

## **Romanticization of Abjection in Hannibal Content on X: An Audience Reception Analysis**

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### **A B S T R A C T**

This study examines the romanticization of abjection in Hannibal (2013–2015) and the audience reception of such representations on X. Using Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and Stuart Hall's encoding–decoding model, the research employs a qualitative method combining textual analysis of selected scenes from the series and reception analysis of 153 textual posts published on X between November 2022 and January 2023. The findings show that the series gradually transforms abjection from bodily violation into shared ritual and finally into romantic symbolism through aestheticized violence, cannibalism, and emotional intimacy. Audience responses are classified into dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings. Dominant audiences interpret violence and cannibalism as metaphors of intimacy and devotion; negotiated audiences appreciate the aesthetic and emotional aspects of the series while maintaining ethical reservations; oppositional audiences reject the romanticization of murder and bodily transgression. The study concludes that Hannibal does not eliminate the abject nature of violence and cannibalism but re-encodes them through visual beauty, ritual structure, and emotional symbolism, while audiences actively reproduce, negotiate, or resist these meanings within contemporary digital fandom culture.

*Keywords: Abjection, Romanticization, Audience Reception, Hannibal, X*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In contemporary fandom culture, violence is no longer viewed solely as something to be denounced; it is often admired, stylized, and emotionally reinterpreted. This shift is particularly visible in digital fan communities, where acts traditionally associated with horror may be discussed through the language of beauty, intimacy, and desire (Fathimah, 2025; Jenkins et al., 2018). The concept of abjection is used to refer to that which disrupts identity, system, and order by destabilizing the boundary between the self and the non-self (Kristeva, 1982). Julia Kristeva argues that the abject produces a contradictory response of horror and fascination because it threatens the symbolic structures that sustain subjectivity, and it is commonly associated with bodily transgressions such as death, decay, blood, violence, and cannibalism. Barbara Creed (1993) further explains that abject imagery in horror culture derives its power from what society seeks to exclude, making disgust inseparable from cultural anxiety and fascination.

Traditionally, abjection is connected with disgust and rejection. However, the abject does not cease to be abject when it is represented aesthetically. Contemporary media frequently re-signifies abject elements through visual beauty, emotional intimacy,

and symbolic meaning, allowing audiences to negotiate rather than simply reject their disturbing nature. Because the meanings attached to abjection are culturally constructed rather than fixed, audience interpretation becomes crucial. Stuart Hall (1997) argues that representation is not a passive reflection of reality but an active process of meaning production through language, imagery, and discourse. Media texts may therefore encode abject elements in ways that encourage admiration, empathy, intimacy, or romantic interpretation, and the present study investigates how such meanings are negotiated, reproduced, or resisted within contemporary digital fandom culture.

This research examines the television series *Hannibal* (2013–2015), an American psychological thriller broadcast on NBC and based on the *Hannibal Lecter* novels by Thomas Harris. The series presents an alternate storyline exploring the early relationship between Dr. Hannibal Lecter and FBI profiler Will Graham. Instead of presenting violence as something horrifying, *Hannibal* romanticizes it with the help of stylized images, sophisticated food imagery, and poetic dialogues, which allows viewers to explore abject actions in a manner that involves both revulsion and desire. With the development of the series, Lecter's killing and eating of human beings is transformed from an expression of solitary pleasure into symbolic gestures of persuasion, intimacy, and courtship, and by the last season Graham himself comes to see violence as something valuable and even beautiful (Casey, 2015; Crape, 2022).

This study focuses on audience reception of the romanticization of abjection in *Hannibal*, rather than on the textual construction of violence alone. Murder and cannibalism treated in the series as intimate, meaningful, or beautiful are not limited to the text but are spread extensively through fan-created content on social media, indicating how romanticized violence is absorbed and internalized within contemporary fandom culture (Hall, 1980; Jenkins et al., 2018). Outside of the text, *Hannibal* has had a profound effect on modern popular culture, particularly in reviving the popularity of cannibalism and extreme bodily transgression as narrative elements, as seen in *Yellowjackets* (2021–), *Bones and All* (2022), and the album *Preacher's Daughter* by Ethel Cain (2022). According to Google Trends data (2020–2025), search interest in terms such as "cannibalism" and "cannibalism as metaphor for love" shows spikes corresponding with the release of these works (Google Trends, 2024), and posts that romanticize murder, cannibalism, and violence on X (formerly Twitter) often accumulate thousands of likes and reposts.

