

Immersive New Media and Abuse: Should There Be Regulations for How Interpersonal  
Abuse is Broadcasted in Online Media?

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## Abstract

Media effect theorists have debated the extent to which media has influence over its audience with some believing that ‘heavy viewing’ may increase vulnerability, resulting in broadcasters introducing guidelines to reduce potential harm. These moderation tools are only in place for traditional media, however, and with the rise of social media, user-generated content has become increasingly popular with younger consumers. This is concerning as user-generated content is posted to platforms without these strictly enforced regulations.

My thesis focuses on how interpersonal abuse is depicted on platforms popular with younger demographics and analyses the effectiveness of the encoding in influencing consumer attitudes towards abusive behaviours, specifically on Wattpad’s *After* and Twitch’s *Dream SMP*. I discuss how audiences decode media and the factors present within the content that may strengthen the potential influence, bringing attention to the platforms’ cultural emphasis on direct producer-consumer interaction and the ‘heavy-viewing’ nature of the content. I observe the encoding choices present and infer the dominant decoding of this framing through user comments. This allows me to observe the relationship between a producer intentionally framing abuse as romantic or abhorrent, and the audience’s interpretation of abusive behaviours.

I consider whether it would be beneficial for new media platforms to create and enforce regulations on depicting interpersonal abuse due to the potential harm of allowing everyday users to create highly influential media without specific guidelines. I also explore the idea of co-existence between artistic expression, creator responsibility, and audience protection, whilst acknowledging the audience’s right to choose and the fine line between moderation and censorship.

## Introduction

The prevalence of social media as a source of content has led to the rise in what is known as the ‘content creator’ meaning the people who gain success from posting content to these platforms. Different to traditional media where teams of writers and directors may work together to create a television programme, or a novel having to undergo rounds of editing before publication, social media sites are dominated by user-generated content. This is content that is created by the users of the websites and apps and posted without professional consultation and can be done by users with zero followers or millions equally, the only difference being the number of other users that are exposed to the content. These websites have terms of services that users must adhere to unless they wish to risk being banned from posting, such as zero tolerance for hate speech, but generally users have full creative control over the content that they post.

This dissertation will investigate whether creators on these new media platforms can create content responsibly without potentially causing harm to the consumers. Interpersonal abuse and its depiction will be the focus as it is a topic that can only be depicted in traditional media if guidelines are followed due to the harm that can be caused if the wrong messaging is implemented. Through content analysis of how abuse is depicted in two new media works created without these guidelines, a determination can hopefully be suggested as to whether it is possible for individual creators to portray sensitive subject matters without the aid of regulations. It is an investigation into user-generated content posted onto loosely regulated platforms that have found large success, making them highly influential on their young demographic due to the immersive, interactive, and time-demanding nature of the content. Teenagers who consume this content have also been suggested to be more vulnerable to influence due to biological and social factors such as undeveloped cognitive ability and inexperience in romantic relationships, which may make them more susceptible to influential

encoding in the media they consume (Eggermont, 2004; Jensen 2015). Due to the vulnerability of their audiences and the success these creators obtain, within this body of work I will strive to answer the question: should there be regulations for how interpersonal abuse is broadcasted in online media?

The impact that these loosely moderated platforms may have on the teenagers who inhabit them is under-researched. Studies such as Eggermont's 2004 investigation into what influences teenagers' romantic expectations and Fredland et al's 2005 research into perceptions of appropriate romantic behaviour in 11–13-year-olds have explored how media may affect teen attitudes to relationships. However, the media the participants in these studies were consuming was traditional and moderated through teams of experienced professionals. For example, Eggermont used soap operas, which must adhere to the regulations such as the BBC Editorial Guidelines (BBC, 2023, n.p). The impact of new media platforms such as the two highlighted in this study, Twitch and Wattpad, has not been substantially researched, especially not through the lens of interpersonal abuse being depicted to teenagers through unregulated content. This dissertation will therefore be making a new contribution to knowledge.

### Structure

Chapter One will delve into how audiences experience media and how they can be impacted by it. This will be done through an engagement with Victor Nell's work on immersion in traditional media such as novels, leading into Marie-Laure Ryan's research into the different levels of being absorbed into a work and the cognitive processes that take place in each stage. Due to the heightened time commitment demanded of consumers of new media such as the *After* series (Todd, 2013-2015) and the *Dream SMP* (2020-2023), and the influence of the paratexts and communities that surround them, audiences experience a more intense level of absorption with the texts. This can result in a merging of the consumers'

perception of the fictional world and their lived reality (Ryan, 2001; Green et al, 2002).

Significantly, the more immersed a consumer becomes, the more vulnerable they are to the messaging due to the time spent within the media. Using Stuart Hall's 1980 theory of encoding and decoding, I will explain how producers implant meaning for the audience to interpret. Understanding how encoding is implemented can highlight why regulations for traditional media are important and how a lack of them in new media may lead to harmful messaging in the work of content creators. To examine whether the content analysed is portraying harmful depictions of interpersonal abuse, the methods used to encode the messaging need to be understood, as do the potential effects this might have on consumers as regulations are put in place to protect audiences.

Chapter Two focuses on interactivity and how its application in new media can increase immersion. Here, I will explore different forms of interactive media, highlighting how reduced critical distance between consumer and producer can cause the audience to be more susceptible to influence. I will use Ryan's 2001 work on interactivity to examine how this applies to media such as *After* and the *Dream SMP*. This content is highly interactive because of the live feedback aspect and the direct contact creators have with their audiences. Due to this, an understanding of how that relationship between consumer and producer may increase the potential for harm is essential. This direct and continuous contact with the audience through comments and live feedback could mean that creators may be aware of the effect of their encoding, introducing the idea that creators may have a personal responsibility for protecting their audience. The psychological effects of media such as *After* and the *Dream SMP* on young demographics will be explored, focusing on factors that can affect teenagers' perception of romantic relationships such as romantic inexperience. Eggermont's 2004 research on teenage expectations in relationships and Gerbner's 1998 theory of

‘mainstreaming’ will be utilised to demonstrate how the time demand of the chosen texts can make new media more influential than traditional media.

Chapter Three will be an analysis of Anna Todd’s *After*, a fanfiction turned book series that was later adapted to film. The series is branded as a romance, but the main relationship is abusive. The encoding choices of the published novel will be examined as to how the abuse is framed as romantic and its effect on the reader’s perception of the abusive relationship. To examine how interpersonal abuse is portrayed in *After* and the *Dream SMP*, Dr. Lenore Walker’s 2009 ‘Cycle of Abuse’ model shall be used to signpost depictions of abusive behaviour. The model has been criticised for its heteronormativity and generalisation of abuse. This is due to its focus on male-perpetuated physical abuse of a romantic partner and whilst this is a common form of abuse within media and real-life, it is not the only type of interpersonal abuse. Despite this, it provides a clear and simple breakdown of abuse that can be used to signpost abusive behaviours and therefore acts as an appropriate model for identifying abusive actions and thought processes. Other, more relevant research and models such as Harsey et al’s ‘Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender’ (2017, n.p), known as ‘DARVO’, will also be used to strengthen the identification of behaviour as abusive and provide a wider view of abuse outside heterosexual domestic violence. The effect on the audience will be examined through comments left on the individual chapters on Wattpad, as these give the reader’s real-time reactions. This will allow me to observe whether the encoding is effective in influencing the mindset of the audience to interpret abusive behaviours as romantic and forgivable. In order to analyse the *After* series and how domestic abuse was encoded to the young demographic that consumed it as positive and desirable, a combination of the fanfiction and the published novel will be used as a source. This is because the original fanfiction remains the most popular form of the *After* story, but the original version is largely lost to time. The version that exists now on Wattpad has been

edited by Anna Todd, changing the characters names, improving the standard of writing, and updating new and returning readers of new films and content released for the franchise. The content analysis in this dissertation will be using the published novels as its main source of material, with the fanfiction and the films being used to show how the representation and encoding of abuse has been changed with the introduction of different levels of regulation. This is because the published novels are unable to be retroactively improved or altered as the fanfiction has been. Anna Todd published these novels as an experienced writer who had witnessed the decoding and direct effect the story had on the audience, resulting in all encodings being purposeful and more eligible for critical analysis. Whilst it would be preferable for the content and the audience reaction to be from the same version of the source material, the chapter-by-chapter reactions from the audience, some comments dating back to the original work, are invaluable and nothing of that calibre is available for the published work. The narrative events of the fanfiction and the published novels are largely the same and relevant differences in both content and encoding shall be disclosed, often relating to changes in the vulgarity of the dialogue. The small alterations in the texts showcase how the author's awareness of the audience interpretation influences their encoding of messaging but also considers feedback from the audience, showing the direct communication between author and reader. This provides support for the author understanding their influence on the reader and therefore the comment section of the original fanfiction is an appropriate method of assessing audience decoding of *After*.

The same will be done in Chapter Four with the *Dream SMP*, the key difference being that the same interpersonally abusive behaviours in the storyline are encoded as traumatising for the victim. The analysis will also be supported by real-time reactions of the audience through the paratext of comments left on uploaded versions of the broadcasts. This is due to the record of the comments attached to the original broadcasts being unavailable. Researched



and verified models of abuse will be utilized to support the identifying behaviours as abusive and the effect they have on victims, showing how promoting these behaviours may be seen as harmful. Both the *Dream SMP* and *After* are hosted on platforms with loose regulations and encouragement of artistic expression; the creators used these platforms to become famous and successful. Through analysing how interpersonal abuse was portrayed in this media without regulation, an inference may be made as to whether it was done responsibly.

Chapter Four will also break convention and present the narrative elements and analysis using the past tense. This is because the *Dream SMP* was live-action content that only existed in the moment it was executed. There are recordings of these broadcasts that can be viewed, but these recordings are often edited and cannot replicate the experience of the original broadcast. As the narrative has concluded and the server that hosted the content has been erased, Chapter Four will employ the past tense.

I determined that the chosen medias were appropriate for this investigation due to their interactive format, them both being uploaded to platforms that spotlight user-generated content and having similar storylines of interpersonal abuse. Importantly, I also have intimate knowledge of the platforms that they were uploaded to, including the culture in both current day and when they were uploaded, and I am also an expert on the content itself. As a teenager I read the original version of *After* and as an adult I watched the hours of content that the *Dream SMP* creators broadcasted every day. I witnessed first-hand the content and producer-consumer interactions that have been lost to time and observed how their respective communities reacted to the abuse storylines as they played out. Due to this, I am confident that they are appropriate choices for comparative analysis that will allow me to delve into the issue of unregulated content being mass consumed by teenagers.

When discussing the possible dangers of encoding choices on audiences, it is essential to clarify that the definition of ‘harm’ is difficult to determine. This is because what is

considered harmful in media can be subjective. For example, one person may believe that media scaring its audience may be harmful, Boyle asking ‘are nightmares evidence of harm?’ (2004, p.58), and another would consider fear to be the media’s intended reception. To be able to concretely name content as harmful, a direct causation between the media and adverse effects on the audience, such as emotional or physical trauma, would have to be recorded in mass, something that would be difficult to prove. Due to this, ‘potential harm’ rather than definitive harm on audiences is what is considered when passing legislation on media production. This is evidenced by the UK government’s response to the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee’s *Harmful content on the Internet and in videos games* report (2008, n.p) stating: ‘We believe that incontrovertible evidence of harm is not necessarily required in order to justify a restriction of access to certain types of content in any medium’ (House of Commons, 2008, p.1). As a result of this, when discussing the possible effect of *After* and the *Dream SMP* on their audiences, any implied adverse effects of the media shall be referred to as ‘potential harm’ rather than insinuating that the media is indisputably harmful.

Due to the nature of new media and its influence on its audience, it is important for this to be investigated. Platforms such as Twitch and Wattpad rely on interaction from their audiences due to their community-based cultures. Audiences of *After* and the *Dream SMP* were prompted to persistently consume the content as they were updated daily, demanding a considerable investment of time. This, as well as other factors that will be explored, can leave audiences vulnerable to influence, especially when the audience are young. The demographic for this content includes teenagers, which makes investigating the content they are consuming essential due to teenagers being suggested to be more susceptible to influential encoding (Eggermont, 2004; Fredland et al, 2005). The nature of platforms that host user-generated content means that anyone that posts can, in theory, make a career out of it, just as the creators behind *After* and the *Dream SMP* have done. This means that anyone can create

popular media with any messaging and market it towards vulnerable and impressionable audiences such as teenagers. As a result of this, it is necessary to investigate whether interpersonal abuse can be safely used as subject matter in unregulated new media or determine whether potentially harmful material is being allowed to be portrayed to teenagers due to lack of regulation.

## Methodology and Ethical Considerations

The primary medium of research methodology in this thesis will be qualitative data analysis in the form of content analysis of two pieces of new media: *After* and the *Dream SMP*. This will be done through thorough examination of how both texts explore and present the theme of interpersonal abuse through dialogue, internal monologue, actions taken by the characters, and the responses of other characters. I will also consider whether the narratives could be interpreted as punishing the abusers for their actions.

The data for the *After* series will be collected through the examination of the primary series, consisting of four books: *After* (Todd, 2013), *After We Collided* (Todd, 2014a), *After We Fell* (Todd, 2014b), and *After Ever Happy* (Todd, 2015). The series will be thoroughly analysed to identify instances between the main characters, Hardin and Tessa, where examples of emotional abuse, physical violence, sexual assault, verbal battery, and manipulations occur and their impact on the wider narrative. The reactions of the perpetrator, victim, and other involved parties will also be studied to determine whether the narrative, in my opinion, forgives or condemns abuse. The actions, behaviours, and thoughts of Hardin in *After* will be interpreted as being abusive using the structure of comparing them to models of abuse such as Walker's Cycle of Violence, otherwise known as the Cycle of Abuse (2009, n.p). The effect of the abuse on his girlfriend, Tessa, will also be compared with research such as Frieze's 1979 work on the psychology of abuse victims and Dutton and Painter's theory of trauma-bonding (1981, n.p). Comparing Hardin's actions and the psychological effect they have on Tessa to the actions and thought patterns described by domestic abuse researchers will allow me more certainty in labelling Hardin's behaviour as abusive. I acknowledge that another researcher may interpret the relationship between Hardin and Tessa as romantic if analysing the text through the lens of romance and as such may view Hardin's manipulations as genuine flirting. A love interest initially flirting with a protagonist for

ulterior motives such as winning a bet or receiving payment before genuinely falling in love is not a trope unique to *After*. It has been seen in other well-loved teenage romances such as the films *She's All That* (Iscoe, 1999), *10 Things I Hate About You* (Junger, 1999), and *Cruel Intentions* (Kumble, 1999). Context can influence how the audience interprets the media they consume and can change with time. For example, a modern viewer might reject the methods, such as lying and manipulation, used by the love interests in these film that may have previously been accepted or tolerated in a romantic lead. As the framing of analysis may influence the interpretation, another researcher or reader may find *After*'s storyline to be romantic if they view it through a romantic lens, determining what has been labelled as manipulation in this thesis as earnest flirting. Due to this, I am conscious of the need to grant a degree of grace to the narrative, especially regarding the first novel, to not automatically label every interaction between Hardin and Tessa as malicious simply because I am looking for instances of domestic abuse. However, I have analysed the text using the framing of domestic abuse and compared those behaviours to models of abuse such as the Cycle of Abuse (Walker, 2009, n.p). Therefore I will be presenting the relationship as being abusive. All instances of Hardin's abusive behaviours discussed, as well as instances displaying Tessa's victimology, will be evidenced by showing quotes from the text. Any mentioned acts of abuse within the analysis will also be followed by studies, theoretical research, and models of abuse to support my interpretation and give evidence as to how these behaviours are abusive.

By compiling all the instances that I have determined to be abusive throughout the *After* series, I shall be able to recognise patterns of the framing of the abuse to determine whether it appears to be encoded as romantic or downplayed to be less severe. Through analysing the manner in which abuse is presented to the readers I should be able to suggest whether the *After* series could be potentially harmful to those reading it. This may support the

idea of introducing regulation. I will also be utilising interviews from the author, Anna Todd, where she explains her writing process and her thoughts behind the story. Author's notes left throughout the original Wattpad version of the story through the course of Todd writing the series will also be used as paratext to analyse the framing in regard to authorial intent. It is important to acknowledge that, whilst I will be using this helpful paratext to support my claims of authorial intent, any inference of intent not directly supported by the author's own stated words is merely an implied conclusion drawn from my own analysis and should not be taken as fact.

Unlike *After*, which exists as a piece of new media through fanfiction and also can be categorised as traditional media due to its publication, the *Dream SMP* was live-streamed and exists in that form only in the moment. As such, the data collected from the *Dream SMP* will be from the uploaded versions of the streams to the creator's YouTube channel:

TommyVODS (2024, n.p). This is due to Tommy and the Exile Arc being the main point of interest in this analysis, though the streams of other creators may be utilised to provide additional information. These uploads or 'VODs' (Video On Demand) are slightly altered on Tommy's channel with the opening few minutes of a title screen and music present in the original broadcast being removed. A recorded introduction and summary of the stream's events replaces this. Despite the slight alterations, these VODs exist as a complete archive of the story and so are viable evidence that can be used to analyse the content of the *Dream SMP*.

As the *Dream SMP* was performed live, narration and descriptions cannot be examined for how they may use literary devices to frame the abuse shown in the narrative. Instead, dialogue between characters, action, music, and character monologues are to be used to assess the content for abusive behaviours. Due to this, there is less material available to make a determination about the presence of abusive behaviours. However, the nature of the

storyline, being a ‘hostage and captor’ situation, allows for confidence in determining the behaviours as abusive. This is because the framing can be seen as more directly abusive rather than potentially clouded by other labels such as ‘romance’. Similar to my analysis of *After*, all interpretations of abuse will be the result of my own deductions and supported with relevant research on abuse as well as any appropriate paratext supplied by the creators themselves to substantiate my conclusions. This is also true for any notion of the *Dream SMP*’s creative intentions that, unless supported by the direct words of the streamers, should be read as inferences and not certainties. As my objective in viewing the material is to find instances of abuse in the text, I acknowledge that there is room for different interpretations from other consumers or researchers.

To support my analysis of the framing of the abusive behaviours displayed in each media, I will be including comments from audience members to provide their reactions to the abuse. I suggest that these comments function as reasonable evidence of how the framing of abusive acts, such as the destruction of the victim’s property, can influence how audiences decode the behaviour. This data will be collected through passive ethnographic observation of the fandom communities of the media. This is a methodology that involves ‘observing people in their own environment to understand their experiences, perspectives and everyday practices’ (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2020, n.p) without engaging with the community myself. I have previously engaged with the fandoms of the media analysed through being a part of fandom culture. I was a fan of One Direction when *After* was being written and knew about the fanfiction and I also watched the *Dream SMP* as it was being broadcasted. These experiences allowed me to understand these communities and how they communicate with each other, but also alerted me to the potential issues that inspired this investigation. Despite the success of both the media highlighted, due to them being largely unchecked by outsiders, only those who are familiar with the text and community

surrounding them may be aware of the environment that the media fosters. My personal knowledge of the fanbases and media also allows me to be aware of happenings that were undocumented and lost to time, such as Anna Todd selling merchandise of the series, due to directly witnessing them. As a result of this, I became aware of the conversations that arose around the narrative points in *After* and the *Dream SMP* that involved abuse. For *After*, fans would speak about the terrible things that Hardin did but would still praise the story as a romance as though the abuse was a necessity to bear for the relationship to work. For the *Dream SMP*, there were those who would claim that Tommy's character 'deserved' the abuse. This may have been due to these viewers not watching Tommy's perspective, exhibiting bias towards Dream's character through their preference for him as a content creator, or by simply interpreting the encoding differently. However, the overall consensus of the fandom, or 'narrativity' (Booth, 2017, n.p) which I will discuss in Chapter Two, was that the abuse displayed throughout the Exile Arc was horrific. The actions depicted in both media are fundamentally the same when viewed in isolation. However, the differences in how the audience of each text reacted to the abuse storylines gave me reason to believe that the narrative presentation of abuse may determine how that abuse is received by the consumer. By analysing audience reaction in conjunction with the content, and observing the decoding of specific abusive moments, it is possible to judge the potential impact that framing can have on the messaging. This work may also provide insight into how the audience's reaction to the abuse shifted over time as the story progressed, with *After* ultimately framing Hardin and Tessa's relationship as romantic and the *Dream SMP* concluding their narrative with the victim apologising to the abuser. By including comments from consumers, the potential influence of framing on audience perception of abuse can possibly be suggested. This can be observed through how the audience's attitudes towards abuse changes as the narrative framing of abuse changes.



If I were to further my research into this area, I would extend my focus. In addition to considering how the fans in these communities respond to the content, I would also explore how they interact with each other. This would provide further insight into how the framing of abuse may influence audiences through observing how fans speak amongst themselves about the abuse shown in the narrative. As fandom is often tied to identity (Duffett, 2013, p.60), and fans may influence each other's perspective due to pressure to conform to popular views (Hitchcock and Chin, 2017, p.184), it may also be necessary to further investigate whether new media should be regulated. Whilst media cannot force a consumer to think or act a certain way, users reinforcing to each other potentially dangerous rhetoric that they have 'learnt' from the media they consume (Gerbner and Gross, 1972; Russell et al, 2014) may lend support to calls for restrictions on the content. However, this would raise further ethical concerns for participants and researchers. Websites such as X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok would be more appropriate to be utilised for discourse analysis due to the emphasis on interaction between users. Users of these websites accumulate followers and any interaction, such as replying to a post, is shown to the audiences of both poster and replier rather than the interaction staying between the two of them. Due to this, more people are exposed to the interaction than what could have been intended. This could mean, for example, that if a poster with fifty followers said something disagreeable, then thousands of people could see this post and reply to it instead of only their followers, which could be harmful to the poster if the replies are hateful. This increased interaction between fans, forming communities and environments unique to each website within fandoms, would pose a greater risk to participants. X and TikTok contain more identifiable information due to the culture encouraging more personal content to be posted. This may be personal information such as users having their age and location displayed on their profiles or uploading videos that feature their location in the background. Therefore, this increased interaction could result in user's

personal information being exposed to a wider audience than intended. Additionally, the fandoms of both *After* and the *Dream SMP* have acquired a reputation for hostility and retribution on websites such as X and TikTok. This is exacerbated by the fact that *After* is a One Direction fanfiction and One Direction fans have a reputation for being particularly vitriolic about anyone they consider to be attacking their idols. Due to this, using tweets or videos posted about the media, whether interpreted as supporting abuse or condemning it, may invite others to react harshly towards the original posters. This risk may be lessened by slightly altering the content of the comments to anonymise them and provide a further level of protection to the posters from potential exposure and backlash from other fans. However, individual comments or accounts are easy to locate on these platforms simply by searching them. Keywords can also be used to find comments on websites such as X and completely altering comments could risk changing the poster's intentions through interpreting their words. It would therefore be necessary to gain the informed consent of the posters before using their comments in my research. Consequently, I will be providing comments collected using passive ethnographic methods of observation from websites with less emphasis on interaction within fan communities but additionally provide more direct reactions to the studied media: Wattpad and YouTube. These websites display far less personal information for users, if any at all, and therefore it would be more difficult to trace any comment used in this thesis back to the people that posted them. Comments on these websites are also not broadcasted to followers the way they are on platforms such as X. This will help protect the commenters used, who have the potential to be young and vulnerable, from any possible negative consequences of being included in this thesis.

The *After* series was originally posted on Wattpad in 2013 and still exists on the platform but the original story has been overridden and edited to be presented in its current form. As such, the comments available to be collected date back to the original posting in

2013. Being the first comments posted, they are free from the potential influence of other users providing paratext or ‘spoiling’ the content that may shape their interpretation. These comments will be included to provide the ‘purest’ reaction to the abuse presented but it is important to note that, whilst the general narrative of the modern *After* remains consistent with the original, the original comments are reacting to a story that is inescapably different. As I seek to explore in this investigation: specific encoding may influence decoding. Due to this, the wording of the original *After* may have framed Hardin’s words, actions, and reactions as more or less abusive. For this reason, comments dating back to the original upload will only be used to show fan reactions to the final chapter of the series. This is be used as a means to communicate how fans and new media creators work in collaboration with each other rather than strictly assuming the roles of producer and consumer. Despite the possible differences between the original and the modern day *After* available on Wattpad, the commentary given by readers, both first-time readers and repeat consumers, provide invaluable data due to how thorough they are. This is due to readers being given the opportunity to comment paragraph-by-paragraph. With the exception of following a first-time reader of the series through their comments, a task that would be difficult as it is unlikely someone would comment on every chapter, these comments provide the best gauge for the fan consensus on Hardin’s behaviour. This can showcase the audience’s journey and how they may go from berating Hardin to scolding Tessa. The useful feature of users being able to comment on individual paragraphs allows me to analyse those paragraphs and deduce whether the encoding within it may persuade audiences to react in a particular way. This gives me the opportunity to be more specific in my analysis and refer to precise moments between content and fan interaction rather than make generalisations based on comments left on the entirety of the work that may refer to any number of narrative points.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, in the modern day, there are plenty of comments within *After* that condemn Tessa and Hardin's relationship. These can be found in the first chapter and scattered throughout the text. This could be the result of re-visiting the series with a new perspective, the influx of commentary surrounding the story through YouTube videos with millions of views, or a first-time reader's genuine reaction and review. There is also a considerable amount of comments throughout that are one-word, only contain emojis, or have been interpreted by me as jokes rather than serious reactions to the narrative events. I do, however, acknowledge that tone can be difficult to read online and that inferring that comments are humorous or serious in nature are not evidence of this being fact. Due to this, the comments used in this thesis were chosen due to their relevance to, and mention of, the specific narrative events that I am analysing. This was made possible due to the Wattpad feature where users can attach comments to specific paragraphs, indicating that they are reacting to the events of that specific paragraph. This provides a direct reaction that could imply a greater consensus within the readers due to the number of likes a comment may get and replies agreeing with them. The clarity of the comments is also taken into consideration as I acknowledge that even comments that appear to be directly stating their opinion could be interpreted by myself differently than their intention. For example, a commenter may be using hyperbole for humour which could be interpreted by myself as sincere. Due to this, comments that can be inferred to be clearly expressing their reactions to abusive moments have been chosen. This could be through the comment linking to specific narrative events which could lead me to have the opinion that their reaction is a result of the content of that paragraph. Alternatively, the comment could provide explanation of the commenter's reasoning behind their opinion to support it being their genuine and clear reaction to help minimise the likelihood of misinterpretation.

A similar issue can arise from sourcing comments from YouTube in relation to the *Dream SMP*. The original, real-time comments that users provided would be optimal data through which to analyse fan reaction as hundreds of comments were made every second, producing extensive live commentary. However, comments from the original streams are unavailable due to the creators discussed not having these real-time comments displayed on screen. This data was available only to those watching live who could see the attached comment section or those who could access the VOD on Twitch before its deletion sixty days after broadcast. Due to this, the uploaded versions of the streams, posted the following day on YouTube, provide commentary posted by watchers of the VOD attached to content that is as close to the original source as possible. This allows me to connect the user reactions with specific streams and specific moments rather than using discussions around the Exile Arc as a whole. As with *After*, these comment sections can contain a large amount of comments that are unrelated to the VOD's content. Due to this, comments relating to specific narrative events that express their reactions in a manner less likely to be misunderstood were chosen to support the content analysis. This has been done through choosing comments that are not referencing the content creators, their personal lives, or their other content. This could be through referencing jokes or moments from their other content such as YouTube videos or their appearances in other people's streams whilst not being 'in character' and therefore just playing as themselves. Comments that specifically reference narrative moments within the streams whether through providing timestamps or including direct or paraphrased quotes from the content have also been preferred. This is because comments of this nature provide the opportunity to connect specific moments to specific audience reactions. It also allows more confidence that the users are speaking about the narrative events and not the creators. Comments that provide additional reasoning to their character analysis have also been chosen. For example, a comment that simply says 'Dream is really scary' supplies

commentary but lacks the explanation that a comment such as ‘Dream is really scary. You can see how Tommy fears him when Dream threatens him at 15:38 and it is terrifying’ provides. The latter comment includes reasoning and references a specific narrative moment to support their opinion that Dream’s character is manipulative. As such the latter comment, and comments like it, would be chosen instead of the former as it gives the most evidence to reasonably suggest that the commentor is explicitly stating their opinion to the narrative events. Therefore, comments such as the example given have been preferred. I do acknowledge, however, that my interpretations of the commenter’s intent and messaging are my own and not factual. However, I believe that using the previously stated criteria to choose the comments used in this thesis will reduce the chance of misinterpretation as I have chosen comments that I feel most explicitly state the poster’s reactions to the specific narrative events that I am focusing on.

In order to abide by the Terms of Service of Wattpad (2019, n.p) and YouTube (2022, n.p), as well as the ethical guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (2020, n.p), the comments that I use will be anonymised. This is because there is no way to confirm the ages of those posting, leading to the possibility that some commenters may have been under the age of eighteen when they posted the comment. Furthermore, the usernames of some commenters may contain personal information that needs to be redacted, in order to protect the user’s right to anonymity. This does not apply to all of the users referred to in this thesis but in order to not draw attention to those censored for anonymity, all usernames will be amended to ‘User A’, ‘User B’ etc., following in alphabetical order and adding numbers if necessary. Screenshots of the comments will be provided in the Appendix with the usernames and profile pictures removed alongside the chapter or video they were sourced from for the purpose of confirming their legitimacy. The decision to not include them in the bibliography alongside links to the specific comments has been made to further protect the anonymity of

the users. Comments that are not anonymised will be those provided by the new media content creators themselves. This is due to them being famous public figures communicating through public accounts. Their words will be used to provide necessary context or add to analysis where it is important that these comments are not being provided by audiences, but the creators themselves. For user comments, the data is being sourced from public accounts from Wattpad and YouTube where it is written into the Terms of Service that users are aware that these comments are public and available to be accessed. Through measures such as anonymising comments and collecting data from websites where you cannot search for specific comments without the help of a third-party website, I will ensure that the users are protected whilst still allowing their important data to be utilised in this analysis.

## Chapter One: How We Consume Media

To examine the possible negative impact of implemented messaging in new media on consumers, we need to first understand how consumers can be affected or ‘changed’ by media. As will be discussed in later chapters, new media has the potential to have more influence on its audience. Understanding how traditional media, such as novels, immerses readers into narrative worlds and how that immersion can affect audience interpretation will allow insight into how new media influences consumers. Equipped with more immersive and interactive methods, new media could be seen to have an even greater effect and influence on audiences when compared to traditional media in this way. By observing how new media adapts and intensifies methods of immersion seen in traditional media, it can be understood why it may be necessary to consider regulations on the messaging implemented within new media.

Victor Nell, neuropsychologist and author of *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure* (1988), has written extensively about the experience of reading and immersion. Immersion is described by Nell as a text’s ability to ‘absorb the reader completely and effortlessly and, on occasion, to change his or her state of consciousness’ (Nell, 1988, p.74). For the reader, and by extension the viewer or consumer of another form of text, it creates the sensation of being transported to a world outside of their native reality and into a narrative one. Immersion is an ‘essential part of reading enjoyment’ (Nell, 1988, p.216) as the process of transportation, which could be described as the experience of ‘cognitive, emotional, and imagery involvement in a narrative’ (Green et al, 2004, p.311), creates a sense of ‘sinking through the page into the world of the book’ (Nell, 1988, p.216). Without this sensation of becoming metaphysically invested, this immersive process might be ‘greatly impeded’ (Nell, 1988, p.216) suggesting that without immersion, a reader may become unable to fully engage and become ‘changed by the journey’ of reading (Gerrig, 1993, p10-



11). In this context, ‘change’ refers to the text’s ability to influence the reader and change their emotional state; for instance, by inducing fear, grief, or happiness.

The extent to which an audience is immersed within a narrative reality is dependent on the degree of critical distance they have from the source material. Critical distance, meaning ‘the distance readers effortlessly maintain between the narrative world and their own safety’ (Green et al, 2002, p17), alludes to the barrier between narrative and native worlds. Safety, in this context, refers to the native world or reality that the reader lives in. For example: the reader may be reading a horror novel and feel the fear of the main character as if they themselves were in the book, a sensation caused by their own immersion, but in their physical native world they are safe. They are not being chased by a killer; they are reading a book.

Despite the reader existing in the native world, their consumption of the narrative world may stay with them, creating the ‘change’ previously discussed. For example, the reader could hear a creaking floorboard in their house and feel afraid. They may associate the sound with an intruder due to watching horror films or reading a horror novel where creaking floorboards are followed by the characters being attacked by an intruder. This association is learnt by the brain through repeatedly witnessing media where a creaking floorboard results in an intruder. It is the result of the convention encoding purposely created by media producers that influences audiences to think this way.

### Encoding and Decoding

An individual consumer can interpret the meaning behind a piece of text, but the material is still produced by an author. The way in which a piece is framed is responsible for how it is received. Through dialogue, environmental description, stage directions, cinematography, and music, the audience is manipulated from the very start. The audience can only interpret meaning from material they are given. This means that audiences can only

interpret problematic meanings from the media if evidence for such interpretations is present in the media, otherwise there would not be enough supportive material for it to become the communal narrative. This will be crucial to consider when analysing the differences in the encoding and decoding of the same subject material in *After* and the *Dream SMP*. Using framing to push an idea, known as agenda setting, is less effective for those who have already made up their minds on a subject, the major impact being the ‘reinforcement of existing attitudes’ (Scheufele, 1999, p.105). Therefore, those who may not have strong opinions or views on a subject would be the audience more vulnerable to the creator’s influence. This may apply to the young demographic viewing new media as the content may be their first exposure to subjects such as interpersonal abuse, meaning they may have been unable to concretely form their attitudes and values towards the subject matter prior to consumption.

