

Homestuck Audience Research

December 8, 2017

INTRODUCTION

I set out to conduct research on fan involvement with the multimedia webcomic series *Homestuck* created by Andrew Hussie (April 2009 – April 2016), which centers on a group of teenagers, and consists of a combination of images, animated GIFs and instant message logs, as well as animations and games made with Adobe Flash. The comic is known for its considerable teenage fanbase, with fan activities that are spread across the internet and real space: conventions, live action role-playing, fan art, etc. In this report I investigate the aspects of the comic that contribute to its huge fan community regardless of the fact that it does not rely on any traditional advertising methods and is not distributed traditionally. My early aim was to look at vulnerable audiences of the webcomic, due to its strong ties with young and queer fans. My research itself consists of investigation into fan participation methods, as well as a survey that I conducted through the *Homestuck* sub-Reddit forum to gather general information on the audience's viewership.

Data from the survey for reference is attached to the end of this report.

APPROACH

I designed a ten question survey to address four main aspects of identity that manifest in fan viewership: age, gender, sexuality, and viewership habits. Surveys and questionnaires of *Homestuck* fans already exist, though they don't address the latter component. I was interested to find out how all of these interact with each other, and knew that I could draw from pre-existing survey results if needed. Within the relatively small scope of this research project, I selected those four topics to investigate specifically.

Since I chose my survey questions with vulnerable audiences in mind, I encountered the ethical challenge of inclusivity in some cases. I was unsure of how many options to provide for the questions of sexuality and gender, so I opted for an "other – please specify" option that ended up being used almost entirely by those who ended up submitting "I don't know" – something I didn't initially think to include as an option but is perfectly reasonable. Some used this "please specify" space to criticise my language choices for many of the labels I provided as options. This is definitely a challenge with likely no perfect solution, and a lot of thought and care needs to be put into it.

This being said, I was surprised at the overall heterosexuality of the respondents due to my own experience with *Homestuck* as a media text, and its fans. I set out to gather information to determine if there is indeed a large community of queer *Homestuck* fans, and while I feel that the results still support this expectation in terms of their overall ratios, the numbers surprised me. My second angle of research was of the age of *Homestuck* fans, and these results definitely support my hypothesis of the webcomic's success with younger audiences. The survey medium also cannot be ignored; people may find it easier to identify themselves

on an anonymous survey versus a form or an in-person interview where their name or likeness is recorded.

I designed the questions with quick, honest responses in mind. To do this, I stayed away from typed responses wherever possible, and instead opted for roughly four checkboxes to choose from for each question. I also made use of a sliding scale, where respondents could express their agreement with a statement by choosing a point on it between 1 and 100. This is especially useful for questions of self-reported fan identification that are hard to quantify or even talk about at all if they are not in the extremes. As for gathering the actual responses, Reddit proved an extremely useful resource to my research: members of the *Homestuck* forum are already self-reported fans to some extent, and the community was very receptive to my study. I received a total of 671 responses, though only 100 are used for the purposes of this analysis.

RESULTS

Fan engagement with a media text can be measured by a unit called “talk”: Janet Staiger describes this as “fans display interpretations and effects in their most observable form”¹. Media also function as mediation to the social world, which I will discuss in relation to my survey and the webcomic. Staiger talks of the constitution of “a particular interpretive community” – that fans usually have developed a network of colleagues; and these groups discuss, debate, and teach perceptions of variation among the formulas as well as explanations for aspects of the text or performance, and predictions of future encounters with it². The *Homestuck* Reddit forum, as well as the forums native to the website *Homestuck* is

¹ Staiger, Janet. *Media Reception Studies*. p114.

² Ibid, p99.

published on (MS Paint Adventures), are examples of this talk where fans engage in theories, debate, and explanations of plot. These are defined by Janet Staiger in “Media Reception Studies” as *commentary* and *speculation*, common forms of fan talk. As well as this, fans of *Homestuck* are active in their creative contributions through cosplay at conventions, and fan art.