A number of recent studies have explored abjection in different literary and cultural works, such as Stephy et al. (2025) on *Tender Is the Flesh* and Akhter et al. (2025) on *The Bride Price*, both of which conceptualize abjection primarily as rejection or marginalization. Other studies apply Hall's encoding-decoding model to audience reception, such as Srinita (2025) on sanitary pad advertisements, Fathimah (2025) on dark romance content on TikTok, and Pratiwi et al. (2022) on Disney's *Mulan*, but none of these focus on the reception of aestheticized violence and cannibalism in a fictional television narrative. In the context of *Hannibal* specifically, existing scholarship by Schwegler-Castañer (2018), Fuchs et al. (2018), García (2019), and Casey (2015) has been concerned mainly with textual analysis of consumption, disgust, aesthetics, and desire in the series,

with little attention paid to how audiences receive and react to these representations in digital environments.

Individually, these Hannibal-focused studies foreground different critical lenses. Schwegler-Castañer (2018) interprets the series through the conceptual metaphor of consumption, arguing that Lecter's cannibalism functions less as shock value than as commentary on taste and cultural capital, turning murder into art and culinary refinement into a marker of prestige, though the analysis remains centered on textual symbolism rather than on how viewers respond to it. Fuchs et al. (2018) similarly examine carnivorous consumption and liminality, showing how the series blurs the boundary between human and animal, civilization and barbarity, and places audiences in an unresolved ethical position, yet the discussion does not extend to how viewers actually decode this ambiguity. Casey (2015) reads Hannibal as a subversion of the detective genre in which Graham's psychological permeability and his queer-coded bond with Lecter transform violence into an intimate, aestheticized experience, while Crape (2022) situates the series within the gothic tradition of queer villainy, arguing that Hannibal reclaims queerness as a signifier of humanity rather than monstrosity. García (2019) contributes the notion of the "paradox of disgust," proposing that disgust itself becomes an aesthetic enhancer when embedded within Hannibal's stylized visual and narrative structures, allowing pleasure and aversion to coexist. Taken together, these studies confirm that Hannibal is a text of considerable aesthetic and cultural complexity, yet each remains anchored in textual analysis and stops short of examining whether real audiences accept, negotiate, or resist the romanticized meanings the series encodes. More importantly, the specific phenomenon of romanticized abjection itself remains underexplored: previous studies generally discuss cannibalism and violence in Hannibal as symbols of social critique, moral ambiguity, queer intimacy, or aesthetic pleasure, but they seldom examine how these abject elements may be re-signified as romantic expressions and subsequently circulated through online audience discourse.

Although scholarship on abjection, transgression, and audience reception has grown considerably, a significant gap remains: comparatively little attention has been paid to how audiences actively interpret representations in which abject imagery is re-signified as intimacy and romance within online fandom spaces. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining how Hannibal romanticizes abjection and how audiences on X decode, negotiate, or oppose that romanticization through Hall's encoding-decoding framework. Specifically, this study addresses two research questions: (1) how is abjection romanticized in the TV show Hannibal (2013–2015), and (2) how do audiences on X respond to the romanticization of abjection in Hannibal content.

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research method combining textual analysis of selected scenes of the series Hannibal (2013–2015) with qualitative analysis of user-generated content on the social media platform X. This approach allows the study to examine both how abjection is encoded in the text and how audiences engage in decoding it. The primary data for the first research question consist of selected scenes, dialogue transcripts, and visual elements from Hannibal, including cinematography, mise-en-

scène, color symbolism, framing, and narrative structure that contribute to the aesthetic portrayal of violence and cannibalism.

