Online Storytelling Spaces: Exploring Participants' Perceptions of Overt and Covert AI Agents

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Abstract

Generative AI (GenAI) is rapidly transforming online collaborative environments, such as online storytelling communities, where creativity and social interaction thrive. Participatory engagement, shared interests, and a sense of community have long characterized such spaces. The entry of overt and covert AI agents—tools and systems explicitly acknowledged or subtly integrated—introduces new dynamics that challenge traditional practices.

Overt AI agents, such as story suggestion tools or automated writing assistants, offer visible contributions that can enhance creative output but may alter the perception of authenticity and originality. In contrast, covert AI agents, operating behind the scenes to create engagement, shape content recommendations, or simulate user behavior, raise questions about transparency and trust. Both types of AI disrupt established norms of collaboration by influencing how stories are co-created and shared among users.

This research focuses on the views and perceptions of participants within fanfiction communities regarding these developments. It examines how technological shifts impact the essence of online creative spaces. Participants shared concerns about diminished human connections and the potential erosion of collaborative spirit when AI participation is not openly acknowledged. They emphasized the importance of preserving transparency and ensuring that AI systems enhance, rather than undermine, the values of inclusivity, engagement, and mutual creativity that define these environments. The findings call for thoughtful design strategies to integrate AI responsibly, supporting ethical practices, promoting openness, and safeguarding the collaborative ethos of such communities.

Keywords

Storytelling, Overt and Covert AI Agents, Participatory community, GenAI

1. Introduction

Recent advancements in Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) are significantly reshaping creative practices, particularly through the integration of overt and covert AI agents in online settings. These technologies are raising critical questions about authorship, originality, and the collaborative dynamics of creative communities. Human-GenAI co-creation has demonstrated its potential to expand creative possibilities, with users describing it as a means of enhancing their imaginative capacity and enabling new ways of thinking [1]. However, concerns remain about how these tools influence critical aspects of creative processes, such as the participatory dynamics of collaborative spaces [2, 3].

Storytelling and fanfiction communities offer a unique opportunity to study the integration of AI technologies within a vibrant, collaborative creative space. Fanfiction (fanfic) refers to stories written to engage with popular narratives and media, often drawing on traditions of oral storytelling [5]. During the last two decades, fanifc communities, rooted in fandoms that have existed for decades, have evolved into expansive online networks, facilitated by platforms like Archive of Our Own (AO3), which hosts over 14 million works spanning more than 68,000 fandoms [6]. The participatory nature of fanfiction encourages writers and readers to reimagine existing narratives, exchange feedback, and collectively build new interpretations of fictional worlds [7, 8].

Rating: General Audiences
Archive Warning: No Archive Warnings Apply
Category: Gen
Fandom: Harry Potter – J. K. Rowling
Characters: Harry Potter, Sirius Black, Kreacher (Harry Potter)
Additional Tags: AI-Generated Text, Book 5: Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, Sad Harry, Hurt/Comfort, Fluff, Harry Potter Needs a Hug
Language: English
Stats: Published: 2024-08-26 Words: 976 Chapters: 1/1 Kudos: 1 Hits: 34

I Told ChatGPT to Write a Harry Potter Fanfic

EtheriaCadenza

Summary:

Prompt: Please write a heartfelt fanfiction chapter based on Harry Potter and Sirius Black's father/son relationship.

Certainly! Here's a heartfelt fanfiction chapter focusing on the relationship between Harry Potter and Sirius Black. The chapter takes place during Harry's fifth year at Hogwarts, after a particularly difficult day.

Figure 1: A fanfiction contributor shares a fanfiction story created by ChatGPT on August 2024 [4].

The human-GenAI co-creation process and culture is increasingly shaped by automation. This shift reconceptualizes creativity in storytelling as a distributed process, shared between human and non-human agents [9]. While this distribution has the potential to expand creative possibilities, it also raises concerns about transparency, agency, and the authenticity of contributions within creative collaborations.

To explore these dynamics, we conducted a study involving over hundred and fifty active members of various fanfiction communities. Participants were either readers or writers and readers. By examining their responses, we sought to understand how overt and covert AI agents influence creative processes, the relationships between participants, and the overall dynamics of storytelling.

