

## The Twilight Renaissance and Nostalgia: The Power of Community (and TikTok)

Nichol Brown

In this article, Nichol Brown analyzes the Twilight Renaissance through the lens of pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory, focusing on the key terms socialization and reception. She explores the way the revival in the *Twilight* series has allowed old fans to embrace their younger selves and defy the shame associated with the fandom, while also allowing them to build a community with new fans.

If you're reading this article, you may have already had an extremely visceral reaction to the title. *Twilight?* What is this, 2008?

Well, buddy, have I got news for you! We're about to unpack all your complicated feelings about *Twilight*—if you have any at all. If not, buckle up.

For the sake of developing credibility here, I must admit that I was a pretty passionate *Twilight* fan back in its heyday. Although I was fairly young when the series was first released (about eight years old when the first book came out in 2005 and about eleven when the first movie came out in 2008), the *Twilight* series was nonetheless very formative for me. It plunged the publishing and film industry into a paranormal romance boom and defined a substantial part of my identity in middle school. In the spirit of fully exposing myself, I will even reveal that I went to *Twilight* conventions with my Mom to meet the actors (Figure 1). So, yes, a fan, to say the least.

However, I can still vividly remember the shame involved in that time as well. Even in *Twilight*'s prime, I did not openly admit to most people that I was going to conventions. It felt like the whole world was snubbing their noses at



Figure 1: Middle-school Nichol with actors who played various werewolves: Alex Meraz, Bronson Pelletier, Chaske Spencer, Kiowa Gordon, and Booboo Stewart.

the movies and their fans. The fans were trashed as “rabid teenage girls” or “bored stay-at-home moms.” As Priscilla Zuni tells *Buzzfeed News*, “Everyone I knew either really loved it or really hated it. It seemed there wasn’t much in between” (Krishna). When *Twilight* actors attended Comic-Con events, male attendees even stood around with banners and signs, declaring that *Twilight* had ruined Comic-Con.

So there seems to be a very clear insider and outsider **community** when it comes to *Twilight*. There are the fans,

and there are those who mocked them . . . which is particularly upsetting to think about when you remember the age disparity here. Many of the fans were teenage girls, and they were not only mocked by their peers, but also by grown adults—sometimes even professional news outlets. Every time I think about *Twilight*, I ask myself, “Why does the world hate teenage girls so much? Why do we judge everything they love?”

There are numerous approaches one could take when looking at the ethics of *Twilight*. For example, we could look at the series itself and the

problematic content within the books and films. When the series was initially released, there were many concerns with the portrayal of Bella and Edward’s relationship as potentially abusive. In recent years, there has also been a greater call for accountability when it comes to Stephenie Meyer’s exploitation of the Quileute Tribe in La Push, Washington, as the treatment of the tribe in the books as well as in the process of filming the movies perpetuates systemic racism and the historical oppression of Indigenous peoples.

This article will look beyond the content of the series, approaching the ethics surrounding the *Twilight* community by looking at the way the texts have been received in society and the way this reception has affected its audience. In particular, I would like to explore the ethical dangers of causing teenaged fans emotional

### **Cultures & Communities, Learning Outcome #8**

The ISU Writing Program has nine primary learning outcomes, and **Cultures & Communities** is Learning Outcome #8. Within this learning outcome, we are prompted to “[c]ompare [our] own experiences in writing (and how that experience has shaped [our] literate activity and writing research identity) with the experiences and products of others in order to understand and explain the ways that writing experience writes itself into the literate activities of diverse individuals and groups of people” (ISU Writing Program).

trauma in the way that their interests are perceived, dismissed, and snubbed by those around them.

If you had asked me a year or two ago about *Twilight*, I probably would have remained at a distance, talking about it more as a cultural moment or a critical text, rather than looking at my own personal experience with the series. If you had told me three months ago that I would be exposing my awkward middle school years to the world? I would have laughed in your face. Before this, I had completely internalized the shame of being a *Twilight* fan.

But I've decided to reclaim that time of my life. I've decided to be proud of middle school Nichol. Because you know what? She was passionate. She was excited. She was part of a community so much bigger than herself. And the Twilight Renaissance has given me the power to reclaim her.

### What the Heck Is a Twilight Renaissance?

Yes, a Twilight Renaissance. It's a real thing, I promise. As CJ Connor writes for *Book Riot*, "It's 2021, yet from the sheer amount of *Twilight* memes shared on my Instagram feed, I could be fooled into thinking it's 2009." This Renaissance seems to stem from two primary events: the release of the book *Midnight Sun* and the addition of the *Twilight* films to Netflix's catalog. Stephenie Meyer released *Midnight Sun*—a version of *Twilight* told from Edward's point of view—in 2020. This book was originally slated for publication years ago, but it was leaked, leading Meyer to pull it before it could be published. In 2021, Netflix also added all the *Twilight* films to their site. These two events have created a revival in interest, in access, and in engagement—especially through memes on social media.