Part of the attraction of some texts or performances is fans’ interest in or identification with characters or individuals. Research shows that identification affects interpretation.³ The social world depends on relations among groups who perceive themselves as disadvantaged either as a group or as individuals, and media are the sites of information and fantasy that may participate in the creation of these perceptions⁴. I refer to these groups as “vulnerable audiences” in this report. Of respondents that felt comfortable defining their sexuality, 40% of them are not straight, with a large portion – 22% – bisexual or pansexual. This is relevant considering the content of the webcomic, as Andrew Hussie’s fictional alien race is canonically depicted as a bisexual or a pansexual society. While 40% on its own is not a majority and may not seem significant, statistics of the straight population ranges between 80% and 97%⁵, so a 40% queer audience is still a sizeable number. It is not unreasonable to assume that *Homestuck*’s original target audience was of the general media standard: a white, straight male in his mid twenties⁶. The comic’s creator, Andrew Hussie, is part of such demographic. However, the content itself is a coming-of-age narrative centered around 13

³ Ibid, p101.

⁴ Ibid, p139.

⁵ Copen, C. E., Chandra, A., & Febo-Vazquez, I. *Sexual behavior, sexual attraction, and sexual orientation among adults aged 18-44 in the United States: Data from the 2011-2013 National Survey of Family Growth*. National Health Statistics Reports, Number 88. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

⁶ Mathijs, Ernest. “*Media Audiences*” Lectures, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC. September 2017.

year-olds and their growth over the years so the ‘boom’ of young audiences is reasonable; Media audiences consume media that reflect and reinforce their own identities and societal values. In a survey conducted on Tumblr in 2013, questions of gender were broke down further than I attempted, yielding better results in terms of vulnerable audiences⁷: out of 575 respondents 71% were cisgender females, and 12.5% cisgender males. The remaining ~16% were either transgender or another non-cis gender. The survey results posted by this Tumblr user address many of the same ideas that I am investigating:

“Most estimates of the percentage of non-heterosexual individuals typically fall between 2% and 10%. So, even if we take the upper limit estimation of 10%, those surveyed from the Homestuck fandom were still seven times as likely to identify as queer, something other than heterosexual. One factor may be our previously discussed demographic: age. Studies have found that younger people are more likely to report being non-heterosexual. Because the majority of fans are in their teen years, they are therefore more likely to respond with the answer of a queer sexual identity. [...] The best statistics available state that trans people account for about .03% of the population, depending on geographic location, among other factors. This is quite different from the nearly 16% of respondents to the [survey] that reported identifying as something other than cisgender.”⁸

These results are notably different from mine, reporting larger numbers of non-straight and non-cisgender fans. My only explanation for this discrepancy is the method of distribution – theirs through Tumblr, a website known for its minority communities, and mine through Reddit; which may have a more heterosexual and a more cisgender population. The heterosexual, cisgender fans are not as vocal as a community perhaps because they feel less

⁷ Homestuck 2013 Survey. <http://homestucksurvey.tumblr.com>

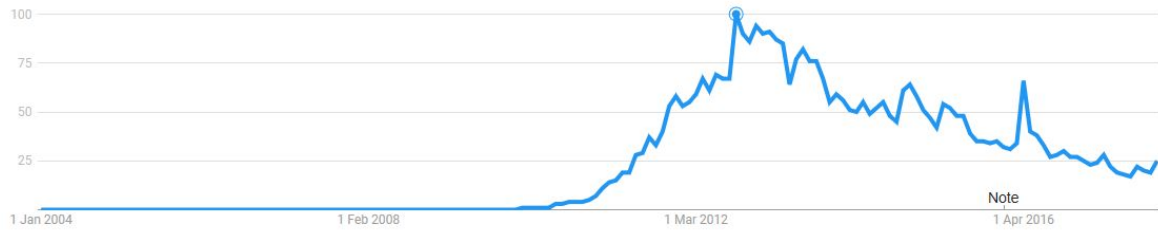
⁸ 2013 Homestuck Survey

of a need to mediate their social struggles and values through fan activity, thus the more prominent (and somewhat inaccurate) view of this particular audience as LGBTQ+.

