

Powers of the Anonymous

A Personal Essay about Plagiarism, Theft, and Hate Speech

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Social media has become an increasingly popular platform for artists all over the world to showcase their work on. Art-centered websites such as Deviantart, more general-use applications like Twitter, and even blogging sites like Tumblr are used to share artwork with the click of a mouse. But despite sharing work from the comfort of one's own home, artists such as myself have become susceptible to ethical issues such as plagiarism, art theft, and hate speech. "Powers of the Anonymous: A Personal Essay about Plagiarism, Theft, and Hate Speech" is a personal account of my experiences as an artist exploring social media in an attempt to gain recognition for my work. What started off as a hobby evolved into a constant overcoming of ethical hurdles, which has taught me the importance of safeguarding my work and myself. While this piece is intended for artists who are interested in sharing their creations online, I hope that it helps anyone using social media to become more aware of these issues as well.

Using social media as an artist to expose my work has given me experiences, both positive and negative, that I otherwise would have never experienced in the real world. Like many artists who use online communities to showcase work and share it with niche groups, I have made myself vulnerable to ethical issues such as plagiarism, theft, and hate speech. However, overcoming these hurdles has taught me how important it is to safeguard my work. My work is the accumulation of my time, effort, and years of experience, so an online stranger taking it as their own is something I should not and cannot let slip by. Using social media as an art platform has been a jour-

ney that has gradually revealed my strengths and weaknesses as an aspiring animator and storyteller.

My middle school self had no idea online art communities existed until a fellow artist classmate encouraged me to join Deviantart, a website specifically created for artists of all skill levels to freely post and share their artwork. I started by posting fanart of my favorite anime at the time, such as *Hetalia* and *Naruto*, and for a while it was simply fun. Part of it was knowing that my work could join the endless pool of art from all over the world with the simple click of a mouse. But the main fun factor was the fact that my work could be seen by people



I am an Academy for Creative Media major with a focus in animation who enjoys telling stories through visual mediums. This personal essay was written for Professor Claudia Pummer's ACM 460: Ethics and Film class in Spring 2017. Drawing has been a part of my life since I was little, from scribbling with crayons on the walls to drawing flip-book animations in the corner of my notebooks. While I enjoy telling stories through art, sharing things about myself has always been a challenge. Writing this essay has taught me that personal accounts are the hardest yet most meaningful stories one can tell. I hope that it helps fellow artists understand that their work is theirs alone, and that they should protect their hard work and artistic experiences.

other than myself and a friend from school. As an amateur artist I did not expect any feedback nor a significant amount of views on my posts, so submitting my work did not make me anxious. It took me months to realize what kinds of people tended to use this website, and how they took advantage of clueless artists who did not believe their work was worth stealing.

Somewhere down the line of sharing fanart and art of my original characters, a user called Anon11 messaged me about whether I accepted requests and if I could draw their characters for the cover of their story. I was extremely flattered that a random stranger enjoyed my work enough to request something, let alone the cover of their own creative work. Without hesitation, I claimed the payless job and spent hours drawing a plain young girl sitting on a wooden chair with a smirking bald man standing beside her. When I posted it, I expected Anon11 to gush over my piece or at least express gratitude, but their response was ungrateful and demanding of more. It went something like the following:

Anon11: Thanks, could you draw the cover for the next chapter

Me: Sorry but I'm busy with schoolwork so I can't take any more requests

Anon11: You could draw it after you finish schoolwork

Me: Oh uh... I guess?

Anon11: Cool thanks

Not only did they continue to demand more free work, but when I checked their page, Anon11 did not even use my first drawing for their cover. Afraid that they would continue to pester me, I blocked their account. The encounter was small but enough for me to realize first-hand how clients can look down on art as an easy commodity; it can be taken for free if they target the right person. As a 13- to 14-year-old, I took the request as a compliment to my artistic ability rather than someone taking my time and effort for free. And when they insisted that I continue obeying their demands, I lacked the confidence to throw a firm *no*. This unpleasant first experience became a shackle that prevented me from opening online commissions out of fear that I would run into ungrateful people demanding more work than they'd be willing to pay for. I had also read countless numbers of stories where people with no art experience would criticize an artist for setting prices at all. It's 'just art' and a true artist would draw for the sake of drawing, right?

