

Exploring the Omegaverse: Dynamics, Tropes, and an Illustrative Dive into A/B/O Fanfiction

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the omegaverse, which is a fanfiction subgenre. Omegaverse narratives are set in an alternate universe where the society in the story is structured within a dominance hierarchy based on the designation or secondary gender (alpha/beta/omega or A/B/O), resulting in a total of six genders. Moreover, the core of the omegaverse society follows a wolf hierarchy, in which the position of the alphas is higher, and they have the power to dictate the norms and usually exploit the omegas. This study analyzes the fundamental power dynamics and common themes that typically occur in the story. It is also exploring the subgenre's potential for intricate thematic analysis and societal critique. The research focuses on a qualitative textual analysis of "The Gilded Cage" by BeautifulFiction, a Sherlock fanfiction story based on the BBC TV show, which serves as a case study. The analysis utilizes critical perspectives on power dynamics and conflict among the alphas, betas, and omegas. The analysis reveals that, despite the omegaverse's frequent use of biologically deterministic frameworks and tropes that may perpetuate patriarchal or problematic norms, works like *The Gilded Cage* have the potential to subvert these conventions, critique systemic inequalities, and explore nuanced character development. It reveals how Sherlock, as an omega, fights to be accepted in society despite his secondary gender and how he overcomes the conflicts in his way. The results emphasize the genre's ability to serve as both a platform for fantasy and a powerful medium for critical engagement with sociocultural issues.

Keywords: Omegaverse, Fanfiction, *The Gilded Cage*, Power Dynamics

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INTRODUCTION

Characterized as literature written by fans that employs the narrative, characters, or universe of established published works (Friess, 2021; Gonzales, 2023), fanfiction has evolved from a marginalized subculture to a prominent domain of academic study. Fanfiction is mainly known as “text derivatives” in terms of meaning, which are produced by “prosumer” (referring to producer to consumer – from the fans who have become the authors) individuals who both consume and create media and who actively interact with, critique, and modify original narratives (Callin, 2024; Gonzales, 2023). This interactive engagement makes fanfiction a valuable resource for understanding audience reactions, establishing interpretative groups, and investigating various issues, often amplifying the voices of those marginalized in mainstream media. Fanfiction is a rapidly growing genre, especially in digital environments, and it provides a unique lens through which to analyze the reinterpretation, subversion, and infusion of new – often critical – meanings into established narratives (Callin, 2024).

A scholarly examination of fanfiction reveals how consumers actively understand, engage with, and alter popular media narratives artistically (Gonzales, 2023). Fanfiction communities often serve as vibrant spaces for artistic expression, social interaction, and exploring themes and identities that are sometimes overlooked or marginalized in mainstream media (Manente, 2023; van der Vegt, 2020). Henry Jenkins, a seminal scholar in fan studies, argues that fans are active creators of meaning and engage in “textual poaching” to produce their own cultural products (Jenkins, 1992).

The omegaverse, also known as alpha/beta/omega or A/B/O dynamics, has evolved into a distinctive and prevalent subgenre within this vast landscape (Cherry, 2023; Houck, 2022; van der Vegt, 2020; Yang & Pianzola, 2024). It is started from the tv series *Star Trek* in the 1960s and evolved into the early 2010s predominantly among the *Supernatural* fandom, the omegaverse posits a biological hierarchy of secondary genders – Alphas (dominant), Betas (neutral), and Omegas (submissive) – which significantly influences social, sexual, and power relations (Busse, 2013; Popova, 2018; Sarkar & Banerjee, 2023). Along with its related biological imperatives (e.g., heats, ruts, knotting, and bonding), this framework has emerged as a multifaceted instrument for examining themes of power, gender, consent, and social critique (Popova, 2017, 2018; Sarkar & Banerjee, 2023).

The omegaverse subgenre warrants scholarly examination due to its extensive popularity, becoming a product of popular culture and literature within many fandoms, and its intricate and frequently conflicting interactions with sensitive sociocultural matters (Busse, 2013; Entrikin, 2022, 2023). The distinctive framework of hierarchies and dynamics established through biological processes provides a foundation for the analysis of the cultural construction of gender, sexuality, consent, and oppression. Academics have identified the genre’s role as a “critical instrument” for examining consent in

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unequal relationships (EntriKin, 2022; Gunderson, 2021; Popova, 2018) and as a manifestation of “low theory,” which offers a different perspective on sex and gender. The genre’s ability to elicit both profound attraction and considerable discomfort makes it fertile ground for cultural critique.

The Gilded Cage, a Sherlock omegaverse fanfiction story written by BeautifulFiction, was chosen as the main case for this study because of its notable features. The chosen fics possess remarkable features that are defined as specific characteristics of the narrative, rendering them intriguing and worthy of academic analysis. The focus is not merely on the appeal or popularity of narratives; rather, it is on the substance of the story that can be analyzed to understand broader trends in fanfiction, the omegaverse genre, or the Sherlock fandom.

The extensive length of the fics is 326,883 words, and the complex world-building provides a thorough and nuanced examination of fundamental omegaverse issues—the narrative centers on Dr. John Watson discovering Sherlock Holmes’s hidden omega status and his history of abuse at the hands of an alpha. This story offers a compelling framework for examining biological determinism, societal oppression, individual agency, and relationship dynamics in this context. This fic explicitly addresses issues of consent, as indicated by the author’s “dubious consent” tag; power imbalances; and the commodification of omega bodies, as exemplified by the “chop shop” subplot. Additionally, it explores the psychological ramifications of systemic abuse. These attributes render it an exceptionally appropriate text for thematic and critical analysis. Its intricate portrayal of oppressive societal structures and individuals’ quests for autonomy and connection allows for a thorough examination of the omegaverse’s fundamental potential.