Fans operate within the constraints of a particular textual world. Part of the attraction to a movie or television program is the universe it offers – this appeals to ideals of the consumer, allows for further story-building and creation of their own through other media “talk”. Reddit forum where I posted is an excellent example on its own. Community and collectivity are important in the way audiences react to media. *Homestuck* is an excellent example of **imagined communities and convergence culture**; Andrew Hussie once said in an interview that he felt *Homestuck* was "still under [his] control", but that the background of the webcomic as a movement "is not under [his] control, and never really was."⁹ A Reddit user commented on my survey's thread, stating “The average reader of Act 1 was 18 years or older, Hussie just began changing the subject matter [of the comic] when he realised certain parts of Tumblr had become his biggest audience. He's always been a crowd pleaser”. Andrew Hussie did use direct viewer input to determine the first outcomes of the story when the medium itself was niche and relatively unknown. As the audience grew this became infeasible, but with such an interconnected community of fans – as well as fans that also became guest illustrators in the comic's later days – fan theory and input did have influence over the content as popularity grew massively.

⁹ Orsini, Lauren Rae. "*Behind Andrew Hussie' Homestuck Adventure Game*". The Daily Dot. 2012.

Interest over time ?



Google Trends represents search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term. A value of 50 means that the term is half as popular. Peak popularity for the term “Homestuck” was reached in September of 2012.

CONCLUSIONS

The size of *Homestuck's* fan community is in the millions, with around a million unique visitors coming to the site daily in its peak¹⁰. *Homestuck* as a media text breaks boundaries of traditional media; the comic itself is published online, and consists mostly of GIF, flash animation, and text chat logs. In the later portions of the comic other mediums are explored – such as Vine and YouTube video, and a simulated Snapchat “story”. This is highly representative of the younger generations in today’s society, as well as characteristic of a cult text: endlessly deferred narrative that delivers detail across meta-texts¹¹. The story itself is an amalgamation of many genres, drawing in audiences who may be fans of one if not many. The paradox of *Homestuck* is its niche distribution and obscure nature, but at the same time

¹⁰ Orsini, Lauren Rae. "The most popular, epic webcomic you've never heard of". CNN.

¹¹ Andersen, Joceline. “Digital Audiences” Lecture, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC. October 2017

its widespread fan audience with “talk” that can be found across all platforms. “Let me tell you about Homestuck” is a memetic phrase that was shared virally online during the comic’s peak success (circa 2013), demonstrating the talk of fan audiences in their attempt to share and educate viewers on the media. According to my research, the vast majority of fans access *Homestuck* through a laptop, which allows for mobile viewing in both the home and public spaces: in retrospect, a survey question on location would have been useful, to examine the places in which fans consume the content (schools, work, home, cafes or restaurants, etc).

The flow of this media text across multiple platforms, its participatory culture and its cult fan audience are all major aspects of *Homestuck*’s viewership – while my survey did not directly address these aspects, vulnerable audiences greatly contribute to this style of fan community. Fans of *Homestuck* are also somewhat ludic, as viewing consists of blurred boundaries between producer and audience, as well as a mobile viewing experience due to the comic’s digital and online nature.

