



Gayshin Impact: The LGBTQ+ Gaming Fandom and Queering Practices on Social Media

BA Thesis

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Glossary

Throughout the study, fandom jargon is used to describe common fan practices and phenomena. To make sure the reader is well-acquainted with the terminology, I am defining the terminology as it has been described by scholars within the fandom and LGBT studies fields.

Queering - also referred to as queer reading, is a practice of interpretation which challenges (hetero)normative readings of mass media, as described by Doty (1993). Within fandom, queering is an umbrella term for a number of different fan practices that attribute queer traits to source media, whether it would be to the storyline overall, a relationship or a particular character(s) (Oh, 2015; Warren, 2021).

Fandom - defined as a *'space where fans of popular media (...) gather to discuss, celebrate, or critique that media within a shared community of understanding'* by Fielding (2020). As argued by Henry Jenkins (2006), fandom comprises the active, socially connected popular culture consumers who engage creatively with the content, showcasing an emerging relationship between the public and mass media.

Canon - *'official storylines and backstories invented by the creators of television shows, movies and books'* (Liebler & Chaney, 2007). Also might be referred to as lore in games.

Fanon - *'the ideas and concepts that fan communities have collectively decided are part of an accepted storyline or character interpretation'* (Liebler & Chaney, 2007).

Headcanon - as suggested by the prefix 'head', the term refers to an interpretation of source material in the head of the consumer, i.e. a personal canon; *'an idea about the text that only exists inside the head of the fan creating it'* (Mullis, 2019).

Headcanon might turn into fanon if its general idea spreads throughout fandom and becomes a mainstream interpretation.

Kinning - *'the act of identifying as a fictional character'* (Nguyen et al., 2023). A derivative of headcanon, where the consumer associates characters' traits with their own and vice versa.

Queer coding - a practice of queer writing established to imply queer identity of a fictional character or plotline without explicitly confirming it. According to Radner

(1993), *'Coding occurs in the context of complex audiences in which some members may be competent and willing to decode the message, but others are not'*. This implies that coding is built to present one meaning to the general audience, but clearly have double meaning for some of the consumers. This practice persists throughout contemporary media.

Shipping - the act of assigning a platonic/romantic/sexual relationship to two or more characters, or to self and character(s); often also result of source narrative interpretation (Nguyen et al., 2023).

Pro-ship/Anti-ship - relates to an ongoing debate on the practice of shipping, specifically ships with contested (problematic, in some interpretations) pairing (Bradburn, 2023; Aburime, 2022). The pro-ship side of the debate is for all forms of shipping (pro- being interpreted as both for and problematic), while anti- is against 'immoral' or 'toxic' ships and shipping dynamics. The terms do not have one set meaning, nor a set standpoint as they change from one discourse to another. However, they represent a constant discourse even within queering practices.

1. Introduction

In May 2021, during my high school final exam season, I downloaded a free computer game. Not to distract myself from the stress of graduating, nor to explore the beautiful fantasy world from screenshots in my *Tumblr* feed. No, I downloaded it because my friend has sent me a ‘*Let’s go lesbians*’ meme on *TikTok* with two of the game’s characters. From that point on, I never stopped getting queer content from the game in my recommendations.

In September 2020, the Chinese video game publishing company *miHoYo* released what will soon become their largest project: a fantasy action game, *Genshin Impact* (Further, GI or *Genshin*). The game gained popularity rapidly, amassing a global player base. By 2021, it became one of the highest-grossing games, beating first-year records of games like *Fortnite* and *GTA 5* (Tyler, 2021). The record is even more impressive considering GI is free to download. That same year, almost half a year after the game’s release, I downloaded *Genshin* myself. However, commercial success was not what piqued my interest. While it was on my radar when it was just released, I dismissed it. That was until the GI fan content started to overtake recommendation pages across my social media feeds.

In 2021, *Genshin* fan content was practically inescapable if you were in any fandom on any platform; for me, queer fan content became the deciding factor in downloading the game. I needed to know what all the talk was about, and why the latest popular game had so much queer content and discourse online. Once I started playing, however, I noticed the absence of any straightforward representation, no official queer characters or couples. At the same time, I could see where all of the discourse originated from - the nods to queer identities of the characters were hidden between lines of dialogue and walls of text, implied in non-replayable cutscenes and presented through metaphors and allegories. This phenomenon, referred to as queer coding, is common in mainstream media - as it allows the creators to include alternative readings of their characters, representing the queer experience through allegories while staying neutral to the untrained eye (Duarte, 2022).

Queer coding was not uncommon, there is a limited amount of games that openly reveal characters’ sexualities or queer relationships. Players might stumble into

queer coding in virtually any genre, and any level of game's popularity; from *Super Mario*'s Birdo being hinted to be a transgender woman to the zombie horror game-made-mainstream TV show *Last of Us* first hinting at Ellie being queer, and then focusing the next instalment on her relationship with a woman.

However, I was surprised to find out GI relied heavily on queer coding, without having any 'out' characters, considering the majority of fan content I have seen so far referred to the queerness of the *Genshin* characters and GI as a game in general. This prompted me to question, what makes fans actively engage in queer discourse in the fandoms?

One specific detail stands out within the current developments in fandom culture and the history of fandom as an online community. That is, the consistent presence of queer content; it might not be the majority in some cases, but it is significant enough to attract attention. The LGBTQ+ content is often highly popular throughout fandoms and on social media fandom spaces. Among the top 25 most popular tags on *Archive of Our Own* (further, AO3), the biggest fanfiction hosting website, 23 are same-sex relationship tags (Randomist1031, 2024). The *Star Trek* fandom, which is considered one of the first contemporary fandoms, had a very significant presence of fans making queer content for the Kirk/Spock relationship (McArdle, 2016).

Why is the level of participation higher and more visible than that of any other fans? The answer lies in the traditional media, namely the lack of (accurate) queer representation, which then prompts LGBTQ+ fans to create content about their favourite media that would reflect and validate their personal experiences (McInroy et al., 2021). Assigning LGBTQ+ identities to fictional characters is one of the more common queering practices within fandoms. It showcases how the experiences of the LGBTQ+ community in constructing and performing their identity, as well as the social dynamics between the members and the public. The practices have been adapted to the current digital age, through fandom-specific content mediums and 'customs'. This way, the community incorporates the missing representation into the source material. This has been seen throughout fandom history, as fans rewrote narratives: from the aforementioned Kirk/Spock to infamous in recent years Drarry (*Harry Potter*), Johnlock (*BBC Sherlock*), and Destiel (*CW Supernatural*).

1.1. History of Genshin Impact

Twin siblings, travelling together through worlds, get separated by an unknown god once they reach the world of Teyvat. This is how the story of GI starts. Next, the player is invited to choose one of the twins, the brother or the sister, as the protagonist who they will be playing as. The other sibling vanishes. The plot follows the chosen sibling, known as the Traveller, as they search for their lost twin. The twin explores Teyvat with their guide Paimon, a small fae-like creature whom the Traveller befriends off-screen right before the start of the main quest. From this point, the lore of the game is built upon through regular monthly updates, adding content to the main quest or expanding through side quests and events. In this context, lore refers to *‘the backstory, history, and world-building elements that make up the game’s fictional universe’* (Illumination Gaming [Aiden], 2024).

The storyline of GI is divided into seven chapters based on the nation the main character is travelling through in search of their twin. Each is ruled by their own god, referred to as the Archon, and their respective element. The elements are Anemo (wind), Geo (earth), Electro (electricity), Dendro (plants), Hydro (water), Pyro (fire) and Cryo (ice). Nations are inspired by real cultures around the world, from visuals to traditions, food, history and character names. For example, Mondstadt primarily portrays Germanic countries, Liyue replicates Chinese culture and landscapes, and Inazuma’s storyline parallels Japan’s Edo period.

The Gameplay of GI: Characters and Gambling

As the player progresses through the game, they can add new playable characters to their party. They are characters from the different regions Traveller meets along their journey. The storytelling of the game is centered on the stories of the characters themselves, their interactions and their backgrounds. The player gets to form a party of 4 characters to explore the world, beat enemies and progress through the story.

Most characters are obtained through a randomised *‘Wishing’* system in limited-time banners, which requires either resources obtained through gameplay or by in-game purchase. This creates commitment to choosing and obtaining new characters, carefully deciding who the player wants in their party as they can only get them during a restricted period known as character runtime (approximately 2 weeks every

3 to 6 months). However, the players will see these characters throughout quests whether they got them or not, they will just not be able to play as them.

The game blends an abundance of genres due to its live-service format. This means that the game gets regular updates, in *Genshin*'s case approximately every month. Those introduce new storylines, game mechanics, limited mini-games and story quests, but also progressions to the main story by expanding regions as they get introduced one by one. The game remains a work-in-progress at the time of writing, actively releasing its updates.

GI combines single-player gameplay with a multiplayer function. This means that most of the content is created to be explored by the player on their own while being able to invite friends or connect with strangers for short boss missions or mini-games. Because of this, the player can choose the level of socialisation they receive in their gameplay, being able to fully limit it outside of co-op events.

The character '*Wishing*' system is another game genre, known to the masses as '*gacha*'. The word comes from the Japanese '*gachapon*', a vending machine which dispenses random prizes in small capsules. In gaming, however, gacha is an in-game purchase system which ultimately inclines the player to spend real-world currency to obtain random items or playable characters, which is highly controversial due to its close resemblance to gambling (Park, 2020). Due to *Genshin*'s gacha system revolving around getting playable characters, who the player might have gotten emotionally attached to during quests, the system can be viewed as problematic and exploitative. Personally, it was a system that kept me off trying to play GI initially. However, GI is not a pay-to-win kind of game, materials for '*Wishing*' are obtainable by simply playing, which means that while spending money is pushed, it is not required.

Genshin's Origin: What makes the game unique?

Genshin is a Chinese game, which was developed by Hoyoverse, then miHoYo. Their primary focus was mobile games, yet since they have expanded their projects to all be cross-platform, aiming for accessibility and global appeal.

The company originates in Shanghai, China. This cultural origin is reflected within the game itself - biggest event each year is '*Lantern Rite*', a fantasy adaptation of

Chinese Lunar New Year. In 2022, the game was praised by the Chinese Ministry of Culture and Tourism for its representation of the country's culture and landscapes (Kessler, 2022). Its portrayal of other global cultures within its fictional nature is just as detailed.

Despite being a Chinese, the company seems to have gone against country's policies, including the censorship law of any (implied) LGBTQ+ content in mainstream media. Readings of GI online suggest that the company has made efforts of making queer (coded) content despite the censorship and crackdowns on queer content within China (James, 2023). Other games from the company, namely the Honkai series which predates *Genshin*, had multiple instances of queer representation in the form of confirmed lesbian characters and a scene with a same-sex kiss in a spin-off manga (Iridescent Mirrors, 2024). Hoyoverse's approach to representation, while limited, is significant within its context.

The slogan of the company '*Tech Otakus save the world*' refers to the company's origin as a company created by fans for fans, otaku being a Japanese word referring to fans of pop culture, namely anime, manga, and video games. This connection to fandom reflects in the company's interaction with their fans, namely through *HoYoLAB*, a social media platform by *Hoyoverse* for the company to interact with their playerbase, and for the players to interact amongst themselves.

The accessibility, high-quality design and storytelling, complex message and social goal are aspects which make *Genshin*'s standing within contemporary culture significant. It presents a case for the interlap of culture, representation and diversity advocacy within a widely successful project. Moreover, its uniqueness creates a basis for the game's exploration from the standpoint of fans.

1.2. The queer fandom of Genshin Impact

Genshin is a unique case when it comes to its origin, history, content and popularity. The factors impact the queering practices, as the fandom actively adapts them to the source material, platform and goal. This research seeks to connect these factors with fandom work, and investigate the *Genshin* fandom as a contemporary example of digital queering practices. To paint a diverse picture of the queer GI fandom, I looked into two distinct platforms, *Hoyoverse*'s own *HoYoLAB* and *TikTok*, and three

queering practices, queer coding analysis, shipping and headcanons. To determine how fans adapt to and exploit platform-specific affordances in their practices, build communities, and engage in fighting societal stigma, I analysed user interactions and the content itself. Throughout analysis, I focused on three main research questions:

1. How does the *Genshin Impact* fandom utilise the affordances of *TikTok* and *HoYoLAB* to create digital discourse around assigning queer identities to game characters?
2. How do GI fans reimagine and adapt the fandom practices of canon analysis, shipping and headcanons to partake in 'queering' on social media?
3. How are the practices of 'queering' linked to the contemporary experiences of queer identity online?

