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Fandom “For You”:
Understanding the Perceptions, Experiences, and Motivations of
TikTok Creators in Anime Fandom

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty of the
Department of Communication and Media
West Chester University
West Chester, PA

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts

By
Noah Glose

May 2024

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Dedication

To everyone out there who is a fan of something: keep being passionate.

Look to the people and stories that *get* you.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my gratitude towards a few important people who helped make this idea of a paper come to life. First off, I would like to thank Ms. Padilla, secretary of the Communication and Media Department here at West Chester University, for her assistance in financial support for gifts sent to my participants after finishing their interview. To my committee members, Dr. Gatchet and Dr. Mahoney - my deepest appreciation goes to you for your continued support and perspective into my research process. I value both of your research fields and appreciate the scholarly insight into my work. I am deeply indebted to my thesis advisor, Dr. Kopacz, who has been quite the motivator and inspiration to my research journey. I admire her scholarly background and her contributions to being a professor. Her attention to detail and passion for new research ignited my confidence and ease to write what I am passionate about, and that is just what I did. A huge thanks to my college friends who got me into the anime fandom: you showed me just how creative and awesome this fandom really is, which helped me express my passions as an anime content creator on TikTok. Lastly, I am extremely grateful for my sister and my mother. The two rocks in my life who constantly inspire me to share what I love every day. Thank you, Linsey, for being such a supportive sister in and out of my college classes, and to my mom for her unwavering inspiration, strength, and resilience. If it wasn't for you going back to college, I would not be where I am today.

Abstract

This study examines the perceptions, experiences, and motivations of TikTok content creators who actively create videos related to the topics and genre of anime. Specifically, this study aimed to examine the gratifications sought by TikTok's anime creators, the platform-specific affordances offered to the anime creator, and the interplay between gratifications and affordances in affecting the themes of content produced by creators. A sample of 15 US participants who regularly create content in the anime fandom on TikTok were interviewed to better understand the central questions proposed. Inductive qualitative thematic analysis of data was performed, which implemented a multi-step coding process to outline connected themes for contribution. The analysis also employed concepts from uses and gratifications and technological affordances theories to integrate the results with prior literature. The analysis isolated gratifications of finding your crowd, character empathy and identification, creative expression, emotional wellbeing, and representation of identity. Additionally, affordances of TikTok were isolated to curating diverse content through an algorithm, connecting to others, and enhancing editing with content tools. Gratifications and affordances influence themes of content expressed such as character-related filters, skits, content criticism, and cosplay. The present findings expand literature on the impact of gratifications and affordances on content creation, and how they seek to create themes of content throughout anime fandom.

Keywords: anime, TikTok, fan, uses and gratifications, technological affordances, content creators.

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RQ1: Uses and Gratifications	RQ2: Technological Affordances	RQ3: Themes of Content
Finding your crowd	Curation of Diverse Content	Character-Related
Character Empathy & Identification	Content Enhancement Tools	Skits
Creative Expression	Intuitive Editing	Content Criticism
Emotional Wellbeing	Algorithm / Wide Reach	Cosplay
Representation of Identity	Connecting to Others	Other content

Chapter 1: Introduction

Fandoms and fan cultures have been studied extensively because they allow the exploration of key mechanisms to influence participants' interactions with the mediated world, such as fan creating, producing, transforming, or influencing the space (Bennett & Booth, 2016). One such culture, which has gained prominence throughout the US is the anime fandom. Research has examined fandoms gathering through clubs, conventions, and online groups as members of the fandom (Geraghty, 2022; Kohnen, Parker & Woo, 2023; Lamerichs, 2016; Taylor, 2009; Yamato, 2018). According to Leonard (2005), the anime fan distribution networks from Japan were spreading the knowledge and enthusiasm of Japanese animations to their American counterparts' years before the diffusion of the Internet. The arrival of social media has created spaces for the expression of fan cultures and has equipped fans with unprecedented ways to share and create content that resonates with them. In the realm of social media, a fan may take the role of both consumer and producer of content on social media (Jenkins, 2009), and fandom membership allows opportunity for the digital user to create a meaningful bond within that space. TikTok is the most novel social media platform whose unique features and formats have facilitated rapid growth of fandom communities and channels. Haddick (2020) claims TikTok's unique search engine of recommendations motivates both anime fans and those completely new to the platform towards a variety of series both old and new. Groups gather online to create these connections and build relationships through experiences (Fiorella, 2023). Montag, Yang, and Elhai (2021) state that TikTok has such a highly immersive platform design that it can offer insights into psychological features of the user.

The present study proposes to examine the uses, perceptions, and motivations of TikTok creators in anime fandom. This fandom has been chosen due to its extensive diffusion through the US in recent years, as well as its potential influence in American culture through meanings constructed by anime content. Despite absurdities and overtly fantastical themes of anime narratives, the shows deeply connect with viewers at large via discussions to core themes ranging from friendship and love to life and passing, with anime becoming increasingly mainstream and accepted in the West as universal entertainment (Kemner, 2021). Fans come together on the platform on TikTok to continuously engage and expand anime fandom.

Findings from this research may provide several contributions. The first is a better understanding of one's digital role as a fan and active user within the wide-ranging fandom of passionate users making and consuming anime content. The role as a fan and creator of media is to be discovered when understanding the gratifications desired from the fandom media. Anime fans on the platform seek and desire varying elements of the media in different ways, which can lead to a better understanding of fan behavior. The second contribution is defining motivations and behavior to being a content creator on TikTok versus only a part of the passive audience and identifying affordances of the TikTok platform that influence user gratification. Creators may utilize the TikTok platform differently than another, which is an important contribution to thematic analytical research. The last contribution is how user gratifications shape the themes of anime content created through TikTok. Additionally, information from this research may contribute to overall understanding of fandom interactions within short form video contexts and participatory culture in general. The next section outlines a comprehensive literature review discussing the evolution of fans and

fandom, history of anime, social media's fan contribution, and TikTok giving significant rise to the anime fandom.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Fans and Fandoms

Fans, unlike casual consumers of media text, use their fandom as a tool for participatory culture (Jenkins, 2018), developing social negotiation of meaning. Both types of media users may place certain emphasis on a particular interest, but fans differ to the extent in which they invest and actively engage in that certain interest (Groene & Hettinger, 2016). A fan can be understood as an individual who develops affective attachment to popular media texts and artifacts (Rawat, 2021). Becoming a fan implies becoming connected with the associated text and establishing links between one's own life and the text (De Kloet & Van Zoonen, 2007). Fans are active users of media who seek to identify and connect oneself with a piece of media that shares values that influence the fan experience. Fans fall under the realm of prosumerism (Jenkins, 2006) by acting as both producers and contributors of content to remix and create the media produced. The fan participates in the production and design to acquire new and exciting content for the fandom.

Usages of the term “fan” have evolved over time, with the earliest case found in the late nineteenth-century to describe sports team supporters and women theatergoers (Jenkins, 2012). Following World War II, sports, music, and Hollywood became an important part to the rise of fandom culture. Artists such as Elvis Presley and The Beatles stole the hearts of audiences and began the development of fan followings of public figures and texts alike (Sawdon, 2018). A fan grants individuals to show passion to someone or something, giving a chance to connect and resonate with a community that connects to the same feeling or interest. Lusterio and Cyrille (2022) point to positive implications to being a fan such as

allowing individuals to discover a greater sense of their self-understanding, expression, and creativity to participate in a fandom.

Being a fan can take antisocial forms, such as expressing overly obsessive behaviors such as violating norms that can invade a fandom's boundaries (Lusterio & Cyrille, 2022). Some fans may develop intense parasocial relationships with celebrities or even fictional characters to the point of confusing fiction with reality. Jensen (2002) points out that in pursuit of these artificial relations with the media text to make up for authentic social relations in real life, some fans engage in excessive or deviant behaviors. Fans of the same interest often interact with one another, which results in social structures called fandoms. A fandom can be understood as a social network composed of fans with shared interests, perceptions, and tastes (Rawat, 2021, p. 228). Fandom changes the literary focus from individual expression to community engagement. Tushnet (2014) states that fandom is constructed of people with imperfections and strengths who have opportunities for collective actions. Individuals form a process of fan gathering by utilizing fan affiliations and expressions - producing new creative forms, collaborating on informal and formal tasks and knowledge, and further shaping the flow of media (Tushnet, 2014). The fan culture is also interpretive in nature, as fans tend to deeply involve themselves with their chosen text. Fans “act as interpreters and producers of media content” (Sullivan, 2013, p. 195). As fans repeatedly consume their favorite movie, television series, or novel, and have intense discussions about their interests with other fans, they become highly knowledgeable about their interest and develop a sense of ownership that is utilized in their daily lives of consuming fan content online. Fandoms facilitate fans’ expression and creative endeavors, with adopting specific fandom-appropriate appearances and behaviors, adapting to the self-

expression of a fan (Groene & Hettinger, 2016). Furthermore, Reysen and Branscombe (2010) indicate that fans view their fandoms as concrete identities, categorizing to groups that have the most similar interests between fans.

Fandoms as Participatory Cultures

A key defining feature to the nature of fandom is active participation: such as membership affiliations, creative expression, collaborating on problem-solving, and shaping the media (Jenkins, 2006). Fan studies was focused on as a form of cultural studies in the late 1980s to early 1990s, intersecting feminist criticism, queer theory, and popular media studies (Goodman, 2015). Jenkins (2009) coined the term “participatory culture” in relation to fandom studies to define fan participation to which individuals act as both consumers and contributors of meaning and play a pivotal role in shaping content, utilizing low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement. The concurrent production and consumption of texts and artifacts implies that individuals mutually engage in processes of identity formation and collective representation. Gee (2004) argues that participatory cultures can represent ideal learning environments, or “affinity spaces” for the fan. These spaces are sustained by people participating in multiple ways according to personal skills and interests (De Kloet & Van Zoonen, 2007). A fandom is then formed by constant motivation to seek new knowledge and reflect on one’s skills as an active participant. Society is now creating distance from a world in which media organizations create and produce the bulk of content, toward one in which most individuals have an active role in the culture that is produced. Fans can identify and originate content themselves, which gives unique value to the original text (anime) as well as other fans providing participatory influence (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 87). A set of

cultural practices and social cues are utilized with technological innovations surrounding the fan, constituting a networked culture of active participation.

Fandom Membership as Social Identity

Utilizing both a consumer and contributor mode of meaning-making underscores the role of identity in fandom membership. Specifically, identification with others is produced through fandom membership. Social identity is the area of an individual's self-concept that is derived from social group membership (Tajfel, 1978). Research suggests fandoms conceptualize aspects of an individual's social identity with media that has fans perceive fandoms as specific entities, forming ingroups of anime fans while simultaneously distinguishing from the outgroups residing beyond a specific fandom (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010; Voci, 2006). Fans are influenced to make subjective evaluations of their ingroups relative to how they connect to outgroups, aiming to maintain a positive sense of identity within a fan (Tajfel, Turner, Austin & Worschell, 1979). Additionally, fans seek to shape the meaning and construction of what the fandom is to them. For instance, internet fan clubs have been argued to insert themselves as a social medium becoming a network of repeatable connections that may be pivotal to one's personal life.

