

#LawrenceHive vs #TeamIssa:
How *Insecure* fans use fandom communities
to perform social and cultural identity

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by
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

#LawrenceHive vs #TeamIssa:
How Insecure fans use fandom
communities to perform social
and cultural identity

presented by Tia Alphonse,

a candidate for the degree of master of arts,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this massive work of love to the friends, family, and fellow scholars who listened to me theorize and conceptualize this research over the past year. I also thank the various Facebook and Reddit users for writing such insightful content in the discussion forums because it made the research so much more exciting.

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ABSTRACT

HBO hit-series *Insecure* became a social media sensation much like the web series that inspired it. The relatability and freshness of the characters made the show an instant standout among fans and critics in a market starved for Black representation since the decline of UPN and the WB. Black fans created digital communities on Facebook and Reddit where they discussed the show, and these spaces quickly became places that prompted conversations about Black identity and traditional gender roles. This study will use textual analysis of the posts and comments in a Facebook group and a subreddit group to examine how users' discussion forums for popular Black television shows are used to define social and cultural identity.

INTRODUCTION

When *Insecure* concluded its final season in December 2021, the creator, producer, and actress Issa Rae wrapped up storylines for characters that audiences had come to know over the show's five-season run. Adapted from the web series *Awkward Black Girl*, the HBO hit show *Insecure* introduced audiences to Black women and men in Los Angeles as each navigated life, love, and career. Growing up in South Los Angeles, Issa Rae and showrunner Prentice Penny infused their knowledge and love of the city and its people to craft nuanced portrayals of Black people in that space. Rae says in a Bustle article that the idea for her first web series came to her one night while she and a few classmates were watching *Flavor of Love* (Tegtmeyer, 2020). Although the show entertained the masses with its shenanigans surrounding the less than pristine love life of rapper Flavor Flav, Rae says it felt like it was one of the only shows at the time that drew audiences to see Black women, and those women on the screen didn't look like any of the Black women she knew. She grew up watching shows that depicted Black experiences like the teens in *Moesha* and Black friendships in *Girlfriends*.

In the late-90s, UPN (United Paramount Network) was a network where the Black sitcom thrived. It produced more than ten comedies such as *Moesha*, *Girlfriends*, and *One on One*. Each of these shows championed diversity in its representation of Black humanity on screen. Co-creator of *Moesha*, Vida Spears said in an interview with Hollywood Reporter, "There hadn't really been a show like that before, where the star was a young Black girl with brown skin and braids" (Brown, 2022). Seeing someone wearing a hairstyle that many Black girls wore in that time period and still do has allowed many of those children to grow up with a sense of cultural pride.

Despite the success of the late-90s and early-2000s for Black content on UPN, the network merged with The WB (Warner Brothers Television Network) in 2006 to create a new network: CW. CEO of CBS at the time, Les Moonves, was quoted saying that the channel would be “a destination for young audiences, diverse audiences, and a real favorite with advertisers” (Davis, 2016). In terms of diversity, the network wouldn’t see new Black programming until *Black Lightning* in 2018. The partnership effectively merged scripted Black television out of existence on network television by removing much of the Black programming that had been associated with UPN. The few shows that survived the merger, *Girlfriends* and *Everybody Hates Chris*, were discontinued by 2008. Recent conversations about diversity in programming and the Strong Black Lead’s initiative by Netflix to bring Black sitcoms from this period to streaming services have prompted television reporters and critics to reexamine the WB-UPN merger and its relationship with the decline in scripted Black programming afterward (Brown, 2022; Jones, 2019).

Frustrated by the dearth of relatable Black content in the media at that time, Rae decided to create her own show. Using a script from *Moesha* that she won at an audience taping as a template, she created a show centering the Black experience from a place of her own identity as a self-proclaimed awkward Black girl. Rae played “J” in the web series—a Black woman who awkwardly stumbles through many obstacles women face as they enter adulthood—love, friendship, and office politics. J accepts that being awkward is a fundamental characteristic of who she is and how she approaches social interactions. Although J says in the first episode of the web series that someone once told her being awkward and black “were the two worst things anyone could be” (Rae, 2011), Rae forges

a character who is funny and relatable. Being relatable and accessible to the community that her show was created for made Rae's show a viral web series. The show's success, Rae states, also proved that there was an audience interested in seeing Blackness explored in ways other than the exploitative works seen on reality television.

Given the opportunity to adapt her web series into a new show for HBO, Rae carried over the essence of the character J when writing Issa Dee for *Insecure*. Rae leans into the fact that each person is insecure to some extent when it comes to transition periods of his or her life. In that sense, being awkward is an experience that everyone can relate to—especially Black women who are often marginalized in the corporate world and the dating scene. Rae taps into this universality in her creation by crafting the most specific human experience that she can through the lens of a Black woman. The show also examines the ups and downs of dating in the Black community from the perspective of women and men, but the heart of the show is feminine friendship. Rae has done several interviews where she states that Issa and Molly were always the true love story of the show. Too often shows create beautiful female friendships solely to break them up for drama, and it was important to Rae and Penny to do the work in making the relationships feel real. “I think friendships are taken for granted in so many ways, and they're not given the same respect and care as romantic relationships,” said Rae in an interview with *Vulture* magazine (Jung, 2021).

Although the show focuses primarily on Issa and Molly's friendship, the show also dedicates time to exploring Lawrence, Issa's primary love interest. He even gets a few episodes that are shown through his lens without the perspective of Issa. By doing this in the second season after the couple breaks up, it creates a peculiar dichotomy

between the male and female fanbase. Male fans, who feel they can relate to the plight of their male hero create #LawrenceHive to solidify their allegiance to the character. As Allison P. Davis pens in her article with *The Cut*, #LawrenceHive is “a passionate, vocal, Twitter-centric group of men (and a few women) who really really identify with Lawrence. They take their name from another passionate Twitter-centric fan club, the #Beyhive” (Davis, 2017). Even though Lawrence’s triumphs undercut the victories of the show’s protagonists, these fans have made shirts inspired by the character’s stint working at Best Buy and even made a petition to get the character back on the show when his character seemed to be written off at the beginning of the third season. The vigor of the show’s fandom surrounding Lawrence, as well as the support for Issa, makes *Insecure* a strong choice for research that explores racial and social identification in the fandom space.

For this research, I will be looking at how Black television viewers in “Insecure Group Talk” and Redditors in the InsecureHBO subreddit discuss aspects of their identity and how they relate to and root for different characters on the show. There has been research done about how Black social media users discuss shows on Black Twitter, but this research is limited in its correlation to fan studies research due to the nature of Twitter (Wanzo, 2015). Wanzo acknowledges in her study that tweets about a show whether negative or positive cannot be used to measure a viewer’s love or hatred for a show. These tweets simply relay audience responses that may or may not equate to fandom or anti-fandom. Chatman also acknowledges in her research on *Scandal* live-tweeting that the platform lacks some of the freedom of fan websites and comments sections on platforms like Facebook. In limiting character counts, Twitter often leads

users to tweet messages that seem out of context to non-fans on the platform, and it doesn't allow for more in-depth fan expression (Chatman, 2017). To directly assess fandom in the digital space for Black television shows, this research will look at Facebook groups. These groups with environments more akin to discussion boards require members to join, which is more of a commitment than sending a few tweets about a topic.

Previous studies have explored the way that identity intersects with television studies from the perspectives of feminist media and queer media (Bury, 2008; Cavalcante, 2017). There is, however, a gaping hole in research on Black fandom, particularly regarding television. In the early days of fan studies research (Jenkins, 1992; Fiske, 1992), scholars saw fandom as an opportunity for segmented groups of society to create alternate idealized realities where their identities were valued. Fiske argues specifically that art and culture developed in fandom spaces are viewed as culturally inferior to the culture that the dominant value system praises. Similarly, Jenkins notes that the objects of fandom are viewed as “devalued cultural material” (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 10). As these spaces are traditionally white, cis-male spaces, the dominant culture often denigrates the cultural tastes of content from and supported by “subordinated formations of the people, particularly with those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race” (Fiske, 1992, p. 30).

Rebecca Wanzo's research complicates the traditional idea that fandom is used to create an alternate reality for all groups. She asserts that the Black fandom serves as an act of political resistance, and this resistance demonstrates the buying power of the Black community as well as their role in circulating positive images of Blackness. These

portrayals of Blackness in television uplifted by fandom help to establish normative ideas of the Black community into American culture (Wanzo, 2015). Furthermore, Kristen Warner's research on Black women fandom for the television show *Scandal* thwarts traditional fan studies research that automatically associates fandom spaces as those operating as a presumed Other. As Warner notes in her research, traditional fans are White, cis-gendered, and heterosexual. Even though the term Other is used by fan scholars to describe the way that fandom is seen by non-fans, Warner explains that using the term ignores groups who are marginalized even with mainstream fandom (Warner, 2015).

In the post-Oscars So White movement and the recent adoption of Black-centered content by television streaming giants, research into Black television fandom will hopefully prompt more discussion of the importance of representation in television and film as well as television and film criticism within journalist institutions. According to a study from USC Annenberg, nearly 63.9 percent of all film critics are white men, with only 4 percent of all critics being women from underrepresented groups (Choueiti, 2018). For more than a decade, the Chicago Tribune had no people of color on staff as entertainment critics (Metz, 2021). With few film and television critics of color on staff, this leads to most of them working freelance without access to screenings and interview slots, Metz said. In turn, Black critics are not able to pitch content from Black content creators to publications, and consumers get less access to reviews about content from Black creatives, Metz said.

The purpose of this research is to examine how *Insecure*—a show written, produced, starring, and run by Black creatives—is discussed in digital fandom

communities. Since there is little research on Black fandom outside of Twitter, I will be exploring how Facebook groups and Reddit create communities wherein participants can discuss concepts of Black identity and potentially redefine themselves in the space. Jenkins (1992) notes that his research does not account for the texts, themselves, as driving forces that fandoms rally behind. Although this study will not involve a content analysis of the show's script or individual episodes, it will take into consideration that the show is created and produced at every level by Black creatives who represent the racial community that the fandom mostly consists of.

