has nothing to do with your right to draw porn involving minors, right? it's still illegal, you freaks. you're still producing and consuming child porn. you're bad and you should feel bad." (15) The argument 'you are what you read' also surfaces, as one anti-shipper claims that "No matter how hard people like to deny it, what you ship reflects at least a little of who you are. Some humans can be so disgusting and ignorant sometimes, so I'm really hoping none of my followers are into immoral ships." (359), and another says that "If you think it's okay to have sex with your own sister in fiction, you also think it's okay IRL. There is no real difference." (360) While anti-shippers primarily portray survivors of abuse as siding with them, one acknowledges that some survivors disagree with them and the anti-shipper shames them for it:

> survivors who openly support media glorifying and profiting off of their abuse are not any better or less harmful than non survivors. if you're making fanart, writing fanfics, sharing it on your tumblr, etc. you're still normalizing it. normalizing abusive content is making others (especially minors) more susceptible to grooming and abuse, it's exposing victims to triggering content, and it's validating the actions of abusers. stop thinking you're excused from criticism. (6)

6.8 Framing: Who Lives? Who Dies? Who Tells Your Story?
6.8.1 Deceptive Framing of Ships, Shippers, and Arguments

As discussed earlier, anti-sheith klance shippers dominated the narrative around *VLD*, forcing their interpretation of the events and the show to become the widely accepted one. This was achieved in part by deceptively framing the rival ship sheith as paedophilia and the shippers as paedophiles. One way they did this, was by making it ambiguous if they were talking about fiction or real life:

> I hope all pedophiles and maps get punched in the throat today :))
>
> #anti shaladin#anti shance#anti shidge#anti sheith#anti shunk#anti otayuri (32)

The maker of this post wrote in the text that they wished paedophiles to get hurt, while putting fandom ships in the tags, trying to make shippers of those pairings synonymous with paedophiles. There were multiple posts where the text appears to be a condemnation of people who molest children, while the tags were related to fandom discourse:

Say no to all forms of child porn.

#just ur average psa#anti sebaciel#anti stevidot#anti billdip#anti royed#it's wild that we have to make posts like this (441)

The texts are general denunciations of abuse, but the post is tagged with fictional ships. This made shippers suspicious of posts that were proclaiming their hatred of paedophiles, as they could not know if the original poster meant real-life predators or shippers. People's suspicion of these posts would then be framed as confirmation that they were what they were being accused of:

If you come across the specific phrase: "Don't sexualize minors!" and you feel attacked, called out, and/or inclined to respond in a way that qualifies that statement/disagrees with it...

you are a part of the problem.

*And yes, this does include people who are coping.

#antiship#anti shipping (122)

By framing shippers as real-life paedophiles, anti-shippers managed to make it look like fandom discourse is about topics more serious than a ship war. Besides the shippers, intentional misrepresentation of the ships themselves was very common. Sheith is described as "literally brothers" (168), "borderline incestious" (187), and "basically incest" (388). Anti-shippers claim that Shiro was the "legal guardian if not the closest thing to that" (187) of Keith and "essentially keith's foster brother/father" (214). Shiro's ex-boyfriend Adam is framed as his "boyfriend" (224) and his "fiancé" (194). While this could potentially be attributed to different interpretations, even when acknowledging that none of these claims are true, anti-shippers will condemn the pairing as if they were: "okay I know that canonically sh / eith is not incest but..... goddamn if that's not what it feels like" (223) and "to be fair even though Sh3ith is technically """"Ok"""""" it wont stop me for criticizing it and the problems it has :)" (254). One post begins by calling Keith "a CHILD", only to admit a few lines later that he is an adult while also immediately throwing doubt on this claim by saying "just because it's probably legal (if keith is in fact 18, as the guidebook age is not confirmed canon)" (379). Some users also admits that Keith is an adult but argue that this still does not make the pairing acceptable: "don't you dare be normalising grown ass adults dating people who in their late teens with the paper thin defense that '18 is legal'" (247).

Some make the argument that the characters do not need to be related (legally or by blood) for it to be incest, claiming that sheith "was clearly sibling relationship. (I know they are not really related but it is still sibling relationship since Keith said that he loves him LIKE A BROTHER.)" (211). One post brought up Shiro's marriage at the end of the show: "Are you ugly bitches really throwing a fit because Shiro is in a happy relationship with a guy his age and not the child you wanted him with" (371). Ironically, as nothing is known about the man he married, there is no way to confirm that they are close in age.