Alphas (α) They are generally depicted as authoritative, physically formidable, and natural leaders. They often exhibit aggression and possessiveness and are the impregnators in reproductive partnerships, regardless of primary sex: Male alphas typically have a “knot” at the base of the penis that engorges during copulation. Betas (β) They are usually represented as having standard human anatomy and are devoid of the distinct biological characteristics found in alphas or omegas. Their sociocultural function may differ; they may serve as mediators or remain predominantly neutral, minimally influenced by alpha and omega pheromonal interactions. And the last is omegas (Ω) They are typically defined as meek, nurturing, and fertile individuals. Both male and female omegas are generally capable of conception and frequently experience “heat.” Male omegas have internal reproductive organs and self-lubricating anuses, which allow for male pregnancy (mpreg) (Barone, 2019; Busse, 2013; EntriKin, 2022; Gonzales, 2023).

Their secondary gender system is associated with specific biological imperatives. The first is heat. It is cyclical phases of heightened fertility and sexual stimulation in omegas that are often accompanied by the emission of powerful pheromones to attract alphas. During this time, omegas may experience a decrease in cognitive control and bodily distress. Second is rut, it

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is defined as a specific interval in alphas marked by increased hostility, possessiveness, and an intense mating drive, often triggered by an omega in heat. Then, knotting is a physiological characteristic resembling that of canines wherein the base of an alpha's penis engorges during copulation, momentarily "tying" the alpha to their mate and purportedly enhancing the likelihood of conception. Next, scents or pheromones are integral to a/b/o dynamics, it is indication secondary gender, emotional states, and fertility while eliciting innate responses. Territorial or mate scent marking is also prevalent. The last is bonding. It is the establishment of a profound and often enduring psychophysiological connection between an alpha and an omega, which is usually initiated by an alpha biting the omega's neck as a "mating bite" or "claiming bite" (Gunderson, 2021; Velvelyami, 2018).

Prevalent narrative tropes in the omegaverse include the systemic oppression of omegas, which is characterized by discrimination and the deprivation of fundamental rights. Other tropes include arranged marriages or bonds that are frequently transactional and dismissive of omega autonomy, male pregnancy (mpreg), the notion of "fated mates" or soul bonds, and significant secondary gender revelations that transform character dynamics and social hierarchies (Cherry, 2023; Entrikin, 2023; Seifrit, 2021; Yang & Pianzola, 2024).

Therefore, this study analyzes the selected *Sherlock* Omegaverse fanfiction, "*The Gilded Cage*" by BeautifulFiction, to reveal the complex power dynamics and integrated conflicts within its narrative. The fundamental premise of this narrative, which revolves around Sherlock Holmes concealing his omega status and history of abuse from an alpha, establishes a framework of considerable conflict and power imbalance. The present study utilizes the sociological hierarchy theory proposed by Pierre Bourdieu to support this analysis.

According to Bourdieu's theoretical framework, social life is organized into distinct domains that function as competitive arenas where individuals strive to accumulate various forms of capital, including social, cultural, and symbolic capital (Claridge, 2015; Riley, 2017). The position of these fields shapes an individual's habitus, defined as a system of internalized dispositions and perceptions. Within the paradigm of *The Gilded Cage*, the alpha/beta/omega dynamic can be conceptualized as a theater in which secondary gender functions operate as a form of biological and symbolic capital, thereby influencing social power and hierarchy.

This theoretical framework will be employed to examine how the narrative portrays the quest for autonomy and the dynamics of power in a rigidly stratified society. This analysis aims to offer a more nuanced interpretation of this subgenre's capacity for critical social commentary. In this context, critical social commentary refers to the use of *The Gilded Cage* fanfiction as a subject of analysis. The narrative transcends a simplistic approach, providing a profound examination of the social system's influence on individuals.

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METHOD

This study will employ textual analysis as its primary research method. Alan McKee defines this type of investigation as “an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of a text” (McKee, 2003, p. 1). Textual analysis involves the direct observation of media objects and the attempt to understand how they produce meaning. This approach offers a preliminary understanding of the process of meaning formation in contemporary societies (Stokes, 2021, p. 54).

To ascertain the most probable meaning of a text, researchers must be familiar with the text and its context (Brennen, 2017, p. 218). Milena Popova delineates this context in the case of omegaverse into several subcategories, including the canon of media texts; the Western patriarchal power relations referenced by omegaverse; the general conventions of omegaverse fanfiction; and other texts and ideas created and shared within the fan culture surrounding the source text (also known as “fanon”) (Popova, 2018, p. 181).

As previously mentioned, fanfiction is a complex phenomenon. This phenomenon can be attributed to the intertextual nature of fanfiction, which makes explicit reference to the source texts upon which it is based (Stasi, 2006, p. 120). According to Stasi, fanfiction also exhibits “secondary intertextuality” (2006, p. 126). Fandom works also refer to paratexts produced by fans and circulating within fandom communities. The term Fanon can be understood as a collection of main ideas that can be taken from these paratexts. To comprehend the multifaceted layers of intertextuality, researchers must possess a comprehensive understanding of the source text and the intricate fan culture that surrounds it (Jenkins, 2012, p. 5). Conducting research necessitates a delicate balance between the roles of scientist and enthusiast (2012, p. 5), from which the term “acafans” (academics – fans) originates.