Baumeister & Leary (1995) express that the need to be accepted and validated by others is one of the most basic human needs, which constitutes the importance of positively identifying with other members of the in-group (fandom). As relationships grow, fandoms are reconceptualized as moving forces of self-sustaining communities that offer joy and pleasure to their members (Golmohammadi et al., 2021). In addition, maintaining the well-being functions of engaging in a fandom positively relates to identification with a fandom

(Reysen, Plante, & Chadborn, 2017). Fiorella (2023) indicates that fan relationships are outlined by a few key components: identity, self-care, human connection, and trust, which may translate into specific gratifications of fandom-centered media use from anime fans (Yi, 2018). This study examines these fan gratifications in the context of the highly participatory world of manga to anime.

Background of Anime

Anime is a style of animated video originating in Japan and targeting Japanese audiences (Leonard, 2005). The term itself comes from the Japanese word *animeshon*, a direct translation of the English word “animation” (Brenner, 2007). The word represents all Japanese animated titles that include feature films, television shows, and original video animation (OVA). Anime was originally released to the home entertainment market but is now available worldwide via streaming services (Julienne, 2022). While Western animated content (cartoons) is often associated with younger audiences, anime is typically directed for a much more mature audience, usually dealing with darker and more serious themes not typically found in Western cartoons (Upadhayay, 2023). Anime stories originated from Japanese manga novels. These are printed books containing comic-style depictions of stories, like how graphic novels in the West are portrayed. Manga is published in a variety of formats, such as a weekly or monthly magazine, as well as bound volumes (Brenner, 2007). The All-Japanese Magazine and Book Publishers and Editors Association (AJPEA) reported that the manga industry in 2020 earned about 5.7 billion US dollars (612.6 billion yen), which projects to be 23% higher than any previous year (Julienne, 2022). While most comics rely on familiar visual and textual language to execute their stories, manga uses a larger and

entirely different set of cues not intended for an international audience, expressing themes such as hope, loss, freedom, betrayal, success, and many more. According to Brenner (2007), “manga fans are an intelligent and adventurous community” (p. xii). Anime’s cultural impact offers unique research for academia in terms of fandom popularity, ease of access, and the relatability discovered among fans (Ahmed, 2021). It becomes easy for fans to choose a particular anime to watch due to such a wide range of shows to choose from on multiple streaming platforms.

Character designs throughout anime are in direct connection to their personality and motives set in the manga, with most anime storylines being a direct adaptation of their respective manga novels. Some notable Animes that are not directly adapted from manga are *Cowboy Bebop* (1997-1998), *Samurai Champloo* (2004-2005), and *Code Geass* (2006-2007) (CBR Staff, 2023). The earliest examples of Japanese animation can be traced back to a 1917 film titled *Namakura Gatana*, also known as *The Dull Sword*, that lasted only four minutes (Kouchi, 1917). Japan Animated Films was founded in 1948, just three years after Japan surrendered in World War II, acquired by the now highly credible Toei film company (Arnold, 2022). *Astro Boy* (1963-1966), originally called *Tetsuwan Atom*, was created in 1951 six years after the end of World War II; the anime began in 1963. The story follows a tale of a young boy’s battle against a demon woman in medieval Japan. Throughout the 1970s to 1980s, anime was mostly accessible from the US in one of two distinct ways. First, dubbing and adapting shows for US Television was common, often resulting in the content differing significantly from the Japanese original. As anime was dubbed for English and other languages, original text and sound may be modified due to licensing and financial

motives (Alola, 2023). Secondly, US fans would obtain pirated copies of anime that had been filmed from Japanese television for American VHS systems (Horbinski, 2019).

The 1990s are regarded as “The Golden Age of Anime” in the U.S., with notable titles of influence such as *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995), *Cowboy Bebop* (1998), *Dragon Ball Z* (1989-1996), and *Sailor Moon* (1992). One of the most significant factors that contributed to the popularity of anime in the US during this time was the increase in accessibility for at-home releases (Sevakis, 2016). In recent years, many Japanese TV Series have been turned into global films for many countries to enjoy. According to Ahmed (2021), 60% of the world’s animated television programs originate directly from Japan. For example, the popular anime series, *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba* (2019), had their animation studio release their first film-length anime story in Japan in 2020, grossing over 386.1 million US dollars in 2021 before releasing to other countries beyond Japan (Golmohammadi et al., 2021). Japan is home to more than 430 anime production companies, with more examples including BONES, Studio Ghibli, MAPPA, Ufotable, and Madhouse (Tiernan, 2023). According to Brenner (2007), to understand manga and anime together is to understand the intent to *which* audience the story is aimed at. According to Kumar (2023), there are five popular demographics of sub-genres of anime, each targeting a different audience: Kodomomuke, Shonen, Shojo, Seinen, and Josei. Kodomomuke is deliberately directed to children below 12 years of age, with possible notions of already viewing this anime when in childhood (e.g., *Pokemon* (1997), *Beyblade* (2001), etc.). Shonen is arguably the most popular out of the five, which targets teen boys with storylines of action, humor, honor, and social obligation, targeting ages around 12-18. Kumar (2023) states that the genre often preaches themes of “friendship and family” (e.g., *One Piece* (1999), *Hunter x Hunter* (2011-

2014), *Naruto: Shippuden* (2007-2017) etc.). Shojo targets teen girls and concentrates more on emotion and relationships, usually for ages 12-18 as well, for any anime fan to watch (e.g., *Fruits Basket* (2019), *Sailor Moon* (1992) etc.). Seinen, directed towards adult audiences, is much more mature in terms of portraying politics, society, violence, sex, and philosophy, and that is portrayed effectively in these anime (e.g., *Berserk* (1997), *Vinland Saga* (2019-present), etc.). Lastly, Josei refers to “woman” or “female”, intended for adult women 18 and older. Kumar (2023) defines this subgenre covering adult themes for women, incorporating LGBTQ+ storylines (e.g., “*Bunny Drop* (2011), *Princess Jellyfish* (2010)” etc.). All in all, these subgenres deliver varying intent to capture fans of anime to continuously engage with their stories.

Tariq and Nesti Willard (2021) claim that these anime stories should not be considered solely for escapism, as they facilitate mental wellbeing, improve psychological health, and lets fans self-identify without constraints of unpleasantness. Anime stories are offering varying perspectives of the human condition for the fan to connect with. Peca (2023) states that “appeal” is one of the most important principles of animation, making the characters easy to read and providing strong character development to captivate viewers. The fascinating stories, expressive features, and overall aesthetic are potential reasons why anime is captivating users across age groups. According to industry publication *Buzzfeed* (Bassi, 2023), there has been a change in anime from being a taboo form of entertainment, to now reaching global popularity as popular anime such as *Jujutsu Kaisen* (2020-present), *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba* (2019-present), and *Haikyuu!!* (2014-2020) are among the topmost discussed anime shows worldwide. This has also led to anime establishing itself as a mainstream genre in North America.

Anime Fandom in the United States

The earliest years of manga and anime fandom in the US involved an evolutionary process of developments through fans of popular culture through the fandoms of science fiction, comics, and gaming, which set the stage for the present structures of fandom (Horbinski, 2019). Gerow (2010) outlines that the discovery of Japanese anime rose in 1976 with mecha shows, outlining the considerable cultural shock as these years progressed. Many anime events in the 1980s sprang from the efforts of local anime clubs in the U.S., gathering passionate fans who sought to share their love for the art. The 1990s saw the U.S. anime fandom scene dominated by the continuous discourse referencing pirated versus officially distributed media, the moral obligation fans had to take to Japanese media companies (Horbinski, 2019). However, clubs at large universities began to fill classroom auditoriums with the latest VHS copies of anime shows. After a showing, fans would make their way over to another room in the building where the latest anime collections were shared for more enjoyment, all of it being completely free (Knox, 2023). These small-scale clubs discovered the popularity of anime conventions and big gatherings where old and new fans alike could celebrate Japanese animation and its benefits to fans. According to Tran (2023), more than 55,000 people attended the Anime NYC convention in 2022 - up from 22,000 in 2017. Additionally, Anime Expo in Los Angeles brought in more than 115,000 fans (Tran, 2022; 2023). Anime NYC Director Peter Tatara states that teens see themselves being reflected through heroes in a way they might not see themselves in a “billionaire who builds suits of armor,” which nods to the Marvel Studios franchise (Tran, 2023).

Jenkins (2018) argues the emergence of digital networks have made it possible for fans to forge meaningful connections that might not have been possible otherwise. He also argues it has created a new context where fans can maintain self-sustaining communities. As Japan's cultural output during the first decades of the 20th century rose, animation captures consumers' perceptions by identifying traditional stories and motifs (Crow, 2021) and curating them into a modern form of consumption through participation in social media platforms. Fans develop a series of practices which can be connected to present day social media: placing emphasis on collaboration, community building, and approaching multimedia in various ways. Fans emphasize just how well-suited social media platforms are for fandom interactions. Early to mid 2000s allowed fans to create anime music videos (AMV) on YouTube, incorporating music that tied to the anime with scenes that match the beat of the song selected (Peralta, 2023), offering continuous interaction occurring on all social platforms.

Social Media as Fandom Spaces

The rise of social media in recent decades has further transformed fan culture and has allowed fans to have a more active role in the fandom space. Carr and Hayes (2015) define the term social media as “internet-based, distained, and persistent channels of mass personal communication facilitating perceptions of interaction among users” with value placed on user-generated content (p. 49). This definition of social media suggests that continuous participation across mediated channels is influenced by what platforms can provide for fans. Fandoms can be found online curating fanfictions to their favorite fandoms, with Tumblr being most well-known for its fanfiction blogs (Sawdon, 2018). It's not something every fan

enjoys but allows fans to be curators of original content while expressing identity and connection. Additionally, platforms such as Reddit and Discord allow fans to regularly express their thoughts about everything about character background, story narratives, and controversial discourse via chats, forums, and blogs (Kocik et al., 2024; Robards, 2018). YouTube and Twitch provide opportunities to upload or watch long form fan reactions to recent trailers and episodes of anime and utilize the comments section to engage with fans (Peralta, 2023). Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok are the most notable social media platforms where interactions involving celebrity-fan, influencer-fan, and fan-fan interactions (Hampton, 2016). These three are seen as important ways to connect fan information through a social media algorithm and the ease of sharing, following, and commenting on the platforms. Jia et al. (2021) state the revolution from social media also changed the mindset of fans from passive to active media consumption, where any participant of a media platform is an active consumer and creator of the content sent, received, and created. Sheikh (2023) states there are over 4.89 billion social media users worldwide, with an average social media user passing between seven different social networks per month (Sheikh, 2023). Streamlining digital engagement with automatic logins, speeding load times, and frequent feeds being refreshed grants efficient access. This translates to higher likelihood of consistent use. Initial access to social media platforms is easier for beginning users, with repetition of use easier for returning users (Anderson & Wood, 2021). Consumers and producers of content can use social platforms to create original accounts and connect with other users on the Internet, as well as upload, download, share, and post content via their newsfeeds (Sharabati et al., 2022). The design of most platforms encourages a constant cycle of communication that is sought and obtained across social media platforms.

