

WELSH LANGUAGE FANFICTION IN LIGHT OF WELSH CULTURAL  
AND NATIONAL IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE REVITALISATION

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ABSTRACT:

While the field of fan studies is constantly growing, it has been scarcely researched in relation to minority languages and language revitalisation. In this paper we have undertaken to explore the small and previously unexplored realm of Welsh-language fanfiction, focusing on the motivations to read and write it. The aim was to explore the possible role of fanfiction in language revitalisation by investigating a relationship between these motivations and the cultural and national identity of the authors and readers, as well as their attitude towards the Welsh language. The article presents the results of a study conducted in 2022 through the use of online surveys on a sample of readers of Welsh-language fanfiction found on the Tumblr platform, and semi-structured interviews with authors of fanfiction posted on Archive of Our Own. The study revealed that the decision to participate in the fandom was strongly connected to the cultural, and in particular linguistic identity of authors and readers, and to a much lesser extent to their national identity. Two out of three major motivations emerging from the study: a wish to broaden the use of language online and the wish to learn it can be connected with language revitalization. Engagement with fanfiction was perceived as an accessible form of leisure available in Welsh and as a safe space for both learners and native speakers to creatively use the language without fear of criticism, which suggests the importance and possible use of fandom in language revitalisation. However, the study also points to some

difficulties in developing a fan community around Welsh fanfiction, mostly due to technical limitations and the small amount of popular media created originally in Welsh.

**Keywords:** fanfiction, fan studies, Welsh identity, Welsh language, minority language media

## Introduction

Fanfiction has been investigated through many different approaches within the constantly growing field of fan studies (e.g. Black 2006, Blake 2012, Rosenblatt and Tushnet 2015, Lamerichs 2018, McInroy and Craig 2020); however, it has been scarcely researched in relation to minority languages and language revitalisation. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the previously unexplored area of Welsh-language fanfiction, focusing on the identities of the readers and authors, and their relationship with the language. The questions addressed are:

1. What are the motivations for writing and reading fanfiction in Welsh?
2. Are readers and writers of Welsh fanfiction making a conscious effort to revitalise the language?
3. Is there a link between Welsh cultural or national identity and deciding to write fanfiction in Welsh?

To contextualise the findings, we will introduce research on Welsh national and cultural identity, the revitalisation of minority languages in an online context, as well as fan studies. We will then present the results of a study conducted on a sample of readers and writers of Welsh fanfiction in 2022.

## Welsh cultural and national identity

The question of what nationalism is has long been a matter of extensive discussion, with no clear consensus how to define it and what constitutes it. From among various definitions of nationalism proposed by scholars, the one most useful for this analysis has been provided by Smith, who discusses a distinction between territorial, focusing on the territory and political structures, and ethnic nationalism, centred around cultural resources, such as customs, language, and ethno-history (Smith 1993: 81-83; 123-128). In analysing this division, Smith proposes a criterion of whether a nation is pre- or post-independence. Since the present article deals with Wales specifically, the relevant aspects are those regarding pre-independence. According to Smith, with regards to territorial

nationalism a pre-independent nation will strive to free itself from the foreign rule and create a new state-nation, while from the ethnical nationalist perspective, the nation will try to secede from a larger political unit rather than integrate with it. For the purpose of this research, the displays of territorial nationalism will be further referred to as a “national identity” and displays of ethnic nationalism as a “cultural identity” to pinpoint their most relevant aspects.

With regards to Welsh identity, a distinction similar to that of territorial-ethnic has been made by Carter (2010: 13-18), who distinguishes between aspects of Welshness derived from the territorial and political structures, and aspects derived from the Welsh language, its literary tradition and the history that comes with it. It has been argued that between the Acts of Union of 1536/1542 and the late 19th century, the lack of political distinction between Wales and England resulted in the predominance of cultural elements in Welsh identity: “an identity evoked overwhelmingly by literary and musical culture and having as its mainspring the language question” (Nairn 1981: 196). However, the last 150 years saw major changes affecting the areas that once could be considered to constitute Welshness, among them population changes (in particular rural depopulation and migration), as well as the decline of the Welsh language and gradual secularisation of society (Carter 2010: 61-67). On the other hand, politically-oriented nationalism emerged as well, beginning with the Cymru Fydd movement in the early 20th century, followed by the establishment of the nationalist party Plaid Cymru in 1925 and Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg, a pressure group campaigning for language rights, in 1962. Notably, violent nationalist activity in Wales has had very limited scope and appeal (Williams 2010: 6-7). The gradual development of separate political institutions throughout the 20th century culminated in the creation of the Welsh National Assembly in 1999, all of which led to the growth of relevance of the political aspects.

Still, the Welsh language has been long deemed a major component of Welshness. In a study conducted by Giles et al. (1977), speaking Welsh was a stronger predictor of Welsh self-identification than place of residence and cultural background. More recently, in her extensive qualitative study on Welsh identity using focus groups, Williams (2019: 82-85) has shown that Welsh identity is heavily connected to language even among those who do not speak it. However, the importance of Welsh is highly nuanced due to its position as a minority language. On the one hand, attachment to the language is commonly voiced – as many as 86% of Welsh people said that it was something to be proud of (Welsh Government 2018); on the other hand, the process of language revitalisation is fraught with a number of difficulties. Among them is the limited use of the Welsh language in some crucial spheres of life, such as leisure (Trywydd for Gwynedd Council 2014), which is particularly relevant to this paper.

### Welsh language in leisure

Leisure, especially participation in arts and cultural activities, plays an important role in language revitalisation as a source of entertainment, a space for acquiring new skills, and a means of building a communal identity (Chick 1998: 111-133). Bearing this in mind, advancing Welsh-language leisure activities could help cultivate the use of the language, especially among young adults who are no longer exposed to the language once they finish school. Statistical data and recent research point to the issue of young adults abandoning Welsh after completing their education: the 1991 national census showed a relatively high percentage of Welsh speakers aged 5-15 (40.8%) compared to a lower one of speakers aged 20-44 (15.5%). In 2001, instead of the expected growth in the older group, the percentages in the two groups were similar: 40.8% in the 5-15 group, 15.6% in the 20-44 group). Similarly, the 2011 census showed that while a fair proportion of children were learning the language (40.3%), still only 15.6% of adults spoke it (Office of National Statistics 2012).