Producers framing their content so that the audience interprets the messaging as intended is described by cultural theorist Stuart Hall in 1980 as ‘encoding’ and ‘decoding’. Encoding refers to the message that is put in the content by those who make it, and decoding is the way in which the audience interprets said message. The concept of ‘meaning’, whether creating or finding it, is the core concept in this relationship. Hall proposes in *Culture, Media, and Language* (1980) that the process from idea to consumption is not ‘sender/message/receiver’ - to mean author/product/audience - but ‘production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction’ (Hall, 1980, p.117). For a television show, for example, this process would be a company creating a show (production), signing a contract for it to be broadcasted (circulation), a viewer watching the show (distribution/consumption), and then continuing to watch the show for as long as it airs, possibly even recommending it to others to watch (reproduction). Without each stage forming its own identifiable ‘meaning’ the process would not be able to progress to the sequential stage. In the production stage, a plotline in a TV show will follow narrative conventions to find its meaning such as a standard

romance story of boy meets girl, they fall in love, they live happily ever after. Following the conventional narrative devices of the romance genre would allow for the production companies and distributors to be able to identify that the TV show is a romance. This would then permit them to follow the story, understand it, and then possibly enjoy it and distribute it as they have found meaning in each stage. However, the people responsible for circulating the media must recognise not just meaning in the content but potential for ‘meaningful discourse’ (Hall, 1980, p.119); audiences will engage with it. If they do not believe that an audience will meaningfully engage and ‘meaningfully decode’ (Hall, 1980, p.119) the media, they will not spend the time and money to distribute it.

Unlike new media which allows real-time feedback from the audience, traditional media such as TV, film, and books do not get to witness audience feedback to their content outside of focus groups until it is distributed. Therefore, producers cannot be certain that meaningful decoding and discourse will occur. There is a lack of fluidity between the intended (encoding) and the interpreted (decoding) and producers cannot guarantee that an audience will engage with their content and interpret it the way they intended, known as the ‘dominant’ or ‘preferred’ decoding (Hall, 1980, p.123). This is why scripts and novels go through stages such as editing, and the process of encoding can become complex to construct a product that transmits the meaning they feel is correct through signposting to the audience how the producers want them to feel. Unlike creators of new media, producers within traditional media can draw on skills and knowledge such as knowing: ‘routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience and so on frame the constitution of the programme through this production structure’ (Hall, 1980, p.118). The production stage of media can involve many people with varying degrees of professional insight into how audiences react to stimulus, but the consumer is an individual. They are not in the

writer's room for a TV show, they do not have the author walking through their thought processes and intentions, they are given the carefully crafted codes, and they can interpret them in a multitude of ways.

Hall details in *Culture, Media, and Language* (1980) three types of consumers regarding interpreting codes: reading 'dominant-hegemonic' codes, reading 'negotiated' codes, and reading 'oppositional' codes.

### Dominant-Hegemonic

A consumer that takes a dominant-hegemonic position will take the 'connoted meaning' and '[decode] the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded' (Hall, 1980, p.126). This means that someone will take the dominant message the original creator intended as the correct and truthful interpretation and interpret it as such. 'Connotation' in the context of mass communication does not mean that something is determined by interpretation, nor does 'denotation' mean that something has been universally agreed as factual. Instead, these phrases are used to distinguish between a sign that is taken by its literal meaning (denotation) by 'any language community at any point in time' (Hall, 1980, p.122) or another associated meaning that can be inferred (connotation).

Denotative signs are universally recognised as reality without an author having to infer it themselves such as associating a sunny day with being warm. This can be achieved by using societal conventions as a denotative sign that has ideological value that is 'strongly fixed—because it has become so fully universal and natural' (Hall, 1980, p.122). The literal meanings have strong meanings because they are so naturalised, thus becoming a convention that authors can rely upon, but they are not set in stone and not above interpretation.

'Connotation' is used to refer to less fixed meanings that can be changed and moulded 'from instance to instance and therefore must depend on the intervention of codes' (Hall, 1980, p.122). Consumers will use the signs presented by the source material to support their

interpretation, whether that be the dominant one or otherwise, and use connotation as ‘the point where already coded signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional, more active ideological dimensions’ (Hall, 1980, p.123). Dominant-Hegemonic decoding is as close to direct and transparent communication between encoding and decoding as is possible. Consumer decodings align with the professional encodings implemented by producers in creating the media.

New media has a reduced level of critical distance between the producer and consumer which makes the relationship between encoder and decoder more fluid, leading to an increased likelihood of dominant-hegemonic decoding. The increased fluidity can allow for signs that would traditionally be denotative such as abusive behaviours in a character being perceived as negative to become more connotative and seen as a positive, if that is what the creator intends and encodes.

### Negotiated Decoding

Negotiated decoders may acknowledge and accept the professional encoding as legitimate but recognise that they can adapt the meanings to meet their own situational understandings, possibly more relevant to their lives and experiences. They lean into connotation rather than denotation. The framing of a situation can influence a reader into negotiated decoding. An example of this would be using ambiguous language around an abusive character, allowing the reader to decode differently than was intended by the creator by moulding the codes to suit their interpretation. This is what producers would refer to as a ‘misunderstanding’ and influences how TV shows and films are created as, although ambiguous endings can be intentional, producers would prefer for the majority of their audience to be dominant-hegemonically decoding. Amateurs such as the creators behind one of the chosen media, the *Dream SMP*, will not have the professional knowledge to truly understand the potential for their audience to ‘misinterpret’ the content. This lack of

understanding and research when dealing with subjects that are sensitive and potentially harmful to a young audience will be discussed in later chapters.

### Oppositional Decoding

If dominant-hegemonic decoding is fully accepting the dominant messaging of the source material, and negotiated decoding is accepting this message but applying one's own ideals and external thoughts, oppositional decoding is to completely change the meaning of the signs through changing the context. Not to be confused with not understanding the source material or not being intelligent enough to recognise signs, an oppositional decoder reads the code in a 'globally contradictive way' (Hall, 1980, p.127) with a completely different frame of reference. They can read the signs and understand them but change the naturalisation, the tendency for a sign to be taken 'as a given' as if it is a natural connection, of the codes entirely. This is done by the reader not interpreting them in the dominant or referred way as they do not sit at home in the context the reader is seeing them as. An example of this could be a reader consuming content that features a romantic pairing who end the narrative in a relationship. The reader may not decode that Person A and Person B are the romantic leads and view them as close friends and thus decode their interactions as platonic. They may instead decode Person A and Person C's interactions to be romantic regardless of the author's intentions and view all of their interactions as flirtatious, only to be left shocked when they do not conclude the narrative together. The oppositional decoder is not wrong, they simply view the material using a different frame of reference.

### Encoding, Decoding, and Their Effect on Producers

The chance that audiences could on one end of the spectrum completely subscribe to the intended message and on the other interpret the media in the complete opposite way influences how the producers structure the media, eager to 'straighten out the kinks in the communication chain' (Hall, 1980, p.124). It gives them the opportunity to assess what truly

matters to them in terms of the material in its purest form. They must consider whether they want to sacrifice their vision to guide the consumer more forcefully to the dominant meaning or have the material as they always intended and risk more people ‘misinterpreting’ it. This is a premise that has been the cause of debate between mass communication theorists: ‘how can we tell if a particular reading or interpretation is valid?’ (Bennett and Royle, 2004, p.10).

Reading in the context of mass communication research is defined as ‘not only the capacity to identify and decode a certain number of signs, but also the subjective capacity to put them into a creative relation between themselves and with other signs: a capacity which is, by itself, the condition for a complete awareness of one’s total environment’ (Hall, 1980, p.124). Simply put, ‘reading’ is to consume and extract meaning from a piece of content.

Critical theorists argue about whether the text or the reader is the more important entity in the relationship, and if one can exist without the other. ‘New criticism’ theorists such as Cleanth Brooks, W.K. Wimsatt, and Monroe Beardsley focus on the actual form - words on the page - rather than other factors such as the ‘life of the author and his or her intentions, or the historical and ideological context in which the text was produced’ (Bennett and Royle, 2004, p.11). Whilst new critics acknowledge that these factors add an interesting layer of context to the text, they consider literary texts as self-sufficient and self-contained. According to new critics, texts should be primarily viewed for what they are rather than what they could be when put through the lens of different social and environmental factors. They also consider audience reaction and interpretation of text to be irrelevant, referring to this as the ‘affective fallacy’ (Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1949, n.p). This is a literary criticism used to refer to the supposed error of judging or evaluating a text based on its emotional effects on a reader. To new critics, including something as subjective as emotional effect in primary analysis is to distract and confuse the ‘true’ meaning of the text and has produced ‘very little actual criticism’ (Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1949, p.44). This is to mean that any analysis

framed upon ‘affective, psychology, the laws of emotion’ (Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1949, p.38) is deemed unworthy and unserious when placed against ‘genuine’ judgement of the contents of the texts and should therefore be held in disesteem.

However, in the context of potential effect on the reader, it may be important to consider sacrificing the creator’s vision to protect the reader from decoding messaging that could be harmful. This is especially true when speaking about something as influential as new media where creators are encouraged to exercise their artistic freedom. In contrast to these critical theorists, reader-response criticism, championed by critics and theorists such as Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish and Michael Riffaterre, believes that the study of literature ‘should concern not only the actual text but also, in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text’ (Iser, 1995, p. 106). New critics would argue that the meaning of a text is ‘extremely clear and direct’ (Bennett and Royle, 2004. p.12) but reader-response critics would reply, ‘to whom?’ (Bennett and Royle, 2004, p.12). For example, the original writings of The Bible would only be clear and direct in meaning to not only someone fluent in Latin but also living at time of writing to understand the historical idiosyncrasies within. A piece of text may only be ‘clear’ to those familiar to it. Even then it is difficult to be certain that the analyser is not falling victim to the false-consensus effect: the tendency to overestimate the extent to which others think the same way we do and hold the same beliefs and attitudes. To believe that the ‘meaning’ of the text is obvious is to fall into individuating and generalising one’s own personal interpretation and opinion of the text as the ‘right’ one.

Theorists Norman Holland and David Bleich were interested in investigating ways in which individuals respond to texts through relating their own lives and experiences, believing that new critics analysing texts ‘usually pretend that they did not experience it in a direct emotional way’ (Bleich, 1978, p.13) and instead focus solely on the ‘facts’ of the text. This is known as ‘subjective criticism’ or ‘personal criticism’ (Bleich, 1978, n.p). Reading is a



personal experience affected and influenced by environmental and social factors such as being taught - or not taught - to analyse texts through looking for conventional codes. If someone has not been taught conventional codes such as that of pathetic fallacy, where rain after two characters have an argument becomes an inference to the characters feeling upset or angry, they may not make the connection that the weather represents the heightened emotion. Similarly, Holland notes that 'it is from such deep and fearful roots of our most personal experience that literature gets its power and drive' (Holland, 1968, p.30), meaning that narratives can become more personal and effective for a reader when they can find connections within it to their own lives. If a character possesses characteristics that the reader identifies with and relates to such as going through similar experiences or having similar personality traits, they may project themselves onto these characters and react to events accordingly.

Reader-response and new criticism focus on either the work or the reader as the more dominant role in the relationship between the producer and consumer. Seeing these entities as separate with little fluid connection only worsens the lack of communication between the encoding and decoding, allowing misunderstandings to be more apparent. Wolfgang Iser suggests that one is not more important than the other as 'exclusive concentration on either the author's techniques or the reader's psychology will tell us little about the reading process itself' (1995, p.107). A producer makes a piece of work, possibly for themselves, but also as an offering for an audience. Acknowledging that an author will have their own intentions of meaning when creating which can be vital to consider within analysis. In spite of this, it is also worthwhile to consider the idea that Delilia Da Sousa Correa and W.R. Owens introduced in their book *The Handbook to Literary Research* (2009): 'why read the text ourselves if its meaning for us, today, is to be set aside in favour of what the author originally

meant?’ (p.93). A consumer can read and accept the primary meaning but still love the work enough to be emotionally affected by it and interpret it to fit their own lives.

Creators of traditional media may not feel the need to have concern for their audiences and their interpretations due to the feedback only coming after the product is released. Instead, they may follow the ideals of new critics and focus primarily on the story that they want to tell and hope that their encoding is effective enough that the audience understand their intended meaning. This principle does not necessarily apply to new media creators. Modern day creators in the age of social media who create content through mediums such as fanfiction and live-streaming receive instant feedback on their product; are also able to communicate directly with the audience that is interpreting their work and adapt it to make the dominant message more decodable. Whilst disruption may still happen, and the audience will still find individual meaning - the imbalance of power and communication between producer and consumer is reduced. These factors may help the creator curate a more seamless relationship between encoding and decoding, but it also may give them more responsibility. This may make it more sensible of them to sacrifice their creative vision in favour of protecting their audience. The audience having a more of a role in the creative process creates a weaker distinction between the native and narrative world for the audience. For works that tackle sensitive topics such as interpersonal abuse, it is a question of whether the author should stay true to their original vision and hope that they have encoded enough signposts to believe that audiences will not decode a pro-abuse message. If creator’s lack of consideration for the audience's interpretation results in young consumers internalising generally harmful moral principles, the content they create may be considered damaging. Due to this, the focus may have to shift from equal consideration between producer and consumer to an emphasis on interpretation over intent when it comes to sensitive topics and their effect on young audiences.

### Intensity of Immersion and Internalising Messaging

The potential for how seriously consumers may internalise the decodings of the media they witness would be dependent on how immersed they are in it. This is especially important when discussing new media as it is reliant on its audience dedicating a significant amount of time into consuming the media. The time demand allows them to become absorbed into the narrative world and thus increases the effect the media's encoding may have on them. This is due to the critical distance between native and narrative worlds decreasing as the immersion increases, giving the narrative world more and more importance, and influence, on the consumer's native world. Literary scholar Marie-Laure Ryan developed a model for explaining the process of a reader becoming increasingly immersed, which she referred to as the Four Degrees of Absorption (2001, n.p).

#### Stage One: Concentration

The first stage of absorption is Concentration, described as 'the type of attention devoted to difficult, non-immersive works' (Ryan, 2001, p.98), which explains the experience of having no emotional investment, temporary or long-term, in text. The reader is not engaged with the media because no transportation occurs. Mental transportation is best explained through Gerrig's analogy of physical transportation:

Someone (the traveller) is transported, by some means of transportation, as a result of performing certain actions. The traveller goes some distance from his or her world of origin, which makes some aspects of the world of origin inaccessible. The traveller returns to the world of origin, somewhat changed by the journey.

(1993, p.10–11).

Simply stated: transportation is the mental and emotional process an audience will go through to insert themselves in the fictional world they are experiencing. The device of having a main or 'point of view' character makes this experience easier for the consumer. This is made even

easier if the text is written in first person as the use of pronouns such as 'I' and 'my' allows the audience to transport themselves more effortlessly into the narrative world and identify with the main character.

Transportation begins through three processes: 'attention, imagery, feelings' (Green et al, 2004, p.312). Feelings are important as, in fiction, transportation is primarily achieved through the reader initially becoming emotionally invested in one or more characters. Arthur Raney developed an integrated theory of enjoyment pertaining to emotional connection with fictional characters, suggesting that both 'affective and cognitive factors influence individuals' evaluation of media' (Green et al, 2004, p.311). The affective factors referred to here relate to the 'individuals' identification with and empathy toward fictional characters' (Green et al, 2004, p.311), whilst the cognitive factors concern 'their assessment of the actions of the characters and the themes inherent to the messages of a narrative' (Green et al, 2004, p.311). Though some stories may be plot-dependent rather than character-led, Nell describes how important this attachment to characters is to initial interest in the work: the crucial detail that stops the reader from putting down the book for good. He illustrates this by talking about his admiration for Tolkien: 'Hobbits become real to us not because we see them clearly but because we know where they live, how they speak, and what they do' (Nell, 1988, p.217-18). These processes: paying attention to the text, imagining the world around the reader, and becoming emotionally invested in the characters and therefore the world, are actions that must be performed for the reader to be transported from the native to the narrative world. To care about a narrative world, the audience must first become invested in the people that inhabit it. If a reader despises a character, they are still emotionally invested in them enough to have a reaction to them whereas if they were not paying attention and consuming passively, they are more likely be indifferent towards their story.

If a reader is in the Concentration stage of absorption, they will not be paying attention to the degree needed to be transported as they are 'highly vulnerable to the distracting stimuli of external reality' (Ryan, 2001, p.98). Due to the lack of emotional investment, the Concentration stage represents a complete lack of immersion. This absence of emotional investment and immersion makes it unlikely that a consumer with this mindset would internalise potentially harmful messages encoded within the media unless the messaging was being explicitly stated. Dominant-Hegemonic decoding would be the expected type of decoding of this media due to the absence of emotional investment, resulting in the information likely being taken at face-value. Even if the encoding was strictly harmful, without considerable absorption and immersion, the message would be unlikely to have a lasting effect and therefore the relationship between consumer and producer at this level is not concerning.

#### Stage Two: Imaginative Involvement

The next degree of absorption is Imaginative Involvement. Colloquially, this is a 'one foot in, one foot out' way of consuming media, known as a 'split-subject' attitude' (Ryan, 2001, p.98) or split-loyalty. The reader is transported 'into the textual world but remains able to contemplate it with aesthetic or epistemological detachment' (Ryan, 2001, p.98). This means that, despite being emotionally involved, the reader still maintains a critical outlook on the text which does not allow them to be fully immersed. The immersion is temporary but leaves no lasting impression as the audience is not truly transported due to their critical outlook; their grasp on native reality inhibits them from complying with the textual authority.

Textual authority refers to the 'fictional truths' of the narrative that are established by the author and 'are unassailable' (Ryan, 2001, p.104). If the book describes a sky made from lava, then the sky is made of lava and this 'fact' is accepted as the absolute truth. This

‘willing suspension of disbelief’, coined by poet and philosopher Samuel Coleridge in 1817, is best described by Kendall Walton in *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Art* (1990). Walton discusses how children play together using these fictional truths, referencing a scenario when a rule within a game could be that any tree stump represents a bear and players should react accordingly, perhaps even making them ‘jump in fright’ (1990, p.24). Logically, a tree stump is not a bear, nor could the sky ever be made from lava, but in this fictional world it is seen as an accepted fact and in order to be immersed the reader must accept this as fact or be lost in the cycle of re-entering, unable to be transported. Re-entering occurs when the reader is unable to avoid pulling themselves out of the narrative world to the native one to criticise textual authority; this means they must continuously re-enter the narrative world, resetting the process of immersion once more and keeping their loyalty between the worlds split. This is likened to ‘dreaming when you know you are dreaming’ (Nell, 1988, p.212). If the spectator of a play constantly reminds themselves that they are watching a play, they will be unable to focus all their attention on the play and its fictional truths, interrupting and therefore limiting their immersion in the fictional reality the actors and writer are creating. Questioning textual authority limits transportation and increases critical distance, as the reader is using native world rules of logic to contradict the rules of the narrative world instead of accepting them as fact. Immersion is somewhat present but not entirely effective as ‘the story lives entirely in the present, and when the reading is completed, it leaves no residue in memory’ (Ryan, 2001, p.97). For the time they are reading, they are invested and paying attention, but once they have finished the media they return to their native reality without any lasting impression.

Being interested but not engaged when consuming text is what Henry Jenkins, a media scholar, would describe as ‘casual’ engagement. Jenkins splits the audiences into three categories: ‘zappers, casuals, and loyals’ (Jenkins, 2006a, p.74). Zappers will flick through

channels carelessly without engaging; casuals will enjoy a piece of media but not dedicate time to actively keep pace with it, enjoying the narrative without in-depth analysis. In contrast, loyalists will become invested and schedule time to consume the content, dedicating 'more of their social time talking about [it]; and they are more likely to pursue content across media channels' (Jenkins, 2006a, p.74).

Viewers in this stage of absorption are invested in the media and enjoying it but have not made the leap to actively making it a part of their life and, by extension, their sense of self like a loyal may feel inclined to do. They are still spending most of their time in the native reality and therefore have the capacity to actively critique and decode the media they are watching, meaning they may break their immersion if something they disagree with occurs in the media, note that they disagree, and then be forced to re-enter. In terms of influencing the consumer with potentially harmful messages, those who are in the Imaginative Investment stage of absorption experience no lasting change as a result of the media. It is likely that they would forget any harmful decodings and not internalise them, making concern for the audience minimal.

### Stage Three: Entrancement

Loyalists, who actively take the time to consume the content they enjoy, would fall under the third degree of absorption: Entrancement. Grounded in pleasure, the consumer becomes so 'completely caught up in the textual world that she loses sight of anything external to it' (Ryan, 2001, p.98). Unlike with the Concentration stage, external forces do not serve as a distraction, the reader vigorously and insatiably consumes the content. However, the individual is still primarily present in their native reality. The reader is epistemologically and emotionally invested, but they know that there is no danger and there is 'nothing to fear, because the textual world is not reality' (Ryan, 2001, p.98). The immersion remains interesting to the reader, but their primary concern is pleasure.

Loyals, as fans who dedicate considerable time and mental capacity to a piece of media, will also be likely to talk about it with others, prolonging the impact of the media. The desire to talk about the media with other people because of being both a loyal and in the Entrancement stage, can encourage a fan to become part of what is known as a 'fandom'. A fandom is an online space where fans 'make explicit what we all do implicitly' (Booth, 2017, p.49); i.e., it makes the experience of consuming content a group activity rather than an individual one.

Consumption of content becoming a communal activity rather than a private one helps to influence the participants who are already being impacted by the encoding due to their desire to continually immerse themselves. Actively consuming and repeatedly watching or reading the content reinforces the messaging of the content (Sellers et al, 2014; Jensen, 2015). If harmful content is revisited years later, a consumer may be able to identify the signs and recontextualise the media but re-consuming it repeatedly in the short-term not only extends the immersion but reinforces the messaging. This is only increased when discussing the media with other people who are also experiencing this, keeping the audience immersed by encouraging them to constantly re-enter the narrative world and leaving them vulnerable to not only internalising potential harmful messages, but aiding others in doing the same. This will have an effect as they are actively watching, re-watching, and talking with people who will only reinforce the message. The chosen texts, *After* and the *Dream SMP*, are both works that have attracted large fandoms to surround it, encouraging consumers to progress into at least the third stage of absorption, therefore increasing the potential effects of encoding on its audience due to heightened immersion.

#### Stage Four: Addiction

The final stage of absorption, where critical distance ceases to exist, is akin to addiction. Unlike the previous stages, addictive absorption has more than one connotation. It



can refer to a hasty form of escapism where 'readers are "'voracious" consumers of books; they devour the text without taking the time to savour it' (Ryan, 2001, p.97). The reader devours the text too quickly to be transported or 'find a home in the textual world' (Ryan, 2001, p.98) and there is little to no room to form an emotional connection with the material, resulting in little to no change within the reader by the end of it and therefore no real and lasting effect can happen.

The second definition of the Addiction stage of absorption is where the critical distance between native and narrative realities becomes non-existent. It is the 'loss of the capacity to distinguish textual worlds, especially those of fiction, from the actual world' (Ryan, 2001, p.99). Nell describes these types of readers not as loyal, but lucid readers. Lucid reading is a sensation of the reader feeling as if they have physically become part of the world as if they themselves are a character in the book. It is feeling as though 'you're not reading any more, you're not reading words, you're not reading sentences, it's as if you are completely living inside the situation' (Nell, 1988, p.290). Lucid readers read with 'absolute effortlessness with dreaming and daydreaming' (Nell, 1988, p.201), as if the real world ceases to exist for as long as they are reading. It is described by Microsoft developer Bill Hill in his influential paper *The Magic of Reading* as an 'extreme case of reading' (1999, p.17) where reading becomes as automatic and necessary as breathing, as the 'readers can immerse themselves in [the text] for hours, often ignoring alternative activities such as eating or sleeping' (Hill, 1999, p.17). This feeling of being completely lost in a book, completely without distraction, completely living within the narrative world whilst engaged in it, reduces the critical distance as immersion increases.

The danger of the narrative world is real to the consumer and the emotional response triggered by the events is not one of empathy or immersion, but a sense that this is their reality, and the events are real. Once the text is put down there is no re-entry into the native

world, as there is no critical distance grounding the reader to it. The story does not stop when the reader puts the book down, the text stays with them and they are still immersed, almost as though they are walking around their real lives whilst mentally still in the narrative world. There is no split-loyalty, and both forms of reality are of equal importance. The narrative reality becomes the native reality, and Victor Nell began to see the issue with this form of consumption, noting that 'to imagine in great detail and vividly is a kind of madness' (Nell, 1988, p.246).

Consumers that are within the second type of Addiction blur the lines between native and narrative so consistently that, mentally, they are constantly within the narrative world and therefore being affected by the messaging within it. As with Entrancement, those addicted will be highly vulnerable and likely to be decoding the media dominant-hegemonically. This is because they are not exiting the narrative world to think critically about the content they are consuming. Much like with the Entrancement stage, fandoms curate an environment where fans are constantly thinking and discussing the content, meaning re-entering the narrative world is not necessary: they are already cognitively engaging with it consistently. Therefore, fans within the final two stages of absorption can be more likely to ingest and internalise encodings, an experience that will only intensify when consuming new media where the distinction between native and narrative worlds becomes even more unclear.

## Chapter Two: New Media and Interactivity

Whilst Victor Nell's 1988 research provides the foundational knowledge of how the reader engages in the text they read, his work centres on reading alone. Tom Wolfe, author of the manifesto *The New Journalism* (1973), believes that books are superior to any other form of media as 'no film maker' has ever 'brought the audience inside the mind' (p.64) of character, which is 'something that even bad novelists are able to accomplish as a matter of routine' (Wolfe, 1973, p.64). The core principles of immersion, transportation, and re-entering are still relevant and applicable to different kinds of media; new media is arguably more immersive than traditional written media. This is due to the increased interactivity within the media, meaning the process of one action influencing another. Through the introduction of interactivity within new media and demonstrating how each form of new media becomes more interactive, these core principles can be seen to intensify immersion as well as decrease the critical distance between producer and consumer. The loss of distinct barriers in the relationship through interactivity and reliance on direct, real-time communication between audience and creator in more interactive new media can be suggested to increase the potential for encoding to be influential on audiences.

Interactivity allows the audience to have a feeling of control over their consumption of media. In traditional media, such as reading a book or watching a film, the consumer can only witness what has already been created and cannot change or influence it as it has already been finalised and published. New media, such as video games, allows for the player to feel as though they have the power to influence the story. An example of this would be in the *TellTale* (2004-2018) gaming franchise where the player can choose between several dialogue options which influences how other characters view the player depending on what option they choose. This interactivity reduces the critical distance between producer and consumer by having the consumer actively participate in creating the storyline and therefore

temporarily experience the feeling of being the producer. The audience not being merely a passenger on the journey of the narrative, but given the option to help drive it, lessens the barrier between creator and consumer. This makes the native and narrative worlds exist less as unique and distinct universes, and more as two worlds intertwined with each other. If the consumer is making decisions for the narrative world, such as which dialogue option to choose, whilst still mentally being in the native world, then the narrative world and native world exist in the same space whilst the consumer is absorbed in the media. The blurring of the lines can be intensely immersive as the consumer operates within both the native and narrative worlds simultaneously. As well as this, obscuring the distinction between the native and narrative worlds makes it easier for the consumer to progress into the Addiction stage of absorption due to the lack of strict boundaries. This is different to the idea of split-loyalty explored in the previous chapter when discussing the Imaginative Involvement stage of absorption. Split-loyalty involves repeatedly re-entering the narrative world due to either distraction from external forces or deliberate breaks in transportation due to unwillingness to immerse oneself, which differs from the consumer experiencing both the native and narrative worlds at the same time.

Immersion in media aids the consumer in feeling emotionally invested and psychologically transported from the native world to the narrative one. The more immersive the experience is, the more powerful and consuming the transportation will be as external distractions will be less effective. As new media has developed, advancements in technology have occurred, creating media that is increasingly interactive as the narrative world can be made to feel even more like the native one.

In the previous chapter, the relationship between encoding, decoding and how audiences can be influenced through this process depending on the intensity of the critical distance was explored. As interactivity in media decreases critical distance between a media's

audience and its creator, it increases the immersion and therefore the likelihood of the audience interpreting the encoded messaging within the media through a dominant-hegemonic lens. This is important as the highlighted texts, *After* and the *Dream SMP*, are highly dependent on interactivity: *After* allows its readers to give feedback chapter-by-chapter to influence the story and the *Dream SMP* was performed live and featured audience participation. The effect of decreasing critical distance can be observed through examining the evolution of interactive media and the progression from investment and concentration to true immersion through increased interactivity. This demonstrates how the mediums of the chosen texts, fanfiction and live-streaming, create the most immersive and influential form of media and therefore may benefit from more specific moderation.

#### Choose-Your-Own-Adventure

The ‘split-loyalty’, introduced in the Imaginative Involvement stage of absorption, is present in an example of non-digital media form of ‘participatory interactivity’ (Ryan, 2001, p.283): ‘Choose-Your-Own-Adventure’ books. Popularised by Bantam Book’s *Choose Your Own Adventure* (1979-1999) gamebook series, the story is written from a second-person point of view, making the reader envision themselves as main character and involving them in the narrative, via direct address. In the stories, the reader is given different multiple-choice options, each leading to a different turn in the story. The order in which they are picked gives a completely different journey and ending, allowing for there to be multiple stories within one book and different experiences nearly every time the reader engages with it. The consumer being given an aspect of control over the narrative not only allows them to experience the illusion of creative control, but it also lessens the distance between the author and the consumer. This is because the reader is under the impression that they have control over the story's narrative. During the decision-making, the reader must break any true immersion they may have experienced to think about each of the choices and their

consequences. This causes the consumer to have to constantly re-enter the narrative world as they must break from it to contemplate their next step. The reader never fully transports into the narrative world because there is no fixed story. The story being written in second-person involves the reader as the main character and forces them to participate as long as they wish to read it. The second-person 'you' is personal and could be immersive due to its direct address if it did not demand that the reader contextualises the narrative through their own thought process and life and not the 'character's'. Positioning the reader as the main character in the book means that there is no main character for the reader to project onto that exists in the narrative world. This keeps the reader within the native world and hinders their transportation and immersion. Characters within books and stories serve as 'mostly empty canvas' (Gass, 1970, p.45) for the consumer to project onto, especially when they mimic their real-life interactions. Where first-person address allows the reader to read the character's thoughts as if they are their own, second-person perspective acts as a narrator which creates further distance between the reader and the text by not allowing for this projection which is a key element in emotional investment. This form of interactive media may be engaging but the lack of transportation results in little effective immersion and so any negative encodings that would be present in this media may not be internalised. It is unlikely that the reader would transcend past the Imaginative Involvement stage of absorption.

### Video Games

Video games, played with a console such as a computer or PlayStation, often force either a third- or first-person perspective onto the player. A third-person perspective presents the player with an in-game avatar that the player observes and controls. First-person positions the player as the avatar so they view the world through the avatar's eyes as if they were their own. The more immersive, and increasingly popular, format of the two is the latter as the 'user is implicitly inscribed in the game-world through the perspective of the display' (Ryan,

2001, p.309). From a first-person player's perspective, an enemy is charging at them directly rather than at an avatar they are controlling. The sensation is comparable to the movie-goers interviewed by J.R. Hilgard on their horror film experience: 'I'm not one of them but I'm trapped with them, and I can feel the fright they feel' (cited in Ryan, 2001, p.97-98). In the horror game *Outlast* (Red Barrels, 2013), for example, the player feels the real emotion of being chased because the sound design creates tension, and they receive the consequences of failing their task by being graphically killed in-game. The player does not feel fear of death as they are still in the native world, but the adrenaline of being in danger, of being chased, is real. The cognitive distance between the consumer's acknowledgement of the 'narrative world and their own safety' (Green et al, 2002, p.17) is lessened as they are immersed in the media. Similar to the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, the player appears to become the main character, but in actuality, they only control the main character. In third-person gameplay, the player is not playing themselves within a fictional world, rather, they are observing the avatar from above as though following them with a camera and deciding their actions as a separate person. As the player moves around the environment, the environment adapts and changes, moving as though it would in the real world, making the world thematically and aesthetically immersive.

Ryan notes that not all games and in-game 'worlds' are thematically immersive. There is a distinction between 'worlds' as a 'set of rules and tokens' (Ryan, 2001, p.307) and worlds such as an imaginary space, a narrative reality. In chess, there is no fictional world, only the one that the player is in, aware they are playing a game especially against someone. Whilst not narratively transported, the player experiences 'intellectual and emotional absorption' (Ryan, 2001, p.307), likely due to the tension of playing a game such as chess. There is no imagination involved in a board game, but there is investment as each player competes to win.

The second form of in-game world, involving an imaginary space, is more relevant to video games. Before graphics and sound-design were as advanced as they are now, the computer games that were popular were games such as *Tetris* (1984), which lacked realistic graphics or story and so focused on ‘purely textual’ (Ryan, 2001, p.308) means to create an immersive experience. Textually-focused immersion relied on the player solving a puzzle, or taking a quiz, or other small tasks that the computer would find simple to analyse and render. However, as graphics and sound design and technology in general have advanced, video games have placed ‘increased emphasis on the sensorial representation of the game-world’ (Ryan, 2001, p.308) as they seek to make the in-game world as close a representation of the native world as is possible.

The emphasis on creating atmospheres that realistically recreate the player’s native reality through visual and sound design allow for the process of transportation to be made easier due less effort being needed to imagine the narrative world. However, as advancements in technology make games more aesthetically realistic, less emphasis on intrinsic interactivity is necessary to achieve immersion from the player. ‘Game worlds have objective existence’ (Aarseth, 2012, p.131): even if there is no real investment, the game still exists as a physical object and not solely inside somebody’s mind. The player is still in the narrative world when playing the game, moving and acting within the environment. A viewer actively concentrating on a TV series will be theorising about how the pieces of the narrative will join and complete the story and be perceptive to foreshadowing. A player of a video game, especially an interactive video game, who is actively concentrating will pay close attention to the media and consider how the actions they take affect the story and will be completing the tasks necessary to further their progression. Even when playing games that are not narrative-focused, such as rhythm games where the player must press the correct buttons on their console in the right order, the player can concentrate on trying to complete the levels by



brainstorming strategies to perform the sequences. In contrast to this, a consumer who is passively concentrating will not be cognitively engaged and allow the media to happen around them. A viewer may have a TV show on in the background and not be paying attention, a player may be walking around the game-world not completing any task and simply existing within the fictional universe. Active concentration refers to the media being a priority in the consumer's mind whereas a consumer passively concentrating will see the media as background noise. Both mindsets involve consumption as the media is still happening, a player who does nothing but walk around the in-game environment is still playing and interacting with the game, and therefore a level of immersion is present. The difference in immersion is that those who are actively concentrating may be more susceptible to emotional investment as they are interacting more intensely and are therefore more cognitively engaged, which can lead to a deeper sense of immersion.

