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**The Antagonistic Anatomy of Anti-shippers: A Thematic Analysis**

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Master's Thesis

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July 27, 2023

THE ANTAGONISTIC ANATOMY OF ANTI-SHIPPER: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

BY

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THESIS

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Psychology

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### **Abstract**

Within the transformative fandom community is an ideologically-affiliated group known as anti-shippers, whose rhetoric contends that fictional interests are an indication of those held in reality. Anti-shippers focus solely on fictional material perceived to be sexual in nature and make frequent references to pedophilia. This rhetoric is used to justify harassment against individuals who do not share in their beliefs. As this population primarily operates on social media, this study was designed to conduct an exploratory investigation into themes gleaned from posts authored by anti-shippers on Twitter. Utilizing latent content analysis, a total of 187 posts from 222 unique users were evaluated, resulting in the identification of 19 themes. Anti-shippers were found to operate from an antagonistic in-group versus out-group position. Several topical themes, such as incest, pedophilia, and sexual grooming were observed. Additionally, anti-shippers exhibited a number of behavioral themes, to include hypervigilance, harassment, and preoccupation, while themes regarding beliefs and values, particularly disgust and morality were also noted. Though further research is required, these themes indicate a troubling pattern, suggesting that anti-shippers present a risk to the transformative fandom community, its members, and themselves.

*Keywords:* anti-shipper, transformative fandom, social media, online harassment

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### **The Antagonistic Anatomy of Anti-shippers: A Thematic Analysis**

As of 2020, social media has grown to become a significant part of daily life for approximately 3.6 billion people globally (Statista, 2022). In the United States (U.S.), social media usage has increased by 22% over 10 years, reaching 72% of the adult population in 2021 (Pew Research Center, 2021). For children and adolescents, 38% of 8-12 year olds and 84% of 13-18 year olds use social media, with an increasing amount of time spent on social media sites since the COVID-19 pandemic (Rideout et al., 2022). Though many of the negative effects of social media have been extensively documented, numerous benefits remain equally important (Cauberghe et al., 2020; Huang, 2020; McLoughlin et al., 2018; Keum et al., 2022). For example, its eponymous socialization aspect facilitates communication, hosts communities, and platforms creativity (Literat & Glăveanu, 2018).

One particular population known for such creativity is the transformative fandom community. Though its origins predate social media and even the Internet by several decades, transformative fandom has flourished under these technological advances (Bury et al., 2013; Pearson, 2010). As its name suggests, transformative fandom is defined as “the community constructed around people who create, share, and discuss fanworks based on existing media,” examples of which famously include fanart and fanfiction (Fiesler & Dym, 2020, p. 2). Those interested in a specific “fandom” (e.g., the Marvel Cinematic Universe fandom, the Sailor Moon fandom) find community with one another through a variety of websites that cater to fan-created material and discussion (Fiesler & Dym, 2020). Some of these sites provide space for people to engage with their fandoms, such as Tumblr and Twitter, while others are made by fans explicitly for fandom, such as Archive of Our Own (Fiesler & Dym, 2020; Lothian, 2012). These spaces serve not only to allow people to participate in their fandoms but have historically supported the exploration of transgressive ideas, from queer identity to sexual taboos (Floegel, 2021; Hellekson & Busse, 2014; Lothian, 2017). For some, fandom may be the only community where acceptance can be found.

While social media can have a profoundly positive impact for those seeking community, other aspects of social media can be decidedly negative. Numerous issues related to social media use have been identified, some highly visible, while others prove challenging to detect. Among the more noticeable variety is online harassment. While efforts have been made to raise awareness for and combat online harassment, the practices thereof remain an unfortunate factor when maintaining a presence on social media (Vogels, 2021). The harmful effects of online harassment can be severe and do not always discriminate between target and perpetrator, as it is not uncommon for them to be one in the same (Brewer & Kerlaske, 2015; Stevens et al., 2021). In contrast, a less apparent negative is the expectation of availability and subsequent ostracization that can occur for failing to respond in either a timely or desired manner (Ling, 2016; Throuvala et al., 2019; Winstone et al., 2021). Pressures to cultivate an online image often require the individual to spend a significant portion of time on social media, which consequently may result in a variety of unfavorable outcomes, e.g., individuals feeling compelled to only present an appealing persona, or decreases in reflective thinking related to the extensive usage of short messages to communicate (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Annisette & Lafreniere, 2017).

Fandom is no stranger to inter- and intracommunity conflict, wherein a history of dissent among fans has been a staple of its existence (Lothian, 2012). Previously, this behavior was often constrained to what was dubbed “fandom wank” – the term alluding to the self-gratifying and masturbatory nature of often pretentious, performative drama – which commonly manifested as “ship wars,” so-named to describe the antipathy between fans of different romantic relationships (ships) within a respective fandom (Lothian, 2012). In example, within the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) fandom, marked antagonism between fans of Angel and Buffy versus Spike and Buffy involved accusations of rape apologism and pedophilia – even the lead actress received death threats upon revealing her own ship preference (bubonicplague1348.e, 2003; Joan the Vampire Slayer, 2016; Stack, 2017; thetopher, 2015). However, as fandom has evolved and expanded, these negative behaviors have grown in

prevalence and severity (Romano, 2015, 2019). The criticism of ships has shifted from a matter of preference to moral judgments, where the dynamics in a fictional pairing are assumed to be endorsed in real life by those who partake (freedom-of-fanfic, 2018; Minkel & Klink, 2020). Alongside this novel approach is the method in which it is deployed – targeted harassment designed to at best, run an individual off social media and at worst, end their life (Dunstan, 2021).

Those who engage in this brand of targeted harassment in fandom are known as anti-shippers or antis, whose name stems from the fandom term “shipping” or the act of romantically pairing two or more fictional characters together (“Anti-Shipper - Fanlore,” 2022; Klink, 2016). Long-established tenets of fandom that expect fans to curate their own experience by not engaging with unwanted material (e.g., don’t like; don’t read, ship and let ship) are flouted by antis, creating a schism between themselves and those who ascribe to the dominant school of thought (Dym & Fiesler, 2020). As a fringe group within a relatively niche field of study, there is a paucity of research on anti-shippers, their rhetoric and practices. In combination with this dearth of academic examination, the high level of context-specific knowledge required presents a challenge when describing this population to a professional audience. At the same time, antis have had an observably negative impact on fandom and those within it, leading to the necessity of study to catalogue and analyze the themes and tactics thereof (Dym & Fiesler, 2020; Dym et al., 2022).

To develop the necessary contextual framework, this paper reviews the mechanisms of online harassment and some of the effects of social media on mental health, as the relationship between the two may play a role in facilitating an environment where anti-shippers thrive. A brief synopsis of the origins of anti-shippers is provided alongside an overview of the existing research. This exploratory study endeavors to expand understanding of anti-shippers and their behavior.

## Literature Review

### Online Harassment and Social Media

Online abuse is given a variety of labels, typically to either denote a specific type of abuse (e.g., cyberstalking, doxing, swatting, etc.) or when applied to certain populations (PEN America, 2022<sup>1</sup>). In example, “cyberbullying” tends to be used to describe online abuse directed at children and adolescents, even while the behaviors themselves have a significant overlap with those directed at adults and are so-labeled “online harassment” (PEN America, 2022). For the sake of brevity, all forms of abuse conducted via the Internet from this point on will be referred to as online harassment.

The virtual environment of the Internet provides a number of factors which set online harassment apart from traditional, in-person harassment – anonymity, access, and algorithms among them (Duggan, 2017; Hoffman, 2019; Vaillancourt et al., 2017). While anonymity and access are not exclusive to the Internet, said elements are eminently more available and exploitable virtually (Duggan, 2017; Vaillancourt et al., 2017). Anonymity stands as a powerful facilitator for online harassment, both in its capacity to embolden individuals and protect them from repercussions (Paciello et al., 2020; Runions & Bak, 2015; Suler, 2004). In allowing individuals to mask their identities and separate their online self from their real self, anonymity can lead to feelings of disinhibition and moral disengagement (Runions & Bak, 2015; Suler, 2004). Both operate as a means to loosen constraints on behavior, though the latter predominately manifests as antisocial conduct (Paciello et al., 2020). This protective barrier of anonymity also presents individuals with the opportunity to act with a measure of impunity. Indeed, anonymity makes online harassment incredibly difficult to prosecute; in some cases, individuals can file a Doe subpoena to a social media platform for identifying information, but

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<sup>1</sup> “Our name was conceived as an acronym: Poets, Essayists, Novelists (later broadened to Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, Novelists). Over time, as Membership expanded to include a more diverse range of people involved with words and freedom of expression, those categories no longer defined who could join. Today, the “PEN” in PEN America does not represent an acronym” (PEN America, 2023).

this largely depends on whether the plaintiff can meet a legal standard or if the acts were patently criminal in nature (Gleicher, 2008). Specifically, online harassment might qualify for federal charges in violation of Title 47 U.S.C § 223, which bars to usage of telecommunications devices to harass or send obscene materials, or under Title 18 U.S.C § 875 in the case of true threats (Bossler, 2020).