The primary data for the second research question consist of textual posts published on X between November 2022 and January 2023, a period that coincided with the release of *Bones* and *All*, during which discussions of cannibalism, romantic transgression, and aestheticized violence became highly visible online and *Hannibal* simultaneously resurfaced in fandom discourse. A purposive sampling technique was employed: an initial pool of posts discussing *Hannibal* was identified through keyword searches related to the series, *Hannibal* *Lecter*, *Will Graham*, cannibalism, violence, romance, and intimacy, and only posts that directly reflected audience interpretations of the series' violence, cannibalism, emotional intimacy, or romantic symbolism were retained. Posts were included if they were (1) posted between November 2022 and January 2023; (2) contained the keyword "*Hannibal*" together with discussion of violence, cannibalism, bodily transgression, intimacy, romance, or aestheticized horror; (3) written in English; and (4) expressed a discernible audience position that could be interpreted as dominant, negotiated, or oppositional. Through this screening process, a final dataset of 153 posts was obtained.

Data analysis was based on Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection and Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model. The selected scenes of *Hannibal* were analyzed first to determine how abjection is aesthetically and symbolically constructed across the series. Audience responses on X were then examined using Hall's encoding-decoding framework: posts that accepted or reproduced the romanticized meanings encoded in the series were categorized as dominant readings; posts that acknowledged the romantic or aesthetic appeal of the series while maintaining ethical reservations were categorized as negotiated readings; and posts that rejected the romanticization of violence, cannibalism, or bodily transgression were categorized as oppositional readings. After qualitative categorization was completed, simple frequency counts were used to illustrate the distribution of audience positions across the dataset.

Data collection proceeded in two phases. First, key episodes and scenes of *Hannibal* that most vividly feature acts of violence, cannibalism, and emotional intimacy as manifestations of abjection were identified, selected according to their narrative significance and their prominence in fan discussion. Second, a purposive sampling technique was employed to collect audience responses from X: a larger pool of posts discussing *Hannibal* was initially identified through searches using relevant keywords, phrases, and character references, then screened against the predetermined inclusion criteria, and posts that merely mentioned the series without expressing an interpretable audience response were excluded. The resulting dataset of 153 posts was not intended to represent the entirety of the *Hannibal* fandom on X; rather, it was considered sufficient for qualitative reception analysis because it provided substantial thematic variation across supportive, ambivalent, and resistant audience responses. The percentages reported in the following section therefore indicate the proportional distribution of audience positions within the selected dataset rather than statistical generalizations about all viewers of *Hannibal*, and their purpose is to support qualitative interpretation rather than to establish statistical significance.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Romanticization of Abjection

The analysis of selected scenes demonstrates a gradual transformation in the representation of abjection throughout *Hannibal*. In Season 1, abjection appears primarily as bodily violation: in the episode "Savoureux", Lecter drugs Graham and force-feeds him the severed ear of Abigail Hobbs through a feeding tube, an act that is secretive, intrusive, and non-consensual. Graham's subsequent vomiting of the ear represents the body's fundamental reaction to abjection, expulsion, generating nausea and rejection rather than intimacy. Yet the series situates this violation within Lecter's psychological control of Graham, so that violence is already connected with a distorted form of intimacy, even though romanticization is not yet fully realized.

According to Kristeva (1982), the abject is that which disrupts identity and bodily boundaries, and this disturbance is literalized by the feeding tube itself: foreign human flesh is inserted into Graham's body without his knowledge or consent, so that the boundary between self and other is broken corporeally rather than merely symbolically. Graham's vomiting subsequently enacts the body's fundamental defense against abjection, an expulsion that attempts to reestablish bodily integrity and reassert separation from the object of contamination. Read through Hall's framework, the violation is not random but intentional and deeply personal, marking the point at which a distorted intimacy begins to take shape even as abjection continues to provoke nausea and horror rather than desire.