Participants expressed a range of concerns about the integration of AI into fanfiction spaces. Transparency emerged as a critical factor, with participants emphasizing the importance of being informed when AI tools are involved in the creation or curation of content. Overt AI agents, such as writing assistants, were generally seen as useful but raised questions about the potential for these tools to diminish the role of human authorship. Covert AI agents, operating behind the scenes, elicited more negative reactions due to their hidden nature and the perception that they could undermine trust within the community. The lack of visibility into the operations of covert systems was viewed as problematic, leading to concerns about manipulation, bias [10], and the potential homogenization of creative output [11].

The interplay between overt and covert AI agents revealed significant challenges for maintaining the collaborative and participatory dynamics of fanfiction communities. While overt tools were seen as capable of enhancing individual creativity and productivity, covert systems raised ethical and practical questions about their role in shaping the narratives and interactions within these spaces. Participants highlighted the need for greater transparency and clearer distinctions between human-generated and AI-generated contributions.

These findings emphasize the importance of thoughtful AI integration that prioritizes transparency and trust. By addressing concerns about the influence of both overt and covert AI agents, creative platforms can better align with the collaborative dynamics of these spaces, enabling GenAI to serve as a tool for augmentation rather than a source of disruption.

2. Related Work

The growing presence of overt and covert AI agents within Generative AI (GenAI) systems is transforming creative communities and reshaping their dynamics, making this an increasingly important area of academic inquiry [12, 13]. Of particular relevance is the fanfiction online community, which serves as a valuable context for examining the complex relationships between individual creators, collaborative community dynamics, and the presence of both overt and covert AI agents.

Fanfiction communities are renowned for their deeply collaborative and participatory nature, fostering

shared storytelling and creative reinterpretation [14]. Rooted in traditions of collective narrative sharing, these communities allow individuals to engage deeply with existing stories, collaboratively reimagining, expanding, and transforming characters, themes, and plots [15, 16]. The process of fanfiction creation and consumption is inherently communal—writers reinterpret and extend existing narratives, while readers actively engage with these stories, often providing feedback and encouraging further exploration [17]. This dynamic reinforces the human-centered nature of fanfiction, where collaboration and shared creativity lie at its heart.

The emergence of digital platforms such as FanFiction.net and Archive of Our Own (AO3) has significantly amplified the scale and visibility of these communities, providing spaces where millions of users can share their work and interact meaningfully [15]. These platforms not only make fanfiction widely accessible but also facilitate collaboration through features like comments, reviews, and feedback loops, which are integral to the participatory culture [18, 19]. The feedback-driven nature of these platforms has established new norms for collective creativity, where storytelling evolves as a shared and iterative process [20, 21].

De Cremer *et al.* [3] and others view creativity as a uniquely human quality. However, today we find large language models, trained on extensive human-created datasets, emerging as powerful players in content generation, creativity, and ideation processes [22, 23, 24]. The use of GenAI has shown to enhance human creativity [11], and AI co-created storytelling is used in diverse areas such as engaging children with literature and learning, medical training, and career development [25, 26, 27, 28, 29].

The emergence of large language models (LLMs), trained on vast datasets of human-generated content, is reshaping traditional notions of creativity by becoming key contributors to content creation, ideation, and storytelling [22, 23, 24]. Generative AI (GenAI) tools have proven their ability to amplify human creativity [11], finding applications across diverse fields such as engaging children with literature, enhancing medical training, supporting career development, and fostering educational storytelling [25, 26, 27, 28, 29].

The integration of AI-powered tools and LLMs in storytelling and creative writing has garnered substantial research interest, with studies highlighting both the opportunities and challenges these technologies present [30]. GenAI facilitates a variety of creative tasks, such as idea generation and development [31, 23, 32], with many writers adopting these tools as collaborative partners. AI's suggestions are often used to inspire new directions and introduce novel narrative elements [33, 34]. Furthermore, AI has played a pivotal role in narrative structuring, allowing for more efficient storytelling processes [35, 36, 37, 38]. These advancements illustrate how AI continues to push the boundaries of creative expression and collaboration.

The integration of LLMs and GenAI tools in creative processes also raises important questions about agency, particularly in the context of overt and covert AI involvement. Overt tools, such as interactive writing assistants, provide visible support and allow users to retain control over their creative direction. However, covert AI systems—operating behind the scenes to influence narrative trends or suggest content without explicit acknowledgment—pose challenges to transparency and trust. This duality highlights the need to carefully consider how agency is distributed between human creators and AI, as well as the ethical implications of AI shaping creative decisions without user awareness.

