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Comparing Online Superhero Fan Discourse to Fascism: A Qualitative Analysis of Digital Fandom on Reddit



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ABSTRACT:

This paper is intended towards analyzing, understanding, and identifying specific aspects of online fan practices, specifically focusing on the political expression through Superhero fandom on media platforms like Reddit that happen to resonate with and echo some of the fascist behavioral traits displayed by leaders such as Trump and Modi to name a few, on public forums. With the growing popularity of superhero films, television series, and other forms of transmedial entertainment across the globe, displays of superhero fandom through fan fiction, fan art, and fan discussions and debates on media platforms have become increasingly popular. However, with the evident similarities between elements of the superhero narrative and typical fascist behavioral elements, fans often tend to use a certain kind of online discourse in the form of specific phrases that may indicate a legitimizing glorifying or normalizing of typical fascist traits. This thesis aims to analyze such online fan discourse within a particular superhero fan community to identify and unravel similarities between narrative elements of discourse created through fan products such as fanfiction and fan-art and typical fascist aesthetics and dramaturgy.

Keywords: Fandom, Superhero, Fascist Aesthetics, Discourse, Captain America, Fanfiction, Fan debates, Media Platforms.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Today, the superhero genre of transmedia content is possibly one of the most popular and globally accepted forms of entertainment. It has undoubtedly transcended national borders and has become a massive cultural phenomenon worldwide. The image of the superhero is presently one of the most pervasive in the sphere of contemporary global popular culture. Whether we may appreciate it or not, these characters and the varying narratives surrounding them play a massive role in influencing and shaping the ideologies of a vast majority of fans who actively consume this kind of content at large (McSweeney 1).

The massive frenzy and fondness for these superhero characters have led to the creation of a vibrant and dynamic world of media fandom around the genre, marked by varying kinds of fan activities, products, and practices. The modern digital world has seen a cultural shift wherein media entertainment consumers are actively encouraged to seek new information and connect the dispersed media content (Jenkins *Convergence Culture* 3). The increasing digital transformation of fandom has led to fans using various digital media platforms to form online communities with fellow fans to interact, create, critique, and debate different aspects of their favorite media texts (Duffett 24). These fan communities and the subsequent fan activities within these communities provide a wide variety of opportunities for people to express and explore their identities through various fan discussions and productions (Lee 110).

Interestingly, online fan communities, on many occasions, also turn into spaces for political discussions and debates amongst its members. These discussions tend to reflect these fans' political ideologies, resonate with them, and may even have a role to play in determining mainstream political discourse to some extent. Fandom has gradually turned into a ubiquitous mode of consumption due to digital convergence, leading to the erosion of the boundaries between spheres of political and popular communication (Sandvoss 253). With many active online fan communities, certain political ideologies and agendas are regularly discussed, debated, and propagated within larger online communities. A prevalent example of how mainstream political references and ideologies resonate online may be observed in the many instances when the former U.S President Donald Trump regularly attacked immigration and political correctness. His views were echoed and amplified mainly on online fan platforms such as Reddit and 4Chan, which solidified his online base (Heikkilä 5). Such discussions surrounding and resonating political ideologies within fan communities often result in creating an online discourse that may provide insights into how certain fans perceive narratives and

characters from popular texts and how they view a certain kind of politics. Therefore, closely analyzing such online fan discourse may lead to understanding certain echoes and resonances of fandom to mainstream global politics.

In terms of mainstream politics, today's world is witnessing a steady resurgence in extreme far-right, nationalistic, and even fascist sentiments among large sections of people worldwide. In recent years, there has been a noticeable retreat in democracy and advancement in extremist and fascist kind of politics. This retreat has been marked especially by young people who are seemingly less concerned about democracy and are outwardly more sympathetic towards a strongman leader's rule than any previous generation (Snyder). This marked resurgence in fascist dictatorial behavior visible within certain global political leaders may also be observed as resonating with online discourse created within superhero fan communities, considering especially the many resemblances between elements of the superhero narrative and aesthetic and typical fascist behavior. The growth of radical right-wing ideas within online communities has happened through the use of online communication and ironic vocabulary that are able to further this kind of political agenda, especially on digital platforms such as 4Chan and Reddit (Lamerichs et al. 182). This suggests the existence of narratives and discourse on digital media that may act as indicators of the kind of political ideologies that are quite popular amongst users.

Therefore, this thesis attempts to closely examine such online discourse within a particular superhero fan community to identify and observe similarities and resonances with what may be characterized as typical fascist political behavior, which is commonly displayed today by certain global political leaders.

The reason behind focusing on online superhero fan discourse and typical fascist behavioral aesthetics is the similarities in the narrative and ideological representation of both superheroes and fascists. March of 2020 saw two fascist political leaders coming together when former U.S president Donald Trump visited Indian prime minister Narendra Modi in India. To mark this historic meet, an article published in the Guardian referred to the two leaders as "strongmen who are heavily in favor of discriminatory immigration and citizenship policies designed to demonize minority groups" (Stanley). The use of the phrase "strongmen" here, an adjective that is often also applicable to most superhero characters, is an example of how discourse around such popular political leaders' behavioral traits exhibits similarities to superhero aesthetics. It is hard to think about superheroes without considering the steady rise of American authoritarianism over the past few years, a mentality wherein people expect a strongman leader to take control of chaos by usually employing extreme and decisive policies

(Abad-Santos “The Avengers was an authoritarian fantasy”). The hypermasculine representation of superheroes, the narratives of the revisionary and the terrorist superhero, and a long-standing association to nationalist iconography in films and comics make the similarities between the superhero genre and fascist discourse even more prominent.

With such likely similarities between the two discourses, this thesis, therefore, aims to analyze fan-created online discourse on superheroes to identify if similarities to typical, characteristic fascist behavior exist. This would subsequently indicate that language used by certain fans of a particular superhero fan community tend towards legitimizing, glorifying, or even normalizing fascist tendencies and behaviors. One of the most exciting ways fans create online discourse is through their fanfictions and fan-art, elements that would be discussed as the main objects of analysis in this thesis. Fans actively and explicitly engage with political issues by writing stories that situate fictional heroes amid real-world social and political situations (De Kosnik 270). They transmute popular characters into “avatars of specific political issues,” which leads to fans becoming profoundly and emotionally invested in various political activities (De Kosnik 270). These fan-made stories originate from a balance between fascination and frustration, where if the original works are unable to fascinate fans or if they tend to frustrate them on some level, it leads them towards constructing their own creations to settle or overcome such differences with the original texts (Jenkins “Fan Fiction as Critical Commentary”). In this thesis, the online discourse for analysis would include narrative elements within a chosen political fanfiction on the superhero character of Captain America. Similarities to typical fascist discourse would establish the use of language by certain fans of the particular online fan community that tends to glorify and normalize such fascist behavioral tendencies.

Apart from focusing on discourse created through fan products such as fiction and art, another kind of fan discourse that would potentially reveal the use of fascist legitimizing language within online superhero fan communities include the various inter-fan debates and discussions surrounding these fan products. This kind of discourse has been considered since such discussions and comments often become the hub for toxic displays of hierarchical behavior among fans. Fan communities quite often become battlegrounds for political ideologies through various displays of toxic fan practices that can be seen, for instance, in the case of the rise of right-wing agents mobilized behind the “alt-right” banner (Kies and Proctor 134). Toxic fan displays due to political and ideological conflicts within online superhero fan communities are indicative of inherent hierarchical and hegemonic differences between different sets of fans. Such behavior may also be evident in the form of language and phrases

used by fans that tend to glorify tendencies similar to fascist behavior. The very essence of such hierarchical toxicities in itself bears similarities to the nature of fascism.