**Figure 1.** Abigail Hobbs' severed ear in "Savoureux" (02:15:31 – 03:03:10)



**Figure 2.** Graham vomits Abigail Hobbs' ear in "Savoureux" (02:15:31 – 03:03:10)

In Season 2, abjection is recontextualized as a shared ritual. In the episode "Naka-Choko", Graham presents Lecter with human flesh and they eat it together willingly, transforming consumption into a ritualized exchange that implies consent and

reciprocity rather than coercion (Fuchs & Phillips, 2018). The scene is visually supported by refined mise-en-scène, elegant table settings, and restrained cinematography, coding cannibalism through visual signs of romance and seduction (Schwegler-Castañer, 2018). Violence here no longer takes the form of contamination but of communion, marking a transition from violation to complicity.

As Fuchs and Phillips (2018) argue, Hannibal frequently uses cannibalistic imagery to blur the boundary between self and other, civilization and transgression, thereby turning eating into a symbolic act of relational connection rather than mere bodily consumption. Where the Season 1 feeding was invasive and non-consensual, the exchange in “Naka-Choko” implies consent and reciprocity: by choosing to cook and serve human flesh, Graham figuratively breaks the very boundary he had previously resisted, so that the abject object is no longer expelled but internalized (Kristeva, 1982). The destabilizing force that once produced nausea is thereby converted into a medium of connection, and cannibalism begins to function not only as horror but as a demonstration of emotional closeness.



Figure 3. Lecter opens Graham's gift in "Naka-Choko" (38:07:07 – 39:02:05)



Figure 4. The human meat Graham gifts Lecter in "Naka-Choko" (38:07:07 – 39:02:05)

By Season 3, the romanticization of abjection reaches its most vivid manifestation. In the episode "Primavera", Lecter leaves a tableau for Graham in the shape of a heart made from a mutilated human body, turning the corpse—the ultimate abject object for Kristeva—into a visual statement of love. The heart shape invokes cultural iconography associated with romantic love, recoding the corpse as an affective rather than horrific object (Crape, 2022; García, 2019). This progression culminates in the finale, "The Wrath of the Lamb," where Graham and Lecter commit an act of homicide together and Graham describes the experience as "beautiful," completing the series' transformation of abjection

from violation, to ritual, to romantic union. This progression does not indicate that violence, cannibalism, or bodily transgression cease to be abject; rather, the series increasingly re-encodes these elements through visual beauty, ritual structure, and emotional symbolism.

The tableau in “Primavera” can also be read as an encoded message in Hall’s sense: Lecter uses the corpse as a communicative gesture, literally encoding violence in the symbolic language of romance through symmetrical composition and artistic staging that soften the brutality of the act, turning murder into a symbolic love letter. This corresponds to García’s (2019) argument that the series converts disgust into aesthetic and emotional experience through highly stylized visual composition, producing what he describes as a paradoxical pleasure that emerges from encounters with disgust in aesthetic contexts. Unlike Season 1, where the abject leads to expulsion, or Season 2, where it becomes a shared ritual, Season 3 fully incorporates abjection into romantic symbolism, so that violence ceases to be merely intimate and becomes openly expressive.



Figure 5. Graham and the heart tableau in "Primavera" (25:31:07 – 27:01:10)



Figure 6. Graham reaches out to touch the corpse tableau in "Primavera" (25:31:07 – 27:01:10)

To examine how audiences interpret this romanticization, 153 textual posts published on X between November 2022 and January 2023 were analyzed using Hall's encoding-decoding framework. Based on this coding process, the dominant position emerged as the most frequent reading, followed by negotiated and oppositional readings, as presented in Table 1.

This period was selected because it coincided with the release of *Bones and All* (2022), a film that renewed online discussions surrounding cannibalism, intimacy, and romantic transgression, during which Hannibal simultaneously resurfaced within fandom discourse due to its thematic association with aestheticized violence and cannibalistic

desire. Audience responses on X should therefore be understood not only as individual reactions but as participatory fan practices through which meanings are circulated, reinforced, and reinterpreted within networked fandom culture (Jenkins et al., 2018).

**Table 1.** Distribution of Audience Reception Positions toward the Romanticization of Abjection in Hannibal

| Position     | Frequency  | Percentage  |
|--------------|------------|-------------|
| Dominant     | 68         | 44.44%      |
| Negotiated   | 52         | 33.99%      |
| Oppositional | 33         | 21.57%      |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>153</b> | <b>100%</b> |

The 153 posts were further grouped into ten thematic categories that repeatedly appeared within each reading position, as shown in Table 2. This two-stage coding process preserved the complexity of audience responses while maintaining consistency with Hall's encoding-decoding framework.

