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Identifying and Connecting with Diverse SFF Readers

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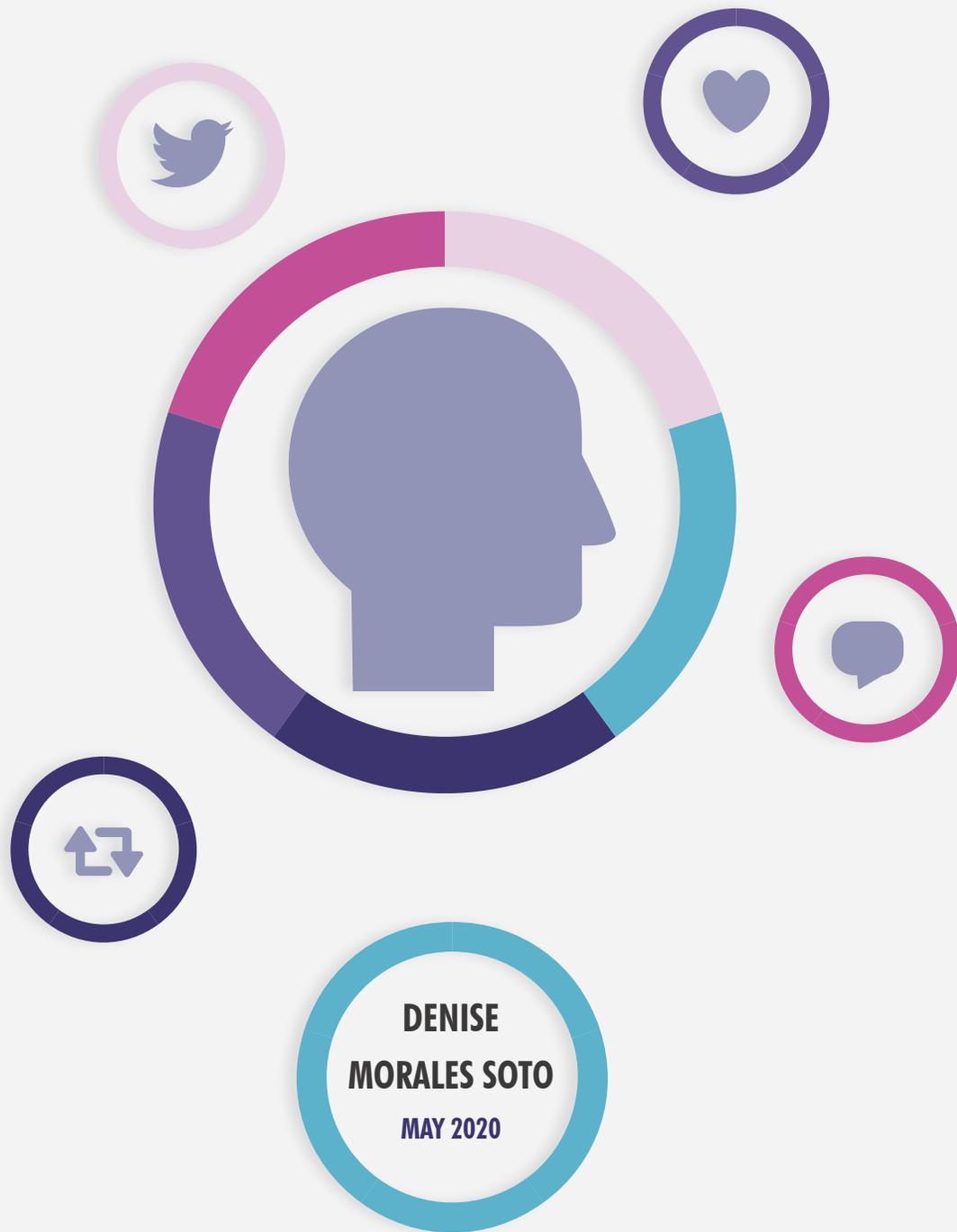
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**DENISE
MORALES SOTO**
MAY 2020

**IDENTIFYING AND CONNECTING WITH
DIVERSE SFF READERS**

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BRIEF

RESEARCH QUESTION:

In what ways can publishers learn more about the racially and ethnically diverse readers of science fiction and fantasy, how can they interact with them, and can increasing interactions with these readers positively affect publishers?