Increasing research in the field of fan studies has revealed the existence of varying kinds of hierarchical behaviors that are often displayed within fan communities. Inequalities in the form of hierarchical practices often manifest through “fantagonism,” which is highlighted by a competitive struggle between fans and even with external institutions at times for creative and affective ownership over a media text (Scott 144). The social spaces of comic book fandom, too, are structured by hierarchies of taste, leading to the creation of insider and outsider fans based merely on their previous knowledge of comic books (Beaty 318). Hierarchies exist within specific online fan communities based on certain set standards of reading, writing, and behaving, which tend to normalize community members (Stanfill “Intra-Fandom Stereotyping” 4). Arguments have been made by scholars for the existence of multiple dimensions of hierarchies based on knowledge, fandom level, and access within fan communities (Hills 30). These kinds of hierarchical behaviors resonate with the evident hegemonic nature of societies of the modern-day, which are characterized by an unprecedented concentration of wealth among certain global elites (Hassler-Forest *Capitalist Superheroes* 19). Fascist ideology, even though it pretends to speak for the people, also actively works towards creating such a rule of the elite much like how conflicts within fandom make a hegemonic distinction within and even outside fan communities (Peters 674). These similarities between the manifestation of political debates within online fan communities and typical fascist discourse make analyzing online fan discourse an interesting prospect. The echoes between elements of superhero ideologies and aesthetics and fascist discourse make analyzing online discourse from a specific superhero fan community even more exciting.

Analyzing the particular kind of online fan discourse, as mentioned above, would help answer the research question of what kind of similarities and resonances exist between online superhero fan discourse and typical fascist behavior, ideology, and aesthetics. In order to answer this question, the discourse analyzed would include the language used in amateur creations of superhero-centric fan fiction and fan art and hierarchical fan displays within a small section of a Captain America fan community on the digital platform of Reddit.

The paper would thus be focused on firstly identifying and establishing certain similarities in discourses between particular superhero narratives and aesthetics and typically characteristic fascist behavior through various theoretical considerations. It would then move the focus towards theoretically understanding how online fan communities may include a manifestation of fans’ political ideologies through fan products such as fanfiction and fan-art.

The final theoretical consideration would be focused on drawing similarities between toxic fan displays that create hierarchies within online superhero fan communities and typical fascist tendencies.

Subsequently, the analysis section of the thesis would focus on analyzing selected discourse from two sets of fan creations and the subsequent fan discussions from a subreddit community titled “r/CaptainAmerica.” The discourse would be looked at from the lens of the established relationship between elements of the superhero narrative, the fascist framework, and hierarchical toxic fan behavior. In doing so, the similarities and resonances that would be revealed or identified during the analysis would signify the use of language and tactics by a particular section of fans within the chosen online superhero fan community that legitimize, normalize, and possibly even glorify fascist tendencies.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

2.1 The Fascist Framework:

Since this thesis is aimed at comparing online superhero discourse created through fanfiction, art, and discussions to characteristic fascist behavioral discourse, it is, therefore, necessary to define a clear framework of fascism. Distinct elements from this framework would be used as a lens and comparison point for the analysis of online fan discourse. It is, however, necessary to establish here that the characteristic elements defined as being fascist in nature are not exhaustive. These are specific ideological and aesthetic features of typical fascist behavior that not only have resonances with the narrative and aesthetic elements of the superhero genre but are also recurring features visible within the chosen online fan discourse in the analysis section.

The rise of the far-right and fascist thinking may be attributed to an obsessive preoccupation with community-decline, victimhood, and humiliation (Yogerst 3). These characteristic behavioral traits of fascism are linked to an authoritarian nationalism and a quest for national renewal based on the conception of a nation in crisis (Peters 674). Fascism also demands a totalitarian state where political power is exercised by one leader buttressed by political repression, which is historically known to have employed a racial hierarchy based on an ideal of superior consciousness (Peters 675).

The nationalist ideology based on a sense of community-decline and victimhood links well with Benjamin's explanation of fascism as being a political power that is able to influence and manipulate collective experience by identifying a defeat in war as a loss in history (Kang 6). This tendency is what subsequently gave rise to one of fascism's core ideologies that propagate a glorification and projection of war as essential and beautiful (Peters 676). Associations to nationalist thinking, the worship of war, and a sense of victimhood based on past traumatic experiences happen to be narrative elements present within the chosen fan discourse being analyzed from the Captain America subreddit.

Another essential characteristic of fascism is that it flows from and justifies a preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behavior, extravagant effort, and the endurance of pain. It endorses two seemingly opposite states of egomania and servitude (Sontag 7). The relations of domination and enslavement take the form of characteristic pageantry that involves the massing of groups of people explicitly marked by the grouping of

people around an all-powerful, hypnotic leader figure or force (Sontag 7). From this analysis, the all-powerful fascist leader may be characterized as an individual obsessed with a desire to control. On the outside, the fascist dictator tends to behave as if their actions are based on a desire to serve the people for their benefit but maintain a strong sense of high handedness by displaying unquestionable superior authority. It can be argued that a lot of superhero characters, too, are molded and presented as behaving in a very similar manner in films or comic books. The chosen fanfiction contains narrative elements that potentially reveal this characteristic behavioral element too.

Fascism also features the cherishing of qualities such as audacity and bravado coupled with a celebration of charismatic leaders, demagogues, and strong men who promote violence, detest vulnerability, and follow a path of nationalism that gives rise to hierarchical social evils in the form of racism (Peters 674).

Keeping this framework of fascism in mind, which includes aesthetic, narrative, and ideological elements that define the typical manifestation of this kind of politics, further theoretical considerations would be dedicated to identifying similarities between this fascist framework and aspects from the superhero narrative and aesthetic. Subsequently, this would also be the lens with which online superhero fan discourse would be analyzed to identify the use of language that legitimizes such fascist tropes.

2.2 Hypermasculinity of the Superhero and its association to Nationalist Iconography:

Having established a framework for identifying certain fascist ideologies and traits, it is now essential to highlight specific narrative elements of the superhero genre that not only bear resemblances to aspects of the above-defined fascist discourse but are also evidently visible within the selected fan narratives and discourse from the subreddit community.

One of the primary aesthetic features of the superhero narrative includes the hypermasculine physical representation of the superhero itself. Physical traits that make the central hero characters seem superhuman with a taller, stronger and physically larger anatomy present them as being more powerful and authoritative than characters around them (Salter and Blodgett 23). This hypermasculine representation is visibly present in the chosen fan narratives from the Captain America subreddit and also bears uncanny resemblances to the masculine bravado, audacity, and the strong man ruling tendency that forms a crucial part of fascist ideology (Peters 674).

The hypermasculine representation of superheroes has often been further highlighted and accompanied by an association with nationalist iconography (Hassler-Forest “Superheroes and the Bush Doctrine” 21). Nationalist iconography in the form of explicit references to the “American Dream,” along with depictions of Captain America posing next to the American flag is also visible along with the hypermasculinity within the chosen online fan narratives. Incidentally, fascism also happens to be a political philosophy that exalts the nation and promotes nationalism (Peters 674). This connection to a nationalist iconography coupled with the hypermasculine representation of the superhero makes for an interesting comparison point with fascist discourse. The fact that the chosen discourse from the fan community also contains language and aesthetic elements created by fans that highlight and glorify such representations may be indicative of a tendency to legitimize and normalize characteristic features common to fascism.

2.3 The Revisionary Narrative and the Terrorist Superhero:

The two kinds of popular narratives within the superhero genre that evidently contain elements that resonate with fascist discourse are the “revisionary” and “terrorist” narratives. Both these narratives involve a reimagination of the superhero’s origin story based on their childhood trauma and challenging past experience that shapes the kind of vigilantism that is later displayed during adulthood (Hassler-Forest “From Trauma Victim to Terrorist” 36). Interestingly, the chosen fan narratives from the Captain America subreddit visibly contain language that highlights and signifies aspects of the revisionary and terrorist superhero narrative, which in turn bear resemblances to typical fascist discourse. To understand the parallels to fascism, an analysis of the superheroes’ trajectory in the films *Batman Begins* and *Vfor Vendetta*, where these two respective narratives are explicitly visible, would be necessary.

