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## SuperWhoLock: An Analysis of Subculture in a Microblogging Setting

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SUPERWHOLOCK: AN ANALYSIS OF SUBCULTURE IN A MICROBLOGGING  
SETTING

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2014

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Sociology  
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## ABSTRACT

While subcultural research has always been a common focus of sociological research, most such studies focus on deviant subcultures. This has led to a glut of information on countercultures and criminal subcultures, but relatively little study of less visible subcultures. While there is a great deal of research on the sociology of sport, including sport fandom, there is very little on other fandom subcultures. While this makes sense, as they are niche subcultures, the popularity of formerly niche entertainment is expanding rapidly. Much of this fandom renaissance owes its existence to the Internet, and its ability to bring geographically separate individuals together into communities of interest. This exploratory study examines a particularly niche fandom, the crossover fandom of *Sherlock*, *Doctor Who*, and *Supernatural* on Tumblr, a popular microblogging site. Though the site lacks tools for formal organization of such groups, it nonetheless gave rise to a unique fan subculture. Through a content analysis of posts sampled from the “SuperWhoLock” tag on Tumblr, this study attempts to understand both how subculture manifests in a social blogging setting, and what the reason is for the creation of this particular crossover subculture. Results show that subcultural markers such as image, argot, and shared values can be found online, though in necessarily different forms. The results also suggest that shared values strongly contributed to the creation of this crossover fandom, and may be stronger contributors to fandom community creation in general than expected.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades the Internet has evolved from a web of information sharing inhabited mostly by academics and hobbyists into one of the major avenues of interpersonal communication, especially among young people. Social researchers have pontificated on whether this is a revolutionary change, or a move to technocratic and corporate control of communication (Fuchs 2014). Overall, the consensus seems to have settled on the understanding that the Internet and social media represent an evolutionary rather than revolutionary change of venue for social interaction. The medium of the Internet enhances some aspects of social interaction, nullifies others, and occasionally creates unusual emergent social effects (Fuchs 2014, Buckels, et al. 2014).

Among the emergent properties of Internet communication is the ability to form social bonds based on shared yet uncommon interests without being limited by geography. This has allowed for a rise in geek and fandom culture online at levels that were unprecedented before the rise of the Internet (Booth 2008, 2010, Obst 2002), except in certain rare cases, such as the massive *Star Trek* fandom (Jindra 1994). These interests were previously seen to be outside the mainstream, but the surge of popularity in these interests since the Internet appeared makes one question if they are marginal anymore. Fans of comic books and video games, traditionally seen as socially awkward males, have found a gathering place online (Obst 2002), but so have middle-aged women who are fans of Harry Potter (Alderton 2014) or Gilmore Girls (Booth 2008). These fans engage with one another in online communities dedicated to their interests, communities which develop their own unique behaviors and norms.

Despite their increased popularity, sociological research on these expanding subcultures is still fairly sparse. Fandom has often been studied from a critical media studies perspective (Booth 2008, 2010), examining the relationship of an audience to a creative work. Fandom research in sociology is often focused on sports fandom. Sports fandom is a fairly popular fandom, and fan groups are often quite local (Melnick & Wann 2010). There's also a good deal of sociological research comparing fandom to religion (Jindra 1994, Geraci 2014), and some examining particular fan subcultures (Alderton 2014, Löbert 2012). Media fandom has somewhat less of a presence in sociology than in other related fields. Similarly, a good deal of subcultural sociology focuses on deviant subcultures, which usually form in response to a problem experienced by multiple people for whom no clear individual solution is available (Downes 1966). This can lead to an implication in the research that subcultures in general are countercultures (Fine & Kleinman 1979). This can be true, but is not universally true. Subcultures exist as an enclave within the larger culture that contrasts with elements of the mainstream. These differences may include norms, modes of dress, and even dialect. Some subcultures, especially deviant or delinquent subcultures, may define a large portion of one's identity (Downes 1966), but for most, a subculture is one aspect of identity, which may or may not apply to various social interactions (Fine & Kleinman 1979).

This research examines a sample of fan culture on the Internet according to the sociological concept of a subculture. The focus is on the intersecting fan community formed by fans of the television shows *Supernatural*, *Doctor Who*, and *Sherlock*, sometimes referred to as SuperWhoLock (Daily Dot 2012). This fandom was chosen because the individual fandoms that it draws from are fairly active on the Internet, but the intersecting fandom is small enough to be

manageable. Specifically, this research focuses on the manifestation of these fan groups on Tumblr, a popular microblogging site. There will be a detailed analysis of the active processes and interactions among group members that create and maintain the fan community. In simple terms, this paper will be an examination of how the traditional understanding of subculture (originally focused on subcultures that are local and form a person's primary social group) might be used to understand the social processes of an online fan subculture, for which the social immediacy is voluntary, not geographic.

Through a rich content analysis of online postings by self-identified fans it should be possible to understand in detail how the processes of subculture continue to exist in this particular setting. There has been almost no sociological research done on Tumblr, whether in the broad or specific sense. Blogs and social media have been studied (Booth 2010, Booth 2008, Grieve & Kemp 2015, Mo & Leung 2015), so the methods to study a social microblogging platform exist. As such, this will be an opportunity to apply subcultural theory to a rarely-examined yet popular online community. It will also provide insight on how group formation, definition, and maintenance is accomplished in this kind of freeform online space. This will be done by comparing the SuperWhoLock fandom as it appears on Tumblr to what Weber called the "ideal type" for the concept. The definition to be used draws from the existing literature, beginning with Brake (1974). If the SuperWhoLock fandom approaches that ideal type for subculture, as detailed in the literature, then it shows that subcultures can be created in unstructured online environments.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## Defining Subculture

A subculture exists as a smaller culture within but set apart from the mainstream culture. Members often define their identity in relation to the subculture. The subculture grants a sense of belonging and social connections that members may not be able to achieve within the mainstream culture. To maintain this separate identity, many subcultures have a distinct style: a set of markers and behaviors that set them apart from the mainstream culture. Brake (1974) defines three aspects of the presentation of style within a subculture: image (including fashion and artifacts, the material culture of the group), demeanor (actions and interactions, nonverbal communications and non-material signifiers), and argot (the language of the subculture). Together these comprise the work of “doing subculture,” and is the means by which both individual subcultural membership and the collective presentation of the subculture are maintained. Subcultural style serves to distinguish subculture members from the mainstream culture, while also serving as in-group markers for other members of the subculture. The previous factors are signifying elements of subcultural belonging, but there are also elements of meaning in subcultural belonging. These include: values (usually the reason for the subculture’s existence), norms (dictated by values), and rituals (actions that reinforce norms and values) (Brake 1985). The meaning elements and the signifying elements of subculture together can be understood to define the subculture, both to itself and in relation to the mainstream culture.

These particular divisions, created before online interaction was common, are biased toward real-world observation. Image and demeanor are both focused on the physical presence of

the subculture member. This presence exists differently online, where image is likely to be expressed as avatar or webpage design, and the nonverbal cues of demeanor have no presence. The markers of argot that require audible speech are generally lacking in one's online presence as well (Suler 2004, Gottschalk 2010). This study will by necessity investigate whether these subcultural features manifest online, and what forms they may take. If they are lacking, then an online fandom may not be an actual subculture, but instead another form of social grouping. However, even if the subcultural markers take different forms in this setting, as long as they exist within the fandom, it has formed a subculture on Tumblr.

### Defining Fandom

The simplest definition of a fandom is a social group composed of fans, people devoted to such diverse things as sports teams, bands, genres of entertainment, books, or entertainers. Being a fan does not automatically make one part of a subculture. For example, being a supporter of one's local football team is a part of mainstream English culture (Marsh, et al. 1997), and people filling stadiums when a rock star comes to town can surely be called fans. The basic fact of being a fan of something is generally considered normal. A strong affection for a form of entertainment, basic fandom, does not fit the definition of a subculture as something set apart from the mainstream.