Pro-shippers arguments are also intentionally twisted. This is called the straw man fallacy, which occurs "when you misrepresent your opponent's position, attribute to that person a point of view with a set-up implausibility that you can easily demolish, then proceed to argue against the set-up version as though it were your opponent's." (Johnson and Blair 1983, 71) One very prominent straw man is to say that pro-shippers claim that fiction does not affect reality at all, while the argument is in fact that it is complicated and nuanced: "@ all of y'all saying fiction doesn't affect reality Did you ever loose sleep or screamed because of a jumpscare in a horror movie or horror game? (...) So fiction does affect reality end of story" (7). The notion that fiction has no bearing on reality is ridiculous and easy to demolish. Another pro-shipper argument is that not all media has the same reach and influence and are meant for different audiences such as big budget family movies compared to erotic fanfiction and should therefore not be held to the same standards. Some anti-shippers apply the same standards of representation to all media: "What im never goin to understand is how people say racism and homophobia in fiction affects real people, but those same people turn right around and say that pedophilia and incest in media doesn't affect anyone." (442) Nuance regarding the discussion of representation is disregarded as shippers picking and choosing what suits them: "You dont get to cherry pick what YOU think has an impact and what doesn't. This is an all or nothing deal." (161)

6.8.2 Downplaying the Harassment

As shown during the discussion about anti-shippers using parody, they tend to view shippers as having victim complexes and (partially) making up the harassment. Drouin shares how during her research into antis from the *VLD* fandom, she became subject to

death threats and other online harassment, but antis claimed she was lying about it (2021, 145). Antis participating in her survey agreed that it was not as bad as shippers made it out to be, saying antis are "all pretty cool and understanding" and being very dismissive, claiming that "yes some of them can be rude, but the rude one are actually a minority" and describing most antis as "nice" fans who "try to explain calmly" their criticisms. Another anti condemned the harassment but only because "it is always brought up so Shaladins can play victim" (82). The antis showed some degree of awareness of the cyber-aggression, but severely downplayed the frequency and viciousness.

This dismissal towards the harassment was prevalent in my data as well, seeing it as little more than justified criticism that shippers should be receptive of. One anti-shipper defended otayuri, saying "a 16 to 18 age difference alone does not indicate abuse" and offered examples of what makes a relationship abusive, such as "belittling". They then claim that "If you see any of those depiction, you may call out artists/writers/other people on them" (38). While offering nuance, they still encouraged harassment of fans they judged to be 'bad'. Others echoed this, saying "If your ship is harmful to other people it deserves to be shamed" (353). These call outs are in turn described as "perfectly valid criticisms of some nasty shit" (153) and "just people with gross ships(pedophilla, incest, abuse, etc) getting told that that shit's gross" (106). Shippers who speak out against the harassment are often mocked:

> someone: incest and pedophilia are bad
>
> shippers: wow,,,,,, do you see the harassment we have to deal with? we are getting bulliEd......by the evil antis yet again :((3)

One anti-shipper express frustration at how their message to a creator was received:

> "Just filter the tag if you don't like it, but don't come in my ask box and attack me over it" BUDDY!!! I'm not attacking anyone!! I wrote you a very kindly worded ask literally begging you to JUST FUCKING THINK CRITICALLY ABOUT IT. THEY HATE EACH OTHER. BAKUGOU IS LITERALLY HIS ABUSER. I'M GOING TO SCREAM. (291)

Some were comparing the actions of anti-shippers to that of shippers, saying the shippers were way worse:

> "antis send hate too!!" as a response to "shaladins are bad" is so...... frail
>
> sure !!! some antis send hate !!! lots of them do! I don't agree with it, but it happens.
>
> ALL shaladins spread content that can be used to manipulate minors into
> relationships with unhealthy, or even straight up abusive age gaps.
>
> it's pretty simple. (366)

Another one was annoyed at how anti-shippers are viewed as being worse than shippers, asking: "no but really, how did we get to a point where 'shaming' people for doing toxic and hurtful things is worse than actually doing bad things??? :/" (156). Anti-shippers do not view their actions as unwanted harassment but instead frame it as legitimate criticism of dangerous actions, or claim the aggression is greatly exaggerated or completely made up.

