The Impact of Fanfiction on Youth Communities in Indonesia: Insights from Published Literature

Rany Syafrina, Sekolah, Tinggi Bahasa Asing H, Agus Salim and Bukittingi
Ramadhaniah, Universitas Muhammadyah Tanggerang, Indonesia
ranysyafrina@stbahas.ac.id
rama30dhaniah@gmail.com

Abstract

In Indonesia, fanfiction is viewed as trashy literature that lacks useful information. However, the indifferent treatment from Indonesian literary scholars to this writing does not make the works less popular among young people. Although fanfiction is viewed as trivial literature, its writings address major societal issues. The practice of fanfiction is a part of the challenging discourse about gender, sexuality, society, domestic violence, and others. The platform is also a place to learn and practice literary writing as well as foreign languages such as English.

This study employs the text-based research methodology drawing on library research as well as interview methodology to compare and contrast the attitudes of writers, readers, and researchers toward fanfiction in Indonesia.

This study reveals that the relationship between the members and the subject of their writing creates a strong para-social relationship that could contribute to their well-being. Moreover, fanfiction is also a form of creativity as they allow both readers and authors to express their freedom in consuming and producing literary work. This study suggests that fanfiction should be dealt with positively like any other literary work, although it is slightly different in terms of production and publication compared to traditional literary writings.

Keywords: Fanfiction, social issues, learning platform, para-social, creativity.

Introduction

Fandoms currently hold massive power in both social media and real life. Their influence can be seen from the participation of members in a large-scale movement without abandoning their identity as fans. A recent documentary entitled "How K-Pop and the BTS Army Disrupted U.S. Politics, 2020" by Aj+ shows the credit of fandoms in American political and social movements through various vigors. This kind of participation is also present in Indonesia, as fans were recorded taking part in two massive demonstrations that occurred in 2020 as an objection to a controversial law. These fans revealed their identities during the demonstration and actively shared their political and social participation online to attract the attention of young people on political and social issues that are deemed important.

The power of fandom is limited not only to political and social movements but also sways the consumption of literary works. A fan community plays a significant role in creating and maintaining the popularity of fanfiction by providing a network of references in creating the work of fanfiction (Samutina, 2017). This is one of the reasons why most fanfiction is not written for the market, but rather for specific target audiences selected by like-minded community members (Coker and Benefiel, 2016). Often, fanfiction is directed to readers familiar with the source material because it requires active participation to maintain continuous production.

Internet access makes active participation in consuming and producing fanfiction possible through online communication. The internet connects members who vary in terms of age, gender, and personal interests (Samutina, 2016). Fandom is treated as a place where members share fanfiction, discuss their ideas, and request stories to help them create the desired stories (Samutina, 2017). Through fandom, members develop their virtual worlds and imaginary lives (Samutina, 2016). As a result, fandom members can develop their cultural norms by classifying what is acceptable and what is not (McLelland, 2017). These norms should be followed by members to be a part of the community. As a result, some of the platforms restrict what kind of writing can be posted and what cannot.

Although fanfiction has become an important part of fandom, its presence is still questioned by Indonesian literary scholars. Some of them refer to it as "trash". Fanfiction as a part of cyber literature is not considered serious writing. Situmorang argues that cyberfiction in all forms is a "waste" because it fails to publish (Septriani, 2016). However, we cannot avoid the fact that cyber literature represents the phenomena in current Indonesian society through the perspective of the young generation. Some scholars argue that the concern of this writing rises through the popularity of slash, as there is an assumption that reading fanfiction that depicts homosexuality may change readers' perspectives about romantic relationships (Selvia, 2013) and these new perspectives might go against religious, social, and cultural values within the society. However, fanfiction is not only about erotic writing, it is available in a wide variety of genres that can be easily classified into name tags. Seeing fanfiction as a work of perverts might lead to a misleading understanding of fanfiction, because some works may share family and religious values among the readers.