Fans gain power from social media in two important ways: first, fans become more active in producing and distributing original content, and second, fans have more ways to navigate fan communication in the cultural industry (Liao, 2021). Papacharissi (2013) states that people's desire to keep coming back to social media platforms sets the stage for self-presentation and social connection of fan culture; utilizing multimedia capabilities of participation that facilitate self-presentation. The feeling of belonging and group membership are pivotal to the mediated experience influenced throughout the social landscape, echoing the patterns of fandom importance. Della Longa, Valori, and Farroni (2022) state that the virtual reality of social platforms that digital users live in can be reconceptualized as social spaces that generate its own rules to create a meaningfully shared space. Social media not only brings diverse sets of cultures, beliefs, and audiences together, but it can also tear down and divide those same structures (Feller et al., 2011; Min et al., 2022;). Fans find multiple avenues of participation to feel a sense of belonging and achievement (Jia et al., 2021), with TikTok offering various avenues of participation.

The Uniqueness of TikTok

Once the viral platform TikTok, Douyin in China, was released in 2016, it received a rise in popularity and engagement. Gupta et al. (2021) notes that about 81.68% of TikTok users who curate and consume content are under 35 years old. The app features varieties of content, ranging from humorous skits to beauty tutorials, to political advertisements and educational DIY videos. According to Kemp (2021), "TikTok became the most downloaded app in 2020, garnering 689 million users active by end of the year." Macready (2024) stated that TikTok holds 150 million monthly active users in the US, as well as the app being the #1

downloaded app in more than 40 countries, and available in over 150 markets as of 2023.

TikTok has similarities to YouTube in a sense with its intuitive interface but differs by granting a space where users constantly consume new content targeted to them by the personalized algorithm, enabling creative video ideas and motives to be set by the content creator (Miranda et al., 2023).

The dominant characteristics of a TikTok video involve incorporation of interactive filters, sounds, and trending images to overlay onto the content. Users are strongly encouraged to engage with other users, through response videos to other content (duets), or even through editing clips together to make a new video. One key factor that sets TikTok apart from other similar platforms is the unique recommendations system. The TikTok user interacts mostly with the personalized algorithm, which repeatedly confronts the user with various traits and characteristics that resonate with a user's persona and personal desires (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). The "for you page" (FYP), is the heart of the platform to which many users view upon login, constantly faced with videos that one may love, hate, or feel indifferent to. The TikTok interest graph (Nakayashiki, 2022) is an online representation of different individuals' interests. This is a way of laser-focusing recommendations of brand-new content to an audience. The social graph of older social networks (Project Liberty, 2021) wants people to be at the center of protocol design, not the platform making the decisions. This makes TikTok a platform that is particularly conducive to fandoms, especially the highly visual ones such as anime. Most of the time, TikTok puts the algorithm at the heart of the social media experience, providing various expressions to filters, sounds, and overall trends. Users have choices to search for content or be fed a streamline of videos that TikTok itself controls in hopes to best satisfy the user experience.

Herrman (2019) expands upon the claim that TikTok is more machine than human, where it is a form of messaging from the future. Simply put, TikTok owns the power to ultimately control and monitor what each user wants to consume with genre recommendations, creating this artificially connected role between platform and creator. TikTok outlines its mission for both creators and consumers to self-identify and capture curated moments that connect best to the user and audience. Bossen and Kottasz (2020) outline that participation on TikTok drives the need to expand one's social network, seek a fanbase, and to express creatively.

TikTok as a platform of Anime Fandom

Anime fans on TikTok strive to share their love for the fandom by creating short form videos connecting to the genre. TikTok's unique search recommendations offer the anime fandom a variety of content to consistently consume and produce meaning daily (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). TikTok has paved the way for the anime industry to flourish, engaging the eyes of curious viewers and garnering a larger community of fans (Peralta, 2023). A prime example of the virality of anime on TikTok is the fans' love for captivating characters such as Saturo Gojo from the anime, *Jujutsu Kaisen* (2020-present). Fans of the anime series have created thousands of edits focusing on the character while including trending sounds and images for curation, with many going viral in the anime community (Lopez, 2022). Furthermore, Comic Book Rant (2022) states that some of the anime that have gone the most viral on TikTok are *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba* (2019-present), *My Hero Academia* (2014-present), *Haikyuu!!* (2014-2020), and *Spy x Family* (2022-present). The platform offers visual enhancements commonly known as filters. These are content modification tools created by actual users of TikTok. The platform has allowed the creativity

of filters by users while ones made by TikTok to use as well. Examples of filters commonly used before TikTok included Facebook and Instagram camera filters that allowed a user to modify their facial or physical appearance. These are creative and intuitive filters made by creators such as tier lists for favorite and strongest characters, fanfictions, and trending anime scenes. Content creators post original filters so that their audience can interact with the filter and expand the fandom. This platform has proven to be an inclusive space for fans in any fandom to express their love and appreciation for their favorite media. Once a TikTok clip becomes viral, many other users would copy or create a similar video making sure they do not miss out on the trend and hoping to expand the anime content to go viral (Herrman, 2021). The influence of the TikTok platform offers various resources for meaningful content creation, consumption, and participation.

Theoretical Framework

To understand anime fan motivations in the context of TikTok and how this platform is shaping the expression of anime fandom, this research relies on two main theoretical perspectives. The first one is Katz and Blumler's (1974) Uses and Gratifications theory (UGT), which allows a researcher to examine the unique motivations driving the use of a medium. UGT concerns itself with understanding the social and psychological origin of needs, which in turn, impact media selection and use (Rubin, 2009; Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Additionally, the approach expresses that individuals have innate needs that can be satisfied by the media (Katz & Blumler, 1974, p. 20), including but not limited to, the need for information, personal identity, social integration, and entertainment. Social Identity Theory (SIT) also points to possible gratifications facilitated by identification with an in-group such as a fandom (Chan, 2014). Consistent with UGT, Tariq and Willard (2021) hint at

multiple gratifications from exposure to anime content, including escapism, but also mental health and identity. According to Chan (2014), online users are active and goal-directed who choose media content based upon the gratifications they can acquire.

The second theoretical perspective employed in this study is the technological affordances theory (Gibson, 1977). An affordance of an object is defined as a combination of the properties of the substance and its surface taken, with reference to the object (p. 67). Objects can be manufactured or manipulated, some more easily accessible than others (p. 133). An affordance may also refer to the range of possibilities featured by the medium to either initiate or facilitate certain media actions (Norman, 1988), if users can visually perceive it. In other words, if users can visually perceive and interpret an object as an affordance, the object can afford certain resources capabilities to a user another object may not have. Action possibilities from features on a medium are essentially what the concept of affordances is about (Kaptelinin, 2014), with social media becoming the object and focus of theory.

The technological affordances theory was further refined for the social media contexts via the MAIN Model by Sundar and Limperos (2008, 2013). The MAIN Model provides a rich approach to examining social media use and gratifications by focusing on the capacity of the Internet-based platforms, offering a range of engagement options to the user (Rathnayake & Winter, 2018). MAIN defines four classes of technological affordances in digital media: modality, agency, interactivity, and navigability. These affordances can provide heuristic cues for the media user, which then trigger mental shortcuts, offering possible new gratifications to discover whilst further expanding UGT (1976). The modality

affordance refers to multiple methods to the presentation of media content (more audio or picture heavy), appealing to different aspects of human perception, with visual modality being stronger than text itself (Sundar, 2008). The modality affordance can offer users gratifications of realism, “coolness,” and novelty to the presentation of technologies and self-expression which is influential in analyzing content from Internet-based media (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Agency allows all users to be sources of information. User-generated content is the most prominent example for the agency affordance. Gratifications to discover within the agency affordance (2013) are community building, bandwagon, and ownness of content. Affordances facilitate the obtaining of gratifications and may become direct sources of gratifications themselves. Interactivity is defined as the affordance that grants users to make real-time changes, edits, and alterations with their content (Sundar, 2008). This affordance is at the center of audience activity by affording users to interact with and through the platform frequently. Sundar and Limperos (2013) outline interaction, activity, and responsiveness to be a few gratifications offered from this affordance. Navigability allows constant user movement through the medium. Gratifications of play are key when moving through the digital landscape. Sundar (2008) states having access to check out links enables the browsing heuristic of affordances, which will grant digital users to make their own path from the navigation features TikTok provides to them as an anime content creator. The MAIN Model has not been studied in the realm of TikTok, predicting the platform will associate itself with the technological affordances that influence the gratifications sought by creators. Furthermore, the relationship between platform-specific affordances and gratifications has not been studied effectively through TikTok, and this present study can

offer predictions that findings will offer new and expansive gratifications and affordances to create content.

Present Study

The purpose of this research is to capture the perspectives of content creators who see themselves as active fans and members of the growing anime fandom culture through TikTok. The study is grounded in substantial research in the field of participatory culture within fandoms (Jenkins, 2006), as well as the growth of anime and manga (Brenner, 2007). Participatory culture can be outlined by low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, with strong support for creating and sharing content with others representing mostly informal mentorships with members of fandom (Jenkins, 2009). Despite this body of research, there has been little insight shed on the motivations and experiences of anime fans who create content on TikTok (Golmohammadi et al., 2021). Research has not been done on anime fan behavior on other social media platforms in the US. However, research has been done on uses and gratifications in the sports fandom, outlining fan motivations such as arousal, competition, ownership, and self-esteem (Ruihley, 2022). Others have examined customer participation in brand communities as a contributor contributes to uses and gratifications in social media (Kamboj, 2019). Likewise, there is a paucity of research on the role of the TikTok environment and its affordances in shaping anime fan discourse. The proposed study employs qualitative, in-depth interviews of anime fans on TikTok to examine their role as a creators and audiences within this fandom, affordances of the social media platform, as well as gratifications sought and obtained by these users.

Specifically, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1. What are the uses and gratifications of creating TikTok videos relating to anime?

RQ2. What is the relationship between platform-specific affordances of TikTok and the gratifications sought and obtained by anime creators?

RQ3. How do the gratifications sought by anime creators and platform-specific affordances of TikTok shape the themes of content the creators develop?

Chapter 3: Methods

Participants

The population of interest in this study is the US-native anime fans who regularly create anime-related content on TikTok. A sample of 15 participants were involved in this study. The sampling approach combined referral (snowball) sampling and purposeful sampling. Criteria that were used to select participants was that they reside in the US, are over 18 years of age, with no collection of specific ages for this study. Lastly, the participants identify themselves as an anime fan who actively posts content to TikTok. Out of the 15 participants, 5 identified as men, 6 as women, and 4 as non-binary. No other relevant demographic information was collected. Personal networks of contacts were used on TikTok to facilitate participant interest and inquiry. Communication through direct messaging, discord groups, and instant messaging were modes of contact for participants. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to respect confidentiality. Participants were incentivized with a gift card upon completion of the interview, funded by the Department of Communication and Media at West Chester University. Demographic characteristics state that all participants were over 18 years or older participating in the study, as well as no gender constraints on participation. Participants had varied numbers of TikTok followers, ranging from a couple hundred to thousands that change every day.