With these questions, I aimed to explore the unique nature of the GI fandom in relation to the constantly evolving digital queer culture. I found it especially important to explore as it would serve as an important case study for community-building in offline and online cultures where real identities of users remain highly marginalised.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. *Fandoms, fan labour*

When it comes to the history of fandom, there is no clear starting point. Multiple sources state different points of origin, from the end of World War II in the 1920s (Sawdon, 2018), to sports fandoms in 1903 (Fandom, 2024), and back to the 19th century and Sherlock fans (Brown, 2009). Regardless of origin, there is no denying that the practices of fans have persisted and evolved throughout the years, forming tight-knit communities, offline and online.

Despite being perceived as an obsessive following, fandom plays a huge part in popularising contemporary media (Jenkins, 2012; Stanfill, 2013). Dedicated fandoms have had a real impact on their beloved franchises. For instance, the *Doctor Who* fandom influenced the revival of the show in 2005. By the 2010s, it returned to mainstream popularity through *SuperWhoLock* mega-fandom, one of the biggest communities on *Tumblr* at the time (Agne, 2021). Fandom influence, especially in recent years, has spread beyond fan communities, the K-Pop fandom being a great example of it - the fans partake in activist, social and political campaigns worldwide (Kanozia & Ganghariya, 2021; Kim & Hutt, 2021).

Over the years, fandoms grew their authority and presence because of increasing digitalisation and easy access to online spaces, transforming from niche forums to huge networks of communities (Jenkins, 2006). This phenomenon has later been described by boyd (2010) as networked publics, working as ‘symbiosis’ between spaces shaped by networked technologies and audiences forming collectives through the use of them. Fandoms exist exploit such technologies and become mainstream, visible, and inescapable in online spaces (Hills, 2015; Sandvoss et al., 2020; Sandvoss & Kearns, 2016).

Since 2020, the *Genshin* fandom has been consistently trending on the internet, way beyond its own niche. This is reflective of GI’s popularity as one of the most talked about projects in the industry; the game is accessible because of its cross-platform availability, appeals to a large audience with its diverse functionality, regular updates and clever marketing through collaboration with brands and influencers (Ren, 2023). The fandom remains active - new players continue joining through

continuous exposure, and established fans have a constant flow of new content to explore and discuss. As with many contemporary fandoms, GI fandom exists as a community across social media platforms, its sheer popularity causing GI trends to reach general audiences as the growing fan base continues interacting with the topic of the game.

As of writing this, one of the latest trends to come from GI was the viral *TikTok* audio of excerpts of lines from a character Neuville's pronunciation of an in-game mechanism '*Oratrice Mecanique d'Analyse Cardinale*' (Diaz, 2023). The original audio and further remixes gathered thousands of videos, with millions of views overall, according to Diaz (2023). It combined trending audio, a dance routine and a meme, all popular *TikTok* practices which created overlap with other communities and further spread the format. The trend went viral in November of 2023, a whole 3 years after the release of the game, signifying that fan content actively puts the source in the public's eye even after initial launch promotions. As a networked public, fandom is built on such digital practices that form close-knit online communities (boyd, 2010). Fandoms, thus, become important networks for participants, providing community and support, and for the world around them through societal influence.

In fandom, a collection of practices which is behind the virality of fan content, is known as '*fan labour*': shaping fan identity through interaction with the media text, creation of content and participation in discussion (Jenkins, 2006). Fan work, as explored by Jenkins (1992; 2006; 2017), is prompted by the coexistence of fascination and frustration with the source media. The motivation behind fan content is rooted in the strong interest towards the source and furthered the dissatisfaction with some aspects of it. Through fan labour, the fans address the lacklustre representation, change the dominating narrative and create social influence for empowerment. Many scholars noted how fan labour addresses minority marginalisation in media narratives (Jenkins, 2014; Collier, 2016; Coppa, 2008, 2014), but also societal marginalisation through positive media (Oh, 2015; Li, 2017).

The source material, the canon, becomes the base for fan reimagining; the fans want to interact with it because of fascination, but feel the need to improve its features, creating '*fanon*', or '*headcanon*'. These address all the issues canon did not or could

not address, yet which fans deem important, as they would reflect own social standing and give them the representation they feel is lacking (Liebler & Chaney, 2007)

The size and online presence of queer fandom can be traced back to exactly this reasoning. According to Craig et al. (2015), media is an ever-present part of the environment of LGBTQ+ youths. This is the demographic group that deals with a disproportionately high amount of discrimination while being equally underrepresented in the aforementioned media (Craig et al., 2015). Due to this, queer fans are highly active in fandoms through content creation, and practices like writing/reading fanfiction become a tool for processing one's identity, but also gaining the visibility and representation that is lacking everywhere else (Satviki, 2020).

The LGBTQ+ fan activity is even more visible when it comes to gaming fandoms, including the GI fandom because there is an even larger disproportion between queer players and queer content. According to Roeloffs (2024), the percentage of gamers who identify as queer has been rapidly growing, from 10% to 17% in 4 years, with projections to increase to up to 30% in the coming years. At the same time, games with queer content amass around 2% of the market (Roeloffs, 2024). The queer gamers and fans critically lack representation, even more so accurate representation (Shaw, 2009). This pushes queer fans to create content that will reflect them, as they engage in queering of games, and queering of characters, through fandom practices (Shaw & Persaud, 2020).

2.2. Queering practices: The convergence nature of fandom

The three key distinct fandom practices of queering that I am outlining within GI fandom content are queer coding analyses, shipping and headcanons. All three practices are not exclusive to this specific fandom, they are well-established throughout fandom culture. The practices are not static, as they often overlap and influence one another, however, they remain distinct throughout fandom content as a way of reimagining, reinterpreting and 'fixing' canon. They exist across different formats and constantly get reimagined by fandoms to adhere to the needs of users.

Queer coding refers to a practice of writing queer characters in a manner that conceals their identity to the public at large but would be obvious LGBTQ+ flagging for the community (Radner, 1993). Queer coding analysis is a fandom practice of decoding the cues in the source through discourse. In the case of Genshin, that can be pointing to hidden texts, interpreting the double-meaning of entire narratives, pointing to subtle details. For example, a teaser video for the Geo Archon character, Zhongli, mentions that he bought a gift for another male character: *'a pair of dragon-and-phoenix-patterned chopsticks'* (GI, 2020, 1:37). While a passing detail for others, the queer fandom has interpreted it through the lens of ancient Chinese tradition (the Geo nation, Liyue, is based on China) as a traditional gift between newlyweds (Contributors To Shipping Wiki, n.d.). As Zhongli significantly represents the nation, being the God of Liyue, this detail has been theorised to imply queerness of the game, and of the two characters. The practice of coding analysis enriches the understanding of complex media by preserving cultural meanings while simultaneously going against restrictive societal norms (Shaw & Persaud, 2020). In the GI fandom, it is especially prevalent as a way of addressing the potential restrictions the creators have when creating queer storylines in a game that is still produced by a Chinese company and targets large Chinese audiences. The inclusion of coding widely known to the locals, but also distinguishable by the LGBTQ+ altogether, creates an outlet for building fan connection and a space for expression.

Shipping is potentially the most commonly known and mainstream fandom practice, having major significance in fan communities. While at its core it is not exclusively a queering practice, it often acts like one; in some instances, it is then referred to as *'slash'* or *'femslash'* - *'man-loving-man'* or *'woman-loving-woman'* relationship (further, MLM and WLW) (Romano, 2016). The practice manifests through a variety of content formats, from fanfiction to art to discussions. Due to the discourse around the boundaries within the practice (Bradburn, 2023; Aburime, 2022), it serves as an important example of queer and fandom discourse, identity making and symbol interpretation.

Headcanons are ways in which the fandom reimagines characters through personal interpretation; a practice highly linked to identity work and relation to fiction (Mullis, 2019). For example, one could have a headcanon that a character without a canonically defined sexuality is bisexual; this can be further built upon with subtle

details of the canon, like a character interacting with others in a certain way, or it can just be a fully independent reading of a character. Headcanons are, again, not inherently a queering practice, yet they are often used in such a way. Sometimes, they exist as personal projections - something also referred to as '*kinning*', a practice of closely identifying the personality of a fictional character to one's own (Nguyen et al., 2023). Overall, they are a practice of relatability, showcasing the bond between fans and fiction and what said bond can result in when it comes to practising headcanon in online spaces.

The queering practices point to a particular cultural phenomenon known as convergence culture, in how they are performed and how they are shaped by the fandom. The phenomenon exist within a broad concept of culture, i.e. the synthesis of practices, customs and ideas within different societies, as well as the manifestations of said beliefs. Convergence culture describes the increasingly blended flow of media through various platforms and formats (Jenkins & Deuze, 2008). Similar to how GI exists simultaneously as a game, as a manga, in the future as an anime, but also through a variety of fan-made formats - the social media posts, the animations, the fanart and fanfiction.

Fandom activities are a layer of the newly evolving convergence culture in which consumers become creators of the media content, adding new formats to it themselves (Jenkins & Deuze, 2008; Jenkins, 1992; 2006). The Genshin character '*identity work*' is one such outcome of convergence culture, as queerness is assigned in discussions online, through shipping in fanfictions, and even through fanart depicting something like top-surgery scars on a masculine-presenting character. The layers of the cultural impact of convergence culture, from official content to fan-made, showcase how the practice of assigning queer identities developed and how it further impacts the players and society at large. Through participation, the queer GI fandom is adding onto, rethinking or entirely reshaping narratives within the original content. With that, they are then creating, popularising and normalising queer representation, while forming a community and gaining personal benefit through their practices (Wood, 2013).

2.3. *Affordances*

An aspect which shapes the performance of queering practices, in ways that they are performed, but also interacted with, is the use of social media affordances. As established by Bucher & Helmond (2018), the term ‘*affordances*’ refers to the meaning-making and use of platform features in user practices. They stress that the design and features that a platform offers affect the overall performance of actions by users, and can serve as a lens to look into the dynamics of digital social interactions. Similarly, online fandom and queering practices are shaped by the platforms they happen to be performed on.

Technological innovation has shaped modern fandom culture, with digital platforms becoming key spaces for fan interactions (Fiorella, 2023). Communities adapt their content to each platform, using affordances to popularise their work, this tendency applies to GI fandom too. The format and interactions vary by platform: visual platforms like *Instagram*, *TikTok*, and *YouTube* see fans using fan art, animations, and videos to queer fictional characters, emphasising visual symbols and personal engagement. In contrast, text-based platforms like *X (Twitter)*, *Reddit*, and *Tumblr* foster discussions, where fans engage in queering through language and discourse.

Two platforms showcase the varied use of affordances in GI fandom: *Hoyoverse’s* own *HoYoLAB* and ByteDance’s *TikTok*. *HoYoLAB* offers a space exclusively for the game’s fandom, with a forum-like interface. It directly links user content and official content, as both get highlighted on the platform through a recommendation algorithm. The platform’s affordances and interface facilitate consistent user interaction, allowing fans to produce long-form content and partake in elaborate discussions with each other while forming a tight-knit community through fandom practices. *TikTok* is a platform that is popular worldwide, with its targeted content recommendation algorithm which contributes to increasingly growing fandom spaces (Blau, 2023; Fiorella, 2023). It facilitates a more visual, creative approach to more short-form content (whether it be a limit on the video length or amount of slides per post), but also a more networked approach to communities. Different fandoms and social groups get interconnected due to overlapping interests, opening niche discussions to a wider public. Fandom communities on *TikTok*, including the

GI community, reflect general topics of fan identity, contemporary queerness and digital practices.