This study will examine how Black viewers use Facebook and Reddit discussion groups to interact with this new digital landscape that promotes Black storytelling and what these spaces mean for Black viewers in terms of racial identity expression and community practices. Drawing on previous literature about social identity theory, television and fan studies, and theory about interpretive communities to be discussed in the next chapter, this study aims to better understand the role television plays in Black identity performance and identity development in new digital landscapes. This study aims to add research about discussion forums, particularly how those digital spaces designed to discuss television shows facilitate conversations about social identity and quality representation. Using a television show that premiered after the Oscars So White debacle as a case study, this research will study how Black Facebook users utilize Facebook discussion groups and the subreddit page for the television show *Insecure* as spaces to perform their social identities. This study deviates from traditional studies about Black Twitter and television because Facebook groups and subreddit communities create unique experiences for facilitating these conversations. A discussion group requires back and

forth conversations, whereas Twitter requires people to post their thoughts in a vacuum where others may or may not ever respond.

For this research, I am using Henri Tajfel's definition of social identity when I refer to the term. Tajfel (1982) defines social identity as the part of a person's identity linked with their membership in various social groups. This identity is developed through intergroup comparisons. This definition serves two purposes: 1. determining how the audience members define themselves in the discussion board because this forum is also a group with its own intergroup dynamics and 2. determining how users' memberships in the Black community function as part of the conversation in the group. As the research observes how the users perform their identity in the discussion group, I integrated Tajfel's definition of social identity with Stuart Hall's fluid definition of cultural identity. Hall states that identity is never fixed and is constantly changing the more we self-reflect and analyze ourselves (Hall, 1989). Drawing on this understanding, I looked at how the social media users use this space to negotiate their understanding of what it means to be a part of the Black community as a social group, leading to these research questions:

RQ1: How do Facebook and Reddit groups made for discussing *Insecure* facilitate conversations about Blackness and its representation in television?

RQ2: How do *Insecure* fans choose character allegiances, and should these allegiances in the fandom constitute social identities?

In the following literature, I discuss how Black television users identify with characters in television shows (Cohen, 2001; Hall, 1989; Tajfel, 1985), how digital spaces can function as interpretative communities (Meltzer, 2017; Zelizer, 1993), and what fandom spaces look like for Black fans (Wanzo, 2015; Warner, 2015). Drawing from this literature, I examine how Black social media users identify with Black characters who function as non-peripheral characters and how these characters are absorbed by fandom members.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theories and Concepts

This paper intends to examine how Black social media users utilize a Facebook group and a Reddit group for television fandom and how they negotiate their social identities in the space—with particular focus on the television series *Insecure* which represents the everyday lives of Black Americans in Los Angeles. Social identity, as defined by Tajfel and Turner in their 1982 work, is the part of a person's identity linked with his or her membership in various social groups. This identity is formed through intergroup comparisons. Stuart Hall dissects the term “cultural identity” in his 1989 work and concludes that identity is constantly evolving as individuals self-reflect and analyze how they fit into different social and cultural groups (Hall, 1989). Integrating Tajfel's definition with Hall's definition while considering both the culture of the fandom group on Facebook and Black culture, this research will explore how Black fandom creates the digital space to negotiate distinct facets of Black identity.

Tajfel and Turner's work on social identity theory has been used in the past to understand how ingroups form and how these groups can create stereotypes, discriminate against minority groups, and reinforce racism. Referencing research on early housing integration, Tajfel noted that white families tended to know other white families' names whereas they referred to Black families by their racial category. This theory helped to explain why some groups considered members of outgroups as a monolithic entity and, in cases of extreme separation of ingroup and outgroups, they depersonalized or dehumanized outgroup members (pp. 21). Social identity theory, however, has particularly profound implications when used in fandom research as it explains how

audiences establish a sense of community with other fans, and it can be used as well to understand the complexity of fandom for minority groups.

In fandom research, social identity theory has been mostly referenced in research about sports fans. Since this theory is largely focused on how communities form ingroups and outgroups—the us vs. them mentality—it works well in communities centered around competition. Despite this traditional usage, Tajfel (1982) cites previous research into group cohesion concluding “intergroup competition does not create greater ingroup cohesion or affiliation than coaction or cooperation between groups” (pp. 16). For research about television fandom communities, this conclusion indicates that competition is not necessary for social identity theory to apply. As television fandoms rarely have direct competition like that which is seen in sports fandom, clarifying that competition is not compulsory for social identity to exist and flourish is a necessary distinction.

In addition to group cohesion, Tajfel’s work on social identity theory briefly addresses multigroup dynamics. Tajfel describes a criss-cross effect in which members of an ingroup have subgroups that compete for dominance. In the research, Tajfel uses previous research about exogamous marriages to explain how multigroup membership and the mixing of social groups can create less discrimination for outgroups because the opposing ingroups compete internally. This phenomenon is further explained in Nils Reimer’s research (2020) with the following example:

Individuals belong to a range of social groups, some of which cross-cut each other. Imagine, for example, a group of male and female students, half of whom study psychology, while the other half studies chemistry. The categories ‘student’

and 'gender' are thus cross-cutting each other (if we assume that both male and female students are enrolled in both subjects) (pp. 14).

In this example, the student category is the main ingroup, but the gender category serves as a secondary lens through which the students' experiences can be focused. Although the larger ingroup may have similarities and characteristics that make it distinct, these subgroups also have interests and similarities that may not be pertinent to the main ingroup. Fandom research could use this understanding of multigroup membership to explore segmentation in fandom communities for groups that divide into different character "ships" or camps. Multigroup membership can also be used to understand how the cultural background of audience members presents unique challenges for fans from underserved communities when they interact in mainstream fandom spaces.

Although social identity theory is necessary to understand the way that collective identity can shape group conversations, Stuart Hall's work on cultural identity (1989) is also a necessary layer of identity to explore in communities as the individual cultures people bring to these groups are also fundamental to the way that communication is shaped. Hall defines two schools of thought for the concept of cultural identity: (1.) "one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history or ancestry hold in common" (pp. 69) and (2.) "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as the past...like everything which is historical, [cultural identities] undergo constant transformation" (pp. 70). Hall makes these distinctions in his understanding of cultural identity because the first establishes a more concrete idea of culture as this uniting force always present at the core of our identity, whereas the second

approach sees cultural identity as a fluid state that adapts in accordance with societal changes, location, and history.

Using his own cultural identity as an example, Hall distinguishes his connections with his identity as a Black man from that of Michael Dyson, an academic who identifies as Black in America. Hall says in an interview with Julie Drew from JAC (1998):

It's different for someone like Michael Dyson, who is much younger than [sic] I am, who comes after civil rights, who comes out of a long, stable, African American community, an American tradition of resistance and struggle. My identity was formed in relation to the formation of a community itself (pp. 180).

Hall makes this distinction to show the way that his cultural identity must account for changes in the understanding of blackness in his community as well as societal expectations. Although it was custom for Black academics to be community leaders and activists, Hall says that he “didn’t think it was right to repeat that” (pp. 180) in his distinctly different political era. As the times change and culture adapts, personal understanding and interpretations of cultural identity must adapt as well. Among the two definitions of cultural identity that Hall presents, he subscribes to the more fluid model. This definition of cultural identity does not discount history altogether in the formation of a new identity, but it shows that, like history books, cultural identity is formed from the examination of the past with the eyes of the present.

To further examine fandom communities and the way that they interact with one another, it is necessary to consider both Tajfel’s social identity theory and Hall’s concept of cultural identity, particularly for research on Black fans. Fandom groups with primarily Black fan communities may wrestle with defining Blackness in certain

scenarios in the space and internally ask questions like what does it mean to be a Black woman? a Black man? or a Black businessperson? These are questions that are often answered personally and discussed as fans dissect the characters. These questions, however, will never come to a complete consensus because there is not only one Black experience. Social identity theory can be used to understand how groups rally behind certain definitions and interpretations of Blackness, and the theory accounts for why fans support specific characters and not others. To ignore or discount either identity is to misunderstand how fans interpret media and communicate their experiences in these spaces.

Television as a medium plays an integral role in learning social identity and establishing personal identity (Ellithorpe, 2016; Strelitz, 2002; Cohen, 2001). The platform is a commonly reachable means by which individuals can see these identities acted out. Because of the medium's accessibility, it is available to enough individuals that they can discuss these interpretations of identity with their racial, gendered, or social groups and determine amongst themselves whether the portrayals are authentic or realistic. Upon accepting these identities as authentic, some viewers go a step further than reception by identifying with the characters that they see (Cohen, 2001). The identification process is a mental decision in which a person combines both reception and text interpretation internally, viewing the story "as if they were happening to them" (Cohen, 2001). This concept is important to understand when contemplating the way Black viewers select, interpret, and integrate characters from Black content into their identity structures.

As more Black producers, directors, and showrunners gain access to Hollywood through production backing and industry connections, the Black community has a greater ability to shape their content and create Black characters on screen less likely to fall into the traps of common Black identity tropes. This progress gives Black viewers characters they can identify with and be proud to see on television. In turn, it fosters healthy conversation about continued innovation in the field.