Materials

Once recruited, each participant took part in one-on-one qualitative interviews. The interviews were conducted via video conference calls. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, with each interview lasting approximately 30-45 minutes, allowing the

researcher to adjust and expand questions at any time during the interview. The interviews were voice- recorded and transcribed with creator gratifications, platform-specific affordances, and themes of anime content measured.

Procedure

The interview data was analyzed using Thematic Analysis (TA), a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning, or better known as themes, through qualitative data (Braun & Clark, 2006). This type of analysis is unbounded by theoretical commitments, and places emphasis on an organic approach to coding and theme development and the active role of the researcher in the process. Braun and Clark's expansion and framework of TA involves telling an interpretive story about the data in relation to the research questions. Familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, and searching and reviewing themes are all a part of the process of a successful thematic analysis. In the initial stage of coding, 15 transcripts were coded for each research question using an open coding approach. Codes were derived directly from the data and assigned to excerpts (short sections) of transcripts. After the first round, 26 themes derived from coding were outlined across all three research questions. Then, the second round was performed to apply all codes to the transcripts as needed. Some excerpts received multiple themes and were grouped together as participant responses were reflected. After the second round of coding was completed, significant themes were combined or merged with other themes to help better outline the three research questions proposed, bringing the total number down to 15 themes across all research questions. Patterns and themes involving the relationship between the

anime fandom and TikTok were grouped into sets of five. Once the themes were organized, they were then compared to gratifications and affordances identified in prior literature.

I have experience being an active member and creator in the anime fandom on TikTok. I consume and create predominantly anime-related content on the TikTok platform. The “For You Page” outlines many opportunities to watch, engage, and create original content from my most important passions. I can understand participant experiences from the lens of a social media creator and a fan of anime. Inductive reasoning is still utilized for Thematic Analysis (TA) of participant findings, even with research bias being a minor implication to the study. However, participants offer multiple codes and themes that connect to each other, exploring inductive findings of research. I can offer in-depth experiential knowledge in hopes to better understand the anime fandom and its relationship to creating content on TikTok.

Table 1

RQ1: Uses and Gratifications	RQ2: Technological Affordances	RQ3: Themes of Content
Finding your crowd	Curation of Diverse Content	Character-Related
Character Empathy & Identification	Content Enhancement Tools	Skits
Creative Expression	Intuitive Editing	Content Criticism
Emotional Wellbeing	Algorithm / Wide Reach	Cosplay
Representation of Identity	Connecting to Others	Other content

Chapter 4: Results

RQ1: TikTok Uses and Gratifications

RQ1 addressed the uses and gratifications of creating TikTok videos in the anime fandom space. Extant literature demonstrates that creators derive various gratifications from creating videos on social media (Buf & Ștefăniță, 2020; Falgoust et al., 2021; Vaterlaus & Winter, 2021; Yaqi et al., 2021). Following a data-driven coding approach, themes of gratifications isolated from the data in this next section include finding your crowd, character empathy and identification, creative expression, emotional wellbeing, and representation of identity.

Finding your Crowd

Creators across the anime fandom have reported a gratification of finding their crowd through content creation. Creators seek to be in a space where they are engaging with others with similar interests. One participant, Rose, claims that she creates original anime content on TikTok to connect with more people like her and to “build inseparable, or not easily severed bonds” with those producing the same content. Similar crowds grant strong bonds shared by creators, developing connections through anime. For example, participant Bee states that not only is creating these videos a form of self-expression, but it enables Bee to “gravitate towards other people who had that same spark” as they do. Sharing a spark of passion in a similar crowd of interests motivates creators to not only create these anime videos, but to continuously engage in this crowd of shared interests. Gee (2000) states that “fanship” conceptualizes itself as a shared space where groups share a set of practices and participation from a text. Rose supports the value of a shared space and interests, stating:

“It’s...a very breathtaking experience of being able to have people that all like the same things that you do, and being able to just appreciate media.” Creators express how they feel about certain things or people, connecting shared interests and passions in the process. Zoe claims posting content on TikTok “is a way for me to connect with my friends that I’ve met on the platform and meet new people...find new things to experience in my real life.”

Creators seek fulfillment in creating anime videos by being a part of a crowd that resonates with their ideas. John states: “So.... a lot of these fandoms...it can connect you to people. It’s just a matter of who you talk with, what certain crowds, what do you know from that fandom, et cetera.” The identity gratification according to Chan (2014) expresses that individuals will integrate themselves in terms of the social groups to where they belong, with potential mediation to greater identifications to be discovered by the in-group formed from similar crowds of people. Fiorella (2023) states that groups gather online to create meaningful interactions and relationship-building experiences. Creators develop a passion for wanting to be a part of a group that holds identifiable themes of conversation that connect to the individual seeking that crowd. Mina supports this claim as she states: “I want to be a part of these fandoms...I want to be a part of this conversation.” When creators are a part of the anime conversation, they can reach and expand to a crowd of fans that are influenced by the videos curated. Participant L creates original anime content to build a passionate crowd of fans. Summarizing fan interaction and reception received from their videos, L states: “I watched this show because of you...I read this manga because of you...I read this fanfiction because of you, which is such a high compliment...I love being able to influence people in that way.” Possible implications to L growing a crowd of fans offers interpretation to how the platform shares L’s content to target audiences through affordances.

One participant expressed their love for cosplay as a vehicle for finding their crowd of people. Kendo states: “I want to show people the character I came up with and relate to other people who liked that character...to make new friends...to show them that...you can do whatever you want and be whoever and still enjoy cosplay.” Kendo is motivated to share her interests with others that connect in a similar way. As she is creating unique cosplay videos, she can create unique content from those cosplays to share with other cosplay creators on the same platform. Rahman et al. (2012) outline that in participatory culture such as cosplay, the identity and image of an individual is never the same. Additionally, cosplaying a favorite character in a crowd of fellow cosplayers is a way of expressing fandom and passion. Participant A states: “I just think as an introvert, it's weird for me to say this, but I think most things are better enjoyed when you're around people you care about. So when you're around loved ones, friends, strangers...I think things are best enjoyed in a community aspect.” Finding a crowd to share one’s passion gives an opportunity for utilizing the creative outlets that are best enjoyed together. Creators’ use of the platform to fulfill their needs and desires for social interaction and connection is consistent with the social integration gratification (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973). They assumed that media users are aware of the needs and gratifications they want to get out using them. People decide to fulfill their desires of engaging and affiliating with other people, seeking a connection outside of the space they currently interact in. Violet supports this claim, as she states: “the best way to connect with people is through shared interest.” Shepherd and Lane (2019) state that social media use and participation to connect with each other is a key feature to social integration, as well as provide important sources of social support. Sangwan (2005) identifies social integration as needs related to inclusion and being regarded as a part of the group. Participant

A shares: “The sense of community was something I wanted with being so passionate about something...I can't be alone with this feeling...I'm not crazy. This is great stuff here, right?” Not only is this a feeling of belonging, but the need to process media content and construct meanings from it through social interaction. Media users decide how they will seek others on the platform, which can help better understand what they gain from sharing a common connection.

Character Empathy & Identification

Another gratification that arose from making anime content on TikTok is character empathy and identification, involving one anime character or the whole narrative, to create videos connecting these characters and storylines through the platform. Creators seek to understand and relate to specific characters, which can motivate the fandom to create unique and original videos. Oden shares: “My favorite cosplay is probably Law from *One Piece*. Just because Law is probably one of my highest kins. I just see myself a lot in Law...and I have more than one. I have...three outfits for him right now, and I'm working on a fourth.” The term “kin” denotes a character that someone relates to. Someone may connect to a specific character based upon the backstory, personality, looks, or all the above. Oden sees himself enough in the character of Law to develop this personal connection to him which can motivate video creation with a cosplay. Character traits can cause identification for fans through which people identify with across the fandom. Jenkins (2007) claims that fan behaviors can be reflected upon as behaviors tied to fan identity. Alecia shares: “I think what really drew me in...was just how the main characters persevered through so much and refused to back down, and I really admired that...I wanted to be more like that in my own personal life.” Previous literature suggests that one individual can sense multiple identities at

once. The degree to which a particular identity is important or prominent relative to other identities within an individual is referred to as identity salience (Stryker, 1968). This is important to the findings due to the possibility of varying anime characters having multiple influences to offer a fan. Consuming different anime stories offers multiple interpretations to where fans place their identification the most. Salience of specific identities is likely to vary within an individual across time, which can shape the choices and behaviors created in media (Randel, 2002; Reed, 2004).

Empathy, a character trait found in this study through creators, may be tied to the connections with characters in fictional stories (Taylor, 2015). Empathy outlines emotional involvement to characters across narratives, providing a sense of attachment to the characters. Oden may use these cosplays and the kin characters in their videos on TikTok; wearing the cosplays, or simply just creating other videos about this character and the impact they have on the creator and the fandom. Travis shares: “Being able to see our main character Tanjiro... face these huge challenges and then being able to overcome them... I think that really relates to personal life and personal growth. Because oftentimes we do face challenges like that, and when we face those challenges...you need something to sometimes inspire you...I think that's what anime does, in that sense.” Taylor (2015) explains that for the empathetic individual, the narrative is more personal and real at certain emotional and cognitive levels. Developing emotions for character narratives can influence levels of identity shared by creators through content creation. When the narrative depicts itself as more vivid and real, the fan is transported into the fictional narrative (Green & Brock, 2000).

Discovering oneself and being comfortable in one's own skin can be difficult; however, Zoe connects to a character in the popular sports anime, *Haikyuu!!* (2014-2020),

stating: “He just reminds me of me... before I finally allowed myself to be myself...that was so important to me...that was it...that was the moment.” Character empathy and identification can greatly influence a creator's motivation to express their identity online. Idia cosplays characters because she has a “personal connection to them, or just some kind of...bond to them...feel for their story...or character arc.” Creators are continuously making anime content on the platform to reaffirm their identification with anime characters that connect on an interpersonal level. The process of developing identification with characters can be understood as a natural merge of the self with the media character (Cohen, 2014). Connection of feelings and emotions for a character becomes present when identity is associated, which offers more gratifications to discover. Cohen (2014) outlines parasocial interaction to be the emotions and behaviors an audience member acquires from experiences of interacting with media characters. Participant A claims: “when you have a show in a manga with characters that are so in depth, you feel like you kind of know them...you might know a friend that's like them, you feel like you might have similar personality traits, or you hate the same villain, etc.” Creators develop strong connections and identification which is associated with the need to share creative expression in the online fandom space.