6.9   Conclusions, Limitations and Further Research

I have documented some recurring traits of the language employed by anti-shippers throughout my research. The question remains of what has the influence of anti-shippers been on the larger context of online fandom? I argue that there are two main effects, namely worrisome attitudes towards critically engaging with media and a prevalence of cyber-aggression and policing in fandom. First, there are issues with problematic content existing online, such as people coming across triggering content they do not want to see or abusers using it to groom their victims: "by posting it on a website that's completely open, you aren't able to control how others use it." (472) There have been measures taken to counteract this in online fandom as it has progressed over the years. Vigorous tagging of warnings has become the norm on fanfiction hosting websites such as Archive of Our Own, needing to confirm one is over eighteen to access certain content, and some fan artists require people to input a password to view their art. Spreading information on how to recognise signs of abuse and protect oneself from predators has become more prevalent in contemporary fandom compared to how it was in the mid-2000s. However, these changes are not enough for anti-shippers, who are more in favour of removing all problematic content instead:

> If you blacklisted billdip you can still find it on Deviantart, twitter, fanfiction, Google
>
> search,ect. The same goes for hidashi, elsanna, mabill, stancest, pinecest, pewey,
>
> stevidot, ponnie, and every other bad ship in existence. The only way to stop seeing

it is to make the creators stop. So shippers, NO WE WON'T IGNORE IT BECAUSE IT CAN'T BE IGNORED. God, do you know how the internet works? If you want people to stop criticizing you and your ships...just stop shipping it! (440)

While some anti-shippers had more nuanced takes, most encouraged people to avoid all problematic content rather than encourage discussing about how to critically engage with it. Anti-shippers could then make any claim they wanted about ships they disapproved of, such as deceptively framing a ship between two unrelated adults as paedophilia and incest, with the goal of getting people to think as ani-shippers say. While fandom was born out of discussions around media, anti-shippers want to limit this to media and topics they deem acceptable. The groupthink then enforced through various intimidation methods, such as claiming anyone who disagrees with them is a paedophile and is responsible for children being abused. This creates a community where people are expected to disassociate publicly from content anti-shippers deem problematic. This disdain for critically engaging with media and forming one's own opinion, especially regarding morals and how they apply to fiction and real life, is extremely worrisome.

As discussed in the chapter about hate speech, cyber-bullying and cyber-aggression, fandom policing does not completely fit any of these categories. The targeted harassment can be labelled as cyber-bullying and the gendered and racial slurs as hate speech. Ultimately, cyber-aggression is the most applicable, but there is a new aspect I wish to add to the definition, because despite the hurt caused by anti-shippers, shippers have a complicated claim to victimhood. As participants in Drouin's (2021, 93) survey testified, almost none of them had personally been targeted, and yet they experienced negative effects such as depression and refraining from engaging in fandom. I argue that what anti-shippers are targeting is not just a group of people but also the online space where fandom is active. On Tumblr, and other social media sites such as Twitter, the border between groups of people are extremely flimsy compared to older versions of the internet where people could gather on different forums and websites. In contemporary fandom, everyone is on the same social media sites. Shippers cannot engage in traditional fandom activities as the online space is filled with hostile posts making them out to be paedophiles, incest supporters, and so forth, and telling them they need to die while mocking them for being

upset. While they might not be personally targeted, they witness others become victims of harassment campaigns. On top of this, outsiders to the fandom, who are also on the same social media sites, become tricked into believe all the lies anti-shippers spread about shippers as anti-shippers frame themselves as vulnerable minorities, garnering sympathy, and shippers as privileged oppressors deserving of 'criticism'. Drawing on my own experience, an example of this is when in the spring of 2020 the hashtags "#SupportExAntis" and "#HoldFancopsAccountable" were created on Twitter as a way for shippers and ex-antis to come together to share their stories and complaints. Not even two days later, anti-shippers spammed the tags full of memes, insults, and threats to drown out any discussion and drive people away. This is the cyber-aggression and fandom policing of anti-shippers in a microcosm. People posting in the tags were targeted and the hashtag filled with hostility and aggression which discouraged people from participating. I conclude that the anti-shippers' fandom policing is a combination of the previous definitions of cyber-bullying and cyber-aggression, occasionally containing hate speech, mixed with a form of harassment targeting an online space instead of a person or group of persons, with the goal of alienating people from it. As this form of harassment has such a wide reach, it does not just affect creators, but anyone trying to engage with the fandom.