In the context of this text analysis, a qualitative evaluation approach is applied. Qualitative research can be interpreted as one of the methods used to investigate and comprehend the meaning that individuals or groups attribute to a social or human issue (Asmarani, 2023, p. 251). This process involves carefully reading the text and marking key phrases and paragraphs that are significant for identifying themes related to research. The preliminary selections were analyzed for similarities and differences. The quotations were then organized into themes and subcategories. Therefore, the data analysis technique has three stages: (1) reducing the data, (2) presenting the data by interpreting them, and (3) verifying the data by analyzing it with the chosen theory involved (Basid & Amboy, 2024, p. 317).

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FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The fanfiction *The Gilded Cage*, by BeautifulFiction, exemplifies a socially complex ecology. It serves as an illustrative case study for Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theory of hierarchy, offering a compelling application of the concept in a literary context. This narrative promotes the establishment of a rigid alpha/beta/omega (A/B/O) society, which serves as a distinct social arena. In this power structure, individuals compete for dominance and legitimacy through various forms of capital. This part analyzes the dynamics of power and conflict in the text by applying Bourdieu's central concepts, which are divided into two main parts. The first part of this study involves an analysis of the various forms of capital – specifically, biological, cultural, social, and economic – that determine individuals' positions and power within this domain. In the next part of this study, the concept of 'habitus' will be examined. This examination involves an analysis of the enforcement and contestation of internalized dispositions associated with each secondary gender. These dispositions ultimately give rise to the primary conflict in the narrative.

Part 1: The Field of Power and Stratification of Capital

According to Bourdieu, the social field is constituted by an uneven distribution of capital, which manifests in several forms beyond mere economics aspects. In the text entitled, *The Gilded Cage*, the extent to which an individual's social influence is manifested and the direction in which their trajectory evolves are predominantly dictated by the magnitude and composition of the capital at their disposal. This narrative methodically establishes a hierarchical structure in which biological capital is given primacy. Yet, its value is perpetually contested by cultural, social, and economic capital, thus giving rise to a dynamic and frequently brutal milieu for social strife.

1. Biological Capital as the Foundational Asset

The singularity and pervasive influence of biological capital in the A/B/O field distinguish it as a distinctive form of capital. It is an internalized and inherent form of capital derived from an individual's secondary sex characteristics or designations, which serves as the primary determinant of social value and legitimacy. For individuals identified as "omegas," this capital renders them both valuable and vulnerable, transforming their bodies into assets that can be owned and traded by the Alpha elite class.

This assertion is established in the narrative's opening summary, wherein omegas are not characterized as an individual entity but rather as valuable objects: "In a world where Omegas are the property of the elite Alphas, locked away and treasured by those wealthy enough to buy them" (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 2). This language directly commodifies the omega

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body, defining its value via the prism of ownership. This phenomenon is not merely a social norm; rather, it is a profound structural reality. John Watson, a non-elite individual who is nevertheless shaped by the prevailing societal logic, has a profound understanding of this system. A reflection on the profound sense of powerlessness experienced by omegas, whose fate has been predetermined since birth, is warranted:

“There’s a whole section of society that the general populace never gets to see. They’re segregated before they present, take part in arranged bonds soon after and spend the rest of their lives in the home whichever Alpha was wealthy or important enough to win them as a prize.”(BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 4)

The initial step in transforming their biological capital into a controlled asset is segregation. The culmination of these transformations is the bite mark, physical evidence that serves as a symbol of permanent and public ownership. This concept, as articulated by Bourdieu, signifies the embodiment of the symbolic mode in bodily form, thereby establishing an unambiguous indication of possession by an omega (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 8). The bite, a symbol of dominance, plays a pivotal role in legitimizing the alpha’s claim and consolidating the omega’s subordinate status. When Sherlock displays the bite mark, John’s astonishment arises from the realization that the scar is not a symbol of a relationship but rather a sign of ownership. The discovery fundamentally alters Sherlock’s status in John’s perception.

Omega’s scent represents an alternative manifestation of a significant biological mode. Paradoxically, this alternative manifestation actually causes weakness for them. Their scent is characterized by its biological nature, manifesting as an unavoidable force that supersedes the rational thinking of the alphas. John’s depiction of the synthetic pheromone exemplifies its formidable potency: “Never, in his entire life, had he experienced something to which his body was so viscerally attuned, like an empty vessel that had been waiting for this moment to find its fill” (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 63). This biological power is exploited by society to isolate and control omegas, as their bodies have the capacity to cause alphas to lose control. Consequently, omegas must be controlled to prevent such a loss of power in alphas. According to omega biology, the reactions of others are dictated even after death. The demise of an omega individual instigates a predetermined biological reaction in alphas, a “deep, putrescent certainty that somehow he had failed to protect something vital” (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 6). This automatic and instinctive reaction emphasizes the profound internalization of the biological hierarchy, which operates on a preconscious level, thereby reinforcing the prevailing social structure.