2.4. Symbolic Interactionism

According to Franzese & Seigler (2020), interactions and perceptions are largely influenced by many aspects of the surrounding world, including the media at large. Symbolic interactionism as a term, then, refers to the creation and interpretation of symbols, and how they affect the social lives of the public (Franzese & Seigler, 2020). This term was originally coined by Blumer (1969), and was based on three core principles of behaviour: people perform actions based on meanings they assign to things (physical objects, beings, concepts, etc.), the meanings are rooted in language (social interactions) and the meanings are modified through personal interpretation, shaping the construction of one's identity. This framework can serve to exemplify how the public interacts with the symbols present in culture at large, and fandom.

In the case of GI, the subtle queer coding within official content would affect the way the players perceive the game, but also how they interact with it and beyond it. In a study on Chinese fandoms' use of symbolic interactionism by Xu (2024), the phenomenon is explained through an example of animal metaphor usage. The fandom applies animal metaphors, and thus characteristics associated with the animals, to idols as a practice of exploring own identity. They project desired qualities onto subjects of their affection, forming their own perception of desired qualities and processing of emotion, symbolic interactionism being a mechanism of reflection (Xu, 2024).

As I observed in the GI fandom, the symbols are fictional characters, and through interpretation of their identity, the participants of the fandom get to explore their own identities. Symbolic interactionism suggests that these subtle cues are significant because they allow players to assign personal and social meanings to the characters and narratives they engage with, and put their own experiences (being queer, for example) into interpreting the narrative.

At the same time, the lack of actual 'on the surface' queerness in-game has its effect on the lack of media representation of LGBTQ+, perpetuating the taboo surrounding the topic and stereotyping. It contributes to a complicated dynamic when it comes to

the reality of the oppression of queer people in China and beyond. On the one hand, as argued by Chen (2020) and James (2023), it is a stance against censorship by the government, a dangerous one at that; and the coding is rather obvious to the Chinese player to not be as harmful to the community as it is beneficial. On the other hand, GI has a player and fan base that spans way beyond China, thus, having a potentially wider negative impact on queer portrayals beyond its country of origin.

Symbolic interactionism points to the complex interconnectedness of media representation and fan practices, providing a glimpse into identity formation. While GI provides a space for queer fans to explore their identities, the results exist in a grey area.

2.5. Parasocial Relationships

An aspect that greatly influences the practice of queering game characters is the parasocial relationship (further, PSR) between the player and the fictional characters. As established by Horton and Wohl (1956), PSRs are an illusion of an intimate bond between the consumer and the ‘actor’. The consumers are the ones who get exploited through media to develop such a bond. In contemporary queer media studies, PSRs are perceived through a different lens, where they proved to benefit and affirm LGBTQ+ identities due to a lack of other external support (Lowe, 2021). Because of this, queer communities continue interacting with PSR content, but also, as I observed, produce it themselves through queering practices.

The case of GI, and games overall, is unique compared to the traditional cases described by Horton and Wohl. The ‘actors’ are the playable characters, they are fictional and fully dependent on their creators. They leave more room for consumers’ interpretation, customisation and projection. In a study of the connection between fandom participation and PSRs, O’Donovan (2016) concludes that the two exist in a repeating cycle - PSRs prompt fans to interact in fandom practices, while those practices increase the connection to the PSR.

The potential effects of PSRs, and their increasing presence and extent in new media, affect the fandom, their practices and the content they produce. This dynamic is no longer built on one-sided passive consumption of content, as seen in the work of Horton and Wohl (1956). Instead, the fandom is an example of an emerging active,

beneficial consumption of parasocial entertainment. Such consumption exists in the form of digital content production, including shipping and kinning (headcanons) (Nguyen et al., 2023), which are then practised by queer fans as a form of identity work.

3. Methodology

To grasp the reasoning, methods and impacts of contemporary fan queering practices, I focused my research on the GI fandom's activity on two distinct social media platforms, *HoYoLAB* and *TikTok*. Specifically, I observed the use of platform affordances to create queering content and the digital discourse the fandom partakes in, to find potential motivations behind their practices and to observe impact on social dynamics within GI fandom, and beyond.

3.1. *HoYoLAB* and *TikTok*

The choice to analyse two separate platforms has been made due to their contributions to providing a well-rounded analysis of GI queer fandom practices. The content on the two platforms differs in themes and tone, yet it showcases the overarching motivations and tendencies, portraying the complexity of such discourse. Observing participants and content on both platforms is crucial to my research, as it showcases the fandom's mobility within different spaces, a perspective important to understanding contemporary digital practices (Postill & Pink, 2012).

To observe the interactions within the Genshin fandom itself, I chose *HoYoLAB*, a platform created by *Hoyoverse* themselves. To analyse these interactions, I went for the digital ethnography approach. Since the platform has a forum format with a GI fandom page, it is a source of rich interaction data, which gave insight into the dynamics within the fandom when it comes to queering characters. It was also a way to gauge the attitudes towards official content platformed in the same space and the interactions between *HoYoLAB* users and *Hoyoverse*.

For data on content created by the GI fans, I turned to *TikTok*. Since *TikTok* is designed to focus more on content than on interaction, as even duets and stitches normally require the user to create their own post, it provided an opportunity to analyse how users utilise platform features, as well as symbols through language and visuals for queering practices. Hence, for this part of the research, I used multimodal discourse analysis. This part of the analysis connected the insights on fandom with its larger position within digital spaces and cultures, showing how they are affected by it, but also what effect they have on it.

Looking at the affordances within *TikTok* and *HoYoLab* will serve as a method for analysis and meaning-making of collected data. The Genshin fandom utilizes different practices depending on which platform they post content on. Their queering of characters on *TikTok* overlaps with the wider social phenomenon of online fandoms, using practices common in different *TikTok* communities, including popular audios, trends or hashtags. The practices on *HoYoLAB* show the degree to which the queering is, first of all, allowed by the company behind the game (as they are also the owners of the platform itself), and, secondly, how a more limited interest-specific space influences the degrees to which the practices are performed, without an active overlap with other communities. Thus, this platform showed different insights on, for example, moderation of content - whether the topics of queer coding were as present as they are on non-affiliated platforms like *TikTok*, were users going against moderation/developing more subtle ways of queering characters?

Together, the observations from both platforms formed a more overarching view of the queering practice creation and distribution within the fandom, covering fandom work, interaction and discourse.

3.2. Queering practices: coding, shipping, headcanons

Throughout my research, I focused on the three main categories of the content on queering *Genshin* characters that I have outlined earlier: queer coding theories (analysis of in-game queer coding), shipping and headcanons. They are the most common unique practices of queering characters that the fandom engages in online, presenting different facets of the phenomenon.

To narrow down the scope of the research for pattern observation, I selected specific characters or pairs to focus on for each of the categories, while also scoping out the general content on the practices. This has been done a month into my data collection, once I noticed which characters seem to appear in each of the practice categories most. Hence, each of my selections is a popular, recurring example within their respective category with a high amount of user interactions on posts about them. At the same time, I tried selecting characters with different assigned identities, not focusing on a particular sexuality or gender. Furthermore, my selection of characters

spans multiple game versions, each example being characters introduced at different points within the storyline and made playable throughout the almost 4-year timeline of the game, to showcase the consistency of both canon and fanon queer content.

To look at user queer coding analysis, I chose the character of Yae Miko (as well as some content related to her relationship with Ei/Raiden Shogun). Yae Miko is most commonly referred to as being an implied lesbian, hinted to be in a relationship with the Electro archon, Ei. The two characters are key figures in the Inazuma story quest, their relationship being a significant part of the story. Due to the amount of in-game content regarding the relationship between the two, they have been the object of many fandom deep-dives into the game's queer coding (E, 2023a).

The pairing that I chose to look at for the shipping part of my research into queering practices is the slash (MLM) ship Alhaitham and Kaveh, also known by the abbreviations (most to least common) Haikaveh, Kavetham, Alhaiveh. The two characters were introduced in the 3.0 version of the game, and throughout the quests and dialogue, the player finds out that they are roommates. Because of their dynamic, the seemingly open-ended nature of their relationship in canon, and the abundance of in-game interactions, they became one of the most popular ships in the fandom in under a year since their release. Currently, they are the second most popular relationship tag for GI fanfiction on AO3 with a total of almost 12 thousand works featuring their pairing as of July 2024 (*Archive of Our Own*, 2024).

For the analysis of the headcanon, I selected the character of Wanderer (Scaramouche). A popular user theory about his character is that his character arc and backstory in Act III of the Archon Quest is an allegory for gender transition and that the character is implied to be female to male trans; the context clues used in these analyses are debated by the GI fandom at large (E, 2023b). However, because of this popular reading of his character arc, the users within the fandom have been actively creating headcanons to express this detail, from text posts to fanart.

3.3. Digital ethnography

Digital ethnography, as explained by Varis (2016), is an approach to researching communication and other social practices online, as well as how digitalisation has shaped practices offline, and the intermingling of the two. To examine the user

practices when it comes to creating and engaging with content which discusses the assigned identities of characters, I partook in participant observation and content analysis in the aforementioned digital space of *HoYoLAB*, relating my impressions to previous experience in fandom spaces and my own experience of fan identity. As an active participant within the GI fandom and an infrequent user of *HoYoLAB*, I went into this research with certain prior awareness and expectations when gathering content, yet aimed to gain insight into a space mostly foreign to my fan identity.

Participant observation is a common method within ethnography at large as a method for observing practices and the meaning-making behind them. As explained by Postill and Pink (2012), this method within digital ethnography provides insight into the social aspects of online practices, as the researcher observes members of an internet community by following their activity or even participating within their spaces. Within my research, I took field notes while observing the user interactions on *HoYoLab* for 3 months, from March 31st to July 1st, reflecting on my observations and interpretations of the platform and the fan interactions. Throughout my research, I have recorded 5 entries, as I explored the fandom space, going through around 10 posts per session; I recorded the contents of the original posts themselves, as well as the comments and discussions under them, together with my own reflections. I did not limit myself to a set of tags since the tagging and search system are not directly related. Instead, I searched for keywords relating to the characters I was researching: their names and ship names (Yae Miko, Scaramouche/Wanderer, Haikaveh, etc.) combined with the practice descriptors ('coding', 'ship', 'headcanon') and/or with LGBTQ+ descriptors - 'queer', 'trans', 'gay', 'lesbian', etc. When looking at comments and discussions, I selected posts with the most interactions.

3.4. Multimodal discourse analysis

Another layer of the research is the analysis of some of the content adjacent to the practice. Namely, multimodal discourse analysis of the *TikTok Genshin* content. Digital content is often multimodal, combining text, visuals, sound, or other semiotic modes, thus, it is important to examine how the meaning is constructed through the interaction of all different facets of online communication presented within social media posts (Jones et al., 2015). Content on *TikTok* goes beyond plain text, with sound and visuals being as important to the context. Through this analysis, I

determined what are the common ways of assigning queer identities to characters, what are the tones of those texts, how they are presented through a combination of modes and what are the potential factors that affect the content of the topic and what they mean when connected to the more general topic of queerness online.

For this part of my research, I first created a database of a total of 60 *TikTok* posts. From this base, I have selected 5 unique texts from *TikTok* per each category by exploring hashtag combinations relating to the game itself (#Genshin #GenshinImpact), the LGBTQ+ community (#lgbt, #queer, #gay, etc.) and the practice itself (#kin, #ship (also separate ship names), #queercoding, etc.). The content was collected over the span of 3 months, to ensure a diverse array of texts (for example, relating to the different seasonal events in the game itself or the release of new characters, which change every 3 weeks). The texts were collected starting from February 1st, until May 31st. I used *TikToks* posted prior to the start date of my collection, however, I did not use any content uploaded to the platform post-May 31st. I have kept the texts in an archive folder on the app to have access to all content modes rather than just the visuals (audio, captions, comments, etc.). As a backup, I have downloaded the *TikToks* and kept screenshots of *TikTok* captions/comments. Through discourse analysis, I established the connection between the practices within online content with general issues faced within the LGBTQ+ community and determined how digitalisation has been integrated into the different aspects of the community, from representation to identity work.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

When it comes to gathering digital data, there are some nuances. Varis (2016) highlights the ethical concerns regarding ‘lurking’, i.e. non-disclosure of observation to participants or invisible observation. The practice has holdbacks in terms of lack of consent from those being observed and privacy concerns. However, for my case, while the data I have gathered could be sensitive due to potential connection to real-life marginalised identities and needs anonymising, *TikTok* and *HoYoLab* are public platforms, and the posts I selected for analysis have also been shared publicly. Because of this, it can be argued that the users consent to their posts being perceived, interpreted and analysed by posting publicly as their content becomes accessible to anyone online.