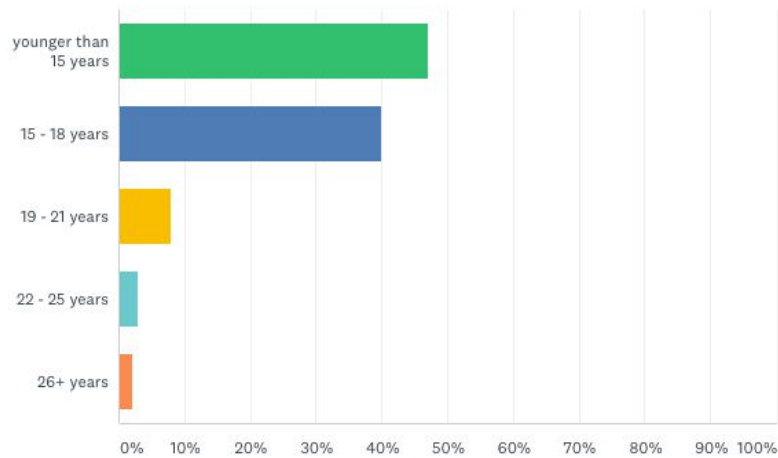
SURVEY DATA

100 out of 671 responses

Q1

Select the age range you belonged to when you started reading Homestuck

Answered: 100 Skipped: 0

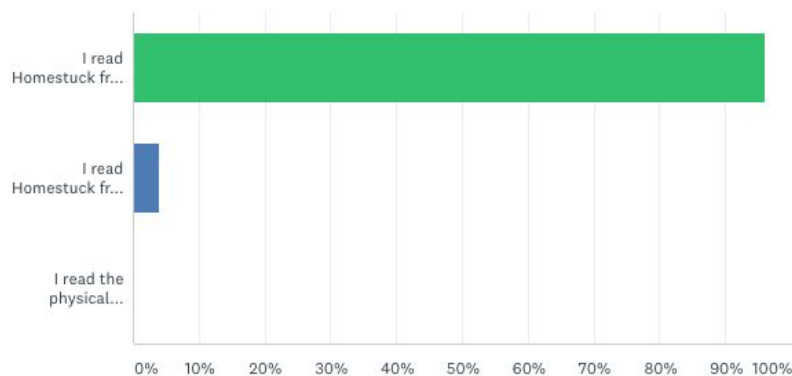


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
▼ younger than 15 years	47.00% 47
▼ 15 - 18 years	40.00% 40
▼ 19 - 21 years	8.00% 8
▼ 22 - 25 years	3.00% 3
▼ 26+ years	2.00% 2
TOTAL	100

Q2

Which best describes your experience?

Answered: 100 Skipped: 0

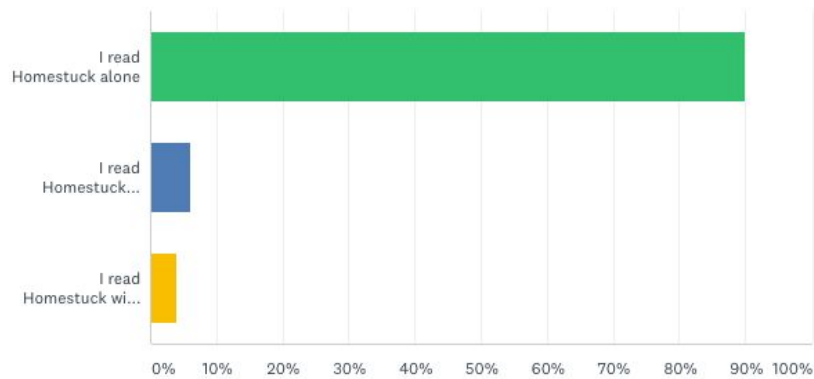


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
▼ I read Homestuck from a laptop or desktop computer	96.00%	96
▼ I read Homestuck from a phone or tablet	4.00%	4
▼ I read the physical Homestuck book	0.00%	0
TOTAL		100

Q3

Which best describes your reading environment?