**Table 2.** Thematic Categories of Audience Reception toward the Romanticization of Abjection in Hannibal

| Position     | Category                                                                             | N  |
|--------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Dominant     | Sees cannibalism as a symbol of closeness and feeling between Lecter and Graham      | 36 |
|              | Thinks of murder scenes and bloody events as romantic gestures                       | 13 |
|              | Appreciates the aestheticization of violence and cannibalism                         | 19 |
| Negotiated   | Accepts the romantic aspects but sees the ethical issues of violence and cannibalism | 13 |
|              | Acknowledges the relationship dynamics while describing them as toxic or problematic | 29 |
|              | Values the artistic presentation but is not at ease with the content of the abject   | 10 |
| Position     | Category                                                                             | N  |
| Oppositional | Does not romanticize cannibalism and violence                                        | 3  |
|              | Experiences disgust, nausea or horror at the abject imagery                          | 7  |

### Dominant Reading

The series' portrayal of violence and cannibalism is romanticized and accepted by the dominant audience. These viewers see murder, body violation, and cannibalism as symbols of emotional intimacy between Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham rather than as horrific crimes, typically describing the relationship using terms such as "romantic," "love

language," "devotion," "intimate," "beautiful," and "soulmates." The heart-shaped corpse tableau in "Primavera" is frequently cited by these viewers as one of the most romantic scenes in the series, and Lecter's acts of cruelty are read as acts of love and emotional exhibition. Another recurring interpretation is cannibalism as a metaphor for love and union, in which Lecter's craving for Graham is read as symbolic of total emotional intimacy. In this respect, the dominant audience interprets the series exactly as it invites them to: violence is presented aesthetically, and this presentation helps these viewers see abjection as beautiful, meaningful, and romantic.

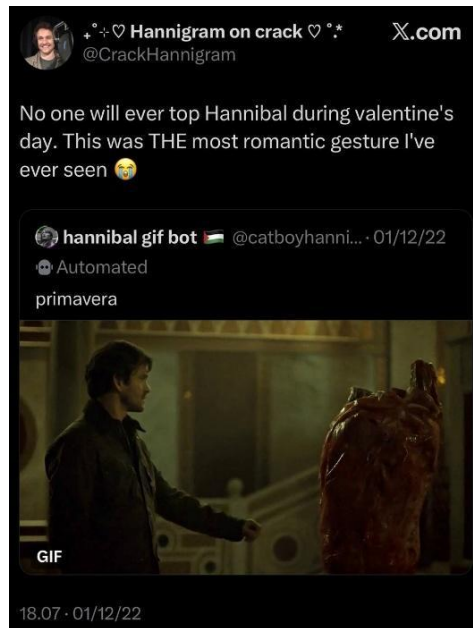


Figure 7. Post from a dominant audience

The first representative post describes Lecter's heart-shaped tableau as "the most romantic gesture" the user has ever witnessed, explicitly framing the murder tableau as romantic rather than horrific. Following Hall's model, this is a dominant reading because the viewer interprets the scene in line with the meaning encoded in the series: the corpse, traditionally the abject object in Kristeva's theory, is turned into a heart and presented through the cultural symbolism of Valentine's Day. The encoding is reproduced without challenge; violence is never questioned or condemned but treated as the supreme act of love.



Figure 8. Post from a dominant audience

The second post discusses several of Lecter's violent and morally outrageous actions, including the murder of Will Graham and the flower-decked corpse tableau, without condemning them; instead, the user frames them mainly in terms of love and emotional loyalty, suggesting Lecter acted because he "missed" Graham. This is a dominant reading because it takes for granted the romantic framework encoded in the series: the corpse tableau, abject in Kristeva's terms, is presented as a symbolic expression of love, and the viewer reproduces this meaning without questioning the morality of the violence.