The simplest way to distinguish a fan from a member of a fandom subculture is by the degree of their devotion to the object of their interest, and their connection to other fans. For example, Jindra's (1994) study found that while nearly everyone he interviewed enjoyed either the original or *Next Generation* series of *Star Trek*, a much smaller percentage were devoted

enough to participate fully in fan culture, such as fan clubs or conventions. This is much like religion, in which roughly 70% of Americans are Christian, but far fewer belong to Christian-identified subcultures or organizations (Pew Research 2014). To clarify, fans are supporters of a star, a team, or media. They are simple consumers. Members of a fandom (to the point of being part of a subculture) are active consumers that may produce work of their own, and will interact with their focus in a way beyond mere consumption of an entertainment product. They also interact with other fans. Subculture is defined by action, by “doing fandom,” and the type of fans that form these subcultures interact with their focus media and other fans to a degree that places them outside the norm.

### *Image*

A subculture’s image is the appearance its members adopt to distinguish themselves from mainstream society. Two subcultures that originated in Great Britain, the Skinheads and the Punks, provide a clear example of subcultures with a clearly recognizable image, and how that image might be influenced by the culture’s values. The values of Skinheads were highly masculine and working class. Their image included short hair or shaved heads, suspenders, blue jeans, and work boots (Brake 1974). The clothing is practical working-class gear turned into a style. In contrast, the Punks’ values include deliberately being outside the mainstream culture, and a DIY (Do It Yourself, a choice not to engage with capitalism when a problem can be solved through one’s own work) ethic. Because of this, their image included hairstyles dyed, spiked, and otherwise made to be far outside the mainstream, with clothing decorated by the punks themselves using easily available supplies such as safety pins (Hannerz 2015).

Image in a fandom is less a constant part of one's look than in a youth culture. Football fans in Great Britain often wear their team colors or insignias, but do not build their style entirely around their group membership. At a sports match, however, they almost always wear the team colors, and other identifiers of fandom (Marsh, et al. 1997). In the same way, *Star Trek* fans are not obvious at all times, though there might be small signifiers in normal life (a *Star Trek* t-shirt or a Starfleet lapel pin). In contrast, when there is an event such as a convention, they will go completely in costume. These costumes range from simple Starfleet uniforms to elaborate alien costumes (Jindra 1994). Many other fans engage in similar practices with their images. Small signifiers in public spaces, and an intensely fandom-focused image during fan subculture gatherings.

Given the nature of image in traditional subculture research, it is possible to interpolate the most relevant parts of this subcultural identifier for use in searching for subcultural image in another setting. The commonality in most examples of subculture research on image is that it is the immediately visually present subcultural identifier. There is no action required for image to be seen once it is established. It is also nearly immediately obvious to those who understand it. Therefore, the relevant description of image is the way in which a subculture identifies itself (sometimes to outsiders, almost always to insiders) in a way that is immediately noticeable, but passive once established.

### *Argot*

Argot refers to the individualized modes of speech of a subculture. In many lifestyle subcultures, it includes both the mode of speech and the verbal lexicon (Brake 1974). In many

cases it is a simple form of identity work, but it may also serve to hide illegal or culturally-unapproved activities. Drug subcultures are a prime example of this. Methamphetamine has been variously referred to as ice, crank, crystal, and countless other things, to keep illegal activities from being immediately obvious to a casual listener (Kelly et al. 2013, Benoit et al. 2003).

Argot is very common in fan subculture. The speech of a fan of a fiction media is often peppered with references to that media. Quotes from, or references to, a television show can act as a sort of call and response to find other fans (Booth 2010). Among video game fans, argot is used to refer to major game-specific events and problems in a culturally unique and condensed way. To use World of Warcraft as an example (Golub 2014): “My guild ran UBRS last night, but we wiped halfway; at least my legs dropped” may seem nonsensical to a non-player, but someone within the subculture can tell that it means “the group of players that I am officially affiliated with played through a portion of Upper Blackrock Spire before all of our characters died; but at least one of the challenges we defeated gave my character leg armor as a reward for our accomplishment.”

The core idea of argot is communication among the in-group, within a subculture. Concealment of meaning from the outside may be intentional, or it may be incidental. The key is simply a form of communication that is specific to the subculture. It may convey more information to the in-group than to outsiders, but it may just serve as a simple cultural identifier. Active communication is the major difference between argot and image as an identifier. So, a way of communication unique in some way to a social group can likely be seen as a type of argot, and suggests the existence of a subculture.

### *Norms and Values*

Norms are expectations and rules that guide social behavior within a group. Values are the source of norms: internalized ideals that guide evaluation of the behavior of one's self and others. Subcultures by their nature have norms and values distinct from mainstream society. For example, the Skinheads valued working-class attitudes and street smarts (Brake 1974). In contrast, the mods and Teds, other British youth subcultures, valued upper-class cosmopolitanism. These values and norms, along with how closely they fit with society, help distinguish the members of the subculture from the mainstream culture and from each other. The degree of acceptance of these values among group members help regulate behavior within the group, and contribute to the continuation of the subculture. If members of the subculture do not follow the norms to the satisfaction of other members of the group, there may be sanctions or corrective action taken. These actions may be violent, such as in criminal gangs or the skinhead subculture. Nearly all subcultures use social sanctions to define their boundaries. These can be as crude as insults (very probably specific to the culture's argot), and as complex as official bans from group events. The average control method for most subcultures is public disapproval with some level of shunning.

Specifically of note in fan culture is the way in which the values of the *Star Trek* fandom are reflected in their activities. Also of interest is that, while the only required shared value for a fan subculture is a positive opinion of the source media, the *Star Trek* fandom shows many other shared values. *Star Trek* fans tend to have techno-utopian values, celebrating technological advancement and social progress. Their values also reflect the inclusive nature of the Federation within the show, tending to be radically welcoming to new fans. One of the first official fan

clubs was created not to organize gatherings for existing fans, but to welcome new fans into the subculture. Many also tend to either work in science, or at least to pursue higher education. Their politics tend toward liberal, reflecting the utopian beliefs in the show (Jindra 1994).

Norms and values are an essential part of a subculture. While image and argot are an expression of subcultural membership, they usually arise from or express the group's values. Values are generally the reason behind the subculture. Without shared values, there is less of a reason to define a group as a subculture. If values do not diverge in some way from the mainstream, or at least are not held more strongly in the group than in the mainstream, then what is there to hold a group together? While individual values are not knowable outside of an honest, direct interview, it is possible to infer group values and norms from observed behavior.

### *Ritual*

Ritual is best understood in relation to religion, or religious subcultures. Rituals are actions meant to promote cohesion within the group. They are often symbolic, and serve to highlight the meaning of belonging to the group. Alternately, they might have the purpose of mentally preparing a group for an important event. For example, rituals within a sports team may include "suiting up," preparing for the game by putting on uniforms and gathering necessary gear as a group (Mazurkiewicz 2011). In addition, sports may include warm-up rituals, home run celebration rituals, and indulgence of minor superstitions. More major rituals are seen in religious subcultures, such as rites of passage. Most also have highly stylized joining rituals, for example, Baptism among many of the Protestant sects in America (Durkheim 1915).

Löbert's (2012) study of Cliff Richard fans in Liverpool demonstrates the existence of ritual in a fan club. Many of the important rituals these fans engage in are centered on concerts. These rituals can be understood to be influenced by the presence or absence of either the other members of the subculture, or the object of the subculture's devotion. As a group, before the concert, the fan club engages in various preparatory activities, such as getting dressed up for the concert, travelling to the concert together, and singing along to CDs during the drive. This brings them together and focuses them on Cliff Richard. Concert going itself is another ritual, a major one, where they are all able to directly engage with the object of their devotion. Subcultural rituals do not require the group, however, just members of the group. For example, a member of the fan club meeting the singer backstage and getting an autograph is doing this to both celebrate their devotion and to gain status within the subculture. Finally, there are individual devotions among fans, such as listening to Cliff Richard's music or watching DVDs of old concerts. This is part of how they maintain their identity as fans.