Creative Expression

As creators identify with anime narratives, characters, and other fans, they seek to creatively express their passionate ideas through content creation. Mina states that she values “being a creative person and having a space where I can truly just be myself and talk about anime for an hour on end.” Discovering a place in which you can let your creativity shine is a motivating factor to uploading creative videos. Chilton and Leavy (2014) explain that creators have mobilized the Internet worldwide to offer virtual spaces and tools for activities

such as sparking creativity, creating a community, and gaining knowledge in new techniques or concepts that offer creative expression. Being creative is at the heart of being an anime fan. Bee shares: “I could find a way that was a form of self-expression and be able to show my love of characters and shows through that...” Sevik (2015) explains that being a part of a fandom is a great way to express and develop one's creativity, whether just starting out or fully engaged in original content creations every day. Idia states that “everyone has their own creative mind and spin on things...their level of passion for a story...everyone's going to express that so drastically different...makes the whole content creation of like any app, so unique, and I think like fulfilling.” Being passionate leads to multiple avenues of creative interpretations when making anime content. Additionally, Travis expresses his joy of imagining one thing in the universe of an anime, and then expanding or altering the discourse with a creative imagination. Once a user imagines interpretive ideas, they may then begin to bring those imaginative ideas to the media landscape of TikTok through creative video. John shares: “I’m a creative person in and out of the cosplay world...I need the outlet to where I’m able to think of something great.” Rose claims she hears “a point that’s valid” in the anime fandom, she can then “take it and interpret it and turn it into something that’s more creative.” Creators support each other by offering outlets of creative expression by gratifying the needs of both creator and fans they connect to, maintaining a healthier wellbeing in and around the social space. Miller (2016) states that high levels of engagement in social media can create such a multifaceted social construct to where ideas of belonging and creativity can be shaped and transformed. According to Acar et al. (2021), all social media users can create and modify online content in a participatory and collaborative fashion (p. 61). Creating videos on the TikTok platform offers users to share their creative spaces as sources of

invitation, inspiration, and connection to new places in a fictional world. Potash (2009) outlines the act of creative expression allows creative artists to not only better relate to personal concepts and reflections but provides a rich opportunity to build the connection with other creators with creative expression. Creators seek to share their creative expression not only across the fandom, but to satisfy emotional wellbeing gratifications for content creation.

Emotional Wellbeing

Several participants discussed the effect of creating anime content and how it has affected their overall wellbeing on the TikTok platform. Participant G states: “I asked myself, does this video make me smile? And every one of my videos that I've posted has made me smile...and that's why I decided to post them.” Posting for a smile motivates G to upload his creative content the way he wants. Receiving the element of joy and happiness promotes a positive mental space for G. This allows him to be true to himself in his videos, maintaining a smile regardless of the circumstance. Zoe reflects on emotional wellbeing as well; they share: “I'm actually autistic, and anime is probably like, my biggest special interest...so getting to indulge in my special interest is really important for my mental health...and so it actually it helps me regulate myself... you know, feel that fulfillment of getting to do my favorite thing, while in the depths and the trenches of working in school.” Zoe expresses that indulging in a special interest helps them and is very important for their overall emotional wellbeing. Indulging in media that makes one feel joy, happiness, and safety is important and having that gratification sought directly through TikTok is important to identify regarding the platform's relationship with anime creators. Bonclay states: “I guess if I'm spreading joy, I get a lot of people interacting with my videos.” Bonclay goes beyond just his own wellbeing by using the positive emotional effects of the content to increase

audience engagement. Oden claims that whenever he is cosplaying characters from *One Piece* (1999-present), “...it just makes me happy.” When Idia posts about her cosplays, she shares: “It brings out a lot of joy and happiness for me just cosplaying the characters that I love and have a really big passion for.” Idia receives an emotional release when she shares her passionate cosplays on TikTok, which in turn can reach other passionate cosplayers and increase emotional engagement tied to posting favorite cosplays. Violet shares: “I could talk about just that ‘one scene’ from *Attack on Titan* (2013-2023) ...for hours if we wanted to...and would have so much fun doing it...and to me, that has really, really positively impacted my mental health.” In summary, creators are expressing that creating and sharing anime content on TikTok positively promotes better wellbeing for them.

Media users are becoming more aware of their emotional and mental health needs, and this becomes evident when they reflect on their media experience. Wagner et al. (2021) found that individuals increased their TV watching, smartphone use, and use of streaming services to stay connected with others, which increased awareness for media becoming a coping tool for stress and improved mental health. Additionally, this can be connected to creators consuming their favorite anime, to curate original content on TikTok. Creators embrace social networking sites as tools for both communication and information, which can influence the mood and psychological wellbeing of individuals. Several studies have already linked mental wellbeing with internet usage, as well as active versus passive usage on wellbeing (Lin et al., 2022, Kim, 2017; Valkenburg et al., 2022;). For example, Davila et al. (2012) expresses that the quality of network experiences is more influential in predicting wellbeing than the frequency of social media use. These findings appear to echo extant literature by pointing to wellbeing effects of creating video content on the TikTok platform.

Representation of Identity

A few discussion points creators expressed while creating content centered around the need for identities to be represented across the anime genre and the TikTok platform respectively. Participant A states that growing up with American media, the content shared was incredibly limiting in terms of representation of individual orientation, as “it was always the guy and girl, and as a young queer child...this is not for me, there was not much representation.” Western media follows many binary patterns of love and connections between others and may have individuals struggling to find a character that resonates with them in the same way Japanese media audiences identify with media characters in Japan. Giroux (2006) explains that animation combines a sphere where entertainment, advocacy, and pleasure meet to conceptualize worldview interpretations of gender, racial, and class positions. Napier (2005, 2011) indicates that anime characters do not belong to a specific race or ethnicity, suggesting that anime deals with problems of modern life affecting people of different nations. Furthermore, fans are participating in what may be a genuinely new and unique Japanese culture (Napier, 2007, p. 210). Anime manifests the conflicts and complexities of Japan, particularly in connection to the West and other Asian countries in midst of globalization, therefore playing a major part of identity emphasis (Yoshida, 2008). Participant A needs representation in anime so that they can resonate truer to the identity expressed by the creator. Bee supports this discussion by stating they “didn’t know they made me, but in anime form.” When consuming anime content, audiences seek to discover themes and characters that embody that need for representation - connecting oneself to the content shared across the platform. Jenkins (2006) encourages participatory culture here in the sense that people mutually participate in the process of identity formation and

collectively represent identities in terms of engaging with the production and consumption of anime content on TikTok. Travis outlines the repercussions that sexualizing women in anime has on specific cultures. Being aware and desiring change was an “eye opener” for Travis, that “women deserve rights in the sense that they shouldn't be just sexualized as objects in this entire genre of [Japanese] TV.” This points to a darker side of anime in terms of female portrayal and accurate representation, with participants seeming to want better representation of diverse identities in anime. Content creation on social platforms like TikTok allows the opportunity to promote better representation with the unique, intuitive, and engaging videos creators outline across the platform.

RQ2: Affordances of the TikTok Platform

Gratifications obtained by creators are at least in part made possible by the unique set of affordances offered by TikTok. Affordances are highly influential to the content creation process and motivate creators to utilize varying features of a social media platform to construct creative videos. This section discusses the platform specific affordances reported by the participants as impactful on their use of the platform.

Curation of Diverse Content

Participant L states that “the great thing about TikTok is how expansive it is” and that “there is content for pretty much anything that you were looking for.” No matter what, there is something for everyone on the TikTok platform regarding anime. Bonclay expresses how “no one knew what *One Piece* (1999-present) was. People knew *Naruto: Shippuden* (2007-2017), but barely...so once TikTok started popping it off, more people started talking about anime and stuff...it's great.” The social media app offers multiple avenues of content exploration and expansion to creating and consuming everyone's favorite anime stories.

Participant A expresses the capabilities TikTok must support content on their platform. A state that TikTok can be seen as a "gateway drug" into anime fandom, where it's "easy to step in," giving creators the opportunity to explore the various content types offered. TikTok has people coming back to the platform due to its ability to expand content types that find preferences across all creators. Travis shares: "I think that's what TikTok is nice about...keeping you in your comfort zone and allowing you to branch out into...something entirely different if you want to." TikTok is now a part of message making and that determines ways in which a message will be perceived to those interacting with it. Travis outlines TikTok as this messaging medium which offers various ways to navigate the platform for content: staying in a niche or expanding and diversifying that content created from other areas of the platform. Additionally, Zoe expresses that "TikTok is bringing a lot of new people who never would have thought to, you know, indulge in anime. It's bringing a lot of content to new people, and it's bringing more people into the fandom which I love." The video-based content being expanded is a representation of the modality affordance of audiovisual media discussed by Sundar (2008) in the MAIN model posits that audiovisual media imparts a *realism heuristic* - people trusting and utilizing more audiovisual media present to them for relatable content to the creator. Online content shared may develop a higher resemblance to the real world than being offline.

Content Enhancement Tools

TikTok is expanding the audiovisual content offered on the platform using creative filters and audio clips, granting engagement and curation of unique content across the anime landscape. The use of filters dominates the TikTok landscape, whether that is in the anime fandom or not. Morgan (2024) states that filters can be used to adjust brightness, hue, and

contrast of videos, but can also be used to add fun effects and overlays. TikTok filters and effects are all about customizing one's footage. The visual and stylistic appeal of the customizable filters was identified by the participants as a prominent affordance relevant to anime creators. Mina expresses her use of filters on TikTok when curating ideas to make for a video. She states: "I call it a filter...one of many, many video effects that you can do...that's probably my favorite one because it just randomizes a character and there's so many different ways you can be creative with that filter, whether that's doing the song and making it sad, or ranking the characters as they pop up not knowing who's going to show up." The visual tools offer multiple creative ideas for content creation, such as ranking characters or sharing an emotional moment with the audience. The visual opportunities are endless for creation when utilizing these character filters shared on TikTok. Zoe states that filters are a great way to "spark new creative ideas...I use those for a lot of content...and then all of the features like green screen and like different filters can give me ways to put images on the screen super easily." There is no limit on creativity when incorporating a filter to a video. Travis believes the filter effects used in the anime space are a "dominant force," and "that's good." Filters of anime content create multiple interpretations and discourse to promote engagement with the fandom on TikTok. Alecia expresses: "The filters where it gives you like a box on the top of your head, and it just scrolls through characters and gives you a random one...I tend to stay away from like, non-animated ones, just because I think it gives people a false sense of security, where it's like...in 2024 you're going to be super rich...like probably not. She recognizes that non animated filters are not as appealing as those used with the topic of anime. Alecia supports the visual and emotional appeal filters may have on creators, as audiences desire to see their favorite characters ranked from worst to best or witnessing their

favorite anime creator talk about their favorites from the filters. Anime filters promote creative interpretation and discourse regarding an audience's favorite anime story. The modality affordance in the MAIN Model (2013) supports this finding with different modalities of digital presentation being utilized from filters curated by “actual users,” as Travis states (e.g., filter selection). The filters embody an area of multimedia that is used to evoke responses from creators and audiences, where, in this case, visual modality is more trusted and predominant than the text (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Limited scholarly research has been done on social media video filters as affordances, however, Hill (2024) states that trending filters on TikTok are selected by users, along with trending audio, encouraging users to create in various ways.