ABSTRACT:

Science fiction and fantasy are some of the most abundant genres today, projected to gross \$590.2 million in the adult fiction market in the year 2020. However, despite its growing popularity and large reader base, it still predominantly caters to white men, something that could be detrimental to the industry. This paper aimed to show how science fiction and fantasy (SFF) publishers can learn more about their non-white reader demographic and how they can potentially increase their interaction with their diverse audiences. I conducted a study of social media interaction by compiling Twitter posts over four months and sorted them into two categories. The first being General SFF Spaces, where my focus was on identifying diverse readers by looking through each post's likes, comments, and retweets. The second was Diverse SFF Spaces, where I analyzed the content of these accounts to see what it was that diverse SFF readers were interacting with. The results showed that, on Twitter alone, there is a moderate to high level of ethnically and racially diverse reader interaction, and a large portion of it revolved around diverse SFF content. These results support the idea that science fiction and fantasy reader demographics are not as homogeneous as it is often assumed to be and that there is an oversight on the publishers' side when it comes to connecting and catering to these individuals in the community. Further demographic research is essential if we are to see a shift toward a more inclusive SFF community and industry.

INTRODUCTION:

Science fiction and fantasy are some of the most popular genres in the book market today. In the year 2018, science fiction sales doubled from the year 2010 and made up about 11% of all adult trade market sales. (Rowe 2018) In fact, in *Book Ad Report's* 2020 projections, science fiction and fantasy were estimated to gross up to \$590.2 million in trade adult fiction alone, making it one of the most successful genres today as this data reflects the whole book market, which includes eBooks and print, however, it does not include science fiction and fantasy sales across other markets such as young adult, middle grade, etc. (Figure 1, Herold 2019)

These are some of the driving forces of genre fiction and it's not hard to see why. Fantasy and science fiction are about exploration. Escaping the bounds of reality, looking beyond ourselves and imagine what could be. Unlike realistic fiction—that although very entertaining—does have certain limitations. It focuses on one time, one place, one set of circumstances, and grounded in what we have experienced and lived. (Jakober 2008, 28) Science fiction and fantasy can explore all these concepts just the same, but without as many limitations or restrictions. It can help us better understand human life in all its complexities by lifting it out of its familiar contexts and going beyond that, searching for elements that might be universal, and create empathy through entirely new means. (Jakober 2008, 29)

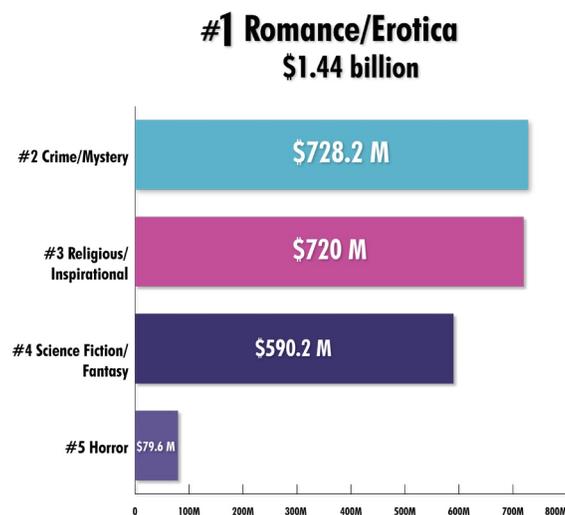


Figure 1 *Book Ad Report's* gross profit projections for 2020. The figure depicts data obtained from Herold 2019 and shows the top 5 projected highest grossing genres for trade adult fiction.

But, for a genre that is so focused on exploration and interacting with new people, places, and experiences, we've somehow come to believe that the readers of these books, the consumers of these concepts, don't hold the same ideals. This train of thought has nurtured hesitance in straying too far away from a formula that has "worked" for years and exploring further storylines without the fear of potentially putting off readers.

Two factors that we hold up to be almost absolutes about the general science fiction and fantasy (or SFF) reader is that they are male and Anglo-American white. While there is a general consensus that there are some variants to that image, these readers are considered the exception, not the rule, and this hypothetical reader remains the target audience for science fiction and fantasy publishers.

However, this image of the hypothetical reader doesn't quite align with what we see in the community. When walking into any space where science fiction and fantasy fans are gathered—both physical and online (i.e.: conventions, readings, signings, forums, social media groups, etc.)—the racial and ethnic diversity among the readers is very clear and not quite as one-tone as it is painted to be. This observation is what led me to find out more about the SFF Reader; what their origins were and how that may align with how we see them today.

THE SFF READER

The origins of science fiction and fantasy tell the narrative of where the SFF Reader comes from. The origins of these genres can be traced back many centuries, but they truly took life in the mid-20th century with the rise of the pulp novel and magazines. These are believed to have brought science fiction and fantasy to the mass market, and while their quality was always up for debate, it is without a doubt that these became massively popular and took over the market.