The Internet also enables access, affording people the ability to connect to others across the globe and share their personal details (boyd<sup>2</sup> & Ellison, 2007; Choi & Lee, 2017; Salter, 2018). However, this access can be a double-edged sword, as public presence on social media opens the proverbial gateway, offering online harassers the opportunity to engage in any number of abusive behaviors (Mesch, 2016; Salter, 2018). Even efforts to mitigate harassment may be thwarted by the access social media offers, e.g., harassers dodging blocks or bans that bar access by creating new accounts or engaging others to harass an individual on their behalf (The Cybersmile Foundation, n.d.; Niverthi et al., 2022).

Social media platforms provide a measure of moderation to prevent and intervene with online harassment, often through the use of algorithms designed to respond to human-initiated reports of abusive behavior (Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2021). Numerous critiques about the efficacy of these algorithms have been made, citing a myriad of issues to include discriminatory treatment and inability to parse coded terms and phrases (Common, 2020; Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2021). The two issues often tie into one another, wherein terms used are known to be discriminatory by either party but go unrecognized by the algorithm and are subsequently not penalized. The lack of effective moderation and any lasting consequences can bolster the existing sense of immunity brought on by anonymity, enabling bold behaviors that would be otherwise unlikely for that individual to engage in offline (Cotler et al., 2017; Zimmerman & Ybarra, 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> danah m. boyd uses all lowercase letters for her name.

## ***Twitter***

One of the more prominent social media platforms to be criticized for the efficacy of its efforts to curb online harassment is Twitter (Amnesty International, 2020; GLAAD, 2021; Tiku & Newton, 2015). Alongside the reported deficits of moderation, one of Twitter's key features may also contribute to its prevalence of online harassment: anonymity. Requiring only a valid email address to sign-up, users have a choice to remain anonymous (Twitter, 2021). According to the theory of the online disinhibition effect, anonymity serves as a dissociating agent, wherein individuals act with less restraint in accordance with a perception of safety, evading accountability through the compartmentalization of online and offline identities (Suler, 2004). Demonstrating this phenomenon, a study by Fox et al. (2015) tested the impact of anonymity using Twitter, assigning participants to one of two types of account: anonymous and identified, wherein the latter was stated to be tied to the participant. Participants were then asked to either create or share Twitter posts containing sexist material, the results of which saw participants with anonymous accounts to be significantly more likely to display sexist attitudes and engage in sexist behaviors than those with identified accounts (Fox et al., 2015).

Other aspects of Twitter may also influence attitudes and behaviors around online harassment. A study by Stubbs-Richardson et al. (2018) investigated users who engaged in victim blaming regarding three high-profile cases of rape and suicide, analyzing the content, follower count, and number of times the content had been shared. Accounts with a high (>551) number of followers were significantly more likely to engage in victim blaming, and victim blaming tweets were shared at a higher frequency than tweets supporting victims (Stubbs-Richardson et al., 2018). Though the researchers did not specify if any of the tweets used in the study were directed towards the victims or their families, harassment was observed to be part of the greater discussion (Stubbs-Richardson et al., 2018).

Indeed, this trend noted by Stubbs-Richardson and colleagues (2018) towards negative engagement has also been documented by other researchers, wherein Twitter has been seen to

foster animosity towards out-group members in a variety of areas and incite moral outrage (Brady et al., 2021; Rathje et al., 2021). Further research into the interplay of Twitter's operational model and online harassment may need to be conducted.

### ***Mental Health***

With a substantial amount of the world's population using social media, the effect these platforms have on mental health is an important question (Statista, 2022). Though an array of studies have been aimed at discerning whether social media has a positive or negative impact on mental health, results remain mixed and appear to depend on trends of usage (Course-Choi & Hammond, 2021; Coyne et al., 2020). Certain behaviors, such as vaguebooking (i.e., making ambiguous but serious posts to gain attention) are noted to have primarily negative outcomes, while factors like needing to belong and feelings of missing out were strongly associated with mental health symptoms of depression and anxiety (Berryman et al., 2018; Fabris et al., 2020). Still, social media can facilitate meaningful connections between people and provide social support, particularly among marginalized and vulnerable populations who may lack such opportunities in real life (Clark et al., 2019; Naslund et al., 2020). All the same, balancing the frequency of social media usage is of import. Spending a considerable amount of time on social media corresponds with an increased risk of developing problematic social media use (i.e., usage becomes disruptive to everyday life); however, individual factors function as more reliable predictors for this condition (Coyne et al., 2020; Stockdale & Coyne, 2020; Wartberg et al., 2021).

Research on problematic social media use itself struggles to determine cause, with one global study on adolescents finding strong correlations with poor mental, school, and social well-being, but was unable to discern the direction of the relationship (Boer et al., 2020). Some studies point towards difficulties with emotional regulation, impulse control, and stress as contributors towards problematic social media use in both adolescents and adults (Hussain & Wegmann, 2021; Wartbert et al., 2021). Importantly, problematic social media use has also been

linked to the perpetration of online harassment, which may signal a potential avenue for intervention (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2016; Kircaburun et al., 2018).

### **Fandom and Anti-shippers**

Modern fandom interactions share little resemblance to their origin, having migrated from different web platforms to host content or facilitate discussion, expanding access while increasing in population and popularity (Bury, 2017; Fiesler & Dym, 2020). Early fandoms operated primarily through word of mouth, presenting a relatively centralized hub for fans to interact in (Bury, 2017). As Internet usage became more widespread, fans began to disperse and create communities of their own using sites like LiveJournal; searchable and no longer reliant on individuals to know one another to participate, fandom flourished for several years (Bury, 2017). In the year 2007, without warning, LiveJournal permanently suspended some 500 accounts, many of which were fandom-centric, initiating an exodus from the site (Fiesler & Dym, 2020; McCullagh, 2007). During this era, the term “anti-shipper” described those in fandom who disliked particular ships, predominately expressing their distaste with other like-minded individuals within their own communities, though harassment was known to occur (“Anti-Shipper - Fanlore,” 2022).

Around 2009, a sizable portion of fandom settled on Tumblr, a microblogging platform that further decentralized communities (Fiesler & Dym, 2020). Over the years, Tumblr became famous for its fandom population, the simple interface and image hosting capabilities serving as significant draws (Hillman et al., 2014). Though a few theories exist to explain the development of the modern anti-shipper rhetoric, the general consensus is that it became mainstream sometime in 2016 (“Anti-Shipper - Fanlore,” 2022; freetofic, 2020). Preference was no longer respected, instead antis fixated on policing the “problematic,” the definition of which became increasingly strained and deeply preoccupied with ideas about pedophilia and incest (freedom-of-fanfic, 2017). In example, a ship between two adult characters with a gap in age may constitute as pedophilia because the older character knew the younger prior to them turning

eighteen, even if they had not been romantically linked at that time (freedom-of-fanfic, 2017). Meanwhile, anti-shippers may qualify a ship between unrelated childhood friends as incest, due to the two supposedly growing up together (freedom-of-fanfic, 2017).

Fans who enjoy fiction that antis deem “problematic” are targeted, subject to harassment both on- and offline, some of which has been catalogued (lizcourserants, 2020, 2021). In response, a number of fans began to refer to themselves as anti antis or pro-shippers, indicating their position regarding both the harassment of fans and the conflation of fiction with reality (“Anti-Shipper - Fanlore,” 2022). Though still a minority population in fandom, antis have proliferated on other social media sites, to include Twitter and TikTok – platforms which arguably better serve to amplify anti-shipper rhetoric, due in part to the negative focus of the content, which research has found to gain better traction than positive content (Schöne et al., 2021; TikTok, 2021).

