

Gendering the Pregnant Male in Fan-Fiction Communities



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Introduction & Background

Over the last decade, the figure of the pregnant male has significantly emerged in popular culture. However, media depictions of male pregnancy ('MPreg') often reinforce the idea that pregnancy is an essentially female experience. This is what Michelle Walks (2013) calls the 'cultural fetish of feminine pregnancy', which alienates pregnant transgender and nonbinary* individuals, whose experiences of pregnancy typically go unrepresented in popular media.

Online fan-fiction (or 'fics', writing which uses a published text's characters/settings) frequently contains MPreg narratives, and has the potential to depict MPreg in more inclusive ways. MPreg fan-fiction sometimes uses a science fictional universe known as the 'omegaverse'. In the omegaverse, humans have animalistic features (including mating cycles) and are divided into three classifications based on their reproductive capabilities: 'alpha', 'beta' and 'omega'. Anyone classed as an 'omega' (regardless of sex or gender) can become pregnant.

This research surveys fans of the television adaptation *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013-2015), in which MPreg and omegaverse fan-fiction is popular, to enquire whether MPreg and omegaverse fan-fiction challenges gender politics surrounding pregnancy and reproduction.

Aims

- Consider how fans produce, critically read and/or subvert the female coding of pregnant men in fan-fiction
- Explore whether MPreg fan-fiction erases or gives voice to transgender and gender non-conforming experiences of pregnancy

Method

Online survey

- Risk assessment and ethical approval
- Questionnaire construction
- Advertisement on social media networks *Reddit* and *Tumblr*
- Comment coding to identify trends
- Close analysis of comments from the trends which appear most frequently

Survey structure: participants were asked how and why they interacted with MPreg and omegaverse fan works, within the *Hannibal* fandom and otherwise. They were then asked to describe the 'alpha', 'beta' and 'omega' classifications.

Sample

- 118 respondents in total, all of whom are fans of *Hannibal* and have read fan-fiction for the show
- Majority of participants stated they were between the ages of 18 and 24 (45.76%), female (68.64%), and bisexual/pansexual (44.07%). The second most common demographics were participants between 25-34 (41.53%), participants who were nonbinary (19.49%), and participants who were heterosexual (18.64%)
- Of the 14 male participants, 9 stated that they were transgender (the other 5 did not state if they were cisgender* or transgender)

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Reference: Walks, Michelle, 'Feminine Pregnancy as Cultural Fetish', *Anthropology News*, 54 (2013).

Results

The table below excludes participants who declined to answer and/or who gave ambivalent answers.

Interaction with MPreg fan works	'I read, write or create MPreg fan works'	'I avoid MPreg fan works'	'I read, write or create omegaverse fan works'	'I avoid omegaverse fan works'
% of ppts	70.34%	23.73%	82.20%	13.56%

Reasons for interaction which appeared repeatedly were counted by mention per participant, of which the top 5 are displayed below:

Top 5 reasons for engaging with MPreg fan works	Top 5 reasons for avoiding MPreg fan works	Top 5 reasons for engaging with omegaverse fan works	Top 5 reasons for avoiding omegaverse fan works
1. Pregnancy is degendered and made accessible to male characters	1. Disinterest in domestic/family-themed fan-fiction	1. Interest in humans with animal/animalistic features	1. It is not true to the source material, making established characters behave out of character
2. Relationship dynamics change during pregnancy, creating interesting narratives	2. Male pregnancy is too unrealistic	2. Fulfillment of kinks or sexual fantasies	2. Exaggeration of gender roles
3. Enjoyment of domestic/family-themed narratives	3. Misogyny, homophobia and/or transphobia in the fics	3. Opportunity for imaginative world-building	3. Romanticisation of sexual abuse in fics
4. The opportunity for queer couples to have non-adoptive children	4. MPreg does not satisfy kinks or sexual fantasies	4. Social commentary on gender roles and dynamics	4. Biological determinism - e.g. 'omegas are made for having children with alphas'
5. MPreg fulfills kinks or sexual fantasies	5. MPreg fics feminise the pregnant male character	5. Male omegas are more relatable to an assigned female at birth (AFAB) reader/writer	5. Misogyny, homophobia and/or transphobia within the fics

"as a trans man ... [a]pproaching [MPreg] in a fictional universe where male pregnancy is normalized and even sexualized ... is less alienating for me than approaching it in a context where pregnancy ... is synonymous with female-ness."