The split-loyalty of the 'Choose-Your-Own-Adventure' format such as *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2011) and traditional task-based games such as *Outlast* have different degrees of critical distance involved but are both examples of the illusion of creative control in interactive media. The audience has no influence on the content, and they are just the 'puppets of the author' (Ryan, 2001, p.284). *The Stanley Parable* is a game where the narrative is dependent on the second-to-second choices by the player and the main objective is to try and break the game by ignoring the narrator's instructions and doing whatever the player wants. Even in a game where the premise *is* that the player has free will, no matter how many choices the player is given or how many routes they take, the player can only find themselves in scenarios that have been coded by Galactic Cafe. The player has no more control than a player of *Outlast* where, whilst the graphics are more realistic than *The Stanley Parable*, if the developer does not want the player to steer from their task, rooms are blocked off or enemies chase them. The player can only perform actions that the developer allows, no

more no less. The community has no power, no influence, and no control over the media they consume and enjoy, no matter what stage of absorption they experience. For this type of media, there is investment and interactivity but the critical distance between consumer and creator is still intact and distinct.

### Virtual Reality

The most extreme extent of immersion and consuming sensory experience that video games are currently capable of is virtual reality (VR). This is the 'imaginary place' that a user is presented with when logging onto the internet: 'virtual friends, virtual sex, virtual universities, virtual tours of virtual cities' (Ryan, 2001, p.25). VR in reference to gaming is where the player experiences the sensation of being in the media they consume as they are inserted into it through equipment they wear, such as a headset covering their eyes. VR heightens cognitive transportation into the narrative world as the simulation makes it seem as though the player has physically and legitimately entered the fictional world, similar to the idea of the narrative world becoming the native one. However, this is not true. Even if the player's entire view through the headset is the fictional world, outside of the headset they will still be in their living room. Cognitively and visually, they are in the narrative world and immersed, but physically they are in the native one.

The player does not just represent the main character in a sense of projecting or making decisions, they become the avatar: when the player moves their head, the avatar does and the environment and sound design changes accordingly. Less reliance is placed on the player's ability and willingness to imagine the narrative world as it is a physical actualisation of the game-world. Whilst it is not real, it feels as though it is. The emotions that consumers experience with other forms of media are real, the difference is that VR makes those feelings more palpable. A reader may feel the fear a character experiences in a tense moment and those emotions are real. However, in the overwhelming immersion of VR where the player

feels as though they actually are in the fictional world, VR can make the consumer feel as though they themselves are in danger and forget the safety of their native world. VR is an example of 'transparent immediacy' where the user is intended to 'forget the presence of the medium' (Bolter and Grusin, 2000, p.272-273). The player is intended to feel as though they are not playing a game, but that the game is their reality. Their entire reality is the virtual reality for the duration of time they wear the headset, the physical removal of the headset being the only way to escape the simulation. French sociologist Jean Baudrillard details the concept of a simulation as something that 'threatens the difference between the "true" and the "false," the "real" and the "imaginary"' (Baudrillard, 1983, p.3). Simulation is not faking an experience or lying and 'simulating is not pretending' (Baudrillard, 1983, p.3), much as in how VR, the player is not being chased but they do experience the physical, emotional, and cognitive sensation of being chased. VR is a simulation of reality, a complete virtual world, not a false, narrative world.

The safety associated with playing video games, meaning the knowledge that no matter what happens, it is not real, is somewhat removed when playing in VR. The player must move around their own environment in order to move in the game-world, which puts them at real risk of actually hurting themselves. This awareness of danger may cause a distraction, and therefore a break in immersion, but the necessity of native world movement is the key to the experience. A player in a horror VR game, for example, would have to physically move to run away from an enemy and looking behind them would reveal their pursuer. Physical and visual confrontation of a chase encourages feelings of genuine fear. This is because everything in the player's vision is a part of the game-world as opposed to a normal video game being confined to a desktop screen: giving the player nowhere to hide. The only way to stop this fear would be removing the headset, similar to forcefully waking up from a nightmare. However, the video game scenario is more immersive as dreaming is

passive engagement (whilst lucid dreaming exists, most dreaming is unconscious and passive) and playing is active engagement. The immersion of VR can be terrifying and the interactivity essential, but there is no creative control. The player can still only experience what has been coded for them.

The critical distance between consumer and the media is almost completely diminished in VR as the player, in a sense, is physically in the media through their vision in the headset as they see themselves in the game-world. Even though the player is physically grounded in the native world, they must mentally remove the headset to stop seeing the in-game world and then re-enter by putting it back on. However, the critical distance in the sense of creative control is still there, as it is in video games in general. It can be lessened through altering the code within a game to change the game slightly, a trend particularly popular within the sandbox video game *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011) which is the medium where the *Dream SMP* is set. Even in the case of changing the code of a game to make it something else, the coder can only change what the game allows it to. In *Minecraft* players can do almost anything they can think of, including making a working calculator within the game (Connected Camps, 2016), but they are still limited by the game's mechanics. Players cannot actually change the game and the player is like a puppet on a string who can only experience the finished product.

### ARG

Consumers of most new media, like traditional media, only get to experience the final product, as is the relationship between producer and consumer. Different to this is the experience of a player involved in an Alternate Reality Game or ARG: an interactive game based in reality but utilises transmedia to tell a story where 'the actions and discoveries of the player or players as a whole drive the plot forward' (Szulborski, 2005, p.10). Rather than the game being constricted to a singular piece of media, it is a treasure hunt through several; the

creator leaving clues that need to be followed and decoded for the players to discover the solution through their collective hard work. Producers create the media, but the interactivity creates the shared experience as without people to participate, there would be no game to play. ARGs are ‘co-created by players with every move that is made’ (Garcia and Niemeyer, 2017, p.1) as the story evolves through each decision the players make. The media is not a finished product given to the masses, but an ongoing project that the consumers are allowed to aid in the production of. The players are given clues through other forms of media, such as ‘websites, e-mail messages, videos, Internet blogs, phone calls, and even real-world interactions’ (Szulborski, 2005, p.13). As well as this they are also given clues through intertextuality, meaning two or more texts connecting through each other. Players can follow breadcrumbs to other texts through clues such as a website referencing a poem, leading them to the next clue hidden in that poem. Here, mediated means that communication is done online and not face-to-face.

Whilst other forms of interactive media seek to accomplish transparent mediacy, ARGs aim for hypermediacy: awareness of the medium whilst participating in it. There is no illusion of control, and the players are aware that they are completing the tasks the designers, known as ‘puppetmasters’ by player communities, lay out for them. The puppetmaster cannot be beaten; the player can only complete the tasks that have been set. The immersion does not come from a loss of reality or transportation into a fictional, narrative world as the ARG exists in reality but as a ‘temporary world within the ordinary world’ (Booth, 2017, p.150). The players must actively participate to keep the narrative moving forward and often do so in groups, making it a community effort.

Paul Booth notes in an interview with Henry Jenkins, that in his analysis of ARGs he is often asked “’why would someone invest so much time, for free, on a game’?” (Jenkins, 2010, n.p). Booth explains that this is a ‘commodity way of looking at ARGs’ (Jenkins, 2010,

n.p) where the consumer is seen to be wasting their time unless they are being paid for their work. This hard work born of passion is a part of what Booth calls a ‘digi-gratis economy’ (Jenkins, 2010, n.p). To summarise, a digi-gratis economy is a relationship between producer and consumer that not fuelled by desire for financial gain. By viewing the content produced as a gift, something made and given to producer and community alike for free to be enjoyed, then it is clearer that the audience dedicating time to participate is not wasting their own time, but ‘using their time and energy to respond to the pleasures they experience in the game’ (Jenkins, 2010, n.p). Fans consuming, interacting with, and creating content on the basis of enjoyment is a concept that will be explained later in the chapter.

The hard-work it takes to crack the code of ARGs is part of the fun as it brings a sense of accomplishment and working towards a goal with people with a shared interest is part of the enjoyment. For example, a portion of YouTuber Wilbur Soot’s ARG was solved by fans who painstakingly decoded the morse code left in the description of a YouTube video until they found a link to a PNG, seen in one of YouTuber JackSucksAtLife’s videos on the ARG, called ‘the strangest Wilbur video so far’ (2019, n.p). The ARG enticed hundreds of people to join together to work towards solving several clues and, despite the ARG never being solved, an entire community formed around it, intent on cracking the code. Solving ARGs can be hard-work and require hours of dedication, but that is what makes it so immersive. This is due to the sunk cost fallacy, which is an economic principle of continuing ‘an action because of our past decisions (time, money, resources) rather than a rational choice of what will maximise our utility at this present time’ (Economics Help, 2020, n.p). Players of ARGs, such as the ‘cloudmakers’ that participated in the first ARG known as *The Beast* (Microsoft, 2001, n.p), dedicated so much of their time to solving the mystery that they ‘complained of losing not only just sleep, but also jobs and friendships’ (McGonigal, 2003, p.111) for no reward other than the accomplishment of de-coding the clues and the sense of community.

Dedicating so much time to a project, even if it is fun for the active participants, can create a sense of failure or wasted time if a player gives up, so they continue.

ARGs introduce the concept of community when consuming content as the players work together to solve the problem; however, there is still a reliance on mediacy. The players are happy to play and follow the clues purposely left for them by the creator to find the right answer, only one of which is correct. No matter how many theories the players may have and how many ultimately worthless leads they follow, there is still only one correct outcome: they have no true influence. The puppetmaster may change how easy it is to find a clue or indicate if a player has correctly solved a problem, such as *The Beast's* puppetmasters making their ARG 'even more challenging and sprawling' (McGonigal, 2003, p.112) after players had surprised them with their efficiency in solving the puzzles. An example of this would be when *The Beast's* developers distributed different game files all over the country via live events they attended, as this forced players to collaborate with other nationally and internationally in real-time to put the pieces together (McGonigal, 2003, p.111). This not only encouraged the players to improve their communication and collaboration skills, but also forced the puppetmasters to develop their skills as game-makers in order to keep players immersed and engaged. One of the creators of *The Beast* explained how the player's efficiency encouraged the creators to reshape their creative process in a Q&A after the ARG had concluded:

after one week, we realised we had to completely recalibrate how we delivered puzzles and information and try hard not to put out even the appearance of a puzzle before a solution was firmly in place.

(Cloudmakers, 2002, n.p).

However, despite this emphasis on collaboration and communication between creator and participants, the players still only get to consume what the producer gives them. The critical

distance between the creator and audience is still present and encouraged, but the audience is transformed from a sea of individuals into a community of people with a shared interest. There is community and interactivity in ARGs but there is no genuine mutualistic relationship as with fanfiction and live-streaming. The enjoyment and fulfilment of the audience could be viewed as being equal to monetary and social power gain experienced by the creator, but the transaction between producer and consumer remains as the community has little impact on the creation.

### Fanfiction

Most interactive new media have a strict producer-to-consumer relationship. The media is made with the audience seen as the end-point: the content is created with the audience in mind, but not in collaboration with them. The interactive element is only introduced at the point of purchase, rather than interwoven throughout the process. Genuinely involving the consumer in the creative process rather than simply offering the illusion of creative control could ignite dedication and a deeper connection to the media amongst fans, which would inspire a greater following and sense of community. This could be due to the audience not feeling as though they are being seen as a commodity, but that their insight matters, and the producer cares that they enjoy the final product instead of simply being focused on making a profit. An example of this is the emergence of fans taking creative control and crossing the line from consumer to become a kind of producer themselves, known as a ‘produser’ coined by Bruns in 2004 (n.p) or ‘prosumer’ by Toffler in *The Third Wave* (1980, n.p). The intertextual world of fanfiction, stories written by fans based on an existing piece of media, is an example of fans becoming produsers that ‘allows fans to feel more invested in characters and to explore them in richer, deeper narrative worlds’ (Duffett, 2013, p.285). Borrowing the characters, plot, or universe of the original canon, the fanfiction creator can create their own fan-canon or ‘fanon’ universe within that world. This method is



often used to re-write plots that the fan dislikes to give it an ending that they would have preferred or create a whole new story that simply takes places within a familiar setting. Currently the most popular places for writers to publish these works are the websites Archive Of Our Own and Wattpad and whilst completely original works are uploaded to these sites every day, they are dominated by fan works.

Interactivity surrounds the culture of these websites. Both have the option for readers to comment at the end of each chapter to give feedback, Wattpad even allows users to comment throughout the chapter to give their reactions line-by-line. In contrast to other types of media, where audience feedback can only be received when the product is published, this system allows the creator to adapt their work during the process of creation due to chapters being uploaded one by one, rather than as a block once the entire work has been completed. This means that instead of a TV show receiving feedback from a season and the audience having to wait a year for their suggestions to be implemented by the creators, fanfiction readers only have to wait for as long as it takes for the author to publish another chapter. The author can also directly respond to these comments, increasing the fluidity of the encoding and decoding process as the author can give further context or explanation through this form of paratext if they see that viewers may be misunderstanding codes. Authors directly and enthusiastically communicating with their audience also breaks the boundary of critical distance as the audience is not merely commenting on something they enjoy; they are potentially directly influencing it. Unlike focus groups or tester audiences, here, the consumers are involved in the creative process. A fan's idea may be included, a criticism listened to and implemented, and the author improves as a writer as their audience grows by listening to these criticisms and adapting to fit their audience's taste. The story is intercreative: not created by one person alone, but instead 'the very form of the WIP [Work In Progress] asks readers to collaborate in the meaning production' through providing criticism,

praise, and narrative suggestions or ‘imaginatively by envisioning various narrative threads as they wait for an update’ (Busse, 2017, p.50). The community contributing to the creation can cause a feeling of shared ownership of the work: something for them all to be proud of.

The sensation of community can be strong in these fandom spaces due to fan works being an example of a digi-gratis economy where ‘fans can self-commodify’ (Booth, 2017, p.15). Some fanfictions are hundreds of thousands of words long, the longest piece of fiction ever written being a Super Smash Bros fanfiction of over four million words (AuraChannelerChris, 2008, n.p). However, the writer makes no money from their work, and readers do not have to pay money to consume it. There are ways for writers of these works to be financially supported such as opening a Patreon, a website that offers creators the opportunity to provide content for a subscription, but it is not a necessity. People only pay if they want to. The author spends hours on something that is made from passion and genuine joy for doing it, and that resonates with the community. The author is not someone they do not know and would struggle to interact with, as is the case with traditional media; they are a fan just like them. This creates a sense of familiarity between fans and lessens the critical distance as they can witness and participate in the creation of the media. The sense of involvement the reader may have in the work can encourage immersion in both the fanbase and the work. Involvement in the process leads to emotional investment, which leads to immersion. The fan work has its own fandom. Dedication to media and being involved in the surrounding community can be immersive and therefore influential.

Even with interactivity being a crucial element surrounding the culture of fanfiction, the interaction can still only occur when a chapter has been published: the audience are still receiving a form of finished product. For a truly interactive and effective feedback loop, the consumer would have to have direct contact with, and influence over, the producer in real-time, as is the for live-streaming platforms such as Twitch.

## Twitch

The only way for a creator to gauge an immediate reaction to their content is to interact with the audience in real-time and receive feedback. A platform that allows this is the live-streaming service Twitch. Twitch was released in 2011 and is a video streaming service where ‘streamers’ broadcast themselves to their viewers in real-time. The content can be anything the streamer chooses: art, gaming content, game shows, etc. The interaction takes place in the form of the viewers typing in the chat section that accompanies each stream. This chat then appears on screen and the creator can read and respond to it seconds after it appears on screen, thereby mimicking a conversation. This aids the encoding and decoding process as the creator is speaking directly to the viewer and the viewer can ask clarifying questions if needed. The direct communication can reduce the risk of misunderstanding in meaning and intention and increase the likelihood of the audience decoding in a dominant-hegemonic manner.

The interaction between streamer and viewer is a conversation, but one with an unequal power dynamic. For the viewer, the conversation is between them and the streamer. The audience is interacting with someone whose face they can see or voice they can hear ‘as if he [sic] were conversing [with them] personally and privately (Booth, 2017, p.126). However, the streamer is performing a form of public speaking where anonymous viewers comment on their performance and interact with them. For the streamer, there is no voice or face attached to these viewers, only usernames and words on a screen. That is not to say there is no emotional connection between the streamer and their audience, but the lack of identity tied to the ‘chatters’ would make it harder to establish one. It is comparable to how ‘fans can write a letter to the editor of a newspaper, call a talk show’ (Booth, 2017, p.126) and interact with content they enjoy via social media, but it differs as it is in real-time. As with fanfiction, streamers can receive feedback quickly and adapt their content according, with Twitch

having an even quicker feedback loop than fanfiction as the content is broadcasted live. The control is still in the performer's hands: they decide what happens, whose message is responded to, they decide when the stream begins and ends. However, the chat is a point of focus for the streamer, and it is integrated into the culture that it is unprofessional for a streamer to ignore their viewer's messages. Due to this, the viewers do have influence over the content, as they effectively *become* part of the content. The chat messages appear on stream and the streamer reacts to them; with nothing to respond to the streamer would have less content. In a sense, the viewers decide what the streamer will do as if they do not like what the streamer does on stream, they will not watch. Due to this, the idea of a 'puppetmaster' is removed as both producer and consumer hold control over the content.

Similar to fanfiction, the consumers' ability to directly influence and interact with the producer can create a sense of community amongst the viewers. Those who interact with the stream and send messages are actively engaging with the creator and the creator returns the interaction. There is not a wall of distance akin to an author and a reader where there is no direct communication between them unless the author attends an event or replies to someone on social media. Being able to communicate with the streamer in real-time allows for the audience to become emotionally invested due to the nature of the parasocial relationship.

Media from both the streaming and fanfiction medium have been chosen to analyse as these are the forms of new media that are the most interactive, with the least amount of critical distance between native and narrative due to the audience being involved in production. When investigating how the encoding of media centred around interpersonal abuse affects its audience, spotlighting those most susceptible to its influence is important as they will be the demographic most at risk if the content is harmful. For new media, audiences of live-streams and readers of fanfiction are the most vulnerable. This is due to their high

levels of interactive immersion and encouragement of fan communities that prolong that immersion as they keep audiences constantly thinking and speaking about the media.

### Psychological Impact of Fans' Investment

As noted previously, those entranced by media may spend more of their time talking about the media they enjoy and seek out others with whom to do this in the form of fandom. Through social media sites such as X, TikTok, Instagram, and Tumblr (all forms of interactive new media), communities can form around specific pieces of media as the members all share a common interest. Fandoms that centre around media will have a space for discussion about the media. This could be in the form of opinions on characters, story analysis, or predictions for future storylines with Jenkins noting in *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*:

One becomes a 'fan' not by being a regular viewer of a particular program but by translating that viewing into some kind of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about program content with friends, by joining a 'community' of other fans who share common interests.

(2006b, p.41)

Communities will spend a significant amount of time discussing the media, even when there may not be any new material to contribute to the discussion as is the case with fandoms of discontinued TV shows, celebrities that have died etc. This is similar to the communities that surround ARGs as participants in fandom may sacrifice considerable time and energy in engaging with it. However, instead of the 'reward' being solving the puzzle, the reward for engaging with fan discourse can be the enjoyment and satisfaction that fans may feel from frequently transporting themselves into the narrative world. Grossberg touches on this in *The Adoring Audience* (1992), where he explores fan behaviour: 'whatever we invest ourselves into must be given an excess which outweighs any other consideration' (p.60). The time, energy,

effort, and money put into these hobbies do not matter, nor does the subject of the fan's adoration when weighed against the benefits; a sense of belonging and enjoyment. What matters is what the fan gets out of it. As long as the benefit outweighs the effort, it is worth it.

With discussion and meaningful discourse being a key factor of fan spaces as people share their opinions and theories, as time progresses, it is likely that the community will begin to form a consensus or popular opinion about a character, a storyline, an interpretation. This is where audiences can transition from having a perceived illusion of control over a narrative to a form of actual control through 'narrativity', meaning a 'fandom's communal construction of a narrative' (Booth, 2017, p.2). Individual interpretation of media is to be expected as every individual has their own experiences, imagination, and connections to the characters as is the case for negotiated decoders. As Nell has observed, 'each reader creates the book anew' (Nell, 1988, p.226); however for a consumer in the Entrancement stage partaking in fandom, it is beneficial for an individual to agree with the fandom's interpretation of the narrative so as to avoid being ostracised. Disagreeing with the agreed viewpoint can become a 'potential danger,' Hitchcock and Chin write, 'for fans who do not hew to the cultural norms of the imagined community' (2017, p.182). This is due to the risk of being berated, cast out, and faced with 'exhortations (even demands) to be 'civil', 'moderate', or 'nice'' (2017, p.184) and agree with the general consensus of the fandom, both to keep the peace within it and to protect themselves. Due to this pressure to conform in order to be welcomed into the fanbase, an individual – and especially a young one as with *After* and the *Dream SMP*'s fanbase - could feel pressured into agreeing with the common consensus.

The lack of critical distance of new media and the level of immersion it engenders means that, to those in the Entrancement stage of absorption and beyond, fiction is not just fiction. It transcends storytelling and becomes important to those within these fan spaces. Fans are emotionally connected to the narrative world, resulting in it having native world

importance to them as not only does the narrative and messaging stay with them in their mind, but their friends are also associated with the media. By constantly consuming the content and engaging with the fandom that surrounds it, fans can develop 'elements of passionate identification' that transcend participating in fandom as a hobby as it becomes 'party of the identity of the individual' (Duffett, 2013, p.60). If the communal narrative is one that pushes a potentially harmful message due to them decoding and discussing a piece of media, then that may be dangerous if that message becomes part of the fan's identity.

#### Time Investment and Age Demographic

Fans entering the Entrancement stage and purposefully dedicating their time into consuming content through fandom complements how the chosen media requires considerable time investment to engage with and understand it. This necessity can be meaningful in regard to how the encoding of the media can affect them, especially considering the age of the fans. Interactive media can be suggested to be more influential than traditional media and therefore the encoding of messaging may benefit from increased consideration of effect on audience. However, this concern becomes even more apparent when this content is being targeted towards teenagers who have been implied to be more susceptible to influential encoding.

A 2004 study by Eggermont investigated the influence of mass media on teenagers, specifically the 'overall impact of romantically themed television viewing on adolescents' expectations of a romantic partner' (Eggermont, 2004, p.250). The study consisted of 457 Flemish 15-17-year-olds being asked to self-report on different variables such as social class, education, time spent watching television, genre of television often watched, peer and parent relationships, and romantic experiences. This is important in relation to this thesis as the demographics of the chosen media fit into this age range, with the majority of their audiences being teenagers. Across all aspects, time spent consuming content that portrayed pleasant

personalities and attractiveness as important influenced the participants more than aspects such as their social class. This was true for both the male and female participants, with overall viewing time being ‘the only variable that could predict the evaluated importance of good looks’ (Eggermont, 2004, p.259) in boys’ preferences. The girls indicated that they preferred a pleasant personality over attractiveness and the variable seen to impact this the most was also how frequently they watched television. This places time-demand and investment as an influential force in media consumption.

The *Dream SMP* and *After* require considerable time investment. Tommy’s story on the *Dream SMP* alone is over two hundred hours long and the main *After* series, discounting the original fanfiction and multiple films, is 2,640 pages long. Compared to the average of seventeen hours of television per week self-reported in the Eggermont’s study, new media demands a more dedicated commitment. In addition to this, those fans who were invested when the *Dream SMP* was live would not know if a stream would be occurring that day. Due to this, fans would have to either keep time available in case a stream happened or allocate time after the fact if they did not want to risk falling behind in the story and being excluded from fan discussions. *After* was originally a fanfiction that was updated on a near-daily basis, meaning that invested fans would have to manually check the story every day on Wattpad to find out if it had been updated. In 2004 Eggermont studied how time investment, as well as other variables, influenced the romantic expectations of teenagers when watching traditional media. As the *Dream SMP* and *After* are forms of new media, and therefore are more interactive and immersive, the fluidity between encoding and decoding is increased more than it is for the traditional media used in Eggermont’s study. This may result in the messages encoded within new media having an even greater influence on its audience of teenagers, making it even more important that these messages contain less material that has the potential to harm.



The age of the demographic consuming the media is important as another variable deemed to have impacted how the participants' decoded media was their lack of romantic experience, something that is to be expected within such a young age group. Similar to oppositional decoding, where the audience is analysing text through a different frame of reference, teenagers who have had no romantic experiences will view the content through a different lens. Having no direct experience themselves, these participants will not have the first-hand experience to contextualise the media they are consuming to real life, meaning they could view it as realistic (Scheufele, 1999; Eggermont, 2004; Russell et al, 2014). This could be increased further through growing up with no romantic role models in their real lives e.g., coming from a divorced household. Direct romantic experience was deemed to have significant influence on the girls in the study regarding their romantic expectations. The significance of this variable was that girls who had more romantic experiences found a pleasant personality to have 'less value' (Eggermont, 2004, p.256). It is theorised that this is because having direct experience would allow for them to transition from 'idealised conceptions' (Eggermont, 2004, p.261) that they may have learnt through the media that they have consumed to 'a more realistic conception' (Eggermont, 2004, p.261) as they get older and realise that expecting someone who is not a fictional character to be without flaws is unrealistic. The audiences of the *Dream SMP* and *After* consist of children as young as twelve. In reference to *After*, one commented 'I was twelve years old when I first read this book' (User A, 2019, n.p). This highlights the fact that it can be expected that there is a considerable amount of people that have little to no romantic experiences within the fan community. Therefore, these consumers will not have a direct experience to aid them in transitioning from the idealised conceptions that have been encoded in this media e.g. a romantic partner becoming possessive being a desirable trait, to having more realistic and healthy expectations. This may lead them to view the harmful behaviour as expected and

normal, leaving audience more vulnerable to internalising messaging encoded in the media and possibly treating it as ‘fact’ (Gerbner and Gross, 1972; Eggermont, 2004, Fredland et al, 2005; Russell, 2014).

The main demographic of the chosen media being teenagers is also concerning due to the age group brain’s only being ‘about 80 percent of the way to maturity’ (Jensen, 2015, p.36), with the areas of the brain still maturing being responsible for processes not only important to behaviour regulation, but also analysis and decision making. Functions that occur in areas such as the parietal lobe, frontal lobe, and temporal lobe are underdeveloped and struggle to communicate seamlessly with each other. This may cause teenagers to become more vulnerable to influence by the media and their peers engaging in the media. Disruption between bodily functions, more specifically brain functions, in teenagers can make it harder for the brain to multitask and do ‘two cognitively complex things at the same time’ (Jensen, 2015, p.38). For teenagers, this suggests it could become difficult to watch the content presented to them on TV, for example, and simultaneously analyse it as such functions take place in different parts of the brain.

This is important when considering how teenagers learn. Despite the potential for learning being high due to the plasticity in adolescent brains, the teenage brain faces obstacles such as their inefficient ‘attention, self-discipline, task completion’ and emotional skills (Jensen, 2015, p.68). As a result of this, it has been found that teenagers tend to learn best through repetition and routine. ‘The more a piece of information is repeated or relearned, the stronger the neurons become’ (Jensen, 2015, p.63) and the more it becomes part of understood knowledge. As discussed in the previous chapter, conventional encoding details how continually showing storylines that follow a certain order and characters that act a certain way create expectations, tropes, and signposts that audiences recognise. For example, if a male and female character make lasting eye contact in a scene in a romance film, the

audience can be expected to decode that they are going to form a romantic relationship due to decades of encoding that same result. This repetition is the same way in which teenagers learn and so if they are continuously engaging in media that is encoded with abusive messaging about relationships, they may internalise those lessons, allowing them to form the blueprint for what is acceptable in their own interpersonal relationships. This is especially true if they are engaging in fandom culture where their peers are also reinforcing these ideas, aiding in the repetition as is seen in media such as *After*. As will be discussed in later chapters, the comment sections of the fanfiction are littered with comments from others, influencing their thoughts on it and offsetting any concerns they have about the abusive actions of the main character's love interest.

Whilst it has been suggested by researchers such as Jensen (2015, n.p), Eggermont (2004, n.p) and Fredland et al (2005, n.p) that teenagers are more vulnerable to encoding, it is necessary to clarify that these audiences are not without agency. As with all consumers, teenagers have the free will to decide whether they consume content that could be considered harmful or inappropriate for them. Therefore, it would be incorrect to generalise that the demographic would internalise any messaging presented to them without question. The majority of the millions of comments left on the online version of *After*, for example, are largely positive and supportive, but there are also a significant number of negative comments. This may be due to popular YouTube videos being uploaded after the fanfiction's publication criticising the series rather than an individual's independent decoding, but these comments are easily accessible and offer alternative opinions to new readers. Due to this, it cannot be said that media has the power to alter a person's perception single-handedly and irreparably on subjects such as abuse as 'it is not possible to prove, conclusively, that a media text, in isolation, causes a human being to behave in a particular way' (Boyle, 2004, p.38). Media will not be the only influence a person has in their life as factors such as upbringing,

environment, and socialisation will also contribute to an individual's beliefs. However, Gerbner's theory of 'mainstreaming' suggests that 'heavy viewing', meaning averaging four hours or more a day of media consumption, 'may absorb or override differences in perspectives and behaviour which ordinarily stem from other factors and influences' (Gerbner, 1998, p.183). This implies that an individual's attitudes and values could potentially be overpowered and changed through heavy exposure to opposing attitudes and values. As with new media, television does not have the power to completely alter a person's values, but wide consumption may influence a viewer to learn 'facts' that they did not realise were learnt from media viewing. This is known as a 'television answer', meaning an answer that is 'slanted in the direction of the world of television' (Gerbner and Gross, 1972, p.191). In a study conducted by Gerbner and Gross on TV's influence on the perception of social reality, it was found that participants that identified as heavy viewers 'were always more likely to give the television answer than the light viewers' (1972, p.191). This was shown when participants were asked about the proportion of people employed in law enforcement, those who identified as heavy viewers believing the number to be greater than it is as a result of the media they consumed. This demonstrates an adoption of a 'fact' learned through heavy media consumption becoming internalised. New media is more immersive than traditional media and also demands more than the four hours considered to be 'heavy viewing'. It also blurs the lines between native and narrative worlds through increased interactivity and the communities surrounding the media. Due to this, it could be suggested that new media, whilst unable to have an all-powerful effect on a consumer, can be seen as more influential to its audience, especially in relation to their younger demographic. This influence could be intensified even further when an individual does not possess strong views or values to be influenced, such as teenagers that have no romantic experience or those who have not been introduced to the concept of interpersonal abuse. For those without these strong values or

direct experience to offer an opposing perspective, it could be easier for the ‘facts’ learnt through media framing to form a blueprint of acceptable behaviour through the media being their first exposure to the concept of interpersonal abuse (Gerbner and Gross, 1972; Eggermont, 2004; Russell et al, 2014).

Due to interactivity being a main component of new media, it may be reasonable to suggest that these creators witness the effect that their work has on its audience. This includes potentially harmful effects and as they are given the opportunity in real-time to adapt their work to cater to their audiences, they have the option to take personal responsibility and alter their work to reduce potential harm. It also allows them the option to not change the encoding of their work and ignore the aspects of their content that could cause harm. Harm reduction is a vital part of professional production as is seen through regulations enforced in traditional media, where producers must adhere to regulations due to the risk of harm from irresponsible encoding. The analysis and discussion surrounding *After* and *Dream SMP* allows for comparison as to whether unregulated content can provide a similar level of harm reduction. This is because, unlike traditional media, creators of new media have direct contact with their audiences to provide a sense of self-regulation as they can use audience feedback to judge whether they may need to change their content to reduce potential harm.

### Chapter Three: *After* and Romantising Abuse

Real-time, community-based interactive media has its benefits, such as immediate feedback, but it also presents its own dangers. The reduced critical distance between the media and the consumer heightens the immersion, meaning that, for the consumer of the text, there is less distinction between the native and narrative worlds. For example, if a reader comments on a fanfiction and influences the story, they become part of the creative process and therefore a part of the content (McGonigal, 2003; Busse, 2017). This blurs the distinct line between the worlds. Media in and of itself cannot influence a reader to think a certain way or force them to act outside of their own already conceived ideas even with the mainstreaming involved in heavy viewing. Audiences still have agency but interactive new media such as fanfiction presents the issue of consciousness and acknowledgment of the power dynamic between producer and consumer. Creators could be more aware of their close interactions between reader and writer than traditional media, replying to comments and monitoring audience feedback to inspire changes and so they may see the effect that their encodings may be having on their readers, especially those in younger demographics. Whilst the media cannot directly influence a person's ideals and beliefs, it can introduce ideas to audiences. If the audience has no other frame of reference or, alternatively, resonates with how an idea has been presented, that idea can be internalised as a 'fact' by the audience, even if they do not realise that they learnt that 'fact' from the media (Gerbner and Gross, 1972; Russell et al, 2014). This is especially concerning when the demographic of the content consists largely of teenagers and young adults due to the suggestion that they may be more vulnerable to the effects of encoding (Eggermont 2004; Fredland et al, 2005; Jensen 2015).

Therefore, Anna Todd's encoding of domestic abuse as excusable, necessary, and, at times romantic in *After* can be seen as problematic, if analysed within the frame of unregulated encoding. This is where a new media producer is actively, or even

unconsciously, implementing messaging that is potentially harmful and disregarding the possible consequences this content might have on vulnerable consumers.

### *After's* Origins

Before finding success from its 2013 transition to traditional publishing, selling fifteen million copies worldwide (Wattpad Brand Partnerships, 2019, n.p), *After* was a One Direction fanfiction. Author Anna Todd, twenty-four at the time, wrote the entire series earlier in 2013, accumulating over 1.6 billion reads (Wattpad Brand Partnerships, 2019, n.p) and six million comments (Vox, 2014, n.p). Fans could comment on the story as it was being published with these numbers only increasing as the fanfiction version, now edited to not include celebrity names, is still available to read for free on Wattpad. A crucial element of *After's* past and the main reason for its success was that it was not just a book written on a popular and free reading app, it was a fanfiction involving Harry Styles, a member of One Direction. In 2013, One Direction were the biggest boy band on the planet and dominated the fanfiction category of Wattpad as a subject matter. At the time *After* was written, 'dark' fanfictions, such as *Dark* (musicforsound, 2014, n.p), were very popular. These consisted of mean 'bad boy' versions of celebrities as the love interest, characterised as aggressive and often criminal to everyone around them - until the main character wins his love. *After* encompasses these popular traits which essentially creates an abusive and toxic relationship but romanticises it with the help of its celebrity muse and the encoding of the main character's behaviour.