The important thing to look for when searching for rituals is the formulaic, the standardized (Durkheim 1915). While in the case of sport fandom, there are certain pregame rituals such as tailgating, followed by attendance at the match, a ritual does not necessarily need to be complex or time-consuming. Any action held in common by a social group that reinforces values might be a ritual. Standard formulas of behavior that repeat in similar situations are what is important to look for when searching out this particular aspect of subculture.

### *In-Group Status and Out-Group Perception*

The purpose of rituals, norms, image, and argot in a subculture is primarily to define the group to itself and the outside world in accordance with the group's values. Status within the group is generally dependent on acting within the values and norms of the group. Comic book fans, for example, value rare comics, creativity, and of course general interest in comic books (Brown 1997). Because of this, status within comic fandom can be increased by simply owning a rare comic book. This does include owning it properly, by the norms of the community, which means keeping the rare book in good shape, and protected from damage. Having a rare issue of a comic book and damaging it is worse for status than having a less rare issue kept in properly collectible condition. Creating comics, either through art or writing, is also a possible source of status. The act of creation is, however, adjacent to the primary subculture purpose of reading and collecting comic books, so creating a comic book is less of a source of status than owning a rare comic, unless of course it becomes quite popular.

Finally, trivia about comic book characters and plots is a source of status. Knowledge of obscure trivia increases status, and not knowing basic information about the comics one collects is a severe faux pas. This affection for trivia can be used by gatekeepers within the community to police the borders. Many comic book fans are male, and unpopular within conventional culture. This leads to some believing that comic book culture is for male geeks only, so anyone who doesn't fit the stereotype is challenged with obscure trivia. This gatekeeping is most commonly used on female fans, accusing them of being a "fake geek girl" if, for example, they started their fandom with a movie rather than the original comic, and don't know obscure trivia from the comics (Reagle 2015).

While subcultural borders matter to the subculture itself, it's important to note that the mainstream culture's perception of the subculture can influence the subculture as well. Many subcultures that are not directly counterculture can be pushed to opposition to mainstream culture by the judgement of mainstream culture. Skinheads were explicitly counterculture, and the mainstream culture judged them as part of the problem with youth of the day. In contrast, some cultures are not particularly noticed by mainstream culture until some event changes the mainstream's perception. Goth subculture in the late 1990s had this problem after the Columbine mass shooting. Since the perpetrators wore black clothes and trench coats (part of the image of the Goth subculture), others of similar appearance were judged to be similar to the shooters. A subculture that had simply been slightly outside the ordinary was believed instead to be dangerous, the folk devils of the media explanations and moral panics the crime caused. This led to the subculture having to work to define itself to the mainstream culture as harmless, and even less outside the norm than they already were. This interaction changed Goth culture as a whole to be less countercultural, and more of a music fandom with a particular aesthetic sense (Griffiths 2010).

To be a subculture requires borders, some degree of being set apart from the mainstream (Brake 1974, Downes 1966). While it is not necessary that the out-group notice the subculture as separate, the subculture itself must show some signs of separating itself from the mainstream. This may be accomplished through the previously mentioned subcultural identifiers, or through interactions between in-group and out-group. It may simply be part of the values of the group, revealed through in-group interactions. What is important is not the method, but that the subculture is in some way separated from the mainstream.

These key elements of subculture suggest questions that will aid in understanding how a subculture operates. Image, boiled down, is the question of how a subculture's members identify themselves to each other and to outsiders. The argot of a subculture can trace the history with cultural references, reveal what's important to that subculture based on what they've changed the language to fit, or simply be another facet of image, an identifier to distinguish in-group from out-group. It's the same with rituals, behaviors that distinguish members, or at least highlight important norms and values. The point of studying all of this is, quite simply, to know what the social construction called "the fandom" actually is. How do its members define it, and how do they see themselves and those outside the group? Does the fandom separate itself, and to what degree does it conform to the ideal definition of a subculture?

#### *Fandom Subculture on the Internet*

Researching the practices of fan socialization in technologically-mediated spaces is not new. Though it involved message boards and even BBS (online message boards that were not part of the World Wide Web) activity, Jindra's (1997) work shows that fans will tend to use whatever means are at their disposal to facilitate their subculture. Booth's (2008) work brings this closer to the present, examining Myspace fan practices. Some of these practices have continued in various online fandoms, and there are others unique to Tumblr fandom, but common among various fan groups on that site. Many of these practices are evolutions of common fan practices.

The relevant practices common to Tumblr fandom are fan works, and role play. Fan works are creative endeavors by fans which connect in some way to the object of their fandom.

Fan art is a common example, which can include things such as portraits of the characters, or making comics to try to express the object of their fandom in another media. Fan fiction is the act of retelling or altering the stories of one's fandom. This can be as simple as a story set within the setting of a show or book, but outside the timeline, or as detailed as AU (alternate universe) fiction, a rewrite of a story with a major detail changed. Role play is the act of pretending to be a character other than one's self; in fandom it's almost always a character from the focus media (there are some occasions where original characters within the same setting are role played, this varies among fandoms). This is largely a form of fanfiction, though expressed in a very different way.

These fan practices take slightly different forms on Tumblr, in my experience of the site. Fan fiction in the normal form (full stories published online) is less common, as Tumblr is designed for smaller posts. Fanfiction takes the form of flash fiction, short scenes, in most cases. This abbreviation of fan works is also seen in narrative fan art, which is often in sketch form or showing only a single scene. A common practice somewhat similar to fan art on Tumblr is to pull quotes and short scenes from video in the form of animated GIF files. There is not much modification to the source material, but it highlights portions that are important to the fans. The second Tumblr-specific variation of fan practice worth mention is the "Ask..." Tumblr blog. This is a form of roleplaying, posting as a character and answering questions in-character from other Tumblr users. Tumblr fandom also has its own general argot, generally encompassing an attitude of exaggerated emotional response in which the funny is superlatively hilarious, and sadness is always tearful. Word choice and tone tend heavily casual. In terms of specific language, "feels" refers to the strong emotional reactions that another post or a plot twist in a

fandom's focus might provoke. "Shipping" is a term and a practice somewhat related to fanfiction, in that it involves fans taking a degree of ownership over the story. It can be part of any fan work, or simply discussion, and refers to expressing a desire to see romantic relationships between the characters in a show. As an example: "I ship Destiel" translates from fan argot to say that the speaker thinks Dean and Castiel (from *Supernatural*) would make a cute couple. Shipping does not necessarily respect canon, as in the previous example, Dean is heterosexual and Castiel is an angel. There are certain ships generally well-known within a fandom (the previous Destiel is popular to the extent that the actors sometimes tease fans about it), but they can also be the source of discord and debate (Hadas 2013).

#### *Supernatural, Doctor Who, and Sherlock: Elements of the SuperWhoLock Fandom*

To understand a fandom, it's helpful to understand what they're fans of. For that reason, I will explain the three shows focused on by the SuperWhoLock fandom. *Doctor Who* is the oldest show of the three, originally airing on the BBC from 1963 to 1989, with a hiatus until 2005. In 2005, the show was revived by Steven Moffat and Russel T. Davies. Steven Moffat has been the showrunner since the sixth year of airing, post-2005. As a BBC television show, it has shorter seasons than most American shows, from 8 to 12 episodes usually, rather than the American norm of roughly 24 episodes per season. The BBC also does not always air a new season of the show each year. *Sherlock* is also a BBC show, with Stephen Moffat as a showrunner. This crew connection to *Doctor Who* is likely part of the reason it is included in the crossover fandom. While *Doctor Who* is an hour long, almost every year, 12-episode show, *Sherlock* is closer to a miniseries. Each season is three 90-minute episodes, the three seasons aired in 2010, 2012, and

2014. *Supernatural*, on the other hand, is an American show, generally with 24 episodes in a season, airing every year. It is currently on its eleventh season.