3. Study

Our aim in this study is to explore how fanfiction community members perceive human versus AI-generated or AI-augmented content, particularly in the context of overt AI tools and covert AI influences, and how these perceptions shape community dynamics.

This question investigates how fanfiction community members perceive human-created versus AI-augmented or AI-generated content, with a particular focus on the roles of overt AI tools (e.g., visible writing assistants) and covert AI influences (e.g., hidden algorithms shaping content discovery or trends). It explores participants' perspectives on critical storytelling elements such as quality, emotional depth, narrative coherence, and authenticity. Furthermore, it examines how overt and covert AI interactions

influence the acceptance and reception of AI-generated or collaborative fanfiction and their impact on the dynamics and interactions within the community.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Questionnaire

To explore these questions, we utilized a structured online questionnaire chosen for its alignment with the fanfiction community's norms and practices. Participant anonymity, a key aspect of fanfiction interactions, was preserved, encouraging honest responses without fear of judgment [39, 40]. This method also allowed us to reach a broad and diverse participant pool across various platforms, capturing perspectives from individuals with different levels of engagement and roles. Additionally, the community's preference for written communication through storytelling, reviews, and discussions [16, 14, 40] made a written questionnaire particularly suitable.

Questions were presented in multiple formats, including multiple-choice, Likert scales, and open-ended responses, allowing for both structured data and narrative insights. To ensure reliability and participant focus, we randomized question order and included strategically repeated items to check for consistency.

We distributed the questionnaire across a variety of fanfiction communities using email lists, Dreamwidth groups, private Discord servers dedicated to fanfiction conventions, and social media posts. To extend its reach, we encouraged community members to share the questionnaire further within their networks. The study was conducted over a period of three months, from May to July 2024.

3.1.2. Data cleaning and consistency

The original survey data included 489 respondents who identified as either fanfiction readers or writers, were adults and signed the consent form. We then cleaned the data as follows. Using a geolocation service, we detected a consecutive bot attack originating from a single location (longitude, latitude), involving 221 respondents who were subsequently removed from the dataset. These bots were characterized by completing only the minimal 44 required questions within 5–6 seconds per response. Additional analysis identified 111 more suspected bots exhibiting similar behavior patterns, such as skipping all open-ended questions and using email addresses from non-authenticated servers. After further validation, these 111 respondents were also excluded from the dataset.

The final dataset comprised 157 valid respondents. Of these, 90 identified as fanfiction writers, 67 as exclusive readers, and one writer identified as a non-reader.

3.2. Data analysis

We conducted quantitative data analysis using Python (version 3.12.4), SPSS (version 29.0.2.0 (20)), and R (version 4.4.1). For Python, we utilized libraries including numpy, re, itertools, pandas, plotly, matplotlib, and scipy, while the dplyr library was employed in R. All multiple-choice responses were numerically coded. Group comparisons were performed using the Mann-Whitney U Test and the Chi-square test. Open-ended responses averaged 23.3 words per answer per participant, providing a robust dataset for qualitative analysis.

For qualitative data (Q29, Q36, Q46), we conducted a content analysis. Two independent coders generated initial codes through a preliminary review of responses, which were subsequently consolidated into broader categories based on frequency. These categories were then analyzed to identify overarching themes. Inter-coder reliability was high, with agreement rates of 86.6%, 99.3%, and 86.3% for questions Q29, Q36, and Q46, respectively, across the entire dataset.

4. Findings: Demographics and Engagement in Fanfiction Communities

This section outlines the demographic characteristics of participants and their engagement with fanfiction, including the platforms they use, the fandoms they participate in (through reading or writing), and the AI tools adopted by writers. Corresponding question numbers are included in parentheses. The tables containing the questions were omitted from this version.

4.1. Participants' Demographics

Gender (Q3) Out of the 157 participants, 65% (102/157) identified as women, 16.67% (26/157) as non-binary/third gender, 12.7% (20/157) as men, 2.5% (4/157) preferred not to say, and five self-described as: "Both female and genderqueer," "none," "gender non-conforming," "Agender," and "Nonbinary man."

Continent Asia 22.93%, Europe 6.37%, North America 63.05%, South America 1.28%, Prefer Not to Say 6.37%.