Harry Styles is a celebrity who is conventionally attractive. His celebrity status and physical appearance, paired with the assumption that the majority of people reading a Harry Styles fanfiction would be Harry Styles fans, means that the Attractiveness Halo Complex may have influenced the readers to automatically defend the character he 'portrays'. The Attractiveness Halo Effect refers to the unconscious attribution of 'positive traits to others

based upon the presence of physical attractiveness, including perceiving more attractive others as more intelligent, well adjusted, and successful' (Palmer and Peterson, 2021, p.553). A pleasant exterior alludes to a pleasant interior and may lead those deemed more attractive to 'enjoy advantages in everyday interactions due to the positive treatment from others' (Palmer and Peterson, 2021, p.552). This is a trope that is constantly repeated through media from films made for children to adults, and the repetitions may lead to an unconscious association: an attractive person is a good person, and an unattractive person is a bad person, creating conventional encoding. *After* benefits from this conventional encoding as the story is seemingly written to be decoded as a romance. The original fanfiction was aided by Harry Styles being the main character as fans of the singer may have been more willing to forgive the character's abusive actions due to the positive associations they may have had with the real person. This encoding is still beneficial to *After* in present day as the love interest is still described to have the physical attributes of Harry Styles but uses a different name.

When *After* was first written, Anna Todd, known by the username 'Imaginator1d', had no writing experience and zero followers on Wattpad. With no regulations on what could be published and no professional experience or team to provide guidance that would be permitted with traditional publishing, the encoding of the story and its handling of domestic abuse was solely done by Todd. However, it did not stay as a pro-abuse fanfiction, which could have been harmful in itself due to its popularity, and instead the material was published later in the same year under the same name. Harry Styles became Hardin Scott, but the character's abusive characteristics were left to be romanticised. Through the continuous editing of the original fanfiction, the quality of writing has improved, and the chapter lengths have increased, but the relationship between Tessa and Hardin remains the same. Readers of the fanfiction, known to re-read or '#rr' their favourite works, are now able to consume the story once more in print form with even more content. This allows them to repeatedly enter



the narrative world for extended periods of time, especially as the novels have been adapted to film. This can result in them becoming more vulnerable to the encoding within the series due to the time spent within the narrative world increasing (Gerbner, 1998, n.p).

### Necessary Context

In *After*, Tessa Young, the protagonist, is from a sheltered and conservative life. At the beginning of the narrative, she is described as never wearing make-up, dressing modestly, never swearing or drinking, and being in a relationship with her long-time boyfriend, Noah. She is also, importantly, a virgin. Tessa is highlighted as being sheltered and naïve, which may reflect the audience of predominantly young girls. These girls may not have romantic experiences of their own to use as a point of comparison to Tessa's relationship with Hardin to be able to recognise that it is neither normal nor healthy. This could result in them possibly believing that it is a healthy relationship, reinforced by their peers in the comment section and the label of 'romance' that the series continues to have.

Once Tessa arrives at Washington State University, escorted by her controlling mother, she is introduced to Hardin Scott. Hardin acts as the love interest in *After* and eventual duo-protagonist. In the first days of her university life, Tessa is persuaded to attend a party where it is made clear that she is different from Hardin and his friends, with them being covered in tattoos and regularly smoking, drinking, and partying. It is at this party where the inciting incident of the story occurs. In Tessa's perspective it is the night where she first flirts with Hardin, but it is also the night that Hardin's friends make a bet to see which of them could trick her into falling in love with them. Originally, this was a bet to take her virginity, but it was decoded by a considerable amount of the audience as being an unforgivable act in the fanfiction, as indicated by this fan's comment: 'I would've castrated him for free right then and there ngl' (User B, 2022, n.p). This change implies that the author may have reflected on the originally encoding of the bet and decided it was too overtly abusive, which

would make it harder for audiences to forgive Hardin and decode the story as romantic. The change also implies that Todd may have been aware of audience's reaction to the original material and, as a result, aware of the effect that the story could have been having on the readers. She therefore may have felt a responsibility to create a less harsh version of the story. The used condom and blood-stained sheets that indicate Tessa's deflowering, however, are still included in the published version despite it being unnecessary with this change. This alludes to a lack of care and effort in portraying the relationship and protecting the audience, a theme that will continue throughout this analysis.

This context is necessary to understand when analysing *After* as the bet between Hardin and his friends results in the implication that the entirety of the relationship in the first *After* novel is an act of deception and sexual coercion, meaning, 'unwanted sexual activity that happens after being pressured in nonphysical ways' (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health, 2021, n.p). Every time Hardin flirts with Tessa or acts in a way that could be viewed as romantic, he is manipulating her to win a bet. These behaviours are not ones of a romantic lead, but an abuser.

### Stages of Abusive Relationships

To detail how Hardin and Tessa's relationship is abusive, the signs and stages of abuse must be clearly explained. Founder of the Domestic Violence Institute and psychologist Dr Lenore Walker created the 'Cycle of Violence' model, also known as the Cycle of Abuse (2009, n.p). Walker's Cycle of Abuse focuses on male perpetrated abuse towards a female romantic partner in an 'intimate terrorism' (Johnson, 2008, p.13) dynamic. This is where one partner uses violence and intimidation to control the other partner who is neither violent nor controlling, which is applicable to Tessa and Hardin. Walker's theory details three stages of abuse that constantly loop, trapping the victim in the cycle: Tension Build-Up, Acute Explosion, and Love-Bombing or the 'Honeymoon Stage' (Walker, 2009,

n.p). These stages will be used as a framework to detail some of the abuse that Tessa is subjected to within the *After* series before it is explained how the encoding of the series tries to frame these behaviours as non-abusive.

### Isolation

Before the Cycle of Abuse (Walker, 2009, n.p) can begin, the victim of abuse must be isolated either physically or mentally from those who may provide support or aid to them when the abuse becomes clear. This is done through methods such as coercive control: using intimidation, manipulation, and gaslighting to control a victim, with the direct intention to make the victim dependent through isolating them from support by rupturing their sense of self.

Hardin physically and emotionally isolates Tessa from her support system by positioning himself as being of higher importance than people such as her mother. Tessa's mother, Carol, does not approve of Hardin, viewing him as a bad influence on Tessa and therefore threatens to stop paying for Tessa's accommodation if she does not stop the relationship and focus on her university work. Tessa chooses Hardin as by this point in the narrative, Hardin has made himself the most important person to her which he achieves through the creation of a trauma-bond between them. A trauma-bond is the attachment between abuser and victim formed through the exploitation of power balance and periodicity of maltreatment, the former of which will be explored more thoroughly in the next chapter. Hardin periodically exposes Tessa to aversive behaviours such as berating her and ignoring her, causing anxiety, only to then compliment her and introduce pleasurable stimuli such as affection to relieve that anxiety. The removal of the positively arousing stimuli allows a victim to crave it, seeking approval from the abuser to receive it and enduring the negative stimuli to be rewarded with it. Alternating between periods of 'aversive or negative arousal and the relief/release associated with the removal of aversive arousal' (Dutton and Painter,

1981, p.148) is known in learning theory as intermittent reinforcement. This has been found to ‘produce strong emotional bonding effects in both animals and humans’ (Dutton and Painter, 1981, p.148) that are difficult to terminate. This is only strengthened with the nature of Hardin and Tessa’s relationship due to Tessa’s sexual inexperience being weaponised to provide this positive stimulus, at times wondering to herself ‘why does my body have to react to him this way?’ (Todd, 2013, p.111). The positive stimulus of pleasure acts as the hope that Tessa clings to as the Cycle of Abuse (Walker, 2009) progresses and intensifies, chasing the relief of not being around Hardin’s violence but his kindness. The readers themselves, mostly teenage girls, are also likely to be as inexperienced as Tessa and therefore may not consider it unnerving that Tessa would choose a boy she has known for mere weeks over her mother, financial stability, and housing. This may be because the act of choosing Hardin is encoded as being the correct decision due to Carol being framed as an overcontrolling and toxic mother who insults Tessa’s appearance incessantly. At this point in the narrative, Hardin’s ulterior motives of winning a bet have not been revealed to the audience and so he seems the more nurturing option to Tessa as the audience view her mother negatively. The audience’s antipathy towards Carol can be seen in comments such as: ‘What!!!!!! She is disgusting, judging him before even talking 1 single word with him. WOW’ (User C, 2022, n.p). Carol’s concerns for Tessa are reasonable and ultimately true but due to her characterisation of being controlling and unreasonable, these concerns may be dismissed by the audience instead of being considered as seen by one commenter’s reaction to the confrontation: ‘how shitty of a mom do you have to be to gaslight your own daughter just cause shes happy’ (User D, 2021, n.p).

The trauma-bond and manipulation of Hardin encourages Tessa to abandon her mother and ultimately leaves her homeless, defenceless, and vulnerable. Hardin convinces her to sign a lease with him where he would pay for everything, creating a power imbalance,

forcing Tessa to be dependent on him, and isolating her from any support system such as her family. This ties Tessa to Hardin and results in her being less likely to leave him as a major consideration into if a victim can leave their abuser is ‘whether she has a place to go. Having money, a car, nearby friends, or family who could shelter her, a ‘safe house’, or a women’s shelter would be essential for the option of leaving’ (Frieze, 1979, p.97). Tessa is isolated socially from her family and friends, financially dependent on Hardin for a place to live, and left to develop a trauma-bond due to Hardin subjecting her to intermittent reinforcement, leaving her vulnerable to the abuse she will be forced to endure.

### Tension Build-Up

The isolation that occurs throughout the beginning of the relationship starts to have consequences on the victim’s mental well-being when the Tension Build-up phrase, described as an ‘overall tension within the relationship’ (Wilson, 2022, p.1), begins. Behaviour exhibited in this stage creates a feeling of unease, keeping the victim in a constant state of anxiety so they become hypervigilant and focused on keeping their abuser in a well-mannered mood. Tessa appears in several instances of the *After* series feeling anxious due to her not being able to understand Hardin’s emotions. At one point she says, ‘I can’t decipher his tone, which makes me uneasy’ (Todd, 2013, p.377) showing that she has something to be afraid of if Hardin’s mood is not pleasant.

Threats of violence, ‘verbal abuse’, and ‘minor battering incidents’ (Wilson, 2022, p.1) can be expected during this time that can last anywhere from a matter of days to ‘months or even years’ (Wilson, 2022, p.1). Hardin displays acts of ‘symbolic violence’ (Engel, 2023, p.7) such as breaking lamps and acting violently towards others if they or Tessa upset him. The violence is known as symbolic as it expresses that the abuser is likely to act out violently and is not only classed as emotionally abusive, but it is also a precursor for physical abuse due to it being a ‘threat of violence’ (Engel, 2023, p.7). Hardin also belittles Tessa and

purposely upsets her to feel dominant over her, sneering out insults such as ‘you are so pathetic. Don’t you see that I don’t want you here?’ (Todd, 2013, p.141). All these behaviours that Hardin constantly displays act as reasons as to why Tessa consistently feels ‘worried about upsetting’ (Todd, 2014b, p.420) him and begins to alter her behaviour to reduce the likelihood of this. Altering behaviour is a common trait seen in victims of abuse. This is especially true if they view the abuse as having an ‘unstable cause’ such as being the result of a singular event, rather than the abuser’s personality, which would be a stable cause as it ‘probably will not change – at least in the future’ (Frieze, 1979, p.87). Simply put, a stable cause is a factor that cannot be easily changed and the victim has no control over, such as the abuser’s personality or desire to act violently. An unstable cause could be a reaction to an event such as a disagreement or a stressful day. A victim could work to avoid the disagreement or expect the situation to improve within a short period of time as they could blame external forces for the abuse rather than accept that the abuse is the fault of the abuser. An unstable cause of abuse could provide hope for the future as ‘if the cause of the violence is seen as something that could change, there is, by definition, more hope than if the cause is stable’ (Frieze, 1979, p.87). Unstable causes, however, also leads to self-blame, causing victims to act differently to attempt to avoid the negative behaviour. Tessa achieves this by, for example, avoiding friends, specifically men, that Hardin does not like to diminish the chances of him being upset and lashing out. She rationalises this by telling herself that the reason she is avoiding them is specifically to avoid his reaction: ‘Hardin would probably lose his mind if I called her’ (Todd, 2014b, p.68). Even if she eventually performs an action that Hardin would not approve of, her instant worry at the idea displays a conditioned fear response seen in abuse victims. Hardin’s dangerous behaviour is encoded and decoded as being caused by Tessa’s inability to behave in a certain way rather than the stable cause of it being Hardin’s personality and fault. Indications of this can be seen with how some fans

blame Tessa and encourage her altering her behaviour, evidenced by comments such as: ‘and you wonder why you’re always fighting’ (User E, 2023, n.p). These reactions are concerning as Tessa’s thought process is commonly seen in abuse victims. Teenagers being taught through repeated learning to recognise the panicked response of an abuse victim as reasonable rather than alarming could be dangerous and may lead to victim blaming in their real lives (Scheufele, 1999; Sellers et al, 2014; Jensen, 2015). This reaction to the abuse from the audience is important to consider due to the violent consequences of the Acute Explosion phase of the Cycle of Abuse (Walker, 2009, n.p).

### Acute Explosion

If Tension Build-Up is the threat, Acute Explosion, otherwise known as Acute Battering Incident, is the delivery. It is the ‘uncontrollable discharge of the tensions that have built up’ (Walker, 2009, p.94) and expresses itself in severe physical, emotional, and/or sexual violence. It is the shortest phase, but the most explosive. The abuser will attack with what they perceive ‘to be a legitimate reason’ (Wilson, 2022, p.1) but will devolve into uncontrollable and irrational lashing out which leaves the victim in a state of severe distress.

Hardin’s explosions often manifest in him inflicting emotional harm onto Tessa by belittling her and her achievements such as him exclaiming ‘in case you forgot, I’m the only reason you have that opportunity to begin with’ (Todd, 2014b, p.192) when in a disagreement surrounding Hardin sabotaging her career. He also regularly insults Tessa whenever he is angry, calling her ‘prudish’ and ‘boring’ (Todd, 2013, p.236) as well as a ‘fucking whore’ (Todd, 2014a, p.616). He blames her for his outbursts, an example of this being “‘You fucked up, Tessa, so badly!’” His fist slams against the wall’ (Todd, 2014a, p.364) which not only scares Tessa frequently, but also contributes to her blaming herself for his behaviour. These explosions increase in severity throughout the relationship and are not avoided through Tessa’s changed behaviour. This implies that the cause of the abuse is stable, Hardin’s

personality, and not unstable forces such as Tessa's actions, meaning that she cannot control the situation and is not to blame. This feeling of lacking control and subsequent emotional turmoil is known as 'learned helplessness', a 1975 theory of depression by Martin Seligman which has since been applied to victims of abuse. This is the feeling within a victim that nothing they do will change their abuser's behaviour, even if they oblige to all their demands and behave in a way that would not anger them. It is complimented by the dependency seen in abusive dynamics, such as Hardin coercing Tessa into living somewhere that he pays for and working a job he got for her whilst isolating her socially. 'With time, the organism loses all motivation to respond and passively accepts further negative situations from which it might escape' (Freize, 1979, p.94) and so, as the Cycle of Abuse (Walker, 2009, n.p) continues, Tessa begins to accept that she will always be in that situation, viewing herself as nothing more than 'Hardin's punching bag' (Todd, 2013, p.236).

Unlike with more ambiguous actions such as emotional manipulation, the text allows Hardin being directly violent and verbally battering Tessa to be viewed as incorrect and hurtful. It focuses on Tessa's fear in these moments and has others reinforce this by confirming to Tessa that Hardin is wrong and reprimanding him, reminding her that 'it's never okay, Tessa. Please don't make excuses for him' (Todd, 2014b, p.277). Due to this encoding, many members of the audience respond with hatred towards Hardin and condemn his emotional and physical violence, one reader commenting: 'I so want to beat this guy up' (User F, 2022, n.p). However, instead of these narrative points where the text and audience view Hardin as dangerous being used as pivotal moments that cast Hardin as the antagonist, they are framed as points of conflict and tension to be resolved. This is done through the story following the structure of the Cycle of Abuse (Walker, 2009, n.p) and using Love-Bombing methods to convince both Tessa and potentially the audience to forgive these deplorable acts.



## Love-Bombing

After a period of Acute Explosion, a victim will feel scared and hurt and this may result in them attempting to leave ‘temporarily while there is an immediate threat of violence but to return when she sees it is ‘safe’’ (Frieze, 1979, p.97). As a result of this, the Love-Bombing phrase is rife with manipulation and gaslighting to weaponise the trauma-bond of the relationship. This is done to convince the victim to cling to the memories of positive stimuli rather than focusing on the aversive arousal of negative memories through lavishing the partner ‘with praise, affection, grand declarations of love, and demonstrations of devotion’ (Sanderson, 2008, p.66). Hardin is seen participating in Love-Bombing behaviours within the *After* series whenever Tessa is angry. A common technique Hardin uses is distracting her by weaponizing affection or intimacy to strengthen the trauma-bond and convince her to stay, an example of this being Tessa describing how ‘he brings our hands to his mouth, slowly kissing each of my knuckles, and my anger dissolves at the touch of his soft lips’ (Todd, 2014b, p.19). A tactic that Hardin also uses whenever Tessa breaks up with him is to write her letters, an act of gift-giving that successfully convinces her to return to him due to them containing the kind words he rarely gives her such as, ‘all I know is that you make me happy, Tess. You love me when you shouldn’t, and I need you. I have always needed you and always will’ (Todd, 2014a, p.248). These acts of Love-Bombing follow Acute Explosions, promoting Tessa and possibly the audience to forgive Hardin, as evidenced by the fan comment, ‘okay but if someone gave me a letter saying there childhood when they don’t like to talk about it I would marry them right then and there!’ (User G, 2021, n.p). Hardin never changes his behaviour after apologising to Tessa and continues to abuse Tessa, the abuse becoming worse each time as ‘without intervention and treatment, most batterers will repeat the cycle of violence and, as the cycles repeat, they will generally become more frequent and more severe’ (Walker, 2009, p.409). Due to there being no

improvement in Hardin's treatment of Tessa but the same methods of Love-Bombing being displayed and forgiven, Hardin continuing to weaponise intimacy and use gifts rather than actions to seek forgiveness, the audience are taught to forgive Hardin as Tessa does without cause. They are prompted to decode his apologies as sincere rather than a manipulation tactic, modelling their behaviour on Tessa's.

#### How *After* Encoded Abuse as Romantic

Despite only a portion of Hardin's actions throughout the series being discussed, they provide a reasonable amount of supportive evidence to infer that the relationship is abusive. However, the fanfiction, novels, and film series are classed as a 'young adult romance,' meaning that it is presented as a love story rather than a cautionary tale of how an abuser may exploit naivety.

One of the more impactful methods that equips *After* to achieve its encoded genre of romance is to permit for half of the chapters from the second book, *After We Collided* (Todd, 2014a), onwards to include Hardin's perspective. The first book is purely from Tessa's point of view, which allows the audience to witness her emotions due to the first-person perspective, as well as heightening the emotion of the plot twist where it is revealed that Hardin has used Tessa to win a bet. This can be seen as a deplorable act by fans, as evidenced by the comment: 'I hate him so much' (User H, 2022, n.p). Having the narrative only be from Tessa's perspective gives permission for the audience to be swept up in the relationship as Tessa is and allows them to equally feel the heartbreak when the bet is revealed, casting Hardin as the antagonist. Without the subsequent inclusion of Hardin's thought process, the audience may have continued to hate him which would make it more difficult for them to decode his actions as romantic due to the focus on Tessa's emotions rather than Hardin's feelings. An example of the audience sympathising with Tessa is the comment, 'I used to not like Tessa for being dramatic and problematic in the relationship, but now I just feel so bad

for her, she's so drained and consumed by her love for her him it's slowly ruining her (User I, 2020, n.p), showing how the absence of Hardin's justifications can aid the audience in seeing the reality of the situation. The addition of Hardin's perspective rarely provides the audience with additional information or plot as he is often with Tessa anyway. This could imply that including it serves only to prompt the audience to sympathise with Hardin and forgive him, influencing the audience to decode the series as romantic.

Including Hardin's thought processes and perspective additionally aids the audience in sympathising and forgiving him through the constant incorporation of his trauma being implied to justify his actions. Hardin grew up in a broken home with an alcoholic father who neglected him, and he was left traumatised when he accidentally witnessed the rape of his mother as a child. Instead of using this information to evolve Hardin into a complex, three-dimensional character who experienced intense hardship, Todd appears to use it to frame Hardin as a victim in every situation where he is in the wrong, providing justifications for his behaviour as he is viewed as an 'angry, hurt man' (Todd, 2015, p.41). His trauma is used to excuse his behaviour and elicit forgiveness from Tessa and the audience alike. An example of this would be Hardin's recurring night terrors where he re-lives witnessing his mother's rape and is left unable to sleep as a result. Tessa becomes the only one who can help him sleep and so whenever he is upset or scares her through an episode of Acute Explosion, he subsequently has a nightmare which sends her back into his arms to comfort him. Afterwards they never discuss Tessa's hurt feelings and move on, allowing Hardin to be the victim in the situation rather than the instigator. This happens frequently throughout the series, which may teach the audience through frequent exposure to this pattern (Jensen, 2015; Sellers et al, 2014) to remind themselves of why Hardin may act a certain way rather than focusing on the action itself and its effect of Tessa's well-being. This can be seen through reactions such as: 'okay this is scary and not okay but then again he's acting out because he feels betrayed like he

always does and this is all because of her. I'm about to cry rn' (User J, 2022, n.p). Hardin is seen as having 'absolutely no control' (Todd, 2014b, p.300) of his actions, casting him as the victim and allowing his abuse to be framed as unstably caused as he could theoretically heal and become a better person. The cause not being Hardin's personality and decision to hurt people (stable) and rather a characteristic of his that could heal with time (unstable), can promote the audience to be influenced by his weaponised trauma (Frieze, 1979, n.p). Believing that Hardin acts out of being hurt by others and not a desire to hurt others can allow the audience to rationalise his behaviour as him not meaning to behave this way and as will be discussed later in this chapter, place blame on Tessa for not fixing his trauma.

Tessa being aware of Hardin's childhood trauma as well as viewing his actions as being unstable causes her to constantly rationalise Hardin's behaviour, frequently exposing the readers to these rationalisations in the process. Rationalisation is a result of cognitive dissonance: the psychological need to change beliefs or behaviours when the two conflict, causing anxiety which is an overwhelming feeling present during the Tension Build-Up phase (Festinger, 1962, n.p). This is seen in *After* when Tessa excuses Hardin's violent behaviour with rationalisations such as, 'he wasn't being violent; he was just drunk. He wouldn't hurt me' (Todd, 2013, p.173). Tessa is aware that Hardin's treatment of her is concerning and dangerous and so must convince herself that she is safe despite Hardin's increasing abuse of her suggesting otherwise as 'just as hunger impels a person to eat, so does dissonance impel a person to change his opinions or his behaviour' (Festinger, 1962, p. 93). By having Tessa replicate the thought process of abuse victims several times through her rationalisations, the audience may be encouraged to engage in the same behaviour, for example, responding with comments such as 'he really do be hurtin' (User K, 2020, n.p) as a reaction to Hardin burning down a house. His trauma provides justification for his unpredictable and criminal behaviour. Just as mentioning Hardin's trauma repeatedly could teach the audience to consider his

motivations, the rationalisations of Tessa, Hardin, and other characters may influence the audience to disregard their concerns for his behaviour. This is because the ‘more frequently’ a message, even a harmful one ‘is used by the media for a specific issue, the more likely it is to be accepted by the public at large’ (Sellers et al, 2014, p.261). This is especially true as Hardin never actually hurts Tessa physically past accidentally knocking her over whilst fighting another man. The abuse not progressing to objective physical abuse is unrealistic as psychological and symbolic abuse such as destroying property has been found to indicate escalation to physical abuse (Murphy and O’Leary, 1989; Engel, 2023). It also provides justification for the audience to believe that Hardin is not a danger to Tessa as he does not physically harm her.

The readers are encouraged to believe the rationalisations of Tessa to be true through them being validated by the narrative. Hardin is disturbingly possessive over Tessa and jealous of any interaction she has with other men. He repeatedly warns her that every man she encounters secretly wants to date her. Rather than depicting these thoughts as controlling and born from insecurity, in *After*, Todd instead choses to prove Hardin correct to the audience. Every man that Hardin wants Tessa to stay away from does eventually confess their feelings towards her. The fact that Zed, Hardin’s main antagonist in the series, does so forcefully proves that Hardin’s concerns for Tessa’s safety are justified. This means that, even though Hardin’s behaviour is manipulative and controlling, audiences could be encouraged to decode these behaviours as protective, rather than possessive. This may have influenced some audience members to blame Tessa for speaking to other men, as evidenced by this reader who said, ‘Tessa just listen to Hardin...it’s not that hard’ (User L, 2022, n.p). Ultimately, the narrative prompts encoded by Todd mean it could be easier for audiences to decode Hardin as a caring boyfriend trying to protect his naïve girlfriend, than it is for them to view him as an abusive partner.

*After* relies on comparison to other well-known romances to encode the toxic couple as romantic. The original fanfiction promoted comparison to *Wuthering Heights* (Bronte, 1847), which suggests that Todd actively chose to encode Tessa and Hardin's relationship as toxic. Some members of the audience decoded this comparison unfavourably, as they were able to connect the comparison to an unhealthy relationship as evidenced by the comment: 'no wonder you are both into toxic relationships LOL' (User M, 2022, n.p). This may have influenced Todd to change the predominant comparison of the couple from Catherine and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* in the fanfiction, to *Pride and Prejudice's* (Austin, 1813) Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy in the published novel. The choice to align Hardin and Mr. Darcy implies that Todd believes they are similar. For instance, Mr. Darcy rudely insults Elizabeth's appearance upon first meeting her, due to his pride. This mirrors Hardin's behaviour, as is discussed by the book when Hardin and Tessa analyse *Pride and Prejudice* in class where Hardin claims 'if he loved her, he wouldn't have been mean to her' (Todd, 2013, p.92), drawing parallels to their own first meeting. However, it is a false equivalency as Darcy goes to great lengths to recognise that his behaviour was unacceptable and works to apologise to Elizabeth through changed behaviour whereas Hardin never changes his behaviour and continues to treat Tessa with cruelty throughout all four novels. The comparison to the couple is frequent, encoding to the audience through repetition that Hardin and Darcy are similar. This implies that Hardin also undergoes similar character development. The references to *Pride and Prejudice* are so prevalent in the *After* novels that Hardin tattoos the quote 'I never wish to be parted from you from this day on' (Wright, 2005, n.p) onto himself to represent that he and Tessa are soulmates. The repeated comparison to *Pride and Prejudice* may prompt readers to decode Hardin in a more forgiving light as they are told constantly that these characters share similarities. This could influence them to believe that Hardin changes for Tessa as Darcy does despite his actions stating otherwise. Some commenters recognise

the *Pride and Prejudice* references and liken Hardin to Darcy themselves, as they are taught to, reacting with comments such as ‘THE FORESHADOWING’ (User N, 2023, n.p) as a response to Hardin disliking Darcy due to finding the prospect of an intolerable man being made into a love interest ridiculous. These comparisons can aid the readers in mentally casting Hardin as the romantic lead in this series instead of the abusive boyfriend. However, this is likely due to their love for Mr. Darcy rather than any character development from Hardin.

Ultimately the most effective method that *After* uses to influence audiences into decoding the series as a romance instead of a cautionary tale, is that Tessa and Hardin repeatedly reunite and end the series together. In *After*, the audience is taught to accept manipulation and dismiss warning signs of abuse due to Hardin and Tessa finishing the series happily married with children. This occurs after multiple-year time jumps in the last chapter where Hardin and Tessa appear as completely different people; Hardin is calm and loving and Tessa is happy. Hardin undergoes character development that the readers are not privy to, and Tessa and Hardin’s relationship is resolved. They are no longer shown to be fighting, although it is unclear whether this is because the narrative does not linger on them long enough for a fight to break out. This resolution is unrealistic for abusive relationships. Hardin’s abuse of Tessa occurred from a stable cause: his personality. That is not something that changes quickly and whilst Hardin does go to therapy in the final book to win Tessa back, returning to the same relationship only places the two of them back into the cycle. It is possible that Hardin could change himself, but not in a relationship with his victim. It should be noted that the ending may be presented in such a way due to the backlash that the original ending of the fanfiction received, once more highlighting the author’s likely awareness of audience decoding. Todd originally depicted the two reuniting at a wedding and deciding to elope in Vegas, with the ending left ambiguous as to whether they followed through. Fans

were left unimpressed, with one commenting ‘that was the worst ending of a book ever wow’ (User O, 2014, n.p). The comments suggest that the audience felt cheated after spending so long with these characters. Original fans who had checked in every day to read the updates, often remaining loyal for years, were quick to vocalise their disappointment. This divergence from the original ending of the fanfiction to a conclusive ending in the novel demonstrates the relationship between author and consumer that is apparent in new media and especially intensified in immersive media such as fanfiction. It also offers an answer to those questioning whether the couple are soulmates as they live happily ever after together. Logically, and realistically, a relationship that is abusive would not end happily and therefore the audience are prompted to believe the relationship could not be abusive due to the happy ending. Throughout the *After* series, fans are frequently exposed to validation of Hardin’s behaviour, victim-blaming, and promotion of the idea that Hardin is not dangerous but merely traumatised. Pairing these aspects with the series ending with a happy and healthy marriage between Hardin and Tessa, the encoding of *After* is cemented as a romance, and not the more appropriate label of psychological horror series.

#### Was The Encoding of *After* Responsible?

Whilst an abusive relationship being continually encoded as romantic can be viewed as generally irresponsible, it is made even more so if children are the main demographic consuming the content, as was the case with *After*. This is due to teenagers not being cognitively developed enough to recognise danger and consequence, as well as being more susceptible to influential encoding (Gerbner and Gross, 1972; Eggermont 2004; Jensen, 2015). Dedicated fans of the series may have read the daily uploads of three hundred chapters, four novels, and watched the films. This level of exposure means they have spent a considerable amount of time within the narrative world, allowing the messages encoded in it to become more easily internalised (Gerbner, 1998, n.p). It would be a generalisation to



suggest that every user of Wattpad is a teenager, or that everyone who read the original fanfiction was a minor, but children read and continue to access and read the story. According to Wattpad's Terms of Service, any user-generated content posted to the platform that contains mature content, including sexual themes, gratuitous violence, and drugs, must be labelled as 'Mature', meaning that users under the age of seventeen are not intended to view the content. The content guidelines state that there are restrictions on discovering 'Mature' stories on Wattpad that help 'ensure they reach the correct audience' (Wattpad, 2022, n.p). This is not the case with *After* as it is easily accessible despite containing sexual content. The first book is not marked as 'Mature' (Appendix A) and the rest of the marked books are accessible through the author's profile (Appendix B). This content, marked as 'Mature' which encodes domestic abuse as romantic, is available to accounts where the user is labelled as thirteen (Appendix C). The work marked 'Mature' does not ask for age verification when selected, meaning that a child aged thirteen is easily able to consume this content. Furthermore, past readers, now adults, have commented on how they read the original *After* series when they were teenagers, as well as how it affected their relationship expectations:

I never realized the abusive relationship at 18 years old but now I do (after learning it and being in one). I idolized this book so much, and it tries to teach the lesson that you can change a person or a person will change for you if they really love you. I got myself into an abusive relationship and would remember this book because Hardin "changed" for Tessa and Tessa stuck around. Not a good role modelling book for young girls.

(User P, 2019, n.p)

These comments provide support to Eggermont's 2004 research that suggests that teenagers who do not have direct romantic experience are more susceptible to the influence of encoding

due to having no point of reference. In the modern day, the comment sections of the fanfiction are saturated with users who have their young age in their profiles and speak in a way where an inference could be made of their age being under eighteen, as suggested by this comment: ‘Tessa got invited too heh but it would’ve been so much fun if she went alone and when Ken asked where’s Harry she’d go oops i forgot to ask him cuz he’s a lil betch’ (User Q, 2023, n.p). Anna Todd has acknowledged that the majority of her audience has always been teenagers, specifically teenage girls, who have been suggested to be more vulnerable to messaging influencing their perception of romance due to their likely lack of experience (Eggermont, 2004; Russell et al, 2014). In an interview, Todd said ‘when people say ‘you’re influencing young girls’ and it’s like yeah! That’s what fiction does’ (Editura Teri, 2020, 7:10), meaning that it would be responsible to encode messaging within the narrative with this in mind. This comment also provides support of creators being aware of their audience and the possible effect their work may have, strengthening the notion that creator responsibility and consideration for audience protection may be reasonable to expect.