Digital Spaces as Interpretive Communities

The term interpretive community was first introduced by Stanley Fish in 1976. He argued that readers group themselves into separate communities of individuals with similar readings or understandings of a given text. He believed these communities were fluid yet selective in terms of members—in that members would recognize other members but there would be no official proof of membership. Their shared understanding and interpretations would also be evident in the work that each member produced (Meltzer, 2017; Zelizer, 1993). Digital forums and discussion boards often fit that description. Online users utilize discussion boards and forums to connect with other people who share similar ideas about distinct aspects of their lived experiences—whether that be sports, television shows, or their sexuality (Cavalcante, 2016; Bury, 2012). Often, these digital groups serve as safe places where individuals feel free to express themselves fully and perform their identities without fear of judgment or retaliation. Some transgender teens use discussion boards to learn about the transitioning process and practice their new identities before revealing them to the world (Cavalcante, 2016). Digital spaces often begin as safe places for individuals to express their views, but the

larger these groups get and the more inclusive they become, they tend to adopt the standards of social power structures like white patriarchy and heteronormativity. Bury explains that HBO's discussion board for the TV show *Six Feet Under* was a space allotted to discuss the characters and storylines. Although this was a niche group with only fans of this show, anyone could join the group. As the masses tend to strictly accept the established power structures, comments in the group frequently reflected the heteronormative and often homophobic script to which the world mostly subscribes (Bury, 2012). Although the members of the show's fandom share bonds through shared knowledge and language of the show, their community cannot serve as a truly united interpretive one because it marginalizes homosexual members of the discussion board. Warner (2015) paraphrases Jacqueline Bobo who argues that Black women's reception of media often functions as an interpretive community. These fans who work as "cultural producers, critics, and members of an audience, the women are positioned to intervene strategically in the imaginative construction, critical interpretation, and social condition of black women (pp. 38).

Not only do social media users utilize digital spaces to converse about content, but they also use these platforms to share content. Digital spaces create unprecedented opportunities to share and discuss stories produced by marginalized creatives. Without the backing from major production companies, these shows often do not have the same attention or production dollars to bring the most polished product to the most people. However, social media groups and networking are the avenues through which many of these projects get shared. Amongst the Black fandom spaces, the shows become cult classics and occasionally attract the attention of larger producers. Issa Rae's *Awkward*

Black Girl web series reached all over the world because she shared the videos with her Facebook friends, and they shared them with theirs. Web series like hers disrupt the traditional production and distribution process by filming with inexpensive equipment and delivering the content directly to the consumer (Christian, 2019). Her web series is a modern example of how stories with authentically Black characters can flourish in society because marginalized people often care more about the characters than elaborate set designs and costumes. When the people feel real, Black viewers often support them in droves.

The Strong Black Lead campaign-turned-subsiary brand took digital spaces where Black viewers already were interacting with each other about television media and created a direct network between Netflix advertising/promotion to market Black content to Black media consumers. Although the account's purpose is to get Black engagement with Netflix's content, it has morphed into a platform that actively engages with Black social media users on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. The accounts are run by Black women, and the posts often reflect the emotional attachment and love that the Black community has in supporting authentic storytelling (Ibrahim, 2020). With this brand, Netflix gave mainstream Black social media users an opening into a more specialized viewing experience for both new streaming content as well as expressing fandom for traditional television series that were recently brought to the streaming platform. In these Black female-led spaces, Black audiences felt safe to perform and redefine their racial identities as they saw fit.

Fandom for Black audiences

In the early days of fan studies research, Henry Jenkins (1992) established fans as people who actively produce content related to a specific cultural text and characterized them as people who manipulate text's meanings for personal satisfaction. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's research about cultural poaching from media consumers, Jenkins argues that fans are the paragon of cultural "poachers" because they appropriate their favorite texts and establish new meanings differing from those established by media producers. He also claims fans use their collective interpretations of texts to construct cultural and social identities that are often ignored by mainstream media (pp. 23).

Although Jenkins recognizes the phenomenon of fans rallying behind particular texts, he ignores the cultural weight of the original texts—assuming the texts are in no way "exceptional" (pp. 284). This assumption dismisses the idea that the source texts can prompt social discourse and appeal to viewers due to relatable representations of people from intersections of race, gender, and sexuality that do not rely on stereotypes.

Fiske (1992) notes in his research that pop culture items are "associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly with those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race" (pp. 30). Because pop culture is distinctly separated from high art established by the dominant value system, this culture is chosen, shaped, and redistributed by the audience. Fans may not control the official narrative, but they use that narrative to tell stories that are important to them and to explore the reality through these characters. Summarizing de Certeau's concept of scriptural economy, Jenkins writes the following:

De Certeau speaks of a “scriptural economy” dominated by textual producers and institutionally sanctioned interpreters and working to restrain the “multiple voices” of popular orality, to regulate [sic] the production and circulation of meanings. The “master of language” becomes, for de Certeau, emblematic of the cultural authority and social power exercised by the dominant class within the social formation. School children are taught to read for authority meaning, to consume the narrative without leaving their own marks upon it: “This fiction condemns consumers to subjection because they are always going to be guilty of infidelity or ignorance.... The text becomes a cultural weapon, a private hunting reserve” (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 24).

High culture or institutionally approved texts have established a culture where texts have a singular recognized meaning set by those in power, whether that be the original producers of the texts or those who teach its meaning (Fiske, 1992; Jenkins 1992). However, as audiences distance themselves from institutions and create their own structures to discuss media, they also move away from these one-meaning constructs and establish meanings that deviate from original learning schemes.

Although Jenkins and Fiske both saw fandom as an opportunity for segmented groups of society to create alternate idealized realities where their identities were valued (Jenkins, 1992; Fiske, 1992), neither researcher explores how marginalized communities such as people of color or women thrive in fandom spaces which are often filled with white cis-gendered, heterosexual men (Warner, 2015). Kristen Warner’s research into how Black women use fandom spaces acknowledges the problems with characterizing fans as “Other.” She states that reappropriating this word erases the marginalized

experience many women of color have when they enter mainstream fandom spaces (2015). Furthermore, Rebecca Wanzo asserts that Jenkins' 1992 research in *Textual Poachers* proposes "a utopian understanding of fans in science fiction communities as being antiracist and progressive," which is not the case for many Black fans in these fandom communities. Wanzo acknowledges recent cultural examples (e.g., racist comments about Rue being Black in *Hunger Games* film, female discrimination with #GamerGate) where fans of popular speculative works required projects to be centered around whiteness or masculinity to find pleasure in the texts (Wanzo, 2015). Some fans go as far as lashing out at other fans in the community or producers who cast characters fitting the descriptions from the source material (2015). Because fandom spaces can marginalize Black audiences and women, Warner finds it important to explore the benefits of racialized and gendered fandom spaces.

Warner's research (2015) specifically examines Black female fandom spaces and how these spaces are vehicles for identification. Warner notes that these fans were particularly starved for representation of themselves on screen, so they gravitated toward any non-stereotypical portrayals of Black women in their media:

Seeing oneself on screen is a privilege that not all bodies are allowed, thus the "make-do" culture that women of color—and specific to this essay, Black women—participate in to make those identities recognizable is worthy of consideration. The ways that Black women reappropriate themselves into the text through the characters who look (and potentially act) like them is inherently narcissistic; yet, it serves a greater purpose of identification and visibility" (pp. 37).

Black female fans often found characters in the shows that reflected their experiences as Black women regardless of how relevant these characters were to the major plot points of the shows. These fans made minor characters the focal point of fan discussion and fan art. They discussed how shows' lack of representation was indicative of Black women's social status in the real world (2015).

Additionally, Warner connects this idea of identification and lack of representation to the new wave of television media that features Black women as leads. Kerry Washington's Olivia Pope was the first Black woman to lead a network television drama in nearly 40 years when *Scandal* premiered on ABC in 2012 (Vega, 2013). Although Shonda Rhimes writes Olivia's character as racially "neutral" (pp. 43) because of her color-blind strategy for writing television, fans still use Olivia's character to act out their own desires. In the case of *Scandal*, Warner examines how Black female fans used "shipping"—romantic show pairings—to subvert traditional narratives about Black women being undesirable romantic partners. Having a Black woman with multiple romantic suitors was "especially exciting" (pp. 46) for audiences looking to feel desired and to have control of their own romantic lives. Although Warner's research is specifically referencing a Black female lead being pursued by two white men, Black audiences are also starved for non-traumatic depictions of Black love between Black men and Black women on screen.

Insecure as a cultural phenomenon

Insecure presents a strong case for further research due to its prominence as a cultural and commercial ecosystem. The web series that inspired the HBO series took its humble audience, grown largely from electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on Facebook,

and continued to explode on various social media channels after the show transitioned to the premium cable network. *Insecure* has since spawned several other projects associated with the show. Faux show Looking for LaToya—a true crime show that characters on *Insecure* watched during season four—has since grown its own following as a separate podcast called We Stay Looking. InsecuriTEA, the official recap podcast for the show, has reached more than 3 million listeners through its different streaming platforms (Shorty Awards, 2022). This podcast also held the number 1 spot on Apple Podcast’s TV and Film charts for 10 weeks in a row, which covered the duration of season four (2022). In addition to the podcasts, Rae captivated listeners with the music selections on the show. She curated music for the five seasons of the show with popular mainstream artists, Los Angeles-based acts as well as up-and-coming artists in the industry. Music for the show became so popular that the series regularly released the show’s music as a playlist on popular streaming platforms. Rae’s endeavor into music continued to grow as she created her recording label between seasons four and five of *Insecure*. She used the show as an opportunity to expose artists on her label to the fanbase she had already established.

This synergistic relationship between *Insecure* and Rae’s other projects was seen very clearly in season five as the line between fiction and business blurred even further. Issa Rae, the business mogul, has executive production credits for the HBO reality series *Sweet Life: Los Angeles*, and she also will be helping to produce a book-to-television adaptation Brit Bennett’s *The Vanishing Half*. She placed products for both of these projects in episodes of season five: a banner promoting *Sweet Life* and characters holding the copies of *The Vanishing Half* at a book signing. Although Rae uses the production of the show to promote her works, she also promotes local businesses in her show. Los

Angeles is an unspoken star of the series. Issa Rae tells Angel Jennings at the Los Angeles Times that she was tired of seeing the city she grew up in portrayed as the “scary hood.” She says she wanted to help people see the sexier side of South L.A. because Black and Latinx spaces are not given that treatment (Jennings, 2017). Rae executes this throughout the series as she highlights businesses from these communities in her show from the restaurants characters eat at to the local establishments Issa Dee features in the show’s block party events.