Despite this growth, formal research on anti-shippers is markedly sparse. Only one study was found to focus specifically on this population, but even this was limited in scope, as the design only addressed a single fandom (Drouin, 2021). In her dissertation, Drouin (2021) surveyed 560 individuals within the *Voltron: Legendary Defender (VLD)* fandom, infamously known as the show that begat anti-shippers. The survey contained three parts: first, participants provided their definition of antis and any opinions or experiences about them, next, participants reported their feelings about *VLD* in a mix of open and closed-ended questions regarding the impact of antis on the fandom and show, negative and positive reactions to the finale and how those were expressed, and finally, demographic characteristics of the participants (Drouin, 2021). Perhaps salient to the aforementioned scarcity of research, Drouin (2021) attested to being subject to such extreme harassment from her population of study that she was unable to conduct her research in full. The majority of responses came from individuals who did not identify as anti-shippers but provided descriptions that Drouin (2021) found to be consistent within the surveyed populace and fandom at large. Harassment, morality, activism, and use of

loaded terms (e.g., pedophilia, child porn) were a few of the key themes Drouin (2021) uncovered. The few self-identified antis provided a contrasting perspective, expressing personal discomfort with certain ships, asserting antis are typically minors, and claiming that shipping normalizes pedophilia and incest, with little acknowledgment of the harassment documented by non-antis (Drouin, 2021). Nearly all respondents concurred that antis had a negative effect on fandom, with approximately 89% indicating antis had a “Very Negative” impact (Drouin, 2021, p. 79).

### **Current Study**

The goal of this exploratory study is to gain a greater understanding of the themes within anti-shipper rhetoric to inform the directions that ought to be taken for both research and treatment of anti-shippers. As evidenced in the Drouin (2021) study, the manner in which antis level accusations of pedophilia and incest tends to be divorced from the fictional content being discussed. The possibility for this same practice to occur in the therapeutic environment is worth considering, exhibiting the need for practitioners to have access to material which contextualizes this convoluted topic. Furthermore, cataloguing these themes may also provide insight into the origins of this phenomenon, uncovering patterns that contributed to the evolution and growth of anti-shipping. Any identified trends in behavior might be able to serve as an early warning that a client is at risk of being exposed to the harms posed by anti-shippers.

As noted, there is a profound dearth of studies conducted on anti-shippers, despite the duration of their presence within the transformative fandom community. As of the time of publication, the majority of research into anti-shippers is informal and accomplished by a mix of trained and untrained individuals within the community. These observations serve a crucial role in cataloguing the anti-shipper phenomenon but lack the rigor of formal analysis. In investigating this phenomenon, we hope to bring awareness to this niche but nevertheless important population. There is immense value in fandom as a community, a space in which fans can explore and engage out of mutual love (Dym & Fiesler, 2020). As attested in the Drouin

(2021) study, anti-shippers are a threat to this community, transforming these positive spaces into ones fraught with toxicity and harm.

## **Methods**

### ***Research Design***

The current study is exploratory and utilized an inductive content analysis design on publicly accessible content composed by anti-shippers on Twitter, which was systematically evaluated for thematic trends. All data was sourced from publicly published online content from various users on Twitter. Any personally identifiable information was deidentified to maintain anonymity. Further, an ethically-derived decision to use pseudo- rather than exact quotes as examples was enacted to further protect individuals from being identified.

### ***Materials***

Data collection was facilitated through the use of Twitter API (Applications Programming Interface). This tool was chosen as it enables broad, detailed queries and provides more accurately filtered results than the built-in search function Twitter offers all users.

### ***Procedure***

This study employed an inductive content analysis (ICA). ICA methods are utilized in a myriad of settings, to include those which derive data from Twitter. This design referenced Bengtsson (2016) and Thomas (2003) for its approach and procedure. Additionally, a study by Li et al. (2021) provided guidance for the usage of Twitter as a data collection source. For the purpose of this study, “post” referred to content published on Twitter, “tweet” referred to a singular post, and “threads” to a series of tweets in sequence. The operational definition of an anti-shipper is an individual involved in transformative fandom who perceives fictional interests as a direct reflection of real-life interests, which subsequently equates to endorsement, and justifies the harassment of those perceived to engage in said endorsement.

In order to collect data for analysis, a list of terms was input into Twitter API with a set date range of one week during the initial phase of our research, from June 5, 2022, to June 11,

2022. This time frame was chosen to ensure data saturation was reached, given the expectation that some tweets captured would not be authored by anti-shippers and would need to be filtered out and/or that some search terms would not pull an equal quantity of results. These terms were generated through a mixture of public polling and observed trends. Some examples include “proship,” “if u ship,” and “illegal ships”. The complete list is provided in the appendix. Queried results were cross-referenced back to the user profile to determine if the author met the operationalized description of an anti-shipper. As some of these search terms may return with posts created by individuals outside the target population and/or by individuals opposing anti-shippers, this confirmation was necessary to avoid artificially inflated results. If available, the published age of the author was annotated for ethical and demographic purposes. Only English-language posts were used. Once the tweets were filtered, screenshots were taken and compiled into a document to be transcribed. During the transcription process, smaller meaning units were highlighted from the text and patterns were annotated. To reduce subjectivity, transcription and the designation of meaning units was co-accomplished by the author alongside three undergraduate research assistants. Assistants were first provided with information regarding the target population and the aim of this study. Training was conducted virtually, consisting of transcription procedures, ICA, and a process walkthrough. Virtual meetings were held approximately once per month for four months to review and discuss analysis until all data had been transcribed. The original texts were then delegated to assistants who had not transcribed the text assigned to determine whether the remaining unmarked text held value. Patterns noted formed the basis of the open codes, wherein observations were discussed and consensus was reached on the validity of each proposed code. Furthermore, codes were checked for redundancy and/or to see if assimilation into an existing code was appropriate. From this point, the transcripts were disseminated to a second set of three assistants (two undergraduates, one graduate) to be coded, and upon completion, assistants reviewed the coding completed by their fellows, marking all disagreements. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion. The data

collected on the ages of the individuals was sorted into one of three categories: adult, minor, or unknown. This information was included as demographic data and was analyzed in conjunction with the content.

The next phase was to analyze the list of codes for themes, subthemes, or other patterns. The resulting themes were derived through latent content analysis; a method which proves effective for high-context material (Kleinheksel et al., 2020). This method is used to derive the underlying meaning of text, which not only served the aim of this research, but was necessary, given the linguistic complexity of the content (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Like the open codes, these themes were subject to refinement for conciseness and clarity. The frequency of each theme was calculated and analyzed to discern patterns and/or trends. Links between themes were also examined to aid in the development of the thematic framework. Both expected patterns and potential new insights were detailed, functioning as an outline for future research.

### **Data Analysis**

This section describes the analytic processing of the data collected on anti-shippers. As explained in the previous section, the process of refining the raw anti-shipper posts first into meaning units and then into codes was accomplished through analyzing the content for patterns, which was then subject to group discussion to determine inclusion or exclusion and required consensus to proceed. Each anti-shipper post was coded for the presence or absence of an established code. Each post was reviewed and marked for disagreements, after which discrepancies were resolved through discussion. To test intercoder reliability, Krippendorff's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) was employed. This test is known for its flexibility and ability to incorporate more than two coders (De Swert, 2012; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Finalized themes specific to anti-shippers were explored and future directions of study were proposed. Themes related to mental health were also noted and discussed for their clinical relevance.

Although the bulk of this study consisted of the qualitative analysis of these themes, the rate of their occurrence provided our quantitative data. Theme frequency was tabulated, and the

percentages are presented. Information provided by this analysis served to bolster understanding of the rhetoric being utilized by anti-shippers. The data collected on anti-shipper age group was analyzed in this same manner.

The two primary age groups of adult and minor were analyzed against each theme to determine if a relationship could be observed. This was examined by employing the chi-square statistic. Themes were individually assessed within age groups, then age groups were collectively assessed between themes. Nondisclosure of age was expected and therefore, known ages were compared against unknown ages to determine whether nondisclosure was related to a particular theme.

### **Intercoder reliability analysis**

Coding was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, three research assistants independently coded the entire data set of posts ( $N = 187$ ), using the 19 themes described below. Each post was coded for the presence or absence of a theme or marked as unsure. Given the contextual complexity of the subject, disagreements were expected. For all but three themes (child/pedophilia, grooming, and incest), reliability was poor (Krippendorff's  $\alpha < .80$ ). Assistants cited lack of familiarity with the subject and difficulties interpreting context as challenges. During the second phase, the assistants met to address discrepancies with the aim to reach an agreement. These resolution discussions yielded significantly better results, whereupon the majority of themes achieved 100% consensus. Those that did not were still calculated to have an extremely high reliability (Krippendorff's  $\alpha > .95$ ). All choices were made solely by the research assistants as the author relinquished his authority to impose a final decision to avoid biasing the results. Reliability for individual themes is tabulated below.