I asked the question of how anti-shippers use language in fandom policing and what their effect is on online fandom. I found that anti-shippers make use of language to portray themselves as a vulnerable minority in need to protection and shippers as privileged oppressors deserving of criticism, despite both being from the same minorities, by scrubbing the queer identity of shippers away. As is common among internet communities, use of humour was prevalent in anti-shipper posts. This allows them to turn their targets into public laughingstocks that people do not want to associate with. The speech of anti-shippers was riddled with violent language such as telling shippers to "choke", but mostly done with a humorous tone, there is a deniability to the severity of the aggression. Anti-shippers would often try to convince non-fans that shippers were paedophile and incest supporters by weaponizing the language of social justice to make the shipping discourse appear to be activism. Playing on how they build an image of themselves as being from vulnerable minorities, they appeal to emotions to get people to agree with their opinion by

either comparing themselves to fictional characters, bring up their trauma, claim that problematic fan works will lead to children being abuse, and by trying to shame shippers. Furthermore, they try to take control of the narrative around the fandom, deceptively framing ships as being paedophilic and incestuous, shippers as paedophiles or supporters thereof, and twisting pro-shipper arguments into ridiculous nonsense and then debunk that instead of the arguments. While anti-shippers, especially in the *VLD* fandom, are infamous for creating one of the most toxic fandoms in history, and yet they do not see that themselves and continuously downplay the harassment. When it comes to the effect anti-shippers have had on online fandom, I make two conclusions. First, anti-shippers create a community where thinking and engaging critically with (problematic) media is discouraged in favour of blindly following what others (motivated by shipping) decide and this is enforced through intimidation and harassment. Second, the fandom policing anti-shippers do does not completely fit previous definitions regarding online harassment as it also contains a type of harassment that targets an online space, making it hostile and unwelcome, with the goal of alienating people anti-shippers disapprove of.

Throughout my research, I came across multiple limitations. Some major ones were connected to technology, for example the shortness of tweets making it difficult to include them in my data and the limited options of Tumblr search system meant I could not search per year. I also found myself restricted by my lack of familiarity with certain pairings that anti-shippers were criticising, as I could not know what was true and what was a deceptive framing. I am also bound to my own fandom experience of how I saw anti-shippers be born and evolve over the years and the toxicity I endured, meaning it is impossible for me to be a completely unbiased researcher on this topic. A shortcoming of my research that I noticed is how certain trends I noticed in the speech of anti-shippers did not show up in my data. I have often seen anti-shippers use religious language to argue their points. Such examples did show up in the harassment of Drouin (2021) when antis told her to "BURN IN HELL" (153) and defined themselves as believing "In god" (144). Other common expression that I have witnessed over the years did not show up during mu search, such as anti-shippers commenting "off a cliff" or "electric chair" as 'humorous' suggestions for how shippers should either kill themselves or be killed. For further research, I suggest that the

harassment that anti-shippers themselves experienced and how it differs from the harassment they perpetrated should also be documented, as well as of the language of pro-shippers as a response to anti-shippers. Testimonies from ex-antis and their experiences would also be interesting to give a fuller picture of the shipping discourse. The lack of representation for queer people in media was often brought up, and yet a ship of two unrelated adults would be accused of incest as the relationship was labelled 'brotherly' by other queer people. Research should be done into how anti-shippers fit into the larger context of homophobia and queer coding and censorship in media.

7 Conclusion: "can i kill them?" "its encouraged actually"

Williams (2011) explained that fans are even more invested in having their textual interpretation proven right as the media comes to an end. This is so they can find closure and feel like all the time and energy they spend being invested was worth it (285-286). Few fans of *VLD* would say that was the case for them. After years of harassment and false allegations of paedophilia and incest, all over which ship one preferred, being 'rewarded' with an ending where beloved main characters are killed off and side-lined felt like a slap in the face to many, including myself. What do you do if the years of dedications do not pay off?