A potentially harmful message that is frequently encoded into the narrative of *After* is that Tessa is responsible for ‘fixing’ Hardin. Victims of abuse often feel responsible for their abuser’s actions due to feeling as though they have influence over their abuser’s reactions, as noted by psychologist Irene Frieze, ‘a woman who sees her own behaviour as the cause (an unstable, internal cause) probably would attempt to change her behaviour so that the violence does not happen again’ (1979, p.94). Failing to avoid the negative behaviour, such as Hardin’s verbally battering, would mean a personal failure on the victim’s part to appease the abuser, making it their fault. Victims will work to avoid these battering incidents, thus devoting themselves to pleasing their partner. As Dutton and Painter observe, ‘in time, the woman's self-esteem may become wrapped up with her attempts to placate her partner and fulfil her "wifely duties"' (Dutton and Painter, 1981, p.145); the victim ends up equating their

self-worth with their ability to serve their abuser. *After* feeds into this narrative, making it Tessa's responsibility to look after and make Hardin a good person by frequently reminding her that she is Hardin's only hope. One character, Natalie, reaffirms to Tessa that she is his only chance for redemption, confessing that she has 'prayed and prayed that Hardin would find his salvation, and I think it's finally happened' (Todd, 2014b, p.786) as though Hardin is not capable of changing himself. This is reinforced through Hardin only going to therapy in the hope that Tessa will take him back, him only restraining himself from committing crimes because he worries about her reaction, and him blaming Tessa whenever he explodes with accusations such as 'it's your fault I'm like this, and you know it!' (Todd, 2014b, p.274). It is also inherent in depictions of him completely falling apart whenever Tessa is parted from him, emphasised with the quote 'I never wish to be parted from you from this day on' (Wright, 2005, n.p) as though Tessa leaving him is detrimental to Hardin's well-being. The use of the phrase 'salvation', as well as the focus on her virginity making her 'pure' and 'innocent', places Tessa in a Biblical light, implying a comparison to a saint where one of the miracles performed to achieve such as status is fixing Hardin. This invokes the Madonna-whore complex as though Tessa is not a human with feelings and only lives to serve her boyfriend. The audience, in turn, may be encouraged to participate in victim-blaming, berating Tessa for engaging in behaviours that may trigger Hardin's anger instead of holding him accountable for his own actions, with one user commenting: 'Christ, Tessa you clearly know you're making bad choices' (User R, 2022, n.p). Some fans blame her for staying with Hardin, with comments such as 'bitch stfu ur doing this to urself . just break up w him' (User S, 2021, n.p), whilst others encourage Tessa to stay with Hardin so she can fix him. This implies that the audience decode that Tessa should accept the abuse that Hardin forces her to endure as she is responsible for fixing him, but simultaneously believe Tessa to be 'asking for' the abuse. This may be because she does not leave him and so audiences decode this as

her choice instead of her being attached to him through a strong trauma-bond. A lack of support is unfortunately a common reaction to those in abusive dynamics as others outside of the relationship are ‘unlikely to respond sympathetically; on the contrary, they are likely to blame [them] for the plight’ (Dutton and Painter, 1981, p.140). Victim-blaming and treating abusers as children without agency or free will to not abuse people is a distasteful message to promote and it could be suggested that *After* does exactly this. The message is especially irresponsible considering the audience consists of mainly young girls who may internalise these messages and practice self-blame in their own abusive relationships. Alternatively, the commentators echoing these sentiments could inadvertently aid others into staying with their abuser through reinforcing encouragement of self-blame (Dutton and Painter, 1981; Sellers et al, 2014; Hitchcock and Chin, 2017).

Encouraging damaging societal ideologies such as victim’s ‘asking for it’ is also implied in the reckless way that sexual assault is portrayed to this audience of prominently teenage girls. *After*’s attitude to sexual assault and poor sexual practices in general is irresponsible and breaks the terms of service of Wattpad (2019, n.p). Sexual assault is encoded as benefitting Hardin on multiple occasions, rather than depicting assault as the devastating event that it is. The looming threat of sexual assault is the catalyst to Tessa and Hardin starting their relationship as their first kiss happens as the direct result of Tessa being the victim of attempted rape. This turns a terrifying experience into the inciting incident of their relationship and therefore a positive memory in both Tessa and the audience’s mind. The rape of Hardin’s mother leaves him with chronic nightmares that allows Tessa to comfort him and feeds into the saviour role that is frequently pushed onto her. Tessa is violated by people she trusts so Hardin can comfort her and reinforce the encoding that everyone who is not Hardin cannot be trusted, validating his severe possessiveness to Tessa and the audience. These assaults also centre around Hardin’s feelings rather than the victim, his mother being

portrayed as healed and unbothered by the events of that night. She minimises the effect of the rape saying, 'it was a dark time in our lives, but we got through it' (Todd, 2014a, p.196) whereas Hardin is still traumatised. In a similar vein, Tessa's pain is overshadowed by Hardin's anger. Placing his feelings over hers, as is consistently seen throughout the narrative, echoes the message of woman's pain being necessary to drive the plot forward. This mirrors Aoko Matsuda's media critique *The Woman Dies* (2018) where she laments that women in fiction are 'raped so that the man can be angry about it. She is raped to spark his vengeful spirit. She is raped so the man can look to the sky and howl in agony' (n.p). The women in *After* suffer so that Hardin can feel sad about it, eliciting audience sympathy. Tessa swallows her feelings to give Hardin the spotlight. The two protagonists even sexually assault each other. Tessa is too drunk to consent, and a sober Hardin rejects her advances, saying 'we can't do this...not like this' (Todd, 2014a, p.81) until he is coerced. Despite them discussing the coercion the following day, it is not viewed as coercion and rather a drunken mistake, encoding the assault as necessary to bring the couple back together after their breakup in the first book.

Even when Hardin admits to directly assaulting someone, he is not punished but thanked by the narrative. Before he met Tessa, Hardin photographed and filmed a girl without her consent during sex and distributed the footage for a bet, because he 'just didn't care. It was fun to me' (Todd, 2014a, p.231). The illegality of filming and sharing sexual content without a participant's consent is never highlighted which is especially concerning as Hardin is stated to be eighteen when this occurred but it is not made clear if the victim was also eighteen. This uncertainly potentially adds the creation and distribution of sexually explicit content of a minor to the list of illegal acts Hardin performs within a series where he is cast as the romantic lead. In fact, when he later reconnects with the victim, Natalie, she not only forgives him, but explains that if he had not assaulted her, causing her to be exiled from her

church, she would never have met her husband, ending the conversation with ‘everything happens for a reason, I guess?’ (Todd, 2014a, p.462). Sexual assault and women’s pain in the *After* series is framed as character development for the male lead. It directly benefits Hardin and is encoded as necessary, as is much of the suffering that Tessa endures. Troublingly, this is presented to an audience that the creator herself has identified as largely consisting of teenage girls, who may not have romantic or sexual experience and could be unaware that sexual assault, much like abuse, can refer to acts other than violently raping someone. Framing these illegal acts as necessary and reducing them to inappropriate rather than criminal allows the audience to focus on how these assaults affect Hardin instead of the victims. This can spread misinformation about sexual assault and promote harmful rhetoric about victims and abusers, all allowed to be done through the lack of content regulation on Wattpad.

*After* as a piece of work could be seen as actively promoting abusive dynamics through the merchandise sold for the franchise. Anna Todd has acknowledged that she wrote an abuse storyline with statements such as “Hardin and Tessa have an abusive relationship’ yeah, I know, I wrote it, I know they do” (Editura Teri, 2020, 6:20). This implies that Todd intended for Hardin to be decoded as an abuser and not a good boyfriend when she wrote *After*, and yet along with the story being marketed as romantic, merchandise such as a T-shirt that reads ‘where the hell is my Hardin Scott?’ is currently sold on Anna Todd’s website (Anna Todd, 2023, n.p). This could be interpreted as promoting and profiting from abuse as the combination of acknowledging the abuse and selling merchandise suggesting others find their own abusive boyfriend could be seen as Anna Todd and the *After* series romanticising abuse to the young consumers. It is also reminiscent of when creator irresponsibility was previously highlighted in the original merchandise of the *After* fanfiction. Anna Todd sold jewellery with Harry Styles and Tessa’s names alongside the *Wuthering Heights* quote

‘whatever his soul is made of, his and mine are the same’ (Bronte, 1847, Chapter 4, p.5). This quote is in relation to the characters Catherine and Heathcliff, a couple that have a toxic and co-dependent relationship to the extent that Catherine’s death directly causes Heathcliff to mentally spiral until he too dies. This mirrors behaviours seen in trauma-bonding (Dutton and Painter, 1981, n.p). The primary relationship in *Wuthering Heights* is not one to be emulated. Yet, in comparing them to the characters in *After*, where the quote appears several times, Todd directly aligned the toxic and ill-fated relationship of Catherine and Heathcliff with Hardin and Tessa. These necklaces were removed from sale, as were the posts promoting them, assumedly due to copyright issues due to the use of Harry Styles’ name. However, their sale presents a pattern of the creator releasing merchandise for an abusive couple, encouraging fans to brand themselves as supporters of this dynamic.

One of the more evident ways that *After*’s encoding can be seen as having the potential to harm the audience that consumes it is the way that the audience echo the dangerous thought processes within the comment section. There is only one time where the idea of abuse is mentioned in *After*. This is when Tessa has been researching abuse online and questions whether their relationship could have abusive elements. Instead of Hardin using this softly applied accusation as a moment of reflection and an opportunity to apologise, Tessa’s concerns are immediately and definitively dismissed with Hardin exclaiming ‘you find me *abusive*? I never laid a hand on you, and I never would!’ (Todd, 2015, p.348). In one sentence, *After* not only denies that any abuse took place, contradicting the author’s words in interviews, but makes known its stance on what constitutes abuse. The assertion that abuse is only physical is incorrect and can be dangerous to audiences. Henning and Klesges concluded in their research that 80% of woman entering the court system due to intimate partner violence had previously been psychologically abused (2003, p.862). This

demonstrates that abuse can take many forms. However, the idea that abuse can only be physical is repeated by some fans:

wtf is not a abusive relationship he was NEVER abusive towards tessa he never laid a hand on her but yes some of the things he said were very messed up but she could have left she just didn't and also people do change with time he got better for her so idk what u are saying read the book and if you did well read it again.

(User T, 2019, n.p)

The same talking points, including the idea that Tessa's influence changes Hardin and that she could easily exit the Cycle of Abuse (Walker, 2009, n.p), being echoed by some consumers suggests that the messaging that is repeatedly encoded into *After* can be internalised by fans. This allows them to believe and spread the same dismissing rhetoric. Fredland et al's 2005 study of dating perceptions of eleven to thirteen years olds suggests that teenagers and pre-teens, despite consuming media that depicted relationships and observing relationships in their everyday lives, were not able to understand appropriate behaviour in a relationship. This was particularly true when the children were asked whether physical violence was an appropriate reaction, as evidenced by the fact that many of them responded in terms of 'if': 'I say it's okay to fight back because if they hit you first, you got the right to hit 'em back' (Fredland et al, 2005, p.107). This implies that the respondents were imagining scenarios where they would feel justified hitting their partner instead of dismissing the idea of violence. Just as Eggermont concluded in 2004 that lack of experience left teenagers more vulnerable to influence, Fredland suggested that this same lack of experience and immaturity 'may cause them to not fully appreciate or underestimate the true consequences of the violence they observe around them' (Fredland et al, 2005, p.109).

The commenters that defend Hardin's violence and persist that the relationship is not abusive due to Hardin not hitting Tessa is only made more concerning when considering that



Fredland also concluded that ‘peer group was the most influential force related to attitudes and behaviours around dating relationships and violence’ (2005, p. 110). The *After* fanfiction has millions of comments full of users not only providing their line-by-line commentary, but having conversations with each other, making the other users their peers. Comment sections act as a form of paratexts, the name given to additional information given outside of the main body of work that may provide context than can change the audience’s perception of the text. Paratexts come in two forms: peritext and epitext. The former refers to content situated within the text such as titles, prologues, and dedications, with the latter being the ‘messages which are situated, at least originally, outside the book: generally, with the backing of the media (interviews, conversations), or under the cover of private communication’ (Genette, 1991, p. 264). Paratexts, once uncovered by an audience, may influence their perception of the text by providing them different points of reference and additional information to consider. For example, a reader may view a character’s apology in a story as sincere when reading but then discover an interview from the author where they describe that character as manipulative and sly. When re-reading the book, the reader may then view this apology as insincere, the opposite of their initial interpretation, due to the influence of the epitext allowing them to consider alternative decodings. In relation to *After*, Wattpad places considerable emphasis on the comment section of stories, interworking the comments into the user interface by the comment symbol being present after each paragraph along with the number of comments that paragraph has. This allows the reader to be constantly reminded of the comment section’s existence and makes it harder to read the story without engaging with the commentary of other users. Therefore comments echoing incorrect and potentially harmful talking points could be influential in reinforcing the messaging of the narrative and aid in convincing the audience to decode the relationship as non-abusive. The first chapter of the *After* fanfiction contains no narrative content, only existing to welcome readers and

promote the film adaptations. Despite this, it still has a comment section that new readers can engage with. Due to this, a new reader with no pre-conceived ideas about the story may read the copious amounts of praise towards Tessa and Hardin's relationship from returning readers. Learning that the story is a romance, the new reader could then view Hardin and Tessa's dynamic through this dominant-hegemonic perspective of romance whereas they may have decoded the dynamic as abusive without the audience input. The potential impact of the comment section echoing the victim-blaming messaging provides evidence to reasonably view *After* as an irresponsible use of unregulated platforms. This is due to the possible influence the paratext of the comments could have on how readers view the dynamic between Hardin and Tessa.

*After* is not a series that takes the time to consider the impact that it has on its audience. Todd handles interpersonal abuse carelessly and without concern for the demographic reading it despite acknowledging the age of readers; her apparent neglect aided by the lack of regulation as to what can be posted to Wattpad. This carelessness in portraying abuse can be viewed simply through the ending of the series. Hardin and Tessa could never marry, Hardin never wants to and makes a point to only mention marriage to convince Tessa to stay through giving her false hope, begging her with empty words such as 'marry me, Tess. Please just marry me, and I swear I'll never do anything like this again' (Todd, 2015, p.168). Hardin never wants children and forbids Tessa from mentioning them, demanding she agree to 'not bring up children' (Todd, 2014b, p.467). When paired with Tessa being diagnosed with a condition that would make it 'not impossible, but highly unlikely' (Todd, 2015, p.289) that she could have children, this highlights how the two of them ending the series married with multiple children is both unbelievable and implies a message that can be harmful. Tessa frequently expresses her desire for children and her dreams of a future with Hardin that he could never give to her. The fact that she achieves what is repeatedly presented to the

audience as impossible could be decoded as marriage and children being Tessa's reward for suffering. Just as she is compared to a religious figure when Hardin's rape victim calls her Hardin's 'salvation', this is akin to the Christian teaching of suffering and endurance. If God rewards those who suffer then it could be inferred that Tessa 'wins' her dream of marriage and children by what appears to be divine intervention. Hardin and Tessa spend most of their time together fighting and clashing personalities even without the consideration of the abuse. Possibly due to the previous audience backlash, Todd may have felt the need to appease her readers by concluding the series with a happier ending when writing the published version, disclosing to Refinery29: 'I don't know if I wanted them to end up together. I just wrote it, and they *had* to be" (2019, n.p). If *After* were to lean more into the reality of abuse, Hardin would be more likely to kill Tessa than be happily married to her as the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) reported that 43% of 470 domestic deaths were from intimate partner violence between April 2020-March 2022 (NPCC, 2022, n.p). Instead of this, Todd chose the unrealistic and unearned happy ending of marriage for the couple. Tessa overcomes the impossible: fixing Hardin and as a result is rewarded with children and a happy marriage, and all she has to do is endure abuse and martyr herself. The message of enduring abuse for the possibility of a reward that could never come and the encouragement to have blind faith in an abuser to change is a hazardous one. This is made even more true as the series is marketed to a young audience suggested to be impressionable by the highly immersive and interactive content (Gerbner and Gross, 1972; Ryan 2001; Eggermont, 2004). Partnered with the demographic's likely inexperience with relationships and undeveloped cognitive ability, this depiction and marketing is at best highly irresponsible and at worst actively harmful.

#### Progression of Encoding from Fanfiction to Film

Through the differences between the original fanfiction and the published novels, the encoding of Hardin's character in particular is changed to make him more sympathetic. The

motivation for this may have been the audience's decoding of his more grotesque actions. The bet, for example, is altered to be more forgivable, allowing audiences to see Hardin's motivations as less sinister as well as framing of the sexually explicit moments in the first novel being changed to be less noticeable as coercion. The ending also considers audience feedback, clearly observed and acknowledged, by having it concretely state that Hardin and Tessa end the series together for the rest of their lives. This firmly encodes the story as a romance. These changes encode Hardin not as less abusive, but less malicious in his intentions, which allows for audiences to favour him and wish for his healing rather than viewing him as an antagonist.

The *After* series has also been adapted into a film series, meaning that there was more regulation involved in producing the content. Todd had complete creative control over the fanfiction and the published *After* novels as Gallery Books were 'committed to keeping the story people know' (Publishers Weekly, 2014, n.p). In contrast to this, film production requires more moderation. Investors, writers, directors, producers, and editors are just a few of the moving parts of film production, and a considerable amount of them will have the professional and academic knowledge to recognise and understand conventional encoding. As a result of this, many scenes from the 2019 *After* film do not exist in the books. Unlike written media which comes with the benefit of seeing into the character's mind and emotions, allowing audiences to understand their motivations and regrets, films rely on visual codes and dialogue without the constant commentary. If the films followed the narrative of the books, audiences would not witness Hardin's consistent thoughts of trauma or be exposed to his and Tessa's mental justifications of his abuse towards her. Rather, they would only see him constantly degrade and hurt her which would likely be decoded as abusive. Due to this, the films feature montages for a considerable amount of the runtime, including scenes such as aquarium dates and library visits that never appear in the novels. In fact, none of the

montages feature scenes from the books; happy scenes between Hardin and Tessa are rare as they spend most of their time fighting. For the films to be labelled as a romance, Hardin's character and the storyline in general had to be watered down. Hardin does not yell at Tessa or act obsessively violent. He does not break their belongings, nor does he suffer night terrors and characters such as Zed act as little more than background characters. The focus is on Hardin and Tessa's sexual attraction to each other and their inability to get along; Hardin is likened to a bad boyfriend rather than a vicious abuser. The film explores just a small portion of Hardin and Tessa's dynamic and only follows the skeleton of the plot points. Another key difference is that Todd removed herself from the final film, citing the shift in the portrayal of Hardin and Tessa being one of the reasons: 'it feels a little strange to have someone writing like the history of my characters that's not accurate' (Cinema Blend, 2022, n.p). The inaccuracy to which she refers is possibly the lack of story due to the removal of most of the scenes portraying abuse. Yet audiences have been able to decode the toxicity of the relationship – the comment 'this is a toxic relationship, and we need to stop promoting it' (User U, 2020, n.p) indicating the prevalence of the abuse in the source material, labelled as a 'young adult romance'. Even with much of the plot removed from Hardin and Tessa's relationship in the film, audiences can still recognise it as abuse. This highlights just how abusive Hardin and Tessa's dynamic is. It is so ingrained within the DNA of the story that it is impossible to show them in a healthy light.

#### After, Creator Responsibility, and Regulation

*After* implants messaging that forgives the abuser and encourages the abuse victim to stay in the relationship, placing the responsibility of improving the situation on the victim rather than the perpetrator. Analysis of *After*'s repeated validations of toxic and possessive thought processes, rationalisations being proven correct, and the unearned forgiveness and reconciliation of the couple, indicates that *After* does not handle interpersonal abuse

responsibly. This failure could be interpreted as an active promotion of abusive relationship dynamics. It could be considered that if the original story faced third-party moderation that vetted for harm, that the many instances of condoning abuse may not have been allowed to be published without alteration to vulnerable audiences.

Anna Todd left author's notes at the end of each chapter of the fanfiction as is common practice amongst Wattpad authors, directly communicating with her audience with notes such as 'I love how many comments each chapter has!! It is so amazing to be able to hear (read) what everyone has to say! I read every single comment, even if I don't respond to all of them' (Imaginator1d, 2013b, Chapter 124, n.p). This direct communication not only lessens the critical distance between producer and consumer, but also demonstrates that Todd was likely aware of audience reactions as previously seen in how the ending has been altered to appease readers. Creators reading and responding to comments suggests that they can observe the consumers decoding their work, hence being able to witness them defending an abuser due to the framing of the character. Creators who receive real-time feedback are presented with the unique opportunity of changing their content as it is released to protect their audience, as well as editing it after publishing as is the case with Wattpad. Due to this, it may be reasonable to consider creator responsibility. Fanfiction authors are not the same as screenwriters with teams behind them with years of academic and professional experience. As a result of this, fanfiction authors, who are often amateurs, cannot be held to the same standard as these large productions. They can be expected to make mistakes, such as the names of the One Direction members still being littered within the fanfiction and *the Pride and Prejudice* quote mentioned frequently in the series, 'I never wish to be parted from you from this day on' (Wright, 2005, n.p), being a quote from the film and not the novel as *After* suggests. Professional teams would have multiple people working together to verify such things and ensure high quality, but content creators are often a singular person working to

produce content for free as a hobby and it would be unrealistic to expect the same quality of work. However, as there is potential for these amateur writers to hold massive influence over their readers and build careers out of posting on these platforms, it could be beneficial to consider that similar standards of harm reduction be implemented, and creators held responsible for their encoding of messaging marketed to teenagers.

#### Chapter Four: *Dream SMP* and Interactive Media

Another, even more recent, piece of interactive media is the *Dream SMP* - a web series streamed live on Twitch. Unlike *After* which, despite its fanfiction origins, can be consumed through the written word of a book series or through watching a series of films, the *Dream SMP* was broadcasted live on social media. This allowed the viewers to interact directly with the creators streaming the story. The interactivity of the *Dream SMP* was multifaceted. The live element, similar to live theatre, created a sense of immediacy within its audience as, although the videos were available to watch after the event, the fan community put considerable emphasis on watching it live. Discussions pertaining to the streams took place over other social media platforms, such as X, in real-time, meaning that if the viewer was not there when it happened, they were missing out. Due to this, as well as the popularity of the people involved in the *Dream SMP*, the view count of the streams could be in the hundreds of thousands, peaking at 800,000 live viewers during one of the streams (User V, 2021, n.p). Such high view counts and follower numbers which reached into the millions resulted in the members of the *Dream SMP* having influence over their followers. This was due to the interactivity of their platform and their direct communication with their communities through mediums such as X which allowed them to engage with their fans regularly, asking for feedback and criticisms. The popularity also came from another interactive element of the series: the medium of the video game *Minecraft*, SMP itself being an acronym for ‘Survival Multi-Player’. This means that multiple players play together on a server where they must work for their resources rather than be able to summon them at will which is available in other types of *Minecraft* gameplay. *Minecraft* is a popular game, with over 176 million copies sold, earning it the accolade ‘the bestselling video game of all time’ (Gaming Gorilla, 2021, n.p). Furthermore, its first-person perspective allows the player, and by extension the viewer, to become immersed in the narrative world because, as previously discussed in Chapter Two,



they view the world through the eyes of the avatar as if they themselves exist in the narrative world. The immersive and popular video game, the element of liveness, and strength of the community surrounding the *Dream SMP* made it greatly impactful in popular culture, trending on X daily and topping the charts in Twitch view count. The significance and influence of the *Dream SMP* makes it a viable option for analysis and comparison to media such as *After*.

The heightened interactivity of the *Dream SMP*, even more so than *After* due to the live element, could mean that the creators of the *Dream SMP* may have felt some more personal responsibility in how they presented their storylines. As seen within the previous chapter, the framing of an abusive relationship may influence audiences to decode and recite potentially harmful messaging in comment sections, reinforcing the encoding to other users. However, creators with ‘better’ intentions can also inadvertently prompt audiences to side with the abuser even with efforts to depict interpersonal abuse in a sensitive manner when they create without regulations providing criteria to follow and structure to aid them. This can be seen within a prominent storyline within the *Dream SMP*, known as the ‘Exile Arc’.

It is important to note when considering the *Dream SMP* that the streamers were playing fictional characters named after themselves – they were roleplaying. The server was originally just friends having fun together which gradually developed into a storyline and therefore there was not a specific moment where the story began. Hence when referring to ‘Dream’ or ‘Tommy’, unless stated otherwise, I am referring to their fictional counterparts. To further add necessary context to the dynamic that I will be unpacking: the *SMP*’s storyline revolved around the characters going to war with each other over territory where the disputes become less about land and more about personal history. Dream and Tommy (also known as ‘TommyInnit’) were the main characters of the Exile Arc, and they were the main instigators in the later disputes as they disliked each other.

The abuse of TommyInnit's character within the roleplay will be broken down using Walker's Cycle of Abuse model (2009, n.p). The interpersonal abuse within the Exile Arc was *not* romantic and was instead rooted in a power imbalance within a platonic relationship between people at different life stages (Dream was twenty-one and Tommy sixteen at the time the narrative unfolded). Walker's Cycle of Abuse (2009, n.p) provides a useful framework through which I will analyse and signpost the abuse Tommy faced within this narrative arc, as it highlights behaviours clearly. Walker's model is primarily focused on male-perpetuated domestic violence, a dynamic that is not displayed within the *Dream SMP* and which has been criticised for its generalisation of abuse. However, it does provide an easily understood structure to abusive dynamics and is therefore useful in signposting what behaviours are abusive to an audience that may not have encountered them before. Using an alternative model whilst comparing representations of abuse would also lessen the accuracy of the comparison of the *Dream SMP* and *After*. These factors are all important to consider when analysing the *Dream SMP* as, whilst it was an improvised story within a video game, it was broadcasted to hundreds of thousands of viewers. Therefore, the *Dream SMP* can be seen to have had influence over those who consumed it live and continue to consume it through the re-uploaded videos. Concerns about the content of this narrative arc are often dismissed with the phrase 'it is just *Minecraft* roleplay'. However, this chapter's analysis of the Exile Arc and the *Dream SMP*'s representation of interpersonal abuse will demonstrate that this narrative was more than 'just' fiction and had the potential to impact its predominantly young audience.

### Calculated Isolation

Tommy was not held in favourable regard by the other members of the *Dream SMP* as, whilst they may not have disliked him, they saw him as an irritant and liability that aided in their troubles through his constant fighting with Dream. Dream's motivation in this story

arc was to break down Tommy's sense of self and inhibitions until he would stop fighting back and hindering Dream's plans to control the server. To do this, Dream needed to physically isolate Tommy from his friends and guarantee that they would not come to his rescue. As the power dynamic between Tommy and Dream differed from that of Tessa and Hardin, isolation and learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975, n.p) was more important than the false sense of security and shallow but overwhelming emotional connection. This was because love and positive emotions would not be present for the victim to form attachments with and cling to when the cycle progressed. Instead, Dream would have to force Tommy into helplessness so that he perceived basic kindness and care as positive treatment used to fuel trauma-bonding (Dutton and Painter, 1981, n.p), meaning it was very important for Dream to isolate Tommy from his friends.

The main manipulation tactic that Dream used to achieve his goal of exiling Tommy was coercion. Coercive control is an abuse tactic where a person uses 'assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim' (Women's Aid, 2019, n.p). Upon discovering that Tommy had accidentally burned down another player's house, Dream used this as a catalyst to enact his plans. He surrounded L'Manberg, the fictional country where Tommy and his friends lived, with a wall, leaving them trapped. As well as informing the citizens and the rulers of the country that it was Tommy's fault they were being imprisoned, he promised that their conditions would worsen if Tommy were not punished severely as something had to 'happen to Tommy for what he's done' (TommyVODS, 2020a, 16:55). This was manipulative as it painted Tommy as a villain who was deserving of punishment and pressured his friends into agreeing with the punishment. The threat of harm for Tommy's peers was effective in persuading them to comply as Dream had explicitly threatened them previously where he made promises of 'no

trade, no-one leaves, no armour or they get slaughtered inside' (TommyVODS, 2020b, 40:18), and so the other members of the *Dream SMP* agreed to Tommy's punishment.

If allowed access to the victim, a close support system may notice signs of abuse and aid the victim in escaping the situation. Due to this, early in the Cycle of Abuse (Walker, 2009, n.p), when isolation is a major priority for the abuser, it is important that those surrounding the victim are not only separated from them, but also that they do not see the abuser as a threat. Dream wanted Tommy completely isolated from everyone and so it was important that any potential support system did not see Dream as a threat to Tommy's safety. Abusers can create a perfect image of themselves to the people in their life so that the victim's support system can unintentionally become complicit in their gaslighting. This idealised version of the abuser is described, albeit anecdotally, by comedian Daniel Sloss when discussing his abusive ex-girlfriend during his *Netflix* special 'Jigsaw':

She created this perfect person, this act that she acted out in public, who everyone fell in love with, who my friends fell in love with, who my family fell in love with, who I fell in love with. She was flawless, and then behind closed doors she was entirely different because she knew I wouldn't have an argument if I then went out into the real world. I'd be like, 'she's being a bitch' and they're like 'she's fucking perfect! How are you ruining this, Daniel?'.  
  
(Netflix, 2018, 46:16)

Dream framed the exile as being necessary to keep Tommy from causing more harm and not that Dream wanted Tommy alone so that he could hurt him. Dream was an authority figure in the SMP and so it was viewed by the others as him doing a public service, creating a positive image in their heads of the situation.

When potential support systems are manipulated in this way, they are unlikely to respond with sympathy when the abuse is revealed to them and as discussed in the previous

chapter, may blame the victim for their own abuse (Dutton and Painter, 1981, p.140). This dynamic would prevent others from believing Tommy if he confided in them about the abuse and lead them to convince Tommy that he was not being abused but rightfully punished, encouraging self-blame and dismissing his concerns just as Tessa's friends did to her in *After*.

The situation of Tommy's potential support system was encoded to show the victim/abuser and abuser/outsider dynamic to the audience. The *Dream SMP* was broadcasted by different streamers, meaning that anyone who only watched a particular streamer would only get one side of the story and may have missed key pieces of information that were only seen through another streamer's point of view. This led to many in the audience watching multiple perspectives but also may have resulted in the people who did not watch Tommy being manipulated in the same manner. During the discussions of Tommy's behaviour and the consideration of exile, Tommy appeared bad-tempered and antagonistic. He constantly acted out and talked badly towards Dream which was considered reckless by the others due to Dream's prior threats to harm them if they did not stay in his good graces. To the audience of other streamers, as with Tommy's peers, Tommy could have been decoded as a threat. This would mean that the only options were to either allow Tommy to stay in L'Manberg where war would break out or exile as Dream made it explicitly clear that 'as long as Tommy is vice president, there can't be peace' (TubboLIVE, 2020, 27:20). Allowing him to stay would have caused destruction and death to others because Tommy was not prepared to behave himself. Due to this interpretation, when the President of L'Manberg, a streamer known as Tubbo who doubled as Tommy's best friend, posted a poll to X asking whether Tommy should be exiled, the audience voted 'yes' (Appendix D). This placed the responsibility on the audience, making them collaborators in the narrative and lessened the critical distance between creator and audience (McGonigal, 2003; Busse, 2017). The streamers may have influenced the audience into choosing exile as an option, but they would have had a plan for how the story

would have continued if they chose not to exile Tommy as they had with previous storylines that involved audience choice (Blake Futch, 2020, n.p). With this, the audience were made complicit in what would happen to Tommy, which showed how easily the framing of a situation can be manipulated and how influential the encoding of a narrative can be.

The showcasing of how powerful encoding can be is only strengthened when considering the other side of the story: Tommy's point of view. Throughout the conversations of whether to exile Tommy, Dream was persistent in antagonising him when Tommy had stated that he was committed to 'staying calm' (TommyVODS, 2020b, 20:17). Dream would privately message Tommy smiley faces whenever Tommy's friends would agree that his behaviour was wrong, signalling that he was getting what he wanted. When they negotiated a probation period as opposed to exile, Dream messaged Tommy, instructing him to 'have fun on probation' (TommyVODS, 2020b, 22:41). This implied to Tommy's viewers that Dream would ensure that anything that Tommy did would be twisted into him breaking probation and therefore becoming exiled. The antagonism worked and where others saw Tommy as being out of control and unruly, those watching Tommy through his own stream could decode that he was helpless in the situation and was trying to find some control where he had none. Viewers of other streamers witnessed Dream informing them that Tommy not being exiled would result in mass harm to the other players, and Tommy's viewers saw Dream taunt him about the proposed probation. Exile may have appeared as the inevitable progression of the story, resulting in the verdict of the vote being to exile Tommy (Appendix D).

When Tommy was exiled from L'Manberg, Dream convinced Tubbo to be the one that issued the order, to which he declared: 'Dream, please detain and escort Tommy out of my country' (TommyVODS, 2020c, 30:16). This was important as Tommy saw this as a personal betrayal as Tubbo was his best friend. Due to this, Tommy believed that everyone

had turned against him, which left him no options for help if he escaped and eventually influenced him to remain in captivity for longer rather than reach out for help.

By exiling Tommy using coercive methods, Dream ensured the social isolation of his victim. Dream could then use the physical isolation of exile to focus on another key aspect of abuse: forced dependency. Upon entering Logstedshire, the barren area that Tommy would stay during his exile, Dream began to hit Tommy. Dream did this every time he visited Tommy, which highlighted to him how helpless and alone he was in the situation. The fact that Dream could and would hit him without consequences reinforced to Tommy that he had no friends to help him. In Tommy's eyes, Dream was the only person that he had in his life at that moment. This is a tactic used by abusers to detach their victims from the outside, seen in how Dream cut off everyone else in Tommy's life, 'isolating [him] from support, exploiting [him], depriving [him] of independence' (Women's Aid, 2019, n.p). To deprive Tommy of his independence, Dream enforced rules of the exile such as not being allowed to leave under threats of violence and, importantly, being forced to give up all his possessions daily. Everyday Tommy would be left with nothing: no food, no weapons, and no protection from hostile creatures in the area which forced him to repetitively work every day to obtain the means of survival. Yet Tommy's efforts would be rendered useless every day when Dream appeared to destroy Tommy's resources. If Tommy wanted to eat, Dream would have to give him the food, if he wanted to get resources that would be destroyed the next day, Dream would lend him tools, if he wanted to go on a walk, Dream would defend him from hostile creatures. Every aspect of Tommy's survival was controlled by Dream to a certain extent, which forced Tommy into helplessness (Seligman, 1975, n.p) so that he would become docile and obedient. Dream wanted to control Tommy as he was 'the only person that doesn't ever listen' to him (TommyVODS, 2020d, 15:34). Some of the audience decoded this manipulation and were able to recognise this behaviour as toxic due to the method of purely

using Tommy's perspective and having the destruction be repetitive to the point of mundanity, as seen with the comment: 'right now Dream is acting as Tommy's handler, punishing him with routine procedures (blowing up his armor) and desensitizing him from toxic abusive tactics (last stream Tommy blew up his own armor with little complaint)' (User W, 2020, n.p). This may have been due to the creators ensuring that every time Dream destroyed Tommy's gear, Tommy appeared more willing and less combative in the process, instead submitting to the action as he became desensitized to the routine. If they had encoded it so Tommy had the same reaction each day instead of this decline into helplessness, the audience may not have been able to decode the manipulative intention behind the action. This encoding supplies evidence to suggest that there was consideration and care put into structuring the Exile Arc and Tommy's deterioration.