**Table 1**

#### *Intercoder Reliability Analysis Using Krippendorff's $\alpha$*

Theme	Pre-resolution	Post resolution
antis are normal	.2494	1
child/pedophilia	.8018	1

Theme	Pre-resolution	Post resolution
culture	.1381	1
disgust/weird	.5272	1
fiction	.6469	1
grooming	.8676	1
harm	.4441	1
hypervigilance	.2698	1
incest	.8093	1
legality	.7393	1
morality	.3381	.9926
porn/sexual interests	.4491	.9891
preoccupation/self-oriented/policing	.0068	1
pro-ship stereotypes	.2444	.9854
queer identification	.4451	.9764
rejection of contradictions	.5208	1
sexism/ageism	.0566	1
suicide baiting/harassment	.4523	.9923
urge treatment	.6656	1

*Note.* An SPSS macro developed by Andrew Hayes (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007) was used to calculate *Krippendorff's a*.

## Results

During the initial phase of data collection, an event meriting capture occurred; posts were queried based on search terms related to the event and were not constrained to the June 5, 2022 to June 11, 2022 time frame. In sum, 39 posts demonstrating the harassment of actress Grace van Dien by anti-shippers were added, totaling 187 posts from 222 unique users in the final dataset. Some posts consisted of discussion threads between individuals identified as anti-shippers and those who were not, totaling 189 unique anti-shippers and 33 unique non-antis.

### Thematic analysis

The preliminary content analysis generated 19 themes: antis are normal, child/pedophilia, culture, disgust/weird, fiction, grooming, harm, hypervigilance, incest, legality, morality, porn/sexual interests, preoccupation/self-oriented/policing, pro-ship stereotypes, queer identification, rejection of contradictions, sexism/ageism, suicide baiting/harassment, and urge treatment. Further analysis determined the frequency of

occurrence of each code to be varied, ranging from 79.14% to 4.81%. Frequencies were calculated against the total  $N = 187$ .

The data collected on age demographics uncovered a nearly even split between anti-shippers ( $n = 189$ ) who identified as adults (38.09%,  $n = 72$ ) and minors (38.62%,  $n = 73$ ). However, further analysis revealed that a significant majority of adult anti-shippers (83.33%) were <23 years old. The remaining anti-shippers (23.28%,  $n = 44$ ) were of unknown age. Anti-shippers whose ages were listed ranged from 13-29, with an average age of 18.04 ( $SD = 3.01$ ). Approximately one third (32.27%) of anti-shippers did not provide a specific age, instead labeling themselves as ‘minor,’ or ‘adult,’ with some adults giving a nonspecific age (e.g., 20s). The ages of non-anti individuals (14.8%,  $N = 222$ ) were not recorded. The frequency of occurrence for each theme within the three age groups is included in the table below.

**Table 2**

*Theme Frequency per Age Group*

Theme	Minor		Adult		Unknown		Full Sample	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
antis are normal	42	42.86	36	36.73	20	20.41	98	51.85
child/pedophilia	35	37.63	39	41.94	19	20.43	93	49.21
culture	6	25	11	45.83	7	29.20	24	12.70
disgust/weird	52	45.22	41	35.65	22	19.13	115	60.85
fiction	13	36.11	15	41.67	8	22.22	36	19.05
grooming	5	41.67	5	41.67	2	16.67	12	6.35
harm	5	22.73	12	54.55	5	22.73	22	11.64
hypervigilance	16	30.77	27	51.92	9	17.31	52	27.51
incest	17	33.33	17	33.33	17	33.33	51	26.98
legality	7	58.33	1	8.33	4	33.33	12	6.35
morality	28	37.84	28	37.84	18	24.32	74	39.15
porn/sexual interests	12	31.58	20	52.63	6	15.79	38	20.11
preoccupation/self-oriented/policing	61	41.22	50	33.78	37	25	148	78.31
pro-ship stereotypes	32	40	28	35	20	25	80	42.33
queer identification	2	12.5	7	43.75	7	43.75	16	8.47
rejection of contradictions	11	39.29	11	39.29	6	21.43	28	14.81
sexism/ageism	4	44.44	4	44.44	1	11.11	9	4.76
suicide baiting/harassment	28	40.58	26	37.68	15	21.74	69	36.51
urge treatment	3	25	6	50	3	25	12	6.35

*Note.*  $N = 189$ . Individuals were on average 18.04 years old ( $SD = 3.01$ ).

The themes were subsequently divided into four thematic categories: topical, behavioral, beliefs/values, and in-group versus out-group. Of the four categories, behavioral was the most prevalent, wherein themes contained therein occurred in 165.24% ( $N = 187$ ) of posts. Topical was second at 135.83% ( $N = 187$ ), followed by belief/value at 124.06% ( $N = 187$ ). In-group versus out-group was least prevalent (103.74%,  $N = 187$ ), however this category comprised the fewest themes. While each theme possessed a distinct quality, several exhibited a marked connectivity with one another. This occurred both within thematic categories and between the individual themes sorted therein.

The six topical codes included incest, pedophilia, grooming, porn/sexual interests, fiction, and culture. Posts coded as incest were those which either explicitly or implicitly mentioned incest as defined by anti-shippers. Within this dataset, this definition almost exclusively did not involve characters who were biologically related, instead referring to characters who shared an adoptive relationship, a mentor relationship, or characters who were versions of one another from alternate universes. Similarly, posts were coded for pedophilia for explicit or implicit mention of pedophilia – to include usage of the word ‘child’ – as defined by anti-shippers. Examples of this definition included relationships between adult characters and minor (i.e., below age 18) characters, between characters assumed to be 17 and 20 years old respectively, and two adult characters wherein the elder knew the younger prior to them becoming an adult. Additionally, pedophilia was often referenced without prompting and frequently equated with being a pro-shipper. This equivalence encompassed both engagement with fictionalized depictions of pedophilia per the anti-shipper definition, and assertions, implied or explicit, that pro-shippers are pedophiles. The term ‘grooming’ was ostensibly used to describe the practice of sexual grooming (i.e., the deliberate process of developing trust and desensitizing sexual content for the purpose of making sexual contact) but was either in reference to speculation regarding fictional relationship dynamics or attributed to behaviors assumed to be exhibited by pro-shippers (Winters et al., 2020). Posts marked for porn and

sexual interests involved both explicit mentions of pornographic material, fictional sexual content, and sexual interests as well as implied sexual interests (e.g., pedophilia). The code of fiction described posts that acknowledged the fictional nature of the subjects being discussed. Culture was coded for posts addressing either real-world cultures (e.g., Chinese culture) or fandom culture.

Fives codes were categorized as behavioral: preoccupation/self-oriented/policing, hypervigilance, harassment and suicide baiting, rejection of contradictions, and urge treatment. Preoccupation/self-oriented/policing was the most complex and frequently occurring code, describing behaviors that demonstrated a significant overlap, necessitating its broader scope. Preoccupation was defined as excessive involvement in anti-shipping and fixation on ideas (e.g., bringing up pedophilia unprompted), self-orientation described egocentric perspectives (e.g., “if I was a fictional character, people would ship me with my abuser,” “as a minor, I feel uncomfortable that someone could ship me”), while policing referred to intentional acts to seek out and denounce disapproved individuals and/or material and urge others to disavow and denounce the same. Posts coded for hypervigilance referenced anxiety and/or fear over the need to be aware of who or what an individual was following or sharing. Suicide baiting and harassment was coded for both engagement in and endorsement of said behaviors. Posts were coded for rejection of contradictions when an anti-shipper refused to acknowledge an argument refuting their own, to include differing perspectives. Within the dataset, arguments could be presented by another individual or brought up by the anti-shipper themselves. Urge treatment denoted a post which suggested or demanded others receive mental health treatment, which was exclusively due to their fictional interests.

The five codes under the belief/value category were morality, legality, harm, disgust/weird, and sexism/ageism. Morality was coded when posts contained moral judgments, moral superiority, and/or when fictional interests were implicated as a reflection of morality, whether positive or negative. The legality code was used for mentions of laws, age of consent, or

material considered to be illegal. All content involving this code was in reference to fictional material and/or characters. The code harm was used when posts referenced harm as a repercussion of fiction and/or assertions that fiction has caused harm. For the former, this included notions that fiction “normalizes” abuse in real life or that being a pro-shipper is harmful. The code disgust/weird was the second most frequently occurring, encompassing posts that expressed explicit or implicit disgust and/or when ideas, groups, or individuals were described as weird or freakish. Sexism/ageism was the least frequent code and was marked when posts contained sexist and/or ageist language. This was predominately directed at pro-shippers in the dataset.