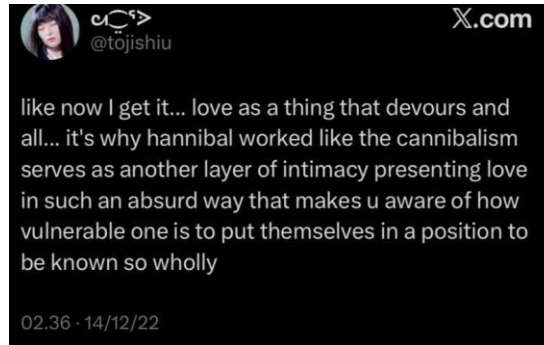


Figure 9. Post from a dominant audience

The third post reads cannibalism literally as a metaphor of love and intimacy, using the term to describe the act of being vulnerable and fully exposing oneself to another, without expressing horror or disgust at the consumption of human flesh. This is a dominant reading because the viewer's interpretation aligns with the preferred meaning encoded throughout the series, where cannibalism is repeatedly associated with closeness and emotional bonding between Lecter and Graham; the abject act, in Kristeva's terms, is re-signified by the audience as a metaphor for being "completely known and understood by another."

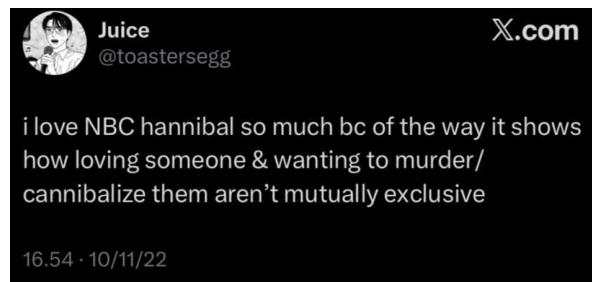


Figure 10. Post from a dominant audience

The fourth post states that one reason the viewer likes Hannibal is that "love and cannibalistic desire are compatible experiences," claiming that love and murder/cannibalism are "not mutually exclusive." This is a clear dominant reading, as the viewer reproduces one of the series' main encoded messages: that murder and cannibalism represent ways of understanding, being intimate with, and desiring another person, rather than crimes to be condemned. Collectively, these four posts demonstrate that a significant portion of the analyzed audience did not merely appreciate the aesthetic

presentation of violence but actively reproduced the romantic framework encoded in the series, taking for granted the preferred meaning offered by the text.

In Hall's terms, these viewers largely accepted the preferred meaning offered by the text. From the perspective of Kristeva, this suggests that the disturbing force of abjection was not eliminated but symbolically transformed into an affective and romantic signifier within audience interpretation.

### Negotiated Reading

The negotiated audience accepts the romanticized view of abjection but retains moral reservations, recognizing the closeness between Lecter and Graham while still finding what is shown upsetting. These viewers typically use phrases such as "toxic but romantic," "messed up," "unhealthy," "problematic," or "I shouldn't like this but I do." Unlike the dominant audience, they do not fully accept the series' treatment of violence; instead, they hold the symbolism and the ethical dimension of murder and cannibalism simultaneously, isolating the fictional meaning from the moral implications of the act. The negotiated audience thereby illustrates Hall's idea that audiences actively modify an encoded message according to their own beliefs and experiences, neither wholly embracing nor wholly rejecting the romanticization of abjection.



Figure 11. Post from a negotiated audience

The fifth post admits that Hannibal contains both horror and beauty: the viewer reports that the graphic violence compels them to "look away with horror" while also appreciating its artistic presentation, likening it to paintings. Following Hall's model, this is a negotiated reading because the viewer both accepts and resists the series' preferred meaning, drawn to its artistic sophistication without being fully overcome by disgust — an outcome consistent with Kristeva's notion of the abject as simultaneously alluring and repulsive.



Figure 12. Post from a negotiated audience

The sixth post describes cannibalism as "beautiful" while simultaneously admitting it is "wrong" and "absolutely disgusting," taking in the aesthetic appeal of Lecter's cooking while remaining aware of the disturbing reality behind it. This is a negotiated reading in which the viewer embraces the series' encoded aesthetic presentation but maintains moral objections to the act itself, exemplifying Kristeva's dual reaction of fascination and taboo.