Dream also made Tommy dependent on him by gaslighting him into losing his sense of self. This meant that Dream could become his frame of reference, which made it easier for Tommy to be manipulated. An example of this was when Tommy wanted to throw a beach party for his friends to visit him as he was not allowed back in L'Manberg. Whenever Tommy would express that he was missing his friends, Dream would remind him that they exiled him and that they did not miss him with remarks such as, 'it's not like they want you anyway' (TommyVODS, 2020g, 24:39). To Tommy, this was reliable information as not only was he isolated with Dream as his only source of information - the purpose of gaslighting - it was also logical to believe as nobody showed up. These events fuelled his increasing rationalisations that Dream's behaviour was okay because Dream was all he had, shown by Tommy accepting Dream's presence, confessing 'maybe it isn't too bad - just me and you' (TommyVODS, 2020g, 28:04). This increased the trauma-bond as this would be an event that Tommy would view as 'positive' between the two of them (Dutton and Painter, 1981, n.p). This grew distrust in Tommy towards his past friends and made him dependent on



Dream for information and companionship. With no connection to anyone but Dream, Tommy was helpless and without a support system, forcing his trauma-bond with Dream to strengthen. The *Dream SMP* having several perspectives aided the audience in being able to decode this behaviour as manipulative as viewers had the benefit of knowing the whole context: Tommy's friends did not attend the beach party because they were not invited. In fact, Dream had been telling them how much fun Tommy had been having and that he did not want to see them which increased the distance between Tommy and a potential support system as well as highlighting how abusers can gaslight the victim's peers as well. By witnessing Dream twist the situation in his favour, the viewers may have been prevented from believing him when he lied to Tommy, seeing him for the manipulator that he was with one viewer noting, 'if only he knew that tubbo never got an invite and thought Tommy didn't want him to come' (User X, 2020, n.p). The *Dream SMP*'s choice to have multiple perspectives protected the viewer from agreeing with the abuser and may have allowed them to see the manipulation as evidenced by the comment, 'Dream has managed to become the one-person tommy 'relies'' on but also the one that has caused him the most harm. Insane manipulation and gaslighting' (User Y, 2020, n.p).

The audience was also able to see the harrowing effects of manipulation and gaslighting. Tommy's memory had been suffering throughout exile due to the stress, forgetting people that had visited him and believing himself to have been exiled for longer than he had, thinking he had been gone 'for about thirteen days now' (TommyVODS, 2020f, 23:07) when it had only been a few days. This lack of concrete memory is seen in prisoners who have had to endure solitary confinement which, considering that Tommy was not trapped in a concrete room but was in an open environment, can be compared to the extreme distress and social isolation Tommy faced. Dream torturing Tommy introduced 'the presence of noxious stimulation' (Grassian, 2006, p.346) which created a similar experience to those in

solitary confinement. The active threat and delivery of physical violence may have also worsened and accelerated his symptoms as the violent stimuli ‘increased risk of adverse psychiatric consequences’ (Grassian, 2006, p.346). This expedited symptomology was noticed by some of the viewers, who left comments such as ‘anyone notice how tommy has only been in exile for 4 days and yet it feels like he’s been there for years’ (User Z, 2020, n.p), indicating that this may have been intentional to show the audience the gratuitous effects of the psychological abuse. Just as gaslighting in abusive situations has the intention of having the victim lose confidence in their own sense of reality, resulting in them becoming more susceptible to their abuser’s influence, solitary confinement can cause similar effects. Dr. John Lilly of the National Institute of Mental Health observed that once paired with the ‘semi-starvation’ and ‘sleep deprivation’ like that seen throughout Exile Arc, solitary confinement has been seen to ‘weaken personalities’ of prisoners, resulting in them being ‘more susceptible to [forced indoctrination]’ (Grassian, 2006, p.344). This would work in Dream’s favour as he wanted to make Tommy obedient and docile to keep him in a constant state of confusion through isolation. This made it easier for Dream to manipulate him. Viewers took note of this, with some realising that Dream was conditioning Tommy to be obedient, as seen in learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975), with one viewer commenting, ‘Tommy instinctively giving Dream his armour and Dream declines later and Tommy THANKS HIM. Thanks him for not blowing up his armour/axe as if he owes him gratitude. As if Dream did a good thing by not destroying Tommy’s possessions.’ (User A1, 2020, n.p). The reaction from many fans being that of concern and heartbreak, recognising the truth of the situation, implies that this treatment was both encoded and decoded as an abusive situation. Tommy’s gratitude for Dream not destroying his belongings is common in victims of abuse as victims will focus on the brief moments of kindness and ‘hope that this time, the loving and calm period will last’ (Wilson, 2022, p.2). This hope can fuel the rationalisations

needed to cope with the abuse: that the abuse will get better one day as the abuser will stop if the victim does the right thing, in Tommy's case listening and obeying (Frieze, 1979, n.p). The way Tommy clung to basic kindness as though he was undeserving of it, even if that kindness had bad intentions, was generally treated as upsetting by the audience. This contrasts with *After* where Tessa reminiscing on the 'good times' of her relationship with Hardin is met with desire for reconciliation by readers, highlighting how the change in framing can invoke opposite reactions in audiences.

The encoding of these isolating behaviours showcased how easily a narrative can be twisted to suit an abuser's purpose and painted the manipulation of Tommy as horrific. Even those likely to decode in an oppositional or negotiated manner who may not come to these conclusions, perhaps believing Dream's intentions were good, could see the visible change in Tommy's appearance. As Tommy became more distressed his appearance changed, his clothes becoming more ragged to signify that he was declining in health as the abuse worsened. The *Dream SMP* made it clear that the emotional effects of abuse were not something to be romanticised as the audience were forced to witness Tommy's decline.

### Tension Build-Up

Even if Tommy followed Dream's rules and tried his best to 'behave', it was never enough. Dream would continue to hurt Tommy even if he did not break any rules, meaning Tommy could not rationalise that he deserved it. Nothing he ever did was correct, and he would be punished even if he acted in a way that would please Dream, which fed into the learned helplessness that Dream was instilling in him. As previously discussed, learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975, n.p) within abusive dynamics has a purpose of deterring resistance as the victim begins to understand that 'certain outcomes are independent to his or her own behaviour, the individual loses the motivation to change that environment or situation (Dutton and Painter. 1981, p.144). Tommy would just have to accept whatever

happened to him. Nobody was coming to save him, and he was dependent on Dream to the extent that he saw himself as little more than a possession, sadly explaining that Dream was ‘borderline my owner’ (TommyVODS, 2020i, 14:35). By Tommy viewing himself as no more than a pet to Dream, the *Dream SMP* showed a key element of how two people become trauma-bonded: power imbalance (frequency of aversive stimuli being discussed in the previous chapter). As the maltreatment continues, the subordinate person (Tommy), will become more reliant on the person they perceive as dominant (Dream) as they begin to feel ‘more negative in their self-appraisal, more incapable of fending for themselves, and thus more in need of the higher power person’ (Dutton and Painter, 1981, p.147). The power imbalance also worked in Dream’s favour. Tommy regarded him as an owner and became more and more obedient which inflated Dream’s ego, as evidenced by Dream later referring to himself as a God who cannot be killed. The higher person in the power imbalance can ‘develop an overgeneralized sense of their own power’ (Dutton and Painter, 1981, p.147) and may therefore be more likely to keep their victim in this cycle for the constant inflation of their ego.

The nonsensical and sporadic nature of the beatings left Tommy perpetually on edge, desperate to not disobey Dream’s rules and avoid punishment even if the behaviours could be seen as irrational – a signifying factor of the Tension Build-Up phase. A moment that showcased this element of the Cycle of Abuse (Walker, 2009, n.p) was when Tommy ventured away from the primary exile area to seek out another member of the SMP who lived nearby, Technoblade, known as ‘Techno’. It should be noted that Dream himself was the person who told Tommy he lived nearby, setting a trap for Tommy to follow so that he could punish him. Acts of manipulation through trap-setting is common in abuse where the victim has become complacent. By tempting Tommy into breaking rules that had been clearly stated, the punishment could be rationalised as being deserved. This would place Dream as a

position of authority which is often seen in parental abuse where a child's disobedience is met with punishment by the parent who seemingly has their best interest at heart. The result of this would be the strengthening of the power dynamic between the two and therefore intensifying the trauma-bond. In reality, Tommy had no intentions of escaping at this time and was only curious as to how far away Technoblade lived from him. Despite this, Tommy was plagued by anxiety about the idea, repeating phrases such as 'what would Dream think?' (TommyVODS, 2020h, 16:45), which showcased his fear of the consequences of upsetting Dream: violence. This fear would keep Tommy compliant as 'domestic perpetrators don't need physical violence to maintain their power - they only need to make their victims believe they are capable of it' (Hill, 2019, p.17). Tommy knew that Dream was capable of severe violence, and that terrified him. Despite Dream not being logged onto the server and therefore not being present in the game-world, Tommy was seen to be stressed during his journey, constantly questioning his decision and contemplating turning back: 'I wanna go back, I wanna go back. I don't like this now; I don't like this now. We've been away for too long' (TommyVODS, 2020f, 9:59). This anxiety was also a symptom of learned helplessness as Tommy was being consistently taught that he could not do anything independently. He was without Dream, away from an environment he was familiar with, and making choices he was not confident in. Due to these factors, he panicked, resembling a child scared of his parents. The scene reached its climax when Tommy reached Techno's house just as Dream entered the game. Tommy was immediately thrown into a blind panic, and he sprinted back to Logstedshire, desperate to get there before Dream to avoid the consequences of leaving, chanting 'we run back, we run back, we run back' (TommyVODS, 2020f, 13:10). Tommy called himself foolish for leaving, the fear consuming him. This resentment of prior choices stemmed from knowing the consequences of non-compliance, a thought process that had been distilled into him via Dream's actions during the Tension Build-Up phase.

The *Dream SMP* encoded this sequence to play out like a horror film, which allowed the audience to feel the fear Tommy's character was feeling. The choice for the streamers to broadcast with their cameras on, at least those who usually stream with their faces visible (some prefer privacy), resulted in the viewers being able to see the streamer's emotions as the scenes unfolded. They could hear the panic in Tommy's voice and see the fear on his face which immersed them in the content. The platform that the *Dream SMP* was broadcasted on, Twitch, also contributed to the encoding as it was streamed live, meaning the consumers did not know whether Tommy would make it back to Logstedshire in time or if he would be caught. By extension they did not know if he would be killed for falling for Dream's trap as Dream had already killed him twice at this point and he only had one life left as per the rules of the server. This made the experience more immersive due to the audience being emotionally invested and feeling Tommy's fear, echoing the movie-goers feelings of immersion interviewed by J.R Hilgard discussed in Chapter One (cited in Ryan, 2001, p.97-98) but made more intense due to the live and unpredictable nature of the medium. Other characters were also seen as supportive of the idea that this was a scary moment, as opposed to enforcing the idea that Tommy would deserve punishment for disobeying rules which would be expected from the other characters in *After*. It is hard to distinguish whether fellow player Philza's message of 'run' (TommyVODS, 2020f, 13:12) to Tommy was from the character or from the content creator. Regardless, it implied to the audience that Tommy had every right to fear Dream in that moment, something that would not have been necessary if Dream's character were not written to be seen as abusive. The audience witnessed how terrified Tommy was in this moment and due to the lessened critical distance between creator and audience, interactive medium, and the heightened immersion encouraged by the live streams, the viewers had to opportunity to feel Tommy's fear. The comments of this uploaded stream indicated the audience's fears for Tommy, highlighting their concern around him

running to Techno's house, one user expressing their worry by commenting, 'im getting exTREMELY freaked out over how much control dream has over tommy...like, tommy says "dream won't like it if i stole" like my heart legitimately fucking stopped' (User B1, 2020, n.p). The Tension Build-Up process was shown through Tommy vocalising his anxieties and how he framed all his decisions around Dream's approval. Through the specific phrases that Tommy said in these heightened moments of anxiety, and by allowing the audience to visibly see the terror on his face, the *Dream SMP* creators presented to the audience just how psychologically damaging this stage was. They highlighted how Dream was altering Tommy's thought processes, and this appeared to scare the audience.

### Acute Explosion

Where Hardin Scott was directly verbally and emotionally abusive towards Tessa, Dream was also physically abusive to Tommy. Just as with *After*, the *Dream SMP* followed the model of each turn of the Cycle of Abuse (Walker, 2009, n.p) becoming more severe. This became evident when analysing Dream's behaviour towards Tommy whenever he would transition into the Acute Explosion phase. As Tommy was used to being physically assaulted and threatened, aiding his descent into learned helplessness, Dream subjected to Tommy distress by taking away what few privileges he had. This included destroying and ridiculing structures that he built and temporarily destroying his enderchest in retaliation for Tommy angering him. This chest is an item in *Minecraft* that is only accessible to the player, whereas other chests can be opened by other players, meaning that valuable items are stored there. These allowances of an enderchest, visits to his old home, and additional gifts such as a trident would act as the 'gift-giving' often seen in Love-Bombing (Walker, 2009, n.p) to strengthen Tommy and Dream's trauma-bond through intermittent reinforcement rather than promote forgiveness (Dutton and Painter, 1981, n.p). This is because Dream had no real reason to make Tommy like him or forgive him as forcing Tommy to believe he deserved the

abuse was more effective in keeping him isolated. As a result of this, there was no distinct Love-Bombing phase seen in the Exile Arc, only the display of Love-Bombing behaviours such as this gift-giving, which could then be weaponised to cause emotional distress when taken away. By stealing this chest from Tommy, Dream took the very few personal items that Tommy had left, including a music disc that Tommy held as his prized possession. Although this lasted less than a single stream, the emotional impact of these possessions being taken was seen by the audience and Dream's power over Tommy was made clear to him. This behaviour culminated in Dream exploding on Tommy when he discovered that Tommy had been secretly storing items to keep them safe from the daily destruction, in the hope that they would aid him in a potential escape. Enraged by his perceived loss of power, Dream destroyed Logstedshire and everything that Tommy had built in his exile, as well as removing the small number of privileges that he had earned. An example of these privileges would be when Dream had allowed Tommy back into the main area of the SMP for Christmas, an abuse tactic used to strengthen the trauma-bond by allowing him small rewards as positive stimuli (Dutton and Painter, 1981, n.p). The severe lack of freedom that Tommy had experienced prior to this made him grateful for even the smallest freedom which allowed him to see Dream in a more positive light. Tommy had been thankful for these perceived privileges, but Dream escalated the punishment further by revealing that he would not be returning to Tommy for many days, leaving him completely alone. Dream leaving him, being forced into further isolation, and the prolonged psychological distress that Tommy was experiencing resulted in the climax of the exile arc: Tommy's attempted suicide. After intense manipulation and narrowing Tommy's focus to be solely on Dream, leaving him for an indefinite amount of time was dangerous. Tommy was heavily dependent on Dream as he was forced into learned helplessness and lost his sense of self (Seligman, 1975, n.p). Due to this, Tommy was not allowed to do anything for himself, not allowed to speak to anyone, and



all his decisions were centred around how Dream would feel, a mindset born from the Tension Build-Up stage. So, without Dream, Tommy was helpless and, unable to imagine a life that did not involve Dream and his control. As a result, Tommy saw suicide as a viable option rather than deal with the crippling anxiety of being without the person to whom he was trauma-bonded. The helplessness was not just a feeling directed at Tommy's ability to live, but also his ability to endure. He saw suicide as the only escape from the torment as he did not have the mindset or perceived support system to run away and survive on his own. Once Dream left, he climbed to a great height and planned to end his life, having been suicidal for several days which Dream was aware of as he had told him 'it's not your time to die yet' (TommyVODS, 2020d, 1:24:30). This reflects real-life abuse as the Home Office's corporate report detailed that of 470 deaths in a domestic setting between April 2020 to March 2022, 27% of them were suspected victim suicides, with a further 43% being through homicide (Home Office, 2021, n.p). These figures only represented reported abuse and focused on domestic abuse which does not extend to other types of interpersonal abuse, such as that seen within the *Dream SMP*. Due to the narrow focus of the Home Office report, it can be believed that the percentage of people experiencing interpersonal abuse that ultimately end their life may be higher. This made it even more imperative that the creators handled Tommy's suicidal thoughts with care, the inclusion of suicidal ideation to a young demographic in general allowing room for creator responsibility within the *Dream SMP* to be questioned. Despite this, the encoding of the final exile stream firmly portrayed this series of events as being devastating but also reinforced that Tommy was the victim and undeserving of this treatment. This sentiment was shared by many in the audience, as indicated by this comment: 'even knowing it's acting and it's apart of the script but seeing tommy so broken and being manipulated by dream fucking destroys you man, like i'm nearly in tearrrsss wtf' (User C1, 2020, n.p). Whereas in *After* this may have been encoded as a mistake that Hardin

made in the heat of the moment, the gradual progression in the severity of Dream's behaviour within the Acute Explosion phase showcased that this was a pattern of behaviour from an abuser.

Tommy did not kill himself. Instead, when he was left alone with his own thoughts and was able to process his situation, he realised that he was the victim. For the first time, he reached clarity and told the audience aloud that Dream did not want to teach him to listen but that he wanted to watch him deteriorate as he realised 'he wasn't here to be my friend. He said it, he was just here so he could watch me' (TommyVODS, 2020j, 38:46). He was able to reach the stage of an abusive relationship where a victim feels capable of leaving as they release themselves from the denial that the relationship is functional and caring and are able 'to redefine the relationship as abusive and label themselves as victims' (Anderson and Saunders, 2003, p.175–6). By having this thought process verbally stated to the audience in no uncertain terms, as well as the visual representation of Dream's behaviour, the audience were directly informed that this behaviour was abusive, and that Tommy was a victim of interpersonal abuse. After his realisation, Tommy climbed down from his tower and ran away to Technoblade's house, escaping exile, Dream, and finding a potential support system. Ending the initial Exile Arc on a positive note showed the audience that suicide was not the answer to such entrapment and that there was always hope for Tommy, and people like him, to heal and improve.

#### The *Dream SMP*'s Representation of Abuse

The *Dream SMP* showcased the stages of Walker's Cycle of Abuse (2009, n.p) within the two weeks that the initial Exile Arc was broadcasted, detailing how the behaviours progressively worsened over time. Tommy's rapid deterioration of his physical, emotional, and mental health was clearly shown and encoded as being a negative and heartbreaking process that greatly upset the audience. This may have reinforced the message that

interpersonal abuse is a negative experience for the victim repeatedly to viewers who have been suggested to learn through repetition (Sellers et al, 2015; Jensen, 2015). Whereas *After* encoded Hardin's motivations as being misguided but born out of immense love for his victim, Dream was painted as a manipulator whose intentions were to harm Tommy. Although the Exile Arc had its faults in representing abuse, it appeared to have made a considerable effort to communicate to the *Dream SMP*'s audience that abuse is a horrific thing to experience through its specific encoding.

The *Dream SMP* did not isolate its education of its audience to those two weeks; they also made the responsible decision to continue the abuse storyline past the point of Tommy's escape and showed the after-effects of abuse. Once Tommy physically left exile, he did not forget the abuse, nor did he instantly heal from it which may have been easier for the streamers to portray. Instead, the creators highlighted the importance of having a support system by showing the impact on the victim of not having one available to help him. Tommy's feelings of abandonment aided his trauma-bond with Dream, which may have allowed the audience to speculate how having a support system to lessen Tommy's isolation may have prevented this. Due to the trauma-bonding and gaslighting done by Dream, Tommy both feared his tormentor and longed for the comfort he gave him. Whenever Tommy was anxious, he would cry out for Dream's help: 'where's Dream? I need my friend, Dream' (TommyVODS, 2020l, 53:32). He would also often immediately defend him and insist that they were friends before becoming confused and correcting himself, an example of this being when he referred to Dream as 'my other good friend Dream' (TommyVODS, 2020k, 6:16) before he instantly doubted this, 'was he my good friend?' (TommyVODS, 2020k, 6:18) The cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962, n.p) he was forced to undergo during exile became habitual and Dream's gaslighting stuck in his mind, showing the audience that situations like Tommy's have long-term effects. The immediate shift in behaviour from being scared to

actively wanting his abuser's presence is known as the 'snap' (Conway and Siegleman, 1978, n.p). Snapping occurs during the period where an abuse victim has left their abuser and is emotionally vulnerable. Anything can emotionally overwhelm the victim and send them back into feelings of self-loathing and depression, causing them to seek out the higher person in the power imbalance as the feelings of helplessness overcome them. It is during this period that a support system is most needed as 'survivors of abuse return to their abusive partners an average of seven times before they leave for good' (National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2023, n.p). Victims need a support system around them to help ground their thinking and push them to not return to their abuser. For Tommy, Technoblade acted as his much-needed support system. Whilst he did not directly confront Tommy's conflicted feelings, Technoblade offered Tommy support by helping him calm down and reassured Tommy that his feelings were valid despite their uncomfortable manifestation. This simultaneously reassured the audience that Tommy's reactions were understandable and to be expected, not ridiculed, which may have further encoded to the audience that Tommy's experiences were traumatic and prompted sympathy within viewers. Any sense of being emotionally overwhelmed may have inspired Tommy to seek Dream out and return to exile as it had become his 'normal' and he could receive comfort from Dream due to their trauma-bond. This made it important for Techno to navigate the situation carefully and not feed into these feelings.

Despite all that he endured whilst under Dream's 'care', Tommy still called out for him as 'an animal (and perhaps a person) of any age, exposed to certain individuals or physical surroundings for any length of time will inevitably become attached to them' (Scott, 1963, p.189). One distressing moment for viewers and Tommy's character was when Dream arrived at Technoblade's house when Tommy was in the yard, guided in by an oblivious friend, Wilbur. Tommy had a panic attack and was visibly frightened by his presence,

screaming ‘Where’s Dream? Wait, wait, Wilbur, where’s Dream? WILBUR!’

(TommyVODS, 2020m, 22:53). For viewers, the arrival of Dream also ignited fear in them as the encoding of the *Dream SMP* may have prompted them to associate Dream with violence and abuse towards Tommy, one viewer commenting, ‘this man has no right making my anxiety rise so much when hiding from Dream’ (User D1, 2021, n.p). This gives support for the *Dream SMP* encoding the abuser and the villain who should be feared and hated, contrasting *After*’s romanticising abuse. Logically, Tommy feared Dream and that is why he panicked when he showed up, but he also sought comfort from Dream in his absence.

Tommy was frantic when he called for Dream and frantic when he hid from him, highlighting how abuse can make victims act in a way that does not seem rational even to the abused individual as they attempt to cope with their overwhelming feelings. It also showcased the power and complexity of a trauma-bond as Tommy still sought Dream for comfort, as he had been conditioned to, despite it being against his best interest. For a support system, this can be frustrating to witness, but it is important that they continue to support them and allow the victim to process their emotions. When Tommy panicked when remembering a traumatic event and once again grew confused and frantic, Technoblade replied to Tommy’s constant apologising with ‘Tommy, it’s fine, it’s fine. No-one recovers in a day, Tommy’

(TommyVODS, 2020l, 53:25). This provided a sense of safety for Tommy as previously his emotions were punished by Dream. This safety was only reinforced later in their relationship when Dream attempted to coerce Tommy through threats to return to exile and his care which was interrupted by Techno defending him with the threat, ‘that’s gonna be a bit of a problem, Dream, ‘cause this guy is with me’ (TommyVODS, 2020n, 01:06:08). The *Dream SMP* gave representation for what can happen to a victim if they are left with nobody but their abuser and what can happen if they have people around them to comfort them and offer reassurance as well as help prevent them returning to the cycle. Some members of the audience noticed

this improvement in Tommy's demeanour, one viewer commenting 'though he can still be annoying (character him not actual him), he's now more confident and stronger' (User E1, 2020, n.p). This provides evidence to imply that the *Dream SMP*'s creators encoded Tommy's mood improving post-exile to place emphasis on the importance of a support system to help elicit sympathy from the audience towards the victim rather than encouraging blame.

A vital element that communicated that abuse is neither romantic nor beneficial was that the abuse was very violent physically, as well as emotionally. In contemporary media, abuse that is done through romantic partners tends to feature coercion and emotional violence rather than physical violence, such as Hardin belittling Tessa. If the abuser is violent in this media, it is towards other people. This feeds the illusion of exclusivity and the romanticised idea of the romantic interest being good for the abuser as the victim can 'change them'. This is seen in characters such as Tate Langdon in *American Horror Story* (2011-), Hardin Scott in *After*, and Damon Salvator in *Vampire Diaries* (2009). These characters are incredibly violent, some are even murderers, and yet they never physically hurt their victim of interpersonal abuse. Viewers can romanticise the relationship and see it as beneficial, as the societal link and conventional encoding of abuse being defined as physically violent is not crossed as seen by Hardin's dismissal of his abusive actions due to him never physically hurting Tessa. Characters that are physically abusive towards their victims are identified as an abuser with greater ease due to conventional encoding of abusers teaching audiences that violence within any relationship is morally wrong, even if their emotional and psychological abuse is the same as that enacted by 'non-violent' characters. Nate Jacobs from HBO's *Euphoria* (2019-) physically chokes his girlfriend once onscreen and is forever, correctly, seen as a domestic abuser by the story and audience no matter how much backstory he is given. Campbell Elliott from *The Society* (2019) almost kills his girlfriend by drowning her and is condemned by the show as an abuser. It may be harder for audiences to rationalise the

actions of physical abuse compared to emotional abuse as it is less debatable: what is manipulation could be interpreted differently but there is no denying that a punch in the face is violent. Dream physically hit Tommy. In fact, he beat Tommy to death. Emphasising the physical element of abuse was not just appropriate for the medium of *Minecraft*, but also heavily implied to the audience that Dream was the villain in the story, which may have been understood by the audience as evidence by the comment, ‘he’s the biggest villain. The undertone of everything he says is so cruel’ (User F1, 2020, n.p).

Dream was also punished for his actions against Tommy, as well as his behaviours towards the other members of the SMP. Whereas Hardin and Tessa’s reunion at the end of the *After* series could be interpreted as a reward for Hardin’s abusive behaviour and Tessa’s martyrdom, Dream was imprisoned in an inescapable fortress. In the *Dream SMP*, Dream’s imprisonment acted as a stark warning to audiences that Dream was not a character to favour in this story arc. This strict encoding was implied to be understood by viewers, as indicated by this comment: ‘Dream is really sick in the head at this moment’ (User G1, 2021, n.p). The other characters assembled to aid Tommy and Tubbo in imprisoning Dream, thereby providing support for Tommy and reinforcing that he was the victim. This stands in contrast to a story encoded to see abusers as sympathetic which may have the other characters defend the abuser, as seen in *After*.

The imprisonment of Dream concluded the Exile Arc and its extended fallout and whilst Tommy continued to be affected and would speak about it to a select few characters, the storyline progressed to focus on other characters. The narrative was pushed by the specific choices that the creators seemed to choose to encode within it as they had the opportunity to influence the audience into believing that Tommy deserved his extensive punishment by Dream but appeared to choose not to. The creators behind the *Dream SMP* may have been aware of the importance and impact of encoding, indicated by how

TommyInnit used the footage from these streams. Tommy uploaded two different versions of his streams, one being uncut, full-length recordings of his streams to his VOD channel, TommyVODS, and the other videos posted to his main YouTube channel, TommyInnit, edited down to an average of ten minutes. ‘VOD’ in this context stands for Video On Demand, referring to the video of a previous livestream that can be accessed after, meaning that people who could not watch it live can still witness the content. The uncut versions displayed the full extent of his time in exile, but the videos uploaded to his main channel focused on the moments throughout his streams that would be seen as more humorous. These would include instances of the streamers breaking character and joking around as friends within the exile streams, which encoded a narrative that the situation was less frightening and more fun. This is seen through the stark difference in how the audience reacted to the two different versions. For example, the video ‘I keep getting harassed by Dream in Exile’ (TommyInnit, 2020) and the VOD ‘Tommy Is So Lonely in Exile with Dream’ (TommyVODS, 2020e) uses the same footage. However, whilst the VOD’s thumbnail features a picture of Tommy appearing upset and isolated with Dream, the YouTube video thumbnail has an image of Tommy laughing, which may give the impression that it is a fun video. Many comments on the stream VOD reacted with concern for Tommy as he is abused by Dream, one user writing ‘are we not gonna talk about Dream emotionally abusing a 16-year-old over armour’ (User H1, 2020, n.p). In contrast, the YouTube video was met with positive reception such as, ‘who else likes dreams and Tommy’s friendship it’s so chaotic but they have their wholesome moments’ (User I1, 2020, n.p). The same footage enlisted two opposite reactions from its audience, signalling that the creators may be fully aware of how to frame their work to receive their desired reaction. This suggests that the creators not only knew how to intentionally encode the Exile Arc to influence the audience to either feel sorry for Tommy or support Dream, but that they may have understood the consequences of such



creative choices. This could have led Tommy's viewers who only watched his YouTube videos to believe that the Exile Arc was a light-hearted storyline and not the abuse-filled nightmare that stream viewers witnessed. Tommy's official YouTube channel has significantly more subscribers than his VOD channel or Twitch channel, meaning there is a chance that they may have gone on to watch the streams and witnessed the stark difference themselves without warning. The difference in reactions highlight that the creators in the *Dream SMP* seemed to know how to manipulate an audience's decodings by making distinct choices in their encoding and framing of the media.

#### Was the *Dream SMP*'s Representation of Abuse Responsible?

As explained above, it could be suggested that the creators behind the *Dream SMP* put care and consideration into representing the development of abuse and how it harms its victims mentally, physically, and emotionally. Observing the comments on the VODs, the viewers who decoded the content in a dominant-hegemonic manner saw Dream's character as an abuser who deserved punishment and Tommy a victim of abuse. Regarding the content of the Exile Arc and the weeks that followed until Dream's imprisonment, they appear responsible by encoding Dream as the villain who may have had his own motivations but was ultimately viewed with disgust by the audience, implied by the comment 'Dream is SO manipulative, it actually scares me' (User J1, 2020, n.p). However, when showcasing subjects as sensitive as interpersonal abuse to a young audience, the way abuse was encoded and presented goes beyond the content of the Exile Arc itself and must be viewed through a wider lens.

The content of the isolated period of the Exile Arc encoded abuse in a manner that implored the audience to believe that Tommy was the victim but also taught the very important lesson to its young audience that suicide is not the right way to escape abuse. However, it is unfortunate that they did not continue with the hopeful, victim-first, message.

Tommy never recovered from his abuse, as seen with his character continuing to spiral into depression and bitterness throughout the rest of the *Dream SMP*'s existence, untrusting of others and self-isolating. This may have communicated to the audience that abuse stays with people, but it is important to note that Tommy never recovered because it appeared the narrative never allowed him to. The *Dream SMP* ended in November 2022, and from the time of the Exile Arc ending in January 2021 to then, Tommy never had anything truly positive happen to him. Anything that could be interpreted as being positive later turned out to be negative, including the reveal that Dream intentionally allowed himself to be imprisoned as a part of his master plan which tainted Tommy's greatest victory over his abuser. Tommy was largely left alone to wallow in his negative thoughts and, whilst he regained his friendship with Tubbo and was not seen with as much vitriol as before by his peers, he was never able to form a solid support system. This allowed him to become filled with anger and hatred which may have been justified but was not healthy and led to his behaviour in the finale.

The *Dream SMP* concluded with Tommy and Tubbo plotting to kill Dream. Tommy was shown to have been obsessing over killing him when he explained 'I'm not saying killing is the right thing to do, I am saying it's the only thing to do' (TommyVODS, 2022a, 16:00). The desire for retaliation is realistic for victims of abuse which Michael Johnson, author of *A Typology of Domestic Abuse*, explains as a feeling of 'he's not going to do that without paying some price for it' (2008, p.10). Tommy spoke of being struck by fear whenever he saw his abuser and not being able to handle it anymore, confiding in Tubbo that 'just the terror, the terror of seeing that lime green bastard's skin sent waves through me, I almost collapsed' (TommyVODS, 2022a, 25:25). This referred to Dream's *Minecraft* avatar which was lime green. The desperation that Tommy conveyed and his desire to wreak revenge on the person that wronged him is common in abuse victims that begin to display 'violent resistance' (Johnson, 2008, p.10). This is when an abusive situation progresses to the victim becoming

violent to deter their abuser or defend themselves as ‘a victim of intimate terrorism may feel the only way [they] can escape from this horror is to kill [their] tormentor’ (Johnson, 2008, p.10). Violent resistance is behaviour that is primarily referred to through the lens of domestic abuse, but the desire for a victim to kill their abuser is not one exclusive to victims of domestic violence. This displayed to the audience representation outside of the ‘perfect victim’ which is a societal concept in criminal justice. A perfect victim is perceived as innocent, pure, and completely undeserving of what they were victim to. According to this archetype, the perfect victim should also have never done anything wrong to mar their image – unlike Tommy who had a history of disruptive behaviour. Tommy was not a perfect victim but still a victim nonetheless who was undeserving of torment and was treated as such by the narrative. In real life, many people will have done something morally suspect. Therefore it is significant that an audience of teenagers and young adults were shown through Tommy’s abuse being condemned and the abuser demonised that even if they have done wrong in their life and are not a ‘perfect victim’, they, like Tommy, do not deserve to be abused. This desire for revenge was seen after the audience had witnessed months, and at this point years, of Tommy being abused at the hands of Dream and so were able to see this anger grow over time. Due to the *Dream SMP* displaying Tommy’s decline and validating his emotions throughout the Exile Arc, much of the audience did not condemn Tommy for these feelings, as can be the unfortunate reaction to victims outside of the ‘perfect victim’ model. Instead, many understood his and Tubbo’s decision, as explained by one commentator: ‘they want their own peace and freedom and they think the only way of having that is killing Dream’ (User K1, 2022, n.p). The *Dream SMP*, through allowing the careful progression of Tommy’s emotions, may have helped the audience to see this aggressive reaction as understandable. This opposed *After*’s framing, where Tessa’s occasional antagonising of Hardin was met with readers believing Tessa to be in the wrong.