In its origins, it was conceptualized and considered to be a medium that exclusively appealed to men. We can see this very clearly not only in the surplus of male authors but in how they were marketed and packaged. (Figure 2) Their covers generally featured adventure, strange machines, bizarre-looking aliens, and other such imagery believed to mostly attract male readers. Added to that, we also saw a lot of hypersexualization of women on these products, to again, further appeal to their "core audience."

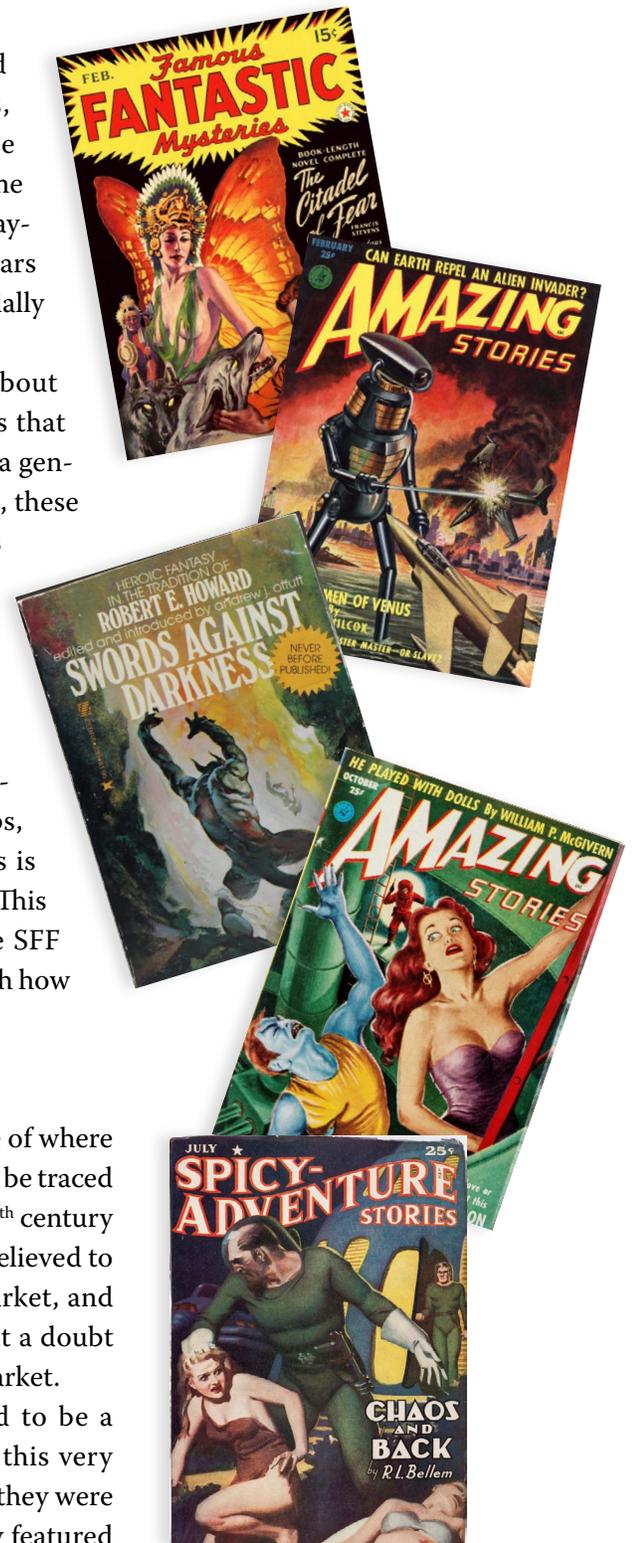


Figure 2. Collection of select SFF book and magazine covers (Pulp Covers n.d.).



SFF READER

RACE: WHITE

GENDER: MALE

AGE: 40–49

*Information based on Menadue and Jacups survey. (2018)

Because of this, it was hard to imagine not only that there was a great level of female readers, but that women were highly involved in the world of science fiction and fantasy, taking part in the production and consumption of pulps. Many women played key roles in the rise of sales and popularity of science fiction and fantasy as writers, editors, and illustrators near the beginning of the pulp boom. (Hemmings 2008, 83)

Looking back on the history of the genre, we see something very important, and that is the idea of your expected audience versus the reality. Who we think our audience might be isn't necessarily who they end up being. So while there was a concept of who this reader was based on the content of the genre and the social beliefs of the time, we didn't really know who the SFF Reader was and that picture remains unclear, even after all these years.