Travis expresses the opposite end of filter use:

I think it's kind of a double edged sword, right, because you use the filter, you get more views off of the TikTok...you're more likely to get more people to interact and engage...and that's great...but also in the same breath, like you do get kind of stuck to those filters...if you want your account to do well, you do have to continue to use the filters...and when you don't use a filter, your view will automatically get less views.

Filters applications develop quickly and are increasingly ingrained to social media fandom culture (Hill, 2024). This area of modality offers the audience the feeling of being there in the environment with the interactive filter through meaningful video (Sundar &

Limperos, 2013). The modality affordance resonates with the gratifications of creative expression and finding a crowd of shared interests, with insight onto more TikTok affordances becoming applicable.

Not only are visual filters prominent in the anime space on TikTok, but the intermixing of various audio clips TikTok offers is key for content creation. Participant A states that even though most audios stop themselves at 30 seconds, anime creators tend to still use those audio formats for wide varieties of content. A short clip of that audio being used with a short form video is enough for that content to reach an audience of shared interests quickly. Idia states they enjoy adding specific songs or memes to their cosplay videos - to heighten enjoyment and possible engagement with more fans. Cosplay creators tend to utilize relatable, trending or completely random audio clips at their disposal to intermix with their cosplay reveal videos. The combination of audio with cosplay makes for an intuitive and creative piece of content that Idia expresses to be “really fun.” G shares: “When I see some of my videos that have more stuttering than the others...it makes me hesitant to post. So...when I try to use the editing filter...maybe add some music...that the TikTok allows me to use and see.” Sound as an audio affordance can be expanded by Keylin (2020) to outline creative listening, which puts the audience (listener) in the creator’s position to interpret the audio and sound making influences on the content. The concept of individual affordances (Leonardi, 2017) is realized by individual users to fit their own specific needs. Utilizing different avenues of content creation helps actualize shared or collective affordances by the anime fandom TikTok allows them to utilize helpful ways of tweaking audio formats to best fit the user. Both uses of creative filters and accessible audio

clips grant discussion on TikTok's overall intuitive editing features for successful content creation.

Intuitive Editing

The affordances described above offer both visual and auditory modalities for the creator, which influence the interactivity affordance of editing real time content on the TikTok platform. The *interaction heuristic* outlined in the MAIN Model (Sundar, 2008) involves users having the option to specify their needs and preferences on a consistent basis with feasible editing, soliciting greater specificity in terms of the resulting content formed. Participant G states that all the filters are fun that he uses, and that they “don’t require much editing.” Using a filter for a video requires little editing on the creator’s part, as the platform offers a pre-made customized filter that can be ready for posting with a click of a button. Alecia states that being able to “easily add captions” to support one’s video for audience accessibility is very important. Alecia values accessibility, which makes the editing process much more feasible to work with considering TikTok pushes creators to include closed captioning in every video. Additionally, she shares: “I think just the short form content of it too, and like being able to add sounds really easily...I think that's good.” Zoe expresses the flexibility of making short form content (15-30 seconds), they share: “I feel as though the short form video content...they make it very easy to post. It's very accessible. I know that I can express my creativity in the way that I want to...not nearly as much time as say, like an Instagram post or a YouTube video.” Idia supports the feasibility editing on TikTok as well, she states: “I feel like it's easier to post more on TikTok, at least for me, because of the video length and kind of like the freedom you have in making any kind of video.” The short span of time is enough to hook an audience without needing to constantly get their attention for the

whole video. John shares: “TikTok has a magic crop that you're able to use if you search for an image...and it will ask if you want to match a crop where it will have the character and not the white background...so it makes the videos of mine crispier...I love being able to present properly.” Interactivity based affordances (Sundar, 2008) engage the creator to utilize TikTok’s intuitive editing software. Creators can freely edit their videos how they desire, with real time changes to interactivity occurring during the editing phase, as well as after posting. TikTok encourages users to continuously edit and share new content, so having a flexible yet expansive toolset is key to content creation through the algorithm.

Algorithm & Wide Reach

Schelleward (2023) outlines that TikTok is an algorithm which facilitates an assembly of videos addressing aspects of people’s interests, tastes, and identity. These same videos are to be constructed by content creators to represent multiple themes of anime content present in the fandom. Travis claims utilizing filters in the anime fandom on TikTok helps you grow your fanbase easier and attains more views and engagement on the platform. On the other hand, he claims creators may get stuck by only posting filter videos to maintain consistent viewership and engagement. Engagement is high but creativity can be stuck because of the TikTok algorithm only enabling specific videos to attain maximum engagement for creators. Participant L supports the discussion on the algorithm, stating: “I think the TikTok algorithm is very difficult to understand...I think that TikTok picks favorites.” Due to TikTok’s personalized algorithm, content consumption and creation will vary across creators. Mina expresses a potential solution to understanding the algorithm; she shares: “You have to listen to the algorithm of TikTok...if you want to be successful at it at all, you have to listen to it.” Violet has the opportunity of “meeting people” that she

“otherwise would have never met,” while Kendo claims her videos reach “way more people than any other app for sure.” Furthermore, Kendo knows her videos will warrant more engagement than naturally posting on Instagram.

Kendo shares her view of growth on social media platforms:

One, it reaches way more people than any other app for sure...if I post my TikTok, I know it's going to reach more people than it is on my Instagram. Two, it's reaching not only just my followers, but new people who haven't seen my content before...so that gives me a chance to grow quicker on the app, as well as TikTok also has a small compensation plan and things where people can send you things and send you money, which other platforms don't have very well.

TikTok’s customized interface grants creators’ feasible growth and engagement on all ends of the video editing process. Violet loves the TikTok community because it exposes her to people “who share my interests, but outside of anime.” The effect of the algorithm has become so vast in a sense in which it knows what viewers want realistically. John sees a lot of “open door opportunities” when it comes to TikTok, where you can meet people from across the states: “like you just never know.” Navigability based affordances may be identified to capture exchanges of information and how that is received, using browsing and activity-seeking tactics to reach the desired audience on the platform (2013). In terms of navigability, the TikTok platform has the dual ability to directly trigger *browsing* heuristics with different navigational aids on the platform's interface, as well as to transmit online cues

through the content that it generates (Sundar, 2008). Creators can navigate how they desire in the TikTok space, with the algorithm providing much to the browsing process to best suit individual needs and desires sought from the “For You Page.” Violet learned that it's harder to grow on Instagram when you have no followers, as she states: “I learned that it's a lot harder to grow on Instagram when you start from zero and it's a little easier on TikTok to start a new account...if you have zero followers and use the right hashtags...you might get ahead. Creators can move freely in the TikTok space, but the algorithm will move on its own to best suit individual needs and desires sought from the “For You Page.”

Connecting to Others

The TikTok medium not only offers modality, interactivity, and navigability as prominent affordances to creators, but the agency affordance (2013) warrants opportunity for creators to be agents of communicating sources of information. Sourcing and exchanging information through content creation involves entities in the chain of communication on TikTok, from an online location to a collection of other users, to oneself, among many others (Sundar, 2008).

Rose shares her connection to TikTok:

I think...of the word TikTok, or when I think of it, the first thing that comes to mind is...community. I have a very hard time expressing how I feel about things or about people, and this app has genuinely given me some of the best people I will have ever met in my life. This app helps people express how they feel about certain things or people, connecting them together.

TikTok offers itself as a platform for connection and community, which ties not only to the technological affordances of the platform, but gratifications of creativity sought by the creator. Zoe states: “It’s a way for me to connect with my friends that I’ve met on the platform and meet new people and find new things to experience in my real life.” TikTok builds connections old and new and expands on opportunities for new experiences. The “friends only feature” outlines itself as a prominent affordance on TikTok for creators to upload videos that are only for people that you follow mutually. Violet expresses: “I’m immediately drawn to it, and I immediately watch...maybe they’re talking about their life, and I get a peek into...who they are beyond anime.” Billingsley (2022) states that often on TikTok, “it is possible to follow anyone, but not everyone follows back. When they do, though, they are considered mutual.” Idia states: “Without the app, I wouldn’t have created as much as I have...I think it also builds a lot of memories, because a lot of the videos I have on there, like are video ideas I’ve done with friends that maybe wouldn’t have happened without the app.” Friends can grow and sustain meaningful connections with others, and Idia values that element of the TikTok medium. As previously stated, the agency affordance (Sundar, 2008; Sundar & Limperos, 2013) allows creators to be agents or sources of information for their audiences, placing emphasis on entities in the exchange of communication. The *identity heuristic* (Sundar, 2008) is likely to be triggered here whenever this affordance allows the user to assert their identity through technology. As TikTok offers motives to connect and share information, self-agency is becoming a prominent tool across creators and audiences alike to continuously build connections and interact with a shared passion across the anime fandom. These same videos are to be constructed by content creators to represent multiple themes of anime content present in the fandom.

RQ3: Themes of Anime Content

The gratifications sought by anime creators and platform-specific affordances of TikTok together shape the themes of content made by creators. The main content themes identified in this analysis are discussed below.

Character-Related Content

Content creators seek to utilize the anime character filters predominantly in the fandom. Mina expresses: “I will just rank characters based on how much I like them or how much I think they would like me, that sort of thing. I just like to...do whatever comes to my mind.” Additionally, Travis states: “I like to use the filters on TikTok. I like the randomness of it.” He then goes on with the construction of how he makes his videos by “building characters or building like fake characters and a universe” and then he uses the attributes of specific characters to then create a custom character which he shares: “That's always fun to kind of imagine something in the universe and kind of build off of it...using *Demon Slayer* (2019-present) filters specifically.” Participant G expresses their favorite types of filters being “favorite anime characters” or “smash or pass” to name a few. Both creators and audiences engage with these themes of character content and more, as many popular anime sustain their popularity by having TikTok users interacting with these customized filters. The theme of character-related content ties to gratifications expressed above such as sharing creative expression, character empathy and identity. Booth (2008) states that fans make self-conscious connections and relationships between narratives and their senses of selves. Both creators and their fan audiences recognize identifiable personality traits and behaviors between the characters-related videos that incorporate various filter types mentioned above.

Not only is this form of content predominantly applied, but skits also arise to engage specific audiences to interpretive storylines that can offer multiple perspectives when created.

Skits

Skits are a mix of improvised and original scripted material made by the creator to encapsulate an anime storyline that may not be present in the main source material. Idia states: “I...absolutely love the storylines people create...it’s kind of like a fanfiction...but like video format...like theater format in a way...really fun to watch.” When creators make skits with their favorite characters, various storylines are created to further engage and expand prior knowledge set by the anime narratives. Another perception of these characters is curated, which offers creative interpretations from the creator to the audience. This can be an enjoyable way to watch and interact with content for passionate fans. Participant A supports the discussion of their skit-based content.