One of the reasons for this phenomenon could be attributed to Welsh being perceived as an academic language, with strict rules and no place for error. In a study by Lewis and Smallwood (2010), many parents and school children reported feeling excluded by the standard and formality of the Welsh used at school, with teachers saying that ‘Welsh has only been a “school/education” language for many members of the workforce in our schools by now’ (Lewis and Ostler 2010: 6). Likewise, Cunliffe et al. note that especially in southeast Wales, “Welsh was seen as the language of school and authority, while English was seen as the language of socialising and relaxation” (Cunliffe et al., 2013). Multiple studies have shown people’s unwillingness to use Welsh in an informal register (McAllister et al. 2013:12-13, Jones 2017). The Trywydd report (Trywydd for Gwynedd Council 2014) on the social use of Welsh in secondary schools also gathered anecdotal evidence that points toward a near-complete abandonment of Welsh after finishing school. This phenomenon points toward the importance of allowing Welsh to be the language of leisure alongside the language of school education. This could be achieved through providing pupils with access to Welsh outside of class, for instance through extracurricular activities. A need for informal usage of Welsh has also been recognised in Welsh Government’s Cymraeg 2050 strategy, which states that “[i]n addition to expanding further and higher education provision in Welsh, further informal opportunities for young people to use their Welsh language skills socially – whether face-to-face or through social media – will be key” (Education Workforce Council, 2018: 61). As the Welsh Government acknowledges the need to find new ways of promoting the usage of Welsh among the younger generation, looking toward the Internet for new possibilities becomes a viable option.

### The Welsh language online

Over two decades ago, Crystal (2000: 89) proposed that the media would gain significance in revitalisation processes, and ever since then increasing attention has been devoted to this matter. Unique challenges and opportunities for minority languages posed by global networks such as the Internet have been recognised by Cunliffe and Honeycutt (2010). As a globalised medium, the Internet fosters the use of majority languages, especially English, yet at the same time facilitates communication and the forming of communities among minority language speakers.

A qualitative study by Ferré-Pavia et al. (2018) notes that, while the digitalization of minority language media outlets often presents financial problems for companies operating them, it has a positive overall impact on the community of speakers (2018: 18). The importance of social media is further emphasised by Cunliffe, who points out that “social media does appear to offer minority language communities the opportunity to create virtual breathing spaces, but those communities also need the capacity and the desire to do so” (2019: 474).

These tensions are clearly seen in the Welsh case. A study by Song et al. (2020) has shown that while 76.9% of the Welsh population use social media (among them as many as 99.6% of people aged 16-29), only just over a quarter of Welsh speakers use Welsh at least as much as English while using these media. Another study has shown that the younger the person, the lower their use of the Welsh language on social media (Welsh Government & Welsh Language Commissioner 2015). The reasons for this phenomenon may vary and warrant further research.

The dominance of English in media and entertainment is certainly a major factor imperilling the revitalisation of Welsh. A statistical study by Wyburn (2017) suggests that if levels of Welsh-language use in the media remain low, the prevalence of English as the lingua franca (especially on the Internet), as well as the increasing consumption of English-language media pose a major threat to the survival of the Welsh language within the next hundred years.

In light of the above, we believe that studies of the online environment are of crucial importance. The importance and value of social media for Welsh, in particular its usage on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, has been gaining certain traction in research (Cunliffe et al. 2013, Cunliffe and ap Dyfrig 2013, Cunliffe and Honeycutt 2010, Jones et al. 2013; Johnson 2013, McMonagle et al. 2019). However, many potentially important forms of communication endemic to the Internet still remain unexplored. One of them is fanfiction, which is the focus of our study.

### Definition of fanfiction

It is difficult to offer a single academic definition of fanfiction, as various fields of research take different aspects into consideration. For the purpose of our research, we will consider three elements that define fanfiction as distinguished by Hellekson and Busse (2014: 6-7):

- 1) It is a form of collective storytelling, based around a community. This is especially true in the modern world, as the Internet allows for the quick formation of communities around media. Users of websites such as Tumblr become very active seconds after a new text is published, quickly producing gifs, artworks, writing, and heated discussions.
- 2) It is always created in response, often a very emotional one, to specific texts, as fans embrace the source material and create more works inspired by it.
- 3) It involves the (sometimes critical) rewriting of shared media to suit the taste of fans when they decide that a certain aspect of a story does not meet their expectations.<sup>1</sup>

The dynamics of fan communities present some difficulties in fan studies research. Black (2006) highlights the way in which Internet-based communities constantly fluctuate, often changing along with the technology they use as a basis for communication. The same is true for websites used for hosting fiction written by fans; some websites fall into obscurity, while others, such as Wattpad, change their focus from catering to their fans to promoting original fiction (Bold 2018: 14).

The main website currently used for accessing fanfiction is Archive of Our Own (also referred to as Ao3 or the Archive). Established by the Organization for Transformative Work<sup>2</sup> in 2008, the Archive offers an extensive search function and tagging system, allowing users to sort through works based on fandoms, characters, tropes, and language. Due to the latter feature unique to the Archive (i.e. the possibility to search for works in a specific language), the present study will focus mainly on fanfiction published on this website, along with the social media platform Tumblr.

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1 This was first observed in the 1960s science fiction fandom formed around Star Trek and marks the beginning of the so-called fanzine culture (Lamb and Veith, 2014). Fanzines were a means of sharing work with other fans, usually through small, self-published booklets or magazines, printed in small quantities to be distributed at conventions or through mailing lists.