Figure 13. Post from a negotiated audience

The seventh post distinguishes between enjoying Hannibal Lecter as a fictional character and supporting cannibalism or murder in real life, a distinction resembling what Janicke and Raney (2018) describe as antihero appreciation, where moral awareness coexists with emotional engagement. This is a negotiated position that respects the character's allure while resisting any attempt to normalize or justify his actions beyond the fictional narrative. Overall, the negotiated readings reveal an ambivalent relationship with romanticized abjection, in which fascination and ethical discomfort are allowed to coexist rather than resolved in either direction.

### Oppositional Reading

The results show that audience reactions to the romanticization of abjection in Hannibal are complex and multiple, and are not determinable by a single interpretation. The aestheticization of violence and the romantic portrayal of Lecter and Graham's relationship were negotiated by a sizeable portion of viewers who recognized both the attraction and the trouble of these representations, while others rebelled against the romanticization of violence altogether and continued to view the relationship critically.

The oppositional audience resists the romanticization of violence and cannibalism in Hannibal, continuing to view these acts as upsetting, sinful, and repulsive rather than as expressions of love. These viewers often label the series as "disgusting," "disturbing," "creepy," "sick," "gross," and "uncomfortable," and several explicitly reject fandom interpretations of the Lecter-Graham relationship as idealized romance, describing it instead as "manipulative, abusive and psychologically destructive." Unlike the dominant audience, the oppositional audience reacts to abjection in keeping with Kristeva's original formulation: the body, the corpse, and bodily violation remain objects of disgust and rejection, so that the series' coded romanticism fails to overcome the viewers' moral and emotional repulsion.

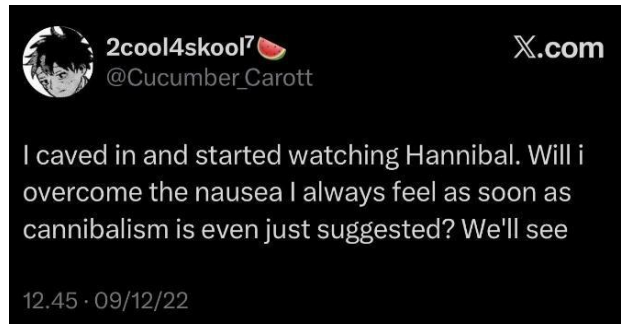


Figure 14. Post from an oppositional audience

The eighth post expresses physical disgust toward the series, asking whether the reader can overcome the nausea elicited by the mention of cannibalism — a reaction very close to Kristeva's definition of abjection as nausea and expulsion. Rather than embracing the show's aesthetic framing of cannibalism as beautiful, this viewer opposes its romanticization outright, decoding at the level of visceral disgust what the series encodes as high culture and emotional imagery.



Figure 15. Post from an oppositional audience

The ninth post explicitly states that the viewer dislikes cannibalism scenes and felt physically sick after watching one in Hannibal, a reaction of repugnance rather than appreciation for the aesthetic or symbolic value of the representation. This is a clear oppositional reading: the audience does not accept the text's intended meaning and cannot see cannibalism as beautiful, meaningful, or emotionally significant.



Figure 16. Post from an oppositional audience

The final post describes Hannibal as "problematic," arguing that no one should enjoy watching it and that the series encourages cannibalism in reality. In contrast to dominant

and negotiated responses, this viewer rejects both the representation and its cultural associations, denying any transformation of abjection into beauty or intimacy. Together, the oppositional readings demonstrate that aestheticization does not guarantee audience acceptance: for a substantial share of viewers, the abject remains fundamentally disturbing despite its artistic presentation.

## Discussion

The findings indicate that Hannibal constructs a progressive romanticization of abjection – moving from bodily violation, to shared ritual, to romantic symbolism – while audiences on X decode this construction in different ways. These findings support the theoretical integration of Kristeva and Hall: Kristeva explains why violence, corpses, and cannibalism remain abject even when aesthetically framed, while Hall explains why audiences may nevertheless interpret those elements as romantic, ambivalent, or unacceptable. Romanticized abjection should therefore not be understood as the disappearance of disgust but as a process of aesthetic and emotional re-signification that is subsequently negotiated by audiences according to their cultural and interpretive positions.