We can see that deviation that the SFF Reader took from the beginning reflected still today. When looking at the readers that engage within the community, we can identify a number of science fiction and fantasy readers that do not identify as male. Subsequently, we can also identify several readers that are not Caucasian but rather come from a multitude of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. These individuals also seem to be growing every year as science fiction and fantasy become more mainstream and accessible to a wider audience.

Currently, there is no publicly available demographic data that clearly identifies audiences of SFF content as majority Anglo-American men. The most comprehensive study available to date was performed by Christopher Benjamin Menadue and Susan Jacups in 2015 in which they created a survey that was open for one year and distributed through the *Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America* Facebook page, personal recommendation, and select Facebook groups. Through this survey, they aimed to identify the characteristics of science fiction and fantasy readers and their knowledge and experiences of works, authors, and subgenres. (2018) After its completion, they gathered substantial demographic data on economic status, education levels, relationship status, age, among other things, but missed on gathering any sort of information on the ethnic and racial identity of the readers of these genres.

Given this, I found this survey to be incomplete and not one that would be helpful to publishers in understanding who their audience is and how to connect with them as there were still many unanswered questions in terms of identity and representation in that study. It became very clear that there is a huge gap in information here

causing a great disconnect between publishers and their readers. A disconnect that could potentially negatively affect the industry.

Thus, the objective of this project was to acquire demographic data for SFF communities through social media and answer the questions of who reads science fiction and fantasy, what ways can publishers learn more about the non-white readers, how can they interact with them, and potentially, can increasing interactions with them positively affect publishers.

METHODS:

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

While diversity is a broad term that encompasses many different identities and backgrounds including race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, disability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, education, language, physical appearance, among many other factors, in the context of this paper the focus is on racial and ethnic diversity specifically. (Racial Equity Tools, n.d.) So, when the term diverse is used in the following sections, it is important to note that the emphasis is on racial and ethnic identity unless stated otherwise.

Other terms being used in this paper include POC reader which is used as a descriptive term for readers of various racial and ethnic backgrounds. I will also use the term non-white as an umbrella term to further emphasize the multitude of different backgrounds in the community that are not Caucasian.

WHY SOCIAL MEDIA?

In the new age of media, most of us congregate online as it gives all of us the ability to find other like-minded individuals with the same interests and goals in mind and communicate with them easily and instantly. Social media is also a world built on the idea of and facilitates participatory culture, a concept that is very well ingrained in both science fiction and fantasy fandoms as well as readers. Participatory culture, as defined by Henry Jenkins, is an interactive culture that “facilitates the social negotiation of the meaning and value of popular texts, enables grassroots creative responses, and provides a context for debates about issues of representation, diversity, and inclusion in the digital age.” (Booth 2018)

These digital spaces are also where media spreads. Where mass content takes life and enters different niche communities and

markets. (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013, 27) Something that is key in the context of publishing.

Given the nature of this study and taking all these factors in mind, it was clear to me that social media would be the best place for me to find the answers to the questions I was posing.

WHY TWITTER

After careful consideration, I chose Twitter as my platform to conduct this study over the many other social media platforms that exist today, and there were several reasons for that. First, Twitter is a platform that is driven by sharing resources, enabling conversations, and coordinating different communities. (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013, 30) It's a platform that promotes active participation, bridges the gap between people, and encourages engagement between users no matter how big or small their influence may be. The nature of the content on Twitter was very important to me as well as there is no limit or restriction to what can be shared and discussed on Twitter, unlike other platforms which I found to be more limited in the type of content discussed.

For example, Goodreads is a social media platform that is dedicated to books and readers. Given that, it seems like the perfect place for this kind of study that is centered around identifying and understanding readers. However, it didn't fit the criteria for what I was seeking to find. Goodreads is not about interaction or participatory culture and there is no real connection between those making the books and those reading them. This is a platform that is dedicated to book reviews and sharing your opinions with others, but that's generally where the interaction stops. And that can only tell you so much.

The second is that I found Twitter to be the one place where readers, SFF fans, publishers, and authors all coexisted and interacted with one another. (Figure 3) Where niche communities such as this overlapped and removed all barriers. Anyone could like, comment, and share anything from anyone without needing to subscribe, follow, or know anyone else—even the creators of the content themselves. Unlike Facebook, for example. Twitter presented the most authentic view of this participatory interaction and painted the broadest picture as to who the readers were, what they were doing, and what they were looking at.