However, my research touches upon the sensitive topic of sexual and gender identity, which means that there are certain ethical guidelines I followed while collecting, analysing and disseminating public data. According to *Internet Research Ethical Guidelines 3.0* by Franzke et al. (2019), it is important to practice multiple levels of consideration when gathering data online, respecting the terms and conditions of platforms, privacy and security of users, and ethics and transparency in data collection. Keeping these points and the context of research in mind, while I cannot ensure informed consent from participants of my research, I have adhered to platform guidelines (no data scraping or fake accounts) I kept the collected data anonymous and untraceable back to the creator by blurring out usernames, profile pictures and other identifiable details, only inserting content screenshots that don't compromise author's identity and only if they are necessary for context. Furthermore, I have kept all stages of my research transparent in this study.

4. Analysis

Throughout my research, I have outlined cases for each of the categories I looked into, which reflected the larger extent of GI fandom's approach to partaking in, reimagining and personifying queering practices. First, I looked at the general categories of content present on both of the platforms, noting the most common ways fans use social media affordances, the topics they discuss, the symbols they use and the meaning they attribute to the queering practices. Then, I focused on the enactment of the three core queering practices to further establish the meaning and impact they have on the fandom spaces, and what they mean for the LGBTQ+ community at large.

4.1. *Queer coding analysis*

Queer coding analysis as a fandom practice was ingrained into the majority of queering content for GI overall, as the practice itself did not only exist as standalone but merged into the other two categories. It established the dominant themes for discourse and content throughout queering posts.

4.1.1. *Coding on HoYoLAB: Pillars of queering rhetoric*

Rather than posts analysing the queer coding with the game, something I was more used to encountering on my own time within the GI fandom, the *HoYoLAB* audience mostly partook in discourse on reasons for the practice instead of the practice itself.

HoYoLAB and Censorship

'Genshin will say they were besties'

Throughout my observation, I have encountered multiple posts referring to the same leaked documents from the *Beijing International Game Innovation Conference* on the regulations regarding games produced in China. Within the leaked internal documents, there were several direct references to GI's condemned portrayals of masculinity and queerness (Kurosawa, 2022). However, the clause that the users have paid attention to on HoYoLAB stated that direct portrayals and references to same-sex or other queer relationships are not allowed while stating: '*we will limit the word use in such story, you can only say they are best friends*' (Kurosawa, 2022).

One of the users on *HoYoLAB* wrote a dedicated post detailing the effect such regulations have had on GI, specifically on queer coding, that has received significant attention from the users of the platform. They acknowledge that the censoring does not apply to GI directly, as the *Hoyoverse* no longer operates from within Mainland China. However, due to the game's main target demographic remaining mostly Chinese, to continue operating and promoting in the PRC, regulations regarding LGBTQ+ portrayals have been adhered to, yet without sacrificing implications to the queerness of characters. They support this claim by giving another example of *Hoyoverse* adhering to similar guidelines - for example, some female characters' designs were changed to be more modest. On Chinese servers, those designs replaced old ones permanently, while in the West they exist as variants for the player to choose from.

'Saying it's not there at all and slapping canon down as your evidence is ignorant and insensitive to queer people around the world' - reads a quote from the aforementioned post. The original poster (OP further) clarifies that each player has the agency to view any queer pairing as platonic or romantic on their own accord. However, the user deems it insufficient to rely only on 'canon' when it comes to interpreting the game's material, as lack of certain representation could simply be a necessary measure for the media to exist in the first place and reach countries where topics of non-normative gender and sexuality are taboo. The user, thus, advocates for coding as one of the possible solutions to queer erasure in conservative cultures. Additionally, through their post, the user addresses the wider discourse within fandom - the frame of 'canon' over the diverse game material when it comes to coding, i.e. is coding canon? This discussion is a significant one, as it showcases the continuous labour behind queering practices as a way of exploring complex themes.

Another user who has posted about the leaked game regulations has further expressed their position on the 'canon'/'fanon' debate. They state that due to censorship it is fair to assume any 'close friend' relationships within the game to be canon. They establish that YaeMiko pairing to that extent is canon as well as many other popular ships within the community, as they exist within the 'close friendship'/censored queerness narrative. Their statement is met with commenters retaliating by arguing that as *Hoyoverse* has not officially confirmed any information of the sort, it is not valid to call coding canon. This raises another semiotic question

in the debate on queer coding within GI of who decides what is considered canon, furthering the discussion among the user base.

HoYoLAB and Canon

‘People keep saying yae is not a lesbian and personally as a lesbian myself that’s lesbophobia like????’ says a post titled ‘implied = canon’, which consists of a *TikTok* screenshot referencing other implications considered canon by the fan base, namely the real-life inspirations for each nation within the game (Figure 1).

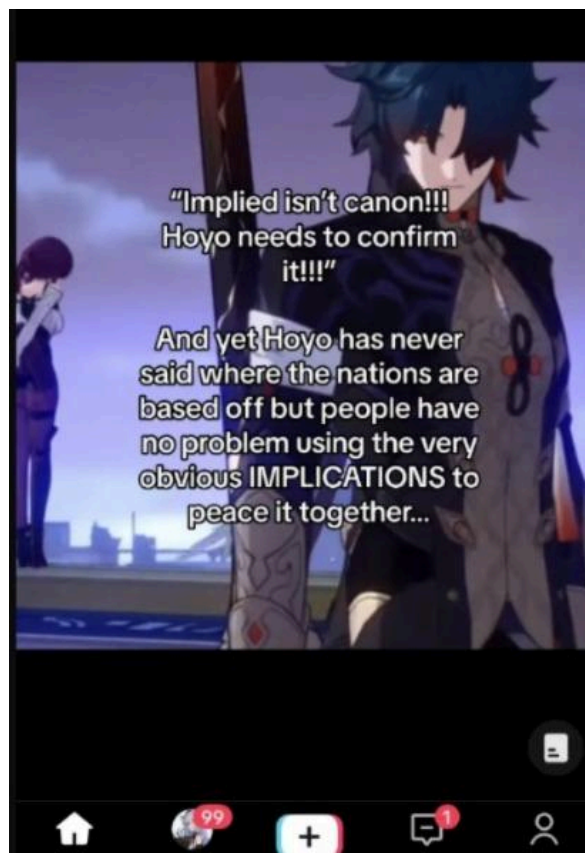


Figure 1. The screenshot posted by the user.

In this case, the user is presenting the implied lesbian coding of Yae Miko as canonical information, pointing out the potential homophobia in people who disagree or ship her with male characters. Their own identity as a lesbian then supports their argument, as they establish their authority through identity. Looking at the comments, however, the opinion is split. One user says: *‘...Do you know what implied means? This is why people say liberals are whiny and extremists (I’m a queer liberal). That’s not homophobia. You’re playing the victim, where there is no*

crime'. Further, the commenter states their own opinion on the topic - ambiguity in characters' sexuality is a way to appease the diverse player demographic. The interaction itself presents a complex dynamic when it comes to authority, but also identity as despite both users being queer, they do not agree on portrayals of queerness in media. Moreover, their interaction goes beyond discussion on fandom, delving into the perception of homophobia by the LGBTQ+ community at large. They might be discussing a game, but through it, they also debate larger issues connected to their identities.

When discussing queer coding on *HoYoLAB*, the users seem to draw connections between the coded characters in *GI* and the confirmed queer characters in the other *Hoyoverse* gaming franchises, the main one being the *Honkai* game series. A popular theory regarding the lesbian coding of Yae Miko connects her with a character from *Honkai Impact 3rd* named Yae Sakura, a canon lesbian character. One *HoYoLAB* user refers to Yae Miko as Yae Sakura's 'expy', or 'exported character', a term that is used for characters that have been directly based on (so, 'exported') a character from another series (TV Tropes, 2024). They attach official art of the two to make the comparison (Figure 2).

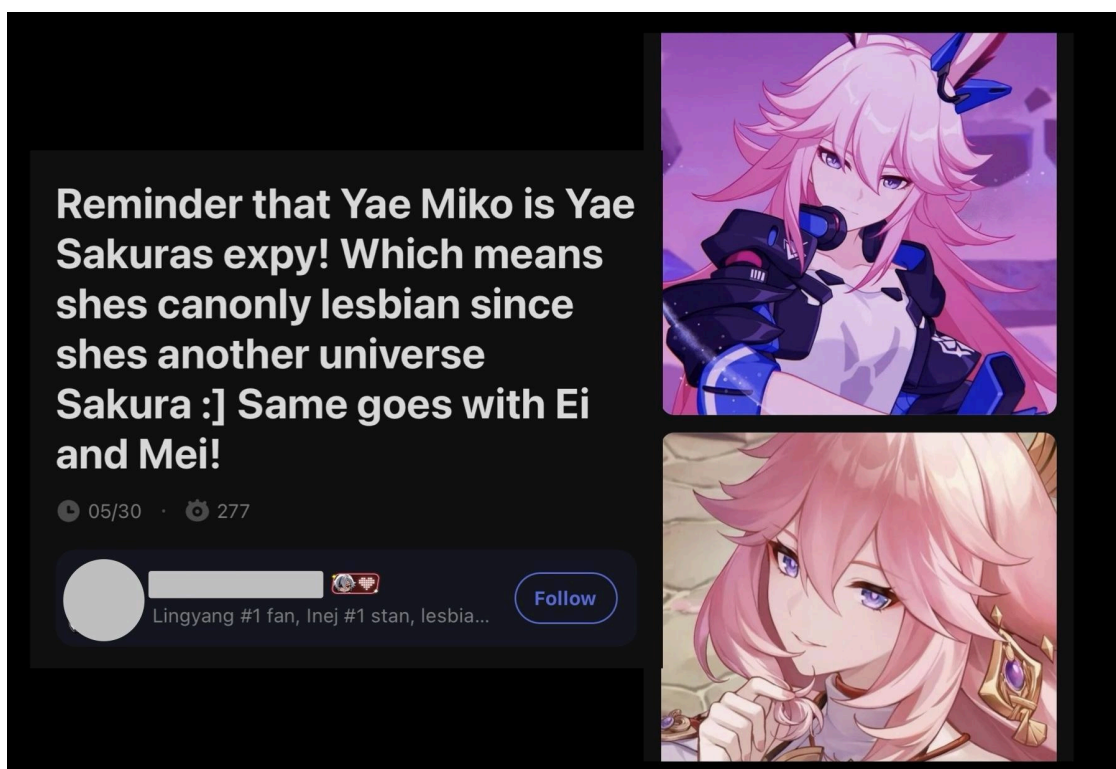


Figure 2. The post's title and attached images

By making such a connection, the users look for validation in their perception of the character as queer coded. Moreover, this aspect of coding analysis reveals another complexity of *HoYoLAB* as a fandom platform - while it is an isolated fandom space, it still exists as a complex product of convergence culture due to it catering to multiple fan bases of Hoyoverse games, showing how content overlap within one company or genre creates overlap in fan practices.

The observations that were made on the GI coding analysis within *HoYoLAB* have shown that the community on the interest-specific platform does not discuss the content itself, but rather the implications behind and of said content. It can be assumed that the fandom on *HoYoLAB* assumes that the users are already knowledgeable when it comes to the potential coding in-game, so instead they find it important to debate the practices and the practice semiotics. The community of GI on *HoYoLAB*, including the queer player base are split in their views on queering and queer content in media. Further, I connect this divide to the homophobia I encountered in my observations of the user interactions on the platform.

4.1.2. TikTok and Coding: Content deep-dives

The queer coding analysis posts made by *TikTok* users include similar rants, after all - some of the *HoYoLAB* posts used screenshots directly from *TikTok* to make their points. However, there is also more informative content compared to *HoYoLAB*, where the users break down symbolism, signs and subtext of the in-game coding itself. Additionally, the users add their symbols to the queering content to drive their point across by curating language, sounds and visuals they put in the *TikToks*.