An issue with this approach was that the plot progressed to the point where Tommy felt that his only option was to sacrifice himself to kill Dream. In this narrative, the only way for Tommy to 'win' was to die; he was never allowed happiness, only suffering. Dying in exile would have meant that the rest of the characters would still be in danger of Dream's anger turning on them, but for Tommy nothing would have changed if he had killed himself that day in exile. In fact, he would have been exposed to less suffering, the only solace being that he repaired his relationship with Tubbo through not previously ending his own life. This was a hopeless and depressing way to write an abuse storyline and a potentially dangerous narrative to show to an audience of young teenagers, allowing for the extent of the creative responsibility with the SMP to be questioned. Tommy did not reconsider this suicide and the *Dream SMP* ended with Tommy allowing a nuclear missile to strike, killing him and Dream. The implication to the audience was that the only way for this victim to escape and move on from his abuse was to die, but not before the messaging carefully implemented within the Exile Arc was reframed.

Dream was the primary antagonist in the *Dream SMP*'s story who also never streamed his perspective of the story. As a result of this, the audience could only decode his motivations and reasonings using his words and actions, which they likely did not trust due to his character's reputation for manipulation. This creative choice that may have aided the audience in viewing Dream as a villain was changed in the *Dream SMP*'s finale. Just before the arrival of the nuclear missile due to kill them all, Tommy was killed once more by Dream only to be revived by him. In an abstract sequence, footage from one of the very first *Dream SMP* streams was played, symbolising that Tommy was seeing into Dream's memories whilst in purgatory waiting to be revived. This allowed the audience to see the server through Dream's perspective for the first time where he talked of wanting to have fun with his friends and create something positive. Much like Hardin in *After*, this gifted Dream a last-second

redemption without any apology, changed behaviour, or even guilt on Dream's part as he made it abundantly clear that he was not sorry for what he did to Tommy. Despite this lack of positive character development, Tommy suddenly 'understood' Dream and realised that he desired a simple life and only wanted to go back to how things used to be on the server. Tommy miraculously saw Dream through a different light, admitting 'I thought you were a villain' (TommyVODS, 2022c, 39:00), which implied that Dream was not really the villain and instead a victim of circumstance. It is possible that Tommy was stalling for time as they were unsure how long it would take for the missile to reach them, and live performance sometimes requires improvisation. However, there was no real reason for this complete shift in perspective to occur, especially when the shift was from viewing Dream as an abuser to viewing him as the victim. Humanising characters and ensuring that they are three-dimensional with motivations and positive attributes as well as flaws is an important element of character design, but this revelation was neither earned nor explored. It was also immediately made redundant as seconds later the missile arrived, killing them all and triggering a 'restart'. This is where the characters were reset to a new world where they did not know each other or have any memories of each other. The sudden change in perspective in this context seemingly only served to have the last memory of this storyline where a child was isolated, tortured, killed, and ultimately blamed for his own abuse was that it *was* his fault and not his abuser's. The encoding choice may have affected the audience's viewpoint of the storyline as shown by comments such as: 'c!Tommy finally realizes what he did and that c!Dream was a person, all for that to be undone instantly. Tragic, but at least he learned before the nukes hit' (User L1, 2022, n.p). The consensus appeared to be that Dream was not the villain, something that contradicted the original encoding of the dynamic between Dream and Tommy, with one viewer's decoding of the finale being, 'the fact that Dream could have had a redemption arc, but it was too late, that's just sad that only Tommy would be the only

one to finally accept who Dream is...' (User M1, 2022, n.p). Whilst character development and plot twists can reveal motivations that may influence an audience to see a character in a new light, Dream's motivations did not erase what he did to Tommy or make his actions justified. This switching of encoding at the last second only served to confuse whether the *Dream SMP* wanted to cast the abuser in a positive or negative light. Ultimately, this final creative decision was both forgiving to Dream's abuse and irresponsible to its audience in the way that it showcased abuse. The paratext of comments can be incredibly influential on audiences who may not have made up their minds (Genette, 1991, n.p). Therefore, audiences being exposed to this framing and decoding it dominant-hegemonically to the extent of agreeing in the comment section may only reinforce the messaging of the sudden shift to others, strengthening the encoding that Dream was a victim all along.

Furthermore, the finale of the *Dream SMP* fell short on teaching an invaluable lesson to its audience as Dream's behaviour and attitude towards Tommy when confronted about his abusive intentions were those that are common in abusers, known as DARVO (Freyd, 1997, n.p). DARVO, which stands for 'Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender' (Freyd, 1997, n.p), is a manipulation tactic used by abusers to weaponise the power dynamic against the victim, to destroy their credibility and encourage self-blame. Dream would not deny abusing Tommy after the Exile Arc, but would deny that it was undeserved, insisting that Tommy was antagonising him, almost forcing him to do it. He was unable to deny the event happened at all, but could deny his fault in it, as an abuser's denial is typically 'indignant, self-righteous, and manipulative' (Freyd, 1997, p.29). Dream also attacked Tommy, physically and mentally, as abusers 'threaten, bully, and make a nightmare for anyone who holds them accountable or asks them to change their abusive behaviour' (Freyd, 1997, p.29) when confronted. As we have seen, Dream had a history of doing this and had already threatened to continue his torment of Tommy, taunting him with promises such as 'I'll kill you again and

then I'll revive you and kill you again' (TommyVODS, 2021a, 07:28). The finale also featured the personal attack of Dream directly ridiculing Tommy. He painted Tommy as obsessive and jealous when Dream battled others on the SMP instead of purely focusing on Tommy, mocking him with statements such as 'I was focused on everybody except for you and then you were like 'hey I want attention' (TommyVODS, 2022b, 09:16). Finally, the displaying of Dream's perspective and concluding the discussion with Tommy agreeing that Dream was also a victim, a victim of Tommy's to be specific, was a clear example of the Reversing Victim and Offender part of DARVO (Freyd, 1997, n.p). This is where the offender 'rapidly creates the impression that the abuser is the wronged one, while the victim or concerned observer is the offender' (Freyd, 1997, p.30). The reversal came after Dream had already twisted conversations to make it seem as though Tommy was hunting him down for no reason, feigning victimhood when he exclaimed 'you're fine with that? You're so cold-blooded? You're fine with breaking in and killing me in my own home for no reason?' (TommyVODS, 2022b, 09:39). This was a direct attack on Tommy's motivations, likely intended to make him seem unreasonable to their peers. DARVO has been found to be a common tactic used by abusers to manipulate victims and concerned peers to offset blame. One empirical study found that out of 138 participants that had engaged in a confrontation over a wrongdoing, 97% of participants reported that the offender employed DARVO to attempt to manipulate the situation (Harsey et al, 2017, p.655). The *Dream SMP* featured these tactics but did not encode them as incorrect and instead allowed Tommy to agree that Dream was a victim before the server ended. The audience were directly shown Dream's perspective which had previously been effective in condemning abuse with its exclusion. Characters on screen also agreed with Dream's denials and accusations whereas they would have previously been challenged which validated Dream's manipulation of the narrative. This encoded implied to the audience that Dream was correct: he was not the abuser that he had

been shown as previously. This was irresponsible of the *Dream SMP* as they showcased behaviours and dialogue that perfectly met the DARVO criteria but did not draw attention to them as specific behaviours that are often used by abusers as they had previously with coercion, for example. A 2020 study suggested that DARVO was effective on social media and in the legal systems, but, importantly, that the effects and influence of DARVO could ‘be mitigated when the observer has some knowledge of DARVO’ (Harsey et al, 2020, p.910). By failing to significantly signpost the tactics of DARVO and encode them as being purposeful and manipulative, the *Dream SMP* did not responsibly handle their portrayal of abuse. Instead, they deprived their audience of learning information that could protect them from abusers in the native world.

#### A Wider Lens: Outside the Direct Content

The *Dream SMP* appeared to pay close attention to character dialogue and narrative action. For example, Tommy’s physical appearance changed as time went on, his clothes becoming more and more tattered and his skin paling. Despite their previously discussed implied efforts to encode the story for the audience to interpret Dream as the abuser and Tommy the abused, there are many critiques of how they handled the storyline in terms of looking after their audience when examining the encoding off the Exile Arc outside of these techniques.

Firstly, there were no warnings on screen before or during the streams. There is a possibility that Tommy may have verbally warned viewers that the content was going to contain darker themes that they were previously used to viewing. However, for a story that featured challenging content including physical and verbal abuse towards a minor, manipulation, hallucinations, and suicide ideation, there was a distinct lack of effort put into protecting the young audience from the events they were about to witness. During the broadcasts, new viewers were joining every second, many of whom would not know the



context and the content of the streams, and thus were exposed to these graphic themes. Many would have no way of knowing at first viewing that it was roleplay and not real, needing some time to understand this, which could be distressing to viewers. Dream himself commented on the possible dangers of outsiders not understanding that the *Dream SMP* was nothing more than roleplay and how it could lead to oppositional decoding due to the different frame of reference, stating:

I think putting something like /roleplay or something else as an indicator that it's just roleplay could be good when tweeting about negative things on the SMP, and maybe disclaimers for tik toks or videos. As the story progresses there will be more and more character progression and that can be really confusing to an outsider that just sees "Tommy might be suicidal" or "wow dream is actually being a dick" or "I can't believe tubbo would do that..." Adding something like /roleplay can make it less confusing to outsiders who might get negative impressions.

(Dream, 2020, Appendix E)

This was a public statement from Dream advising that viewers make clear distinctions that they were referring to fictional characters and not the real streamers when discussing the content online. Due to this, the audience were encouraged to label characters such as Tommy as c!Tommy for example, the 'c!' being an abbreviation of 'character' whereas 'cc!' would be referring to the 'content creator'. This statement from the SMP's creator indicates that the creators may have been aware of the harm that could be caused by people not understanding that the events were fictional but only in the context of it harming their public image as they made no effort to add trigger warnings or 'content notes' within the streams themselves. This would result in people entering the stream not knowing that they would be subjected to Dream verbally abusing Tommy, for example. Whether they knew the SMP was roleplay and were aware it was fictional abuse, there were no warnings that could have protected them

from these distressing scenes. There is always an option when consuming content to walk away and chose not to partake, but these viewers were given no warning of the content that would be seen. Broadcasters such as ITV and BBC have regulations that must be followed such as warning for alcohol misuse, gun violence, and specifically to ‘avoid including material that condones or glamorises violence’ (BBC, 2023, n.p), including domestic abuse ‘unless there is strong editorial justification’ (BBC, 2023, n.p). It should be noted that the creators of the *Dream SMP* also appeared, perhaps due to audience feedback from the Exile Arc, to realise the benefits of including content notes within their streams. This was seen through creators such as Ranboo displaying content notes at the beginning of their streams that included potentially distressing content post-Exile Arc (RanbooVODS, 2021, n.p). However, the *Dream SMP* offered no such warning during the Exile Arc and therefore viewers could not make that decision to protect themselves until after the potentially triggering event happened on screen. Due to the viewer demographics of the *Dream SMP*, this lack of warning can be viewed as irresponsible.

A counterargument could be made that this is an unjust criticism as the SMP was ‘just *Minecraft*’ and therefore not to be taken seriously. The *Dream SMP* started as a server with the sole purpose of providing a space for friends to have fun together and make content for their audience. Even at the time of the Exile Arc, many of the creators who streamed on the SMP had ‘storylines’ that were not meant to be taken too seriously by the audience and had more of a light-hearted tone. Examples of this include creators such as Quackity, KarlJacobs, Sapnap, and GeorgeNotFound building a nation in the sky called ‘El Rapids’. Audiences could view these stories as serious within the context of the diegesis if they wished, but they were encoded as light-hearted with the creators constantly breaking character. In contrast to this, Tommy’s streams, especially during the Exile Arc, were taken seriously by the content creators and audience as Tommy tried his best to stay in character and create an emotionally

driven storyline. This was something that he had a history of doing during his time on the SMP. Abuse is not something that only exists in fiction; it happens to people in their real lives every day. Amongst the millions of followers Tommy had, and the thousands of people who watched these streams live, it is likely that there would have been people watching who had lived experience of abuse. Not allowing room for these people to make an informed decision about whether to engage with the content may have resulted in them becoming triggered. In this respect, the *Dream SMP* may have potentially caused harm to their audience through their lack of protection.

The idea that the SMP should not be taken seriously is also irresponsible as it forgives another issue with the Exile Arc: the creators not appearing to understand the gravity of the storyline. Despite the storyline focusing on the traumatic decline of Tommy's health at the hands of Dream's manipulation, the streamers did not always seem to take it seriously. Due to the nature of live, unrehearsed broadcast, mistakes or 'bloopers' (such as Dream accidentally killing himself with dynamite when destroying Logstedshire) were inevitable. Often, the creators would laugh about these mistakes for a moment and then get back into character. Whilst these interruptions could be badly timed and disrupt the tension and immersion of dramatic scenes, these were accidents common within live theatre. However, at times, the creators broke out of the abusive dynamic and Tommy and Dream would be seen joking around as friends even if something abusive had just occurred such as Dream's character hitting Tommy. Here, the *Dream SMP* appeared to rely on the audience to conclude that this was not 'in character'. This was something that some viewers noticed when trying to stay immersed in the story which left them annoyed that they had to continuously re-enter into the narrative world with one user stating, 'I kinda wished he didn't break character so much, like I know it's funny but it does kill the mood a lot' (User N1, 2020, n.p). Blurring the lines between the native and narrative worlds could have made it more difficult for the audience to

distinguish which sections of the stream were part of the story, and which were not. This resulted in it appearing that Tommy's character and Dream's character were getting along and that Dream was being genuinely friendly towards Tommy which complicated the encoding and decoding process. The distinction between 'c!Dream' and 'cc!Dream' during these interactions was not made clear and so audiences may not have known whether he was in character or not. This could have led audiences to decode Dream's character as more friendly and genuine and his actions as less sinister as a result. When portraying abuse to young audiences it is the responsibility of the producers to clearly outline who is being abused and who is the abuser, and these instances could result in audiences coming to the defence of Dream's character as seen with one user's comment: 'turns out the dream isn't the villain theory was quite true' (User O1, 2022, n.p). To safely handle subject matter as serious as interpersonal abuse, there should be as little room as possible for audiences to decode the abuser as a good person who is simply misunderstood. The casual attitudes of the creators at times during these streams lessened the sense of severity of these behaviours to the audience, possibly influencing them to view the abusive instances as less dangerous.

It is reasonable to suggest that the creators behind the *Dream SMP* had good intentions with their amateur portrayal of interpersonal abuse. However, due to the lack of creator accountability and the absence of structure that guidelines would bring, it was allowed to confuse its own encodings and ultimately failed to protect and educate its audience. There were contributing factors to the ending of the *Dream SMP* and the extended abuse storylines shortcomings such as the creator's need to focus on entertainment over protection and the death of beloved creator, Technoblade. Technoblade's role in the abuse storyline was executed well as he provided a support system at the time and was someone who knew what happened during the Exile Arc. However, when the creator tragically passed away it is understandable that his friends and colleagues may not have wished to continue a storyline

that he was a large part of without him. Streamers are also primarily entertainers and not educators and to linger on such a distressing and dark storyline would not be fun for the creators themselves or the audience and as such may hinder their career. As TommyInnit himself said in an interview, ‘what aligns with success? That, for me, is to make people laugh...I want to keep entertaining these people’ (AnthonyPadilla, 2022, 23:08). Their jobs are not to provide completely accurate and healthy representations of abuse to their audience, but to make them laugh.

I specifically highlight that, although most of the *Dream SMP* streamers are still actively streaming, when the SMP first began they were amateurs. At the beginning of the SMP, the streamers were only in the early days of roleplaying and most of it was improvised, with the storyline and dialogue progressing naturally. The streamers may have been paid by their viewers in the early days of the SMP but by the time that the Exile Arc was broadcasted, their audiences and their sub-counts had exploded in numbers where they were making far more than a minimum wage. This was evident to viewers as Tommy had the thousands of paid subscriptions he received per stream visible on screen. After months of roleplay, some of which was, by this time, scripted and planned beforehand, the creators had become experienced at writing and performing live and were being paid a large amount of money for it. The streamers *were* amateurs, who *became* professionals. Whilst it may not be expected for these streamers to be held to the same standards that producers of traditional media are, at times these streamers had hundreds of thousands of people watching them and as such had a responsibility to protect their audiences. This is something that regulations may have helped with. At the time of writing, TommyInnit has 7.4 million followers on Twitch, Dream has 6.4 million, and both have influence on their viewers as personalities that the viewers are attached to. Twitch is a modern social media platform with incredible immersion due to aspects such as real-time direct communication with the creators and the ability to influence

the story which makes the audience's connection with the creators and their content more extreme. The streamers were the ones responsible for encoding the content and the ones creating the signs. Even though they did not possess the skills and knowledge that are present in professional production companies where the producers have years of education and practical experience creating and encoding media, they may have had more personal responsibility. The audience saw the people behind the content, and the creators had the opportunity to see first-hand in real-time the audience's reactions and witness how they were decoding the content. The *Dream SMP* started their abuse storyline with a strong narrative of abuse being a complex topic that showed its audience that an abuser may mask themselves as a victim. However, it ended with the victim apologising and defending the abuser from their actions and thereby created the narrative that abuse can be deserved. With influence as great as that enjoyed by these Twitch streamers, and with such an extreme level of immersion, it can be suggested that the creators should have considered that they may have a responsibility to handle such sensitive content with care. If the creators were not willing or capable of fully concluding the story in a way that protected the young audience that followed it, they should not have chosen to portray abuse on screen.

Even creators with good intentions, which might be assumed of the *Dream SMP* creators, can lose sight of their message and forgive abusers without the regulations for showing abuse seen in traditional media. The *Dream SMP* may have benefited from a similar structure as it may have prevented the tonal shift in the encoding. The audience of the *Dream SMP* could have included adults with more developed cognitive abilities, but there were also young teenagers watching this content. Whilst there is evidence to suggest that the creators intended to condone abuse, without a regulatory structure to focus on audience impact or emphasis on the personal responsibility of creators, the *Dream SMP* could not achieve their goal of showcasing interpersonal abuse responsibly.

## Conclusion

I chose the focus of this investigation because I was concerned about the lack of moderation surrounding the representation of interpersonal abuse to teenagers on the new media platforms that have emerged from social media. This is due to me witnessing it first-hand and I wanted to investigate it further. When I was a teenager, *After* (alongside other ‘dark fanfictions’) was being written and published online and I noticed how my friends who obsessively read it would describe Hardin’s abusive behaviours in a positive light. I am also intimately familiar with Twitch as a platform, as I am an active user who also watched the *Dream SMP* from its origins. Having consumed the media and seen how it showcased interpersonal abuse, I had my concerns about the effect these depictions may have been having on their audiences. Therefore, I wanted to investigate the extent of the influence and whether the framing of the abuse could influence audiences’ reaction to it.

I found that the way in which the abuse was encoded and framed appeared to influence how the audience interpreted it. *After* portrays a heavily abusive relationship between two young adults and twists it to be a romance through the encoding. This is done through encoding choices such as Tessa and other characters repeatedly forgiving the actions of the abuser, Hardin. It can also be implied that the author encourages audiences to sympathise with Hardin by having half of the chapters from the second book onwards be from his perspective. This narrative technique aligns readers with Hardin, giving them access to his thoughts and feelings, and fostering a closeness that allows them to understand and excuse his actions. Hardin’s abusive behaviours, such as his extreme possessiveness towards Tessa, are also repeatedly validated and he is cast as being protective over his victim as opposed to a dangerous presence in Tessa’s life. These encoding choices by the author help to dismiss any concerns the audience may have over Hardin’s behaviours, and may encourage them to vindicate, rather than condemn, him. As a result, the audience can be influenced to

decode Tessa and Hardin's relationship as romantic and view their ultimate marriage as a happy ending. This interpretation of the encoding and decoding relationship can be supported by the wealth of positive fan comments throughout the online version of *After*, especially when focusing on the final chapter where readers praise the story and the conclusion of the relationship.

The ending of the *Dream SMP* sits in contrast to *After*'s handling of abuse. Although the narrative may have confused the audience's perception of Dream and Tommy's relationship dynamic, the Exile Arc was encoded to heavily imply that Tommy's treatment was wrong. This was done through methods such as only showing the victim's perspective, other characters becoming horrified at his abuse, and having the abuser face major consequences for his actions. Unlike *After*, where the narrative jumped forward several years to a point where Hardin and Tessa's relationship was unrealistically thriving, Tommy's storyline did not conclude when the Exile Arc ended. The audience were able to follow his story and witness how he continued to be negatively affected by the abuse, thus providing a more authentic representation of abuse that showcased it as a terrible experience to endure. This was communicated effectively to the young audience and the comments left on the past broadcasts suggest that the majority of the fanbase decoded the storyline as representative of abuse.

Both pieces of media showcased relationships that were interpersonally abusive and displayed all the elements of Walker's Cycle of Abuse (2009, n.p), and yet only one of these dynamics was seen as abusive by most of its audience. This was due to how the storylines were presented. This disparity shows that identical behaviours - even objectively wrong behaviours such as abuse - can be seen in completely different ways depending on how they are framed. These encoding choices are influenced by the creator's perceived intentions in portraying interpersonal abuse. New media content creators can be more aware of their



influence on their audience due to the closer relationship between producer and consumer through aspects such as real-time communication between fan and creator. Therefore, it can be argued that creators bear the responsibility for the messaging that they are specifically implementing in their content. When analysing *After* and the *Dream SMP*, it appears that the creators' intentions differ – at least at first. Anna Todd sold merchandise that portrayed Hardin Scott as the kind of boyfriend that audiences should aspire to have. Todd has also mentioned in interviews that she was aware that she was writing a romance series about an abusive relationship without condemning the abusive behaviours. In contrast to this, there was an attention to detail present in the *Dream SMP* such as the progression of the intensity of the abuse and inclusion of a support system to oppose Tommy's rationalisations. This allows me to infer that the creators behind the *Dream SMP* had intentions to portray interpersonal abuse as horrific and the abuser as the wrongful party. Despite this, the *Dream SMP* concluded with the contradictory message of Tommy's abuse being a necessary evil and Dream not being the villain in the storyline. Without the aid of regulations to guide the creators in the writing and execution of these storylines, both *After* and the *Dream SMP* were able to conclude their portrayals of interpersonal abuse with the same message: abuse is sometimes necessary and victims should consider forgiving their abusers.

Due to both pieces of media framing abusers sympathetically, I believe that it would be reasonable to conclude that platforms that host user-generated content would benefit from regulations regarding the portrayal of abuse. However, this conclusion is not without noticeable complications for anyone familiar with the nature of 'dark' literature or new media platforms. Notably, the existence of content that explores, but does not explicitly condemn, darker themes such as abuse is not a concern as an isolated issue. Media that explores taboo subjects has always existed and will continue to exist for audiences to engage with out of curiosity or to indulge in graphic subjects through the safety of fiction. Moreover, restricting

content that does not condemn abuse for being ‘immoral’ is not beneficial to audiences. As Karen Boyle notes on the consumption of pornography, another taboo subject matter: ‘to take the attitude that viewing violence is necessarily ‘bad’ or ‘immoral’ is both profoundly patronising to viewers and distorts the experience of viewing violent acts in a narrative and social context’ (2004, p.57). Censoring such content would be removing the audience’s agency as consumers and treating them as though they cannot engage with media critically. The concern for new media such as *After*, the *Dream SMP*, and others that tackle subjects such as abuse is that they are specifically targeted towards teenagers and young adults as it has been suggested that this demographic can be more influenced by encoding (Jensen, 2014; Eggermont, 2004). The brain development of teenagers is not complete. It has been implied that this can result in them having trouble comprehending risk and struggling with cognitive multitasking, meaning it can be hard for teenagers to both enjoy and critically consume media simultaneously (Jensen, 2015, n.p). New media such as *After* and the *Dream SMP* also demand a heavier investment of time from its audience, exceeding the four hours a day required to qualify as a heavy viewer. Gerbner’s 1998 theory of ‘mainstreaming’ proposes that four hours a day could be enough for media encoding to override an individual’s prior opinions and influence their perception of fact to align more closely with what is presented in the media. Paired with Eggermont’s 2004 research which implies that adolescents may be more vulnerable to their perceptions of relationships being shaped by their media consumption, the fact that this media is targeted at teenagers is concerning. Through observing the comments left on works such as *After*, this media could be interpreted as being influential in how audiences react to abusive behaviours. For example, readers would echo the victim-blaming rhetoric seen repeatedly throughout *After*, blaming Tessa for how Hardin treated her. Due to this, the decision by the creators to cater their content towards a demographic vulnerable to influential encoding can be challenged as inappropriate or

irresponsible. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the protection of a vulnerable demographic over prioritising the complete artistic freedom of the content creators. Nonetheless, I believe that recommendations can be made to improve these platforms and the presentation of abuse in new media that value both artistic expression and audience protection.

### Suggestions for Improvement

In Chapter Five, the idea that creators on platforms such as Twitch could potentially be held to the same standards to that of the BBC in terms of regulation was mentioned. This is because of the popularity of the creators of the *Dream SMP* and their peers in the streaming space, where they can regularly accumulate thousands of live viewers at any given time. The BBC have guidelines that must be followed if sensitive content such as drug use, racism, or interpersonal abuse is shown on screen. The content must meet certain criteria for it to be shown otherwise it is not greenlit and the show is not made. These guidelines are agreed upon by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Ofcom, and the British Board of Film Classification. If the BBC violates these guidelines repeatedly or in a serious way, the communications regulator Ofcom ‘has the legal powers to impose sanctions’ (Ofcom, 2023, n.p), encouraging broadcasters to consider public safety when producing media. The guidelines that Ofcom have in place for traditional media work to protect the audience and grant broadcasters their right to freedom of expression. However, I do not believe that simply copying restrictions as extensive as those set out by Ofcom for the BBC would be realistic for new media. This is because the communities that engage with these platforms and create content on them place tremendous value on artistic freedom and historically loathe any essence of censorship. Fanfiction.net has extensive rules for publishing fanfiction such as not allowing explicit content of any kind and has acquired a reputation for deleting stories that do not meet the writing standards of the moderators. The restrictions implemented by the

website are so constricting that the mass ‘purging’ of content by moderators for violating these rules has been credited for driving users to other sites such as AO3 (Organisation for Transformative Works, 2012. n.p). Tumblr also experienced a mass decline in users when it banned explicit content in 2018 (Staff, 2018, n.p). AO3, hailed as a censorship-free website, has itself faced backlash from users for suggesting policies that would potentially restrict content (OTW Elections, 2022, n.p) involving children with comments such as: ‘It is DISGRACEFUL that OTW has allowed Tiffany G. to run for the Board. Tiffany who opposes everything the OTW was created to protect. Censorship & moral panic are NOT welcome in fandom. I will be casting my vote for literally any candidate besides Tiffany G’ (User P1, 2022, n.p). Therefore, I would suggest a need for regulations that serve the same purposes as the BBC content guidelines but adapt them to the creative process and audience expectations of new media. This is due to the more collaborative nature of new media and its reliance on harmony between audience and creator.

A possible solution to help limit the potential for harm to the audiences of interactive new media could be for the websites hosting user-generated content to enforce their own guidelines. Wattpad has a reputation for having a younger audience than competitors such as AO3 and so has a ‘Mature’ option that can be toggled so that those under seventeen cannot see them. However, as discussed in previous chapters, there are no restrictions stopping someone under seventeen from accessing explicit content, which means that underage users can continue to access content that Wattpad has deemed inappropriate for them to view. Wattpad also does not appear to strictly enforce its guidelines on explicit content. It is written into the terms of service that any story including ‘glorification of sexual violence’ (Wattpad, 2022, n.p) would be removed from the app. This is classed as ‘non-consensual sexual acts to include rape, sexual assault, kidnapping for sexual purposes, or sexual slavery. The content cannot be encouraging or promoting non-consensual sex acts’ (Wattpad, 2022, n.p). Using

these guidelines, *After* would not be permitted to be hosted on the site; nor would lesser-known works that contain content that breaks the guidelines. Instead, *After* has billions of views, was published into a series of novels, and adapted into several films. Wattpad not honouring its own terms of service allows for the children that use the services to be exposed to explicit sexual content in general and therefore leaves them vulnerable.

Like *After*, the *Dream SMP* storyline branched into mature and graphic themes such as interpersonal abuse and suicidal ideation. The server had delved into topics such as war and violence previously, but the Exile Arc dedicated a large amount of time to a storyline that focused on abuse in a graphic and detailed manner. Due to this it could be argued that the content may have been more appropriate to be broadcasted under the ‘mature audience’ section of Twitch, marking it ‘18+’. *Minecraft* being widely recognised as a ‘children’s game’ amongst players could be the reason the creator’s decided to stream in this category. The story outside the Exile Arc being less graphic as well as the possibility of this category change limiting their potential viewers to be only adults may have also contributed to the stream’s label. However, it is not unusual for *Minecraft* streamers to broadcast under the ‘mature audience’ label when they recognise their content is less appropriate for younger viewers. At the time of the SMP, ‘mature audience’ was a label that was self-allocated by broadcasters. It could have been a viable option for the *Dream SMP*’s creators, even if it was only applied during the Exile streams as this label could be toggled on and off at will. Children under the age of eighteen can still access this content, which could also be an area that Twitch could consider restricting, but it means that a notice appears informing the viewer that the content broadcasted is for older audiences and therefore may feature mature content. This, if implemented with the *Dream SMP*, would have informed consumers about the type of content they may have been exposed to if they chose to view the stream, allowing them to exercise their right to make an informed choice and take control of their own viewing habits.

Within Twitch's Content Guidelines, it is made explicitly clear that no content that 'promotes harm' is allowed on the website. It warns that any creator that broadcasts content deemed 'harmful' will be suspended on either a temporary or permanent basis and the offending content removed. This includes but is not limited to promotion of self-harm, threats of violence, 'doxxing' (revealing someone's address or identifying information), alcohol overconsumption, or distracted driving (Twitch, 2024, n.p). Therefore, to protect audiences from potentially harmful content and also provide guidance to creators wanting to portray abuse, I would encourage an addition to the Twitch Content Guidelines in relation to roleplay. Conflict is essential in fictional narratives, meaning that it can be expected that characters in a fictional setting might become verbally or physically violent with each other or perform deplorable acts on each other. My suggestion would be to add a caveat to roleplaying abuse: the portrayal cannot be promoting abuse. Naturally, this could be met with issues such as the interpretation of 'promoting'. However, I believe a website that has pre-existing guidelines about 'promoting' acts such as drinking, drug usage, and hate speech could create a clear guide about what constitutes 'promoting' abuse or being 'pro-abuse'.

Creator responsibility can be useful in giving the audience the right to choose, which is essential to remember when discussing how the concerns around new media's depiction of abuse could be improved. The consumers, in this case teenagers, have the choice to consume, and by extension write, media with graphic or 'inappropriate content' if they wish. However, this can only be accomplished if the consumer is given the tools to make an informed choice. Due to this, I believe that a tagging system similar to that of AO3's interface could be a beneficial addition to other new media platforms such as Wattpad and Twitch. Twitch has updated their categorisation system since the conclusion of the *Dream SMP* to introduce the 'Content Classification' system (Twitch, 2023, n.p). This new system consists of features such as automatically labelling games as 'mature' if it is marked as such by the Entertainment

Software Rating Board (ESRB.org). It also allows for streamers to issue specific warnings for content such as ‘significant profanity and vulgarity’ which viewers must click an acknowledgement of before accessing the content. This development in the guidelines is beneficial for creating a more protective environment. However, I believe this could be extended even further to apply to the actual ‘tags’ on the streams and could also be implemented on sites such as Wattpad. AO3 features an extensive tagging system that provides the fictional universe, characters, list of themes, and actions that will feature within the story. The tags act in equal parts as advertisement and content note as one person may want to avoid any content that depicts, for example, ‘Major Character Death’, whereas another may be actively seeking out content with those themes. It allows the writers to create whatever they desire and provides the readers with crucial information needed to make an informed decision as to whether to engage with the content. AO3 also allows users to filter content so that specific tags are not included in searches, shielding users from content they specifically would find disturbing or simply do not wish to view. An example of how moderation can simultaneously allow artistic expression and help users to protect themselves is the popular AO3 tag known as ‘Dead Dove Do Not Eat’. This tag labels stories as containing topics that are conventionally viewed as taboo such as necrophilia, cannibalism, incest, graphic sexual content, or extreme violence that writers are allowed to explore in their work. By reading these tags, the reader acknowledges that the material will be graphic and by choosing to engage they are actively choosing to expose themselves to that content. Whilst they may still feel disgusted by the content, as they have chosen to access the material, they cannot condemn the author for exposing them to it. Twitch does not allow broadcast of the subject matter often found under the ‘Dead Dove Do Not Eat’ tag, with the possible exception of education around these topics. However, the tag highlights the benefits of allowing creators to specifically label the exact content they are showcasing. It provides

audiences with the information needed to understand that the content not only has the potential to be upsetting, but also explains what the upsetting material may specifically include. This means that the user can make an informed decision that best caters to their individual wants and needs. ‘Mature’ is an umbrella label that informs users of the type of content that *might* be included within the media, but introducing features that can inform the user of the specifics of the content could provide them with the information to protect themselves from viewing it or prepare themselves for engaging with it. When informed prior to consumption, audiences are given the opportunity to make a choice as to whether they engage with content that may be deemed as ‘harmful’. Children will always access media that has been deemed inappropriate for them if they are motivated to seek it out, but the distinction is that they are choosing to oppose restrictions rather than being specifically targeted by media that may be harmful.

I believe that the tagging system is capable of being monitored as the introduction of the Content Classification system was accompanied by the instruction that consistent failure to appropriately classify streams would result in ‘Twitch applying a label to [the] stream on [the streamer’s] behalf that will be locked for a period of days or weeks, depending on the number of prior warnings’ (Twitch, 2024b, n.p). Given the popularity of the SMP, it would be reasonable to suggest that Twitch could monitor the content being broadcasted by popular creators to thousands daily to assess whether it was complying to guidelines as opposed to content being streamed to very few viewers that may ‘slip through the cracks’. This would allow for creators to still be able to roleplay as villainous characters who do terrible things but also aid them in clearly encoding their narrative message to the audience.