The revisionary narrative in *Batman Begins* is highlighted primarily by the unquestioned vigilantism on display by the leading superhero. Batman goes from being a “violent, proto-fascist vigilante to an unquestioned agent of morality” (Hassler-Forest “From Trauma Victim to Terrorist” 36). This unquestioned vigilantism and parading around as an agent of morality and justice is justified due to the character’s irreparable traumatic childhood that turned him into a vulnerable individual (Hassler-Forest “From Trauma Victim to Terrorist” 37). Such behavior, it can be argued, resembles the fascist ideology wherein obsessive victimhood drives demand for cultural and national renewal, as described previously by Peters and Paxton. An unquestioned vigilante is quite similar in nature to a fascist dictator who also

prefers to have absolute authority operating on a philosophy of political repression that does not allow for any opposition to object or even question the figurehead's decisions (Peters 674).

The terrorist superhero narrative in *V for Vendetta* showcases the government as an inherently evil organization with V's resistance against as being implicitly good. This reinstates an observation about the superhero genre that it consistently projects simplistically drawn-out conflicts between good and evil (McSweeney 9). Closely observing the behavioral traits of the superhero in this film, it is seen that Evey is educated to embrace terrorist acts as a justifiable and legitimate means of protest and is conditioned to believe in the ultimate sacrifice of giving her own life for the cause she believes in (Hassler-Forest "From Trauma Victim to Terrorist" 40). This kind of narrative perpetrates and glorifies an anarchic way of attaining justice. The superhero, in this case, seemingly tends to promote and attach a positive connotation to violent actions, disregards institutions such as the government and the media, and uses violent means against such institutions to oppose them. These characteristics observe similarities in aesthetics to the fascist manifesto, one which also openly glorifies war and celebrates great crowds that indulge in violent riots (Peters 676).

The existence of these two narrative elements within the chosen fan narratives indicates the use of language by certain fans that once again tend to highlight the legitimization of behavioral discourse that bears a resemblance to fascism.

2.4 Fandom and its Relationship with Politics: A Framework for Political Fanfiction

This thesis aims to explore and identify the use of online fan discourse that contains similarities to fascist discourse. In order to do so, the fan activities and the subsequent online discourse that is chosen must therefore be of a political nature, which would enable an understanding of the underlying political messages within the narratives. This would subsequently give way to identifying discursive elements that indeed bear resemblances to typical fascist behavior.

Political ideologies may often manifest within online fan communities since both popular cultures and political texts are now increasingly accessed and shared through various digital media platforms. This has resulted in a rather intimate, fan-like relationship between politics and the people who access both political and popular culture texts online (Sandvoss 253). With both politics and fandom being participatory in nature as both require people to put forward their ideas and express their concerns, it often happens that fans begin to alter popular culture texts as per their own preferences in order to express their political ideologies (Stanfill

“The Reactionary in the Fan” 4). When fans use popular culture in this manner, to possibly transform and express their idea of what aspects of the world should look like, fandom automatically becomes political (Stanfill “The Reactionary in the Fan” 4). It may, therefore, be argued that fan culture within online communities is often entirely political in nature and cannot be considered as merely a space for lively displays of emotional attachment towards popular culture texts or icons.

One of the ways in which the participatory nature of both fandom and politics is observed is when fans indulge in creating fictions that also contain underlying political thoughts and messages. Fanfiction, as mentioned previously, is an integral part of the online superhero fan discourse being analyzed in this paper. Abigail De Kosnik outlines an interesting framework for critically understanding political fanfictions. She points out that political fanfictions “replicate and redeploy the existing semiotic regime,” which leads to the “substitution of message for another and the imposition of an alternative set of signs in the place of the dominant” (De Kosnik 275). She refers to “radical intertextuality,” which is the connection of multiple texts with each other for the purposes of building a world or an experience, as one of the most essential and defining characteristics of political fanfictions (De Kosnik 275). In the case of political fanfictions, there often exists a mingling of two archives by the fan author, namely that of reality and a fiction archive. There exists a movement between the past and present, which is characterized by the past being enacted again in new bodies and the present being suffused with styles, signs, and qualities from the past (De Kosnik 276). This framework, therefore, helps provide an understanding of the characteristic features and nuances behind a participatory creation, such as fanfiction, an element that is the core object of analysis in this paper.

Theorizing the political nature of fanfiction is necessary primarily since the fiction was chosen as the point of analysis, is also, apart from being a depiction of the fictional superhero’s interactions in a real-world setting, happens to be a story that deals with an important political matter related to the election of a supposed fascist ruler in the United States. Incidentally, the fanfiction analyzed also includes interaction between past events, namely explicit references to the Second World War, and a present scenario, namely the swearing-in ceremony of the President of the United States. Such a framework, therefore, establishes essential points of analysis that would help identify political elements within the superhero narrative of the story that may resonate with fascist aesthetics.

2.5 The Hierarchies within Fandom and the similarities to Fascist discourse:

In addition to analyzing discourse such as fanfiction and fan art, the hierarchical displays of fan behavior, which are evident through fan comments and inter-fan discussions, would also be interpreted so as to establish similarities between such hierarchical behavior and fascist characteristic behavior. With fandom being such a large entity, there are varying kinds of hierarchical actions that fans often indulge in. However, the discussions accompanying the chosen superhero fan narratives from the Captain America fan community may be indicative of a few particular kinds of hierarchical fan displays, which in turn resonate with elements of a fascist discourse. This section is therefore dedicated to elaborating on the sorts of hierarchical fan displays that may be observed in the comments and discussions around the selected fanfiction and fan-art. When it comes to the hierarchical nature of fandom, often, fans themselves would never recognize it (Hills 30). This is possibly one of the significant reasons why such behavior continues to thrive within fan communities.

Moving focus to the evidently visible hierarchies within the chosen fan discussions, one that clearly emerges is due to the distinctions and conflicts created because of a separation between “insider” and “outsider” fans. The smaller insider fan community, based on their previously acquired knowledge from comic books, attempt to claim more authority over the media texts and, as a result, try to outcast the broader, inexperienced outsider fan community (Beaty 318). This kind of hierarchy stems from the fact that not all participants or fans within the participatory world of fandom are created equal since particular fans definitely have greater abilities and privileges to partake in fandom than others (Jenkins 3). This specific kind of conflict also displays uncanny similarities to typical fascist behavior. Fascism, as a political philosophy, also happens to promote the rule of the smaller section of the elite, much like the insider fan community. The hierarchies within fascism tend to be further highlighted with the ideological belief in a superior consciousness which employs and propagates racial hierarchies (Peters 677).

One of the more common forms of disputes that seem to arise within fans who have expressed their views regarding the portrayal of Captain America in the chosen fanfiction is seemingly over a supposed right way to read, write and interpret meaning which arises from specific set standards and expectations of reading, writing, and behaving that specific fan communities have (Stanfill “Intra-Fandom Stereotyping” 4). This showcases a rather unidimensional approach that poses a threat to any kind of constructive discussion between fans. Often the conflicts that arise from a unidimensional way of interpretation are indicative

of at least a section of fans displaying an insidious dynamic wherein they tend to heavily oppose different perspectives by shouting them down with prejudice (Johnson 395). Fans discuss television and cinema aesthetics by either generating or re-affirming a hegemonic interpretive consensus (Johnson 396-397). This sort of hierarchical behavior that may be visible within the chosen online discourse arguably resonates with aspects of fascist behavior wherein presentation of differing viewpoints are heavily opposed. Such disregard for opposing views is often accompanied by a very unidimensional thought process that does not allow for constructive discussions, debates, or critiques which may otherwise be beneficial

The final kind of hierarchical conflict visible within the fan discussions includes antagonism. It is described as the deep emotional investment in which dispute arises amongst fans or even between fans and producers who compete for affective and creative ownership over a shared media text (Scott 144). This kind of entitlement over media texts, coupled with a desire to uphold and maintain fandom as an elite space for insider fans, are behavioral traits that are visibly evident in the fan discussions accompanying the chosen fiction.