Another factor that we have to address, of course, is the global COVID-19 pandemic. In her article for *Book Riot*, CJ Connor points out,



#### **Ethical Concerns with the Quileute Tribe**

In recent years, there has been significant criticism over the way the *Twilight* franchise handled its relationship with the Quileute Tribe. Stephenie Meyer drew on the history, culture, and legends of the Quileute Tribe while writing the book series, and the films even used the reservation in La Push, Washington for scenes in the series. However, the Quileute Tribe was never compensated for the way that Meyer used them as direct inspiration, despite the success of the series. Although further analysis of the Quileute Tribe in the *Twilight* franchise is beyond the scope of this article, you can check out Screen Rant's comprehensive article for more on the ethics of the Quileute Tribe's involvement with and portrayal in *Twilight* (QR code above).

“The timing also must have influenced how strong of a force the Twilight Renaissance has become. In times of uncertainty, nostalgia can be comforting, and I think many of us were and still are taking comfort in escapist reads.” For many people who were existing fans of *Twilight*, the series still offers that same comfort and brings us back to simpler times. We can fondly remember our younger selves and the enjoyment we derived from the community and the series.

However, it is important to note that it is not just nostalgia and comfort that we have been seeking during the pandemic. In fact, it is community itself that we are searching for. While isolated from loved ones and navigating uneven social terrain, society has turned toward unconventional methods of community building—whether that be Zoom trivia nights, socially distanced outdoor gatherings, or interactions on social media. While cut off from our physical community, we strived to find ways to reconnect with old communities, as well as join new communities . . . which is where, funnily enough, *Twilight* comes into play.

### A Return to Forks for Pre-Existing Fans

For those who were already fans of *Twilight*, the Twilight Renaissance has allowed them to revisit their past selves. In some ways, we are even given the opportunity to interact with and socialize with our younger selves—in the same way that I am engaging with middle school Nichol throughout this article. This ability to “socialize across time” can be tied to the ISU Writing Program’s use of **pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory (P-CHAT)**. Although P-CHAT includes seven primary terms (production, representation, activity, distribution, socialization, reception, and ecology), I’d like to focus on socialization and reception in this article. The Writing Program defines **socialization** as “the interactions of people and institutions as they produce, distribute and use texts. When people engage with texts, they are also (consciously and unconsciously) engaged in the practice of representing and transforming different kinds of social and cultural practices.”

For many fans, *Twilight* helped foster a sense of community. When I would go to the *Twilight* conventions (hosted by Creation Entertainment) as a kid (Figure 2), I would see the same attendees every year. They would exchange contact information and stay in touch in the year between each convention. They called themselves “convention friends.” Although I was too young to fully engage in this practice at the *Twilight* conventions, I went to similar conventions for *The Vampire Diaries* in high school (exposing myself,

yet again . . .), and I was able to bond with a lot of other attendees over our shared interests and passions for media. This shows how a text can bring people together in a way far greater than the text itself.

This discussion of socialization also brings us back to shame. There were many negative reactions to *Twilight* when it was in its prime. For example, there were the reactions of those male Comic-Con attendees, who tried to exclude *Twilight* fans from the Comic-Con space. There were the reactions of parents, who may have tried to limit their children’s exposure to the series because of concerns about its content—such as the love triangle, the sexual component in the later books, and the portrayal of a potentially abusive or toxic relationship. All of these interactions reflect what the Writing Program talks about with socialization: “the practice of representing and transforming different kinds of social and cultural practices.” These naysayers deemed *Twilight* beyond the acceptable parameters of their social and cultural practices. As a result, many *Twilight* fans retreated in on themselves. They hid their interests and their passions because of the way society dismissed them as a group—not only as *Twilight* fans, but more generally, as teenage girls.

In an article for *The Harvard Crimson*, Millie Mae Healy writes, “Beyond the dazzling number of issues with ‘Twilight,’ it is possible not all of the cringe-culture surrounding it was fair. Just like boy bands, K-POP, and YA literature, media with a demographic primarily made up of teenage girls is often unfairly belittled and demeaned in a way that media aimed at boys is not. This modern resurgence has allowed adults to shamelessly re-engage with what they enjoyed as teenagers and look at it through a more evolved lens.” A critical feature of our interpretation of the term “socialization” in this context is the way that we perceive and interact with teens as a result of the texts we associate with them.

This brings us back to the questions I asked earlier: Why does the world hate teenage girls so much? Why do we judge everything they love? This judgment of media made for or taken up by teenage girls has influenced how teenage girls approach future passions and how they interact in the world. And now the Twilight Renaissance is giving these *Twilight* fans the opportunity to proudly re-embrace their inner teenage girl. As Joanna Murphy tells BuzzFeed News, “We’re really just trying to enjoy ourselves . . .