This research challenges the idea that fanfictions are a leftover literature. It discusses why fanfiction should be viewed as a piece of serious writing by exploring the previous studies that focus on fanfiction. The objective of this research is to encourage a reform among Indonesian scholars to approach fanfiction as serious literature instead of leftover work. It also tries to explore the potential of fanfiction that can be explored and applied for future research in Indonesia.

Literature Review

Fanfiction gains more popularity as works are found to be intertwined with a wider scope of human life, especially women. Globally, talking about fanfiction is not only about literature, but also copyright, collaborative writing, mental health, and sexuality. So far, copyright debate over fanfiction remains the main concern in the current research, as the gap between original work and fan's work is now thinner than ever as and the fact that fanfiction now can be commercialized makes the copyright issues of fanfiction more complicated.

It is against the traditional concept of fanfiction as fair use or writing for nonprofit purposes (Lipton, 2014). Although copyright issues are raised continuously, Fegel and Roth find that women keep writing more fanfiction because it is seen as a practice to explore different kinds of writing before publishing their original works. The process of writing, sharing, giving, and receiving feedback somehow builds their confidence to deal with publishers, while at the same time, the content they write allows them to promote gender equality (Flegel & Roth, 2016).

As a space of agency, pleasure, and play, fanfiction allows both writers and readers to explore their sexuality (Basu, 2021). Narderpour also indicates that fanfiction can also be used as a tool for collaborative writing to learn new languages, although as a tool it doesn't give a guarantee for the success of understanding new languages but at least it ensures each student has the freedom to express their thoughts (Naderpour, 2022). The promising nature of fanfiction that can be used for different purposes does not seem to entertain Indonesian scholars. In Indonesia, fanfiction is still not classified as serious literature that requires serious research. Fanfiction is still considered as a non-creative writing which imitated the original works (Merawati, 2016). This ancient concept of fanfiction is no longer applicable in modern life where we live, especially since fanfiction is more accessible than the hard-printed novel. This research tries to explore how fanfiction can be cultivated by Indonesia's younger generation for their benefit.

Research Methods

This research draws on data taken from previous studies as well as the work of fanfiction itself. To challenge the idea, several research journals and books about fanfiction are collected and compared to determine different perspectives about fanfiction. Several fanfiction works are also taken into consideration to support the argumentation of the paper. Therefore, this paper focuses on *Bangtan Sonyeondan* or Bangtan Boys (BTS) Fanfiction, as it is one of the largest fandom groups both in Indonesia and in the international forums. BTS fandoms also actively participate in community awareness by creating new stories, video remakes, etc. BTS itself is also regarded as an ambassador of youth as they actively address social issues in its activities to influence its fans.

Although the main source of data and the argument for this paper are taken from previous studies, additional information is also collected to see the actual perspective from both fanfiction authors and readers as they are the ones who play a major role in the fanfiction communities. The interview is done through a direct message (DM) to ascertain their point of view regarding the importance of fanfiction. Both authors and readers are chosen randomly from Facebook pages that focus on fanfiction. Since the fanfictions discussed in this study main rely mainly on BTS fanfiction, the interview is also done among the BTS fanfiction authors and readers who are a part of the BTS Fanfiction Army (All Genres) community on Facebook.

Findings and Discussion

In Indonesia, fanfiction is not considered a serious literary work, it is seen as a leftover narrative that has an unfavorable value that will never pass an editorial. Moreover, previous research also implies that consuming fanfictions that are influenced by K-pop might correspond to teenage misbehavior because Indonesia and South Korea have different cultures. Often, what is acceptable in Korean culture might not be suitable for Indonesians (Merawati, 2016). However, the stand of fanfiction as an influential literary work among young people seems to be stronger. It provides both the readers and the authors a place to express their ideas as well as to raise public awareness of issues found in their daily life. Claiming that fanfiction is a leftover work is outdated because, as part of cyber literature, it cannot be controlled by both political and economic powers, which makes them capable of addressing serious issues. Besides, fanfiction works are just one click away from your internet browser, which means that these literary works are accessible to almost everyone.