Twitter is a vast place with many accounts and people dedicated to science fiction and fantasy, so I had a very broad pool of options that I narrowed down into two categories.

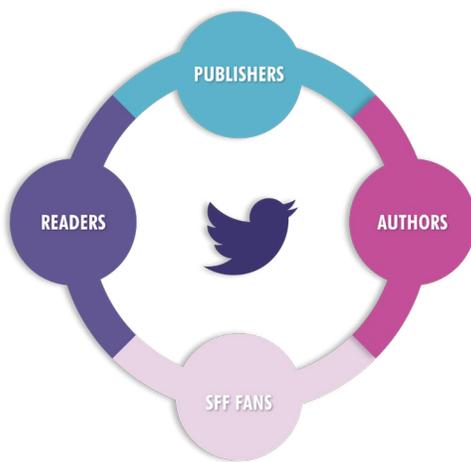


Figure 3. Schematic depicting the multiple communities that interact on the platform Twitter and its relevance in engaging SFF communities.

The first was what I labeled **General SFF Spaces**. These are accounts dedicated to science fiction and fantasy. They do not cater to one specific group or niche community but rather to the masses of SFF and are an open space to any who consider themselves a fan of science fiction and fantasy or have any sort of interest in it. In this category, there were a total of six accounts that can be seen in Table 1.

These accounts were further grouped into three categories: **publishers, journals, and community spaces**.

The second category was the one that I labeled **Diverse SFF Spaces**. These were accounts that were dedicated to and run by racially and ethnically diverse SFF individuals. For this category, I collected a total of seven accounts which can be seen in Table 2.

For both of these categories, I collected a series of Twitter posts that had to adhere to the following criteria. First, it needed to have at least twenty likes for it to be considered relevant for this study. Based on observations within these spaces, this number was representative of active interaction. Second, the content of the post needed to relate to books in some way, shape, or form, as the focus of my research was on science fiction and fantasy reader demographics. This included book announcements, author promotions, book reviews, comic books, graphic novels, and other SFF content that has a book tie-in (i.e: *Game of Thrones*, *His Dark Materials*, *Star Wars*, etc.)

Due to the nature of these accounts, the approach and information acquired from each were slightly different.

<i>Account Name</i>	# Followers	# Posts
<i>Tor Books</i>	280.1k	27.2k
<i>Tor.com</i>	82k	44.3k
<i>Orbit</i>	57.3k	10.6k
<i>FIYAH</i>	7,353	14.5k
<i>Clakesworld</i>	30.1k	10k
<i>Fantasy-Faction</i>	57.4k	24.6k

Table 1. Follower-Post Distribution of General SFF Spaces.

Table 2. Follower-Post Distribution of Diverse SFF Spaces.

<i>Account Name</i>	<i># Followers</i>	<i># Posts</i>
<i>LatinxGeeks</i>	5,938	22.4K
<i>Nerds of Prey</i>	4,916	14.8K
<i>Nerds of Color</i>	33.2K	31.2K
<i>Geeks of Color</i>	77.1K	29.4K
<i>Desi Geek Girls</i>	3,462	528
<i>POC Culture</i>	2,234	17.7k
<i>Rich in Color</i>	4,169	12.3k

General SFF Spaces

When it came to the General SFF Spaces, what I focused on was the people. Who were the users interacting with the posts themselves and trying to identify these diverse individuals within the community.

I went into each post I collected and searched through the likes, retweets, and comments and split the people into three categories: **diverse**, **unidentified**, and **white**. Again, the focus here was on racial and ethnic diversity, so this does not take into consideration sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, or other forms of identity and diversity as that would be difficult to measure with my methods and would go well beyond the scope of this study.

I identified these individuals with the available information within their profiles and accounts which was as follows: **profile picture**, **description**, **username**, **handle**, **location**, and **language**. If none of these factors gave any indication as to what their background or personal identity was, they were categorized as unidentified. I took careful consideration when analyzing the various elements before sorting them within each category. However, it is important to note that the interpretation of these elements was qualitative and relied solely on my previous knowledge, background, and understanding.

Many of the posts that I gathered for this study went far beyond the twenty likes minimum, but as I am not the proprietor of these accounts I only had access to the most recent forty-three likes, retweets, and comments of each of these posts. Given that, all of the data gathered will be based around those forty-three interactions per post in each category.

It is also worth noting that all of the posts being used are living entities of the internet, so if you were to repeat my study using this

method on the same posts, your numbers may vary as the interaction with these accounts and their content, while it may slow down over time, it never truly stops.