3. METHODOLOGY:

3.1 The Method:

3.1.1 Discourse Analysis:

In this attempt to interpret the language used by Captain America fans in their online creations and to subsequently be able to draw comparisons to fascist discourse, the method of “Applied Discourse Analysis” has been chosen. James Paul Gee points out that discourse analysis is primarily the study of language which is in use in the world, aimed at a variety of things ranging from communication and cooperation to destroying and building institutions (Gee *How to do Discourse Analysis* 1). Theoretically, Gee’s approach to discourse analysis involves analyzing the details of language structure and deals closely with understanding meaning in social, cultural, and political terms (Gee *How to do Discourse Analysis* 1). Since this thesis too aims to closely analyze the language in use in fanfiction, art, and debates to understand social and political meanings being expressed by certain fans, the method of discourse analysis, therefore, fits quite appropriately. In discourse analysis, the primary concern is to understand the relationship between language and context and to look at the context to determine what one means or may have meant (Gee *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis* 20). The aim of the analysis section is also to identify through close observation what fans may have meant to express through their creations and whether the associated meanings and contexts of the language used bears similarities to fascist discourse. In this manner, Discourse Analysis would, therefore, be the most useful and appropriate method for determining the answer to the research question.

3.1.2 The Tools for Conducting Discourse Analysis:

In order to conduct a discourse analysis, Gee also provides an extensive framework consisting of a set of 28 tools that enable researchers to chart out their desired course. For this research, the tool that would be put into use is called the “Building Tasks Tool,” a tool that is used to design and build structures and associated meanings. In order to possibly establish similarities between selected fan narratives and fascist discourse, it would be necessary to interpret and develop appropriate meanings that may be associated with the texts and subsequently draw comparisons of the derived meanings to established understandings of fascist discourse. The Building Tasks tool has therefore been chosen since it allows the

generation of appropriate interpretations and meanings of the language-in-use through the employing of the “seven building tasks” that fall under it. Each of these building tasks enables the use of a specific tool for inquiry that is able to derive various perspectives of contextual meanings from the language-in-use (Gee *How to do Discourse Analysis* 94). While Gee outlines seven points of inquiry the fall under the building tasks tool, in the case of this analysis, five of the seven tools would be put into use. The aim of the research is to specifically interpret and derive meanings from the online data that would enable a comparison to certain ideological and aesthetic aspects of fascism as described previously. These ideological and aesthetic aspects are covered by five points of inquiry, which do not require the use of the remaining two tasks. The five points of inquiry that enable questioning the data from a particular social, political or cultural angle to understand the kind of meanings being built through the use of language include “significance, practices, identities, politics, and sign systems and knowledge.” In the following sections, each of these building tasks would be discussed further in order to understand how they would be used in this research.

3.1.3 Significance:

The first of the building tasks includes the aspect of “significance.” Language is necessary to render certain aspects of life as significant or lesser their significance (Gee *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis* 32). For doing so whilst analyzing a piece of text, one must therefore ask the question of how that piece of language is being used to make certain things significant or not. This tool would be used to identify how certain fans highlight or signify specific ideological, narrative, behavioral, or aesthetic aspects in their creations and discussions that may have resonances to typical fascist behavior. When fans tend to highlight certain elements that have resemblances to fascist discourse, it may be then be argued that there may be an attempt towards glorifying and legitimizing such aspects.

3.1.4 Activities:

The second building task used for discourse analysis involves the aspect of “activities.” Activities are socially recognized and institutionally or culturally supported endeavors that usually involve sequencing or combining actions in specific ways (Gee *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis* 33). The subsequent inquiry that must be made into the text, therefore, involves asking the question of what activity or activities this piece of text is seeking to get

others to recognize as being established (Gee *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis* 33). By making an inquiry into the chosen text on this basis, it may be observed whether the different kinds of activities, practices, and endeavors that are being recognized and established by the fans indeed contain resemblances to fascist discourse.

3.1.5 Identities:

The third building task involves analyzing language to make meaning through the lens of “identities.” Gee writes that “we use language to get recognized as taking on a certain identity or role, that is, to build an identity” (Gee *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis* 34). The question for inquiry thus leads one to ask, “What identities is this piece of language being used to enact? What identity or identities is this piece of language attributing to others, and how does this help the speaker or writer enact his or her own identity?” (Gee 34). As described previously, both superheroes and the fascist ruler have a particular type of identity. By inquiring into and deriving possible meanings and context about the kind of identities that are being recognized by the fans in their creations and discussions, the comparison to discourse describing the identity of a fascist figurehead would be made possible.

3.1.6 Politics:

Possibly the most essential point of inquiry in the context of this paper, Gee points out that language is often used to “convey a perspective on the nature of the distribution of social goods, that is, to build a perspective on social goods” (Gee *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis* 34). The point of inquiry, therefore, asks the question of “what perspective on social goods is this piece of language communicating” or what is being communicated regarding what must be taken to be “normal, right, good, correct, proper, appropriate, valuable” (Gee *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis* 34). Since fascism is a political philosophy with its own set of ideologies that identify aspects of human life as right and appropriate and others as not, the inquiry-based on this tool would allow for understanding and derivation of what certain fans have appropriated as being good, right, or normal through their creations and discussions. The derivation of meaning that would indicate how fans have built perspective on social goods would allow for a comparison to elements of fascist political discourse that also build similar views.

3.1.7 Sign Systems and Knowledge:

Gee points out that language is often used to build privilege or prestige for one sign system or way of knowing over another (Gee *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis* 35). This is clearly related to the Politics Building Tool of inquiry since constructing privilege for a sign system over another is to create and offer a social good (Gee *How to do Discourse Analysis* 98). The point of inquiry, therefore, is “How does this piece of language privilege or deprive specific sign systems or different ways of knowing and believing or claims to knowledge and belief?” (Gee *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis* 35). Analysis of sign systems and the distribution of social goods are interconnected as they both aim to reveal specific aspects of what kind of thinking and knowledge of the world is being highlighted (Gee *How to do Discourse Analysis* 145).

3.2 Choosing the Corpus:

Lamerichs et al., in one of their research endeavors, conducted online research that aimed to analyze the manifestation of certain kinds of political debates within online communities on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Their study aimed to investigate online discourse surrounding the hashtag “#godemperortrump” in order to determine whether or not online posts that contained this hashtag had any role to play in determining the course or outcome of the 2016 U.S Presidential elections (Lamerichs et al. 188). Since this thesis also aims to look at the manifestation of political narratives and debates within a particular superhero fan community, certain aspects of the method adopted by Lamerichs et al. in determining the corpus have been used here as well.

The research endeavor of Lamerichs et al. is a more elaborate one compared to this thesis. Their research aims to analyze and establish “larger patterns” of how users used memes and other images supporting Donald Trump during the 2016 elections on various social media platforms (Lamerichs et al. 188). Hence the size of the corpus chosen by them is much larger. Since this thesis aims to identify the existence of fascist legitimizing discourse on a smaller scale without establishing or proving it as a larger pattern, the chosen corpus would remain much smaller. However, a similar approach to Lamerichs et al. has been adopted in determining the kind of corpus. One of the potential pitfalls of engaging with online data involves sticking to analyzing only the more typical type of data rather than focusing on a variety of different data sets (Lamerichs et al. 187). In order to avoid such a situation, the chosen online discourse for this thesis includes a variety of data sets in the form of fanfiction, fan-art, and the subsequent

fan discussions surrounding these posts. Since Lamerichs et al. choose the most popular posts from Facebook and Instagram based on a higher number of likes and comments, similarly, two of the most popular posts have been identified and chosen from the subreddit community.

While it may still be argued that the corpus is too small to be able to make any substantial claims, it also remains a fact that small data sets can also offer equally insightful results as compared to those obtained using Big Data research only due to the fact that creating general distinctions between the two can prove to be difficult (Caliandro and Gandini 3). A larger corpus and a much more extensive analysis of online data from this community and communities on other platforms like 4Chan, Tumblr, and so on is definitely a future prospect for continuing and progressing this discussion further.