2 A non-commercial and non-profit hosting place created to preserve the history of fanworks and defend authors from commercial exploitation and legal challenges ([www.archiveofourown.org/about](http://www.archiveofourown.org/about), date of access: 29 Sep. 2022).

As of September 2022, there are 57 works in Welsh published on the Archive, with the oldest texts dating back to 2014. The number of Welsh fanfiction texts on the platform seems to be rising, with 15 works published in 2019-2020 and 29 works published in 2021-2022. A notable surge of Welsh-language works since 2019 can be attributed to Archive's decision to remove English as the default language for publishing fanfiction in that year. This change forced users to manually select a language before submitting their works, possibly bringing more attention to non-English fanfiction. What is worth noting is that most of the Welsh-language writing focuses on English-language media. We have identified only four stories based on distinctively Welsh sources: three on stories of the *Mabinogion* and one on the soap opera *Rownd a Rownd*.

#### Fandom, community and language revitalisation

A crucial aspect of fandoms is their communal nature. To fully acknowledge its importance, it is useful to place it in the wider context of Benedict Anderson's work concerning what he calls "imagined communities". Originally focusing on national identity, his work has proven useful in analysing other communities whose members "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 2006: 6). A factor Anderson considers important to the creation of such a community is people's awareness of one another and the connection they maintain despite not actually interacting in person. He considers the invention of print and newspapers to be one of the factors which exacerbated the concept of national identity, by providing people with technological means to recognize and relate to one another as a community. A modern fandom fits well within this model. Operating primarily online and rarely interacting in person, fandom members have the power to shape their (largely anonymous) presence and can create a shared identity above divisions.

Moreover, it can be observed that at least some fandoms, constituting of closely integrated people coincidentally connected by a shared practice, could be described as a community of practice (for definition of a community of practice see Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 2000). There have been documented examples of fandoms developing their own shared traditions, such as using certain character archetypes (e.g. the Mary Sue, an inserted character representing the author's persona) or giving characters traits that were not mentioned at all in the canon text but which became popular in the community (e.g. a specific sexual orientation). By sharing tropes, people in fandoms create a common base of fan-accepted canon and ideas that become widely known to every participant of the community (Hellekson and Busse 2014: 78). Thus fandoms can be considered an online example of a community of practice. Such groups, when perceived in a

minority language context, can be seen as small epicentres of language revitalisation. Latest models of language revitalisation stress the importance of new domains of practicing the language, particularly among young generations of speakers; by affirming the public value of the language and engaging in interactions in the language, young speakers may gain a sense of ownership and responsibility (Kaartinen 2020: 216-217).

In fact, Dariva (2021) has proposed that fanfiction could be considered an alternate form of acquisition of vocabulary in an additional language. While fandoms are usually English-dominated spaces, many people involved with fanfiction seem to be either English learners or bilinguals with English as their second language (cf. Black 2006). For such individuals, fanfiction may be a new, effective method of English vocabulary acquisition. As involvement in fandoms comes with a high level of emotional connection to both the source material and the content created for it, fandom offers an environment with a unique motivation for language acquisition. While this has been previously considered only in the context of English, it should also be kept in mind whilst considering minority language-based fan communities.

It can be argued that fanfiction as a specific form of creative writing (usually anonymous, amateur, largely informal, and focused on a community) presents a more inclusive space for an amateur writing in a minority language. In the Welsh context, aspiring authors may feel discouraged to share their Welsh writing in an environment of a higher standard (such as Eisteddfod competitions) due to lack of linguistic confidence, fear of making errors, competition, and the pressure to produce high-quality writing. In contrast, Archive of Our Own, in allowing for immediate reader feedback through its Kudos option,<sup>3</sup> grants immediate validation and appreciation, thereby encouraging writers to continue publishing. Thus, this type of online publishing may constitute an attractive linguistic middle ground between the vernacularity of social media and the higher, literary register.

The idea that fanfiction might indeed have a positive impact on language revitalisation is still largely speculative, bearing in mind the lack of research on minority-language fanfiction. However, it can be argued that the unique position of fanfiction as a casual creative form, the linguistic opportunities it offers, and its communal nature provide a framework for the present study.

## Methodology

The study has been conducted on two groups of participants with two separate methodologies applied.

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<sup>3</sup> A button for sending 'kudos' is located at the end of every fanfiction, and pressing it after reading sends a short message to the writer's account which notifies them that their work has been read and enjoyed.



The first group consisted of readers active on the Tumblr platform, whom we reached by contacting several bloggers that had gathered a Welsh-speaking community around them. The readers on Ao3 could not be recruited, as the site provides full anonymity and offers no means to address specific users who do not publish their works. In order to study reader behaviours, the readers were sent a survey in English consisting of 20 closed-ended and 6 open-ended questions. In total, 11 responses were gathered.

The second group comprised writers publishing Welsh-language works. We contacted nine authors whom we considered active i.e. who published fanfiction on Ao3 in the last two years (2021 and 2022). Additionally, we placed a post on Tumblr encouraging any author who had published their works online to contact the researchers. This yielded a response from one person. Out of the ten authors, four stopped responding at various points of the study, leaving six valid respondents.

The authors were sent an abridged version of the reader survey, with 16 closed-ended questions. The remaining questions from the reader survey were incorporated in the following semi-structured interviews. After filling out the questionnaires, the authors were interviewed via the Discord platform. The semi-structured interviews, lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, were recorded and transcribed by the use of automated transcription, and then manually checked and corrected.

The data was then organised according to common themes that appeared in the interviews and surveys. The topics of interest included in the survey and interviews were feelings towards nationalism and the Welsh language, as well as the participants' engagement with fanfiction. These will be discussed in the following sections along with other themes that emerged during the interviews. For reasons of confidentiality, the participants are identified by numbers: R1-R11 for the readers, and W1-W6 for the writers.