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The biological capital of the omega is primarily valued for its reproductive abilities. Sherlock's incisive critique of Sergeant Donovan's prejudice draws attention to a reductionist perspective, which regards an omega as "merely a means of producing children and sold into a bond she had no desire to form" (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 8). In the context of omega, the designation of "barren" signifies the devaluation of its biological mode, reducing it to the status of a "broken toy to be ignored" (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 9). This suggests that the value of an omega is not intrinsic; rather, it is purely fictional, determined by its utility for the alpha class in preserving their lineage. The reduction of individuals to their biological function constitutes a profound form of symbolic violence. In this case, the social order imposes a narrow, utilitarian identity on an entire group, which is then evaluated solely on its ability to fulfill that role.

Subsequently, the legal codification and medical-biological status must be addressed. Symbolic violence manifests in the omegaverse paradigm, exemplifying this dynamic. Within this context, legal and medical institutions in society have established a codified and legitimized framework that utilizes omega biology as a foundation for the systematic deprivation of autonomy. The story explicitly states that omegas are legally categorized as children, lacking the capacity to make independent decisions:

Omegas and children alike were considered incapable of making medical decisions. For kids, that changed when they were twelve years old. Omegas would go their whole lives without the final say in their own treatment. (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 14)

This medical discrimination is also reflected in the legal system, where the testimony of omegas has no value. Greg Lestrade's assertion that "omegas can't testify" (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 60) has the effect of effectively silencing them and rendering them invisible to the judicial system. The notion that their status as property is not merely a social convention but rather a legal reality is crucial to this analysis. Greg corroborates this dismal reality for John:

'If you find an Omega?' Greg's smile was dark and mirthless. 'Well, they're lost property. You're meant to return them to their Alpha, even if they fight you every step of the way.' (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 32)

By establishing a legal definition for omegas as property, the state not only legitimizes but also perpetuates the symbolic violence inherent in the omegaverse hierarchy. This institutional reinforcement ensures that an omega's biological mode is trapped in a state of permanent oppression, where escape is not only socially difficult but also legally impossible without the intervention of a more powerful agent.

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2. Cultural Capital as a Site of Conflict and Subversion

Although biological capital establishes a rigid and fundamental hierarchy in omegaverse fanfiction, *The Gilded Cage* identifies the most dynamic and engaging conflicts within the domain of cultural capital. In the context of Bourdieusian theory, cultural capital is defined as non-financial assets that confer status and power, including education, intelligence, specialized knowledge, and communication skills. Sherlock Holmes is an archetype intentionally crafted to embody cultural capital. The comprehensive account of his life serves as a testament to the challenges faced by an individual whose most personal attributes are systematically undervalued by the societal context in which he is situated. Therefore, this resistance is not merely physical rebellion but a lifelong strategic effort to force the field to recognize his intellectual legitimacy and power over his biological demands.

Sherlock's remarkable intelligence is not regarded as a mere coincidence but rather as a resource that was meticulously cultivated as a form of preventive resistance. Confronted with the realization that the only way to prepare her son for the life ahead was to provide him with a superior cultural capital, his mother, an omega trapped in the system, decided to pursue this objective. By subjecting him to omega taste-tests from infancy, she ensured that Sherlock could pass as a non-omega for many years, thereby providing a crucial period to develop outside the segregated, intellectually stifling environment intended for omegas. Sherlock emphasizes that this is a gift of freedom:

“It was one of the gifts my mother could give me: the chance of a normal childhood. I went to school, had as much social interaction as I desired – not much: people can be annoying, even as children – and could go where I wanted without limitation. That was freedom, and I was unwilling to relinquish it.” (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 119)

Having a ‘normal childhood’ and access to education are not coincidental. Both are means of accumulating cultural capital, which will become his primary means of influence. These efforts are so vital that they are included in the bonding agreement, a very rare concession that shows their importance: “One of my mother’s conditions of the bonding was that, after this – ‘He gestured to the silvery bite mark on the back of his neck.’ – I was to be allowed to attend university” (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 120). The validation of his intelligence by institutional authorities bestowed upon him formal qualifications and a knowledge base that enabled him to distinguish himself, thereby fortifying his cultural capital in ways that most omegas could not.

Furthermore, given that the character in question was first mentioned in the story, Sherlock's strength has been attributed to his intelligence. His confidence, bold attitude, and “sharp and intelligent” gaze reflect the image of an alpha, the dominant gender (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 6). John's preliminary

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evaluation is founded exclusively on the embodiment of this cultural and symbolic mode:

“His next thought had been a Beta, but then Sherlock had moved and blown that idea out of the water. Too much confidence and swagger, too much presence and certainty. No Beta John had ever met before could prowl like that or command the attention of a room so thoroughly. That left one viable option: Alpha.” (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 7)

This misrecognition is an essential form of protection. This ability enables Sherlock to navigate the world, gain access to crime scenes, and garner respect that would otherwise be unattainable for an omega, who typically does not enjoy such privileges. He is capable of operating in a state of autonomous function due to the pervasive and pronounced nature of his physical characteristics, which reflect a high level of cultural capital. Consequently, he can temporarily overlook and conceal his biological identity. This dynamic unveils a vulnerability within the deterministic framework of the field: if an individual possesses sufficient variation in highly valued forms of capital, they have the capacity to influence the perceptions of other individuals and, at least temporarily, circumvent the constraint imposed by their designated position.

Following the revelation of Sherlock’s omega status, the rationality that previously dominated this field transformed, thereby endangering Sherlock’s cultural capital and leading to a decline in his status. This dynamic can be interpreted as a manifestation of symbolic violence, in which hierarchical structures attempt to impose a sense of order and dominance on their members. Greg Lestrade, an alpha who is characterized by his affection, serves as a paradigm of excellence. Following the revelation of the truth, perceptions of Sherlock underwent a metamorphosis, transitioning from a character depicted as an intelligent consultant to one who exhibited vulnerabilities and necessitated protection. This transition effectively undermined Sherlock’s proven expertise. Lestrade stated: “I was being an idiot – treating him like a child – but I couldn’t help it.” (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 29).