Challenging the Social Issues and Discourse

Fanfiction as interactive writing can challenge the mainstream discourse as well as hegemonic representation and question traditional ideas (Black, Alexander, Chen, & Duarte, 2019). It provides freedom for both authors and readers to express their thoughts and emotions in fanfiction without being restricted by other agents, producers, and networks (Mixer, 2018). As a result, they are also free to explore low and minority cultures within the society to express

their thoughts, frustrations, and criticisms. While presenting the work to a publisher might make it lose its original purpose due to the editorial selection process, fanfiction authors can express their inner thoughts without worrying about social justice as they can publish their work under pseudonyms in fandom groups with whom they share the same interests. This freedom allows the author and the reader to explore issues that are taboo such as sexuality.

Due to the explicitness of some fanfiction, many scholars in Indonesia argue that consuming fanfiction is delinquency, but they ignore its function as a safe place for young people to explore popular culture texts, the dynamic of social and cultural norms, as well as to understand their own identities (Black 2009; Chandler-Olcott and Mahar 2003; Thomas 2007, in Berkowitz, 2012) when the place to explore that knowledge is not available or accessibly for young people. Fanfictions allow both the readers and the authors to explore different identities without fearing the consequences.

Indeed, fanfictions can be regarded as a psychosocial moratorium (Mixer, 2018). The existence of same-sex fan fiction is written based on woman's dissatisfaction with heterosexual love stories and patriarchal restrictions on female sexuality (Chiang, 2016). Since the patriarchal society expects women to control their sexual freedom and fluidity, women choose to embrace slash fiction to explore their fantasies. In this type of writing, men become objects of sexual attraction while avoiding women for sexual exploitation (Neville, 2015).

Writing romance fanfictions is also a way to deal with masculinity, as they can re-imagine the ideal characters who are friendly and less threatening to women and who allow feminization to become one of the common approaches used by the authors (Barnes, 2015). Moreover, Flegel and Roth also argue that "fanfiction communities can give some women writers the strength to face a gender-based double bind in traditional publishing" (2016). It means that fanfiction can be used as an instrument for its author to challenge the masculinity ideology within their community while actualizing their identity as the author. Through fanfictions, authors recreate the male characters into someone who is female-friendly, and publishing the stories on social media and open-access platforms will allow them to go against the publication discourse dominated by male authors.

Although it is clear that not all fanfictions have negative effects on readers, consuming fanfiction remains one of the major concerns of parents as they lack control over their children with the absence of parental monitoring and guidance within the fanfiction fandom (Brydges and O'Brien, 2017). The fact that erotic fanfictions are accessible to fandom members does not necessarily mean that all members enjoy reading this type of writing as fanfictions are available in varied genres, and sometimes it is a combination of two and more genres in one work, which sometimes presents serious issues such as mental health. As portrayed by Pita Tamburan in an interview:

"*Aku suka banget dengan FF yang menggangkat cerita seperti itu karena selain dari masalah inti mereka jgak mengangkat masalah dari dasar seperti mental, mslah pribadi, dan keluarga ... secara tidak langsung cerita itu bisa menghibur dan terkadang mereka jgak menyelipkan good advice dan kata2 penyemangat ... klw merekanya terlalu berlebihan dan lebih menjurus ke hal negatif seperti NC dan terlalu fulgar yah itu salah. Tapi klw seperti aku pribadi yg lebih kehiburan dan hobi itu baik2 aja malah aku jdi bisa lebih pintar dan bijak dalam menghadapi mslh kerena secara tidak langsung mereka selalu menyelipkan kata2 penenang untuk memperbaiki mental*" (Tamburan, Pita, 2020)*

which translates as follows:

"I do like FF because it tells stories that focus on core problems such as mental health, individual struggle, and family… those stories are not only entertaining but also provide valuable advice and supporting messages… if they cross the line by consuming NC and explicit text, of course, it is wrong. I individually prefer entertaining works that sometimes relate to my hobbies. Often,

> fanfictions also teach me how to deal with my problems as the authors always
> write their messages to provide mental support
>
> Tamburan, Pita, 2020

This implies that explicit fanfiction is not always appreciated by fandom members. However, some fanfictions present serious issues such as mental health that make such literary works an instrument for members to look for a solution. This also implies that fanfiction writings are not only about fun and re-imagining the idol into something approachable or otherwise. For both readers and authors, fanfiction is a platform to express their emotions or an instrument to learn things informally. Limiting fanfiction to something explicit does not help the study of fanfiction itself, because they are more than erotic literature as they are divided into different types of genres covering different social and political issues. A work by Laclatul Nur Hafifah, entitled 'Regret', is one of the fanfictions that addresses serious issues such as domestic violence, child abuse, and mental health. Like Laelatul Nur Hafifah, many other fanfiction authors address serious issues such as cybercrime, and political and legal issues in their writings. Some of these authors include Upin with his Hacker JJK and Momnomnom with her Toxicity. These authors believe that not only does fanfiction deal with social problems, but it also allows both readers and authors to learn things from their activity in consuming and producing fanfiction.

Informal Learning Platform

The online publication that becomes the primary space for public writing has contributed to the fame of fanfiction (DeLuca, 2018). However, it becomes crucial among other cyber literature because of the availability of learning instruments as well as learner interactions (Harb & Abdullah, 2016). The interactions within fanfiction fandoms look more like peer sharing or which is also known as workshopping (Magnifico, Curwood & Lammers, 2015). Both the author and the readers may write their own stories and review others. They may also read and share the works on one particular fandom platform. As a result, fandoms and fanfictions become the affinity spaces that make virtual learning among members possible. It is classified as an informal learning mentoring process within the community and amateur members who share a similar passion for fanfiction.

Fanfiction, a learning platform for those who want to learn how to write narrative works and fiction, is free from editorial selection, which allows everybody to post and publish their narrative works as long as they are part of the fandom, or they can also publish their fanfiction on Whatpadd to gain popularity independently without the support of fandom from a social media account. As fanfictions are editorial-free, it is a useful instrument to practice their passions in writing. Euforia argues that;

> "*kalo aku nulis fanfic itu buat menuangkan imajinasiku, ngelatih buat tulisan rapi, dan makin ngerti sedikit demi sedikit cara nulis cerita yang enak dibaca*."
> "I write to express my imagination, it gradually improves my writing to be easily read", and sees writing fanfictions as a way to improve her writings skill".

Fanfiction is a platform for beginner authors to practice their writing. It is a platform that helps writers to get more ideas for their writing. Supporting this is Fitriani who argues that fanfiction along with K-pop is a tool to improve talent in literature (Syaharani, & Mahadian, 2017). Fanfiction is not just preferred by its audience because it is editorial-free, but because it also provides mentorship to readers as well as other writers (Evans et al. 2017). Mentorship can be available in different forms: some fandom might conduct special events that focus on mentoring new authors with their "senior", while other types of mentorships come from interactions between the author and the reader, as online social media allow such interactions.

Mentoring can simply be a comment from other writers or readers and may encourage the author to keep writing the story and improve their writing style. Simple feedback such as "you did a great job" from the readers may boost the confidence of the author.