After Deviantart I discovered Tumblr, a micoblog-

ging website that is not only utilized by artists but by anyone with an interest in sharing anything, whether it be British desserts, Korean fashion, or videos of birds dancing to pop music. Microblogging is when people share content in small forms, as opposed to the traditional style of blogging where people write long texts accompanied by multiple images. In other words, it is small-scale blogging. Microblogging can be as simple as posting a picture of a cat or writing a one-liner. After following a few artists on Tumblr, I noticed that they tended to poke fun at the annoying and demanding users of Deviantart, and I could not relate more. After running into more problems on Deviantart, I deleted my account and strictly moved to Tumblr to post my work. While the experiences I had with people on Deviantart were discouraging and hurtful, my recent experiences on Tumblr have gone so far as to draw the legal line.

I enjoyed expressing myself as a fan of my favorite shows by drawing and sharing fanart. Some may question whether fanart is its own form of plagiarism, and this would be true if the artist claimed the original content as their own. But for me, fanart is a visual medium that starts conversations among people who are familiar with the source material. When I produce fanart, it is usually in the form of short comics that explore alternative ways a scene could have been handled, scenes that I wish occurred within the show, and more. The same result could be accomplished if I wrote extensive analyses using images taken from the animated shows as evidence to back up my claims, but it would not be as fun nor easily consumable as a drawing. By posting more and more fanwork, I slowly gained recognition from fellow fans. For immensely popular anime and animated Netflix shows, the positive response from hundreds of users has been overwhelming. I owed it to the popularity of shows such as *Yuri!!! On Ice*, which was so popular that the finale caused multiple websites to crash from the influx of excited users.

But the larger the community was, the easier and more likely it was for people to steal art. On Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram and even Facebook, people have stolen my work and posted it to their own accounts. Some of them credited me while others simply wrote "credit to the artist :)" or "not mine," which would look equally impressive on a Works Cited page of a dissertation. To top it off, most of them did not ask for permission to repost. They quietly took my work, posted it on their own Facebook account, and were bombarded with thousands of positive reactions and hundreds of comments.

The myriad of responses they received as opposed to the responses on my original posts was incomparable. All the reposter did was take a low-quality screenshot of my work and post it to their social media sites. They gained more recognition and followers within a day than what I was able to build up over a span of years. I did not understand how they could achieve so much more without breaking a sweat. Like any aspiring animator and artist in general, I could not allow anyone to take advantage of my hard work and hobby. These encounters have made me rightfully protective of my work and straightforward in refusing requests to repost. Unfortunately, art theft is too common for social media runners to be able to track down each case. Some artists themselves have given up on reprimanding art thieves since their words fall on deaf ears. While it may be impossible to stop every crime, I try to minimize the damage by stating on the front of my social media pages that I do not allow reposts. I also make sure to write my username on each piece, so if someone were to find my work from a reposter, they would know how to track me down. Google also has a reverse image search, which allows one to enter an image in the search bar and find the original site that the image came from.

Expressing my interest in certain fictional work and being a part of communities of like-minded fans have also made me susceptible to hate. Recently someone replied to one of my posts saying, "I can't believe you spent actual time on this. Not something I wanted to see." While

I knew that there would always be haters, or people who hate for the sake of hurting others, I was still surprised to read this. But to my greater surprise, people who did like my work encouraged me even more and told me to ignore comments like those; they were the ones wasting their time responding to content they hated. Receiving a simple message such as "I love ur art :D" encouraged me to continue drawing because there was at least one person looking forward to my creations.

Even though my work has been stolen, taken advantage of, and exposed to persistent haters, putting myself out there has given me the confidence to discover my appeal as an artist. Constant positive feedback has shown me that I have strength in storytelling through comics, which is extremely valuable as I pursue a future career in animation and storytelling through art. On the other hand, lesser feedback has taught me that my weakness is in painted illustrations, which is something I plan to work harder at. Because of obstacles like plagiarism and hate speech, I can stand up for my artwork, myself as an artist, and as a person who simply enjoys stories. I have also learned that the best measure to counter hate is to continue doing what I love. Not everyone will appreciate it, but that does not mean everyone will hate it either. Even if there are haters who bash on my creative endeavors, there will always be people who support them with ten times the power of the anonymous.