Eternity is far too cruel: Framing queer coding

Different cuts from a dialogue scene of Yae Miko and Ei reconnecting after 500 years of no contact have been used by the *TikTok* users to point out the implied romantic nature of the relationship between the two characters. The most popular *TikTok* post with the dialogue from this cutscene that I could find has 1,1M views as of July 2024, and it frames the scene as queer (Figure 3).

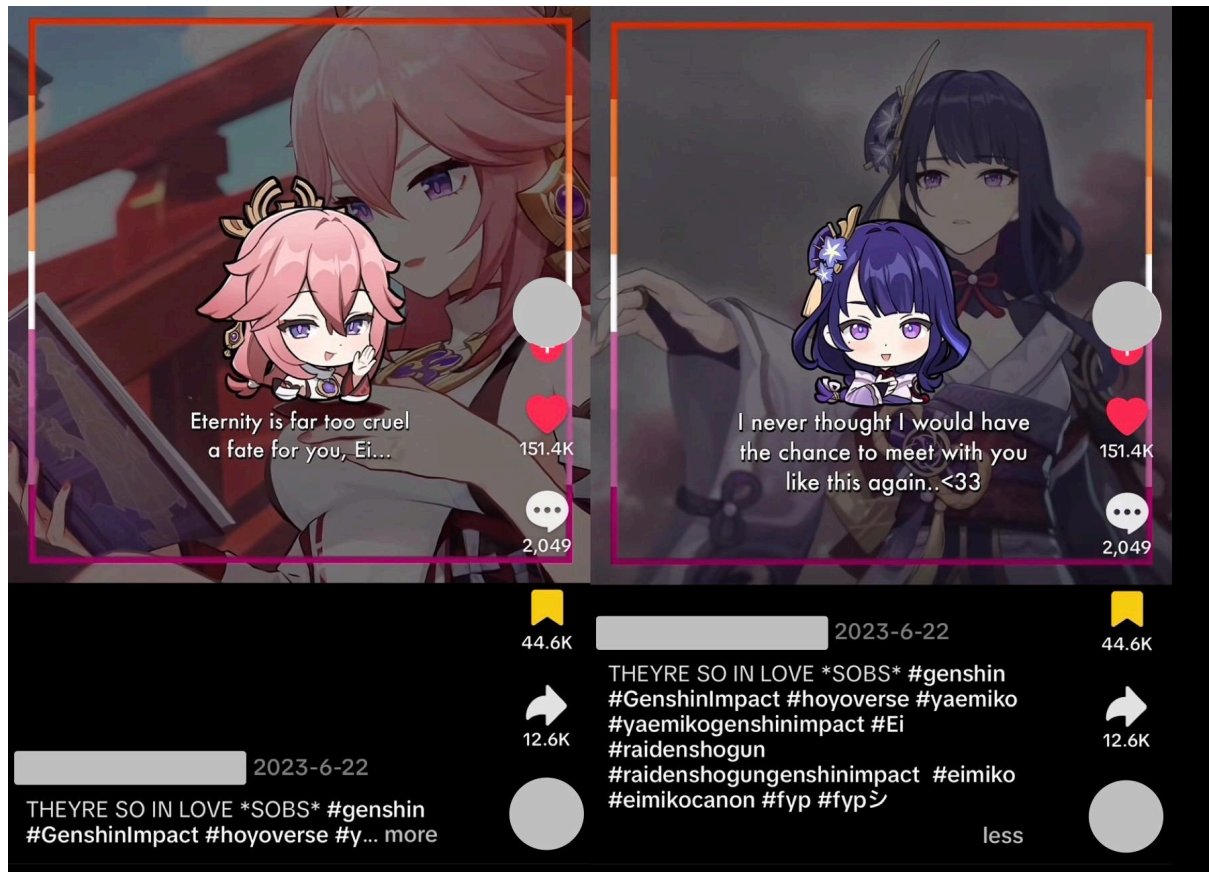


Figure 3. Screenscaps of the TikTok and hashtags

The audio of the dialogue plays over gifs of the characters, which have a lesbian pride flag framed over them. Other than captions, there is no further text in the video; the description reads *‘THEYRE SO IN LOVE *SOBS*’* with hashtags *‘eimiko’* and *‘eimikocanon’*. In the comments, the author of the video likes comments that talk about the pairing being canon in-game. This way the fandom frames the in-game content (the dialogue, but also the official art used as background) through queer symbols (the lesbian pride flag) and the use of affordances like description, tags and liked comments. The content on its own does not have a direct link to sexuality, yet the user utilises the following tools to emphasise the queer subtext and make it convincing through the aforementioned visual and textual cues.

The next *TikTok* showcases the dialogue scene within gameplay, in the text overlay it refers to the interaction as *‘the first time Ei has smiled and laughed in 500 years’*. The video itself does not prompt the viewer to think it is romantic, however, the details added by the user through multiple affordances do. The video is overlaid with a song called *‘seasons’* by *wave to earth*, a romantic song with lyrics referring to love

and grief (Genius, 2020). In the caption, the OP motivates them posting the clip with it being Pride month. The first comments that appear in the comment section, ones liked by the creator, refer to the two characters by their ship name, EiMiko, adding words and phrases like *'wives'*, *'so in love'*, *'canon'*. The tags also include #eimiko and #wlw. The context and the response of the user base frame the scene as queer coded, as queering is performed through the use of multiple symbols, the use of queer hashtags (or ship name hashtag) or even the choice of sound and lyrics which play during the video. The *TikTok* affordances which have been designed to categorise content, thus, while still doing so, also serve as a way for users to express the coded queerness of the characters.

Another *TikTok* which depicts the same scene is more confrontational; the text over the video reads: ‘*“Not everyone has to be a lesbian! Theyre just friends!”; The ‘friends’ in question: ’*. The post is more explicit in pointing out the coding of the scene, but also in the use of the platform affordances. In addition to calling the characters lesbian, the user put the song *‘we fell in love in october’* by *girl in red*, a popular queer artist, as background music. The piece is about a WLW relationship, the part played in the *TikTok* having the following lyrics: *‘My girl, you will be my girl; You will be my world’*. The OP also used more queer hashtags in the description, putting in #wlw, #lesbian and #lgbt. The tone of the video, despite using the same scene, is different.

The more explicit reference to the two characters being heavily implied lesbians in canon material through both text and music choice seemingly ridicules those who deny the existence of queer coding for these characters in the game, framing the romantic subtext of their interaction as an obvious detail. While using affordances similarly to the previous post, this *TikTok* curates a completely different message for the viewer. That message is more similar to the ones present on *HoYoLAB*, expressing the frustration the queer GI fandom has when it comes to people disregarding LGBTQ+ subtext.

Pretty Please, Kitsune Guuji?: Debating queer coding

‘Didn’t Miko write a fan fic of her and ei’ reads a comment under a popular YaeMiko post. It is highlighted in blue, a *TikTok* feature which hyperlinks a common search

made after interacting with the post. When clicking on the hyperlink, the search reveals post after post of coding analysis posts about an in-game book (Figure 4)

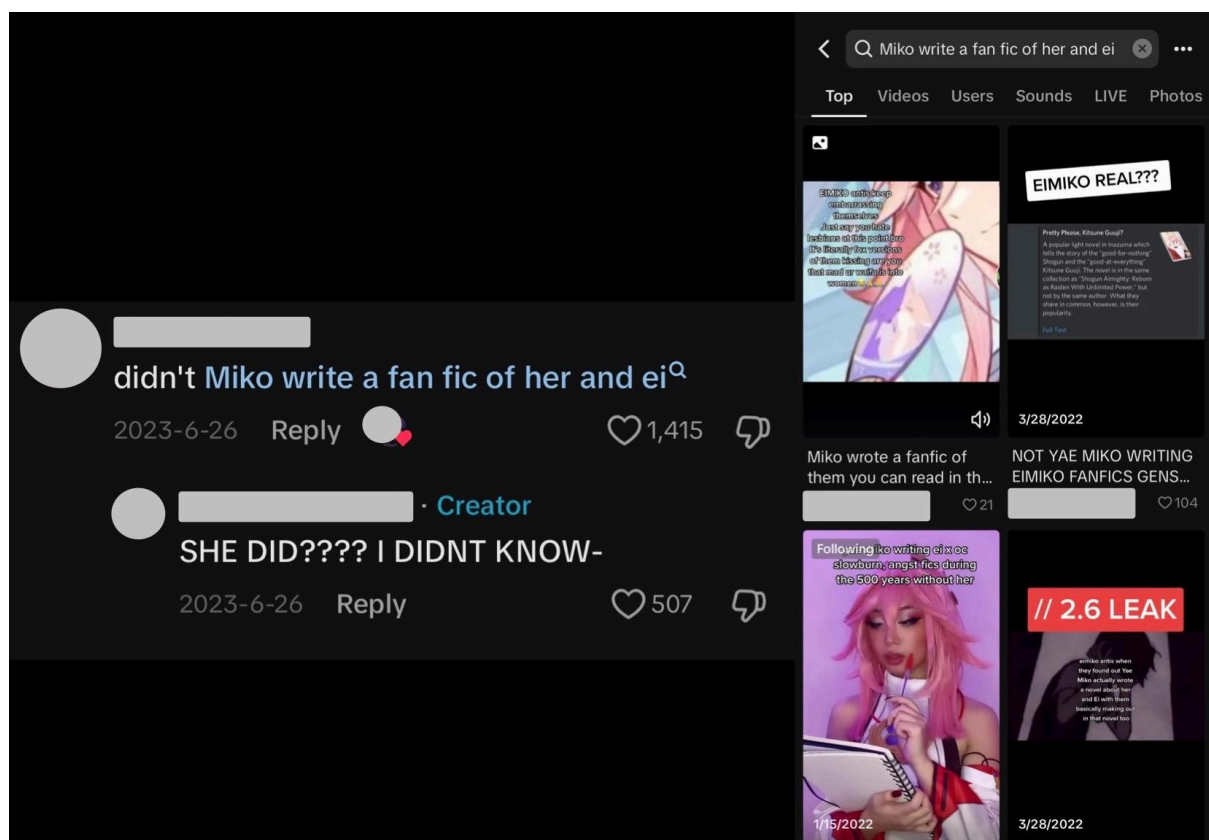


Figure 4. Highlighted comment, creator's interaction and search results

This discussion point commonly recurs in the discourse on the coding of EiMiko as a WLW ship, and Yae Miko specifically as an implied lesbian is an in-game book written by Yae herself. The book in question, a light novel by the title '*Pretty Please, Kitsune Guuji?*' (further, PPKG), was an optional item for one of the Inazuma quests that the players are able to purchase and read within the game. The contents of the book describe an intimate interaction between the Shrine Maiden and the Shogun, alluding to Yae and Ei. Written from the Shogun's perspective, it describes her closeness to the other woman ('...*here are only two kinds of people in my life: nobodies, and the one with fluffy ears and a teasing voice*'); the line is about the Shrine Maiden's kitsune (fox) form (*Genshin Impact*, 2020). Further in the text, it raises themes of longing and affection between the two. Excerpts from the book act as a base for multiple coding analyses on *TikTok*.

First *TikTok* is a meme template of frames from another game, *Omori*, a video of the main character of the game gripping his head with a sombre expression, with a sped-up version of Mitski's '*Liquid Smooth*'. The post has the following text: '*eimiko antis when they found out Yae Miko actually wrote a novel about her and Ei with them basically making out in that novel too*' (Figure 5).