Diverse SFF Spaces

Within the Diverse SFF Spaces category, I collected and studied a total of seven accounts. Here, my focus was not on the *who* as we can assume that the people who are following and interacting with these accounts identify as diverse in some way. Rather, when it came to these spaces, I wanted to see *what* it was that they interacted with. What science fiction and fantasy content were they talking about and what their focus was on.

FINDINGS:

Over a period of four months, I collected my posts from the accounts stated before and began my counting and coding of this data which showed some very intriguing results.

In each of these three categories—publishers, journals, and community spaces—there was a significant amount of interaction from ethnically and racially diverse science fiction and fantasy readers. The highest amount of interaction was, interestingly enough, with science fiction and fantasy journals.

I observed that 44% of the overall interactions (including retweets, likes, and comments) were by readers whom I could identify as ethnically or racially diverse. Unidentified interactions made up 22% of the numbers, and the other 34% were interactions by white readers. (Figure 4)

The amount of interaction in the general community space I found was fairly evenly split between white and non-white individuals, making up 24% and 25% respectively. But as we can see, an overwhelming amount of the interactions with these accounts were done by unidentified users. (Figure 5)

One of the most riveting findings from my research was that the lowest amount of interaction involving diverse SFF readers was actually with the publishers themselves. POC reader interaction made up 17% of the total amount. Unidentified readers made up 34% of the interactions, and 49% were white, which is, so far, the highest number within these three categories. (Figure 6)

Next, I looked at the Twitter accounts that were dedicated to diverse individuals within the science fiction and fantasy community.

SORTING GUIDE



PROFILE PICTURE



DESCRIPTION

USERNAME



HANDLE



LOCATION



LANGUAGE

GENERAL SFF SPACES

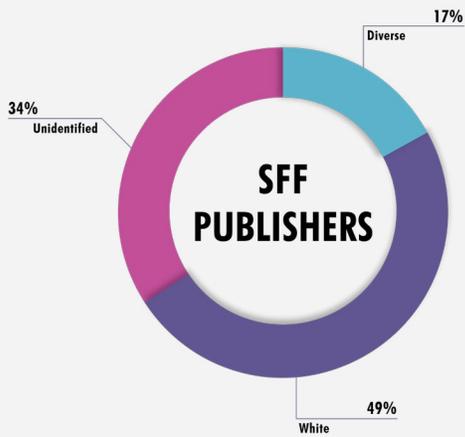


Figure 4. Pie chart showing the distribution of ethnic and racial diversity of community members within SFF Journals Twitter accounts.

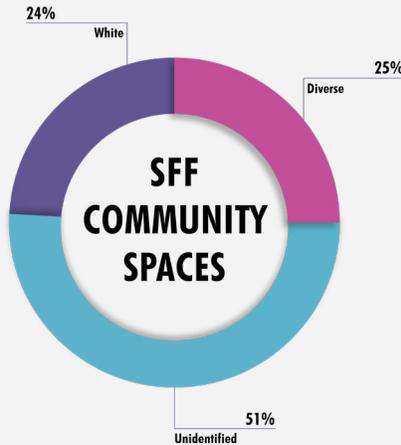


Figure 5. Summary data showing the distribution of ethnic and racial diversity of community members within Twitter accounts for SFF Community Spaces.

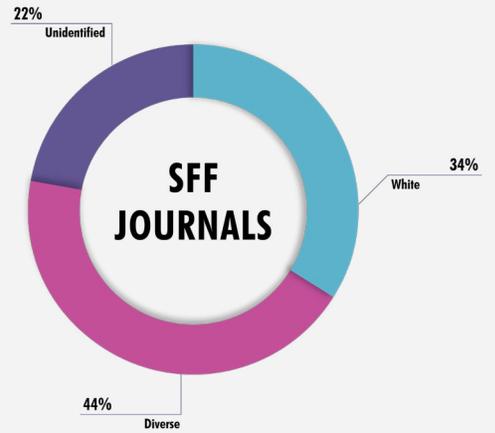


Figure 6. Data depicts the distribution of ethnic and racial diversity of community members within SFF Publisher Twitter accounts.