*Doctor Who* is a science-fiction show about the adventures of a nearly-immortal humanoid alien from the planet Gallifrey. His people do not go by their given names, instead naming themselves according to a role. This role can be factual or aspirational (the Monk, the Master). The main character of *Doctor Who* is, as one might guess, the Doctor. He travels through space and time in the TARDIS, a Gallifreyan ship camouflaged as a blue police call box (it's bigger on the inside). He generally travels with a human companion. The show has run as long as it has partially because its main character is capable of regenerating from death as a different version of himself, allowing the Doctor to be played by different actors every few years. Each regeneration has a slightly different personality, though they remain the same base character. *Sherlock* is a modern version of the classic detective character, Sherlock Holmes. The stories are not simply modernizations of the old stories, but are instead new stories inspired by the old ones. *Supernatural* is about two brothers, Sam and Dean Winchester, who were raised to be monster hunters after their mother was killed by a demon, and now travel the country together "saving people [and] hunting things." Many episodes are monster-of-the-week episodes that stand on their own, with an overarching plot each season. The show uses Judeo-Christian mythology and urban legends as source material for many of its plots. In recent seasons, the brothers were joined by another major character, the exiled angel Castiel.

In 2012, a crossover fandom developed on Tumblr between these three fan groups. That subculture, which emerged from the intersection of three other fandom subcultures, seems strangely unique to Tumblr. The three constituent fandoms exist offline, but the crossover seems

unique to the Internet, and mostly focused on one specific site. The reason for this research's focus on this particular fandom is the fact that the subculture evolved almost entirely on the Internet, allowing a look at the characteristics of subculture specific to that setting. Also of interest is why there is an overlapping fandom involving such dissimilar sources as a 50-year-old British science fiction show, a British mystery miniseries, and an American action/horror series. Understanding where the overlap is between the three constituent fandoms may also reveal something about what motivates fandom affiliation.

## METHODS

This exploratory study is designed to provide a sociological analysis of the actions and social interactions that define the existence of a fandom subculture online. The form of the study will be a content analysis of postings on SuperWhoLock fan blogs on Tumblr. These postings include both individual posts and communication with other fans, and are publicly visible. This exploration was done as a qualitative analysis of microblog content and interaction, following broad ideas of subculture research initially, with more focused and nuanced understanding as the research progressed. I have attempted to determine whether and (if so) how the online fandom in this particular medium (microblogging) acts as a subculture. The analysis focused on the “how?” and “why?” of being part of a fandom subculture. The “How?” aspect of fandom is meant to cover what actions the members of an online fandom group take in maintaining and being part of that group. These actions are what compose and maintain the group, as well as what define a social group as a subculture. The “Why?” aspect explored the apparent meaning that the fandom’s object of devotion, and their membership in the fandom itself, has to the fandom. As further understanding of this group’s practices emerged during the research the focus was modified accordingly. Because of the unstructured nature of interactions within the microblogging setting, there are certain challenges that had to be kept in mind from the beginning, mostly dealing with initial data collection, though also affecting the precision of later analysis.

The basic approach of this research is not grounded theory, but owes a great deal of credit to the methodology detailed for grounded theory research by Charmaz (2006). Though I went in

with a working awareness of the SuperWhoLock fandom, a good portion of data collection was in the interest of not making assumptions, approaching the data with fresh eyes, and refining the methodology based on the evolving findings. In addition, the focus on individual posts was inspired by the concepts of Actor-Network Theory (Latour 2007). In designing the methodology, the assumption was that the “fandom” as an independent entity did not exist, that it was composed entirely of the actions of fans, in the form of posts. Therefore, the post became the primary unit of analysis. This view was especially valuable on Tumblr, which doesn’t support the creation of official groups of blogs, leaving the individual posts to be the almost the entire source of fandom definition.

#### Reflexivity Statement

I am a member of this fandom, and have been, as it turns out, since its beginning. I began with *Doctor Who* a few years after it started airing again, discovered *Sherlock* because of Steven Moffat being the showrunner for both, and actually started watching *Supernatural* because of the SuperWhoLock fandom. I am not active within the fandom socially, and in fact rarely post on Tumblr at all. I use my account to look at blogs that I find entertaining, and became aware of SuperWhoLock through other fan blogs. This experience was helpful in learning how to navigate Tumblr.

I’ve had an interest in stories, religion, and fandom for some time, and studying Sociology has increased my desire to study these things. Since reading Durkheim, I’ve been fascinated with the degree to which fandom and religion overlap, and have done multiple projects in the graduate program on that topic. Since I rarely interact socially with other fans of

SuperWhoLock or its constituent shows, I thought it would be interesting to find out in detail how the fandom came to be. I also believed that not being socially involved with this fandom would give me an outsider perspective, while being a fan of the shows themselves would give me a level of insider knowledge. This turned out to be the case, as many fan interactions are incomprehensible without knowing who the characters or plotlines referenced are.

I found the experience of trying to research on Tumblr a bit overwhelming at first, as the interactions on the site form an almost impossibly complex knot. Once I let go of the tendency to try to collect data in a more quantitative way, the data collection became far easier. As a fan myself, it was pleasant to see others with the same or greater affection for these great shows. The way in which some of the themes were important to them in the same way as I find them important made me feel a connection to these people I've never interacted with, since we have something in common. As someone who is extremely socially awkward, a sense of normalcy and something in common with a group is a great thing. This seems to be common among fans, and that feeling may have influenced my tendency to notice fans with such an experience within the fandom.

### Setting

The focus of this research is Tumblr, a popular microblogging website with social media elements. The site has been active since 2007, and now hosts more than 250 million blogs on a variety of topics. The site itself is not geared toward any particular topic, and is designed to facilitate an anarchic, stream-of-consciousness style of blogging (Tumblr.com 2015). The main interface of Tumblr consists of the dashboard, which contains posts from Tumblr blogs the user follows (has specifically chosen to have shown on their dashboard). The dashboard also allows

the user to interact with these posts by replying (making their own post that includes the original post for reference and notifies the original poster), reblogging (posting it on their own blog, with reference back to the original poster), or liking them (tagging the original post in a way that notes that they liked it). Users are also able to create their own posts from the dashboard. Posts can be text, video, images, or links; this applies whether a post is original or a reply. The design of the dashboard can be determined by the user, but most available options encourage short, prolific posting by the size at which posts are presented on the dashboard. The area in which each post is presented is generally larger than either Facebook or Twitter posts, but much smaller than the text area common to the design of long-form blogging platforms. Because of this design, halfway between blogging and social media interaction, most initial Tumblr text posts tend to be at least a paragraph on a specific topic, or a single video or image. Replies can vary from longer than the initial post to just a few words. In terms of communication, the platform is very similar to other social media sites, like Twitter or Facebook. Every post defaults to public, though a user can control if the public view of their Tumblr blog shows replies or just their own posts.

There has not been a great deal of quantitative or qualitative social research on Tumblr at this point. Social media research tends to focus on the more purely social media sites: Facebook, Twitter, and similar sites (Fuchs 2014, Grieve & Kemp 2014, Mo & Leung 2015). Meanwhile, research involving bloggers tends to involve those who post long-form blogs, without the social media aspect, or separate from the social media aspect. For example, Heo and Lee's work on informal learning (2013) considered the blog investigated a separate category from the social networking site investigated. Surprisingly, research involving the older site Myspace has some

use (Booth 2008, 2010). Users engaged in social interactions with Internet-connected friends, but had the option to post many kinds of content.