Despite the interplay between capitalism and art, *Insecure* did give a nuanced portrayal of an awkward Black woman that had not been explored thoroughly in mass media, and it helped fill a void in representation for Black women and men on television that had never been fully repaired since the dissolution of UPN and the WB networks. As the medium of television provides the space for more character development and examinations of Black life, there needs to be additional research into how Black fandom members interpret these characters and to what extent they absorb these characters into their identities.

With *Insecure* garnering such a large audience of Black women and men in the digital space, the show presents an opportunity to explore how they define, reform, and reconcile their understanding of Blackness as they discuss the show. There have been a few studies on Black fandom, in which researchers use Twitter to dissect comments from these communities (Warner, 2015; Wanzo, 2015). In her section about anti-fandom, Wanzo (2015) poses a potential problem with using Twitter for fandom research. As tweets often require contextualization, researchers struggle to attribute audience responses to fandom or anti-fandom because a person making a single positive or

negative tweet doesn't automatically equate to love or hate for a show. Her research does not discuss digital spaces outside of Twitter where Black fandoms can come together like Facebook discussion forums or Reddit groups. This research aims to answer questions about fandom identification specifically for Black women and men who have joined a discussion board on Facebook or the subreddit for the television show *Insecure*.

RQ1: How do Facebook and Reddit groups made for discussing *Insecure* facilitate conversations about Blackness and its representation in television?

RQ2: How do *Insecure* fans choose character allegiances, and should these allegiances in the fandom constitute social identities?

METHODS

As mentioned previously, past research about Black television fandom on social media primarily uses Twitter posts to understand these communities (Wanzo, 2015; Warner, 2015; Williams, 2017). Rebecca Wanzo's research (2015) on anti-fandom points to a flaw with using Twitter as a source of fandom or anti-fandom versus audience response. Both anti-fandom and fandom require high levels of feelings of attachment that cannot always be interpreted in a single tweet. Open social media spaces like Twitter and Instagram are also less defined with fans, anti-fans, and ambivalent viewers all posting and commenting on the topics at the same time. To offset some of these challenges, some researchers use blogs and fan websites as other sources of digital fandom communities as well (Warner, 2015). Users who locate these communities and engage with the content through subscribing and commenting show more commitment to the fandom than the average Twitter user who may engage with the object of the fandom, but these communities are mostly focused through the lens of the main content creator. The blogger or fan website author is usually the only user who creates posts on these websites. Because this research will discuss the cultural bond and the way race and fanship coincide in the fandom space, this research study will use Facebook Groups and Reddit to examine television fandom.

Facebook Groups and Reddit

Facebook Groups is a feature on the social media website that allows users to create communities for specific niches. These groups are more defined than other parts of the platform because users must find the communities to participate in these

conversations, and the communities usually have guidelines that dictate the focus of the group's content. Facebook Groups are often moderated by administrators, but unlike fan websites or blogs, each community member can contribute by creating posts as well as leaving comments. Moderators help keep posts geared around the content in the group, but generally these users are equally passionate about the topic and allow the conversations in the group to happen without much intervention. Facebook Groups also give users a unique way to build community. As the nature of Facebook requires people to make accounts with first names and last names instead of usernames, the website forgoes the typical level of anonymity seen in other digital spaces. The nature of this platform allows members in the group to form opinions and assume identity from the publicly available information. Research shows social media with personal visibility helps further foster community and trust as there is less room for trolling when users are not anonymous (Bishop, 2014). With this knowledge of the social media platform and Groups feature, Facebook is a strong choice for a study about fandom community building and identity.

In addition to Facebook Groups, this research will use Reddit to look at posts from a particular digital fandom community. Like Facebook, Reddit allows users to divide themselves into groups—subreddits—for specific niche topics. These groups, however—are designed into the structure of the entire platform and not a side feature that users can choose to engage or not engage with. Because this research is interested in how Black television fandom communities use the show to discuss different facets of Black identity, choosing a social media platform that was made for specialized community building is paramount. Reddit further separates itself from Facebook as a necessary

additional option for this research because the platform has an assumed degree of anonymity for the users and the platform allows groups to self-moderate (in addition to designated moderators). Redditors have usernames that are often not associated with their actual names, and profile photos are often default images. Anonymity makes it more challenging for other community members to attribute stereotypes from personal identifiers such as race and gender. This is not always the case though as Reddit users who make posts often use identifiers like “F, 32” or “M, 35” to disclose gender and age. The strength of Reddit communities, however, is the ability for members to decide what is of importance. The upvote and downvote feature helps members moderate themselves—with the most relevant posts and comments at the top of the page and the less relevant material at the bottom. This feature helps to understand what information the community values. Using the knowledge of both social media platforms, this research will analyze the posts and comments from a Facebook group and Reddit community dedicated to the television show *Insecure* to determine how Black fans use discourse about the show to have discussions surrounding facets of Black identity.

Insecure Group Talk and r/InsecureHBO groups

By the show *Insecure* being so popular and having close connections with social media in its inception, the show is a great option for a case study on the way that Black television fans use social media groups to have discussions surrounding Black identity. *Insecure* has prompted fans to create groups across social media platforms to discuss the series. The InsecureHBO subreddit has nearly 15,000 members, and two private Facebook groups have garnered 57,000 and 17,000 members. Nevertheless, this research

analyzes a public Facebook group with 946 members: Insecure Group Talk. The group has had consistent engagement from both women and men, and the allegiance to the different characters will likely give richness to the dataset. Because the group members are on Facebook, fans will also enter the space as themselves by name and face as most Facebook profile images show individuals' faces. Additionally, the research analyzes posts and comments on the r/InsecureHBO subreddit. The community is much larger than the Facebook community chosen, so there is more opportunity for users to interact with one another.

The study was hyper-focused on the sense of community developed amongst fans in digital spaces through the posts, so this research used textual analysis to extract meaning from the messages in the group. Textual analysis is a method that helps researchers “try and obtain a sense of the ways in which, in particular cultures at particular times, people make sense of the world around them” (McKee, 2000). Using an interpretivist approach to textual analysis as explained by Lacity and Janson, the goal during the interpretation of the social media posts and comments was to account for the cultural influences of the writer and the interpreter (Lacity and Janson, 1994). As a member of several *Insecure* discussion groups and a fan of the show, I also consider myself to be an “insider” (pp. 139) that Lacity and Janson state researchers using the interpretivist approach should be in order to understand the text. This research was interested in understanding how social and cultural identity in the fandom space shape the conversations had in a digital discussion group. As Stuart Hall explains in *Encoding, Decoding* (1993), before the meaning of a text can produce its intended effect, it must be decoded by the audience. This research was more focused on how these messages and

their meanings establish community and create a safe space to discuss Black identity. Therefore, the message itself and its reception among community members were more important than the author's intentions for this study. As a long-term member of this fandom community, I brought awareness and understanding to group-specific language and codes that helped in performing a thorough textual analysis to decode the meaning of the message and other fans' responses in the comments.

Data Collection

I conducted a case study that explores the way Facebook users in Insecure Group Talk and Redditors in r/InsecureHBO utilize the digital space. Because the show *Insecure* aired its last episode in December 2021, the content in both groups is relatively fresh, but the number of new posts had decreased at the time of data collection. With less new content being added to the discussion groups, additional posts did not disrupt the data collection process. On Facebook, the last 100 posts and corresponding comments were pulled for analysis. Because Reddit has more users and some of the comments sections were very extensive, only the last 50 posts were pulled from that group for analysis. To ensure that there were duplicates in the data sample, the discussion boards were set to the chronological timeline option, and I noted which posts I stopped on when the data collection process was interrupted. This gave me a sample of 150 texts.

During the pre-coding process when I read the posts and comments, I determined that the sample size was sufficient as data saturation had been met. Michael Grady defines data saturation as the point when new data repeats data already gathered, particularly in interviews when researchers begin to hear the same comments over and

over again. At this point, Grady says it is time to stop collecting data and analyze what has been collected (1998, pp. 26). If I had not reached data saturation by the end of the pre-coding process, I would have used the additional posts that I screenshotted in during the collection process. There were 20 Facebook posts and 10 Reddit posts not included in the sample size. This process of finding patterns and themes in the data is called coding. The codes that arose from the data were used to analyze the results and provide some organization for the data collected. Because my research is interested in cultural and social identity, I used socio-cultural analysis to find themes that related to racial dynamics in the group as well as the relationships between members that align with opposing characters.

Coding Process:

Using an inductive coding process, the codes were not predetermined. Before coding, I reread all the posts and comments, so I knew what kinds of posts were in the sample. The initial 100 posts collected from the Facebook group were divided into five groups of 20. Then, I selected the first group and read the texts from that sample. After reading, I decided on codes and applied them to the texts. I looked for the previous codes in the next group of texts while checking to see if new codes were necessary. If new codes are needed, they are added, and I returned to the previous sections to see if the new codes apply before repeating the process. The inductive coding process allows for the coder to produce, reproduce, and split codes throughout the process. The coding process continued until there were no uncoded texts, and data saturation has been met.

After determining the codes, I organized them using a hierarchal coding frame. The tree-like structure helped to determine major themes in the data—with the most important and most inclusive categories at the top and the most detailed themes at the bottom. Because this research is interested in finding out what conversations are being had in Black fandom spaces, this organization can visually show what common topics of conversation are in the group as I analyze how the space and content function together.

Personal Connection to Black fandom and *Insecure*

Growing up in the late 90s and early 2000s, I grew up watching iconic Black television shows like *Sister, Sister*, *Mo'Nique*, *Mo'Nique*, and *The Parkers* in syndication. I associate that time of my life with those shows and attribute my love of television to the representation I saw early on screen. When those shows left syndication and the few children's networks stopped greenlighting Black-centered leads and families, I was frustrated and clung to the few Black actresses and actors with supporting cast roles on random projects over the years.