Primary Language (Q6) 73.89% (116/157) reported English as their primary language, while 24% (38/157) primarily spoke eight other languages, including Chinese, French, German, Hebrew, Hindi, Japanese, Spanish, and Russian.

Education (Q4) 55.4% (87/157) had an undergraduate degree, 25.48% (40/157) a post-graduate degree, 14% (24/157) secondary education, six had vocational or technical training, two were undergraduate students, and one preferred not to say.

Age (Q2) 42% of participants (66/157) were 18-24 years old, 39.5% (62/157) were 25-34 years old, 15.3% (24/157) were 35-44 years old, and 3.1% (5/157) were 45-54 years old.

Comparison to Known Attributes of the Fanfiction Community Although limited, demographic data on fanfiction readers and writers was compared to the 2013 AO3 Census [41] and the newly released 2024 AO3 Census [42]. Both surveys highlight North American dominance, a strong representation of English-speaking participants, and a majority of women, which aligns with our findings. However, our study reflects a higher proportion of Asian participants and slightly fewer from Europe. Our approach also follows CHI community guidelines for gender inquiries [43].
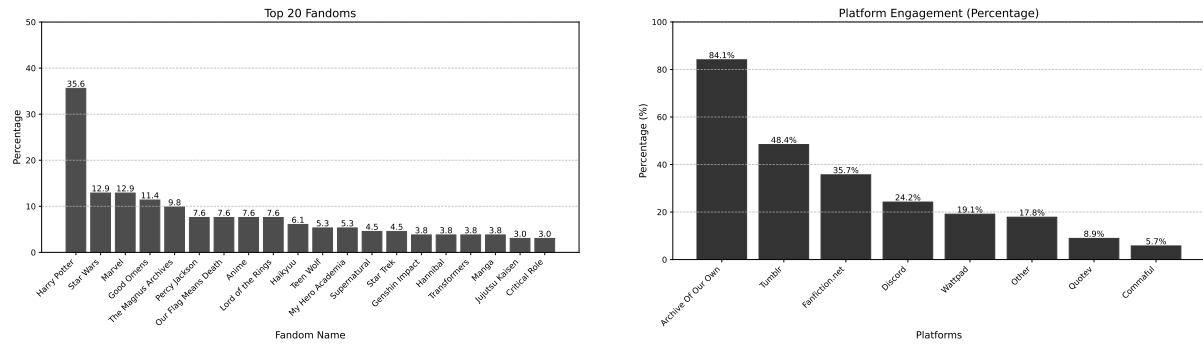
4.2. Engagement with Fanfiction

Participants were generally fanfiction veterans (Q7): 46.5% (73/157) had been active for over 10 years, 31.21% (49/157) for 6–10 years, and 21.6% (34/157) for 1–5 years. Most participants (86%, 135/157) described themselves as highly or moderately engaged (Q9). Writers (Q31) tended to have higher levels of education and longer community involvement compared to non-writers.

4.2.1. Fandoms and Platforms

Participants engaged with 292 different fandoms, with Harry Potter being the most popular, followed by Star Wars. Figure 2a illustrates the top fandoms participants reported engaging with, along with their respective percentages.

Participants reported using nine different platforms, often engaging across multiple. AO3 emerged as the most dominant platform, with 84.1% of participants using it. Figure 2b presents a bar chart of fanfiction platforms used by participants.

(a) Top fandoms participants reported engaging with (Q12).

(b) Fanfiction platforms used by participants (Q8).

Figure 2: Prominent fandoms (a) and platforms (b) used by participants.

4.2.2. Engagement Motivation

Participants reported joining the fanfiction community (Q15) primarily to explore non-canonical relationships that were not fully developed in the original stories (68%, 106/156) and to spend more time with their favorite characters (64.74%, 101/156).

When it comes to reading engagement (Q16), participants prioritized stories that allowed them to further explore specific relationships and pairings (75.6%, 118/156). Recommendations from trusted sources within the community also played a significant role, guiding 64.1% (100/156) of participants in their reading choices.