"[Permitting] characters this opportunity who would not otherwise be able to experience [pregnancy] in real life, is to open those characters to a whole new set of experiences."

"I find it a little irritating that people love writing pregnant men but don't often write trans male characters"

Pregnant men as fantasy
Many participants stated that "MPreg is a fantasy setting" but did not indicate they were aware that pregnant men exist in real life.

Five of the participants who criticised MPreg's lack of realism believed that MPreg was something that only happened in fantasy. For one participant, MPreg "takes me out of the story. It's like suddenly having a character sprout wings without context." Positive responses to MPreg often asserted that the experience of pregnancy is unavailable to queer men 'in real life'.

Trans and nonbinary respondents were largely ambivalent. Some felt able to use MPreg narratives to explore their relationship to pregnancy. Others felt alienated by the 'MPreg as fantasy' narratives. Many respondents also expressed discomfort with fan writing's feminisation of pregnant male characters, described as being "to the point [they are] no longer recognizable" as established characters from the source text.

* Glossary

- **Cisgender:** identifying as the gender that matches the sex you were assigned at birth (e.g. a cisgender man = someone assigned male at birth who identifies as a man)
- **Nonbinary:** identifying as a gender outside of the male/female gender binary
- **Intersex:** having sexual/reproductive anatomy that is deemed not to fit the male/female sex binary
- **Transmasculine:** used here as an umbrella term for transgender men and nonbinary people who identify with masculinity and maleness

Conclusions

Overall, survey respondents' interactions with MPreg fan-fiction showed a desire to degender pregnancy. However, many participants overlooked real-world experiences of male/nonbinary pregnancy.

Many participants believed that MPreg is solely relegated to fantasy and divorced from real life. Others criticised MPreg fan-fiction for its focus on cisgender men becoming pregnant by fantastical means, which erases transmasculine* and intersex experiences of pregnancy. MPreg fan-fiction, therefore, presents an opportunity to represent the experiences of pregnant transgender and intersex individuals, but this opportunity has not been sufficiently explored by fan writers.

Many respondents criticised the feminisation of pregnant men in MPreg fan-fiction. This was more marked in omegaverse fan-fiction where respondents defined omega men as being feminine, maternal, or equivalent to cisgender women. Coding the pregnant omega male as female/feminine offers a displaced way to navigate the oppression of women, but simultaneously plays into the idea that the ability to become pregnant is an inherently feminine trait. That being said, other interpretations do exist within fandom: some participants interpreted the pregnant omega man as transgender or intersex. As these interpretations clearly occur and develop in fan culture, they deserve further scholarly exploration.

Male omega as feminine man

Participants were asked to define the essential traits of the 'alpha', 'beta', and 'omega'. All three were highly gender-coded:

- **25.45%** of participants described alphas as 'hypermasculine/masculine'
- **10%** of participants described betas as cisgender, non-intersex* men and women
- **30.91%** of participants described omegas as 'feminine'
 - **48.18%** of participants defined omegas by their reproductive role, as 'able to become pregnant'

Femininity and the ability to become pregnant are both seen as 'essential' to the omega. The correlation suggests that the pregnant body itself is seen as feminine. This reinforces the fetish of feminine pregnancy and erases the gendered experience of male pregnancy.

"Omegaverse provides an opportunity to insert male characters into otherwise almost exclusively (historically) female roles"

"The subtext of 'omegas are women'"
7.41% of participants stated that the omegaverse can make male characters more relatable to cisgender women and/or AFAB individuals. Many argued that omegas were more relatable to cisgender women because they face similar kinds of discrimination.

Other survey responses disagreed that omegas always signify cisgender women. In omegaverse fic, **9.09%** of participants wanted to read/write about *Hannibal* characters presenting as a different classification, moving between alpha/beta/omega labels fluidly, and/or transitioning to a different classification.

For one respondent, transitioning in the omegaverse was closer to cisgender women presenting as masculine to avoid unwanted attention from men (or alphas). However, transgender, queer, and intersex experiences of pregnancy still resonate in omegaverse works:

"it's not just people who are cisgender or non-intersex who have children. As someone who also personally lands on the spectrum as both genderfluid and queer, I personally relate to those [omega males] who aren't a cookie cutter mother-to-be."

On reading a fic which "portrayed the omega as intersex": "[it] made more sense biologically, provided representation, and added an interesting dimension to the story."