Finally, three codes were categorized as in-group versus out-group: antis are normal, proship stereotypes, and queer identification. Posts asserting that anti-shippers are “normal,” typically in contrast to pro-shippers and/or references to the anti-shipper stance being ‘correct’ qualified as antis are normal and occurred a little over half the time. Posts that used generalizing statements to describe pro-shippers, including appearance, identity, behaviors, and interests, were coded as pro-ship stereotypes. Lastly, queer identification was used when posts referenced a queer identity and/or the act of gatekeeping queer material (i.e., preventing those who are suspected of or do not possess identity credentials matching that of the material in question). The table below provides examples of anti-shipper posts that correspond with each of the 19 themes.

### **Table 3**

#### *Qualitative Examples of Themes*

Theme	Example quote
antis are normal	<p>“Pro-shipping is shipping ANYTHING from abusive ships to incest and pedophilia. ‘Antis’ are just normal people who know that that’s disgusting” (age 16)</p> <p>“I don’t understand how people can admit to being a pro-shipper and not feel guilty. Like how FUCKED up in the head do you have to be to admit that.” (age 23)</p>

Theme	Example quote
child/pedophilia	<p>“She was about 17 when she died, which still makes her a minor and Eddie is 20 years old, so he's an adult. That makes the ship pedophilic.” (age 18)</p> <p>“Dude, but being a pro-shipper means you're fine and/or support minors being shipped with ADULTS. That's pretty disgusting. People like you are chronically online degenerates.” (age unknown)</p>
culture	<p>“Pro-shitters will be like “listen to Chinese people and try to see things from a Chinese cultural perspective for once!! 🤔” when it comes to defending incest, but not when a character is blatantly lesbian-coded.” (age unknown)</p> <p>“<i>Fujoshi</i><sup>1</sup> are women that're either fans/creators of works that mainly surround male/male romance, sometimes if not usually to a rather creepy and fetishy amount.” (age 27)</p>
disgust/weird	<p>“PLEASE! MOST OF THE TIME IT'S LIKE 25+ YEAR OLDS OR ANON ACCOUNTS LIKE, LITERALLY GROWN ASS HUMANS BE THINKING INCEST AND ILLEGAL SHIPS ARE HOT, LIKE?? EXCUSE ME, WHAT?!” (age 17)</p> <p>“A PRO-SHITTER JUST FOLLOWED ME!! GAGGING, PUKING, THROWING UP ALL OVER THE FLOOR! GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM ME!” (age 16)</p>
fiction	<p>“What? Y'all are mad that I'm right. It's you that can't think logically. Fiction does affect reality; fiction comes from reality and reality exists.” (age 17)</p> <p>“Incest is real and selfcest<sup>2</sup> isn't far from it. I know it can't happen in real life, but it's about fucking someone who's connected with you. But okay, read or watch stories with disgusting things and then use your whole FICTION argument to defend your love of incest.” (age 16)</p>
grooming	<p>“Please mass-report them to stop the romanticization of grooming and incest. And also repost this so others can know.” (minor)</p> <p>“The mindset that minor/adult ships are okay is probably the cause for a good portion of internet grooming.” (age 15)</p>
harm	<p>“The reason problematic ships can be harmful is because they can normalize/glorify harmful behaviors. This can be especially harmful for those who're already vulnerable to these behaviors.” (age unknown)</p> <p>“Literally had to unfollow someone for incest. To top it off, they admitted to being a pro-shipper. That's literally so fucking harmful to people, like what the FUCK is wrong with you?!” (age 23)</p>
hypervigilance	<p>“If y'all see me follow someone drawing this sort of stuff or supporting it (to your knowledge), including on a side account, please let me know!! If anyone following ME supports that sort of thing, please step back, ask yourself why/research about it, then either unfollow or dump it &amp; stay.” (age 21)</p>

Theme	Example quote
incest	<p>“I just found out one of my favorite writers is a fucking pro-shipper/nsfw account. I feel sick.” (age unknown)</p> <p>“Miles is saying shipping Kaeya/Diluc is not okay. It's never okay to ship incest. All those normal and decent ships in Genshin are always there to ship, yet that you wanna go out of your way to ship incest speaks volumes on what kinda person someone is, don't you think?” (age 18)</p> <p>“Shipping siblings is fucking disgusting! Thinking it's okay to do it JUST BECAUSE they're not blood related is even more gross because it's insulting! My siblings are still my siblings, blood or not. I fucking hate pro-shippers! [image of male anime character giving a thumbs up and containing the text “kill yourself”]” (age 19)</p>
legality	<p>“I don't know if you know guys but explaining yourself with "creating an alternate universe setting where they're of similar age" is just admitting your "ship" is wrong, because you needed to change something so it'll be legal.” (age unknown)</p> <p>“Because most pro-shippers ship children with adults, so of course minors will hate it? And then, those children don't even look like teenagers, but a literal child? How's that even legal? Just imagine yourself as a child and people sexualizing you with other children. Would you enjoy it?” (age 16)</p>
morality	<p>“If you're a pro-shipper/pedo/lolicon<sup>3</sup>/shotacon<sup>4</sup>, I hope you end up going to the most agonizing area of hell for eternity.” (age unknown)</p> <p>“[Pro-shippers] are basically people that ship brother/sister father/daughter minor/adult, and literally anything possible without any boundaries and morals.” (age 20)</p>
porn/sexual interests	<p>“I'd also like to use this opportunity to remind everyone that if you are a pro-shipper, or unironically ship/sexualize real people, you're fucking weird and I want nothing to do with you. 😬 Block me and chug a cup of lighter fluid please.” (age 19)</p> <p>“Pro-shipping is basically an excuse to jack off to adults raping young children, but instead it's fictional, which even tho it's not real, you're still thinking about it. These people are STILL getting sexually aroused by CHILDREN.” (age 15)</p>
preoccupation/self-oriented/policing	<p>“So, I had to delete the thread exposing pro-ship artists for mental health reasons, as I was receiving a lot of hate comments that weren't doing me any good. I hope you guys understand.” (age unknown)</p> <p>“Hey @GraceVanDien you're not a fucking princess. Take responsibility for your actions. Keep fooling</p>
preoccupation	

Theme	Example quote
	around, go ahead. But your actions are numbered. Fucking weirdo.” (age 17)
self-oriented	<p>“I don't think it's 'overreacting' in my opinion, because as a minor, it's really gross to me to ship a potential minor with an adult. Even if she's not actually confirmed to be a minor, it's better to be safe than sorry if you ask me.” (age 14)</p> <p>“I'm like, extremely disappointed in some of my mutuals for following other incest, pro-shipper people, like why??? Can't you obviously see what their content is? I don't care if you like their art style, JUST DON'T FOLLOW PEOPLE LIKE THAT!! It's so easy. 🙄” (minor)</p>
policing	<p>“Do you remember seeing them enjoying any art from pro-shippers? That they follow several pro-shippers is already a reason to add them to the list, but I need concrete proof.” (age unknown)</p> <p>“Hey!! Super sorry to @ you this on a post; your DMs are closed! You're following a pro-shipper who ships shimadacest<sup>5</sup>. Their username is [redacted]”. (age 20)</p>
pro-ship stereotypes	<p>“Basically, pro-shippers are Very Bad and it seems a lot of them want to jump to “touch grass” as self-defense. Just stop being problematic, it's not hard to control yourself, people.” (minor)</p> <p>“Let's pretend y'all pro-shippers are sexualizing kids and making porn of them just to deal with some kind of trauma, and that this is not just some stupid lie. You're basically posting dream material for pedophiles, publicly on the internet, and then get mad when pedophiles interact with you?” (age 18)</p>
queer identification	<p>“Just say you fetishize mlm<sup>6</sup> and leave. I'm literally mlm. Femme presenting / cis woman who ship toxic ships are weird, especially if it's a racist. Like, you just like the ship because both men are attractive and white.” (age 20)</p> <p>“Friendly reminder that pro-shipping isn't a valid coping mechanism! How the fuck will remembering your traumas help you cope, you fucking fag?” (minor)</p>
rejection of contradictions	<p>“I'm done with you guys. Gonna do a spam block and clear my shit lmao. Pro-shippers just repeat the same points over and over again and fail to actually understand how fetishizing can affect people.” (age 18)</p> <p>“It's proven by professionals that fiction doesn't hurt people. You're using the video game argument that was disproven a long time ago. You're just looking for a reason to be toxic to people over fiction you hate.” “Erm, checkmate: Then why do people sometimes cry over movies if it's fiction? Erm, why does the Slenderman<sup>7</sup> case exist?” (age 18)</p>