DIVERSE SFF SPACES

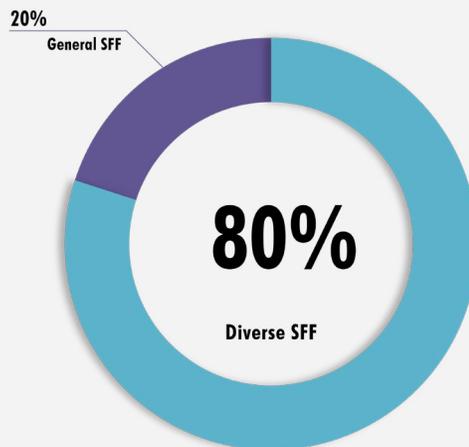


Figure 7. Representative data demonstrating the type of content promoted on Twitter by Diverse SFF Community Spaces.

As stated before, for this portion of my data I focused on the content rather than the people.

Once my data set had been gathered, I noticed a pattern within the posts. This led me to split them into two categories: **General SFF** and **Diverse SFF**. As you may have guessed, General SFF referred to content that is not focused on or featured any diverse character or community. Diverse SFF was content that promoted, discussed, or shared science fiction and fantasy that featured some sort of racial and ethnic diversity or was written by a diverse author. The results of that were that 80% of the content produced from these accounts was in some way promoting diversity in science fiction and fantasy. The other 20% was discussion and interaction around General SFF content. (Figure 7)

DISCUSSION:

READER DEMOGRAPHICS

These very simple graphs and numbers speak volumes to the reality of who is actually reading science fiction and fantasy. By looking at this data we can very clearly see a moderate to high level of interaction from diverse readers. Not only is the interaction there, but it is an active one. They're not just passively consuming content, scrolling past it on their stream. They are making an effort to engage with the community and the producers of this content.

Looking at the limited pool of user interaction I had access to and the sheer amount of followers and interaction from the diverse accounts themselves, it is clear that the science fiction and fantasy reader demographic might not be as homogenous as we think it to be.

Another important takeaway from this research is that almost half of the interactions with the posts themselves were anonymous. That being, an interaction by an individual within the unidentified group that either adopted an identity from a character or which assumed no identity at all in this digital space.

This is not surprising given the nature of science fiction and fantasy. This is a community that thrives on things like cosplay, Dungeons & Dragons, and other such activities that invite people to adopt completely new identities. There is also the fact that this is online. Many people are very careful and very protective of their identities online for several reasons that range from fear of oversharing to wanting to completely separate their online selves from their real selves. It is impossible for us to know who exactly it is that we are

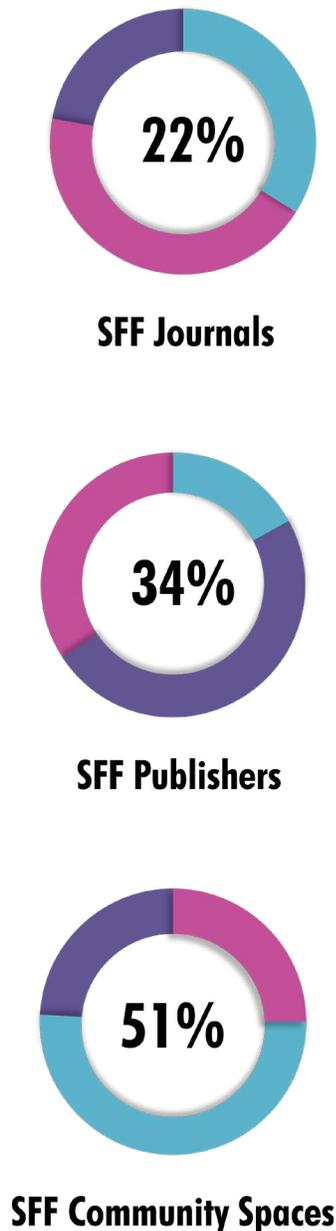


Figure 8. The figure depicts the percent of accounts whose users could not be identified using the present method (Unidentified).

talking to, selling to, and reaching out to or how they identify just by looking at profiles alone.

Which falls into the issue of assumed whiteness. Rukmini Pande points out that when it comes to participatory online communities there lives this assumption of a white Anglo-American norm. This default whiteness stifles diversity because it removes the possibility of it entirely. (Lee 2019) This in turn creates a very inaccurate picture of the individuals within the community and continuously contributes to this idea of who that SFF reader is.

DIVERSITY IN CONTENT

Across both of these categories (General SFF Spaces and Diverse SFF Spaces), I noticed a trend in the content and the interactions: and that was the lack of diversity in the content itself.

When it comes to the General SFF Spaces, the ones with the highest level of interaction were with the SFF journals. This also happened to be, within this category, the accounts that most promoted diverse science fiction and fantasy books and authors. On the opposite end of that, SFF publishers were the ones with the least amount of interaction and were also the ones that had the least amount of diverse content in their streams. Anecdotally, whenever the publishers did promote a diverse author or a book that featured diverse characters, the POC reader interaction increased significantly.