In addition to that reaction, Lestrade also encountered challenges in “maintaining the image” of Sherlock’s daily life, who he regarded as the alpha, suddenly changed into an omega. He showed struggle by saying, “I couldn’t mesh Sherlock Holmes with the image of an Omega I’d built in my head. It didn’t make a damn bit of sense” (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 28). The instinctual inclination to address Sherlock ‘like a child’ exemplifies the profound and entrenched nature of this behavioral pattern. Furthermore, the field socially constructs and imposes the concept of “omega image,” a low-capital identity. Sherlock, with his profound intelligence, challenges this perception, thereby creating a paradox. The crux of this narrative lies in his personal tragedy and insurgency, which stem from a particular intellectual aptitude that is highly esteemed across numerous social domains. However, the prevailing

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omegaverse hierarchy regards this intellectual aptitude as less critical when compared to his biological designation.

Lestrade's assumptions are not criminal; instead, they are consequences of a social structure that defines vulnerability as the primary characteristic of an omega, regardless of the capital they may possess. Therefore, Sherlock must then expend energy to combat this devaluation and assumption of his biological trait. He then does this when he single-handedly takes down a den of criminals "just to prove a point" to Lestrade that "what he is doesn't change a damn thing about what he can do" (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 29). For Sherlock, the pursuit of recognition for his cultural capital was a strenuous endeavor, particularly in the context of his biological status. This pursuit became the primary conflict in his life.

Ultimately, it is evident that Sherlock's most significant form of subversion stems from his capacity to leverage his cultural capital as a tool, compelling the prevailing authorities in the field to acknowledge his worth. He has demonstrated an ability to solve problems that elude both institutional power, as embodied by the police, and economics power. His entire career as a consulting detective is an exercise in this. The final and most significant example is his negotiation with Patricia Cunningham. She embodies the conventional hallmarks of authority: she is an alpha, she is affluent, and she possesses legal rights over Sherlock. However, she is desperate to find the answer regarding her son's murder. Therefore, Sherlock's ability to meet her needs is predicated on his unique cultural capital, which serves as his sole resource in this endeavor. He negotiates by saying, "relinquish your claim on me, and I'll make sure that's not the case" (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 401). Faced with no other choice, Patricia responded:

'You leave me little choice.' She stared at Sherlock, her gaze unblinking. It felt like a standoff, and John was nothing but an audience to whatever silent communication they shared. 'Very well, the day you solve Alexander's murder, I shall relinquish my claim.' (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 402)

This strategic maneuver was a masterful decision. He established a scenario in which his cultural capital, at a pivotal moment, became the most valuable form of capital in their specific interaction. He compelled Patricia to execute a transaction in accordance with his stipulated terms, exchanging his knowledge for his freedom. Therefore, he achieved his objectives while also demonstrating the capacity of cultural capital to disrupt and restructure the dynamics of power in a social sphere designed to exclude it.

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3. Social and Economics Capital as a Mechanism of Control

The social hierarchy depicted in the omegaverse fanfiction "*The Gilded Cage*" is not merely an abstract status system; rather, it is a pragmatic and brutal economy of power that is implemented through the strategic allocation of economic and social capital. In the context of Bourdieusian theory, these forms of capital function as the primary resources that determine individual power, shape their life chances, and define the characteristics of their relationships. This narrative carefully outlined how the alpha elite class utilizes considerable wealth – known as economics capital – and esteemed lineage, referred to as social capital, to acquire, control, and commodify omegas, thereby maintaining their dominance.

In this field, economics capital functions as the primary control mechanism. The narrative consistently portrays the relationship with Omega as a high-risk financial transaction rather than a social or romantic bond. This purchase effectively converts omega into an economic asset, representing a significant shift in its status and value. Upon observing the financial obligations associated with Annaliese Ducart's bond contract, John became cognizant of the substantial financial resources necessary to become a part of this exclusive group:

‘Teresa Karndine bonded to Annaliese Ducart. Look as the financial value of the transaction.’ He passed the device to John, who pursed his lips at the price listed at the bottom of the text. He could work a dozen lifetimes and never see that much.’(BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 11)

This is not only a matter of acquiring a partner but also an opportunity to showcase one's financial prowess. The omegaverse society places a high value on honor, and the willingness to allocate financial resources for a bonding contract is a testament to an individual's standing within the community. This system engenders a paradox for omegas. The only manner in which these individuals can attain their “independence” is by selling their bodies, which represent the sole asset that is held in high esteem by society. There is no conventional method through which they can obtain their own economic capital. Sherlock investigates the dark rationality that drives Annaliese Ducart to sell her reproductive organs on the black market:

‘She’ll be more than property, and any beneficial treatment she received was not to ensure her happiness, but to allow her Alpha to prove themselves to their peers. She could not vote or be employed, and her only method of acquiring self-sufficiency would be to sell what society views as her primary asset.’ He looked back at the surgical slice in her stomach. ‘She thought the risk was worth it, not only that of being caught, but that of losing her life as well. Imagine how desperate she must have been.’(BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 8)

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This results in a closed system where omega biological capital is their only economics resource, and selling it is illegal and life-threatening. Consequently, they are incapable of achieving self-sufficiency and must rely on their alphas for everything.