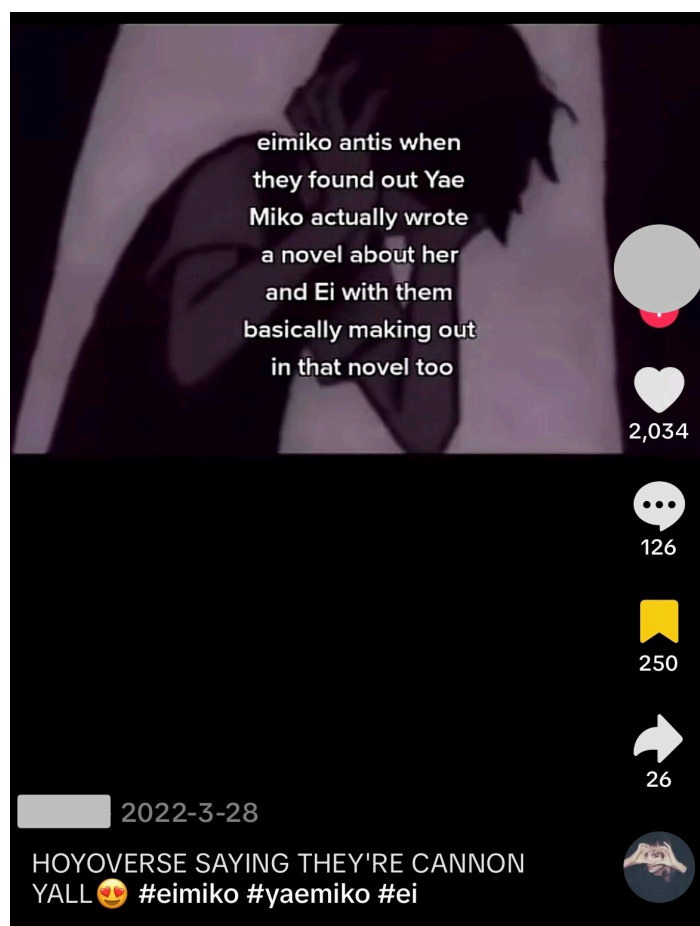


Figure 5. The screenshot of the post's format

Looking through the sound used on the post, this is a popular template used to ironise on faux-dramatic situations, with posts not only within the context of GI, but other fandoms and overall (self-)deprecating memes. While the tone of the text itself relays the message of hostility towards the 'antis', the use of a popular meme format furthers the irony the authors seek to evoke with the post. It pre-establishes the connotation of the video, viewers interpret the content not only through the lens of the post itself but through the lens of it being a meme format. This situates the video both within its own fandom, but also within the larger context of the trend. In this

case, the OP mocks the positions of those who oppose the EiMiko pairing by implying that it is canon in the game, hence their stance is invalid.

The caption brings up the recurring debate on canon/fanon in queer coding, as it states that the existence of PPKG in the game is a direct confirmation that Yae Miko and Ei are queer and in a relationship. The video was released prior to the book being available in the game, hence the author prefaces it with a red warning that says ‘2.6 LEAK’, meaning that the information was not yet confirmed but was released as a leaked part on an upcoming game version. This situates the video at the start of the discourse about the book's existence in the game, serving as an example of the basis for further arguments made when discussing this instance of potential queer coding.

Another *TikTok* refers back to the argument made in the previous post, where authorship is the key detail for validating queer coding analysis. This post, however, addresses this discourse by suggesting that the authorship is not relevant. Instead, the text in their video reads: ‘*the fact yall dont realize the book even BEING A THING in general is hoyo trying to tell us something, says alot about genshin fans mental capacity*’. They restate the same point in the caption, emphasising the importance of the coding itself over its details. With their post, they simultaneously address the fans who deny the queer coding of the two characters altogether, but also those who overlook the intricacies of the game’s messaging.

The posts about the piece of game content act as dialogue without using the ways of replying to content that *TikTok* offers (duets, stitches, video replies to comments). Instead, the debate is an ongoing and recurring topic for any user on the platform who gets these videos either recommended by the algorithm or through searching the topic. The users bring up the coding in different formats, exploiting *TikTok*’s algorithm to make the discussion prominent, make comments about it searchable and building ideas in the specific discussion niche. This creates a type of discourse which is non-linear, yet rich in positions.

4.2. Shipping

Shipping content prevails over other queering practices; throughout my observations of the GI interest page on *HoYoLAB* and tags on *TikTok*, I would continuously stumble into the different formats of character shipping, whether it would be fan art

of two newly released characters, who are enemies according to the storyline, kissing, or a recommendation for an *AO3* fanfiction set in an alternative universe where the same two characters fall in love in a coffee shop, akin to a mainstream romantic comedy. Despite this, the discourse throughout the practice has recurred consistently.

4.2.1. HoYoLAB: Fandom vs. Shipping

The practice's popularity throughout the GI fandom, but also throughout fan practices in general, have put it in somewhat of a spotlight for discussion. The visibility of shipping prompts increased levels out homophobia, but also skepticism from the community that partakes in queering, or witnesses it.

HoYoLAB and Homophobia

'people see queers represented and be like ew u are ruining the game'

When exploring the trending posts on *HoYoLAB* prior to looking into specific searches related to queering practices, one ship was recurring consistently - Althaitham/Kaveh. Despite both characters being released last year, posts about them were constantly appearing in my feed alongside characters who had just been announced for release. The very first post that caught my attention, making me further focus on the queering practices within the Haikaveh ship, was a repost of a cosplay photoshoot with 12k views and over 100 comments. The OP is not the author of the photos they posted, instead, they have shared the usernames of the cosplayers, substituting a repost feature which does not exist on the platform. Pairing cosplays are a popular practice among the queer fandom, one that I have seen across different communities, especially as it allows to create more explicitly LGBTQ+ content as the users are free to roleplay romance and act as their favourite fictional characters.

On the post, only about 180 comments are visible to the user, the others seemingly hidden through *HoYoLAB*'s filter, as at the end of the comment section there is a tab saying: 'Some comments have been filtered for you' (Figure 6).

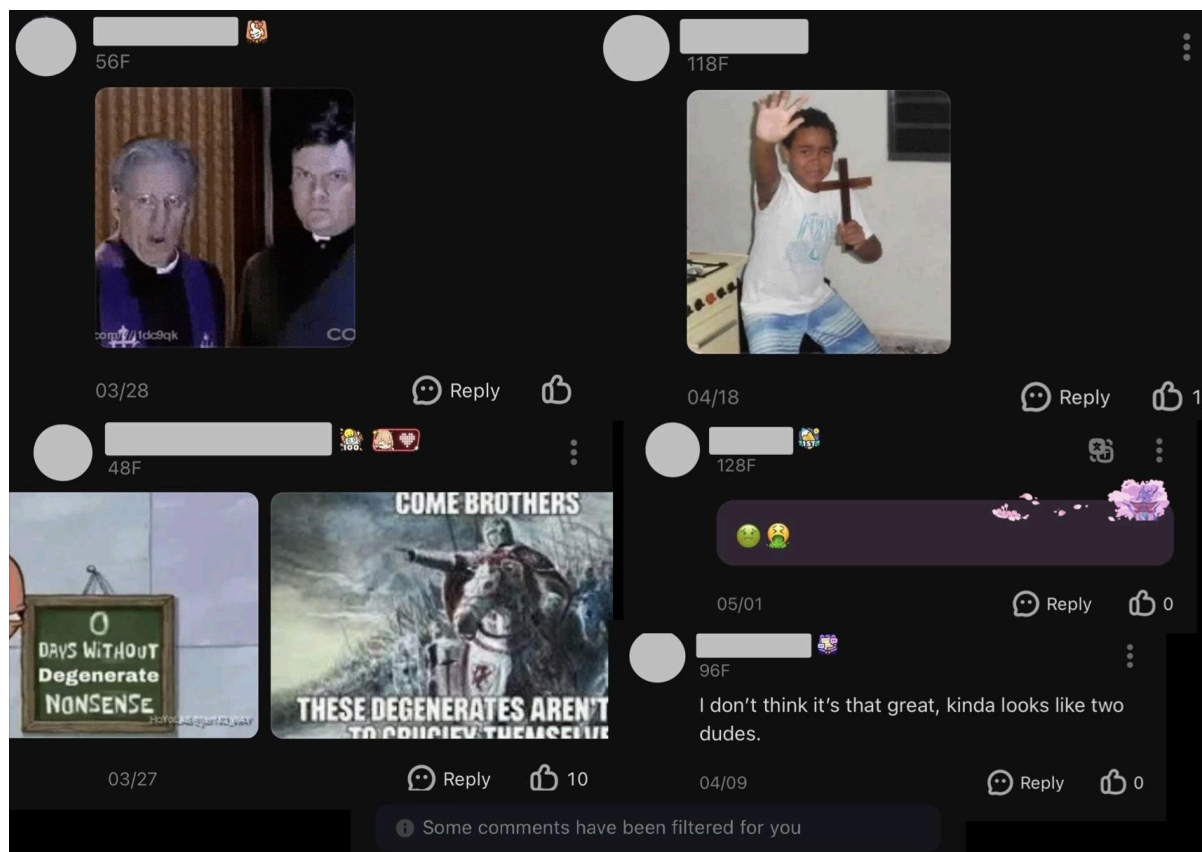


Figure 6. Some of the hateful comments, and the comment filter tab.

There is no option to remove said filter, which prompts an assumption that those comments have been reported as violating the platform's guidelines. However, looking at the visible comments, it was unclear to me why a portion of them were not filtered either. Among a few users complimenting the cosplay and talking about Haikaveh being their favourite ship, some comments stand out - memes and gifs expressing disgust. The subtext of these pictures is evident, even though the majority are not explicitly homophobic, they still refer to the post as degenerate, cringe and disgusting. These comments avoided filtering and moderation despite the terms of use stating that explicit and offensive content is not allowed on the platform (Nable, 2021). This creates a confusing interaction dynamic, as shipping is condemned and praised by the userbase, while offensive comments should be restricted but are still present.

Another detail that I have noticed is the prevalence of comments in Russian, discussing one of the cosplayers; looking up the usernames of the cosplayers, I found out that the two of them are indeed of Russian descent. This adds another layer to

interaction, bringing up the debate of cultural norms and national restrictions to the practice of character queering and LGBTQ+ identity expression. The Russian comments mention the potential danger the OP might be putting themselves, and the cosplayers, into by reposting this content, due to anti-LGBTQ+ propaganda laws in Russia. The presence and visibility of different cultures, especially ones in which queerness has been a particularly taboo topic, on the platform signifies that it might act as a safe place to consume otherwise restricted content. However, at the same time, looking at unfiltered homophobia, it might do just as much damage to the identity of someone dealing with constant oppression from society, but also from their government.

The environment under this particular post has incentivised me to look further into the interactions users typically had under shipping posts, as Alhaitham and Kaveh is a popular MLM ship - I continued browsing the content with them by searching other content that had an influx in comments.

HoYoLAB and Shipping Morals

‘omg they looked at each other, so obviously Kaveh is pregnant with their third child /j’

Haikaveh-related searches on *HoYoLAB* have presented me with a diverse array of content typical for fandom. However, some discussions stood out significantly, as they had the most comment interactions under them. They were discussing the reasons why they do not ship the two characters, or why they see the ship as toxic, non-romantic or not justified in its popularity. Multiple posts bring up how they do not see the appeal of Haikaveh and how they are tired of seeing posts with this ship on their feed. Instead, they either see them more as bickering siblings, or as *‘frenemies’*. Others have even declared the dynamic between the two, if interpreted as a romantic relationship, to be toxic and abusive, questioning the morals of shipping the two characters. Throughout these posts, the users mock the constant presence of shipping under all content including the two characters, despite the context.

The arguments of multiple posts revolved partly around how they see same-sex shipping, particularly MLM, to be non-sensical within the fandom, either relying on over-exaggeration or misreading of character. Taking Kaveh having to live together

with Alhaitham due to being in enormous debt for example, as an implication that the two are more than roommates. They also express that seeing the shipping posts in their feed has ruined their perception of the two characters. One user says they ‘*could not make their own judgement on the personalities of the two*’, because they encountered a lot of shipping content prior to playing through their storyline. While this might be viewed as homophobia, there is an interesting layer of discussion which these reflections stimulate within the community. These discussion posts are not hostile, for the most part, and their comment sections stimulate discussions between shippers and non-shippers.

The discussion of morality, but also the necessity, of shipping delves into the complicated nature of fictional portrayals, which are especially intricate when it comes to portrayals of minorities. As the fandom engages in these discussions, as they share their own experiences, they simultaneously learn. While anti-shippers might come off as condescending, their input also serves as a way of addressing harmful clichés and tropes when it comes to queering. Addressing poor portrayals can certainly be a way for the community to work on their approach to viewing, but also creating queering.