The corpus was chosen for this thesis, therefore, involves a variety of posts selected on the basis of higher popularity and engagement within the subreddit community called “r/CaptainAmerica.” The corpus is comprised of two case studies that contain fan fiction, fan art, and the subsequent fan discussions surrounding these posts.

3.2.1 Categorizing the Selected Corpus into Discursive Clusters:

In order to make the process of conducting the discourse analysis more structured, the method of categorizing the chosen online data into separate discursive clusters has been adopted. This is the same method as used by William Proctor’s discourse analysis research around a particular hashtag used by journalists for indicating a source for racism towards John Boyega, for his role in the *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* film released in 2014 (Proctor “Canonical fidelity” 165).

Proctor conducts this discourse analysis by manually extracting data and binding it into various discursive clusters. The two posts and their subsequent comments that have been selected for study in this thesis have also been divided into two different discursive clusters titled “Politically Opinionated Fan-Fiction” and “Fan Discussions on a Political Cartoon.” The clusters have been distinguished on the basis of the nature of the two posts chosen, where the first one is a fanfiction and its following comments, and the other includes fan art and the subsequent fan discussions.

3.2.2 The Tools within the Discursive Clusters:

The five tools or points of inquiry, as discussed previously, would be incorporated into the two discursive clusters as per requirement. The first discursive cluster contains fanfiction

and the subsequent fan discussions around it. Inquiries into the fanfiction have been made on the basis of what is being expressed by the author as significant, the kind of activities that are being highlighted, and the kind of identities being built around the character of Captain America in the story using the respective tools as mentioned previously.

Since the subsequent fan discussions indulge in critiquing and commenting on the ideological aspects of the story, which involve discussions about how social goods have been distributed in the fiction and the kind of sign systems that fans consider more relevant than others, the “Politics Building Tool” and “Sign Systems and Knowledge Tool,” have been employed to interpret and derive relevant meaning. The hierarchical conflicts between fans in the discussion section have also been analyzed using the same tool.

The second discursive cluster includes fan-art and the discussions that accompany it. The “Identities Building Tool” and the “Activities Building Tool” have been employed in analyzing text within the first image posted by a fan in order to interpret whether or not Captain America’s identity in that image has resemblances to characteristic identity traits of a fascist figurehead. Subsequently, the ideas and conflicts being displayed in the fan art and the fan discussions that involve fans expressing their ideological beliefs in connection to the fan-art, have been analyzed using the “Sign Systems and Knowledge Tool” and the “Politics Building Tool.”

3.3 Limitations of the Corpus:

While some limitations have been mentioned previously in passing, it is quite necessary to reiterate the existing boundaries of such a corpus when compared to other similar kinds of research. The corpus of this research is limited since the subreddit community being analyzed consists of numerous posts by about 8000 members fans, out of which only two posts have been selected in this research, based on the higher levels of activity shown on them due to the higher number of likes and comments on these two posts. This signifies that the results of this research are certainly not universal or absolute in nature but are instead intended towards initiating a discussion in this regard, wherein if there do exist similarities between the selected online discourse on Reddit and fascist characteristics, it may lead to further large scale research which can possibly establish a larger trend within superhero fan communities. However, the limited corpus restrains this research from making any such claims that may indicate the existence of usage of fascism glorifying language as a universal trend among all fan communities. It merely attempts to establish through a small case study that such a trend, however small in nature, does seemingly exist within the fan community being analyzed here.

4. THE FIRST DISCURSIVE CLUSTER:

4.1 POLITICALLY OPINIONATED FANFICTION:

4.1.1 An Introduction to the Fan-Fiction as “Political Fanfiction.”

The analysis section begins with the point of focus emerging from a particular piece of fan fiction that was published on ‘r/CaptainAmerica’ about three years ago and was received with a significant amount of critique in the form of debates and comments by fellow members of the subreddit community.

The story, titled *America the Great*, begins with the author, a potential fan, describing a phone call between their version of Steve Rogers, also known as Captain America, and a United States government official right before the country is about to swear in a new President. The story reveals that Rogers had decided not to attend the ceremony at all because he was initially against the election of the new President, but had now gone on to change his mind for some reason and had accepted the invitation to be present at the swearing-in ceremony. The story progresses towards a big reveal wherein Rogers makes a grand, typical superhero-like entrance at the ceremony to knock down and murder the President on stage right in front of a huge crowd.

While Captain America leaves the scene with Falcon, another character from the MCU and one of Captain’s allies flies him out of the stage, and the reader is obviously left thinking as to why a hero of his stature decided to take such a step and kill one of the most important political figures of the country. The story culminates with an explanation in the form of an editorial submission that is sent to all major newspaper publications by Captain America himself, containing a detailed description of his actions. The following is a small extract from that very letter that Captain America writes justifying his decision to murder the President.

I spent two years on the ground fighting German Nazis in Europe, and seven decades in the ice to stop them from dragging the horrors of that war over to our home. And I’ll be damned if I let them start it all up again, just because they think we won’t recognize them in a fancy new suit. For the first time, let’s make America great.

After reading and summarising the story, it becomes evident that the chosen fanfiction is political since it seemingly exhibits all the characteristics as described by De Kosnik. There

exists a reality archive in the form of a depiction of a swearing-in ceremony of the President of the United States. This reality archive is shown to be mingling with a fictional library in the form of the presence of a superhero character interacting with elements from the reality archive (De Kosnik 275). Additionally, the story also includes an interaction between past and present events, wherein references to the superhero's involvement in the Second World War are made in conjunction with the current event of the superhero murdering the President at their swearing-in ceremony (De Kosnik 276). This particular fanfiction can, therefore, indeed be attributed to being political in its narrative. It may, therefore, be considered as an expression of the author's political ideology and thinking and, therefore, a worthy discourse for identifying possible similarities to existing fascist norms and tendencies.

4.1.2 Building Significance of Hypermasculinity and War:

Putting the Significance Building Tool into use, when we look to ask how language is being used in the fanfiction to make some aspects of the overall narrative more significant than others, the following may be revealed. At the start of the story, Captain America strides on to the stage to meet with the President before he has been sworn in. At that moment, he is shown to have knocked down and killed the President in front of a huge crowd. While doing so, Captain America uses a "negligible portion of his considerable strength." This signifies and highlights the superior physical capabilities and strength of Captain America compared to the President of the United States. His physicality is given further significance by the author when they described how Captain America brought his "star-spangled shield down on the exposed back of the President's head with a non-negligible portion of his considerable strength." The focus on the superhero's superior physical ability may be interpreted as being similar to the general hypermasculine representation of the superhero as taller, stronger, and physically more capable than those around him (Salter and Blodgett 23). A model that builds the significance of masculine strength may have several adverse outcomes for the formation of a subculture, where both women and men become targets of unrealistic expectations and abuse (Salter and Blodgett 26). With the author resorting to such a display of Captain America in their fanfiction, it may be argued that they are using language that is not only glorifying hypermasculine imagery but also simultaneously legitimizing the strongman characteristics and the masculine displays of bravado which fascism as a form of politics tends to cherish (Peters 674).

After the assassination, Captain America writes a letter explaining or justifying why he murdered the President. Using the point of inquiry of significance building once again, it may

be observed that the letter begins with a flashback to the Second World War, where the character's tremendous desire to "contribute more directly to the war effort" despite "technical concerns about regulations" is highlighted. It may be interpreted that this signifies an attempt by the author to portray the superhero as a national hero whose time as a soldier makes him a devout servant of his nation. The author also writes the following: "I even attempted to fudge my paperwork, trying to slip myself past a doctor who was careless." Through these attributes of the character, there seems to be an attempt by the author to glorify Captain America's past by focusing less on his choice to ignore legal and ethical considerations and signify his deep desire to join the war effort against the Nazis. Such characteristics, it may be argued, bear resemblances to elements from both Paxton as well as Peters' description of fascism. Paxton clearly outlines the outward disregard or abandonment of ethical and legal restraints with the goals of internal cleansing and external expansion as an integral element of fascist political behavior (Yogerst 3). This is something that Captain America is also seemingly doing by choosing to ignore and instead glorify his disregard for rules. Peters highlights the glorification and projection of war as the world's only hygiene as a crucial ideology within the fascist manifesto (676). This deep-rooted desire to flout legal and ethical boundaries in order to join a war effort, despite being denied initially, showcases an attempt by the author to project participation in the war as an ultimate sacrifice for which one must admire the hero. In fact, there is seemingly an attempt to use it as justification for the assassination as well.