5. Perceptions on overt and covert GenAI involvement

The survey participants described fanfiction as a deeply social and community-focused activity. A majority viewed both the reading (74.5%, 117/157) and writing (73%, 115/157) of fanfiction as inherently social and community-centric practices (Q48_3, Q48_4). Additionally, an overwhelming 92% (145/157) of participants (Q48_7) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: *"Fanfiction is a space for human creativity."*

5.1. Perceptions of identifying AI Involvement in Fanfiction

When asked about their ability to identify a story written with GenAI, the majority of participants (66.2%, 104/157, Q49) expressed uncertainty. This highlights the challenge of recognizing covert AI involvement in fanfiction. However, when asked whether they had knowingly read a GenAI-generated story, 57.69% (90/156, Q19) categorically stated they had not, while only 16% (25/156, Q19) were unsure.

Participants overwhelmingly believed that AI-generated content could not replicate the emotional nuances and depth found in human-authored stories (84.7%, 133/157, Q48_1). They also expressed skepticism about AI's ability to maintain the authenticity of fanfiction narratives while introducing innovative storytelling elements (77.5%, 121/156, Q45). These perceptions reflect a cautious attitude toward both overtly AI-generated stories and the potential covert influence of AI in shaping narratives.

To understand expectations for AI-generated stories, we analyzed responses from 63 participants who indicated they had read or might have read an AI-generated story (Q19). When assessing such stories (Q25), participants prioritized creativity and originality (54%, 34/63), plot coherence (52.4%, 33/63), and emotional depth (52.4%, 33/63) as the most important factors. Writing style and fluency (36.5%, 23/63), authenticity (33.3%, 21/63), and character development (25.4%, 16/63) were also noted as relevant considerations.

Writers' Perspectives on Overt and Covert Impacts of AI   In response to an open-ended question about hopes and concerns regarding AI in writing (Q46), several writers highlighted potential benefits of

overt AI tools, such as increased engagement and productivity. For instance, one participant remarked: *"If used properly, it can help more fanfic writers publish quicker and actually finish stories"* (P36, primarily a reader). However, others expressed significant concerns about the covert impact of AI, fearing it could discourage or displace writers. As one participant noted: *"Biggest concern that young girls will stop writing because they can't compete and the AI is biased against them"* (P25, primarily a reader).

5.2. Diverging Perspectives on AI's Role in Creativity, Community, and Ethics in Fanfiction

Participants expressed significant concerns about the growing presence of AI-authored fanfiction (Q48_5, Q48_6, Q48_8, Q48_9). A majority (76.4%, 120/156) believed that AI-generated content poses a danger to the social aspects of the fanfiction community (Q48_5). Additionally, 83.4% (131/157) were concerned that an influx of AI-authored stories could overwhelm fanfiction platforms, overshadowing human-created works (Q48_6).

Concerns about the impact on human creativity were particularly strong, with 79.6% (125/157) asserting that reliance on AI for content creation could stifle human creativity and limit creative freedom (Q48_8). However, 31% (49/157) of participants felt that worries about AI's role in fanfiction might be exaggerated (Q48_9), reflecting a divide in perceptions of AI's influence on the community.

5.2.1. Ethical Concerns Surrounding AI in Fanfiction

Ethics emerged as a significant concern for participants, with 68.6% (107/156) expressing ethical reservations about AI's role in fanfiction (Q51). Half of the participants highlighted concerns about potential infringement on originality and creative ownership. For instance, one participant stated: *"I don't need auto-plagiarism involved in my work, or to have the most statistically obvious wording."* (P109, both reader and writer, Q36).

Additionally, participants raised concerns about legal implications, particularly in relation to copyright law. These concerns reflect apprehensions about how AI-generated content might undermine the originality and creative agency that define the fanfiction community. A primary ethical concern is the training of AI on original content without obtaining permission: 'My main concern is the fact that ai is essentially exclusively trained off of stolen material" (P13, reader more than a writer, Q36).

5.3. The Perceived Effect of Overt and Covert AI Agents on the Community

When asked whether knowing a fanfiction story was generated by AI would decrease their interest in reading it (Q22), most respondents (66%, 103/156) indicated that it would. A smaller group (16%, 25/156) stated that their interest would depend on the context, while only a minority expressed increased interest (5.77%, 9/156) or reported no influence (3.85%, 6/156).

Transparency emerged as a key concern, with 86% (135/157, Q48_2) of participants asserting that authors should disclose AI involvement in the creative process. When asked how they would feel if they retrospectively discovered that a fanfiction they had read was written by AI (Q21), 72.2% (112/155) described negative feelings, with 58% (90/155) specifically reporting a sense of deception. A smaller portion, 9% (14/155), stated they would feel impressed, viewing it as a positive experience, while 5% (8/155) expressed neutrality.