## Results

### *Demographic data*

Questions Q1-Q4 gathered general demographic data: gender, age, national identity, and place of residence of the respondents. With regards to gender, eight of the respondents identified as women, four as men and five as nonbinary or genderqueer. Respondents tended to be young, with 11 (65%) between 16 and 29 years of age and six between 30 and 49 (Figure 1). Of 17 respondents, 11 identified as Welsh, with six being Welsh only, two Welsh-British, two Welsh-American, and one Welsh-Irish. The remaining six were of other nationalities (Figure 2). With regard to residence, eight of the respondents resided in Wales at the time of the study and a further two had resided in Wales in the past. The

remaining seven had never lived in Wales. There were no marked differences between the readers and the writers regarding the demographic data.

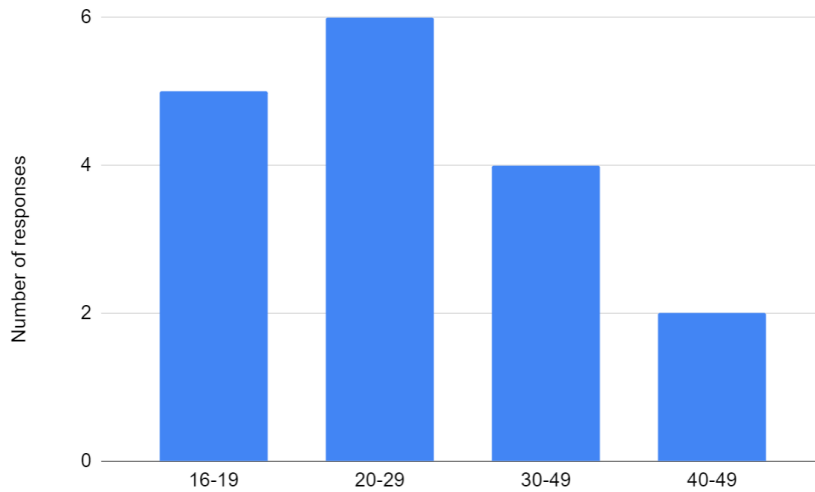


Figure 1. Age of respondents

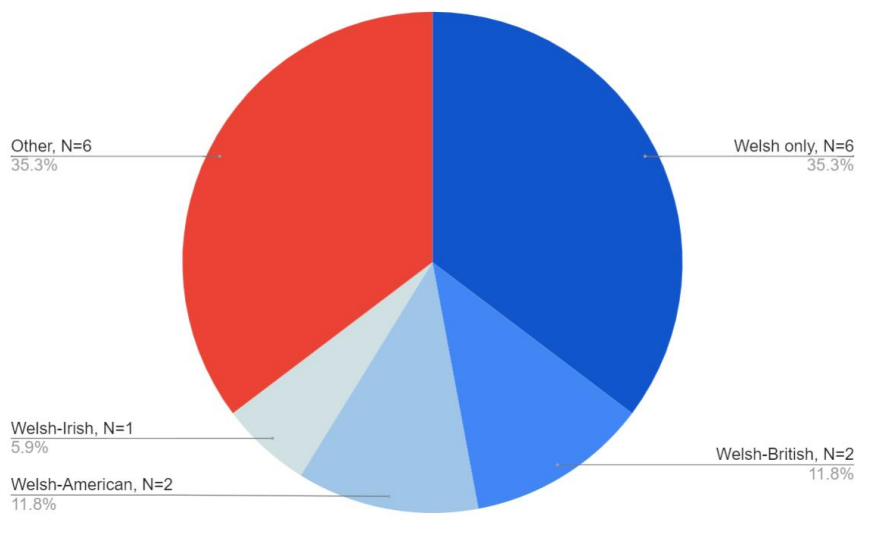


Figure 2. National identity of respondents

### *Welsh language and identity*

The following 10 questions (Q5-Q14) dealt with Welsh language and identity. All respondents assessed their fluency as A2 or higher (on the Common European

Framework), with writers assessing it higher on average than readers. Q6 and Q7 asked about the age at which respondents started using Welsh and English respectively, with those that started using Welsh between the ages of 0 and 4 being considered native speakers for the purpose of the study. By these metrics, 7 of the respondents were classified as native speakers and 10 as learners; most of the latter (80%) began to learn the language at age 16 or older. Notably, writers were more likely to be native speakers than readers (50% vs. 36.4%). Almost all respondents, except for two readers, started using English at the same or younger age than Welsh. The majority of participants were native speakers of English (70.5%) and everyone had started to use that language before the age of 16.

Q8 concerned the personal importance of Welsh to the respondents. On a scale of 1 to 10, all respondents judged it to be 4 or above, with the majority of responses being 8 or higher (76.5%). Native speakers tended to rate its importance higher than learners, and Welsh people higher than non-Welsh people (Figure 3).

Q9 and Q10 dealt with frequency of interaction with Welsh in various modes and environments. Notably, native speakers were found to interact with the spoken language more frequently than learners (71.4% and 45% respectively stated that they interacted with it at least a few times a week or more). The opposite trend of learners interacting more with the written language was also true, but was much weaker (64.3% for native speakers and 75% for learners). Writers also tended to interact with the language more than readers, but this trend can be explained by the higher proportion of native speakers in the former group. As for environments, the Internet was by far the one with the highest frequency of interaction with Welsh (70.5% encountered Welsh there a few times a week or more). This trend was stronger among learners (80%), but still noticeable among native speakers (57.1%). The latter, however, also tended to interact with the language in their friend groups and local communities to a notable extent. For both groups, the environment with the lowest frequency of Welsh-language interaction was family (88.2% encountered Welsh there almost every week or less often, 90% for learners, and 71.4% for native speakers).

Q11 concerned the perceived amicability of various groups (roughly corresponding to environments of Q10) towards the Welsh language. The Internet was generally considered the most amicable (94.1% judging it as positive or somewhat positive), though it was followed closely by the respondents' friend groups (82.4% considering it positive or somewhat positive). Local community and work/school colleagues were generally considered the least amicable (29.4% and 41.2% positive or somewhat positive answers in the two groups). Importantly, the participants did not judge any group as negatively predisposed towards the language: colleagues and local communities were generally judged as neutral, internet spaces as positive, and friend groups and families as somewhat positive.