It wasn't until I was introduced to the show *Insecure*, in its second season at the time, that I aggressively entered the fandom space again via Twitter and Facebook Groups. On Twitter, I could react in real time with people all over the world and talk about the series by following the show's various hashtags or looking through the trending sections. Facebook Groups, however, was where the real action was. Due to posts often needing to be approved by the group's admins, Groups was a less real-time environment, but the community met there to discuss episodes for days after the conversation had died on Twitter. Groups kept the conversation active even after the season finale, sometimes

for months. Although *Insecure* has a unique fandom community, I have seen a similar intensity among television fans in various other Facebook groups that I participate in. The firsthand experience with interacting in these spaces and the knowledge I bring from personally interpreting posts, comments, and memes will be part of how I can ensure validity in this study.

Unlike quantitative studies that use statistical methods to ensure the validity of results, qualitative research requires researchers to confidently prove that the results are an accurate representation of the information given to them by participants and that enough different voices were heard to draw conclusions. For my research, I ensure validity during my coding process by using my prior knowledge of the space in the interpretation of the texts as well as making sure that the codes remain consistent throughout the coding process. To ensure validity during the data collection process, I was intentional with my sampling of the social media posts from different users. The goal was to get posts from enough men and women so that both genders would be fully represented in the posts and comments chosen for the textual analysis. This happened naturally during the data collection process without additional intervention.

Reflection on Challenges and Limitations

The study only looks at the fandom community for one television. This research, however, does not aim to reflect the culture of all Black fandom discussion boards, so I find the case study to be sufficient at observing the way that some Black fans utilize the digital space. Another limitation of my research is that it looks at a show that primarily focuses on the perspectives of Black women. The show does an adequate job at fleshing

out the supporting male characters, and this brings in a decent size Black male fan base. It is worth noting that this study may lean more heavily on the female perspective.

ANALYSIS

I have to ask: who is to say what we do and don't do? What we can and can't do? The very definition of "blackness" is as broad as that of "whiteness," yet we're seemingly always trying to find a specific, limited definition. As CNN produces news specials about us and a white female rapper feels culturally dignified to use the N-word, our collective grasp of "blackness" is becoming more and more out of touch. To quote the gentleman at the end of the trailer [for *Black Folk Don't*], "Black folk don't necessarily agree with each other about what being black is." And, that's not a bad thing.

From an article by Issa Rae on the HuffPost Contributor platform

The data sample of 150 social media posts and their hundreds of corresponding comments gave insight into the ways that *Insecure* fans use Facebook groups and Reddit to discuss the different facets of Black identity. Forging character allegiances to characters they identify with, *Insecure* fans used these digital platforms to create defined fandom communities that discussed the series but also helped them find other like-minded fans. In the discussion groups, *Insecure* fans dissect the show's characters and share how the show's storylines relate to each of their own lives and personal experiences. To analyze the data collected, this research uses socio-cultural analysis to find commonalities and trends in the posts and comments. Two major themes can be found in the data: (1) cultural identity is still largely shaped by mainstream ideas of heteronormativity and misogynoir even in predominantly Black spaces and (2) fandom segmentation into character allegiances and "ships" form distinct social identities often in accordance with gender. The analysis revealed that Black fans adhered to constrictive ideological positions when advocating for characters in *Insecure*. These ideas shape the way they define Blackness and its intersection with gender. Using an understanding of Tajfel's social identity theory and how people form ingroups and outgroups, these character allegiances constitute social identities that compete with the individual's ability

to define nuanced cultural identities. Stuart Hall posited that cultural identity is fluid as individuals choose which cultural assumptions to adhere to with each action they perform and each word they speak. The allegiance to the social identities formed in the fandom proved to compete with the reformation of cultural identity in the face of stereotypical and oppressive ideology.

Heteronormativity and Misogynoir in Black fandom spaces

The first theme that emerged from the textual analysis was the pervasiveness of mainstream ideology rooted in heteronormativity and misogynoir. This language was coded as such whenever users wrote negative comments about sexual orientation, women's sexuality, or racially charged terms like hoodlum or gangster. Despite these groups being dedicated to discussing a show with a predominantly Black cast and bringing representation that has often been discounted in the media for years, fans still use these perpetuated negative stereotypes about the characters in the show. Because Facebook is the less anonymous of the two social media platforms studied in this research with users having names and profile pictures associated with their posts, it is important to note that the Facebook group is predominantly comprised of Black fans.

The posts and comments pulled from Facebook and Reddit are the most recent in the groups, so the data consists of content from the show's final season and several posts after the series concluded. The texts pulled mostly include reactions to this season but also contain the occasion reflection on characters no longer in the show's current storylines. Because season five commits much of its time to the character Molly and her tumultuous love life, it is not surprising that fans reflect on her previous relationships in

their digital discussion forums. Fans have mixed feelings about a controversial past fling: Jared.

Although many fans agree that Molly missed out, “fumbled,” the opportunity of dating a great guy by breaking up with Jared, several users perpetuate common stereotypes about bisexual men as they rationalize Molly’s decision. For context, Molly struggles in her relationship with Jared initially because she is embarrassed about his lack of college education and his low-profile career. Molly ends the relationship with him, but she later decides her reasoning is flawed and reconciles. In getting to know Jared more, she finds out he experimented sexually with another man when he was in college. She admits to a similar experience earlier in their conversation, but she cannot get over this. Molly ultimately ends their relationship because of his honesty.

Despite the progress that the LGBTQ+ community has made over the years in becoming more culturally accepted, the heteronormative concept of the straight Black man continues to be a cultural identity established as an unwavering standard in the Black community. This concept is expressed in the show through Molly’s interaction with a character who simply explored his sexuality. Although the behavior is addressed as problematic and homophobic by the show’s main character Issa Dee, similar language is repeated in the Facebook Group by the fan base. One fan admits that Molly treats Jared poorly in the show, however, they stand with her in the homophobia: “She played games with him and that was wrong. But for me, him messing around with a dude in college is something I couldn’t look past.” This fan and several others in the comments on the Facebook post subscribe to hegemonic ideals of masculinity that do not view Black men

with non-traditional sexual backgrounds as suitable men. Some of the additional comments coded as homophobic in the Facebook group were:

- “I don’t want to knowingly date anyone who is or ever was bisexual. I’m good. Andrew [another male suitor in the show]...she messed that up.”
- “He had to explore a bisexual practice/response to learn that he wasn’t...I’m all for being transparent but I think he could have kept that to himself. Call me old-fashioned or worse...He was too comfortable sharing that info for my liking.”
- “She wasn't getting past his entangling with buddy. I can't blame her. She wasn't ready then anyway”

These negative replies under the initial positive post about Jared being fumbled were not the only comments. Several commenters expressed their love for Jared, but only one commenter in the Facebook group engaged with any of the comments that were coded as biphobic. The commenter clarified that Jared was not bisexual and that the character strictly dated women. This comment doesn’t challenge the status quo or the problematic ideology, but the user’s reply is the only comment that negates anything said in the previous comments about Jared’s sexuality.

Conversely, Reddit’s *Insecure* community has a post about the Molly-Jared situation, and the comments are only positive. The initial post features a clip where Kelli, another female friend in the show, poses an important question about the way that Black masculinity is defined in the Black community. Kelli asks, “Why do Black men have to fit in a box and be super masculine all the time?” This toxic idea of masculinity alienates Black men who exist on the margins of these definitions, and the idea lays the foundation for other patriarchal problems for women. Although there are significantly fewer

comments under the Reddit post than the post on Facebook, commenters provide an oppositional reading of the episode that pushes for Black women to be open to Black men exploring their sexuality. One commenter says, “I always wished that Molly gave Jared an honest chance.” Stuart Hall describes cultural identity as a fluid identity that is shaped by cultural expectations and how the members of the community define themselves. In this case, the Black man has been culturally accepted and frequently encoded in media as one that adopts the characteristics of toxic masculinity, but fans have the agency to choose whether they will accept a new, more inclusive concept of Black masculinity.

Similarly, several posts in the Facebook discussion group were coded as examples of misogynoir. Because *Insecure* is a series produced on the premium cable network HBO, the show can take more liberties with depicting sex between characters on screen. Sexual freedom has historically not been allotted to Black women, so seeing Black women on screen comfortable with their sexuality and not judged for that freedom is different from traditional messages that have been encoded into mainstream media for years. Despite the source material’s message of sexual freedom for Black women, misogynoir is a persistent problem in the way that some Black men view the Black female characters’ sex lives in the show. A fan in the Facebook group says, “Molly will f-- anybody any where [sic] anytime any season ... I’m not slut shaming but damn girl get it together.” This post was made days after episode nine, and it likely references the impromptu sex scene between Molly and her romantic partner that took place during a private party. The fan understands that the meaning of this post could be interpreted as slut shaming, but they chose to make the remark anyway. By saying she needed to “get it together,” the commenter communicates his judgment of her sexual freedom to others in

the fandom group. This comment aligns with current hegemonic ideology of patriarchy and white supremacy that view the Black female body as an object needing to be policed. This was not, however, the only response to seeing a sexually free Molly on screen. Another user pushed back against the misogynoir with this response: “I don’t see the issue! Spontaneous sessions are life!! lol.” With this statement, the user expresses his oppositional reading of the scenes with Molly by stating that sexual freedom is a regular part of life that should not be shamed for both men and women.

In addition to slut-shaming female characters in the show, some fans also participated in misogynoir when they misname Condola, the mother of Lawrence’s child in the show. From the posts in my data sample, fans have renamed the character “condolences,” “canola oil,” “Candola,” and “Condoleezza,” to name a few. Although more subtle than the previous example of misogynoir regarding Molly’s sexuality, the fans choosing to intentionally change Condola’s name is an exercise in base-level dehumanization. Names have held a special place of power in the Black community in terms of identity and recognition since the Emancipation. Enslaved people once were required to take on the names of their slave masters. When freed, however, these Black women and men could name themselves anything they chose, and these names often held rich meaning, history, and culture. Nevertheless, Black men and women frequently have their names mispronounced, changed, and joked about in non-Black spaces.