Another instance of participating in a war that is seemingly being glorified may be observed right at the end when the story highlights Captain America's time as a soldier fighting on the ground. The character writes, "I spent two years on the ground fighting German Nazis in Europe, and seven decades in the ice to stop them from dragging the horrors of that war over to our home. And I'll be damned if I let them start it all up again." Such language may once again be strongly indicative of an attempt to use the past experience of having fought a war and been a hero as a justifiable defense for murder, something that may resonate with the futurist and fascist belief that war is the world's only hygiene.

Therefore, the Significance building tool may reveal to us that there seems to be a hypermasculine representation of the superhero as well as a blatant glorification of the object of war in this political fanfiction. While such elements may be familiar to the superhero genre, when a fan tends to include and normalize such representations in their own creations, it may be considered problematic since they at the same time are also legitimizing elements of fascist behavior through their products.

4.1.3 Resonances with Fascist Dramaturgy (Practices):

When we use the “Activities Building Tool” for discourse analysis to ask the question related to the kind of activities or practices that are being enacted or enforced by this piece of language or fiction, there seem to be elements that resonate strongly with how Sontag described fascist methods. In the story, Captain America may be observed making an entrance on to the stage only to disrupt the ceremony and murder the President who was chosen against his wishes. Such a practice that the author seems to propagate may be argued to be quite similar in how it showcases a tendency to always be in a situation of control, coupled with displays of egomania and servitude (Sontag 7). I argue for egomania being on the show since the author firstly showcases the superhero leaving the ceremony without being stopped and subsequently provides an elaborate justification, which indicates that Captain America was not to be held accountable. A letter was supposed to be enough to account for his actions and vindicate him. At the same time, it may be argued that there is a clear indication within the justification that killing the President-elect was, in fact, a choice made for the overall good of the nation and society and was somewhat projected as a selfless act. The following sentence from the story indicates this sentiment:

“Even when you’re as big as Steve is now, sometimes things are just plain bigger than you.”

4.1.4 Similarities to The Revisionary Superhero Narrative:

Putting the “Identities Building Tool” to use, when asked the question of the identities that this piece of fiction is attributing to its main character, certain similarities in the narrative to the description of the revisionary and terrorist superhero may be observed. Apart from the apparent similarity between an act of murder and an act of terror, the descriptive references of the character’s past when he was fighting the war against the Nazis may be interpreted as a traumatic time during his youth, which has seemingly shaped his personality in the present. This glorified representation of his traumatic past as a hero who struggled and overcame a crisis is also being used as justification for his act of violence in the present. Such a narrative bears certain resemblances to the revisionary and terrorist superhero narrative, as described by Hassler-Forest. As described previously, the two descriptions consist of behavioral elements that also echo fascist behavior. Apart from the victimization perspective and the glorification of violence and war which has already been mentioned previously, Captain America in this fanfiction is depicted as almost an “unquestioned agent of morality,” which is not only how

Hassler-Forest describes the revisionary superhero but also a trait that is quite characteristic of any fascist ruler or dictator.

4.2 The Fan Debates:

In addition to the story itself, the comments that followed the story also lead to exciting debates between some of the fans who engaged with this fanfiction. Some of the interesting comments and responses have been noted down below from this particular discussion thread. For the sake of anonymity, user accounts have been named as 1,2,3 and so on:

User 1: So, you believe Steve Rogers, paragon of virtue and embodiment of the American Dream, would assassinate Trump? A man who has to date, committed no act of tyranny, no crime against humanity, and was duly and legally elected under the system of laws of the U.S.? Perhaps his nationalistic speech has upset a sizable portion of the country, but until he actively seeks to undermine our system or cast it aside, he is simply a man doing his job, poorly or otherwise. Would he have assassinated Bernie for his socialist beliefs.”

Author: Trump's & his administrations first actions include:

- Delivering an inauguration speech written by a white supremacist/white nationalist that quite possibly borrowed verbiage from a supervillain and used the word "America" more times than any other inauguration speech in U.S. history..... These are the actions of a fascist who has campaigned on a fascist platform.
- Declaring intent to create a National Day of Patriotism.
- Giving a press briefing in which the White House Press Secretary told 7 lies in 5 minutes, said that the administration would "hold the press accountable," and took no questions.

These are the actions of a fascist who has campaigned on a fascist platform. Steve Rogers has never seen it backfire when people go "well sure they SAY they're violently racist but do we REALLY KNOW they're going to follow through.

User 2: Trump's "violently racist"? Where's that coming from? Deporting illegals, a moratorium on Muslims? That's not violent. Distasteful, yes; undesirable, sure. But until people start losing their rights or disappearing from the streets and winding up in camps (or worse), it's still not violent. Quoting a piece on Hitler doesn't prove anything

with Trump. The left has actually praised Castro, Guevara, and Chavez. Does that put them on the same level as those human rights abusers?

User 3: You make a very good argument. Unfortunately for both of us, (the author) has already deemed us fascists and therefor(e), unworthy of having opinions.

User 4: I am also frustrated with the author manipulating captain America. (Of all people!) to fulfil her weird fantasy. She hasn't rebutted any of my criticisms except to say I too am also a fascist if I dont think intent is worthy of condemning someone to death.

User 5: It's not in character, it's not well written, and it is not something Captain America would do. Killing people over expressed ideas is actually exactly the sort of fascist concept that the author is trying to project onto readers who disagree with her interpretation.

Author: If you don't see deliberate inclusions of white nationalist fascist dogwhistles like "America First" as a problem, and you nod your head along with the ideas that there's any kind of "dangerous anti-police atmosphere," that we need to "strengthen" our military, and that we should wall off our borders, I'm not going to waste my time on someone who's already firmly in favor of fascism. And I don't mean that hypberbolically: this sort of ultranationalism with an emphasis on state violence is classic, textbook fascism.

User 3: You're assuming an awful lot about me as a person. You're not thinking of the consequences of the story post this action. Captain America would be the number one most wanted man in America. Would some people support him? Yes. Would some people believe he should be locked away for actual treason? Also yes. Do you honestly think he'd just be out there penning editorials and promoting sedition? His act would divided the team more than ever, and the American people, too. Captain America would have to spend the rest of his life in hiding or fighting, and this action could very well lead to an actual Civil War. In what universe do you think Mike Pence would be a better President? Have you read up on his voting record and beliefs? Or do you just keep having Captain America assassinate until we get to someone you personally get behind. Captain

America killing the President because he (you) believes the man is evil because you disagree with him--that's treason.

Author: I don't think we have a legal disagreement: I just disagree that Steve Rogers cares more about legality than he does about ethics. YMMV on the writing; personally, I'm quite happy with it, and many others agree."

User 3: Can I take a gander and assume you're about what--16? I think it explains both the tone of your story, the clumsy syntax and organization, and your heavy handedness. I think it also explains why you're so quick to throw around words like fascists with people you disagree with. If you think using "America" a lot in a speech is fascism, I don't know what to tell you.

4.2.1 Political Nature of the Fan Debates and the Underlying Toxicity:

Focusing specifically on the discourse of the comments using the "Politics Building Tool" and the "Sign Systems and Knowledge Tool" for discourse analysis, the combined question that may be asked of the fans' use of language is what is being communicated as right, good or normal and what kind of beliefs and claims over knowledge is being propagated? (Gee *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis* 34-35). All the users unanimously seem to have disagreements with the author regarding either the story or their explicit political views. What all of them clearly seem to be opposing is the portrayal of Captain America killing the President, therefore expressing the idea that an act of physical violence such as murder is ethically and legally not the right thing to do.