Some challenges anticipated with the research included anonymity, lack of structure, and quantity of posts. Anonymous users can behave differently from their offline personas, but what matters to this research is the interactions in the online fan community. Given that Tumblr blogs have at least some permanent identity in the form of a screen name, this means that full anonymity, avoiding the social consequences of one's actions, is not possible. Lack of structure was a challenge during the beginning stages of research, as there is no easily-accessed collection of links to all the *Supernatural*, *Sherlock*, and *Doctor Who* fan blogs. The major challenge in research in this online space is the quantity and variation of Tumblr blogs that participate in some way within the fandom, as well as the microblogging format itself. Because Tumblr encourages a large quantity of short posts, it quickly became clear that despite being an offshoot of larger offline fandoms, the SuperWhoLock fandom produced too much data to be exhaustively analyzed.

### Data Collection

The initial challenge for data collection was, as expected, finding the community-specific fan blogs on a large site like Tumblr. Fortunately, posts can be tagged for easier searching, and most users do so. I began the process by searching the tag "SuperWhoLock," followed by individual searches for "*Supernatural*," "*Supernatural* Fans," and the same pattern for "*Sherlock*" and "*Doctor Who*," looking for references to crossovers or one of the other two shows. Each post in the search was likely to be a reblog or otherwise connected to another fan

blogger. When a post proved relevant to the fandom (tags are occasionally abused due to popularity), I followed the links for each reblog, and also examined the blog found in the initial search, for signs of interaction with other fans. The initial search served to find active blogs, and following the links served to find popular blogs. This is casting a wide net, but I don't pretend to be capable of finding a representative sample. My intent was simply to find groups of fans interacting to a sufficient degree that these interactions can be examined as a subculture.

As data collection continued, it became clear that post linkage data was insufficiently relevant to be continued, as it took up the greatest portion of time with the least useful information. As this study is exploratory and not exhaustive, interaction data was simplified to two factors: estimated popularity, and direct conversational interaction. Estimated popularity subsumed the exact count of reblogs or likes, as well as including other less quantitative signs of a post's popularity among the fandom. This includes references to particular posts, or archiving and re-sharing in another form. This change in methodology to focus on the most relevant data was one of the aspects of the study influenced by the methods in *Constructing Grounded Theory* (Charmaz 2006).

Though the fandom is almost exclusively composed of interactions on Tumblr, there is some fandom presence in other online settings. Some sites, such as the Tumblr blog called "This is Where *Supernatural* GIFs Go" collect fandom interactions or creations that they find interesting. One of the better sources of crossover GIFs I found, "SuperWhoLockians Are Cool", collects these GIFs from other sources in addition to making its own. Finally, KnowYourMeme.com was invaluable in directing me to older SuperWhoLock Tumblr blogs, with their user-generated archive of examples of the fandom.

The unit of analysis for this study is blog posts on Tumblr, as well as blogger profiles. This choice of focusing on only the visible artifacts of interaction and identity creation was influenced by Latour's work (2007). The posts were copied in their entirety into NVivo, making sure to include a list of the tags. Initially, the number of replies, reblogs and likes were identified as well, though this changed within the first dozen entries to a URL link instead. Posts representing an entire conversation were copied into NVivo as a full conversation, rather than individual posts. Immediately prior to the beginning of data collection, the eleventh season of *Supernatural* was half complete, and the ninth series of *Doctor Who* had finished, including a Christmas special. This defined the initial time period of interaction to examine, from the beginning of these seasons to the end of the year. As the full crossover fandom is less active than it once was, the time frame was expanded beyond the initial time restriction. Data was collected from early January 2016 to mid-April 2016, from posts originally created anywhere from 2012 to the date of collection. 75 posts were fully analyzed, as saturation began to be reached near 60 posts. Later, broader examinations of posted content to see how common themes that emerged within coding were within the fandom covered at least one hundred more posts.

### Coding

The initial data set came with existing potential codes, added according to the tags given by the bloggers. A "Tagged" category of codes served as a useful initial classification in the coding process, reflecting the tags used by the Tumblr users themselves. Given the practice of using tags for jokes or commentary, I coded any particularly unique tag as part of a category reflecting its purpose, which were almost entirely the previously stated categories, rather than as

a simple identification tag. For ease of identification, each Tumblr post was also coded with the handle of the blogger who posted it and the blog it came from. These initial codes were less about content and analysis than they were about organization of data. The source coding especially was primarily useful in organizing initial impressions and directing further data gathering.

In searching for signs that the fandom on Tumblr represents a subculture, I examined posts for possible examples of the identifying characteristics of a subculture mentioned in the literature review: argot, image, norms and values, ritual, and definition of in-group or out-group. Potential characteristics were noted as possible examples until the cross-group presence of the characteristic was verified. The focus of coding for argot was primarily lexicon and jargon, though speech style along a broad formal/informal continuum was also noted in later coding. Image online is not the physical presentation referenced in most definitions of subculture. Image was instead interpreted based on the aesthetics of the group members' blogs, and the presentation of their online avatar. Of special interest are posts that reveal, reinforce, or seem to deliberately transgress norms or values. These were given a high-tier "Values" code, with specifics in various subcodes. The way in which a group like this communicates its norms and values to other members is a primary interest in this research. Lack of physical presence may preclude many rituals, but there were codes classifying rituals into four groups based on presence or absence of the fandom focus, and whether done in a group or individually. Finally, references to those outside the community or posts that talk about the fandom itself were coded as a possibility for information on how in-group and out-group are seen by the subculture.

There are individual codes for use in analyzing fan activities based on previous research into fandom, mostly based on Booth's work (2008, 2010), but also influenced by other research (Brown 1997, Geraci 2014, Gottschalk 2010). These activity codes include "fan works," as many fans write fiction or create art based on their object of devotion. "Roleplay" is not uncommon in online fandom, where anonymity and the ability to choose a name and avatar allows fans to pretend to be characters from their favored media. Fans also often tend to have high expectations of their favorite shows, so a "criticism" code was required when the object of their devotion failed to meet their expectations. Sometimes, fans simply discuss the show, or display emotional reactions to it, and these were coded as well. Finally, online multimedia posts have the capability of putting words, pictures, and sometimes video into simple, short clips or pictures with text or video meant to convey one simple idea. These efficient packages of communications are usually referred to as "memes" and were coded to identify them as such.

This multimedia capability was one potential major challenge in coding these data. Fortunately, NVivo proved nearly as capable of holding multimedia data as the source. Animated GIF format pictures were the only sort of data NVivo seemed unable to work with, and this problem was usually solvable with a series of screenshots and descriptions. Any media beyond text was coded to identify the media type. Sound was transcribed, videos or other animation described in supplemental text. Text that exists as part of an animation or picture meme was transcribed for ease of searching. Once rendered into text, multimedia data was coded the same way any other post would be, looking for the same subcultural indicators or fandom activities.

About 20 data points into initial coding, patterns began to emerge, so I moved on to focused coding in addition to basic subcultural markers and fandom practices. The focused

coding addressed themes common to the content of interactions, fan works, and roleplay. As detailed coding was fairly time consuming, I also kept notes on how often themes that had already been coded, or extremely similar posts or themes, appeared on other blogs. Coding for themes and values used a multi-tiered system to avoid a possible interesting bit of data being lost in the shuffle. The top level theme/value codes were, as one might expect: “Themes” and “Values.” “Themes” included narratively complex ideas such as “being alone” or “loss.” “Values” included simpler (usually one word) qualities of character, such as “courage” or “selfishness.” These codes were then sorted by the way the fans portrayed them, reacted to them, or otherwise revealed their own opinions.