Theme	Example quote
sexism/ageism	<p>[The] majority of Eddie/Chrissy shippers are heterosexual cis white women. They took that scene and ran with it when there was nothing to run with #edussyhatespace.” (age 23)</p> <p>“This is a CHILD! [photo of then-25 year old actress Grace van Dien]” (adult)</p>
suicide baiting/harassment	<p>“You and every jilco<sup>8</sup> in your comment section are an infection that needs to be wiped out immediately.” (age 18)</p> <p>“Yeah, one time a big artist blocked me because I was making fun of a pro-shipper in their comments. I didn’t think anything bad about them until I got blocked, but I genuinely think they endorse pro-ship now. So, it can really be really telling in some scenarios.” (age 19)</p> <p>“I love how pro-shippers will say weird shit, but suddenly I’m bad for telling them to go drink drain cleaner.” (age 18)</p> <p>“Bro, one of my fav TikTok mutuals just deleted all their posts and made an "apology" post where they came out as a pro-shipper. But then they said they didn't intend on apologizing for being pro-ship? I hope they kill themselves.” (age 16)</p> <p>“Pro-shippers die challenge (attainable) (recommended).” (age unknown)</p>
urge treatment	<p>“As a survivor, if your therapist is telling you that writing rape fic is okay, then you need to get a new therapist. I’m so tired of pro-shippers saying their therapist told them to. If anything, your therapist is not doing their God damn job.” (age 18)</p> <p>“I’m mostly going off the number of likes of these, which is pretty awful. You're aware that if you consume this sort of content, you're setting yourself up for needing a self-control check later on, right? In other words, you should probably seek help for it. This isn't healthy or justifiable in any way, it's just really concerning.” (adult)</p>

*Note.* <sup>1</sup>*Fujoshi* (lit. rotten girl) is a Japanese term to denote women who enjoy male/male romance; a reclaimed pejorative which used to describe women who enjoyed "fantasies of sex that [were] not productive of children" (Galbraith, 2011, p. 212).

<sup>2</sup>Selfcest is a portmanteau of self and incest and describes ships between individuals who may be clones or versions of themselves from another timeline or universe.

<sup>3</sup>Lolicon is an abbreviation of Lolita complex and describes a type of art style that emphasizes cute, childlike traits in girls and may or may not be pornographic, individuals who enjoy said style, and individuals who specifically enjoy pornographic depictions of childlike girls.

<sup>4</sup>Shotacon is an abbreviation of Shotaro complex, and describes the same, with boys in place of girls.

<sup>5</sup>Shimadacest is a ship name for Hanzo and Genji Shimada, two brothers from the videogame, Overwatch.

<sup>6</sup>mlm is short for men who love men, which encompasses men who are gay, bisexual, pansexual, et cetera.

<sup>7</sup>Slenderman is a character from an Internet meme; in the case referenced, two mentally ill 12 year old girls lured a friend into the forest and stabbed her 19 times in order to appease Slenderman.

<sup>8</sup>Jilco is a ship name for Jinx and Silco from the Netflix series, Arcane; Jinx and Silco share a found family relationship.

The two age categories of minor and adult were analyzed in conjunction with each theme to determine the frequency of occurrence within each group. Although five themes – grooming, incest, morality, rejection of contradictions, and sexism/ageism – were observed with equal frequency between either group, the majority of codes appeared to demonstrate notable differences, especially after removing the unknowns from each calculation. To fully account for all data, frequency rates for the presence of themes among age-unknown anti-shippers were also tabulated. The results indicated a number of themes had a high proportion of occurrence among age-unknown antis. To determine if the relationship between age group and theme was statistically significant, a chi-square analysis was conducted. The first analysis assessed the relationship between minor, adult, and theme, whereupon the results indicated no statistical significance within any individual themes. A chi-square analysis conducted between groups also found no statistical significance,  $\chi^2(18, n = 763) = 20.97, p < .05$ . The second chi-square analysis compared theme against age-known and age-unknown. This too, yielded no statistical significance within or between groups,  $\chi^2(18, n = 989) = 13.73, p < .05$ . Tables for both minor versus adult and known versus unknown are included below.

**Table 4***Chi-square Analysis for Known Age Groups*

Theme	Minor	Adult	$\chi^2$
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	
antis are normal	42	36	.54
child/pedophilia	35	39	.17
culture	6	11	1.41
disgust/weird	52	41	1.45
fiction	13	15	.12
grooming	5	5	.0004
harm	5	12	2.79
hypervigilance	16	27	2.67
incest	17	17	.001
legality	7	1	4.58
morality	28	28	.002
porn/sexual interests	12	20	1.9
preoccupation/self-oriented/policing	61	50	1.24
pro-ship stereotypes	32	28	.32
queer identification	2	7	2.71
rejection of contradictions	11	11	.0009
sexism/ageism	4	4	0
suicide baiting/harassment	28	26	.1
urge treatment	3	6	.96

Note.  $df = 3$ ,  $a = 7.815$ ,  $p < .05$ .

**Table 5***Chi-square Analysis for Known versus Unknown Age Groups*

Theme	Known	Unknown	$\chi^2$
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	
antis are normal	78	20	.33
child/pedophilia	74	19	.31
culture	17	7	.54
disgust/weird	93	22	.90
fiction	28	8	.01
grooming	10	2	.26
harm	17	5	.00
hypervigilance	43	9	.91
incest	34	17	3.18
legality	8	4	.75
morality	56	18	.09
porn/sexual interests	32	6	1.07
preoccupation/self-oriented/policing	111	37	.39
pro-ship stereotypes	60	20	.21
queer identification	9	7	3.93

Theme	Known	Unknown	$\chi^2$
rejection of contradictions	22	6	.03
sexism/ageism	8	1	.70
suicide baiting/harassment	54	15	.05
urge treatment	9	3	.03

Note.  $df = 3$ ,  $a = 7.815$ ,  $p < .05$ .

## Discussion

This exploratory study investigated the anti-shipper phenomenon with the aim to develop greater understanding of this ideologically-affiliated group through a systematic analysis of its themes. Within that, we sought to examine the relationship between anti-shippers and age, factors which may facilitate their harassment of others, and whether this phenomenon presents a mental health risk to individual anti-shippers and the community. Overall, we found that anti-shippers exhibit rhetoric, behaviors and beliefs that are consistent with our theoretical framework. Moreover, we uncovered several themes novel to the existing research on anti-shippers, while also demonstrating consistency among established themes found therein. A number of thematic patterns noted by Drouin (2021) were reflected in the results, as were perceptions that anti-shippers skew young. Additionally, these findings make evident that the anti-shipper phenomenon has persisted for at least seven years at the time of this publication, based on its earlier documentation in 2016 within the *VLD* fandom (Drouin, 2021). Furthermore, as the present study did not focus on a specific fandom, these results suggest that anti-shipper behavior and rhetoric is generalizable to the broader transformative fandom community.

The findings of this study were similar to those of Drouin (2021), wherein beliefs, behavior and rhetoric attributed to anti-shippers by observers were reflected in our analysis of the population. Participants in her study described anti-shippers as being driven by a sense of moral purity and personal disgust, who use “loaded terms” as a weapon to enforce their stance, often through the use of harassment, with a particular fixation on the concept of pedophilia (Drouin, 2021, p. 65). Our findings mirror these same assertions, which confirms the accuracy of

the observations her participants had made about anti-shippers. Specifically, the presence of these themes in both data derived directly from anti-shippers and from observations made of said population indicates that participant perceptions of antis had validity. Further, as the bulk of understanding regarding this population has been rooted in community observations, such confirmations are meaningful to those who have been negatively affected by the presence of anti-shippers in fandom. The replication of themes bolsters the credibility of our thematic framework, ultimately aiding the development of our understanding of this phenomenon.

