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Captain America and The Winter Soldier: A Template for Gay Superheroes?

**An Introduction to the Stucky Fandom**

Since their 2008 release of *Iron Man*, Marvel Studios garnered massive popularity for the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Prior to the release of *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, the studio had already grossed almost eleven billion dollars (Johnson). As these movies have gained popularity, various groups of fans have been identifying with the superhero characters. In particular, gay and bisexual men appear to be resonating with the main characters of the *Captain America* franchise—Steve Rogers (Captain America) and Bucky Barnes (The Winter Soldier)—as evidence by the vast, ever-growing fandom known as Stucky.

Stucky, a word which combines Steve and Bucky, is a fan-created phenomenon where Rogers and Barnes are romantically paired in interpretations of the *Captain America* movies known as fan fiction. When looking at two of the most popular fanfiction websites—*FanFiction* and *Archive of Our Own*—one can see over thirty thousand pieces of Stucky fanfiction currently exist (*FanFiction*; *Archive of Our Own*). However, fan response to the *Captain America* movies has also included other mediums such as video, music, painting, and other visual arts. Furthermore, fans have used social media as a powerful tool to share their creations. For example, on Instagram “#Stucky” appears over 300,000 times, and accounts like the popular @the\_life\_of\_bucky\_barnes, which has over 56,000 followers, are dedicated to displaying artistic contributions to the Stucky fandom.

**Fandom and Fanfiction: Why It Matters**

Though the Stucky fandom is unique in its rapid rise to popularity through social media, it is but one of many fandoms which exist. In his article “From fan appropriation to industry re-appropriation: the sexual identity of comic superheroes,” University of Wakato professor Gareth Schott writes, “Analysis, interpretation, and speculation, building a community through shared texts and playfully appropriating them for their own ends – these are the defining features of fandom both online and off” (Schott), providing a working definition of fandom. In fandom, fans explore alternative readings or expand upon existing ones, transcending the original creations (Schott). As author J. Richard Stevens notes in his book *The Evolution of a National Icon: Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence*, fans use existing material “to reconstruct and reconfigure cultural significance in their own lives” (Stevens 10). Furthermore, for comic-based narratives, Stevens points out that fan response is incredibly important to how future publications are formed, making them unique in their ability to reflect how their fans feel about them in the actual storylines. Thus, superhero fandom offers insight into how people are consuming media, what they feel is lacking within said media, and how that media represents the populace within its time of publication.

**Captain America and The Winter Soldier**

Though Captain America has existed from many years, Stevens succinctly summarizes the history of fan reaction to the character when he writes, “Throughout the character’s history, which contains messages from ultranationalist jingoism to a critique of the role of nationalism in the propagation of racism and terrorism, his narratives have provoked incredibly articulate responses” (Stevens 2), ranging from fans sending fan mail to the Captain America creators to them creating elaborate costumes to portray the character at fan conventions. People from all backgrounds easily identify with Steve Rogers, and his character is important to consider “because of [his] centrality to the Marvel Universe” (Stevens 3), demonstrated through his leadership of the Avengers in the cinematic movies. However, it is also important to consider Barnes when looking at the movies. As *Buzzfeed* writer Rachael Krishna notes, Barnes, while not as prominent as Rogers, has become incredibly popular among fans who seem to relate to him because he is more flawed than the other superheroes (Krishna). Furthemore, Barnes is central to the plot of both the second movie—which is subtitled *The Winter Soldier*—and the third movie (Vary). Thus, it seems this version of Barnes contributes heavily to the development to the Stucky fandom.

Along with considering the role of Barnes in the emergence of the fandom, other factors in the creation of Stucky are worth considering as well. Though homoerotic interpretations of traditionally heterosexual characters are not abnormal—the example of Batman and Robin being a prime example—the rise of the Stucky fandom is occurring while actual gay superheroes, such as Northstar and Iceman, are starting to become more prominent in the main stream. To explain this apparent anomaly, Schott writes that “despite the surfacing of ‘out’ gay superheroes, fans that take a queer reading of comic texts have persisted in their queering of these characters due to the underdeveloped nature of mainstream comic treatments of queer performative identity” (Schott). Thus, it seems Barnes and Rogers are more relatable to gay and bisexual men because they offer more complex characters than their openly queer counterparts. Furthermore, it appears that the Captain America character offers a chance for gay and bisexual men to garner to greater acceptance because he is such a prominent figure in the media. Even the characters in the comics themselves acknowledge Roger’s power to create change, with Black Panther telling him at one point, “You’re Captain America. The living symbol of this country. You could change the hearts and minds of the public” (Stevens 249). However, it is impossible to pinpoint exactly why gay and bisexual men are resonating with Rogers and Barnes because little study has actually been done on the Stucky fandom itself.