A share their view of skit videos:

They call it head canons in the biz. Basically, when you have a show and a manga with characters that are so in depth, you feel like you kind of know them...you feel like...you might know a friend that's like them...you feel like you might have similar personality traits, or you hate the same villain...which is why I like well written characters...and so the content that I really like to make is, like, just skit-based content off of this character...if this character had a conversation about blank, this is how it would go...and it's typically comedy. It's usually never like angst or drama. It's typically a satire comedy.

Zoe mainly posts skits, calling them "unhinged discussion posts," saying whatever comes to mind in the moment for characters. Participant L states: "I make a lot of skits, where it's characters from my favorite shows interacting in ways that they would pretty much never interact in the actual shows." Skits become increasingly popular when characters are put up in certain interactions that fans connect with more than most themes of content. L expresses that when most of their fans know who prominent anime characters are, such as being a part of the "Dazai" fandom, it "helps a lot with engagement." Skits are an enjoyable and engaging way to capture fans' hearts with their passion for anime characters and storylines. Gratifications of creative expression and character identity are prominent through this theme of content to reaffirm social identities with characters. The agency affordance (2008) grants users to be sources of information exchanges, and creative skits are an easy way to deliver fun and engaging content that fans can react to, share, and expand the information given. Harwood (1999) incorporates social identity gratification as an important mediator for in-group identification and the outcomes. While creators upload interactive skits embodying their favorite anime characters, other creators choose to take the stage with discussion-led videos that can provide meaningful discourse across the fandom.

Content Criticism

Another theme that became prominent across content creators was the use of discussion videos in which creators critique anime storylines, characters, or current news releases out in the fandom. The purpose of a critic is to "form the tastes that would determine which works would function as general culture" (Frey, 2014, p. 20). Having the role as a critic in this anime fandom can involve being cultural gatekeepers, acting between the artists and the audience, with authority to add certain value to culture and elevate the art of it

(Janssen & Verboord, 2015, p. 440; Bourdieu, 1996, p. 229). Frey (2014) describes the key to criticism is authority, granting the legitimacy to describe, explain, and contextualize a certain cultural topic to a certain audience (p. 18). Travis states he posts a “kind of discussion video...those are less common, though.” Furthermore, he could make a video about an “anime villain that you agree with” from *Naruto: Shippuden* (2007-2017). Posing a question that can spark engaged discussion amongst the fandom, by the audience offering their answers to the question, either agreeing or disagreeing with Travis. Violet expresses that she makes “rants” where she might complain about something or say something funny, in a “type of monologue” format. A pattern of long form discourse is present within this theme of content; expanding information and opinions from the creator to share with the audience to keep a conversation going. On the other hand, Rose exclaims she would never do the “hot take” type of videos she sees in the anime fandom. Potentially controversial videos such as discussing topics of critique in anime pave different routes of engagement depending on the context of the video. Kendo says she must be careful of spoilers from certain videos in the fandom that appear on her page. She states that there are “definitely people who get into the meat and potatoes of the storyline and the critiques and what they think is going to happen next,” which gives the opportunity to share content that not everyone may be caught up with yet. Booth (2008) states to have a successful post through this fan created dialogue, the creator must build an identity that is different from others, but similar enough to offer fans to be on the same page. Bailey et al. (2020) outlines a gratification of self-expression that grants individuals to assert their identifiable sense of self. On the other hand, self-idealizing behavior can refer to acting out of character related feelings of internal conflict and strong emotional reactions. In the area of content criticism, individuals may possess characteristics

that are more or less socially accepted and desirable by the target audience. Content criticism as a form of video can be informative, engaging, and discursive to varying interpretations across popular anime.

The Art of Cosplaying

When most creators are not generating new discussions for engaging with their fans, they are creating cosplays and original content that speaks to the creator and the character. Bee expresses that they “didn’t necessarily do skits,” but would find audios on TikTok to pair with their favorite cosplay, starting to “shift a little bit more into...the art form of it.”

Rahman et al. (2012) state cosplay is a theatrical performance with high involvement of participation. Individuals may spend large amounts of time choosing their favorite character due to the role and personality they signify, while others may do so because of the physical appearances that connect to their own physique (Rahman et al., 2012, p. 321). Bee continues by sharing that they are “more so well-known with...braided cosplays...a lot of *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba* (2019-present) ...Mitsuri, Rengoku, Sanemi” while also being “super into *Chainsaw Man* (2022-present) ...tend to cosplay based off of hyper fixation.”

Neelam (2023) defines hyper fixation as “a complete obsession or absorption to a task.” Individuals who hyper fixate on a certain anime show or hobby may tune out the world around them and solely focus on their passion at hand. John expresses from his cosplay reveal side that his “Yuji Itadori cosplay reveal” is one of his “definite favorites.” He was able to brand himself as a “dancer cosplayer” - two of his favorite passions - to the TikTok medium. John holds TikTok to a “tremendous value” because that is where he does most of his cosplay edits and creation. Kendo expresses that she feels “very strongly about TikTok and cosplaying...there's a good community out there that does support each other.” Rose

recently transitioned from making skit-based content to being a part of the “cosplay community” and maintaining a predominantly “cosplay account.” Even though Violet’s content is not cosplaying, she states that she has “so much respect for the content creators who are cosplayers who do such a phenomenal job with their cosplays.” Cosplaying characters from popular anime is a prominent theme of content that is shared amongst the fandoms. Cosplaying associates itself with feeling for the character through identification, which motivates content creators to share videos of them in specific cosplays. Scott (2023) states that cosplaying on TikTok has not only impacted the individual cosplayers, but it has also brought the cosplaying community together. Cosplayers connect with others across the platform to share and collaborate original ideas. TikTok offers cosplayers to showcase their creativity in unfiltered and authentic manners. Cosplay provides individuals with dreams and fantasies that cannot be fulfilled in their daily lives (Rahman et al., 2012). The cosplaying community connects each other together with fans who are passionate about the art. Benesh-Liu (2007) states that cosplaying can transform bland surroundings into surreal tableaux of art. Rose enjoys that the cosplay community “do not gatekeep,” but instead “give you the things that they do to make it better” for her content. This, in turn, can improve video curation and make content engagement much more enjoyable.

Other Themes of Content

A few other themes of content were discussed and are important to understand regarding anime fandom on TikTok. Alecia shares her experience with opening mystery bags on her page. Alecia shares “I watched a lot of other people open blind bag stuff...and I think it's, it's like fun. It's kind of like gambling...when you open those bags...it kind of sucks to get like five of the same things in a row. I think it was the first series I collected, and it was a

Naruto: Shippuden (2007-2017) bag clip... literally got five Pain bag clips.” Blind bags are a fun way as a fan and collector to gather favorite anime characters together through opening mystery bags and sharing that with an audience. Furthermore, unboxings are a neat way to gather fans to watch various collectibles unboxed through video. Idia states: “I’ll do like an unboxing for different anime things that I get.” Reaction videos are an interesting way to hook old and new viewers to an anime narrative. Violet shares: “I do a little bit of like reaction videos where if there’s like a new episode that comes out of *Jujutsu Kaisen*, which was you know, a huge anime that was going on from August until December 2023. I would do a little bit of reaction videos because I could see that there was an audience for it.” Themes of content shared across the fandom would not be possible if it wasn’t for the popular anime associated with them [e.g., *Demon Slayer* (2019-present), *Jujutsu Kaisen* (2020-present), *Bungo Stray Dogs* (2016-present), *One Piece* (1999-present), *Naruto: Shippuden* (2007-2017), *Chainsaw Man* (2022)].

Discussion

This study examined the perceptions, experiences, and motivations of TikTok creators in anime fandom. This type of fandom creating anime content on TikTok has not been widely researched in prior literature due to minimal studies examining the relationship between uses and gratifications and platform-specific affordances in the realm of a content creator through a fandom. Themes of gratifications connecting to one another will be discussed, as well as the platform-specific affordances of TikTok and their value to the gratifications sought by creators to construct many themes of anime content.

Gratification Themes Old and New

Some of the findings are consistent with prior literature on uses and gratifications across media, as well as the relationship to technological affordances. While prior research mostly examined direct needs and desires driving the consumption of the mass media by its audiences (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000), this present study builds on this scholarship by examining how new media such as TikTok creates new gratifications and new motivations to drive content creation through the anime fandom on TikTok. The five gratification themes outlined in the analysis reflected the uses and gratifications sought by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974), such as personal identity, social integration, entertainment, and information seeking. The gratification themes isolated in this study directly tie into one another. Connecting to others with shared interests may amplify how users share character empathy and identification through creative expression of creating anime videos on TikTok. The gratification of personal identity associates itself with character empathy and representation of identity by finding models of behavior and reinforcement for personal values through media. Additionally, personal identity gains insight into oneself, which is

reflected upon when creators seek empathy to identify with an anime character for content creation. Both social integration and information seeking tie to fans finding their crowd of people with shared interests by finding a desire for conversation and social interaction, as well as identifying with others to gain a sense of belonging. Likewise, seeking a similar crowd of people leads to information seeking of curiosity, advice, and overall insight into the environment in which creators step foot in. The entertainment gratification has connections to the findings of emotional wellbeing and creative expression. Seeking entertainment involves any intrinsic cultural or aesthetic moment, as well as seeking relaxation and emotional release. Having a fan being represented by their identities from an anime character or story is valuable across the anime fandom. Feeling for a character or narrative can influence the need to be represented in media and the participation of anime culture. Napier (2005, 2011) outlines that anime characters do not belong to a specific race or ethnicity, suggesting that anime storytelling deals with problems of modern life affecting varying nations across fandom. TikTok content creation today represents a positive progression of a broader representation in today's media versus when the younger generations were growing up.

If fan behaviors are understood as behaviors interlinked with fan identity (Jenkins, 1992), then fanship may arise from involvement with a specific anime narrative or body of narratives. Identification with others is produced through fandom membership. Media fanship constitutes an aspect of user identity: while bonding with the ingroup, anime creators on TikTok simultaneously distinguish themselves from the members outside the anime fandom, or outgroups (see Reysen & Branscombe, 2010; Voci, 2006). This element of participation through this social medium can create a multifaceted and multi-networked,

media object where notions of belonging and creativity transform the social landscape (Miller, 2016). The empathy that a creator feels for an anime narrative or character can directly tie into the properties of emotional wellbeing when creating these types of videos in the fandom. The effect of an emotional release from creating videos is an important gratification to identify, as prior research pivots more exclusively to social media usage and wellbeing with these few studies (Lin et al., 2016; Kim, 2017; Valkenburg et al., 2022). Elements of emotional wellbeing that are shared by participants can be tied to the empathy and identification across anime narratives. Media users in the anime fandom are becoming more aware of mental health and emotional wellbeing needs, which positions research to expand in the relationship between content creation and emotional wellbeing. Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch's (1974) original uses and gratifications develops a foundation for why people seek out different elements of a social medium. The present study expands those gratifications to outline more from the lens of the content creators on TikTok as to why they are engaging in the anime fandom. Overall, these findings are important considering research pointing to uses and gratifications of social media (Hanson & Haridakis, 2008; Vaterlaus & Winter, 2021; Yaqi et al., 2021) by expanding gratifications related to creating fandom-specific videos as tools for creative expression, emotional wellbeing, and representative identity, and to share identifiable characteristics and values in a shared space.