Q12 asked the respondents how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: “Being able to speak Welsh is an important part of my identity” (Q12a), “Every Welsh person should be able to speak Welsh”(Q12b), “I consider myself a Welsh-language activist”(Q12c), “I consider myself a Welsh nationalist”(Q12d), and “I support Welsh independence”(Q12e). Native speakers invariably considered language an important part of their identity (100% strongly agreed with the statement). The percentage was also very high among Welsh learners (75% strongly agreeing and 25% agreeing). Unsurprisingly, non-Welsh learners tended to disagree with this statement (66.7%) or slightly agree (33.3%). In Q12b, both groups agreed completely. In Q12c and Q12e, most of the Welsh participants agreed or strongly agreed that they considered themselves nationalists or activists (63.6% and 81.8%, respectively), while non-Welsh tended to disagree or slightly disagree (66.7% and 50%, respectively). The trend to agree was stronger for native speakers than learners (100% of native speakers and 70% of learners agreeing to some extent with both statements).

Q13 dealt with participation in events promoting Welsh language, culture, and identity. Eleven respondents (65%) participated in such events, with the percentage being higher for Welsh than non-Welsh people (72.7% compared to 50%). Of those events, the most popular were cultural ones (47% of respondents participating in those), such as Eisteddfodau and musical ones such as Welsh-language festivals. The least popular were campaigns from language activist groups, in which only one respondent participated.

Q14 concerned the perceived importance of various factors to Welsh identity. Self-identification was considered the most important, with Welsh language and cultural customs closely following. Religion and race were considered irrelevant (Figure 5). All those trends were the same for native speakers, learners, Welsh people, and non-Welsh people, though importantly, native speakers tended to consider language more important than learners in general, but less important than Welsh learners.

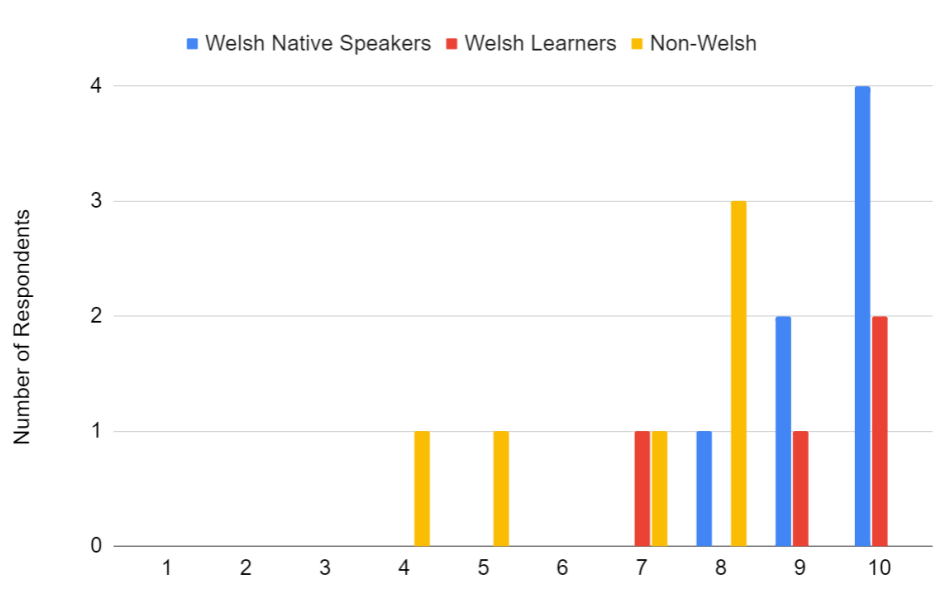


Figure 3. Personal importance of the Welsh language

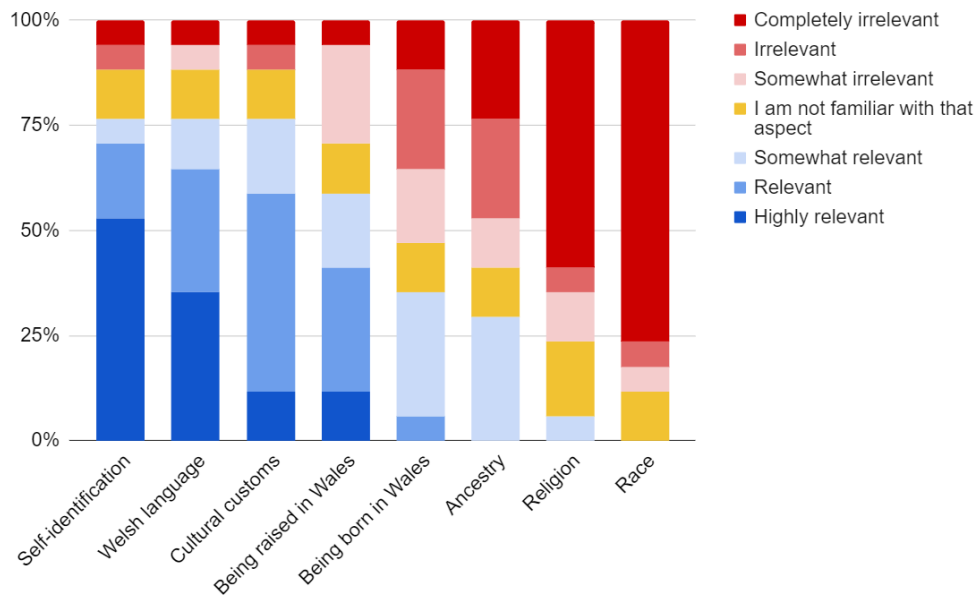


Figure 4 - Perceived relevance of given factors to Welsh identity

*Engagement with fanfiction*

The last section of questions, Q15-Q21, concerned readers' engagement with fanfiction. This section was distributed only among readers. Q15 asked how often respondents interacted with fanfiction in general (Q15a) and in Welsh (Q15b). Most respondents read fanfiction every day (18.2%) or almost every day (63.6%), but for Welsh-language fanfiction the frequency was predominantly a few times a month or lower (90.9%). Q16 concerned the perceived friendliness of four websites (Ao3, Fanfiction.net, Tumblr, and Wattpad) towards minority languages. Ao3 was overwhelmingly considered the most amicable and the only one positively predisposed on average (63.6% considering it positive and 36.4% slightly positive). Tumblr was considered somewhat friendly by five respondents, but the remaining six judged it as neutral or unfriendly. For both Fanfiction.net and Wattpad the dominant answer was "I haven't used this website". Notably, native speakers tended to judge websites as less amicable compared to learners (37.5% and 46.4% of positive answers respectively).