**The Inquiry**

Thus, with the preceding knowledge in mind, one is left to ponder several questions. Primarily, why are gay and bisexual men identifying with the traditionally heterosexual main characters of the *Captain America* franchise? Though the existing knowledge allows for some informed guesswork, no easily accessed study seems to have directly sought answers from gay and bisexual men. In par, this lack of knowledge stems from the relative recent inception of the fandom, as it only really took off with the release of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* in 2014.

With this main question in mind, other supporting questions arise. What are the specific qualities which are drawing gay and bisexual men to the characters? What do they find relatable about Steve Rogers that differs from how they connect to Bucky Barnes? Are they more influenced by one of the men over the other and, if so, why? Why are other canonically gay and bisexual superheroes like Iceman and Northstar not appealing to them?

**Research Plan**

To conduct my research, I plan to have to major approaches to gathering my research. Both of these approaches will involve human subjects, so I will be submitting my proposal to the Institutional Review Board at LMU to seek approval for conducting my research.

The first step I will be taking in my research is to send out a demographic survey to the writers of Stucky fanfiction. Because so much of the fanfiction pairs Rogers and Barnes in a homosexual relationship, one could assume that many of the writers are gay and bisexual men who are identifying with these characters. However, since almost no demographic data exists about Stucky fanfiction writers, I would need to first obtain this knowledge. If this survey comes back with results that suggest gay and bisexual men are not the primary writers of these texts, my research will change slightly. Instead of asking “Why are gay and bisexual men identifying with Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes?” my question may become “Why are [group x] identifying Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes with gay and bisexual men?”

Once this primary research has been complete, I would then go out and interview gay and bisexual men about their experiences with Stucky fanfiction and the *Captain America* movies. I would ask them the various questions I proposed in the preceding section, delving deeper whenever an interesting line of thought emerges. To find these gay and bisexual men, I would travel to cities that have large gay and bisexual male populations and heavy media exposure such as San Francisco, Seattle, and New York, trying to seek out the largest amount of information possible to attempt to encapsulate the gay and bisexual male experience of the fandom and the movies.

Once I have collected the information, I plan to write a research article which compiles my findings and submit to variety of peer-reviewed publications to disseminate the information I have uncovered. Not only will this article shine a light on the Stucky phenomenon, but it will also offer advice on how to create authentic gay and bisexual superheroes who accurately represent the experience of queer men.

**Conclusion**

Despite the rise of openly gay superheroes such as Iceman and Northstar, it appears gay and bisexual men are identifying instead with Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes. Research needs to be done to understand what is driving them to resonate with these two traditionally heterosexual characters rather than canonically queer superheroes. The information gathered from such an undertaking will help future superhero creators to produce gay and bisexual male characters who accurately reflect queer men’s experience.

Works Cited

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Sample Budget (Based on Travel to Three Cities)

Airfare (Prices subject to change and are based on flying to the city on Friday and returning on Monday, using May 18th and May 21st for reference)

* Seattle (LAX to SEA, SEA to LAX)
  + $282.40 for round trip flying Alaska
* San Francisco (LAX to SFO, SFO to LAX)
  + $264.39 for round trip flying American
* New York (LAX to EWR, JFK to LAX)
  + $311.40 for round trip flying Alaska

Housing

* Seattle
  + $0, as I can stay with family
* San Francisco
  + $467.05 at the Inn on Castro (includes breakfast and is located in the LGBT district-Castro)
* New York
  + $357 at the Larchmont Hotel (includes breakfast and is located in the LGBT district-Greenwich Village)

Food

* $60 (based on spending three days in each location with a $15 stipend for each day, minus the breakfast at the housing and all meals for the trip where I will stay with family)

Transportation

* $60 (Based mostly on trips to and from airport; staying in the LGBT districts minimizes the travel needed)

Total Sample Amount Requested: $1,802.69