Although dominant readings were the largest category (44.44%), the substantial presence of negotiated (33.99%) and oppositional (21.57%) interpretations shows that viewers actively construct meaning based on their own values and experiences rather than passively accepting the text's encoded message.

These findings are further evidence for Hall's central argument that audiences actively construct meaning in the process of consuming media texts rather than simply absorbing it. Although Hannibal portrays violence and cannibalism in aesthetic and romantic terms, audiences do not necessarily decode these depictions in the same way: some viewers embrace the meaning intended by the text, others use that meaning as a starting point for negotiation in light of their own values, and still others reject it outright. The dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings identified in this study therefore demonstrate an ongoing interaction between media representation and audience interpretation, rather than a fixed or predetermined response to romanticized abjection.

Overall, the study shows that abjection is romanticized not only within the text but also through audience interaction within digital fandom, demonstrating how contemporary online fandom can become a space in which moral boundaries are continuously negotiated through affect, aesthetics, and social interaction rather than simply accepted or rejected.

This study carries both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it contributes to the development of abjection studies by demonstrating that abject elements can be aesthetically re-signified and interpreted through romantic and affective frameworks without losing their transgressive character; by combining Kristeva's psychoanalytic perspective with Hall's encoding-decoding model, the study bridges textual analysis and audience-reception analysis, offering a more dynamic understanding of how meanings of violence and bodily transgression are constructed and negotiated in contemporary media culture. Practically, the findings contribute to media, literary, and cultural studies by showing how digital audiences engage with morally disturbing

content on social-media platforms, illustrating that audience responses to aestheticized violence are not uniform and that viewers actively participate in reproducing, modifying, or resisting the meanings offered by media texts; this may be useful for future research on fandom culture, online discourse, horror media, and dark romance.

This study is limited to selected scenes from *Hannibal* and textual posts on X within a specific time period, and future research may expand the scope in several ways. Studies may compare audience reception across different platforms such as TikTok, Tumblr, Reddit, or Instagram to examine whether different platform cultures produce different interpretations of romanticized abjection. Researchers may also investigate visual fan practices, including fan edits, fan art, memes, and video compilations, which were excluded from the present study but may reveal additional forms of aesthetic and emotional engagement with abject imagery. Future work may likewise employ interviews, focus groups, or digital ethnography to explore more deeply how viewers consciously negotiate disgust, attraction, morality, and romance when engaging with *Hannibal*. Finally, comparative studies involving other media texts such as *Yellowjackets*, *Bones* and *All*, or other contemporary works that aestheticize cannibalism and violence may help determine whether the romanticization of abjection represents a broader cultural tendency in contemporary popular media rather than a phenomenon specific to *Hannibal* alone.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the romanticization of abjection in *Hannibal* (2013–2015) and the audience reception of that romanticization on X, using Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model to analyze selected scenes and 153 textual audience responses published between November 2022 and January 2023. Regarding the first research question, the findings show that *Hannibal* progressively romanticizes abjection through aesthetic, ritual, and symbolic representation, moving from bodily violation in Season 1, to shared ritual in Season 2, to romantic symbolism in Season 3. The series does not eliminate the abject nature of violence and cannibalism; instead, it re-encodes these transgressive elements through visual beauty, emotional intimacy, and romantic symbolism.

Regarding the second research question, audiences on X interpret this romanticization differently: dominant readings (44.44%) were the most frequent, reflecting acceptance of the series' romantic framework; negotiated readings (33.99%) revealed ambivalence between aesthetic appreciation and ethical reservation; and oppositional readings (21.57%) rejected the romanticization of violence and cannibalism outright. The integration of Kristeva and Hall proved useful for understanding both the textual and reception dimensions of this phenomenon, showing that romanticized abjection is produced through an interaction between media representation and audience participation, and highlighting the role of contemporary online fandom as a space where moral boundaries are continuously negotiated rather than simply accepted or rejected.

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