A common television trope throughout the years involves characters who can’t remember other characters’ names or people who playfully change characters’ names for comedic effect. The trope is even more dangerous when applied to Black female characters. As Black women deal with oppression from the systems of racism and

patriarchy, this seemingly trivial trope further perpetuates a trend of marginalizing Black women's existence. The popular television convention has even been used by Black women against other Black characters. Two notable examples are Whitley maliciously calling Kinu everything but her name in *A Different World* and Toni giving the most outlandish stand-in names for Jabari in *Girlfriends*. In both cases, the characters mispronouncing or renaming other characters actively invalidate the personhood of the other Black characters.

Insecure fans across the various social media platforms engage with this practice whether intentionally or passively with their posts that misnamed Condola. This dismissal of the character's identity begins when Condola is introduced as a romantic partner for Lawrence in the show. Her character's existence sullies the chance that #IssaHive and #LawrenceHive fans have of the protagonist reuniting with Lawrence. This is only amplified when the news of Condola's pregnancy is made known during the Lawrence-Issa reconciliation at the end of season 4. The two largest segments of the fanbase were reunited in their distaste of the Black female character, and it is seen through the number of times Condola is misnamed in the final season. With the future uncertain for the couple in the days before the series finale, a proud #LawrenceHive fan on Facebook writes, "Condolences will try to get back with Lawrence, cuz [sic] she's clearly falling in love with him." Despite the show focusing on Condola and Lawrence's new roles as parents, Condola being the baby's mother led audiences to see the woman as a threat to Lawrence and Issa's happy ending. Furthermore, another fan downplays the past relationship between Condola and Lawrence in his comment by stating: "he WAS NOT in a committed relationship with cocomungrel, he was her jumpoff." Lawrence fans have

maintained since the first season that he is the true victim of nearly every situation that has gone wrong. This victim mentality is especially extended to his relationship with Condola when she decides to have a baby he initially doesn't want, and it contributes to the misogynoir directed at her character by Lawrence fans throughout the final season.

Fandom segmentation along Gender lines

The previous section alludes to the different segments of the *Insecure* fanbase and how these subgroups have different allegiances that shape the way they interpret information--both from the show and the responses from other members of the fandom. While conducting a socio-cultural analysis of the social media posts, it became clear that these character allegiances constitute social identities that the fandom adheres to. These social identities are chosen by fans often in accordance with each fan's gender identity, and the character allegiances outline how fans identify with (and separate themselves from) the experiences of characters in the show and other fans in the discussion groups. This phenomenon is particularly dynamic and polarizing with the subgroup of *Insecure* fans who identify with Lawrence's and Issa's characters. Lawrence fans dubbed themselves #LawrenceHive during the season one finale. For context, Lawrence and Issa were a couple in the first season of the series. Lawrence was introduced as Issa's long-term, live-in boyfriend who had been out of work for two years while he developed a mobile app. After some prodding from Issa, he got a job working retail at Best Buy and eventually acquired another job in the tech industry. In the process of getting his professional life together, Issa decided she was not happy in the relationship and cheated on him.

Lawrence fans rallied around the idea that he was a nice guy who turned his life around only for the woman to prove unworthy of the effort. A Black-owned counseling service posted a character analysis in the Facebook discussion group which drew a similar conclusion: “So many men are team Lawrence. He’s the quintessential guy who is just doing the best he can.” The user behind the account makes a connection between the Black male fanbase of *Insecure* and those that root for Lawrence’s character. Although #LawrenceHive members are not exclusively men, the idea that a Black man’s loyalty and love were not enough resonates with a large part of the male *Insecure* fanbase. This subgroup of the fanbase used their frustration with the show’s protagonist to form a social divide between those that support Lawrence and other fans that support Issa Dee.

Male fans refocused the female-centered narrative around the male lead and pushed this idea of Lawrence as the good guy or hero in the series, which is rooted in masculinity. Boys learn from an early age that men are heroes and that being a hero should earn them the girl in the end (Kivel, 2009). This idea stays with them often through adulthood. One user in the Facebook group literally refocused the narrative of *Insecure* with his summary of the series from Lawrence’s perspective. This version of the series portrays his character as the wounded hero who overcame. In this summary, Lawrence got a small job to contribute to the household, which “lead his *Insecure* [girlfriend] to cheat on him” with her high school boyfriend. When she told him about the infidelity, it “crushed him,” so he focused on his career and was hired to do his dream job. The author describes the mistakes that Lawrence makes after the breakup as “understandable” and says that Issa Dee’s jealousy ruined Lawrence’s relationship with Condola. Ending the tale, the user writes: “[T]his is Lawrence’s story that Issa & friends

are just in and this is Insecure. Note if any woman tells [sic] you different they're most likely [i]nsecure." This user takes his social identity as a member of Lawrence Hive so far that he actively chooses to rewrite Lawrence's flaws and portray the opposing character Issa Dee as his vindictive ex-girlfriend.

Men who are part of Lawrence Hive also subscribed to this form of hegemonic masculinity in less direct ways when they rooted for him to rekindle his relationship with Issa in the final season. For these fans, Lawrence is their hero who has faced numerous obstacles and has now earned his reward in Issa. This potential reunion with Issa helps further establish Lawrence as the good guy and reaffirms the notion that good Black men should be seen as a prize for Black women. Challenging any naysayers in the fandom to "argue with [their] mama," a proud member of #LawrenceHive in the Facebook group shared a tweet that a fan of the show wrote about Lawrence. The tweet said:

Lawrence was the prize in @insecurehbo. He got cheated on. Got his life together professionally. Had a baby with a woman he was in a committed relationship with. Did his duty as a father and fought for his true love. We can argue if you want though. Lol

Although this message is seemingly subverting the traditional idea of women as prizes that can be won or earned, the subtext of the post keeps much of the hegemonic masculinity that the opening statement attempts to argue. By listing the obstacles that Lawrence has endured over the seasons, the fan centers each item listed around struggle instead of achievement. Because each action is less focused on emphasizing Lawrence's value as a man and more about proving that he is owed a happy ending, the post

subscribes to the cultural idea that Black women should reward or see value in Black men performing traditional masculinity.

Unlike the unanticipated devotion to the supporting character Lawrence, it is no surprise that a large segment of the *Insecure* fandom supports or aligns with Issa Dee. Most fandom communities identify at least to some degree with the protagonists as these characters are often the viewers' first introduction to the fandom. *Insecure* is a series depicted primarily through the lens of female protagonist Issa Dee; therefore, it makes sense for audiences, particularly Black women, to flock to her character and relate to her experiences with finding love and achieving career goals. A female user on Facebook says that the show "documented [her] adulthood all the way down to 'We Got Y'all' [the non-profit that Issa Dee worked for during the early seasons of the show]." For this user and many other female users that subscribe to this social identity that aligns with Issa's character, the show is a visual representation of their journey to womanhood in the workplace and navigating personal relationships outside the office.

Women who aligned with Issa Dee exclusively—or Issa purists as they will be labeled for this analysis—challenged hegemonic femininity through their oppositional reading of the series. The subset of the Issa Hive fans agrees that Issa should "choose herself" instead of pursuing a relationship with Lawrence or Nathan. Although this subgroup of the fandom was less vocal than their Lawrence Hive counterparts, their comments and posts could be interpreted as part of this subgroup by the way that they advocated for Issa and often against Lawrence. One female user said she did not want Issa and Lawrence to get back together because he was an "F boy." According to these fans, Lawrence's actions made him an unsuitable option for Issa, and his actions were

irredeemable. Issa purists argued that by choosing herself Issa would have the time and opportunity to grow into the best version of herself. Fans with this social identity challenge hegemonic femininity because they see self-fulfillment as the pinnacle of femininity instead of traditional feminine ideals such as marriage and motherhood.

Furthermore, Issa purists were mostly dissatisfied with the series finale because the writers spent the final episode pairing off the show's four leading ladies with romantic partners. Using time jumps, the finale episode breezed through several years of the characters' friendship as the women marry and have children. A Redditor, who seems to align with Issa, stated her frustration with the series finale in the following post:

I liked that the show was “rom-com light” [in the previous seasons], and things were super messy and realistic... Kelli who-hated-kids-except-her-goddaughter is suddenly all about babies now? In the earlier seasons it was more relatable but this [final season] was all “you’ll change your mind” and “everything works out in the end” and I’ve seen that enough in so many other shows.

Fans and critics alike associated *Insecure* with its dynamic cast of Black women who play characters that wouldn't normally be depicted on screen. Kelli was vocal about not liking kids and was not overly concerned about marriage. Issa Dee was inconsistent, awkward, and a weak communicator. Dynamism is important for character development, but fans were rightfully frustrated by the show's attempt to rewrite the characters in the finale episode. Because Issa purists do not subscribe to hegemonic femininity, the finale choices to change Kelli's position on having kids and to have all the women get married or engaged are particularly irritating to these fans.

Moreover, Issa purists argue that by coupling up each of the four main women the show stops being realistic and authentic to the story they have been telling for five seasons. A Reddit user asserts that the writers rushed to get a “neat and tidy” ending to wrap the series. The user wrote:

I think the ending was too neat and tidy, honestly quite boring in my opinion.

[Lawrence and Issa] had so many chances to be together without harming other people and they didn't. Then in the last episode everything maniacally fits into place? ... Issa could have finally figured out her career and been really happy with herself and they could have left the relationship part a bit more ambiguous.