Affordance Themes

Research in affordances supported in RQ2 suggests that users of media develop a relationship with the properties of social media platforms, which can then manufacture or manipulate those properties the platform has taken (Gibson, 1977; Sundar & Limperos, 2013; Sundar, 2008). An affordance refers to the capacity possessed by the technological medium

to either initiate or facilitate a specific action (Norman, 1988), and in regard to this present study, exploring how the platform-specific affordances and gratifications are directly connected to one another. The MAIN Model provides a rich approach to examining social media uses and gratifications by focusing on the capacity of the Internet-based platforms, providing a wide range of engagement options (Rathnayake & Winter, 2018). The findings of this study reveal that the TikTok platform helps creators express how they feel about certain issues or characters, connecting both creators and viewers together. With the expansive content and reach TikTok holds, the affordance of facilitating connections ties directly to the gratification of finding one's crowd of shared interests and related passions. Creators can personalize their video how they desire with customized filter effects, closed captioning software, and sound additions. Intuitive editing features and accessibility lead to creative expression as a prominent gratification tied to these affordances. Diverse content shared by the algorithm to the user can offer relatable content that identifies creator values and traits for video ideas. The algorithm acts as a navigational aid, transmitting cues to the content that it generates (Sundar, 2008). TikTok is an algorithm which offers an array of videos addressing parts of people's preferences, tastes, and identity (Schelleward, 2023). TikTok users' motives and behaviors ties not only to the technological affordances of the platform, but how the platform-specific affordances and gratifications sought create the popular themes of content shared across the anime fandom.

Content Created

Themes of content shared in RQ3 offers insights into how TikTok gratifications and platform-specific affordances influenced the themes of content shared across the anime fandom on TikTok. Anime themes of content can be better understood when associated with

the gratifications shared by participants. Creators who seek to creatively express their identifiable traits across the fandom tend to create videos such as character-related content involving anime character filters, or unhinged discussion posts known as skits to embody multiple anime narratives. Additionally, other creators in the anime fandom will upload content criticism, having authority in describing, explaining, or contextualizing a certain cultural topic to the audience (Frey, 2015). Criticism of anime news, narratives, and overall character development are possible topics of discourse and controversy in regard to content criticism. The art of cosplaying is a newfound community on the TikTok platform, bringing people together to showcase their creativity in authentic ways. The cosplaying community connects each other through the passion of anime, which furthers creative expression and heightens the capabilities in which anime cosplayers express their art to the online fandom.

A major takeaway of this analysis is that content creators across the anime fandom share themes of gratifications and platform-specific affordances that influence creators to upload different kinds of anime content. The participants in this study shared a variety of needs: they sought to find their crowd (through connecting, conversating, cosplaying, and belonging), feel for character empathy and representing their identity (through narrative influence, and kinning), and to creatively express (through an outlet) with increased awareness to emotional wellbeing and mental health. While seeking these gratifications, creators actively utilize the affordances brought by the TikTok platform. The algorithm offers wider reach than most social media apps and offers expansive content with intuitive editing features and filters at the creators' disposal. McLuhan (1964) outlines an understanding of the media's role in meaning-making to claim that the medium is in fact the message. The TikTok platform represents the medium in this case, outlining that it is not just

the medium, but what one did with the medium, that was its meaning or message. The medium shapes and controls how users interact and value the platform affordances, with the connection to user gratifications. In other words, every fan is an active participant on the platform, no matter if one passively scrolls, comments on a video, or creates the content that people engage with. With these features of the TikTok medium in mind, anime creators can successfully consume, engage, and create content that resonates with the trending fandom.

Limitations and Directions for Further Research

This study presents itself with some limitations. First, TikTok was the sole platform of focus throughout this study, with no attention to other social media anime experiences such as creating on Instagram (Haug et al., 2024) or being a YouTuber (Buf & Ștefăniță, 2020; Fedele et al., 2018). The second limitation stems from the analytical approach used. While thematic analysis is flexible, this flexibility represents varying experiences shared from research gathered, which may limit consistency with thematic findings. Thematic analysis of anime creators through other social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube can be of interest for future studies of anime fandom research. The third limitation results from the sample characteristics. This study involved a small network sample of 15 content creators based in the US. There is importance in sampling larger and more diverse groups across the US, with focus on triangulating interview-based studies with larger-scale quantitative research like surveys and content analysis of anime-related TikTok content. Future research may expand the scope of creators to other countries to better understand if creator experience through anime is similar or different, especially given the varying prominence of the TikTok platform across countries and cultures. Additionally, participants were all over 18 years of age. The adult users' gratifications, affordances, and creative

themes might differ from those of younger users, who constitute a high proportion of TikTok's user base (Howarth, 2022) Findings were also completed over the course of two months, which included a volume of qualitative data that can make analysis and interpretation time consuming. Implementing quantitative or mixed method approaches that tie to more longitudinal-based research with anime fandoms across countries outside of the US can be of interest in the future to expanding anime fandom studies and research.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Despite its limitations, the present study provides initial insight into the perceptions, experiences, and motivations of TikTok creators in anime fandom. The specific aim of this study was to better understand how user gratifications and platform-specific affordances together impact themes of anime content on TikTok. Findings suggest that creators desire to make anime videos to find communities of shared interests, to express character empathy and identity, as well as for creative expression, achievement of emotional wellbeing, and opportunities to contribute to representation of identities. The present research extends our prior understanding of fandom, anime fandom culture, media users as creators, and TikTok participation. It reveals that fans can use a short form video medium to cultivate communities where individuals share their love for passions they deeply care about, which offers research implications to the realm of fandom studies and social media interaction. Content creators are an important population of study due to the varying experiences each one has with not only creating content through the anime fandom but being a fan of the content themselves. Additionally, content creators impact their audiences and the anime fandom at large by creating original video ideas that spread throughout the online fandom.

TikTok is an expansive and collaborative platform that offers creators a multitude of capabilities that address user needs and desires related to creating content in a fandom that they love. These findings can help guide further research on content generation behaviors in the context of fandoms, with various relationships of user gratifications and platform-specific affordances to be discovered. Being a fan of something and desiring to create offers a variety of gratifications that share a relationship with platform-specific affordances of TikTok. The power of individual choice is apparent in this study and offers insight into how the platform

constructs decision-making and meaning in relation to content creation. Fan creators, through the content and social network to which they engage in, combined with the platform's unique algorithm, have strong potential to influence the cultural and social trends among media users. McLuhan's (1964) discussion of technological media representing content mediums for exchanging messages expands the knowledge to how individuals control the scale of possibilities of connecting with others and creating content on the TikTok medium. If fans are applicable to represent McLuhan's (1964) statement, then not only is TikTok a content medium to which meaning derives from the user's capabilities to the app; but fans choose how to communicate, as both consumers and producers, which holds more value than the medium itself. Not only are all fans active participants of social media; fans are the creators and will always be at the center of content creation - to upload and share videos across the landscapes of media fandoms that are targeted just for you.

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Appendices

Date: 12-15-2023

IRB #: IRB-FY2024-74

Title: Understanding the perceptions, experiences, and motivations of TikTok Creators in the area of Anime Fandom

Creation Date: 9-26-2023

End Date:

Status: **Approved**

Principal Investigator: Noah Glose

Review Board: West Chester University Institutional Review Board

Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Expedited	Decision	Approved
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Tee-up

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I am interested in understanding the perceptions, experiences, and motivations of TikTok creators in Anime fandom. Are you OK with this session being recorded and transcribed? (switch on recording).

I would like to send you a summary of our interview within the next few weeks to make sure I reflected your responses accurately. Would you be willing to send me a verification? If so, could you please provide me with an email address I can utilize for this correspondence? I will ask you some open-ended questions. There are no right or wrong answers to them, and you are welcome to refrain from answering any of them. If you have any questions for me, feel free to ask them now. You may also ask questions as we go along throughout the interview.

I will ask you 3 sets of questions. The first group of questions will refer to anime, the second will be about Tik Tok, and the last group of questions will be about those two together and their influence. First, I would like to ask you a bit about yourself and who you are, please introduce yourself:

- Introduce yourself (preferred pronouns and where you are from)
- How many followers do you currently have, and how frequently do you try to post?
- Age, gender, race, occupation (student, professional, etc.), educational level

Anime

First, I would like to ask you a couple questions regarding anime fandoms and being a fan.

1. How long have you been an anime fan?
2. How did you become interested in anime? What drew you into this content?

3. What are your favorite types of anime?
4. How do you consume anime content? Watch shows? Read? What are your favorite formats?
5. What place does anime fandom have in your life? For instance, how much time do you spend engaging with anime? What kinds of activities do you pursue as part of your fandom?
6. How much have you engaged in various fandom activities, e.g., cosplay events, creating content, participating in online discussions [give more examples].

TikTok

Now, I would like to ask about your use of social media in general and TikTok in particular:

1. How long have you been on TikTok?
2. What made you decide to join the platform?
3. On a typical day, how often do you access TikTok? Overall, how much time do you spend on the platform? Can you describe your typical interaction? How do you mix it with your daily activities?
4. Describe your typical TikTok session. Where do you usually start? Are there any specific accounts that you check/visit? [tweak this based on your understanding of TT]?
5. How much do you actively participate on TikTok (vs. just scroll and watch). This might mean posting content, commenting, reactions, sharing, DMs, etc.
6. What is TikTok to you? How do you see its place in your life? What is it that makes you keep using it? [U&G/Affordances]

TikTok and Anime

Lastly, let's talk more specifically about Anime and TikTok together.

1. When did you start creating anime content on TikTok?
2. Please talk a bit about the content you create:
 - a. What do you post?
 - b. What do you talk about?
 - c. What are different types of content you share?
 - d. What made you choose these topics /content types? What have you seen other people make that you could never see yourself make?
3. What does creating this content mean to you? Which of your needs does it help you meet? What does it help you achieve?
4. Why did you choose to post your content on TikTok vs. another platform?
5. What Features of the TikTok platform do you find most useful for content creation?
(affordances)
6. What, if any, features do you find limiting? Are there any ways in which TikTok has limited what you have wanted to say with your content or how you wanted to present your content?
7. Where else, if at all, have you published Anime-related content outside of TikTok?
[U&G/Affordances]
8. How is TikTok shaping or changing anime fandom? What are your predictions for the future?
9. How do you see the fandom of anime on Tik Tok shape next year? 5 years? (leave room for open ended discussion) This concludes my list of questions. Do you have any questions for me? Within the next few weeks, I will reach out to you with a summary of our interview

via email. I would be very thankful if you could verify if I summarized your responses accurately. Thank you for participating in this interview!