Answered: 99 Skipped: 1

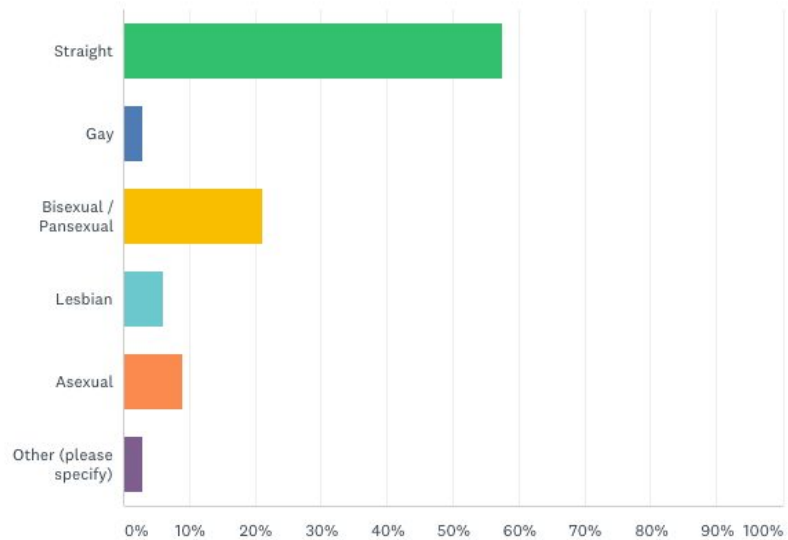


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
▼ I read Homestuck alone	89.90%	89
▼ I read Homestuck alongside another person	6.06%	6
▼ I read Homestuck with a group of other people	4.04%	4
TOTAL		99

Q4

Select which best describes you

Answered: 99 Skipped: 1

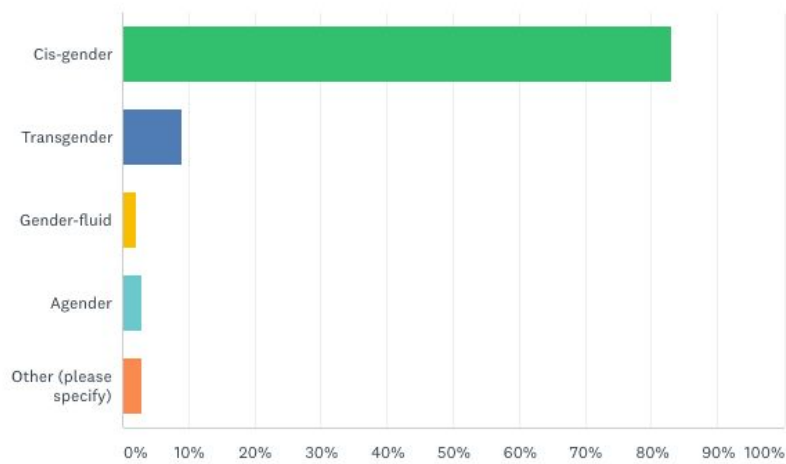


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
▼ Straight	57.58%	57
▼ Gay	3.03%	3
▼ Bisexual / Pansexual	21.21%	21
▼ Lesbian	6.06%	6
▼ Asexual	9.09%	9
▼ Other (please specify)	Responses 3.03%	3
TOTAL		99

Q5

Select which best describes you

Answered: 100 Skipped: 0

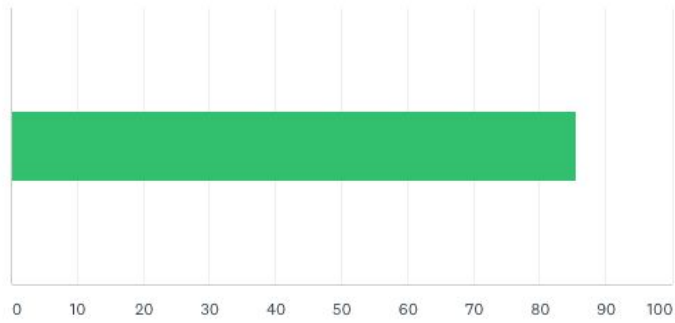


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
▼ Cis-gender	83.00%	83
▼ Transgender	9.00%	9
▼ Gender-fluid	2.00%	2
▼ Agender	3.00%	3
▼ Other (please specify)	Responses 3.00%	3
TOTAL		100