In the open-ended Q17, participants were asked to elaborate on their responses to Q16. The respondents referred only to Ao3 (7 respondents), fanfiction.net (3), and Tumblr (2). The feature that was always mentioned was the tagging system. All seven respondents praised Ao3 for allowing for searching Welsh-language fanfiction specifically. Opinions on fanfiction.net were divided: it was criticised for lacking a Welsh option yet praised for better search options than Ao3. Tumblr's tagging system was criticised in both answers.

In Q18, respondents were asked about their frequency of use of the four websites. Ao3 was used most frequently (63.6% reported using it often, with 36.4% using it rarely), with Tumblr being considerably less popular (none of the respondents reported using it often and 54.5% used it rarely). None of the respondents reported using Fanfiction.net or Wattpad. Q19 asked about any other websites used by the respondents for fanfiction and their frequency of use. Facebook was mentioned by one person but used rarely.

Q20 dealt with respondent's motivations for reading Welsh-language fanfiction. Possible reasons were listed with an option for the respondents to add their own ones. Here, the most popular answers overall were the desire to learn or practise the language and support the use of Welsh online (81.8% in both cases). Both reasons were popular with learners (100% and 71.4%, respectively), but only the latter with native speakers (100%), who also all declared that they read Welsh-language fanfiction because it elicits different emotional responses in them and because they felt a connection to it owing to their national identity (75% and 100%, respectively).

Lastly, Q21 asked what (or if any) feelings Welsh-language fanfiction evoked in the readers. Four out of the eleven confirmed that it evoked universally positive emotions. R4 responded that they "love" seeing it because they have "grown up

with the attitude towards actually using Welsh for leisure as something that looked down upon so seeing someone write fanfic in Welsh feels so much more important" [sic]. One respondent, who had been "in exile for a few years", mentioned feeling homesick. Three of the readers, however, stated that their emotions were positive only under specific conditions: 1) when the writing was "specifically relevant to Welsh culture", 2) when it only included "short turns of phrase" (as the respondent claimed to have a "more limited grasp" of the Welsh language), and 3) when it was simple enough for the respondent to read it without struggling (and that otherwise it caused frustration). One of the learners mentioned that "every language has a different energy and it reads differently", hence considering Welsh "different", but not more emotional. Two of the respondents claimed that it did not evoke any unique emotions.

#### *Data from the interviews*

##### *Welsh independence and nationalism*

Out of the six authors interviewed, all four of those who identify as Welsh (W1-W3 and W6) agreed that Wales should be independent, although with different degrees of certainty. W1, for instance, said that she definitely agrees that Wales should be an independent nation, but only "when the world, I suppose, is in the less tenuous position", and W3 said that before Brexit, she would have been hesitant to support independence. On the other hand, W6 said that they "believe very much in the independence of Wales".

The same participants also agreed that they are Welsh nationalists, although only W2 said that he "agrees" rather than "somewhat agrees". When inquired about their nationalism during their interview, all of the authors mentioned the negative connotations that go with the term, and further explained that they were hesitant to use it: W1 called it "a bit loaded", and W2 and W6 expressed similar sentiments. However, both W2 and W6 continued by explaining their interpretation of nationalism, which focused solely on the language. Similarly, W4, identifying as an American, said that as an "outsider", he perceives Welsh nationalism as a "recognition that Wales is the homeland of Welsh culture". An opposite view was expressed by only one participant, W3, who interpreted "nationalism" as inherently political and related to the nation itself. When asked whether she considers herself a nationalist, she discussed independence and the economy, and did not speak about culture.

##### *The Welsh language as part of Welsh identity.*

Five out of the six writers recognised the importance of the Welsh language for Welsh identity, with W5 being the only one who did not. However, W2 also said

that while he had a lot of positive feelings towards Welsh, he did not consider it superior to English. W1 said that she felt “more connected to the Welsh language than [she does] to the English, simply because it is the language of [her] homeland”, while considering English to be “just there”, “just the language of the majority”. W1, W3 and W6 stated that it was helpful to know Welsh to connect with Welsh culture; W1 expressed this by saying that “it’s important for anyone who wishes to be here and wishes to, well, just be part of the actual culture itself”, and W3 said “I think it’s a big, big element of the culture around here. You do... you do notice that people behave differently based on the language that they’re speaking.”

Most of the interviewed authors were not concerned with the possibility of losing their Welsh as they were either using it regularly at work or learning it. However, W2, who had pursued Welsh-language education and finished it about a year before the interview, noted that his emotional connection to the language had somewhat dwindled. Writing fanfiction in Welsh was a way for W2 to keep in touch with the language: “I think it’s kept, it hasn’t improved it, but also it’s kept it fresh for me, because I’m not speaking it much in my day-to-day life.”

#### *Perceptions of Welshness in and out of fandom.*

Each of the authors who live or have lived in Wales (W1-W3 and W6) reported that they saw a lot of anti-Welsh sentiment and aggression in their everyday life; two of them also mentioned the fact that some English-speaking Welsh people they know dislike the language or consider it, along with the cultural events related to it, somehow inferior. W6 mentioned Eisteddfodau, saying that the school Eisteddfod was “thought to be uncool” by “the primarily English-speaking half of the school”. W2 noted that even though he mentioned that the language was an important part of Welsh culture and that he valued it greatly, he did not believe that to be a common attitude. In fact, he said that he knew “basically no one who went to an English language school and likes Welsh”, and “even among Welsh users it is 50/50”.