As an example of the “themes” coding, consider a speech from the *Doctor Who* episode “The Zygon Inversion” from Series 9, Episode 8. The Doctor is telling two factions on the brink of war to sit down and talk before fighting. His argument is that war leads only to death, followed by the negotiation that they should have done in the first place, so he reasons that they should skip the war. Many fans shared captioned GIFs of this speech, often with approving comments. This was coded as follows: “Themes > Violence > Anti-Violence > Negotiation > War Wastes Life.” The final code on many of the themes was overly specific, but higher level codes were quite useful in finding general themes. An example of “Values” coding is a crossover picture using a quote from *Supernatural*: “Family don’t end with blood.” There are three pictures involved: the Doctor and his companions, Sherlock and Watson, and the Winchester brothers with Castiel. The coding is “Values > Family > Defining Family > More than Blood.” The final code was inspired by the quote, but turned out to be useful as a common theme.

## RESULTS

### Subculture Online

While it is interactions that truly make a subculture, it's very useful to frame the understanding of those interactions according to Brake's (1985) subcultural markers, especially when examining potential subculture in unusual settings. Lifestyle subcultures, like most youth subcultures, deliberately make their markers fairly constantly visible. A punk or a skinhead is nearly always somewhat visibly a punk or a skinhead, even if he has to moderate it for certain social or economic reasons. These markers of cultural membership can affect interaction with others in everyday life, sometimes adversely. An online identity, however, is separated in many ways from everyday offline interactions. In addition, one may have differing online identities on different sites, making more literal the practice of differing personas for different social settings (Suler 2004). Because of this ability to sustain multiple online identities separate from an offline identity, it seems likely that online identities would be more subculturally obvious than offline identities. For example, while one is unlikely to build one's entire identity about a sports fandom (though it may be a large part of some masculine subcultures), one can create an online identity entirely defined by one's fandom.

### *Image*

Identification with the social group was very clearly displayed within the intersecting SuperWhoLock fandoms. On any random day of research, the SuperWhoLock tag on Tumblr is populated by posts written by fans who wear their fandom on their sleeve, as it were. Since image is the most obviously visible of the qualities a subculture uses to identify itself, I'll begin

by describing the image common to many SuperWhoLock fan bloggers on Tumblr. Because of the difference between online settings and real-world settings, the elements of subculture must be reduced to their essentials. The essential element of image is the ability to show passively, at a glance, membership in a subculture. Image on Tumblr is presented primarily through screen names and avatar icons. Screen names have some overlap with blog names, as Tumblr blog addresses take the form of <screenname>.tumblr.com in the address bar. This may or may not match the title that appears on the page, but it leads to a fairly large percentage whose identities are partially defined by their blog topic. These screen names are what is usually visible on a reblog. Avatar icons are small pictures that are visible on the default blog design's "About" section, and are also visible in links on a reblog or comment, or on the tag search. There is a small percentage (roughly ten percent of those sampled) of Tumblr users who show up on a SuperWhoLock tag search that show few fandom identifiers. Upon looking at the blogs themselves, most of these are more personal blogs, rather than fandom blogs. A much greater percentage of those participating in SuperWhoLock fan activity are clear fans of at least one component of the trio. There are the obvious screen name identifiers, such as SuperWhoLockians Are Cool, Official SuperWhoLock, and Fuck Yeah SuperWhoLock. Most are more subtle signals that would lead to other fans recognizing them, but not necessarily non-fans.

As an example, the screen name "Do I Really Say Awesome a Lot?" is a quote from one of the main characters of *Supernatural*, one of many jokes that lean on the fourth wall which appear in later seasons. "Salt and Guns" is an example of a simpler reference to the tools of the *Supernatural* main characters' trade as monster hunters. Similarly, "In The Tardis Don't Blink" refers to the major common setting of nearly all *Doctor Who* episodes and in important phrase in

a popular *Doctor Who* episode. Alternately, “Netflix-Enslaved” is a fandom identification, but not obviously SuperWhoLock. The main page of the blog, however, explains that it is mostly a *Supernatural* fan page, and the icon is an occult symbol from *Supernatural*, so the image still has some specific fandom identifiers.

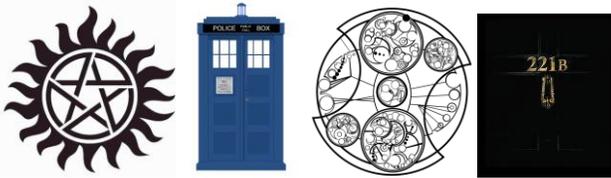


Figure 1. *Supernatural* Symbol, TARDIS, Circular Gallifreyan, 221B Baker Street Door

Icons are also a common identifier. In those Tumblr blogs that were not originally created as fan blogs, icons are often used to show fandom affiliation. Some symbols used as a visual indication of portions of the SuperWhoLock fandom can be seen in Figure 1 (above), and include: the door or address plate of 221B Baker Street or the main character’s silhouette for *Sherlock*, a flaming pentagram (a tattoo the main characters had which was important to the plot in an early season) for *Supernatural*, and either the TARDIS or Circular Gallifreyan (the language of the Doctor’s home planet). A common way of showing SuperWhoLock fandom is to merge these symbols in some way (e.g. Figure 2). Those which most often appeared were Circular Gallifreyan replacing the pentagram portion of the *Supernatural* tattoo symbol, or a representation of the TARDIS with the doors for 221B Baker Street.



Figure 2: *Sherlock/Doctor Who* Icon, *Supernatural/Doctor Who* Icon

A majority of SuperWhoLock blogs seem to have *Supernatural* as a primary fandom if a primary fandom can be discerned. Generally, the primary or original fandom is the one most likely to influence a choice of screen name. So if someone was a fan of *Supernatural* before finding SuperWhoLock (such as Salt and Guns), that can be seen by the reference in their screen name/blog name. On the other hand, those who identify themselves as definitively part of the crossover fandom (both major SuperWhoLock named blogs) rarely seem to reveal their original entry into the fandom.

The individual fandoms of *Supernatural*, *Doctor Who*, and *Sherlock* all show clear identification with the fandom, with consistent symbols used for the visual aspect of their blogs. SuperWhoLock blogs not only engage in similar identification using consistent symbols, but they blend them in various ways to make them unique. The consistency of the use of symbols, the common ways of referencing and showing fandom among users allow identification with the group, and the blended symbols distinguish the SuperWhoLock fandom from the original three. While it takes a different form in this setting than offline, and is influenced by other related fandoms, the SuperWhoLock fandom on Tumblr does possess its own subcultural image.

### *Argot*

The speech of SuperWhoLock fans uses much of the same vocabulary and practices as other fandom groups, with differences appearing in the specifics. In many ways, the argot of the SuperWhoLock fandom and its constituent fandoms emulates the style of speech used in the shows. The *Sherlock* portion of the fandom is least likely to stand out from general fandom argot, but on some occasions they quote or paraphrase the erudite speech of the main character. If they are members of the SuperWhoLock fandom rather than just *Sherlock*, some of the other fan

groups' argot may appear in their speech, such as a reply of "DO WE MOTHERFUCKING LOOK OKAY" to a comment of "fandom u ok" in reaction to a strange GIF of a fan brushing a character's teeth on their screen sometime during one of the long hiatuses between seasons. This explosive, confrontational reaction is very much in the style of *Supernatural*. The fact that the person who replies is called "the-doctor-to-my-tardis" shows that the crossover fandom is at work here.

The *Doctor Who* portion of the fandom tend to have an argot slightly different from the other two. Many of these oddities are likely due to their origin as a much older fandom. As in many fandoms, it's largely catchphrase and character-style speech, but with far more information for other fans within the argot. Each incarnation of the Doctor tends to have a different personality and mode of speech, while remaining a similar character. This allows for a fan to emulate the speech patterns of specific Doctors to convey emotion and attitude in a far more detailed way than simple text normally allows. Communication using fan argot to convey more than simple text is something the *Doctor Who* portion of the fandom has in common with the *Supernatural* fandom.