Q6

Select a point on the scale below

Answered: 100 Skipped: 0



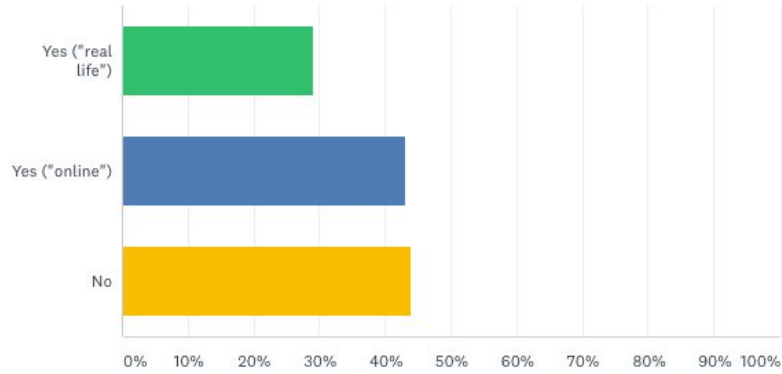
ANSWER CHOICES	AVERAGE NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	RESPONSES
Responses	85	8,547	100
Total Respondents: 100			

(0 being not a fan at all of Homestuck, 100 being Homestuck's biggest fan)

Q7

Have you ever made a friend through Homestuck?

Answered: 100 Skipped: 0



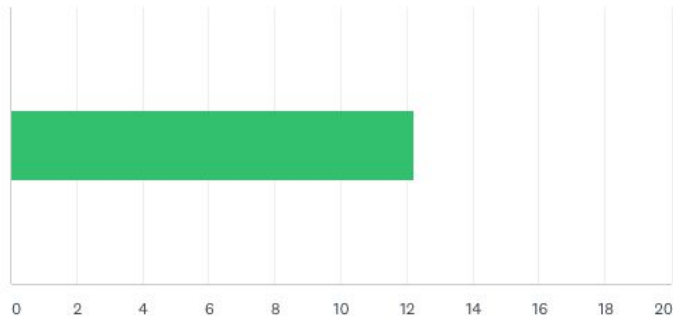
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes ("real life")	29.00% 29
Yes ("online")	43.00% 43
No	44.00% 44

Total Respondents: 100

Q8

Among your "real life" friends, what portion of them are fans of Homestuck?

Answered: 97 Skipped: 3



ANSWER CHOICES	AVERAGE NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	RESPONSES
Responses	12	1,187	97

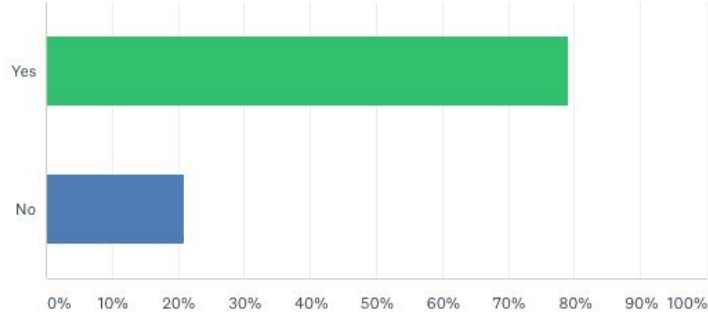
Total Respondents: 97

(out of 100, 100 being 100% of respondent's friends)

Q9

Do you have "online" or internet friends, whom you communicate with primarily through the internet?

Answered: 100 Skipped: 0

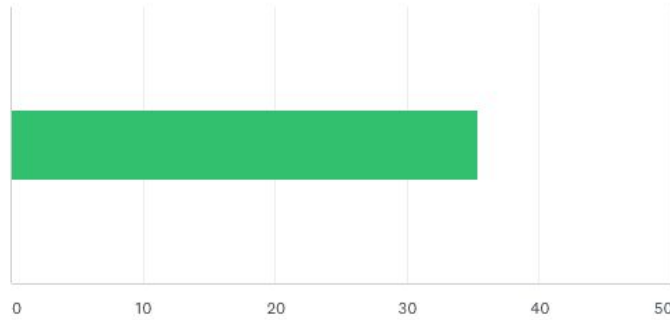


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes	79.00% 79
No	21.00% 21
TOTAL	100

Q10

Among your "online" friends, what portion of them are fans of Homestuck?

Answered: 92 Skipped: 8



ANSWER CHOICES	AVERAGE NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	RESPONSES
Responses	35	3,253	92
Total Respondents: 92			

(100 being 100% of respondent's friends. Compare this number to Q8)

REFERENCES

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