The author, however, stands their ground. It may be observed from the discussions that the author is clearly anti-Donald Trump in their thinking. Therefore, a significant portion of their arguments highlights why they specifically believe Donald Trump to be fascist. While previous analogies made in this paper have indicated similarities between leaders like Trump and typical fascist behavior, the author in their story, however, seems to be contradicting their thoughts. While attempting to showcase an anti-fascist outlook in the comments section, their story uses hypermasculine representation, a glorification of acts of violence and victimhood, and an absolute position of moral authority as characteristics defining their favorite superhero, all of which are crucial elements of the fascist narrative as well.

Toxic fan behavior may be noted on specific occasions when the author resorts to calling others “fascist” when they disagree with the narrative of their story. User 3, too, responds in a brusque manner and writes, “Can I take a gander and assume you're about what-16? I think it explains both the tone of your story, the clumsy syntax and organization, and your heavy handedness.” While this may have been a reactionary statement to being called “fascist” by the author, the overall discussion does seem to generate similarities to how toxic fan discussions often manifest within online fan communities. Reactionary responses from individuals who have social privilege lead to the creation of “progressive toxicity” (Kies and Proctor 132). Something similar may be observed in this case as well, where both the author and User 3 are engaging in a heated discussion with the aim of debunking or disproving the other’s viewpoint and at the same time proving that the other is reductive in their thinking and is hence fascist. This may be argued to be an instance of progressive toxicity wherein both sides are attempting to project the other as being fascist in their thinking.

Fandom bases itself on opposition to dominant culture coupled with a disregard “for norms of measured aesthetic appreciation, intellectual property, and all varieties of social acceptability, choosing their subcultural values over those of the mainstream” (Stanfill “Intra-Fandom Stereotyping” 3). Conflict and hierarchy within fandom may often form on the basis of disagreements over the right way to read, write and generally behave as a fan (Stanfill “Intra-Fandom Stereotyping” 4). These attributes may be observed in the case of the argument between the author and the fans. There is seemingly a dispute over the story in terms of what one believes in, writes about, and, subsequently, also the way the text has been interpreted. This resonates with a kind of hierarchical and hegemonic discussion where fans are seemingly attempting to showcase their opposition as having less knowledge and understanding of the Captain America franchise and certain mainstream political debates of the United States.

Elements of antagonism and possible conflicts due to insider and outsider fans may also be visible in this fan discussion. When User 4, for instance, criticizes the fiction by pointing to a manipulation of the character in the story, it may be argued that it potentially stems from their feeling of greater authority and understanding of their favorite character as compared to the author, something that resembles elements from both the insider and outsider fan conflict theory as well as antagonism (Scott 144; Beaty 318). Since the fanfiction was not appreciated by most fans, the entire discussion is indicative of how fans may attempt to shut down or oppose differing viewpoints (Johnson 395). The author, as well, was also reluctant to accept any of the criticisms and was instead focused on responding and calling others fascist. The hierarchical conflicts based on one set of fans claiming to have greater knowledge and

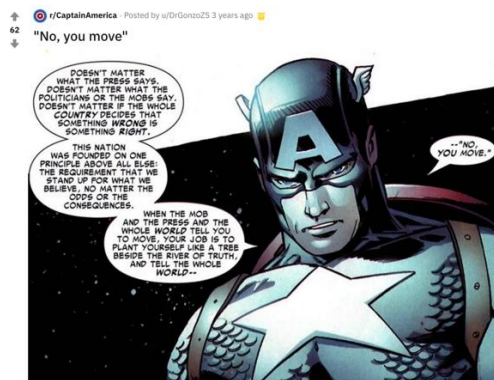
hence effective ownership on how Captain America should be represented in fan productions such as fiction are clearly visible in this discussion. Since the fan conflicts in this discussion seem to originate from and display hierarchical elements wherein certain fans seem to feel that they understand Captain America better than the rest, it may be argued that such a dynamic of privilege may resonate with the hegemonic nature of fascism too.

However, while there may be some instances of hierarchical fan displays, it also remains true that the language used in this discussion was not very extreme or toxic. Except for one instance, when User 3 assumes and calls out the author as being 16 years old, there weren't other instances of fans or the author using extreme means or language that tends to attack on the basis of race or gender or any other such personal aspects.

5. THE SECOND DISCURSIVE CLUSTER

5.1 DISCUSSIONS ON FAN-ART:

5.1.1 Analysing the discourse on the Fan Art Thread:



This art piece, inspired by the movie *Captain America: Civil War*, was posted by a fan on the subreddit community. This led to responses in the form of comments and another fan-made piece of art. While this particular art piece may not be a fan-creation in itself, it was nonetheless posted on “r/CaptainAmerica,” something that led to responses from other fans and hence may be considered as worthy of analysis too. Decoding the language on this art piece would also help provide additional context to the study of the comments sections later on.

5.1.2 Identity Portrayal of Captain America:

Using the “Identity Building Tool” for discourse analysis, the question that may be asked of this piece of fan art is what identities this piece of language is promoting or propagating. In this regard, it may be observed that the character of Captain America is put on a pedestal above every other major institution within a democratic setup, namely the press, the government, and, most importantly, even the people. The use of language such as “Doesn’t matter what the press says, doesn’t matter what the politicians or mobs say. Doesn’t matter if the whole country decides something wrong is something right”, may be indicative of how Captain America is being portrayed as “an unquestioned agent of morality” warranting certain similarities once again to the description of the revisionary superhero (Hassler-Forest “From Trauma Victim to Terrorist” 41).

In this context, the point of inquiry through the “Activities Building Tool” may also reveal that by making statements that seem to indicate a disregard for institutions like the press and the voice of the people, activities of the “terrorist superhero” are being highlighted. Much like the superhero film *V for Vendetta* where the government is also projected as inherently evil, and the superhero’s struggle against it is portrayed as implicitly good, the narrative of this art piece too seemingly highlights similar ideologies of the character of Captain America (Hassler-Forest “From Trauma Victim to Terrorist” 41). These narratives, as argued previously, resonate with fascist tendencies as well with the simplified projection of a conflict between evil and good and the showcasing of the tendency to disregard the views of any kind of opposition. This thereby indicates the language used in this piece of art may be indicative of legitimizing and glorifying fascist characteristics.

5.2 The Comments:

The comments that followed the posting of the art piece described above were as follows:

User 1: I never cared for Cap all that much until I realized that his loyalties don't lie with the government, the President, or the will of the masses. He is loyal only to the American Dream and will do anything to keep it alive, and if it becomes corrupted then he will fight to fix it.

User 2: Responded by creating the following comic strip.



User 3: Holy shit. I'd join the military if Cap was in charge.

User 4: This does not work if you are alone and have no power. This does not work if the side you are standing up against is planting their feet on other side standing up to you.

User 5: It doesn't matter if you have power or not, but if you are alone in your point of view, you are probably wrong. Cap was neither alone or wrong. Remember, even the mightiest oak began as a little acorn. This is from CIVIL WAR, that is exactly the point. You don't have to tell people who don't have an opposing viewpoint to move.

5.2.1 The Political Nature of the Fan Discussions and the Signs of Fascism within:

Mixing popular culture with the study of politics is often considered non-serious, but Van Zoonen highlights the fact that fan practices are structurally the same as the activities of information-seeking, discussion, and activism, which are fundamental to the political tradition of democracy (Stanfill “The Reactionary in the Fan” 5). In the case of this fan discussion, too, it may be observed that fans take to Reddit to discuss and seek information on a piece of art that includes a popular culture element from one of the Captain America films. The discussion also happens to be entirely political in nature, with the fans seemingly engaging in discussing the societal position of a superhero figure with respect to the democratic institutions of the government, the press, and the masses. In fact, the discussion tends towards legitimizing and supporting the idea of a superior and almost unquestionable position of authority for the superhero, which may be visible not just from the comments but also from the fan art created by User 2, the discourse of which would be discussed in detail subsequently. While Van Zoonen advocates for similarities between fan practices and democracy, the subsequent discussion will elaborate on how the language used for discussion and information-seeking within these fan comments actually echoes and tends towards legitimizing certain fascist behavioral tendencies.