Of particular interest is the *Supernatural* fandom's argot, at least where it diverges from normal Tumblr fandom behavior. There is a popular phrase relating to the fandom, that "the *Supernatural* fandom has a GIF for everything." This comes from the *Supernatural* fan practice which turns the normal fan practice of quoting the show they're a fan up to a much higher degree. The *Supernatural* fandom posts GIFs containing the visual and dialogue from certain scenes of the show instead of using their own words on many occasions. As an example, there was a post of Castiel, the angel, saying: "I need your help. It seems this is gonna involve..."

talking to people.” Context is that, as an angel, Castiel doesn’t relate well to humans. When posted, this GIF was used to express the poster’s social awkwardness. In one case, it was in reply to a story about being nervous about confronting a roommate. In another post, the comment by the original poster was “Maybe the reason I love Castiel so much is that I AM Castiel.”

It’s fairly clear from the posts that there is a set of mutually-intelligible argot among the three fandoms, originally based on general Tumblr fandom argot, but evolving to be specific to this fandom. The argot is highly influenced by the original fandoms; this is very true. But in the SuperWhoLock fandom, the argot of all three appears, and is also influenced by the setting in which the fandom exists. This mix of varied cultural influences form a somewhat unique variant of fandom subcultural argot used by the crossover fans of SuperWhoLock on Tumblr.

#### *Interactions with the Out-Group*

On Tumblr, the stigma of being a fan in general is less of an issue than in normal life. In many cases, the fans speak proudly of general fan stereotypes and their own stereotypical fan behavior. A few examples serve to illustrate some of the negative stereotypes associated with the SuperWhoLock fandom, as well as their tendency to embrace these perceived flaws. One common criticism levelled among many online groups is a tendency to over-meme, to use repetition and recognizable catchphrases instead of humor. An example of this criticism can be seen below, in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Example of In-Group Interaction with Out-Group

The first *Supernatural* fan has chosen to engage directly with the criticism through stereotypical fandom activity, but his choice of message is generally taken to mean “don’t get mad if it doesn’t hurt you.” The other two, in embracing the stereotype in the complaint down to exact words, are using the criticism as a way to say “yes, but we do actually have a GIF for everything, so we’re justified.” Their dig at the criticism embraces the criticized behavior as part of what makes the fandom special.

There is a common phrase on Tumblr: “Science side of Tumblr, please explain this” which is a request for someone who knows about the topic at hand to chime in. This is met with varying degrees of success, but nearly always takes the form of a request, an answer, and “Thank

you, science side of Tumblr.” This is used in the interaction shown in Figure 4 as a way to criticize the Supernatural Fandom.



Figure 4: Further example of SuperWhoLock fans embracing stereotypes

Once again, the *Supernatural* fan directly confronts the criticism, embracing the stereotype of their fandom. The criticism is likely good natured, as all involved in the conversation are similarly within the “fan” subculture, though perhaps not the *Supernatural* fandom in particular. And, the final portion of the exchange, where a *Supernatural* fan responds to being compared to a clumsy, incontinent werewolf is simply yet another GIF saying “we prefer the term lycanthrope,” a term that literally means werewolf. Once again, the *Supernatural* fan embraces the qualities that get them criticized and make them stand out from the other fandom groups.

While these examples focus on the *Supernatural* portion of the fandom, it shows a clear willingness by fans to identify themselves as fans, even in conflict with those outside the group. Self-identification as part of the fandom, and defending the in-group from out-group criticism (even if by embracing it) shows that there is an understanding of a border between the

SuperWhoLock fandom and those outside the fandom. It also shows that this border between fandom identity and non-fandom identity is acknowledged by both the in-group and out-group. Thus, the fandom shows an interest in its own self-definition, and a willingness to define themselves to those outside the subculture.

### Intersections of Fandom Subcultures

Subculture is similar to a fractal pattern, there are continually more sub-subcultures beneath the original division. The example “youth culture” in Britain referenced in the 1985 literature split immediately into those working-class youth who emulated the archetype of their own class, or those who emulated a higher class. Punks spun off new ways to be punk seemingly every year. The SuperWhoLock subculture can’t be understood without paying attention to fandom overlap, and subcultures within subcultures.

In the case of the SuperWhoLock fandom, subculture boundaries are defined to varying degrees depending on the relation between groups. There is a small core group that identifies clearly as SuperWhoLock fans, those rare few with the specifically SuperWhoLock blogs. Most who use the tag tend originally self-identify as a fan of one of the three shows (commonly *Supernatural*), but those fans will often share images or posts that indicate that they also watch one or both of the others, often with an image symbolizing the crossover fandom as they become more active in it. Even without being a crossover fan, fans of one the three shows on Tumblr interact with fans of other shows in a way that suggests being part of the same subculture, even if their fandoms do not entirely line up. A very commonly posted SuperWhoLock fan identifier is a screen shot of a fan’s Netflix recommendation queue. The first three on the list are *Supernatural*, *Doctor Who*, and *Sherlock* with the caption “They understand us!” While some fans may not

participate in full crossover fandom image use in their online identity, their posts often clarify their SuperWhoLock fandom very clearly. Often this is through argot, or simple self-definition as a SuperWhoLock fan. It is also very likely to be through a unique SuperWhoLock practice of creating crossover fan works.

The unique practice of the SuperWhoLock fandom is the creation of crossover images and GIFs. These could be thought of as a type of fan art, but it is distinct from the type of fan art common to most fan groups on Tumblr. These SuperWhoLock specific crossover images involve existing scenes and dialogue from the individual shows, put together in such a way as to tell a crossover story. Some are slightly altered, some entirely rewritten, but many are kept with the same dialogue as in the original scene (e.g. Figure 5).



Figure 5: Fan work: SuperWhoLock crossover GIF series

This practice is an example of the heart of the SuperWhoLock fandom, which appears to be bringing three fandoms together to create something new, whether that is an alternate shared narrative, or simply a group of fans sharing a bond that is unique to Tumblr. This does not refer to a single narrative thread, as in the case of roleplay blogs. Mostly it is creating a shared setting and interpretation of the characters of the three shows, certain ideas shared among the fandom. The shared setting includes the possibility that Sherlock has noticed the missing persons who leave to become the Doctor's companions, and the series of minor crimes and unusual events that follow the Winchester brothers around the United States. In many ways, *Sherlock* is the glue that keeps the crossover setting together. This also applies to the fandom itself, as participation by *Sherlock* fans in the SuperWhoLock fandom during a *Sherlock* hiatus keeps the SuperWhoLock fandom linked together. Character interpretations focus on the immortal Doctor being incredibly lonely, and often dangerous without intending to be. They also include the tendency of the Winchester brothers to shoot a monster first and ask questions later, focusing on their violence in contrast to the more intellectual Sherlock and Doctor. The fandom character interpretations of Sherlock tend to focus on his connection to Watson, and his near-sociopathy.

This unique practice differs from normal fan fiction, fan art, and the basic Supernatural fandom's GIF use. Combining all three into something new. In the same way, the fandom itself is the combination of three fandoms that already existed as subcultures with offline and online presence (with the possible exception of the *Sherlock* fandom), being made into a new and distinct social group for a new setting. The ways in which crossover discussion and fan works present the characters show a shared interpretation, and a shared interest in certain themes and values presented within the shows.