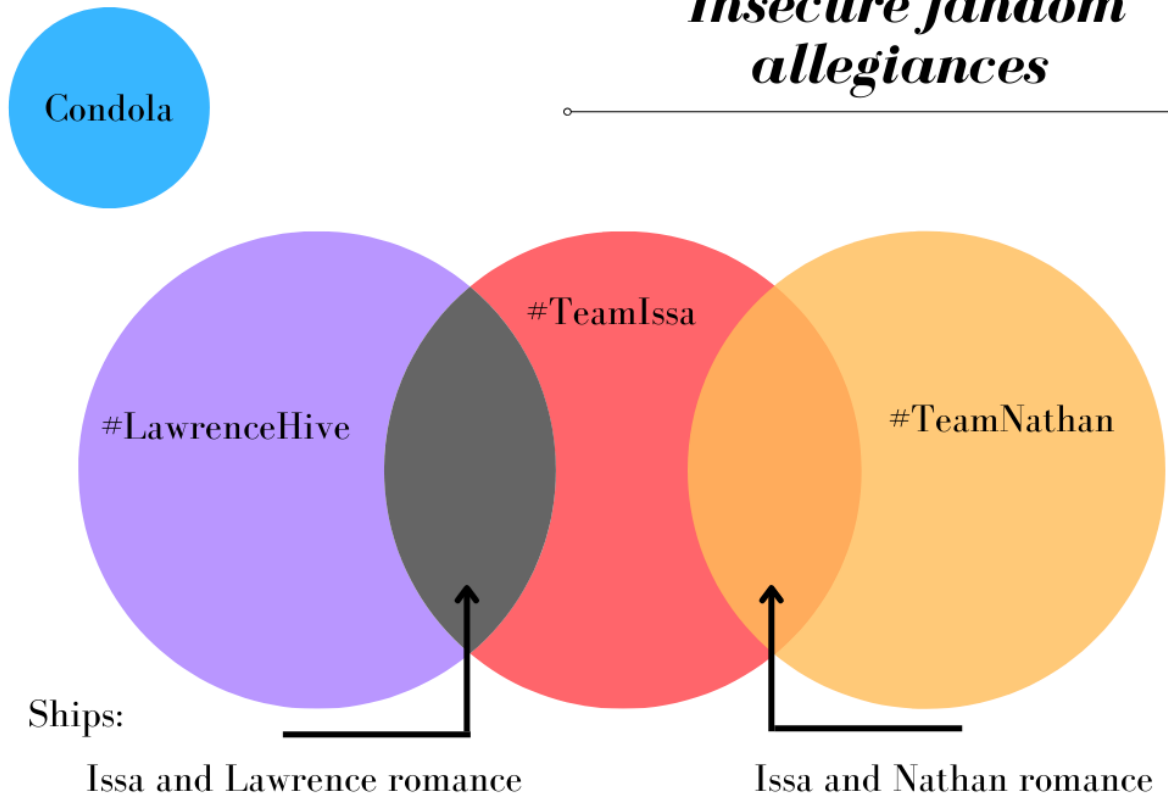
The fan gives an opinion that is corroborated by many other Issa purists who wanted to see Issa choose herself. In creating what another user describes as a “fairytale” ending, the show was no longer the messy, realistic show that these fans tuned in to watch each week. Additionally, Issa fans argued that the ending with Lawrence contradicted the journey of self-discovery that she had been on throughout the series. A Reddit user describes this criticism best in their comment: “The best part about Insecure is watching Issa grow and learn about herself, not this whole arc for her to end back up with Lawrence.” For Issa purists like these social media users, the ending was not satisfying because it did not serve their social identity. Some Issa purists even argued that the show’s writers “gave into whatever Lawrence hive wanted” to create an ending that had the approval of the most vocal fandom subgroup.

In addition to female fans who align with Issa exclusively, there are male fans who break the typical character allegiances of the fandom community by aligning with Issa Dee. These male fans have an oppositional reading of Issa Dee’s character that

values her personhood instead of her identity in the extension of another man. A male Facebook user, who consistently posted in support of Issa, said he was unsatisfied with the show's ending because he didn't understand the purpose of reconnecting the character with Lawrence in the finale. He said: "At the end of the day, this show felt more like it was about Molly and Issa's friendship but their relationships with men were secondary." This fan formed an allegiance to Issa as a character rooted in his dedication to the story. In a story focused on female friendships, the user argues that relationships shouldn't be the focus of the finale. His allegiance to Issa and her story required him to subscribe to non-hegemonic feminine ideals in his process of rooting for her personal growth and happiness.

Although the fandom was often divided by the allegiances to these two characters, the end of the fourth season and the fifth season prompted characters to re-evaluate these stances. The allegiances became more fluid with fans who were once diametrically opposed now occasionally uniting forces to 'ship' Issa and Lawrence. This mixing of the fandom created the criss-cross effect that Henri Tajfel describes in his work on social identity and multigroup membership. Due to crisscrossing between the main subgroups, some users who once proudly vocalized their social identities as part of these fandom subgroups were now considering the possibility of their characters sleeping with the enemy and what that would mean for their identity as a fan. The following Venn diagram can be used to understand how the character allegiances fall particularly for the romantic relationships in the series.

Insecure fandom allegiances



The two largest subgroups were #Team Issa (or #IssaHive) and #LawrenceHive. With Nathan proving to be a romantic suitor for Issa in the last two seasons, part of the fanbase created a separate group for Nathan, but it was less popular in the fandom community. Allegiances to Nathan were often crisscrossed with that of Issa, but some fans aligned themselves with Nathan excluding Issa in the final episodes of season five. Condola supporters, on the other hand, were often unaligned with the main fandom allegiances. Because Condola often represented Lawrence and Issa's failed relationship, fans who sided with her were a small subgroup that didn't intersect with other fandom allegiances. This research acknowledges the different allegiances formed in the fandom community but is focused primarily on how Lawrence Hive, Issa Hive, and the romantic

“ship” of Lawrence and Issa function as subgroups that divide the *Insecure* fandom into distinctly different social identities.

While Issa purists were vocal in the discussion groups on Facebook and Reddit about how dissatisfied they were with the ending, Lawrence fans celebrated the completion of their character’s redemption arc. As previously stated, Lawrence reuniting with Issa was a crucial step in earning his title as the good guy, therefore, nearly the entire Lawrence Hive subgroup became part of the intersection of Lawrence-Issa shippers. This intersection of the fandom became its own social identity comprised of supporters from both Lawrence Hive and Team Issa—not including Issa purists. One male user, who had been consistently writing positive comments about Lawrence throughout the final season, made the following post after watching the series finale: “#LawrenceHive WE WON TONIGHT.” Because these social identities were constantly competing for dominance in the discussion forums, anticipation for a choice to be made in the finale regarding Issa’s love life had been building for weeks. She chose Lawrence, and this positive ending was a win for the male fans who aligned with Lawrence because it satisfied a need to see their hero get the girl. Whereas Issa purists criticized the ending for being unrealistic, another Lawrence proponent in the Facebook group argued that the finale worked because often love is not rational: “[P]eople keep trying to have these logical reasons of why they think that [Lawrence and Issa] shouldn’t or should be together...there’s nothing logical about love!” In this case, this Facebook user is content with the ending because it is a realistic ending that aligns with his social identity as a Lawrence fan and supports a dominant reading of the text.

In addition to #LawrenceHive, female fans who fell at the intersection of the Issa and Lawrence fandom subgroups also relished in their romantic “ship” defeating the other “ship” of Issa and Nathan. These women who subscribed to some ideals about hegemonic femininity were excited to see their heroine get her happily ever after. Prior to the finale episode airing, a female fan posted a message in the Facebook group that said:

I just want all those who hate Lawrence to just know that he will be the last man standing tonight. It’s never too late to support Issa and Lawrence together. We do have a few extra spaces left before our ship sails.

Continuing to build on this idea of winning that is observed in #LawrenceHive’s celebratory posts after the finale aired, this pre-emptive post from an Issa-Lawrence shipper further shows the competitive nature of these character allegiances and ships in the groups. The user offered to let other skeptical fan members join what she anticipated would be the winning team. While some Issa purists were frustrated with the specificity in the finale regarding Issa’s love life, Issa-Lawrence shippers critiqued the final episode for the lack of details in the final scene with Lawrence and Issa. Their social identity as Issa-Lawrence shippers left this subset of the audience wanting to see more of their characters’ narratives on screen. A significant number of female Issa fans shipped the couple together. Issa purists were mostly against the idea of her getting back with Lawrence, but some swayed to the Issa-Lawrence ship by the end of the finale. A female fan wrote: “I initially wanted Issa alone to sit in her shit, but with the time passing, she was able to self reflect [sic], do the work on herself, then her and Lawrence could have they [sic] happy ever after.” For this fan, the time jumps in the finale helped rationalize an ending with the pair together. She accepts a negotiated reading of the finale that

depicts Issa getting back with her ex-boyfriend because Issa Dee has time to self-reflect and become a better version of herself first.

Other female fans who fell at the intersection of Lawrence Hive and Issa Hive idealized the relationship between the two characters. For example, a user on the Facebook discussion board asked users to describe the hard lesson that they learned from the show. Several Black female fans responded, and nearly every comment was about love:

“My first true love will be my last”

“Some relationships are worth fighting for”

“[L]ove and pain are part of the cycle of life”

“Soulmate[s] will always come back”

In an entire series where the female protagonist goes from a dead-end job to couch surfing to being her own boss, these fans’ major takeaway from the show were platitudes about love rooted in hegemonic femininity. Statements like these are consistent with ideology that disproportionately values romantic relationships over self-love and friendship.

Although some female *Insecure* fans may not have idealized the relationship with Lawrence in particular, they still subscribed to hegemonic femininity because they felt the need to place her with a partner. One Facebook user says she isn’t committed to the Issa-Lawrence ship or the Issa-Nathan ship, but she wanted the protagonist to end up with one of these male characters. Fans who adhere to this form of femininity rarely visualize a happy ending without romance or marriage. This tendency to partner off Issa Dee was even occasionally extended to characters that she never entertained romantically. Several

fans in the Facebook group said they wanted Issa to end up with Crenshaw—a character who appeared in three episodes and was at best a business associate to Issa by the end of the series. By hoping Issa would get with a random male character in the finale, these fans prove that women who support hegemonic femininity would rather have any man than be single, and they extend this mentality to the characters they identify with.