This also ties in with my observations of the Diverse SFF Spaces. When looking at these accounts I found that 80% of the content was about, promoting, discussing, or demanding more diverse science fiction and fantasy.

What these numbers are telling us is that there is a possible disconnect between the readers and the publishers. These diverse readers seem to be looking elsewhere for the content that they crave because the publishers are not providing it. So while we can see that the fans enjoy SFF in general and interact with it very actively, there is a visible gap here and a demand. Not just from the diverse readers but all readers across all three categories, as we can see a significant amount of white and unidentified user interaction with these diverse posts as well.

CONCLUSION:

This was a simple study with some limitations and is in no way a replacement or stand-in for the demographic data that we currently lack. That being said, just within this very limited context, we are

seeing a lot of very valuable information and there are many take-aways about SFF readers, their interactions within the community, and how this can or currently affect publishers and the industry.

BACK TO THE SFF READER

So, after all of this extensive research, who is the SFF Reader? The answer to that is: a lot more complicated.

What we are seeing through all these numbers, users, and accounts is that the readers of science fiction and fantasy are as diverse as the concept itself. Filled with unique individuals, from different backgrounds and all walks of life.

At the end of all of my research and all I've seen, I find myself wondering why we are still holding on to that original SFF Reader. The one that was conceptualized a century ago and disproven almost immediately. Why do we still insist that there is no room for diversity in science fiction and fantasy?

The root of it I believe is in that disconnect that the data is showing us. The publishers don't see the diverse interaction, so they don't produce the content. Inversely, the diverse readers don't see the content, so they don't interact. It's a vicious cycle and a direct result of the lack of information, I believe.

But what can we do? How can we bridge this gap and end this cycle? Can the industry connect with their diverse audiences and is there any benefit to that?

The answer to that is simpler and an overwhelming yes.

There are so many steps we as an industry can take to help bridge this gap and encourage this participatory culture on both sides.

First, it is imperative that we start interacting with these members of our audience. This kind of interaction won't happen if we don't start seeking out and listening to our diverse readers. If they continue to feel like they're not being listened to, we can't expect them to continue to support an industry that continues to overlook them. In this paper alone, you can find a list of just a few of the many diverse spaces within the science fiction and fantasy community on Twitter. If publishers took the time to follow only a couple of these accounts and observe, that alone would be a step in the right direction. Even with a more passive interaction (no retweeting, liking, or commenting required), you can learn so much about your audience. This is a very simple way to not only gauge who your readers are but what they are reading, where are they investing their time and money, and how they are responding to your own content—if at all.



SFF READER

RACE: ???

GENDER: ???

AGE: ???

But most importantly, *gather demographic data*. I think it's important that the industry realize that we need to conduct a formal study to gather all of this information. A simple survey, open for a reasonable amount of time and distributed throughout the many channels dedicated to the genre and its readers, will give us a more extensive and accurate view of who our readers are. And inevitably, once we know that, things will change, but I truly believe that it will be for the better.

WHY DEMOGRAPHIC DATA IS SO IMPORTANT

If you are unfamiliar with publishing, you may not know that the readers are the most important aspect of the process. Without readers, there is no publishing. Every decision we make, every book we acquire, every ad that we put out is always with the reader in mind. This is what makes this lack of demographic information so concerning and why there is so much resistance to embrace change in science fiction and fantasy publishing.

“Publishing houses want to embrace diversity, but they are coming up against the business side that doesn't want to deviate from history without a proven audience,” says Yet Seo to *Publishers Weekly*. “You're constantly having to prove that putting a Black or Asian character on the cover of a book is not going to destroy sales.” (Obeso 2014)

So if that is the case, if proof is what we need, what steps are being made to acquire it?

These diverse readers are being overlooked and this fact could become very detrimental to the industry as it is potentially resulting in decreased reader interaction and may, later on, lead to a loss in sales. This is of course the worst-case scenario as it harms everyone involved, the publishers, the authors, and the readers. Further understanding our readers can only benefit us as an industry as it will allow us to make more informed decisions and take risks with our books without as much fear.

The message this data gives us is very clear: diverse readers are there, and they want more content that is representative of them. Science fiction and fantasy so naturally lend themselves to inclusion, and yet, we continue to fight against it. There is a cry for more diverse and representative science fiction and fantasy, a need for new authors that can tell them new stories and travel to new places through perspectives yet to be explored.

I believe it's time that we start exploring them.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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