In a world where these suggestions for regulation are actualised, creators and consumers of new media may feel that their passions are being sanitised and censored. As mentioned previously, fanfiction users historically respond to regulations with outcry and



migrate to other platforms such as AO3. Likewise, Twitch has a reputation for wrongfully banning streamers and viewers alike for either malicious and false reports or enforcing bans for a length of time disproportionate to the violating actions. An example of this would be a streamer accidentally vomiting on camera due to falling ill and being permanently banned for it. Plenty of regulations are in place for what a streamer can and cannot showcase live but further restrictions may act as a deterrent from using the platform. However, despite these suggestions aiming to lean into censorship as little as possible, it is important to consider the role of creator responsibility when producing new media content. Only 65,000 out of millions of streamers are given the label 'Twitch Partner' (Stream Charts, 2024, n.p), a status achieved by averaging seventy-five concurrent viewers per stream over a month-long period as a minimum requirement. The majority of creators on platforms such as Twitch and Wattpad do not achieve mass success, and many may not wish to. Despite this, those who do accumulate large followings, such as Anna Todd and the *Dream SMP* creators, are often referred to as 'influencers'. This acknowledges that they are aware that influencing others is their job. It is plausible to believe these creators are conscious of the messaging that they are inputting into their creations, an example of this being the difference in framing of TommyInnit's stream uploads versus his shortened YouTube videos. Therefore, it would be reasonable for them to consider whether the media they create is appropriate to broadcast towards teenagers. Regulations could assist them in this or possibly guide them into choosing to cater to an older audience. If they instead chose to target an older audience, there would be less pressure to compromise artistic expression as creators may not feel the need to censor themselves to protect younger consumers. If a teenager then decides to engage with this content, they would be making the active choice to do so. Audiences have agency and the ability to moderate their own viewing so that if they find themselves feeling upset, disgusted, or feel that the content is having a negative effect on them, they can make the decision to limit or cease their exposure

to it. Whilst teenagers, the demographic mainly engaging with the content studied, may face difficulties in critical consumption, ‘we all have moral and political decisions to make about our own consumption of media violence’ (Boyle, 2004. p.61). This means that teenagers, like everyone else, are ultimately responsible for their own viewing habits, but they can only make those decisions if they are informed on what the content is. The suggestions that I have made, although not exhaustive, may help to ensure that the content that is being specifically targeted towards a demographic implied to be vulnerable to influential encoding (Eggermont, 2004; Jensen, 2015) are less likely to be exposed to pro-abuse narratives. Equally, it would allow for those consumers to take charge of their media consumption by being provided all the necessary information to make an informed decision about whether to engage with content that could be upsetting or deemed ‘inappropriate’ for them and better help them to understand the consequences of choosing to, for example, being scared, upset, or disgusted.

Recently, TommyInnit, now nineteen-years-old, revisited the server and spoke about the Exile Arc, saying, ‘I’ll admit, [getting] a sixteen-year-old to portray a mental health depiction of, like, the brink of wanting to die was a pretty bold take that I may not...in hindsight I may not [have] done’ (TommyVODS, 2023, 26:30). This reflection acknowledges the possibility that they perhaps should not have portrayed such dark subject matter and now that he is older, he would not do the same. Interestingly, Tommy also identifies that he himself may have been too young to be playing a suicidal victim of abuse without the aid of psychologists and other professionals that child actors have access to in traditional media. This may support the notion that creators should be more conscious of how their content may affect their audience and also the potential of harm to themselves. The *Dream SMP* had the ability and freedom to create any storyline they desired to drive engagement, something that the Exile Arc accomplished. However, TommyInnit’s retrospective and apparent regrets about the arc highlights how complete artistic freedom when creating content surrounding

abuse may not be in the best interest of the audience or the creator. In hindsight, Tommy has seemingly recognised that the extremes that the *Dream SMP* went to were ultimately detrimental to both their original intentions to depict abuse and to the audience's interpretation of abuse, as seen with the change in audience response to Dream's actions. The creators of the *Dream SMP* were able to create whatever they desired without outside inference. This meant they were able to transform their messaging from abuse being horrific to abuse being a just punishment, as there was no system in place to deter them or inform them about the potential harm that change in framing could bring to their audience.

When questioning the 'right' of an individual to consume pornography, Boyle poses the idea that a person's 'right' to view cannot be squared with the rights of others' (2004, p.60), suggesting that the 'right' of the individual to consume is not more important than the 'rights' of those being exploited in the content. I believe the same question can be considered through the opposite lens of creation rather than consumption. A creator has the right and ability to make and publish content on any topic, to any degree of depravity, that they wish. However, it does not have to be to the detriment of its audience, and especially not at the expense of the vulnerable teenagers who consume it. New media such as *After* and the *Dream SMP* are hosted on platforms that have terms of service and general guidelines that set out how users must conduct themselves. However, through my analysis I have concluded that without specific rules and regulations regarding the portrayal of abuse, creators can produce media that romanticises, minimises, and apologises for abuse. This media is then potentially consumed by millions. As a result of this, I believe that, despite censorship concerns, it is in the best interest of both creators and audiences that a form of regulation be introduced to these new media platforms. This would encourage creators to exercise more thorough consideration for the potential impact of their content on consumers and help them to determine whether it is appropriate to specifically target their content towards teenagers.

Regulations would act as a guide that creators could refer to when producing material to ensure that their framing of abuse reduced the potential for harm to their audiences. Equally, they would provide moderators the information needed to oversee these creators and ensure that they are following rules to help protect audiences. It would also allow audiences to make informed decisions and give them the ability to take control over their media consumption. Artistic expression and audience protection can co-exist, but only if both the creator and consumer are given the ability to take responsibility for their relationship with the content and only if the freedom of expression does not come at the expense of the audience's safety. Content creators or 'influencers' can make millions from the content they make, even if that media is portraying abuse positively and potentially causing harm to the people that fund their lives. As such, it would be reasonable to suggest that if influencers want the social and monetary rewards of 'influencing', they should be willing to accept the responsibility that comes with that influence and welcome the introduction of regulations.

## APPENDIX

A

Two pictures showcasing the difference between the rating of 'Mature' on *After* (Imaginator1d, 2013) and *After 2* (Imaginator1d, B, 2013)

The screenshot shows the Wattpad interface for the story 'After' by Anna Todd. The top navigation bar includes the Wattpad logo, 'Browse', 'Community', 'Search', 'Write', 'Try Premium', and a user profile 'realafterfan...'. The story cover for 'After' is displayed, showing a couple in a forest. Below the cover, the title 'After' is followed by statistics: 715M Reads, 11.3M Votes, 114 Parts, and 12h 19m Time. A 'Start reading' button is visible. The author's bio for 'imaginator1D' is shown, stating the story is 'Complete'. The synopsis describes Tessa Young, an 18-year-old college student, meeting a boy named Hardin. The page also features a 'w premium' advertisement on the right.

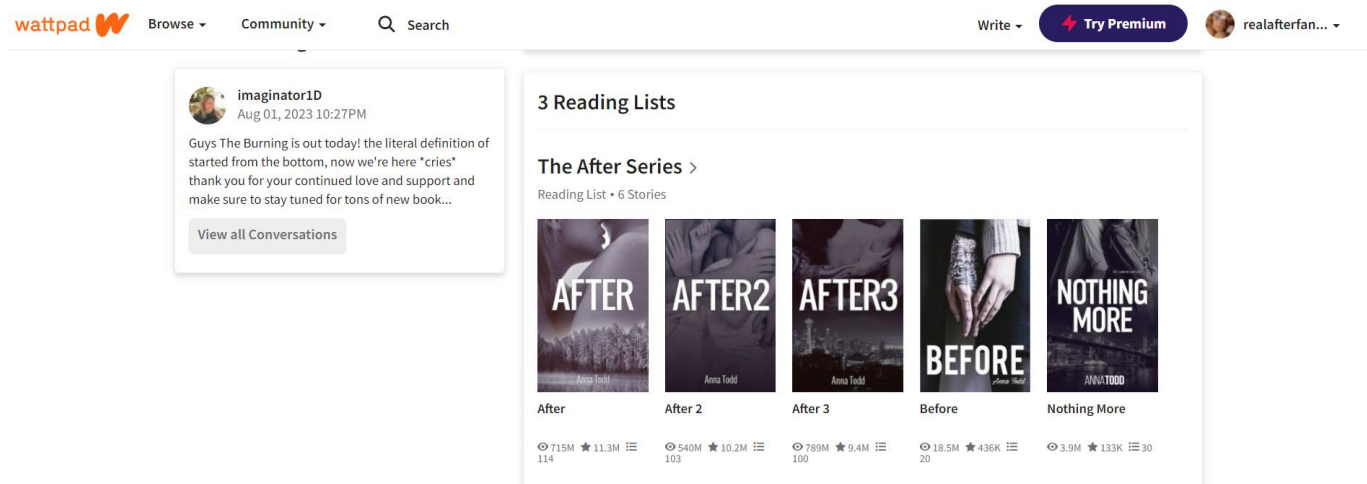
The screenshot shows the Wattpad interface for the story 'After 2' by Anna Todd. The top navigation bar is identical to the first screenshot. The story cover for 'After 2' is displayed, showing a couple in a close embrace. Below the cover, the title 'After 2' is followed by statistics: 540M Reads, 10.2M Votes, 101 Parts, and 18h 35m Time. A 'Start reading' button is visible. The author's bio for 'imaginator1D' is shown, indicating the story is 'Complete' and 'Mature'. The synopsis states it is the sequel to 'After'. The page also features a 'w premium' advertisement on the right.

## APPENDIX

B

Picture showing the full After catalogue is available to users under 17.

Wattpad (2023) Imaginator1D. <https://www.wattpad.com/user/imaginator1D>



Picture showing the age settings of the profile used to access the After content – stating the user was thirteen years old.

**Account** Notifications Muted Accounts Blocked Accounts

Change your account information and privacy settings

Username	realafterfan123	<a href="#">change</a>
Password	*****	<a href="#">change</a>
Email	barstardofbolton@gmail.com	<a href="#">change</a>
Date of Birth	<input type="text" value="16/04/2010"/>	<a href="#">?</a>
Join Beta Program	<input type="checkbox"/>	<a href="#">Learn more</a> <a href="#">?</a>
Download your Personal Information	<a href="#">HTML</a>	<a href="#">JSON</a> <a href="#">?</a>

**Submit**

Tubbo [@TubboLive] (2020, 2nd December) *What do we do...* [poll showing options ‘Exile Tommy’ and ‘Don’t Exile Tommy’] [Post]. X.

<https://twitter.com/TubboLive/status/1334238042131980290>





Dream [@dreamwastaken] (2020, 6<sup>th</sup> December). *I think for the Dream SMP it's really important to remember that when we're not messing around, we're playing character versions of ourselves...* [Post Thread]. X.

<https://twitter.com/dreamwastaken/status/1335535494281785346>



User A (2019)

Comment on the video “After | RANT REVIEW”. YouTube. Available:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOKfrGbvjBo&ab\\_channel=FullOfLit](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOKfrGbvjBo&ab_channel=FullOfLit)

I was twelve years old when I first read this book. For me, the main reason of why they still together is because she's supposed to fix him and make him a good person. Tessa obviously has a savior complex. She thinks she can make him better in some sort of way, and through all of her attempts, the book is swiftly telling us that we should try in all of our relationships to save the other person, so they can stay with us. Its like saying "If you stay long enough, and love them above everything else and have faith in them, they can change for good, and they will definitely be with you". That's bullshit. Thanks to examples like this I fell in love with this girl who didn't (and still doesn't) give a crap about me. I thought that if I try to "save her", she would fall in love with me and we would be together. She only hurt me every single time like Hardin did with Tessa and sometimes even worse. You don't have to save anybody. Nobody has to save you. You save yourself. I'm not saying is bad to stay by your partner's side when they are going through rough times. But you have to remember you don't have to go through anybody else's bullshit so you can deserve to be loved.

Show less

👍 362 🗨 Reply

User B (2022)

Comment on Chapter 101 of *After 2* (2013b).

I would've castrated him for free right then and there  
ngl

2y ago Reply

User C (2022)

Comment on Chapter 78 of *After* (2013a).

What!!!!!!! She is disgusting, judging him before even  
talking 1 single word with him. WOW!

2y ago Reply

User D (2021)

Comment on Chapter 78 of *After* (2013a).

how shitty of a mom do you have to be to gaslight your own daughter just cause shes happy 🤔

3y ago [Reply](#)

[View 2 Replies](#)

User E (2023)

Comment on Chapter 144 of *After 2* (2013b).

And you wonder why you're always fighting 🤔

7mo ago [Reply](#)

User F (2022)

Comment on Chapter 224 of *After 3* (2013c).

I so wanna beat this guy up

2y ago [Reply](#)

User G (2021)

Comment on Chapter 135 of *After 2* (2013b).

Okay but if someone gave me a letter saying there childhood when they don't like to talk about it I would marry them right then and there!

2y ago [Reply](#)

User H (2022)

Comment on Chapter 101 of *After 2* (2013b).

I hate him so much

1y ago [Reply](#)

User I (2020)

Comment on Chapter 269 of *After 3* (2013c).

I used to not like tessa for being dramatic and problematic in the relationship, but now I just feel so bad for her, she's so drained and consumed by her love for her him it's slowly ruining her 😞 😞

3y ago [Reply](#)

User J (2022)

Comment on Chapter 153 of *After 2* (2013b).

Okay this is scary and not okay then again he's acting out because he feels betrayed like he always does and this is all because of her. I'm about to cry rn

1y ago [Reply](#)

User K (2020)

Comment on Chapter 266 of *After 3* (2013c).

He really do be hurtin 😞 ❤️

3y ago [Reply](#)

User L (2020)

Comment on Chapter 144 of *After 2* (2013b).

Tessa just listen to Hardin ...it's not that hard

2y ago [Reply](#)

User M (2022)

Comment on Chapter 9 of *After* (2013a).

No wonder you both are into toxic relationships LOL.

2y ago [Reply](#)

[View 1 Reply](#)

User N (2023)

Comment on Chapter 14 of *After* (2013a).

THE FORESHADOWING 🤔

11mo ago [Reply](#)

User O (2014)

Comment on Chapter 295 of *After 3* (2013c).

that was the worst ending of a book ever wow

9y ago [Reply](#)

[View 6 Replies](#)

User P (2019)

Comment on the video “After | RANT REVIEW”. YouTube. Available:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOKfrGbvjBo&ab\\_channel=FullOfLit](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOKfrGbvjBo&ab_channel=FullOfLit)

I used to be in love with this series. I first read it on wattpad in 2014 and reread it when it was published. Now I'm 22 and rereading it again and it's horrible. The grammar and just the content itself, is horrible. I never realized the abusive relationship at 18 years old but now I do (after learning it and being in one). I idolized this book so much, and it tries to teach the lesson that you can change a person or a person will change for you if they really love you. I got myself into an abusive relationship and would remember this book because Hardin “changed” for Tessa and Tessa stuck around. Not a good role modeling book for young girls. Also, Tessa is just dumb. She pisses me off so much because she's hypocritical and immature. As much of an asshole Hardin is, I have to say I love his character change. He changes by working on his anger and becoming kinder. It's not much but I like that part. Plus there's way too much drama in such short period of times.

Show less

👍 7 🗨️ Reply

User Q (2023)

Comment on Chapter 60 of *After* (2013a).

Tessa got invited too heh but it would've been so much fun if she went alone and when Ken asked where's Harry she'd go oops i forgot to ask him cuz he's a lil betch 🤡 🐱

6mo ago Reply

User R (2022)

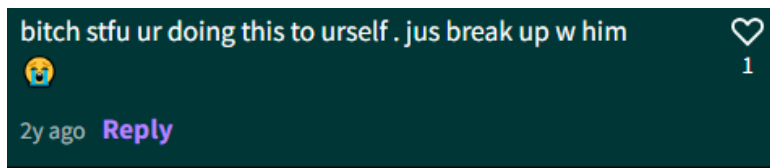
Comment on Chapter 144 of *After 2* (2013b).

Christ Tessa, you clearly know you're making a bad choice.

2y ago Reply

User S (2021)

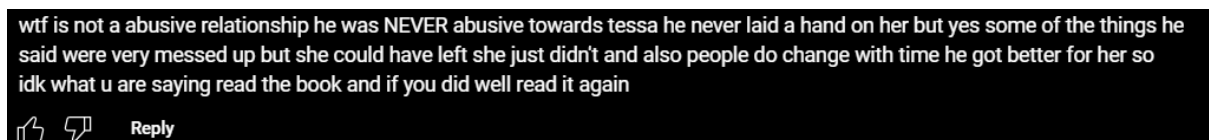
Comment on Chapter 269 of *After 2* (2013b).



User T (2019)

Comment on the video “After | RANT REVIEW”. YouTube. Available:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOKfrGbvjBo&ab\\_channel=FullOfLit](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOKfrGbvjBo&ab_channel=FullOfLit)



User U (2020)

Comment review on the IMDB page for *After* (2019).



User V (2021)

Reddit post on the subreddit r/Technoblade.



User W (2020)

Comment on the video "Tommy Is Holding It Together in Exile with Dream". YouTube.

Available:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_tQgUPoTv6c&lc=UgxdX0eGqS3bQYq4E9V4AaABAg&ab\\_channel=TommyVODS](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_tQgUPoTv6c&lc=UgxdX0eGqS3bQYq4E9V4AaABAg&ab_channel=TommyVODS)

It's called manipulation tactics! Gaslighting, psychological tampering, even some Stockholm syndrome and prisoner conditioning. Right now Dream is acting as Tommy's handler, punishing him with routine procedures (blowing up his armor) and desensitizing him from toxic abusive tactics (last stream Tommy blew up his own armor with little complaint). He does this effectively by manipulating his emotions- being his 'friend' when Tommy is upset (depressed, suicidal, etc) and then making sure he stays in the mindset (not letting him back to L'manburg, taking his things, bossing him around, etc). This makes Tommy extremely dependent on Dream. (When Tommy found Techno's house, the first thing he thought was that Dream wouldn't like it- since when had Tommy cared about what Dream thought? exactly) This is manipulative/abusive relationship 101, and while we can obviously see what's going on, the point is that Tommy hasn't got the foggiest idea that he's being manipulated. Btw I am NOT a professional in any type of way, I've just studied this a little a taken a few classes but that's it. Correct me or add on if you'd like!

Also MAJOR KUDOS to their script writer. (Wilbur had to step down to deal w/ other stuff and I heard that Techno is now writing it. Could be wrong but if so GG POG Techno! Glad to see ur using ur English major Lal <3)

Show less



597



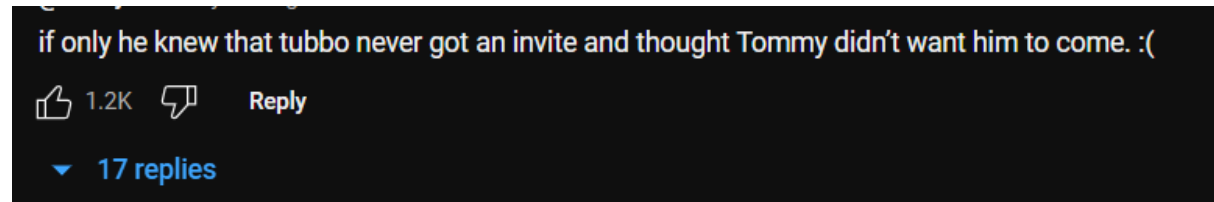
Reply



User X (2020)

Comment on the video “Tommy is Actually Depressed in Exile”. YouTube. Available:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FYZdckVvDDk&list=PLs8d2xbb6iB58QmL\\_CxbRrylzVSEpcmdA&index=12&ab\\_channel=TommyVODS](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FYZdckVvDDk&list=PLs8d2xbb6iB58QmL_CxbRrylzVSEpcmdA&index=12&ab_channel=TommyVODS)

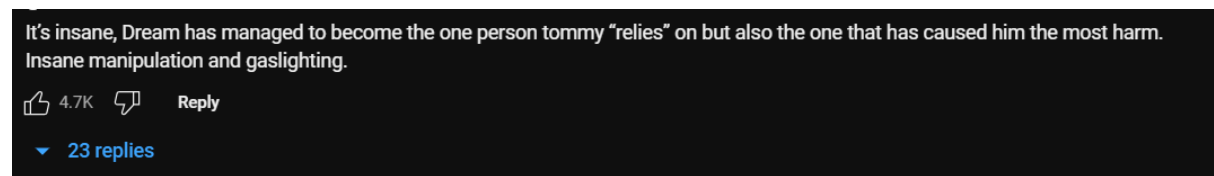


User Y (2020)

Comment on the video “Tommy is Left ALONE at his Exile Party with Dream”. YouTube.

Available:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vvews4NiUsM&list=PLs8d2xbb6iB58QmL\\_CxbRrylzVSEpcmdA&index=11&ab\\_channel=TommyVODS](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vvews4NiUsM&list=PLs8d2xbb6iB58QmL_CxbRrylzVSEpcmdA&index=11&ab_channel=TommyVODS)

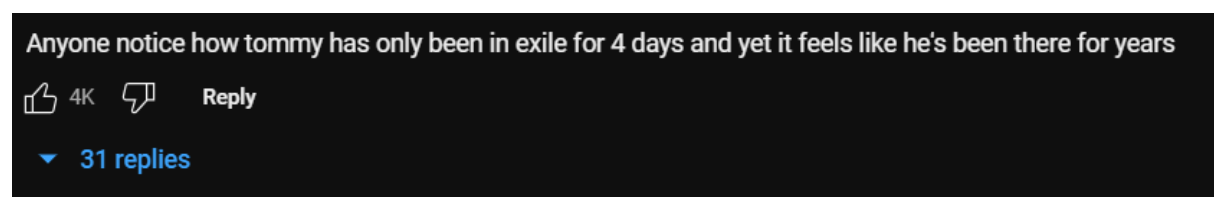


User Z (2020)

Comment on the video “Tommy is Left ALONE at his Exile Party with Dream”. YouTube.

Available:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vvews4NiUsM&list=PLs8d2xbb6iB58QmL\\_CxbRrylzVSEpcmdA&index=11&ab\\_channel=TommyVODS](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vvews4NiUsM&list=PLs8d2xbb6iB58QmL_CxbRrylzVSEpcmdA&index=11&ab_channel=TommyVODS)



User A1 (2020)

Comment on the video ‘‘Tommy is Left ALONE at his Exile Party with Dream’’. YouTube.

Available:



[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vvews4NiUsM&list=PLs8d2xbb6iB58QmL\\_CxbRrylzVSEpcmdA&index=11&ab\\_channel=TommyVODS](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vvews4NiUsM&list=PLs8d2xbb6iB58QmL_CxbRrylzVSEpcmdA&index=11&ab_channel=TommyVODS)

It's the switch from "I'm sure they care about you, Tommy" to "They don't want you over there anyway, nobody showed up."

And Tommy instinctively giving Dream his armor  
and Dream declines and later Tommy THANKS HIM  
Thanks him for not blowing up his armor/axe as if he owes him gratitude. As if Dream did a good thing by not destroying Tommy's possessions.

The manipulation is so perfectly written.

Show less

 3.7K  Reply

▼ 20 replies

User B1 (2020)



Comment on the video ‘‘Tommy Is Holding It Together in Exile with Dream’’. YouTube.

Available:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_tQgUPoTv6c&lc=UgxdX0eGqS3bQYq4E9V4AaABAg&ab\\_channel=TommyVODS](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_tQgUPoTv6c&lc=UgxdX0eGqS3bQYq4E9V4AaABAg&ab_channel=TommyVODS)

im getting exTREMELY freaked out over how much control dream has over tommy...like, tommy says "dream won't like it if i stole" like my heart legitimately fucking stopped. and then dream says to put the armor in the pit and tommy does so without kicking up a fuss. the only time tommy fights back is when dream says to light the tnt up and tommy says "i dont want to", but then dream goes "just light it" and it fucking terrifies me that tommy shuts up and does as dream says. like. it looks like any rebellion tommy makes is ...

Read more

 1.4K  Reply

User C1 (2020)

Comment on the video “Dream finally Abandons Tommy in Exile”. YouTube. Available:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_okO4CssoqI&list=PLMoYA0exdeizdlKmAJSn-rp8qLcfzFTZU&index=12&ab\\_channel=TommyVODS](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_okO4CssoqI&list=PLMoYA0exdeizdlKmAJSn-rp8qLcfzFTZU&index=12&ab_channel=TommyVODS)

even knowing it's acting and it's apart of the script but seeing tommy so broken and being manipulated by dream fucking destroys you man, like i'm nearly in tearrrrrss wtf. this scripting is better than any show i've ever watched lmao

 5  Reply

User D1 (2021)

Comment on the video: “Tommy is Trashing Technoblade’s House with Ghostbur”.

YouTube. Available:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ndMLZrfkXsc&list=PLMoYA0exdeizdlKmAJSn-rp8qLcfzFTZU&index=15&ab\\_channel=TommyVODS](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ndMLZrfkXsc&list=PLMoYA0exdeizdlKmAJSn-rp8qLcfzFTZU&index=15&ab_channel=TommyVODS)

**This man has no right making my anxiety rise so much when hiding from Dream.**

 14  Reply

User E1 (2020)

Comment on the video “Techno & Tommy Do a Kidnapping [Dream SMP]”. YouTube.



Available:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXizYGwac0g&list=PLui3XgJFnwoMRsvBZlbWO5heApkcP6k9Q&index=26&ab\\_channel=Technoblade](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXizYGwac0g&list=PLui3XgJFnwoMRsvBZlbWO5heApkcP6k9Q&index=26&ab_channel=Technoblade)

Tommy's entire demeanor changed. He honestly seems very threatening and dangerous now that you teamed with him. Though he can still be annoying (character him not actual him), he's now more confident and stronger than he was before exile. And with the turtle helmet, he honestly looks even more threatening.

The power obtained by just being on Team Techno is immense. One of the moderately weak and least threatening players on the server (at his lowest point due to exile no less) became something close to a fierce sidekick within a week of just being on Team Techno.

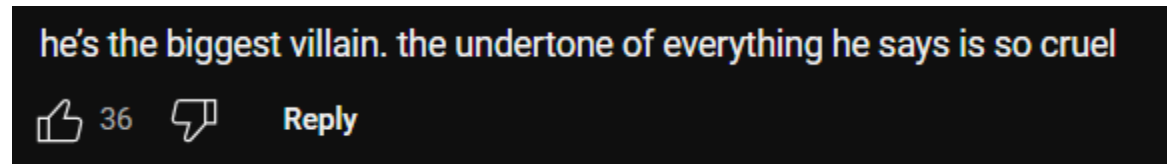
Show less

  Reply

User F1 (2020)

Comment on the video “Tommy is Alone in Exile with Dream”. YouTube. Available:

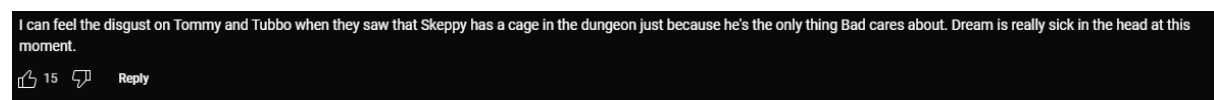
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6ILC5Z5bD4&ab\\_channel=TommyVODS](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6ILC5Z5bD4&ab_channel=TommyVODS)



User G1 (2021)

Comment on the video “Dream SMP Finale Stream”. YouTube. Available:

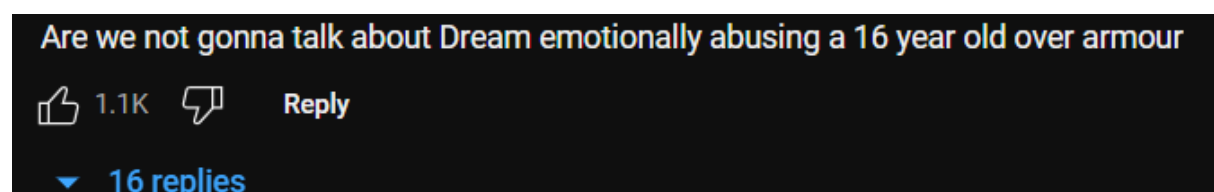
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYWs7zme-eI&t=3140s&ab\\_channel=TommyVODS](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYWs7zme-eI&t=3140s&ab_channel=TommyVODS)



User H1 (2020)

Comment on the video “Tommy is So Lonely in Exile with Dream”. YouTube. Available:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UEj1xRvpSbk&t=1526s&ab\\_channel=TommyVODS](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UEj1xRvpSbk&t=1526s&ab_channel=TommyVODS)




User I1 (2020)

Comment on the video “I keep getting harassed by Dream in Exile”]. YouTube. Available:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lSewwlHjzz8&t=305s&ab\\_channel=TommyInnit](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lSewwlHjzz8&t=305s&ab_channel=TommyInnit)

Who else likes dreams and Tommy's friendship it's so chaotic but they have their wholesome moments

 3.1K  Reply

▼ 29 replies

User J1 (2020)

Comment on the video “Tommy Is Holding It Together in Exile with Dream”. YouTube.



Available:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_tQgUPoTv6c&lc=UgxdX0eGqS3bQYq4E9V4AaABA&ab\\_channel=TommyVODS](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_tQgUPoTv6c&lc=UgxdX0eGqS3bQYq4E9V4AaABA&ab_channel=TommyVODS)

Dream is SO manipulative, it actually scares me. He's got the act nailed. The way he's destroying Tommy's items to slow down any success that will bring him feelings of accomplishment, but then playing nice and constantly hinting that he's his only 'real' friend. He does everything in his power to isolate Tommy and make him think everyone else has given up on him. Logically Tommy understands that and dreads Dream's visits, but as he drifts further from his old world, he starts to long for attention and cling desperately to anyone he can, and therefore looks forward to them in a way. Slowly that need for social interaction will completely take over and Tommy won't care who Dream is as long as he can talk to him. He'll start listening more and believing what he says. He'll feel abandoned and kicked aside by everyone, no matter how many gifts he gets. Dream's manipulation is strong. Soon Tommy will be exactly what he wants him to be. He broke him down, shattered his spirit, leaving him vulnerable enough to be reshaped to Dream's desires, which is kind of terrifying. It kinda reminds me of what I know about abusive relationships, actually. It's all so interesting to think about, though. This is actually such a cool roleplay, it seems pretty surface-level for people who would rather just watch a fun minecraft series, but it has much deeper themes and ideas that you can analyze to your heart's extent if you want to.

Edit: I found a really great example of this. At this point they're not really roleplaying, just messing around, but it's worth bringing up. Around 1:20:48, Dream gives Tommy a set of armor. The important thing to note is that Tommy is grateful for it and takes it like what Dream presents it as: a gift. But it's not a gift. Dream destroys every set of armor Tommy gets. He's doing him no favors. He's brainwashed him into seeing the bad as neutral and the neutral as good. That's a common sign of stockholm syndrome: when the victim sees even the most neutral actions, simple human decencies, as favors or rewards. Just thought it was worth pointing out an actual example. Carry on.

Show less

 2.6K  Reply

▼ 117 replies

User K1 (2022)

Comment on the video “Tommy & Tubbo Finally Kill Dream...(Dream SMP)”. YouTube.



Available:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rf8LhcULwFM&list=PLHejO4RqN8rvovTogryg5eX5bAt5Vb6l7&index=36&ab\\_channel=TommyVODS](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rf8LhcULwFM&list=PLHejO4RqN8rvovTogryg5eX5bAt5Vb6l7&index=36&ab_channel=TommyVODS)

What I love about this is that Tommy and Tubbo aren't fighting for discs anymore they're just fighting for peace. They wanted the free and peaceful life that they dreamed of when joining the server (Tubbo sure, for Tommy, he joined the server causing chaos so idk) but besides that,

The difference between the disc and Imanburg wars to this fight is that they're fighting for themselves and not for anyone else anymore. They want their own peace and freedom and they think the only way of having that is killing Dream. Sure killing Dream will free other members like Quackity, Eret, etc. from his wrath, but this is solely for Tommy and Tubbo, not necessarily thinking about others because they know that they have done enough for them.

Show less

 1.6K  Reply

▼ 5 replies

User L1 (2022)

Comment on the video “Dream SMP - The Last Stream”. YouTube. Available:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7bUaH4yCV4&t=548s&ab\\_channel=TommyVODS](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7bUaH4yCV4&t=548s&ab_channel=TommyVODS)

C!Tommy finally realizes what he did and that C!Dream was a person, all for that to be undone instantly. Tragic, but at least he learned before the nukes hit.

 67  Reply

User M1 (2022)

Comment on the video “Dream SMP - The Last Stream”. YouTube. Available:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7bUaH4yCV4&t=548s&ab\\_channel=TommyVODS](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7bUaH4yCV4&t=548s&ab_channel=TommyVODS)

Damn, this one really got to me I don't usually cry at things but this was just the one that got to me. The fact that Dream could have had a redemption arc, but it was too late, that's just sad that only Tommy would be the only one to finally accept who Dream is... That's dark damn good job to EVERYONE WHO WAS INVOLVED IN THIS! It was incredible

 59  Reply

User N1 (2022)

Comment on the video “Tommy is Left ALONE at his Exile Party with Dream”. YouTube.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vvews4NiUsM&list=PLs8d2xbb6iB58QmL\\_CxbRrylz](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vvews4NiUsM&list=PLs8d2xbb6iB58QmL_CxbRrylz)

VSEpcmdA&index=11&ab\_channel=TommyVODS

I kinda wished he didn't break character so much, like I know it's funny but it does kill the mood a lot, like when he's all depressed looking into the lava, I think it's dumb when he starts laughing and noticing chat saying "do a flip" or whatever yknow?

 22  Reply

User O1 (2022)

Comment on the video “Dream SMP - The Last Stream”. YouTube. Available:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7bUaH4yCV4&t=545s&ab\\_channel=TommyVODS](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7bUaH4yCV4&t=545s&ab_channel=TommyVODS)

Wow! Turns out the dream isn't the villain theory was quite true, dream just wanted that back. But this ending was insane! I cant wait for season 2, and what's to come.

 5  Reply

User P1 (2022)

Comment on the OTW Elections (2022) blog post.

2022-08-12 at 00:41

It is DISGRACEFUL that OTW has allowed Tiffany G. to run for the Board. Tiffany who opposes everything the OTW was created to protect. Censorship & moral panic are NOT welcome in fandom. I will be casting my vote for literally any candidate besides Tiffany G.

I have donated to the OTW for years. I actually donated over \$100 this past fiscal year. I may have reconsider if this kind of thing continues.

OTW- do better. How does allowing this pro-censorship candidate to run further your legally defined mission as a nonprofit? Why should we support OTW if you're allowing people to openly run on a platform of violating your founding and legally binding tenets??????????

I am beyond disappointed.

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