Using the “Sign Systems and Knowledge Building Tool” and the “Politics Building Tool” for discourse analysis, the combined question that may be asked of the comments section here is how fans are using language to privilege specific claims to knowledge and what kind of social goods are considered as right or moral (Gee *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis* 34-35). It may be observed in the case of User 1 that they resonate with the view that the all-powerful superhero figure, such as Captain America, must disregard institutions and follow an unquestioned path towards upholding the “American Dream.” User 5, at the same time, seems to be of the opinion that being alone in one’s viewpoint being indicates them being on the wrong side. Both these ideas showcase a disregard for opposing views and a preference for allowing a single figurehead to have unquestionable authority. The language thus used to

propagate such beliefs may indicate unconditional support for an all-mighty superhero figure in their quest towards crushing opposing viewpoints, be it in the form of the government, the masses, or any other institutions. Such expressions tend to showcase similarities to Peters' description of fascism, where he connects the phrase "might is right" as being championed by fascist thought (Peters 674). Fascism's central ideology cherishes and promotes the rule of charismatic, strong demagogues who possess unlimited power and authority that enables them to rule in whatever manner they deem fit (Peters 674). Similar ideologies are seemingly propagated within this fan discussion as well, with fans actively supporting the idea of bestowing a fictional character with such authority and power possibly on the basis of a perception that makes them believe that he can do no harm. It may be argued here that such fans might even be part of the section of the population that cherishes and supports outward superhero-like behavioral displays that are observed among many global political leaders.

5.2.2 Analyzing the Nationalist Iconography and Discourse in User 2's Creation:

The discourse on the fan art created by User 2 points towards quite similar aspects of typical fascist behavior once again. The character is shown to have barged past the guards despite not being allowed to enter. While it is not clear from the art piece what the newspaper says, it may be inferred that Captain America forcefully entered the general's office to demand certain information from him, highlighting and cherishing his brave, strongman audacity that does not stop him from entering places and asking questions he feels are necessary.

The final sentence in the art piece displays an ultranationalist tendency by showcasing Captain America as loyal only to the "Dream," which he does while holding the United States' flag. It may therefore be safe to assume that the fan creator hinted at the character's loyalty towards the "American Dream." Referring back to theories of how the superhero characters have historically been associated with nationalist iconography, in the case of this fan art, too, apart from the hints provided through the discourse, Captain America is shown standing next to an American flag. This is very similar to how Hassler-Forest describes his theory on the association between superheroes and nationalist iconography (Hassler-Forest "Superheroes and the Bush Doctrine" 21).

"Nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time" (Anderson 3). When fan-created products and discourse tend to represent an extreme focus and glorification of the idea of the nation and national identity, it showcases this ultranationalist obsession with nations even further. The concept of the nation being a community or a

fraternity that ultimately makes it possible for millions of people to die for such a limited imagining (Anderson 7). Resonances of this idea may also be visible in both these cases of fan representations of Captain America, and wherein there is clearly a focus on projecting the character's undying love for the nation. It may be argued that this projection stems from a need to glorify the character's willingness to go to any lengths, "no matter the consequences," and possibly even die for the cause of upholding and uplifting the cultural and political identity of the United States. This may further be visible when we take a closer look at User 1's comment, for instance, where they clearly write that in their interpretation, Captain America "would do anything" to keep the American Dream alive. Such expression of a very nation-centric devotion by a strong, masculine, and supposedly righteous superhero may be interpreted as resonating with an ultranationalist thought that happens to be one of the essential characteristics of modern-day fascist behavior, clearly visible through leaders like Trump.

6. CONCLUSION:

With the advent of the online digital world, media fandom around the superhero genre of content has not only emerged and manifested as a cultural phenomenon but has become much more pronounced over the years. While individual schools of thought tend to portray fandom as a lively and beautiful display of emotions towards particular media texts and narratives, the growing inequalities and toxicities within fan culture seem to suggest the emergence of an opposing kind of trend. Instances of “#Gamergate” in 2014, fan backlash against the 2016 *Ghostbusters* film reboot with an all-female cast, and the 2019 *Captain Marvel* backlash in the form of negative movie reviews after the first pre-release screenings, which targeted female lead, Brie Larson, for not smiling in the film posters, indicate the emergence of a trend wherein individual sections of fans use media platforms to express ideas, opinions and create products that promote a hierarchical, hegemonic and exclusive kind of behavior and ideology (Johnson 398; Abad-Santos “Captain Marvel and Brie Larson”). This sort of toxic cultural trend, which is seemingly common within online fan communities, may be observed through the use of certain types of discourse or language within fan creations and discussions that may tend to glorify and normalize such behavior. Such online discourse and practices incidentally on occasions may also have strong resemblances to a fascist way of thinking and behaving.

The resurgence of a fascist and extremist way of politics across the globe also tends to propagate such hierarchical, hegemonic, exclusive, and unidimensional types of ideologies. Along with its evident similarities to some aspects of the superhero narrative, it, therefore, becomes exciting and worthwhile to investigate whether or not discourses created through activities of superhero media fandom also resonates with similar ideologies and thinking. Therefore, this thesis was an attempt to analyze a selected section of online fan discourse in order to ascertain whether the language used by certain fans of the Captain America superhero genre in their fiction, art, and discussions were indicative of legitimizing or normalizing hierarchical, hegemonic, and fascist-like behavior. The problematic nature of fascist politics is quite apparent, with undue power and authority bestowed in the hands of a single figurehead who not only displays innumerable toxic qualities themselves but also dictates society to remain hegemonic and hierarchic in its core. If a particular section of fans indeed use language on various online media platforms that legitimize such politics of hierarchy, it indicates promotion and propagation of problematic ideologies through their own expressions and

creations. These expressions and creations, much like the films and other popular forms of superhero content, are also consumed by a significant group of people.

This particular research has indicated fascist legitimizing language used by fans of one specific superhero character within the narratives and discussions in the chosen corpus. The presence of narrative elements within the fan discourse that are common to the superhero genre, such as the association to nationalist iconography, the hypermasculinity of the superhero, and aspects like the revisionary and terrorist superhero, which may be specific to certain superhero films, were identified. Narrative elements of the “revisionary” and “terrorist superhero” have been theoretically identified as being present in particular superhero films different from the Captain America franchise. However, traces of such narrative elements are arguably visible even within fan made productions within a fan community of a different superhero franchise. This may indicate how such distinct aspects of superhero culture may be influential or popular enough among certain fans to have spread or trickled down to a Captain America fan community as well. Subsequently, the established similarities of these narratives, and ideological and aesthetic elements of the superhero genre to aspects of fascist discourse, further argue how certain types of online fan discourse are potentially highlighting and glorifying a problematic style of thinking. Some of the fan debates also indicated inter-fan conflicts that have been argued to be hierarchical and hegemonic.

When online discourse is seen to legitimize hierarchical, hegemonic tendencies with a specific focus on highlighting and glorifying hypermasculine traits, violence, war, and victimhood for a lost cultural and societal heritage, it indicates a nostalgia of supposedly lost past privilege and power of a specific section of contemporary fanboys (Click et al. 449). This supposed projection of disempowerment is quite common among fascist thinkers who tend to crave exclusivity, much like individual sections of fan communities. It is, therefore, necessary, in my opinion, to not just identify and acknowledge the presence of such problematic online discourse but also term it as being problematic and even fascist if necessary.

While it is true that the corpus for this research was limited and the findings from the analysis are certainly not absolute or universal, the presence of problematic discourse, however small it may be, is something to consider seriously. For starters, to investigate whether such resonances between superhero fan discourse and fascism is a common trend within online fan communities, further research with a more significant corpus is necessary. Through this thesis, I have attempted to show the presence of a certain kind of online discourse on a small scale. If such type of online fan discourse were to be a larger trend, it might even be possible to connect aspects of the rise of fascist politics to a more extensive section of people appreciating and

normalizing such thinking within online spaces and communities that contain a large number of possibly impressionable people.

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