4.2.2. The Duality of Shipping on TikTok

TikTok content furthers the discourse of shipping on *HoYoLAB*. The users’ content points at two coexisting narratives within the practice: shipping as queer self-expression, and shipping as perpetuation of stereotype.

TikTok and Projection

‘@__ *Us in another universe*’, ‘@__ *this is so us, we are kavetham btw. just so you know*’ - browsing through shipping *TikToks*, I kept stumbling into these phrases in almost every comment section, throughout different types of shipping content. The comment sections were riddled with users shipping the characters, but at the same time, they were relating content to their own experience. To this extent, the users personalised queering.

When it comes to *TikTok* fandom content, edits come to mind as one of the most popular formats. The sequence of the original content edited with special effects and

a track (or, often, a track remix) has become a staple of fan labour on visual content-centred social media platforms. Another form of edits, since *TikTok* introduced the slideshow function, is the curated collages of (fan) art and text to an edited audio clip. For GI fandom, these are also a way of partaking in shipping. Users edit game cutscenes, dialogue and fanart to romantic (queer) songs. Simultaneously, through interaction, the users exploit the practice, but also the affordances of the platform to express their own identity.

Shipping through *TikTok* content becomes an outlet to place oneself within the narrative of GI, building a connection between the game's content, the fan content and own experience of queerness, or queer relationships. One of the *TikTok* posts that exemplifies this tendency within the fandom is a post consisting of three slides: a collage of Alhaitham art with the text 'You', a similar collage with Kaveh with 'Me', and a collage of the two with 'Us?' and a quote from Kaveh's in-game line which ends with '*I will say that it's not every day you get to know someone, like him*'. Another similar post example is a collection of slides in which the author titles '*Which queer genshin ship are you and your partner/friend?*'. Further slides are collages of the character art and different photographs which curate the aesthetics of the bond. Those photos are varied, portraying different landscapes, objects, pieces of clothing, food, etc.; all are grouped to symbolise the characters, but also popular online aesthetics like '*dark academia*' for Haikaveh (Figure 7).

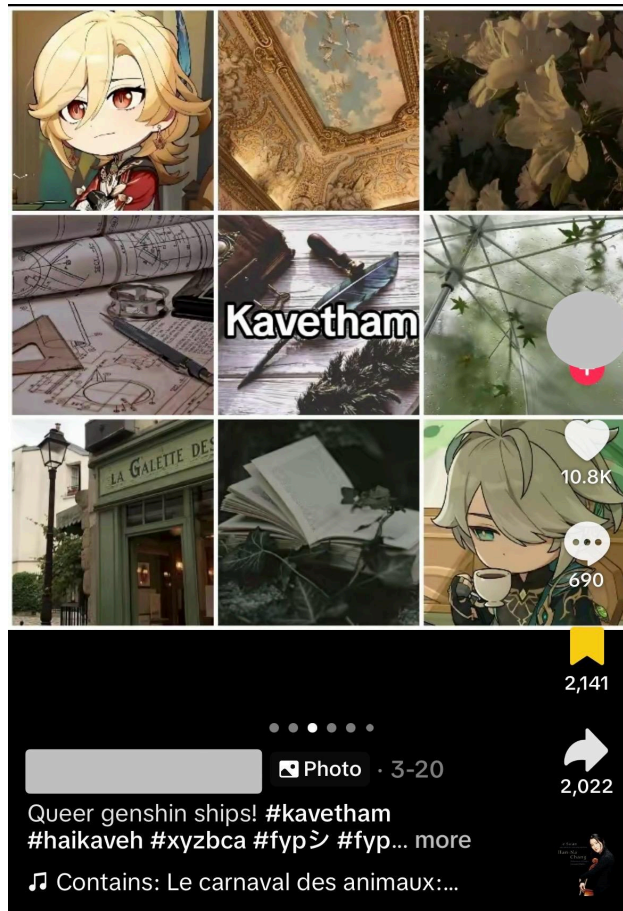


Figure 7. The user's 'aesthetic' collage for Haikaveh

'Kavetham. I don't have anyone it's just me. I am kavehtham real', 'where's the Alhaitham to my Kaveh fr', 'Where's my Kaveh I can't do this anymore', 'Me n who'-users interacting with the ship content, other than participating in the act of shipping itself by affirming the content of the post, also project themselves (and their partners/friends) into the fanmade ships. The fans are immersed into those fantasy worlds by getting introduced to complex lore, including that of relationships between the characters, which leads them to create their own imagined experiences. These experiences are directly linked to convergence culture of fandom (Jenkins, 2006). They get to mould their reality around the reality of the fictional world, partaking in rooting for a fictional relationship, while also associating said relationship with their own queer experience, gaining their own understanding.

TikTok and Stereotyping

Criticisms that the fans of GI have expressed on *HoYoLAB*, particularly about mischaracterisation that is often prevalent in shipping content is something that the *TikTok* users also seem to be addressing. However, instead of arguing for a completely platonic interpretation of character relationships, they bring up the debate about queer stereotyping done by shipping fans. Rather than condemning the practice for there not being any direct references to queerness in the source, these users advocate going beyond one-dimensional readings of characters, more specifically to not minimise some characteristics to just being sexuality/gender implications.

Another post from the author of aesthetic ship collages, a looped animatic of Kaveh blankly staring at the viewer, reads: '*Kaveh when his hard work, trauma and struggles gets dismissed to be a fembottom princess for his roommate*' (Figure 8).

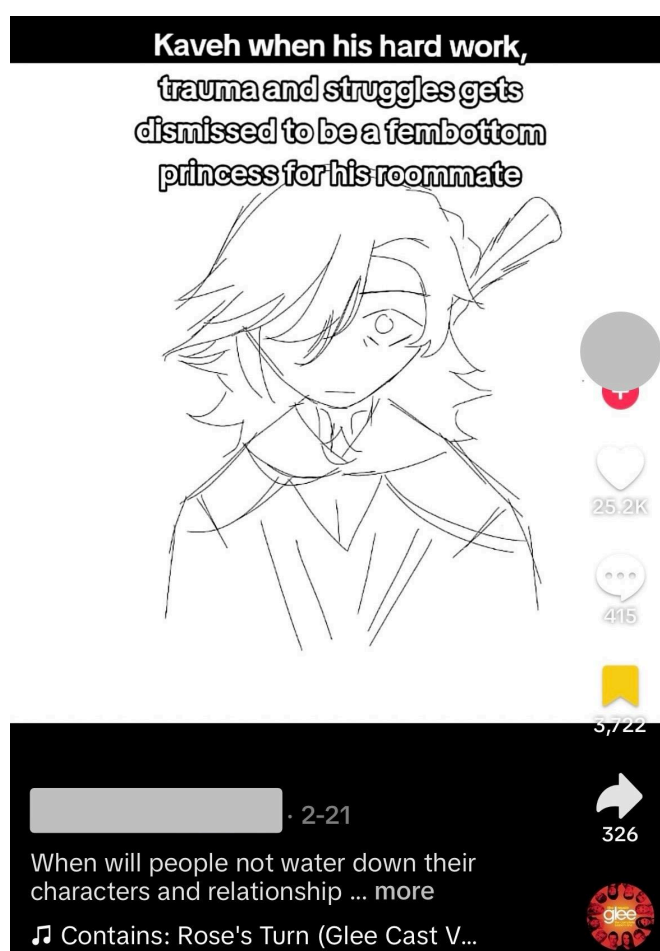


Figure 8. A screenshot of the Kaveh animation

It criticises the fandom viewing the ship through the heteronormative stereotype dynamic for queer men, dividing them into effeminate ‘bottoms’ and aggressively masculine ‘tops’. This stereotype is overpresent in shipping, boiling complex relationship bonds down to sexualisation, while simultaneously implying the norm of there being ‘the man’ and ‘the woman’ in queer relationships. This dismissal is a harmful oversimplification of the spectrum queer relationships exist within, and the OP, together with the commenters and other users interacting, bring the discussion to the masses through content like this *TikTok*.

Another post includes Alhaitham and Kaveh while listing off characters whose ‘relationship is one of the most misunderstood by the fandom’. In the comments they elaborate further, bringing up how the fandom often classifies Haikaveh to be ‘toxic’. These readings exist as two extremes, according to the commenters - either the pairs’ perceived toxicity is romanticised and idealised, or its severity is exaggerated to fuel fandom discourse. The portrayal of unconventional dynamics within queer representation, including problematic behaviour, is a point of fandom discourse in the ‘pro’/‘anti’ ship debate, with opinions leaning into either of the extremes. The author, and some of the comments with most interaction, argue against the two contrasting readings. Instead, they use the platform to showcase complexity and bring in nuance into how the complex relationship dynamics are viewed.

What the GI fandom has been doing is bringing attention to the nuance of the coded representation, the OPs of the two posts being examples of the queer GI fandom working through stereotypes. The pinned post on the *TikTok* page of the first vide’s author is a 14-slide-long analysis of the relationship between Alhaitham and Kaveh, describing their backstories, character lines and other source information to present a case on how it affects the queer reading of their relationship. The goal of the post is, first and foremost, to inform the (anti)shippers and GI fandom at large of the Haikaveh subtleties, to fight against all the layers of mischaracterisation within the fandom works. The user effort to improve the representation within the Genshin fandom, but also other queer fandoms, by bringing discussion to the masses on *TikTok* is one of the community pillars for addressing ‘malpractice’ in fan labour.

4.3. Headcanons

4.3.1. *HoYoLAB and the Headcanon niche*

Headcanon content is less prominent in *HoYoLAB*, throughout my observation I have not stumbled across any posts from this category on the trending pages, and when searching through keywords only a couple of posts had more than 300 views. There was not as much diversity in the formats either - only one type stood out consistently - redesigns. The practice seems to be more integrated into the previous two practices and occurs more rarely as a standalone.

HoYoLAB, Redesigns and PSRs

A category of fan content that I kept seeing throughout my interactions with *HoYoLAB*, whether I was searching through tags or was simply looking through my 'Home' page, was character redesigns. As the name suggests, the users tweak the official GI designs to fit their perceptions of playable characters, creating a visual for their headcanon. There were many variations of the format, from edits of the character cards (GI's art used to announce the character) to stand-alone fan art.

The category that stood out within this type of content was referred to by the users as 'gender swaps' or 'gender-bends'. As someone who has been in fandoms, and in the queer parts of said fandoms in particular, the gender-bending practice felt almost nostalgic. In my experience, gender-bending was used in fandom content (often, fanfiction), to either make a popular straight relationship queer or change the character dynamic by making an MLM ship into a WLW one, or vice versa. Sometimes, gender-bending has also been used as a way to make a canonically cis character trans through subtle detail. Overall, this type of content has always been a way for the fandom to queer source content, but I rarely saw it applied oppositely. In the GI fandom space on *HoYoLAB*, the practice of genderbending is more prominently visual rather than textual, and judging by user interactions, its purpose and format have expanded beyond what I was used to seeing in other fandoms.

The character of Wanderer is one of the most prominent examples of how the GI fandom has adapted the redesign practice to share queering headcanon. The gender of the character in the game can be read as ambiguous because of his storyline -

being created as a vessel for a canonically female god, but presenting as masculine in gameplay, as well as being the only character who the player has to change the name of during a main quest, with no option to keep his 'deadname'. The parallels with gender transitioning are evident yet subtle enough in the game itself. For the fandom, this creates an opportunity to project qualities onto the character, come up with interpretation and experiment with headcanons that would further expand on Wanderer's 'transness'. While searching for Wanderer headcanons, multiple redesign posts come up. They include visual tweaks like a change of haircut or scars, but the majority also have flags for gender identity and sexuality to signify the users' headcanon about the character (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Two common examples of the redesign format

'A lot of people resonate with trans Wanderer' says a comment under one post. They are responding to the hate comments condemning the queering of the character. The OP also addresses the influx of transphobia in the comments through an edit to their post where they express unwillingness to give in to the homophobia, as this content is their way to express their identity in the reality where they are being actively silenced by unacceptance from those around and hate spread by politicians and traditional media. This type of content is targeted to other trans fans, the comments on several headcanon posts contain users praising the author for spreading representation: 'as a trans man, i love the representation!!(...); OP reply: Oh cool!!