Moreover, economics capital is frequently employed to acquire social capital, which in this context is primarily manifested through family prestige. A powerful family can gain legitimacy and elevate its status above other families by establishing bonds between its members, particularly between the alpha and the omega, which are often referred to as strategic investments. Annaliese Ducart received a considerable sum for her services, not only for herself but also for the reputation of the family:

The Ducart family are prominent jeweller, hence the price on their Omega daughter. Karndine paid for the name.’(BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 12)

This represents a direct transformation of economic capital into social capital, marking a significant shift in economic thinking. As Karndine’s acquisition of an omega is not merely a material transaction, it is also a means of establishing a connection to the Ducart legacy, thereby elevating the prestige of her family. Given these circumstances, the role of omegas in the expansion of dynastic power becomes more evident. An intricate series of transactions and connections characterizes the social world of the elite, a status game that Sherlock recalls from his childhood: ‘My childhood was full of it. Tit-for-tat; who owed whom, who owned whom. My parents’ bond was arranged.’(BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 12). Sherlock’s childhood world was characterized as a field of debt and ownership, or, as he himself has described it, “who owes whom, who owns whom.” This provides a perfect illustration of Bourdieu’s structured field, which focuses on the accumulation and exchange of social capital.

A combination of factors, primarily the resources and strategies they provide to the omegas, maintains the alpha class’s dominance. This dynamic ensures that the omegas are unable to accumulate capital, thereby keeping their complete reliance on the alphas. A deliberate control mechanism characterizes this approach. Sherlock’s explanation of this prevalent yet efficient restraint method is as follows:

‘Conjecture, of course, but the assumptions are logical. Look through the bonding registries for the last week. It’s likely her Alpha’s home is local. Omegas aren’t permitted a driving license, and Alphas tend not to provide a cash allowance in the hopes of preventing independent behaviour.’ (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 11)

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Alphas exert their dominance by restricting omegas' ability to move freely (e.g., in a car) and to engage in economic activities (e.g., financial autonomy or access to cash). This tendency is also evident in the context of social capital. The maintenance of omegas in a state of imprisonment and segregated conditions has been shown to impede their ability to establish autonomous social networks, resulting in a state of isolation and reliance on alpha connections. This enforced isolation guarantees that omegas are deprived of the resources, both economic and social, necessary to challenge their subordinate position.

The preservation of their social capital is of paramount importance to the alphas who predominate in this domain. The greatest threat to their status is not financial loss, but rather social stigma, particularly the shame associated with an inability to exercise self-control. This narrative demonstrates that the fear of a detrimental reputation serves as the coercive force that drives the behavior of the alphas. An alpha's failure, a public stain on their honor, is symbolized by an omega who flees from their control:

“Her Alpha would be unlikely to pursue her, since her desertion would be considered a poor reflection on them; they would not want to admit it. Better that people thought her dead than realised she had escaped.”(BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 9)

This emphasizes a prominent aspect of the logic of this field: the symbolic value of alpha's reputation can be more significant than the economics value of omega's "assets." The same reasoning can be applied to the stigma associated with omega as "barren." Instead of acknowledging the possibility that her omega may have run away, Karndine employs a strategy of self-preservation by fabricating a lie that portrays her omegas as incapable of conceiving. This approach serves to deflect any potential social stigmatization associated with an omega's flight from its owner. The persistent societal expectation of demonstrating a habitus for success and impeccable self-control is fundamental. The fear of social exclusion is a form of symbolic violence that forces alphas and omegas to regulate their behavior, ensuring that any deviation from the norm is hidden and the illusion of a strong and consistent hierarchy is maintained.

Part II: Habitus, Embodied History, and the Struggle for Agency

To comprehend the psychological and behavioural dimensions of power in the fanfiction *The Gilded Cage*, it is imperative to utilize Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Habitus is defined as a system of transferable and enduring dispositions, which include ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that are deeply ingrained in a person. An individual's objective social conditions shape these dispositions. In the omegaverse environment, a habitus characterized by its profound influence from gender and personal history is imposed on its members. However, the conflict in the story stems from the characters'

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struggle against this imposition, as their individual histories and bodily experiences refuse to align with the roles they are expected to play.

1. The Imposed Habitus: Symbolic Violence and Internalized Norms

The omegaverse society maintains its social power through various means, including but not limited to physical force and economic dominance. Symbolic violence, a pivotal concept in Bourdieu's theoretical framework, represents a particular pernicious and efficacious mechanism of social control. Symbolic violence is defined as the process by which hierarchies, dominant social structures, and norms are instilled and accepted by individuals as "natural" or "common sense." This process shapes an individual's habitus – a system of dispositions, perceptions, and behaviors embedded within them – to align with their assigned social position. In the fic *The Gilded Cage*, the narrative illustrates the operation of symbolic violence, thereby demonstrating that the hierarchical structure within the omegaverse is sustained by the actions of alphas and the beliefs instilled in each member of the society.