For me, I tried to spin a negative into a positive by documenting how language is used by anti-shippers and what the effect has been on online media fandom. To achieve this, I first laid out the history and evolution of how anti-shippers in contemporary fandom were born in 2016 in the *VLD* fandom with the goal of driving people away from sheith so that klance could become canon. I referred to the seminal work in media fan studies *Textual Poachers* by Henry Jenkins (2013) to explain why fans can get so attached to media as well as create their own art and culture based on existing popular texts while making it their own. These are people that are generally looked down upon as social outcasts, and yet this is an untrue stereotype as this hobby is an immensely social one with fans constantly seeking each other out and engaging in discourse around their different interpretations. Within fandom, a popular but even further marginalised hobby is the act of shipping. This means having an investment in the relationship of two (or more) characters, sometimes with the hopes of them becoming canon in the source material. Williams (2011) explains how shippers can use these fictional relationships to reflect upon themselves and construct their identity in conversation with their pairing of preference. Some fans, however, take this too far. Just like there are people dedicated to liking a ship, there are people who spend time and energy hating ships. These types of fans have always been around, being called anti-fans and primarily being straight and male, not just hating shipping but also certain media (often targeted at younger female audiences) and fans (often female fans in media aimed at male audiences). However, the *VLD* fandom in 2016 resulted in a specific type of anti-fans being

born who relied on morals to argue why media and ships they did not like were bad and should not be enjoyed by anyone. They named themselves anti-shippers. The first significant academic research into anti-shippers was done by Drouin (2021). She gathered testimonies from fans about anti-shippers, and while the survey was open to everyone over eighteen, few antis themselves participated. What they did do, however, was relentlessly harass Drouin for her research, which she dedicated the second half of her research to discussing, especially bringing attention to protection of researchers. I relate to this, as I also worry how studying people known for harassment and false allegations of paedophilia might one day lead to them to target me.

To understand the language of fandom policing, I relied on the theory of discourse analysis and CDA, which essentially means that linguists look beyond the grammatical sentence to the wider socio-cultural context in which the speech is said, as it is influenced by its context and influences this context back. Further, I discuss some definitions pertaining to harassment online, namely hate speech, cyber-bullying, and cyber-aggression. I conclude that all of these happen within the language of fandom policing, but with the added element of anti-shippers also targeting online spaces with the goal of driving fans with different opinions away.

I approach my research by relying on the concepts of the aca-fan, an academic who is also a fan, being able to rely on their own experience to draw preliminary conclusions and navigate the communities they study because they are already a part of it and have insider knowledge. Building upon this term to emphasis an awareness for societal issues, the term geek feminist has been proposed, to which I can add queer as the community I research is primarily female and/or queer. Based on my previous encounters with anti-shippers, I set up eight criteria that I thought characterised their speech, most importantly the fact that it is a form of policing of what other fans can do or create in fiction. I gathered 500 post from the social media site Tumblr between 2015 and 2020 that matched those criteria.

The results of my analysis show that anti-shippers use language to portray themselves as marginalised minorities deserving of sympathy and shippers as ignorant oppressors and

predators that need to be warned against. A recurring trait is the use of humour, on the one hand simply because people enjoy making jokes, and on the other hand because it turns who they make fun of into cringy social pariahs that people want to avoid being associate with. This humour was also often used in combination with violent language such as telling people to "choke", but the humour makes it deniable and easy to downplay. This means they can spam online spaces full of their vitriol and then accuse anyone who takes issue with this as being overly sensitive and paranoid. One way that anti-shippers so successfully painted shippers they do not like into alleged paedophiles and incest supporters, was by weaponizing the language of social justice, often using buzzwords, making their cause appear as activism rather than a petty ship war. A popular rhetorical device was to appeal to people's emotions, playing up their attachment to characters as meaning they had a say over what could be done with them. There was a recurring worry among anti-shippers that what people do with fictional characters is what they will do to them, displaying a lack of being able to fully distinguish fiction from reality. Anti-shippers would often accuse fandom creators writing about a type of trauma of writing about their specific trauma. A common argument was to claim that children would be harmed by the content shippers post online, no matter how many barriers of entry they put in place, while also trying to shame shippers into capitulating to them through for example false paedophilia allegations. Deceptively framing ships and shippers was very common, as outsiders were more likely to rally behind the cause to stop 'paedophilic ships' rather than, for example, 'a ship between two teenagers' such as otayuri. They would also misrepresent pro-shipper arguments, turning them into implausible and easy to debunk straw men. Despite the amount of evidence of the perpetual harassment, no anti-shippers acknowledge the levels of viciousness or how widespread it was.