Black points out that learning in fanfiction is not only about how to write a proper literary work but also about learning a new language such as English, it is a good place for a novice to learn both writing and language at the same time (2016). The internet allows not only writer to publish their writing for mass readers but also provides opportunities for writers to express their ideas by using different languages. While using English in a novel is designed mostly to attract urban readers, the purpose of writing and consuming fanfiction in English is mostly part of global participation. Since fans have no direct access to their idols, they rely on the internet and fan club sites to get information (Marinescu & Balica, 2013), it is also supported by the fact that many fandoms and much information regarding K-pop idols are available in English instead of Indonesian. It should also be noted that writing fanfictions in English is not only about being a part of the global community but also an expression of one's identity and freedom without fear of repression (Warschauer and De Florio-Hansen, 2003). Through fandoms, authors construct their images on the narrative using language (Pérez-Sabater & Moffo, 2019).

Fanfiction is a medium to practice writing skills, especially for those who learn English as a foreign language. In addition, writing fan fiction allows discussions among the fans. It is also a platform for peer review between the authors and the readers. Although English is not always perfect, it doesn't prevent both the authors and the readers from producing or consuming fan fiction. It is because the contents of the stories are more important than the technical errors that appear in the narrative structure (Holmes, 2018).

English as the writing language in fanfictions may also serve different functions, one case study where English is compared with Finnish indicated that Finnish in fan fiction narrative is used to represent reality while English describes the fictional world (Leppänen and Peuronen, 2012).

Previous studies also indicate that using a foreign language in communication may limit someone's psychological distance, it also reduces emotional reaction that leads to an objective decision (Hayakawa et al., 2016: 792). However, the use of English in fanfiction by Indonesian authors may indicate an opposite suggestion. It should be noted that fan fiction is originally written to fulfill the authors' needs as well as to be a part of a therapeutic practice (Peeples, Yen, & Weigle, 2018) in which the internet provides them with a platform where they can 'vent their feelings and voice their ideas' (Leppänen and Peuronen, in Pérez-Sabater & Moffo, 2019). Through the characters in fan fiction, the authors can address their issues and challenge them in a less threatening space (Peeples, Yen, & Weigle, 2018: 259). fanfiction is regarded as the media where both writers and readers can find pleasure in reading and writing the story, it is also a medium to critic marginal audiences where they can explore their feminity and desire (Jamison, 2013).

Young adult psychology and movement through fanfictions and fandom engagement

Previous research by Brydges and O'Brien indicates that fanfictions allow both the readers and the authors to experience ideas and situations that they are not ready for, and to discuss issues they face (2017). This happens because fanfiction is a safe place for young people to experience those situations without having to deal with the consequences that they might probably have to face when they are in the real world. Moreover, "fanfiction is a wonderful way for people to come together around interests and shared passions. At a time when young people are trying to find their voice and their identity, fandom can provide the comfort of familiarity" (Garcia, 2016). Fanfictions allow both the readers and the authors to recreate a situation that they might be experiencing and try to find answers to those situations without being afraid of failure or being judged by other people. It can also mean that certain fanfictions might be used by both the authors and the readers as an instrument to look for possible solutions

as previously stated by Pita Tambunan who found comfort in reading fanfiction because it often gives her advice about how to deal with the problems.

Fanfiction work allows both the readers and the authors to find comfort in para-social activities usually regarded as dysfunctional behaviors corresponding to loneliness, isolation, and a restricted social interaction between an individual and other people as those with deep para-social relationships often spend their time in imaginative or out of reach world such as television. It is seen as a replacement for interpersonal relationships for those who suffer loneliness, as a para-social relationship requires emotional involvement (Ballantine & Martin, 2005). However, further studies also found that para-social relationships resemble social relationships although it is minor (Giles, 2002). Concerning fanfiction, authors spend their time and emotion in developing the character's relationship and emotions, as writing characters that are taken from idol figures is one of the solutions to maintain a para-social relationship.