I'm also a trans man :)(...)', 'I do like the hc of Scara being trans, especially since I'm a trans FTM'.

Judging from the recurrence of comments with similar sentiments, it seems that the practice of headcanons is most closely linked with the real-life identities of the fans in the queer GI fandom. One user brings this point further, as they write: *'Transmasc Scara kinnie here, 10/10'*. Kinning, as briefly described earlier, is a practice of identifying with the character on a personal level, e.g. relating to their personality, and feeling connected to them due to going through similar experiences. The term is closely connected to the concept of parasocial relationships with fictional characters, and associated specifically with its 'identification' dimension (Nguyen et al., 2023). However, I would argue that the practice of headcanons overall fits in this dimension of PSRs, as my findings suggest a close connection between users' personal identities and their queering of Scaramouche, or other GI characters, through projection, but also identity formation.

4.3.2. Practicing transition through TikTok headcanon

Compared to other categories, the headcanon content on *TikTok* involved the most posts with videos featuring users' faces, continuing the close connection between the practice and personal identity. Furthermore, the headcanon content on *TikTok*, in more ways than one, seemed to contain a lot of reflection on personal experience of being trans.

TikTok and 'The Trans Experience'

'Scaramouche is trans because he's been through 5 fucking names'

What I found to be particularly interesting while researching the content posted by the queer fandom of GI is their nuanced use of stereotypes. Throughout the shipping content, discussions of generalisations for queer people's experience with sexuality seemed to contain more criticism for the potential harm of misrepresentation of diverse identities. For the headcanon practice, however, the opinion might be the opposite. The users seem to use these generalisations to relate their own experiences to not only the character, but also other queer fans of GI, and the LGBTQ+ community (specifically, the trans part) at large. In this way, they partake in

community building for the sake of validating own identity through shared experience.

The queering headcanons are commonly presented by *TikTok* users through reflections on the trans experience through jokes and memes. One post lists out the common theories of why Wanderer can be read as trans (wears women's clothing in his origin story cutscene, and was created as a vessel for a female god) to set up a punchline stating that the real reason he is trans is because he kept changing his name. This, of course, is in reference to a transitioning practice of choosing a new, gender-affirming name. The commenters jump on the joke, listing other ways in which Wanderer fits the 'typical' trans experience through irony - '*out of all names he had he picked scaramouche 🧠 i bet he can't even do the fandango*', '*because he has unreal amounts of tboy swag*'. Similarly to the users on *HoYoLAB*, some of the commenters under this post draw a connection between their own experience and Wanderer's, expressing the relatability of his character and referring to him as their kin.

Another user jokes in their post that they always headcanon their favourite characters as transmasculine. The video is formatted as a meme which uses an audio saying: '*I'll let the finger decide.. Woah, it's me*', prompting the authors to point at themselves and admit something. The meme format is not exclusive to GI fandom, with the 50k videos under the sound all being about different topics. The only common trait is that they are made to poke fun at the user's own trait. While the OP does not mention Scaramouche in the clip itself, he is the only character they tag, and a character they frequently post about at that.

Another post from their page depicts a fanart of them as Scaramouche, titled '*scaramouche self-insert*'. While they do not explicitly refer to themselves as a 'Scaramouche kin', judging by the content that they post it is likely that their connection to the character closely resembles this particular fandom practice. Furthermore, their connection shows the close connection between queer fandom practices and self-identity, as they utilise methods like meme formats, but also fan art and headcanon to explore their own gender.

TikTok, Representation and the Parasocial

*'Dysphoria is **** but you are an absolute menace to society, gender is a social construct anyways'*

To those queering characters through headcanons on *TikTok*, irony and memes are contrasted by another distinct format, the previously observed 'rant posts'. The emotions and connection expressed in them appear more raw to the viewer, as they respond to the hate they receive from the rest of the fandom for their opinions on character identities.

Despite the queer GI fandom facing constant backlash from other fans of the game, it is clear that the community finds comfort in their practices of queering. When it comes to headcanons and kinning, the close albeit parasocial bond built between fans and characters has major significance when it comes to their identity experience. The LGBTQ+ community faces constant marginalisation, especially as hateful narratives are spread increasingly by not only online radicals but high-ranking politicians and public figures, the users themselves use this type of content to express how queering can be a haven for their identity.

In a rant post, where the user addresses fans who disagree with the trans Wanderer headcanon, they write the following - *'Do your own research before you (...) decide to remove representation for a group of people that barely has ANY representation'*. Another user, in a similar post format, expresses that the character's background in the game, namely his journey of finding identity and getting a name, his craving to be seen as human, can be relevant and important to trans people. In the comment section, another user shares that the character was so important to their partner's transition that they considered Scaramouche as their chosen name *'because of how much he kinned him'*. This feedback from the queer fandom is abundant throughout their content, but I found it to be especially concentrated within the headcanon category. Moreover, it points to the significance which PSRs have for the queer GI fans, while simultaneously providing the potential motivation behind the practices of headcanons and kinning.

The role of PSRs within fandom communities, as exemplified by this specific practice, no longer has an entirely negative effect. Initially, they were only enacted by companies producing mainstream content to exploit viewers. Now, the viewers themselves partake in the creation of PSR content, and the formation of PSRs

themselves, on social media through fan labour. With this development, the 'consumers' partake in forming their own connection with, in this case, a fictional character to address their own needs. For example, for many queer, trans fans that is the need for representation and support along their journey of discovering their identity.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This research examined how the queer GI community on *HoYoLAB* and *TikTok* uses affordances in creating online discourse, reimagines established fandom practices and links them to contemporary queer experiences. The study employed digital ethnography on *HoYoLAB* and multimodal discourse analysis on *TikTok* posts that displayed the queering practices of queer coding analysis, shipping and headcanons, focusing on the characters Yae Miko and Ei, Kaveh and Alhaitham, and Scaramouche/Wanderer. Throughout the analysis, several cases were explored, specifically - I have outlined the typical content under each category, its characteristics and its significance to the community.

5.1. *GI queer fandom and affordances*

The affordances of the two platforms have shaped the practices of queering in the GI fandom by impacting the format of the fan content, the theme and tone of discussions the users have on these platforms, and its connection to the wider queer community online. There were very minor differences in discourse topics between the content on *HoYoLAB* and *TikTok*. The format of content, its popularity on the platform, and the interactions within the two communities have proved to be more contrasting.

On *HoYoLAB*, a platform limited to only a couple of Hoyoverse game fandoms, queer discourse is less visible to fandom at large, rarely appearing on trending and recommendation pages. Despite this, the exploitation of platform affordances for queering is recurrent throughout all three practices. The fans create lengthy comment threads addressing issues from the bigotry within the community to personal identity struggles, share their opinions on (mis)representation and stereotyping, and use content trends to engage in identity exploration and validation. While *HoYoLAB* is undoubtedly a space for community-building and meaningful interaction with queer fans, it is not what one would consider a 'safe space' yet. Queer content is not restricted, but neither is homophobia. In this way, the platform, and its lack of strict moderation, is exploited not only to uplift queer voices but also to oppress them.

TikTok, on the other hand, presents the intersection of the queer GI fan content not only with the rest of the game's fandom but also other 'sides' of the platform, like the LGBTQ+ *TikTok* due to several platform affordances. *TikTok*'s algorithm plays a bigger role in content creation and dissemination, as the audience is significantly larger with more diverse interest profiles. This means that the queering GI content reached more users, and because of it, has a more prominent presence in multiple communities. At the same time, this intersection shaped the content itself, with GI posts partaking in platform trends, using popular queer (artist) audios, and carrying over discussions from other 'sides' of *TikTok* into the GI setting. The queering content on the platform is an amalgamation of queer, fan and gaming culture. GI content highlights new tendencies in queer readings, addressing the erasure of WLW representation, the digital experience of queer relationships, the breaking of the LGBTQ+ stereotypes, and self-expression through the practice of kinning.

5.2. Reimagining fan labour

The GI fandom has showcased how fan labour is evolving as communities reimagine and adapt mainstream fan practices to fit the context of source media, community dynamics, and medium-specific issues and address issues within fan culture itself.

The practice of queer coding analysis for GI fandom has evolved beyond its initial purpose of pointing out hidden contexts, instead serving as a way to address the silencing of minority groups in different political and cultural contexts, and also reassess the '*canon/fanon*' debate as reductive for cases of mandatory coding. The practice repurposes its fan labour core to highlight queer oppression rather than only focusing on the analysis itself.

In the GI community, shipping, while still being about pairing characters romantically, has evolved into a catalyst for discussion and reflection. Influenced by the recent debates about morality and stereotyping for queer portrayals, shipping posts became grounds to discuss those issues, express frustration and find solutions. Furthermore, the fans seem to have personalised the practice, associating personal queer experiences with those couples as a form of self-expression. Simultaneously, they use shipping posts to confront the homophobia and restrictions the LGBTQ+ community faces, being a way of safe expression of queerness online for some fans.

As a practice, it reflects the symbolic interactionism within online fandom, where the different interpretations of the fictional relationship symbolise the various aspects and debates within the LGBTQ+ community.

Queer headcanons, though the least recurring practice, have been substantially transformed by GI fandom, extending being a creative outlet and entertainment source. While gender bends have had a mainstream presence in queer fandom culture, GI fans expanded their original role of addressing underrepresentation. Headcanon content in the community is a representation of the users' PSRs with fictional characters. The responses from the community to headcanon content have shown how this 'customisation' of a trans-implied character has been personally important to the queer fans exploring their own identity, transitioning or struggling with dysphoria. The GI fandom exemplifies how PSRs are being repurposed to support consumers, providing a crucial support system for queer fans seeking comfort in the media they consume.

5.3. The identity of the queer fan

The practices have reflected the convergence culture within the LGBTQ+ GI fandom, showcasing its impact on contemporary queer experiences. The queering content on social media platforms has become engraved in the queer culture, becoming part of identity work, community building and activism. The context of GI as a Chinese game, by a company that has created queer content previously and has endured censorship, with a global audience which is active in online fandom spaces is an important detail. It demonstrates the growing accessibility of an accepting community and representative content for the LGBTQ+, even in places where they experience constant silencing, prosecution and violence. It is not a perfect example of such a 'safe space', but it is a signifier that such online communities are crucial to queer people today, and they play a major role in their experiences with identity.

5.4. Implications, Limitations and Future research

The findings expand on the existing research into fandom and its interlap with digitalisation through convergence culture (Jenkins, 2019; Jenkins 2014; Nguyen et al., 2023). The queering practices of fandoms and their exploitation of platform

affordances have been previously explored, especially within East Asian media and cultures (Li, 2017; Guo & Evans, 2020; Oh, 2015). However, the queering practices of GI fans reflect the globalised fandom rather than national branches (Chinese or Western fandoms), portraying a more overarching example of contemporary fan practices in the LGBTQ+ fandom.

However, the study is limited by the focus on two specific platforms, fandom and three queering practices. This limits the more general application of the findings to other fandoms, or other representations of queering or other canon-transformational practices. Future research could delve further into queer discourse within fandom, explore other common modes of fan labour and expand motivations behind queering.

While collecting data, I came across discourse regarding 'straight' practices of fandom, in opposition to queering as the latter is too oversaturated within fan spaces and is oppressive to cisgender and heterosexual fans. This aspect of gender and sexuality discourse, as well as the homophobia in fan communities, should be further engaged with to portray the different dynamics within fandom and approaches to identity representation.

Fandoms and their practices evolve constantly, together with new digital inventions, as they continue to shape new online cultures and communities, impacting online and offline identities. It is a branch of culture studies which requires revisiting to understand how fan practices shape identities and intersect within larger social contexts.

5.5. Conclusion

The queering practices and the discourse around them reflect the rapidly changing cultures and communities affected by digitalisation, highlighting the role of affordances in online expression. The implications of the evolving fandom practices contribute to further discussions of fan and queer identities, self-expression and new cultural groups. Simultaneously, they address the marginalisation minority groups continue to face across online and offline spaces, and the importance of alternative spaces for their identity work. The study emphasises the constantly changing yet important role of online communities in social and cultural contexts.

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