Our analysis of age demographics builds upon this knowledge, finding that anti-shippers tend to be adolescents or emerging adults (< 23 years old). The expectation that anti-shippers would skew young was based on community observations, including those presented in Drouin's (2021) research. Though our sample data confirmed this assumption, we thought to investigate further to discern if being a minor or an adult had any impact on how an individual participated in anti-shipping. Given the nature of anti-shippers' beliefs and behaviors, particularly the intense focus on youth, we might assume that minor-aged anti-shippers would be more likely to demonstrate certain themes related to being an adolescent, such as pedophilia or self-orientation. However, our analysis determined that age was unrelated to any particular theme, indicating anti-shippers engage with the observed beliefs, rhetoric, and behaviors regardless of being a minor or adult. Such results only yield further questions. A potential theory is that adult anti-shippers have been antis since they were minors, and therefore their adherence to the ideology has carried through into adulthood – the persistence of the phenomenon since 2016 lending credence to the idea. Whether this sustained dedication implicates the strength of the ideology or the control its members exercise over the group is worth exploring.

***“being mean to freaks that condone pedophilia, incest, and abuse”***

Our analysis of anti-shipper posts identified 19 themes which form the basis of our framework regarding anti-shipper behaviors, beliefs, and rhetoric. These themes were then grouped into four categories which serve to label themes with key factors and are not meant to

be restrictive. Rather, themes were broadly interconnected, typifying the complexity of the subject. At its root basis, anti-shippers operate from an in-group versus out-group perspective. Many of the themes that follow are explained by this orientation. The inductive design first uncovered topical themes; these focused primarily on specific subjects and were predominately used to express personal dislike and antagonize members of the out-group. Beliefs and values inspired the use of these topics, as well as in-group/out-group hostility, while also fueling subsequent behaviors. Enmity towards the out-group was directed both outwardly and inwardly, manifesting within groups and on an individual level.

Of all topical themes, pedophilia was the dominant subject among them. As previously articulated, the application of this term was broad and inaccurate, and often leveled against members of the out-group (e.g., pro-shippers). Though the context exclusively regarded fictional characters and ships, anti-shippers rarely used the term pedophilia to describe existing ships between prepubescent children and adults, instead typically referring to pedophilia in one of two ways. First, as the fictional trope commonly referred to as ‘underage’ (i.e., ships between minor and adult characters) and second, the actual paraphilia. These two were largely connected, whereupon antis assumed an interest in underage fiction was an indication of attraction to real children. Further, antis attributed interest in the trope to pro-shippers to such an extent that for anti-shippers, the term pro-shipper became synonymous with underage fiction, shifting the definition from its origin as an ideological stance and identity to a descriptive noun. To point, “[p]ro-ship = ship between an adult and a minor”. Consequently, this conflation of fictional interest and actual pedophilia was also often ascribed to pro-shippers. Exemplifying this, one anti identifying as a minor wrote: “IF YOU SHIP A MINOR WITH AN ADULT, THAT MEANS YOU’RE A PRO-SHIPPER AND A PEDOPHILE”. As with pedophilia, incest was likewise painted with a broad, inaccurate brush to describe relationships between characters antis perceived to be solely familial in nature. Although accusations of supporting actual incest were observed, anti-shippers more frequently implicated that fictional incest was somehow harmful.

The vector of harm was seldom explained. Though some vaguely alluded to incest survivors being psychologically triggered by being exposed to fictional incest, one anti gave a more explicitly damning rationale, asserting pro-shippers believe “incest ... is healthy ... basically a soon-to-be groomer.”

Understandably, such accusations make for a powerful weapon. Numerous studies indicate language which evokes moral emotions, such as shame, disgust, guilt, compassion, and anger can have a powerful effect on people (Brady et al., 2020; Luttrell et al., 2019). Both incest and pedophilia are inarguably terms which evoke strong emotional responses. Consequently, anti-shippers are able to capitalize on these reactions, serving multiple purposes. To most, being against pedophilia or incest is a generally unassailable position. By removing the fictional context and using moral-emotional language, antis feign a position of moral superiority. This conviction is then reinforced when the tweets anti-shippers post utilizing this technique gain traction; a process aided and abetted by both human reactions to moral-emotional language and Twitter’s own algorithms which promote negative engagement (Brady et al., 2020; Rathje et al., 2021). An additional benefit of this moral-emotional language is its use as justification for anti-shippers’ beliefs and behaviors. The express focus on topics like pedophilia and incest share a great deal of overlap with the theme of disgust, itself a moral emotion. For an anti-shipper, having personal disgust towards a ship is not simply a matter of preference; the dislike must be morally justified to be valid. Calling the ship pedophilic or incestuous allows the anti the freedom to dislike the ship, but from a higher, more ostensibly noble position. Unsurprisingly, a trend among anti-shippers is to invoke these moral arguments against rival ships, effectively manufacturing a justification for ship preference that was never necessary to begin with while also serving to disparage fans of rival ships. To uphold the morally superior position, antis cannot be passive. After enmeshing fictional and real-life interests, then imposing that belief upon the out-group, anti-shippers create a justification to confront these so-called pedophiles, incest supporters, or would-be rapists through the use of harassment and suicide baiting.

“[R]emember kids it’s always morally correct to tell a pro-shipper to die,” reads a tweet written by a 14 year old.

There are consequences for the obligation of active participation, however. Anti-shippers are required to be constantly aware of the out-group as a means of impression management to protect against peer rejection. Harassment is one such act, demonstrating loyalty to the in-group by reinforcing the ostracism of the out-group (Brenick & Halgunseth, 2017; Rambaran et al., 2019). Anti-shippers also accomplish this by composing unprompted and performative posts condemning pro-shippers or associated topics. Yet, these actions are not always enough to meet the high expectations of moral integrity produced by the anti’s own rhetoric. To avoid the appearance of endorsing the out-group, anti-shippers conduct investigations into the backgrounds of individuals they interact with on social media to ensure no connection exists. A 16 year old anti conveyed the experience in a tweet, stating “[w]henver I scroll ... pro-shippers accounts to mock them, I have to check my likes to make sure I didn’t accidentally like their posts and give anyone the wrong idea”. Driven by fear of misstep, anti-shippers effectively reinforce their own yoke and maintain the boundary between either group. Said fear may even be related to the tendency among anti-shippers to reject empirically-evidenced information when in contradiction with the narrative, i.e., if an anti is seen agreeing with the enemy, they become a pro-shipper by association. Nevertheless, these contradictions are a challenge to the social and moral identity anti-shippers have crafted for themselves and as such, are perceived as a threat to said identities. Evidence and informant both are rejected to preserve and protect anti-shippers from the negative implications revealed by such contradictions (Nauroth et al., 2016). In a dialogue between an anti and another individual, the latter provides an example to contradict the former’s assertion that “media you consume is a reflection of your morality,” stating “[Y]ou can enjoy horror movies and still know the content is immoral ...”, whereupon the anti-shipper responded “[G]reat defense in support of child porn”. To further bolster these fortifications, there is a perception held among anti-shippers that their position is what ought to

be considered 'normal' in contrast to the alleged degeneracy of pro-shippers. Itself a loaded term, 'normal' is an appeal to respectability, an inherently politicized and moralized concept dictated by the dominant social group (i.e., white, Christian, cisgender, heterosexual men), which ironically stands against the predominately queer material that anti-shippers enjoy or identify with personally (Pitcan et al., 2018).

Finally, data collected for the purpose of documenting the harassment of actress Grace van Dien stood as a reminder that anti-shippers do not limit their abuses towards nameless online fans. Perhaps in part due to the anonymity afforded by Twitter, antis displayed a total lack of concern over the harassment they wrought upon Ms. van Dien. While one anti-shipper made a post celebrating being blocked – receiving 363 likes – another tweeted “[I]’m begging you to kill yourself Grace” directly to her. Moral disengagement on full display, anti-shippers who harass and encourage suicide show open disregard for and/or minimize the consequences of their actions, often through moral justification (Ouvrein et al., 2018; Runions & Bak, 2015). As one 23 year old anti stated: “people are only trying to confront [G]race because she’s been racist & transphobic”. Investigation into the matter found neither of these accusations to be true and were in fact misrepresentations spread by anti-shippers.