Doxa, a collection of unquestioned beliefs that are considered normal and serve as the foundation for the social field, forms the basis of symbolic violence. Arbitrary social conventions are often regarded as biological facts, deemed immutable in the contemporary world. Characters frequently characterize the "rules" of their community as basic science, rather than tradition or law. In addressing the concerns of young alphas, Sherlock refuted the prevailing doxa of the area by posing a rhetorical question to John, seeking to ascertain the rationale behind their apprehensions regarding potential harm to their non-omega partners:

"Alpha-specific physiology only responds to an Omega in heat. That's basic biology. Have none of your patients attended school?" (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 4)

Sherlock emphasized these biological and social principles, characterizing them as "basic biology" taught in schools. Additionally, the system's recognition of the subjugation of omegas is depicted as an inherent aspect of its functioning. Sherlock provides a rationale for the bonding intended to protect omegas:

"For the most part, it works. An unbound Omega isn't safe. By arranging a bond to a strong, wealthy Alpha, they're protected. In many cases, Donovan's assessment is correct. They are – should be – treated like treasures: valuable and precious. They are respected and cared for. Sometimes there is even something like love." (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 12)

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This statement offers a remarkable illustration of doxa, positing that social solution, namely, arranged marriage (to a more powerful party), is the sole rational response to the biological predicament of omega (the weak and vulnerable). The process of normalizing power imbalances through societal structures is a critical aspect of symbolic violence.

Moreover, this narrative illustrates how omegas are indoctrinated to embrace their subordinate status. Their behavioral patterns are characterized by a pronounced emphasis on reproductive activities and a general tendency toward passivity. This condition is so profound that omegas are “educated” to perceive their desires from the perspective of alpha’s need. In the course of his discussion about the tale of insatiable omega, Sherlock draws attention to the psychological complexity of the symbolic violence in question:

“One of the most common myths is that, for an Omega experiencing their heat, any knot will do. It’s a falsehood that’s been perpetuated for centuries. Sexual need does not equate to sexual attraction for a specific individual, although most Omegas are educated to think otherwise. To be grateful.”(BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 68)

“Educated to think otherwise. To be grateful” is the prime example of a phrase that describes symbolic violence. Even those characters exhibiting rebellious tendencies, such as Sherlock, are subject to the physical consequences of this habitus. The system actively fosters a misinterpretation of coercion as desire in omegas, instilling a sense of gratitude for actions that consistently prioritize the interests of alphas. His experience with his ex-alpha, Alexander, has led him to develop a profound fear of alpha domination. Upon first seizing him in a state of heightened emotional distress following the disclosure, Sherlock’s response is not informed by his awareness of John’s character but rather by the historical patterns of aggression that are ingrained within his psyche:

‘Sherlock flinched, his muscles tightening in expectation of attack as old memories of other, Johnless times stirred in his mind. He subconsciously steeled himself even as something curled up, hollow, and bereft in his stomach, because of course it would come to this. Despite all his logical deductions of John’s character, one fact remained irrefutable. John was an Alpha, and Sherlock should have known it was only a matter of time before he started acting like one.’(BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 50)

The phrase “expectation of attack” was an omega habit stemming from years of suffering, which cultivated a state of fear and submissiveness in Sherlock. Although his rational mind recognized that John was not a threat, his instinct was faster than his mind.

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The concept of alpha habitus, which refers to a social class or status, is also present. Symbolic violence shapes the habitus of the dominant class, normalizing their power and privilege. Alphas learn early on that dominance is their inherent right. Moreover, through their dominance, their masculinity is also shown. This aligns with the statement that through masculinity, embedded power, and the ability to formulate law, institutions, and policy from their position of power, institutions and policy development are gendered (Siahaan et al., 2023, p. 308). In this passage, the author examines the profound animosity that Edward Stratford harbors towards Sherlock, an omega with whom he engages on an intellectual level. The prevailing dogma in this field has been instrumental in shaping his rejection of concepts above, “All this it’s – it’s science. A bit beyond an Omega, don’t you think?” (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 570).

His arrogance cannot be considered a deliberate criminal act; rather, it is an automatic reaction coming from habitus that lacks a comprehensive understanding of omega, a factor that wields substantial cultural influence. This attitude is indicative of an indisputable belief in intellectual superiority. Despite his moral opposition to the system, John Watson is also a product of this conditioning. His initial perception of Sherlock was based on preconceived notions about the physical characteristics and demeanor of alphas and omegas:

“I assumed he was an Alpha when I met him. I never asked, and he never said anything. John sighed. ‘Not a bond, a mate... nothing.’” (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 28)

In that social milieu, the prevailing doxa identified Sherlock’s self-confidence and intelligence (high cultural capital) with the alpha label. The exposition of the alpha habitus in challenging circumstances closely intertwines with the evolution of John Watson’s character. Watson’s personal habitus demonstrates a prioritization of morality, loyalty, and justice, principles derived from his professional experiences as a physician and military veteran. However, his biological status as an alpha produces a series of instinctive, often aggressive traits that frequently conflict with his conscious values. Consequently, John’s unshakeable assumption was a direct result of his habitus.

Alpha John’s instincts manifest with such intensity that even he is taken aback, particularly when Sherlock is in peril. “Get off him” (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 91) is a clear and unambiguous directive that illustrates John’s spontaneous reaction when Alexander assaulted Sherlock. Watson’s strong possessive and protective instincts often manifest involuntarily. Following an altercation of a heated nature, Greg Lestrade made the following observation:

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“The other day, you spent the whole time I was talking to Sherlock looking like you wanted to break my nose for breathing the same air.’ He ignored John’s weak sound of protest, pressing on. ‘No brew, no chat, and any smile was all teeth. You didn’t want me there. Even Sally noticed.’”(BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 303)

John was taken aback when he became aware of his unconscious manifestation of territorial aggression. His journey entailed a process of learning how to address this conflict. Refusing to bite Sherlock without consent and offering to leave after the bond was formed, actions that completely reversed the expectations of alpha dominance, he consciously chose to reject the most brutal aspects of alpha behavior. Nevertheless, the instinct persisted, resulting in persistent tension between the man he desired to be and the alpha he was born to be. This internal conflict suggests that the alpha social status, despite its associated social power, may also function as a form of internalized repression, compelling individuals to conform to behaviors that contradict their personal moral principles.