In contrast, all the authors – Welsh and non-Welsh alike – stated that in fandom the reception of their work has been nothing but positive, even from non-Welsh speakers.

#### *Motivations for writing*

W4 and W5, as learners assessing their level of Welsh as B1 (on the Common European Framework), considered fanfiction a space where they could freely improve their language skills. W4, who learnt Welsh through a Duolingo course and in-person conversation groups, asserted that writing fanfiction for the



animated characters used by the Duolingo platform was a comfortable starting point for his writing. He admitted he was “excited that there was a place where I could write in Welsh with the mistakes and all.” He also mentioned that it “absolutely” improved his language skills: “Being able to write a long, kind of connected piece, made me feel much more confident.” Similarly, W5, also a learner using the Duolingo platform, stated that “reading is very good for learning, but creating as in speaking or writing just brings you to new heights in the learning languages.”

As for the native speakers’ motivations, W1, who publishes translations of English fanfiction, said that she believes that fanfiction should be “available for people who want to speak Welsh and [who] enjoy this type of thing in their own language”. W3 mentioned that her only Welsh-language story published on Ao3 was originally written for her university course, and only later did she decide to post it online.

Notably, W2 mentioned an unusual motive for creating his first fanfiction, writing not solely for his own entertainment but to prove a certain point: “I think the first time I wrote Welsh fanfic was out of spite. Because I just looked in the Welsh tag on Ao3 and it was full of people using it as a joke. And I got annoyed about it and I wrote a Welsh fic.” The author referred to the fact that there was a considerable number of works wrongly tagged on the platform as Welsh language.

Another native speaker, W6, who does not currently reside in Wales, said that writing fanfiction in Welsh helped them to “feel more connected to my Welsh heritage, ultimately to the Welsh language in general and the Welsh speaking community”.

Notably, three out of four native-speaker authors (W1, W3 and W6) voiced apprehensions towards writing in Welsh. W3 said she had decided she would rather write poetry in English than in Welsh because of the pressure to use perfectly correct Welsh. She expressed feeling limited by creating in Welsh and believed that “you have to write really well to write in Welsh”. She recalled showing people a poem written partly in Welsh: “I wrote one poem that I submitted for a competition which included code switching with parts of *Hen Wlad fy Nhadau*. Umm, they didn’t like it very much.” She also mentioned some works on less serious topics that she had written and had still not published, mainly out of a fear of facing criticism toward the language.

In contrast to W3, W6 was more inclined to write poetry than prose in Welsh. W6 stated that they “would really like to write more Welsh prose, but Welsh prose tends to be much more difficult to me”. Similarly, W1, who published Welsh translations of English fanfiction, said that if she were to write original works, she would do so in English, as “Welsh is very much an oral language, it’s more... It’s meant to be spoken more than written. (...)”.

As for the factors potentially discouraging the creation of Welsh fanfiction, the lack of suitable Welsh-language media was also mentioned. W6 noted that “there’s also not much media in Welsh for people to start making connections to make bigger Welsh language fanfiction groups”. Indeed, as mentioned above, only 4 out of 57 works tagged as “Welsh” on Ao3 focus on Welsh-language media. Similarly, W2 stated that there are no major or even “mid-sized” web-based content creators that could speak Welsh.

### Discussion

The data gathered allows us to establish the demographic profile of readers and writers of Welsh fanfiction. The majority of the respondents were between 16 and 30 years old (75%), which is typical for fandom spaces. The gender distribution showed an unusually high percentage of genderqueer and low percentage of male participants. This is in line with recent studies suggesting that fandoms are groups mostly dominated by women (Flegel and Roth 2016, Tosenberger 2014) with an increasing number of genderqueer people (McInroy and Craig 2020). While the majority of participants were of Welsh identity, there was also a considerable number of non-Welsh respondents, suggesting the existence of a sizeable group of foreign learners interested in Welsh-language fanfiction.

Moreover, natives and learners alike considered the Internet to be the friendliest environment towards the Welsh language. This shows the potential of fandoms becoming spaces where young people can freely use Welsh in a casual context. What might be stopping that from happening is the fact that Ao3, considered the best website for hosting minority language fanfiction, does not allow for direct communication other than comments under the author’s work. In contrast with other websites (such as Tumblr), on Ao3 it is not possible to create a discourse between the readers or even share other content (e.g. memes) related to fanfiction.

The study has shown that the Welsh identity of readers and writers of Welsh fanfiction is built mostly, although not exclusively, on cultural components. Notably, however, the most defining aspect of Welshness was self-identification, with the language coming second. Nation-related aspects such as ancestry and place of birth were considered less important, and those no longer associated with Welshness (cf. Jones 2008), such as race and religion, played the most negligible role. It should also be noted that the majority of the Welsh respondents were in favour of independence, thus indicating that the national aspects also played a certain role in their identity.

Among the Welsh-identifying members of the group, all participants recognised the Welsh language as an important aspect of Welsh identity; this tendency was slightly higher among native speakers than among learners. This

result is in line with observations made by Williams (2019) that native Welsh speakers were particularly likely to consider the language a vital part of their identity, but the tendency was also present in learners. On the other hand, a common sentiment expressed by participants was that it was not necessary to speak Welsh to be considered Welsh and that the language should not be imposed on people. At the same time, they stressed the importance of every Welsh person making at least an attempt to learn it. The findings of our study point to the increasing inclusivity of the definition of Welshness and agree with the claim made by Jones (2008: 22) that Welsh identity is moving towards a more inclusive model and away from traditional identity markers. This is due to the ongoing process of devolution and significant population changes, in particular the rising proportion of ethnic minorities in Welsh society.