### ***Clinical Implications***

The findings of this study have several clinical implications. First, as the anti-shipper phenomenon continues, mental healthcare professionals may encounter clients who have experienced the negative repercussions antis have had on both an individual and community level. While the harm incurred by online harassment is a known entity, there is a potential for compounding effects due to the manner in which anti-shippers proliferate within the transformative fandom community (Dym & Fiesler, 2020; Stevens et al., 2021). By their very nature, anti-shippers inflict harm upon the community. The behaviors demonstrated create a hostile environment that drastically changes the community from one born of shared interest and affection into a battleground of antipathy and moral judgment. Efforts to avoid being

attacked for fictional interests which run afoul of anti-shipper dogma lend themselves to a paranoia that negatively affects both groups. Further, rather than participate in fandom by focusing on material they enjoy, anti-shippers exhibit a preoccupation with material that upsets them, which ultimately begets a culture of harassment. On an individual level, each of these aspects are known to have a detrimental effect on mental health (Bellet et al., 2020; Bird et al., 2018; Brewer & Kerlaske, 2015; Stevens et al., 2021). An extrapolation of the damage this has on the community is not far-fetched; Drouin (2021) identified the gross negative impact anti-shippers had on the *VLD* fandom – shared thematic patterns suggest this too may be generalized to the broader transformative fandom community. The significance of this harm becomes all the more impactful upon consideration that vulnerable populations comprise a large portion of the community (e.g., LGBTQ+, neurodivergent) and for some, fandom may be the only supportive community available (“Autism and Fandom,” 2023; McCracken, 2017; McInroy et al., 2021; Reysen et al., 2018; Rouse & Stanfill, 2023; Shaffee, 2021). In addition to raising awareness for this phenomenon, clinicians may want to investigate ways for clients to participate in fandom safely and prevent the loss of this important support network.

There may also be negative consequences to being an anti-shipper. Our research suggests there are a number of additional concerns that accompany membership to this ideologically-affiliated group. Chiefly, anti-shippers are self-sabotaging in that their own practices and rhetoric create such impossible restrictions that it is all but inevitable for them to eat their own. Research notes that participation in online harassment renders the individual vulnerable to being targeted themselves, which appears to be self-evident among individuals who identify as former anti-shippers, wherein anything short of complete disclosure of personal information and interests was attested as grounds for suspicion and accusation (aem, 2020; Brewer & Kerlaske, 2015; Fellow, 2020; Stevens et al., 2021; stockholm syndrome, 2021). Accounts of abuse when individuals disavow anti-shipper beliefs have also been noted, illustrating the complexity of these interactions (Skye, 2021). The fear of being labeled

‘problematic’ and attacked by fellow antis has been shown to linger as well, even after ending association with the group (Drouin, 2021). Other problems may stem from an unhealthy relationship with fictional material. The conflation of fictional and real-life interests puts anti-shippers at risk of internalizing a negative self-concept. For example, should an anti-shipper develop an interest in a ‘problematic’ ship, the motivations for that interest come in conflict with their rhetoric. By their own logic, an anti may question whether they are a pedophile for liking a ship labeled pedophilia by their peers. Additional risks come from anti-shippers’ misunderstanding of real issues, such as sexual grooming, paraphilic attraction, or the use of fiction for both exploration as well as coping mechanisms.

### ***Limitations***

This study is not without limitations. Although the use of Twitter API was an essential component for data collection, its search function is limited in its capacity to filter results using Boolean operators. Consequently, access to available data was limited by these restrictions, resulting in a smaller pool for analysis. This constrained collection to queries built off a relatively restricted set of search terms that do not fully accommodate for the breadth of anti-shipper activity on Twitter, even within the one week timeframe. Additionally, given the inductive design of the study, search terms were frequently present within the dataset and therefore, were assessed to be necessarily included in the thematic framework. Though steps were taken to mitigate the author’s influence on the analytic process, this did create some measure of unavoidable bias.

While anti-shippers are prolific on Twitter, the character-limited nature of the platform may influence the ways anti-shippers interact with others. Other social media sites populated by anti-shippers, such as TikTok, which uses videos, or Instagram, which uses pictures, may have offered a broader range of examples to analyze. The use of Twitter as the sole source of data is therefore not inclusive of the entirety of anti-shipper activity and rhetoric, and as such themes identified within this study are not comprehensive.

### ***Future Directions***

Being such an under-researched topic, the anti-shipper phenomenon offers multiple avenues of study. One option is the further refinement of this framework through deeper analysis. By teasing out patterns within the population and comparing them with similar movements or ideologies, researchers might gain insight into the etiology of the anti-shipper. For example, fan scholars have already drawn connections to other ideologically-affiliated groups, comparing anti-shippers to Christian evangelicals and right-wing authoritarianism (Aburime, 2022; freetofic, 2019). On a less macro scale, the hazard presented by anti-shippers warrants exploration into the recruitment and retention of individuals. Uncovering these practices may serve to prevent or intervene in becoming an anti-shipper and the subsequent harm created by affiliation. Given the evidence indicating that anti-shippers are a primarily young population, there is value in investigating what makes youth more susceptible to anti-shipper rhetoric.

Consequently, clinical research should focus on treatment for anti-shippers. More population specific ideas might include psychoeducation on subjects such as the difference between discomfort and harm or how creative expression is a means of safe exploration. Some practical options might involve investigating ways to shift perceptions of fiction to be more accurate and less distressing, or to develop healthier habits for interacting in fandom spaces, e.g., reducing time spent on social media, curating social media feeds through blocking and muting to decrease likelihood of encountering unwanted material, or resisting urges to engage with individuals or material that causes upset. For managing the harassment component, cyberbullying programs aimed at developing empathy or employing social regulation might help decrease perpetration (Bustamonte & Chaux, 2014; Schultze-Krumbholz et al., 2015).

### **Conclusion**

Anti-shippers represent a population of ideologically-affiliated individuals within the transformative fandom community which engage in the harassment of others who do not

endorse their moralized rhetoric regarding sexual material in fiction. We find the harmful impact anti-shippers present is not restricted to targets of harassment; anti rhetoric itself fosters an unsafe environment for its own adherents. Expectations of moral purity are based on increasingly strained and arbitrary labels, leaving anti-shippers vulnerable to becoming inadvertent targets themselves. Furthermore, the negative effect anti-shippers have on the transformative fandom community as a whole is a valid concern, as their actions and beliefs run counter to the principles of creative celebration, exploration, and communal enjoyment.

This study set out to establish a thematic framework of anti-shipper beliefs and behaviors with the expectation that themes and patterns identified in previous research would be confirmed by the data. In addition to the majority of themes being found to be consistent with the research, additional themes were uncovered, further developing our understanding of this population. As online harassment is a key component of anti-shipper behavior, we anticipated factors known to help facilitate online harassment, particularly with regard to Twitter, to be present. Numerous examples of moral disengagement were observed, enabled by the anonymity afforded by Twitter, as well as the lack of consequences imposed by the platform.

Although the anti-shipper phenomenon may appear limited to a niche population, it would be irresponsible to minimize the range of effect this has had on the community. That this inaccurate understanding of fiction and its relationship to reality is not solely a product of adolescence holds equally troubling implications. The persistence of the anti-shipper ideology since 2016 suggests that this harmful rhetoric will continue, necessitating the attention of professionals. To best address these issues, further research is required to catalogue and analyze this phenomenon. If we are to preserve that which makes the transformative fandom community a supportive and positive space for the vulnerable and marginalized, anti-shippers and their rhetoric must be regarded as a serious matter.

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## Appendix

### List of Search Terms

#### ***Pro-ship Variations***

proship, proshipper, proshippers, proshipping, prosh1p, prosh1pper, prosh1ppers, prosh1pping,  
 proship, proshipper, proshippers, proshipping, pr\*sh\*p, pr\*sh\*pper, pr\*sh\*ppers, pr\*sh\*pping,  
 pr\*ship, pr\*shipper, pr\*shippers, pr\*shipping, proshit, proshitter, proshitters, proshitting,  
 prosh\*t, prosh\*tter, prosh\*tting, pro sh1p, pro sh1pper, pro sh1ppers, pro sh1pping, pro-ship,  
 pro-shipper, pro-shipping

#### ***Pedophilia Variations***

pedophilia, p3dophila, p3dophilia, pedo, p3do, pedo, pedo ship, pedo-shipper

#### ***Incest Variations***

incest, inc3st, 1ncest, 1nc3st, inc\*st, selfcest, selfc\*st

#### ***Ship Names***

obikin, ob!kin, ob!k!n, ob1kin, ob1k1n, ob\*kin, ob\*k\*n, jilco, j\*lco, j\*lc\*, j1lco, j\*lco, sylki, sylk1,  
 s\*lki

#### ***“-ize” Terms***

fetishize, fetishizing, fetishizer, normalize, normalizing, romanticize, romanticizing

#### ***Miscellaneous***

minor, adult, mlm, nblm, fujoshi, fujo, fujoshit, f\*joshi, f\*josh\*, fujoshi, fujosh1, fujosh!, if u  
 ship, if you ship, illegal ship, illegal shipping