Participants were also asked whether the possibility of GenAI-generated content influenced their interactions within the fanfiction community (Q29). More than half (54.3%, 56/103) reported no impact. As one participant expressed, *"Artificial intelligence or not, as long as the content is good"* (P75, reader, Q29). Another participant mentioned a potential positive influence: *"It depends, I've been part of 'dead' fandoms where there has not been any recent fanfiction updates in months/years and would like to have some sort of new content to read"* (P36, more reader than writer, Q29).

However, 38.8% (40/103) mentioned moderate or strong negative influences. Within this group, 22.5% (9/40) actively avoided AI-generated content, 27.5% (11/40) expressed general disdain for AI, 17.5% (7/40) criticized AI's limited creativity, and 20% (8/40) viewed AI-generated works as plagiarized or inauthentic.

For example, one participant wrote, *"I do not want to read AI-generated fic or engage with people who post AI-generated fic, especially on platforms focused on fic, such as AO3. If I encounter someone on AO3 who admits to generating their fic with AI, I block them and hide all works by them..."* Several participants also mentioned blocking users who utilize AI to generate fanfiction.

When participants reflected on their biggest concerns or hopes regarding the intersection of AI and fanfiction (Q46), responses frequently referenced the future of the community and the importance of connections within it. While a few expressed optimism about AI fostering collaboration and mentorship, such as P86, a reader, who stated, *"Hope: AI will foster a culture of collaboration and mentorship within fanfiction communities, encouraging knowledge sharing and skill development,"* many others voiced apprehensions. Concerns included the potential devaluing of fans' labor, fluctuations in interest within specific fandoms due to AI-driven activity, and the erosion of meaningful fan interactions.

One major concern centered on how AI might undermine the community's social dynamics. In the words of P17, a reader, *"One of the things I love most about fanfic is the community, to know that someone feels the same about a character that I love or hate or have a different opinion for an interesting reason. AI can't feel, can't have informed opinions."* This sentiment underscores the importance of human connection in sustaining the fanfiction community.

6. Discussion

Creative communities are experiencing significant disruption with the rise of AI, particularly large language models (LLMs). To explore these transitions, we studied fanfiction communities, focusing on the roles of overt and covert AI agents and their implications for community dynamics and design.

Participants highlighted the importance of transparency in AI involvement, with 86% (135/157) agreeing that authors should disclose AI's role in content creation. Many expressed frustration upon discovering covert AI influence, such as retrospectively learning that a story was AI-generated, with 58% (90/155) feeling deceived. Ethical concerns about the covert use of copyrighted material for AI training were also prominent, aligning with broader debates about intellectual property and data ethics [36, 44].

Overt AI tools, such as writing assistants, were generally viewed as helpful for tasks like grammar correction and idea generation. However, participants overwhelmingly valued human-created works for their emotional authenticity, originality, and creativity, which they felt AI could not replicate. Early adopters of AI tools were more open to their integration, suggesting that familiarity with AI may increase acceptance over time.

Covert AI influences raised concerns about overwhelming platforms with AI-generated content, diluting the value of human-authored works, and undermining fanfiction's participatory culture. Participants feared that such shifts might weaken community connections and engagement, with some emphasizing that AI cannot replicate the emotional and social bonds formed through fanfiction.

Our findings suggest several design implications. Platforms should ensure transparency through clear labeling of AI-generated or AI-assisted works, allowing users to understand the level of AI involvement. Providing opt-in or opt-out options for using content in AI training datasets is critical to addressing intellectual property concerns. To preserve creativity and engagement, platforms could promote human-authored works, support collaborative tools, and introduce mechanisms to encourage narrative diversity and originality. By balancing innovation with transparency and community values, platforms can mitigate the risks posed by overt and covert AI agents while fostering trust and engagement.

7. Conclusions

This study examined how fanfiction communities are adapting to GenAI, focusing on overt tools like writing assistants and covert influences such as undisclosed algorithms. While overt tools were seen as helpful for productivity, covert AI raised concerns about creativity, authenticity, and community connections.

Transparency was critical, with participants calling for clear labeling of AI-assisted works and safeguards against the covert use of copyrighted material in AI training. Our findings emphasize the need for thoughtful AI integration that balances benefits with risks while preserving the values and participatory culture of fanfiction communities.

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