The final habitus is derived from the beta perspective, which demonstrates that symbolic violence is perpetuated by the dominant and the dominated, as well as those in between. While not inherently involved in the alpha-omega power conflict, beta characters frequently act to support the established hierarchy. A prime example of this is Sally Donovan’s cynical attitude toward the “murdered” omega. In her cynical remark regarding an omega who “had the world land in her lap just because she can pop out a kid every nine months like clockwork” (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 8), she, a beta, demonstrates her adherence to the prevailing logic of the system. She does not contest the notion that the purpose of the omega is reproduction; she is merely envious of the benefits the omega receives. In the absence of critical scrutiny directed towards the fundamental tenets of the hierarchical structure, the dynamics of symbolic violence emerge. Similarly, Anderson and other beta forensic officers regard omega’s corpse with enthusiasm, thereby confirming that omega is an exotic other: “Just because Betas were not attracted to Omegas, it did not make the sight of one, even a dead one, any less fascinating.”(BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 7)

By treating omega as a spectacle, they engage in a symbolic process that creates a separation and objectifies them. This curiosity functions as a form of symbolic violence that distinguishes omega from the majority of the population, thereby maintaining the prevailing social structure.

2. The Rebellious Habitus: Sherlock’s Lifelong Resistance

Sherlock Holmes manifests tendencies toward rebellion, persistently rebuffing the roles assigned to him. With the assistance of his mother, he has been actively opposing the typical characteristics of omega since early childhood. His apparent indifference to social conventions, his strong sense of

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independence, and his pursuit of knowledge are indicative of a social class or social group with a strong sense of freedom and a strong desire to accumulate knowledge.

The dynamic between Sherlock and Alexander has been characterized as an “emotional war-zone” (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 126), a constant battle between Sherlock’s desire to expand his knowledge and Alexander’s attempts to compel him to fulfill the tasks he is obligated to perform. At the core of this conflict is a fundamental discord of values. Sherlock posits that “the chase, the game, an exhilarating puzzle” (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 25) is the definition of a meaningful life and that these activities are linked to his cultural capital. He would consider the imposed omega habitus, which emphasizes domestic life and child-rearing, to be a “death penalty” for his mind Beautiful (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 25).

This rebellious habitus is not merely reactive; he possesses a coherent strategy. Through meticulously analysis and strategic maneuver, Sherlock successfully identifies a method to navigate and subsequently manipulate the internal system effectively. He transforms his primary social role by developing contraceptives through the application of his chemical expertise. He elucidates his cognitive approach to John, articulating his thought process and the underlying rationales, “You can’t expect to fight against the norms society thrusts upon you without facing consequences.” (BeautifulFiction, 2013, p. 117)

This statement demonstrates Sherlock’s keen awareness of the power structures in this field and the associated risks. Throughout his life, he consistently demonstrated a strong inclination towards intellectual freedom and personal autonomy, often prioritizing these values over even physical safety. The culmination of this resistance was his ultimate decision to enter into a relationship with John. The outcome was an attempt to regulate his social position with his personal behavior, building a relationship based on a shared habitus founded on mutual respect rather than imposed hierarchy.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of *The Gilded Cage* fanfiction reveals that the omegaverse subgenre, although often grounded in the framework of biological determinism, possesses a significant capacity as a medium of social criticism. The study shows that in such narrative ecology, an individual’s value is rigidly constructed based on their secondary sexual characteristics. This creates a form of biological capital that puts the omega in a complicated position: it is considered a valuable asset but also an entity that is highly vulnerable to exploitation. Specifically, the case study on the character of Sherlock Holmes illustrates the complex dynamics of class conflict. As an omega with extraordinary intelligence, Sherlock embodies the struggle to convert cultural capital into a tool of resistance. These findings confirm that the accumulation of artistic and intellectual capital is capable of destabilizing established power structures,

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enabling individuals to negotiate their worth in the pursuit of structural hegemony. Furthermore, the application of Pierre Bourdieu's theory reveals that narrative conflicts not only occur externally, but also internally, through the concept of habitus. Symbolic violence effectively instills a submissive disposition in the omega and dominance in the alpha as a virtue; however, the narrative also highlights agency, as seen in the tension John Watson experiences between his biological instinct and his moral compass, as well as Sherlock's rejection of forced gender roles. Thus, *The Gilded Cage* goes beyond its function as a mere erotic fantasy, transforming into a discursive space to explore systemic inequality, bodily autonomy, and the struggle against social oppression. Therefore, based on the findings and limitations of this study, several recommendations can be proposed for future researchers interested in studying similar topics. First, the study corpus can be expanded by applying comparative studies, alternative theories such as biopolitics from Foucault, and reception and reader-response analysis to examine this particular fan fiction.

CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Andi Febriana Tamrin: Conceptualization, Data curation, Writing-original draft. **Hafian Yamina:** Data curation, Writing-review editing, Investigation, Supervision, Validation.

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