I conclude that anti-shippers create a community where going against their opinion is punished with relentless harassment and false accusations of being a predator. This discourages people from critically thinking about how to engage with media, instead being pressured to distance themselves from and publicly renounce everything judged to be problematic. Comparing fandom policing to previous definitions of internet harassment, I argue that it contains cyber-bullying and cyber-aggression, occasionally with hate speech,

but also has a new aspect where shippers are indirectly being targeted with anti-shippers instead making an online space unsafe. The goal is to exhaust people and eventually drive them away as withstanding the constant vitriol becomes unbearable. However, despite the toxicity they experience, shippers have a dubious claim to victimhood as most of them were not personally targeted, while still experiencing the negative effects of fandom policing.

Throughout the writing of this thesis, I often found myself doubting how bad the harassment by anti-shippers had been. *VLD* had been over for more than two years, ancient history by internet standards. Had toxicity really been exaggerated like anti-shippers were saying? Was I just making a mountain out of a molehill? While taking a break from writing this thesis, I looked up sheith on Tumblr and came across a user complaining about a shipper reblogging their post. Even though I should know better by now, curiosity got the best of me, and I clicked to see the comments. The first one asked "can i kill them?" to which the original poster replied "its encouraged actually".
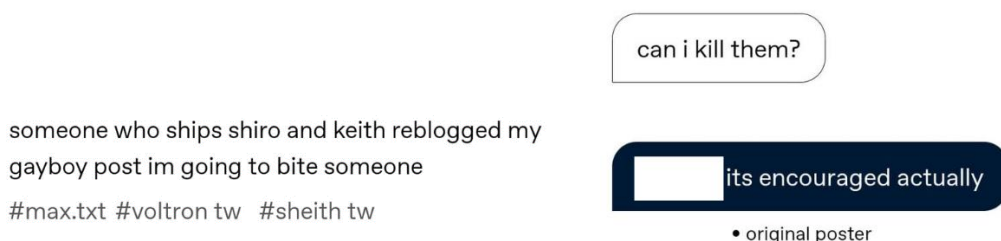

can i kill them?

someone who ships shiro and keith reblogged my gayboy post im going to bite someone
#max.txt #voltron tw #sheith tw

its encouraged actually
• original poster

Image 8
Screenshots from the Tumblr post and comments with usernames censored.

I just felt tired. I just wanted to see some cute fanart of a queer ship between two unrelated adults that I, as a queer man, saw so much of myself in. How was there still such aggression aimed at sheith shippers in May of 2021? *VLD* ended and we all lost. On the other hand, while the post was an unwelcome intrusion on my fandom experience, no one forced me to open the comments to see what people were writing.

I wanted to do this research in part so I could feel like there was something positive to salvage from the disaster than was *VLD*, the fandom, and how anti-shipping did not die after the show ended but spread to other fandoms. Another reason was because of the

frequency with which I see outsiders talk about *VLD* and have such a warped view of what happened, especially when they claim that "both sides were just as bad". How can one see one side sending death threats and make false allegations of paedophilia as easily as they breathe and claim both they and the people they target are "just as bad"? Anti-shippers took control of the narrative around *VLD*, dictating their twisted version of what happened with the goal of promoting klance and this is now the story of the fandom that non-fans have come to know and is how it will be remembered in the grander history of fandom. In 2019, I had the pleasure of meeting the nineteen-year-old cancer survivor fan artist at a convention in Germany and we also went to a meetup of other sheith shippers. Eventually, the topic of anti-shippers and the ending came up. Everyone had multiple anecdotes of unwanted cyber-aggression by anti-shippers as well as hurt and frustration at the fate of our favourite characters. To this day, I still see people regularly talking about the harm the ending caused the fandom, especially queer fans and fans of colour. I hope documenting what went down with *VLD* and the fandom as well as the ways anti-shippers use language to manipulate can be the beginning of a much-needed healing process, both for myself and others.

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9 Appendix

Appendix 1: Anti-shipping posts gathered from social media site Tumblr

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1EkqZMShTFX29qfJ347gBFBdICy-IN9p2/view?usp=sharing