In Indonesia, the relationship between BTS and the fandom goes beyond the relations between the idols and their fans. The position of BTS within the fandom does not only influence how the authors develop the characters they want to present in their writing. BTS itself is widely used to influence other aspects of fandom, to encourage members within the community to be critical about their surroundings and often to participate in political actions such as demonstrations as well as to direct the online trending into the current political issues (Awkarin dan K-Poppers Ternyata Top Influencer Demo Mahasiswa Tolak RKUHP | Kabar24 - Bisnis.com, 2020). One of the quotes often used by fandom members to address political and social issues is a speech by BTS during their UN visit to encourage their fans to speak up, as RM the leader of BTS noted in his speech that "No matter who you are, where you're from, your skin color, gender identity: speak for yourself" (Wilkinson. 2020). It is now common to find BTS lyrics, posters, and quotes during political demonstrations that are used as an instrument to raise the awareness of the fans of important issues.

Some studies have demonstrated the positive impact of para-social attachment, especially on the social level. These studies conclude that para-social reduces communication sigma, prejudices, stereotypes, as well as interaction anxiety among the members by providing knowledge and normalizing serious issues such as mental health to both consumers and producers (Hoffner & Cohen, 2018). Another positive impact of parasocial interaction is its ability to create a space of belonging among members with introversion, as they often find it hard to maintain a relationship. Parasocial interaction might be able to help people with introversion to experience their sense of belonging with a little risk especially if their introversion is also accompanied by social challenges (Jarzyna, 2011). We might need to re-think whether fanfiction consumption is only an act of mischievousness because it might work against some people. Generalizing fanfictions as naughtiness is similar to generalizing the shortfall of the internet as both might have ugly sides that are avoidable through proper guidance so that they know what type of readings are appropriate for their age.

Unlimited Creativity and Freedom

Fanfiction can be seen as creative work for several reasons as stated by Flegel and Roth (reference) who also claim that it is often different from traditionally published work, both in its genres and styles, and the community and structures that create, sustain, and consume it (2016). Although many people assume that fanfictions are not original work, we cannot ignore the fact that they are both transformative and transgressive writings (Jing, DeDeo & Ahn, 2019). Many researchers question the originality of fanfiction writings, but they avoid the fact that fanfictions remain creative writings consisting of rewriting, replacing, adding, and transforming the work into something new. Lee describes a fanfiction author as a producer who makes a variation of the original (Barnes, 2015). To develop fanfiction, the author must be well-informed about the object that they use for the story in which gaining knowledge about the object is a must (Black, 2007). Fanfiction written based on canon literature presents extended stories that are not present in the original works. While some fanfictions inspired by the real

figures in television such as BTS and other K-pop idols are written as original work, the author only lends the K-pop idol characters to make their own stories.

Fanfictions contain creativity as the work itself is an alternative version of a text that has its aesthetic value (Fulamah, 2015). However, fanfiction is not only about transforming the canon into something new "stories that reinterpret, re-imagine, and remix the events, characters, settings, and ideas found in popular media and elsewhere"(Sauro & Sundmark, 2019) that make fanfiction not limited to one kind of writing. The creativity in fanfiction can also be found in the variation of the genre for each story that they wrote. Authors in fanfiction do not only stick to one genre in building their story, they may pick up different styles based on direct reviews and responses from readers to develop the story into something else which was not predicted at the beginning of the writing. The genre of fanfiction can be added along the way when an author finds ideas between the stories or when they agree on putting the reader's advice in their writing which makes the development of stories in fanfiction might sometimes unpredictable. In fanfiction, it is not only the author who has the power over the works but also the readers who will respond to it.

Conclusion

It is worth noting that fanfiction is more than a leftover literary work, as it is also able to convey the social discourse and issues that exist in society. It is freely accessible, and its consumption and production scheme make both the authors and the readers capable of addressing issues that are important to them without being restricted by publication laws and regulations. Some fanfiction writings actively address sexual content to raise awareness of sexual identity, violence, as well as mental health issues. Fanfiction is also a platform for novice authors to practice their writing capability as the fandom provides support and learning to its members. This paper concludes that it is a useful tool for learning a new language, especially English. It is not only the process of reading and writing fanfiction that supports young adults' well-being but also the community interaction among them and toward its parasocial object.

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