Overall, this textual analysis examined digital fandom communities on Facebook and Reddit for the television show *Insecure* and investigated how users interpreted information from the series concerning their identity. Despite the Facebook fandom being publicly comprised of Black men and women and the Reddit community being assumed to consist primarily of Black users, these spaces were not overly inclusive as the fans subscribed heavily to mainstream ideals of heteronormativity and misogyny. Fans also frequently used hegemonic masculinity and femininity to inform the way they interacted with other fans as well as how they commented about characters from the show. Although the social identities formed from character allegiances usually aligned with gender, several men in the discussion board aligned with the female protagonist and supported non-hegemonic feminine ideals as they advocated for the character in the discussion boards.

CONCLUSION

The *Insecure* fandom community is an extension of existing Black television fandom culture. This research looks at the way that users across both Facebook and Reddit make use of the discussion board to talk about *Insecure*, but these discussion boards are also places where users frequently make references to other Black television shows from the various decades. In turn, these references are recognized by the other fandom members. Whether they use a meme from *Sister, Sister* that says “Go home, Roger” or juxtapose the four main characters of *Insecure* with images of the female-led casts of *Girlfriends* and *Living Single*, this show and its fans are consistently adding to a pre-existing culture and shaping the conversation for future Black television fandom across digital spaces. Although Black sitcoms and other scripted television shows were dropped for the excitement of reality television in the early 2000s, this culture of Black representation was not forgotten by the generation that grew up enjoying these shows. Black audiences yearned for it to return, and *Insecure* was one of several series to step in and provide the diverse representation that audiences hadn’t seen since the dissolution of UPN and the WB.

In the era of television on UPN where programming slates of Black sitcoms like *Girlfriends*, *The Parkers*, and *Everybody Hates Chris* filled the primetime slots, audiences had representations of Black people in multiple sectors as they navigated different aspects of life. These characters were representative of middle-class everyday Black Americans who worked jobs that brought with them a similar level of financial success that the average viewer could relate to. This era was less focused on producing escapism that the media of the 2010s that we have more recently become accustomed to

seeing. The Golden age of Black sitcoms was less focused on showing Black people living upper-class lifestyles that resembled the American dream or the lifestyles that glamorized drug and gang violence. With creator and star Issa Rae at the helm of *Insecure*, she embraced the nostalgia of shows like *Girlfriends* and *Living Single* when she chose to center the show on the less-than-elegant experiences of Issa and Lawrence.

The characters in *Insecure* were the first in a series of Black representations seen in the past decade where Black women and men were allowed to fail repeatedly as they tried to figure out young adulthood in their late-20s and early-30s. Issa Dee was 29 years old when the series began. Unsure about her career goals, Issa was going through the motions at her job and was similarly frustrated in her long-term relationship with Lawrence. Oftentimes, popular media portrays Black women as professional, put together, and certain—especially when those characters are college-educated. By creating a character like Issa that embraces the less glamorous parts of humanity, the writers wrote a protagonist that audiences could identify with and root for. Likewise, Lawrence struggled to make his professional dreams come to fruition at the beginning of the series. As a Black man trying to break into the tech industry, his professional struggle was a story that other Black men could see themselves in. This connection to the character was further established when he found out that the woman that he wanted to marry was cheating on him. Hegemonic masculinity has conditioned men to be selective in how they show vulnerability, so experiencing a betrayal like infidelity also prompted an emotional response from many Black male fans.

Wann (1995) attributes several motivating factors for fan identification, but the two most relevant for this research were self-esteem and group affiliation. Motivated by

this sense of self-esteem, most fans who identified with Lawrence and Issa made allegiances to the characters in a way that fed their ego and confirmed or reflected their personal assumptions about gender and sexuality. These bonds were further supplemented with group affiliations that combated feelings of alienation (e.g. Issa navigating her Blackness in the workplace, Lawrence feeling insecure about masculinity after the infidelity). Many Black female fans used these feelings of professional alienation to solidify their sub-fandom community surrounding Issa; this alienation gave the fandom an emotional tether to the character. Men equally used romantic alienation as a unifying force for their sub-fandom community in support of Lawrence.

In addition to conceptualizing how the fan text serves as a catalyst for identification among fans, this research explored how social media users on these platforms dedicated to *Insecure* could redefine and challenge facets of the blackness in accordance with their understanding of cultural identity, as well as how fandom segmentation establishes social identities in digital fandom that shapes interpretations of texts. Using Tajfel's social identity theory, this research explored how character allegiances and "ships" constitute social identities that fans adhere to and contribute to competitive camaraderie in the space. These fandom-created social identities often are segmented in accordance with gender and ideological perspectives on hegemonic masculinity or femininity. The two largest and distinct fandom subgroups for *Insecure*, Lawrence Hive and Team Issa, were a strong example of how fans can divide themselves into groups along gender lines—with Lawrence fans often subscribing to hegemonic masculinity and Issa purists subscribing to non-hegemonic femininity. In this case, Lawrence Hive was popular among the male fans, and Issa Dee was popular among the

female fanbase. These stances framed the conversations that fans had in the discussion groups with each other, and they shaped how they discussed the characters' actions in the show. Surprisingly, there were male fans who

This research also uses Stuart Hall's understanding of cultural identity as a constantly evolving concept influenced by societal expectations and history that is ultimately negotiated by each member of the culture. To investigate whether these Black spaces could be inclusive to all Black identities, the research employed socio-cultural analysis using value-based coding to see what ideologies were found in the posts and comments. Despite being a space made of Black users on Facebook and an assumed majority of Black users on Reddit, the users often perpetuated mainstream ideas of Blackness that were rooted in heteronormativity and misogynoir. Although Hall's research on cultural identity acknowledges the agency that individuals have to choose which parts of assumed cultural standards form this identity, many users default to definitions of Blackness that alienate non-heterosexual people and Black women. There is hope, despite the prevalence of mainstream ideology in Black spaces, because other fans challenge these narratives in their replies to users recycling these ideas.

In addition to exploring the concepts that emerged from the textual analysis, a secondary goal of the research was to show how much Black-centered stories and characters mean to the Black communities that they represent. Journalism often discounts Black television shows and films in terms of reviewing and criticism due to systemic issues such as a lack of Black film and television critics in the newsrooms and less access for freelance reporters to screenings for Black television shows and films. In showing the passion from the fan base of a recently completed Black series that had a successful run

on HBO, I hope this study encourages newsrooms to invest in the Black film critics that often expose audiences to shows that they may not have heard about otherwise. This study is a way for me, as a fan and a scholar, to do my part in preventing another decade-long absence of scripted television that represented the Black community.

This exploration adds to the decades of fandom research in several ways. Much of digital fandom research is concentrated on posts from Twitter, with blogs and fan websites providing additional context when possible. For this study, it was important to add platforms like Reddit and Facebook Groups to this discussion because these spaces offer the opportunity to create digital communities with specific and consistent users. These specialized communities for discussing the show gave me additional means to interpret conversations and fandom than searching Twitter hashtags to attribute levels of fandom. Furthermore, this study also adds to fandom research on social identity, particularly regarding television fans. In the past, social identity was used mostly to describe the phenomenon of sports fans and their allegiances to teams. This research expands the use of that theory to explain the way that fans create alliances and ships for characters in television shows. Fan commitment to the characters they identify with seems comparable to the commitment of sports fans; for example, *Insecure* fans created and wore their own merchandise (ex: Lawrence hive t-shirts), they packed live venues for the premiere of the show, and many hosted live viewing parties for the episodes.

Although this research gave new avenues for how to conduct fandom research, there are still numerous topics in the field of Black fandom research that could be further explored—from the way that fandom community culture differs on the various social media platforms to the obsession with spinoff culture in television with Kenya Barris’

Black-ish and 50 Cent's *Power* and how that differs from serial drama spinoff franchises like *Chicago Med* and *Law and Order*. Because fandom research has its origins in the 80s and was not used to study diverse communities at its inception, the research opportunities are bountiful.

Because this research was driven by a textual analysis of messages and comments on discussion pages that had been inactive for a couple of months prior to this research, future research could perform textual analysis on multiple fandom communities after the source material for the group ended. This research idea works particularly well for fandoms geared to specific television shows. Researching how these digital fandom communities evolve could be insightful for understanding the staying power of fandom. Reddit has several communities that continue to be active years after the groups' television shows end, and Facebook Groups often rename communities to include newer television series that target similar audiences. Although television series all must eventually end, the fans from these communities often stick around much longer.

Fandom proves to be even more important as the culture at journalistic institutions continues to underserve film and television series representing the Black community in regard to reviewing and criticism. The art of film and television criticism is far from extinct, but women and people of color are rarities in this field. Journalistic publications have very few Black or female critics on staff, and the coverage of Black media often requires agency from these few reporters or freelance writers. Publications without Black critics outsource these reviews through freelancing opportunities, but these writers rarely get early access to the content to write reviews prior to the content becoming available to the general public. This research is important because the point of criticism is to

challenge media narratives by holding producers and creatives accountable for the content they put into the world. The best criticism deepens conversations that are prompted from the viewing of the art. If the media cannot be critiqued by critics from the demographic and cultural background that the content was made for, criticism would be worthless.

To combat this lack of representation from Black critics in journalism regarding the critiquing of Black television series, I found it important to see how viewers and fans, in particular, become involved in this process. Fandom communities give the power back to the people to critique and praise the representations in media that serve them. With trending on social media becoming a measurement of success for television shows and even becoming a part of the decision-making process for deciding to renew or cancel a series, fans have more power than ever to demand attention from the media producers and ask for the representation they need to see on screen. The more that social media becomes intertwined with the viewing (and post-viewing) experience, the more important that it is for us to understand how audiences interpret the messages that they see on screen. This research and future Black fandom research should be a part of examining this new wave of fans holding media accountable.

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