#### *Motivations behind reading and writing Welsh-language fanfiction*

As for the motivations for writing and reading fanfiction in Welsh, the study showed that the most common ones were personal connection with the language or a wish to popularise its usage online (among the native speakers) and the desire to learn the language (among the learners). Two of these motivations (a wish to broaden the use of language online and, to some extent, the wish to learn it) can be connected with language revitalisation. However, when it came to offline activities, while the vast majority of the Welsh-based respondents considered themselves Welsh-language activists, only one participant mentioned taking part in activities organised by language activist organisations. For the remaining writers, language activism was first and foremost connected with culture, especially Welsh-language contests and music festivals. This again confirms the vital role of the cultural component in Welsh identity.

The question of language correctness and tolerance of mistakes in writing was a recurring theme in the interviews with the authors. The learners spoke of fanfiction as a safe space for improving their language skills regardless of possible mistakes. Issues of language correctness were also mentioned by native-speaking authors, who mentioned difficulties they encountered while writing in Welsh. These included perceived expectations of a high literary register connected with the vast literary tradition of Wales, as well as general difficulties with writing in Welsh, or the feeling that Welsh-language writing was less natural than writing in English. These results illustrate a number of issues inherent in the revitalisation of Welsh: the low self-confidence of native speakers, the lower prestige of the Welsh language in comparison with English, and increasing diglossia. Fanfiction thus emerges as a safe and accessible space for learning and practising language through writing. This potential has been recognised by Black (2006), who notes that learning through fanfiction is more effective thanks to the

prevalence of the communicative function of language over language correctness in fanfiction, and the positive impact of text-based social interaction.

However, with regard to the social dimension of fanfiction, our research has shown that the functioning of Welsh-language fanfiction communities differs in some respects from communities using mainstream languages. Fanfiction has been recognised as a communal gesture where fandom members are connected by a common interest (Hellekson and Busse 2014: 8). However, most major fandom spaces function in English on an international, globalised level. Therefore, in contrast with English speakers, who are guaranteed to find texts matching their interests, speakers of Welsh who wish to engage with Welsh-language fandom have to read fanfiction on any topic due to the limited number of Welsh works. Another factor is the small amount of popular media created originally in Welsh, which was repeatedly pointed out by the interviewed authors. Consequently, motivations for reading and writing Welsh fanfiction are not connected with an attachment to particular fandoms, but rather to Welsh language and identity. As fandom is an environment that emphasises the ability to personally curate your own experience, these limitations are a considerable roadblock in developing a traditional fan community for Welsh fanfiction.

With their anonymity and disregard for people's social background, fandoms can be an effective way to create close-knit groups connected by the shared practices that could be described as communities of practice, where members develop a common way of thinking and opinions which further cement their connection as a group. Our study, however, has shown that the existing Welsh-language fan spaces have not developed into communities of practice. The only common element in the Welsh-language fan space was an interest in parsnips in the community centred around the Welsh course on Duolingo. However, it is more of a shared joke (parsnips are related to Owen, one of the animated characters) than a writing tradition and does not create much discourse. Indeed, most members of the existing Welsh-language fan spaces seem to focus on creating works in the Welsh language rather than forming a community around it.

### Limitations

Due to a very limited sample size, reflecting the scarce number of both readers and writers of Welsh-language fanfiction, a quantitative study proved impossible to run. Thus, the presented data should be treated not as an exhaustive analysis, but rather as a presentation of a phenomenon that requires further investigation.

The digital nature of the research may have led to a sample bias, since the survey could only be filled in by readers who found it on the Tumblr platform or who were known by the fanfiction authors. Consequently, readers who felt

neutral about the topic might have ignored the survey altogether. However, since fandom and fanfiction tend to create anonymous communities, this problem was difficult to avoid without breaking the barrier of anonymity.

A significant shortcoming of the study design was the failure to include questions regarding the respondent's race. It has been pointed out that race has often been overlooked in fan studies, with whiteness being treated as the default (Stanfill 2018); this error has been, regrettably, reproduced here and not identified until later in the study. Despite that, the results of the study still provide some insight into the topic, and this specific shortcoming will hopefully be compensated for in future research.

### Conclusions

The intention of this study was to assess the role of Welsh-language fanfiction in language revitalisation, and to research the role it plays in minority language communities.

We have established a link between Welsh cultural and national identity and making the decision to write fanfiction in Welsh. While most of the Welsh-identified writers expressed their hesitancy about the term "nationalist", they also expressed a desire for a change of Welsh political status and declared that they were making a conscious effort to revitalise the language, albeit on a small scale. However, the identity-related motivations were much more strongly connected to the cultural rather than national dimension of Welsh identity. The study participants saw Welsh-language fanfiction as a way to deepen their connection with the language and/or to practice it. Outside of online activities, they were all either active learners of the language or took part in Welsh-language cultural activities. Engagement with fanfiction was perceived as an accessible form of leisure available in Welsh and also as a safe space for both learners and native speakers to creatively use the language without fear of criticism about linguistic correctness.

Overall, our study suggests that interaction with Welsh-language fanfiction appears to stem mostly from one's personal connection with the language. This stands in contrast to fanfiction produced in mainstream languages, which is usually related to interest in particular fandoms. Factors that probably contribute to this phenomenon is the lack of Welsh-language source material specifically for Welsh fandoms and the small number of people engaging with Welsh fanfiction. Consequently, it appears that currently there is no stable community forming around Welsh-language works.

The findings of the present study indicate the importance of fanfiction websites as possible spaces for language revitalisation in the context of minority languages, yet at the same time pointing to a number of difficulties inherent in

the process. While fanfiction offers a possibility for younger Welsh speakers and learners to actively engage with the language, it may not create enough opportunities to pursue their specific interests and build a community around them. Nevertheless, further research of the use of Welsh language in fanfiction and fandoms may prove beneficial not only from the perspective of fan studies, but also for language planners and educators.

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