## DISCUSSION

So far, the data seem to paint a fairly clear picture of the structure and practices of the SuperWhoLock fandom. While a few members identify themselves as clearly members of the SuperWhoLock fandom, most primarily identify as members of the three distinct fandoms that compose it. Despite this, the fandoms interact with one another as different facets of the same group, while remaining distinct from non-fans. The most common primary fandom in my observation of SuperWhoLock fans is *Supernatural*, with *Sherlock* as the least common. Given that *Sherlock* is more a miniseries than a show, and *Doctor Who* has long had its own individual fandom, it's fairly unsurprising that *Supernatural* is the fandom most popular within the crossover fandom. Though SuperWhoLock on its own does not have fully distinctive subcultural markers that distinguish it from its component fandoms it does have a few. In addition, it is the combination of the component fandoms that form the subcultural identifiers for SuperWhoLock. The image of the SuperWhoLock fans is generally clear, involving symbolism of the at least one part of the crossover and usually referencing the fandom clearly in their handle. Further identification as members of the crossover fandom appears in their interaction with other fandom members. The crossover fandom also has their particular practice of creating crossover story GIFs.

The obvious thematic differences between each show are class based, which may explain the initially divergent fan bases, and the unique elements of each fan base. *Supernatural* has fairly broad appeal (it has been successful on network television for over a decade), and the main characters are of a working-class background. Some of the tension between the brothers

originates from class differences between Sam, who went to college, and Dean, who stayed in the family business (one of the show's catchphrases is "Saving people, hunting things, the family business"). *Doctor Who* is a classic nerd/geek show, like *Star Trek*. The Doctor himself is a member of the educated class on Gallifrey, and often uses his greater knowledge to his advantage. Meanwhile, Sherlock is a genius from a rich family, so is privileged to be naturally gifted, and able to ignore class.

The intellectual elements outside of class, however, are very similar. Intellectual ability and knowledge are celebrated in all three shows. All four major characters are experts in what they do, and fan work of the three of them arguing in favor of their own area of expertise (aliens and time travel, the supernatural, and amazing observational skills) is relevant to a problem is very common. This shared value of knowledge and intelligence is part of what appealed to me about each of the three shows, and the common examples of fan works addressing the same idea imply that it may be one of the reasons the fandoms were able to form a crossover subculture.

Interestingly, the shows do have differing ideas on the use of knowledge, if not the value. The Doctor uses his knowledge and intellect to avoid violence whenever possible, and nearly never uses guns. Violence is always a last resort, and even willingness to use violence shows either the danger of an enemy, or the level of the Doctor's hatred. Violence is always presented as a suboptimal final option. On the other hand, *Supernatural* involves hunting (and usually killing) monsters, using knowledge of their weaknesses against them. As time has gone on, there have been more plot lines where violence isn't the best option, and is treated in a more complex way. Sherlock absolutely prefers to triumph intellectually, but the plot sometimes portrays this as unrealistic, and Watson has to occasionally kill someone dangerous when they're threatened.

Though on the surface, the shows' views on violence seem divergent, there is an underlying similarity that might also appeal across fandom lines.



Figure 6: SuperWhoLock crossover values example

A common theme in all three shows is loneliness, being alone, and isolation (e.g. Figure 6). The Doctor is literally the last member of his species left alive. The Winchester brothers live on the road, constantly travelling, doing a service to humanity that most people don't even know is necessary. Sherlock's gifts and inability to relate to most people isolate him. I doubt it is a coincidence that the Tumblr fandom is popular with people of non-normative sexualities, or non-neurotypical (a term encompassing people living with mental illness, and other divergent mental traits like autism) individuals. A related theme might be described as "While there is nothing wrong with being alone, it's important to not always be alone." The idea is that friends can ground someone, stop them from losing touch with who they should be. The Doctor always needs a companion, Sherlock is a lonely sociopath without Watson, and the two Winchester brothers and Castiel keep one another from going off the deep end. With posts like that, fandom members have occasionally mentioned that this is how they feel about their membership in the fandom, that knowing like-minded people makes them feel less alone, even if they aren't particularly social within the fandom. The individual fandoms have many of the same values as the crossover. There are warnings in all three shows of the possibility of life dragging one down,

and the need to stay positive...or if not positive, at least keeping up the fight. It takes different forms in the three media...but the idea that problems are either solvable or endurable is common to the three. Also important is the value of close companions, exemplified in the earlier mentioned phrase “family ain’t just blood.” I believe this kind of similarity of philosophies and themes is the reason the SuperWhoLock fandom evolved on Tumblr, where the emotional and personal aspects of media are often celebrated.

#### Further Research Directions

Though this initial survey of the online subculture found some interesting possibilities, its exploratory nature means that no particular aspect of the subculture was able to be studied in-depth. There are few clear protocols for examining such an unstructured subculture, as much subculture research is either on a clearly-defined group of individuals, or on a clearly-visible lifestyle subculture. Researching a subculture without a specific subset of individuals through textual analysis is not the usual method, but may be a useful practice for online subcultures where interaction is asynchronous and the subculture doesn’t clearly define group membership.

Future research on this topic can take multiple different directions. First is the refinement of the methods of researching subculture without a defined locale. As subcultures begin to interact through various forms of social media and blur the line between online and real-world interaction, such methods will eventually prove necessary for understanding larger subcultures. While this research studies the coming together of individual fans on one platform, similar methods may apply to the rise of modern political movements that may exist in such diverse places as news site comment sections, message boards, and Facebook groups.

A particular theory that may be useful in the examination of online subcultures such as this is Actor-Network Theory. It focuses on the actions that create what other theories see as social constructions. This focus on the “real”, the actions of creating and maintaining a social group, may be of use in similar settings where social groups are created through very minimal direct one-on-one interactions. Each post is an actor independent of yet tied to the person who made it, and it would be interesting to see how Actor-Network Theory might map the way this creates/maintains the subculture.

Further opportunity exists for research on the ways in which subcultural markers appear in online settings. Through a detailed analysis of a small groups in clearly-defined settings, it may be possible to understand more about how subcultural markers manifest in other social groups, and to generalize a theory of identity construction and presentation online that includes subcultural affiliations. As more interactions have an online component (dating, keeping in touch with friends), the field will need to understand online elements of social interaction.

An important perspective to understand for online subcultures such as this are whether they have the same function in one’s life as any other subculture. From initial research, this seems to be the case. The fandom grants like-minded individuals the opportunity to connect with one another. Though the apparent focus of a fandom culture often appears frivolous, participation requires time and attention, making it a part of members’ lives. Understanding the degree of investment individuals have in online subcultures like this would require individual interviews or surveys, and would be a valuable continuation of research. While relatively few posts analyzed referenced fandom in connection to the poster’s personal life, those who did

seemed to state that finding a place to fit in socially was a benefit to them. This may be reflected in the common theme within the fan works, that even a misfit has a place where they belong.

### Implications

It can be inferred from the current study that it is definitely possible for a subculture to exist and even originate in the disorganized social setting of Tumblr. All available data points to SuperWhoLock as a separate fandom developing on the site, and the data collected in this study fairly clearly show many of the markers of a subculture. Of some interest is the way in which the SuperWhoLock subculture does not entirely line up with the SuperWhoLock fandom. The subculture is formed in the alchemy of four fandoms: *Supernatural*, *Doctor Who*, *Sherlock*, and SuperWhoLock. This subculture with shared symbols and practices developed from activities quite different from traditional social interaction. In general, social interaction is immediate, involving physical presence and a single identity. Interaction on Tumblr is much less immediate, and involves an identity that, while persistent, does not necessary link back to one's true offline self. Despite lacking any formal or enforceable methods of social control (beyond those common to Tumblr and online interaction in general involving blocking and/or reporting extremely antisocial behavior), the subculture is able to clearly define its boundaries and identity. In theory, the subculture's identity is composed of a pure synthesis of the fan identities of its members, expressed through their activities in posting on Tumblr. Because of this, online subcultures like SuperWhoLock with its shared practices, apparent values, and themes illustrate the power of social constructions in human interaction, being durable and well-defined while being created

and maintained entirely by social interactions, which may not even necessarily be direct interaction.

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