Figure 2: Middle school Nichol with Nikki Reed, who played Rosalie.

### Representation and Conceptualizing Ourselves

When discussing the way shame influenced the teen audience, we can also tie in another P-CHAT term: representation. According to the ISU Writing Program, **representation** involves all the ways we conceptualize and plan a text. Essentially, by shaming teenage girls, society infiltrated their minds and impacted the way they conceptualize and plan their future interactions with the world—which includes the way they conceptualize and plan their own literate activity, their own texts, and their own lives.

because we were too ashamed to do that the first time around” (Krishna). In a twist on the term socialization, the Twilight Renaissance is actually fostering socialization between our present and past selves.

### An Introduction to Forks for New Fans

The Twilight Renaissance is also opening the door for new fans—whether that be the younger generation who missed the initial release or other generations who were around but simply never involved themselves in the discourse. The inclusion of the *Twilight* films on Netflix in particular has created an opportunity for this new audience to

enter the discussion. In pursuit of better understanding this new audience, I interviewed my friend Kathryn. Kathryn, a twenty-something working woman, was heading into middle school when the first *Twilight* film released, but she never watched them because her parents did not allow her to watch anything that involved magic or lore. She shares that she was aware of the hype when she was younger, but didn’t feel a huge drive to watch them herself. She remembers the discussions of the love triangle—Team Edward vs. Team Jacob—but she wasn’t super invested because she had never seen the movies. She was able to follow along with the discourse just by talking about how attractive the actors were. She decided to finally watch the films in 2021, as a twenty-four-year-old, after seeing videos on TikTok and noticing that the films were now available on Netflix (Figure 3). She shares:

**Kathryn:** . . . when I was on TikTok, almost every tenth TikTok I’d watch was about *Twilight* because everyone was watching the movies. And there were all these theory discussions around things that people had missed before, like commentary on things that Kristen [Stewart] said and how her character really developed over time. And I was just really interested in that. And I was like, *Oh, I understand the commentary, but I don’t understand the material they’re talking about, so I really want to watch it.* And then you were also an influence, I knew you had watched them, you’ve been into them, so I was like, *Oh, this is something I could bond with Nichol over because I can finally understand the references.*

**Nichol:** When you finally did watch them, what was your experience?



**Kathryn:** I watched them alone, but I viewed watching them as a comforting thing. I think I started on a Friday afternoon, I finished work early and I just decided that I’m going to take this time to have “me time,” and I’m going to watch *Twilight*. And then I just sat on my couch with my blanket and my tea and Sandy [her dog], and I watched. And it was great. Well, the movie quality wasn’t awesome, but it was a great experience. And I ended up watching as much as I could that weekend. I think I got to *Eclipse*. And then the next week, I tried to pick it up again. So I finished them in like two weeks.

**Nichol:** And what were your thoughts on the series as a twenty-something? Did you notice anything in particular? Were you focusing on anything? Also, did you enjoy it? How did it make you feel, just what was your reaction in general?

**Kathryn:** I think I focused a lot on movie quality. Like I don’t think I was so drawn to the story that I was focusing on specific story parts or plotlines or anything like the script or even the actors. I was just really focused on quality and I think that comes from Jordan [our mutual friend who studied videography in college] because I’ve seen a lot of movies with Jordan, and whenever I have movie discussions with him, he’s all about cinematography, audio design, music, track list, how the actors are, do they really immerse you, do they make you cry, do they make you laugh, all that stuff. So that’s just been where my mind is these days. And so I think that was probably the biggest thing I focused on and that’s probably why I’m not like, “Oh, I love them.” Because their quality didn’t really pick up until later, which makes sense. I have to say, though, I was very impressed with *Breaking Dawn*, like those movies are definitely my favorite parts of the series. Just the jump in funding and quality of acting ability was just so incredibly noticeable. And it was just beautiful, I just loved how it looked. As far as the plot, I thought the love story was one of the weakest things—actually the love triangle, I mean, was one of the weakest things.



Figure 3: A conversation between Nichol and Kathryn about *Twilight*.



Figure 4: Middle school Nichol with Kellan Lutz, who played Emmett.

**Nichol:** So, now that you've finally watched them, have you engaged in any discourse about the series online? You mentioned the TikTok videos that you watched before you watched the movies, have you seen any since then that make more sense now?

**Kathryn:** I don't think I have actually. Not so much about theories and more serious stuff, but I've just seen a lot of people on TikTok do "If I were a Cullen, this is how I would act," or "If I invited the Cullens to my Halloween party, this is each person and how they would act," and I just laugh at those so hard. But I haven't really seen very many videos compared to before I watched them.

**Nichol:** Do you think that's your feed specifically or do you think that's a broader trend?

**Kathryn:** It makes me feel like it's a broader trend but I don't really know. To me it felt like, oh, as soon as it went on Netflix, everyone's flocking to see it, then everyone watched them in the first month. And now it's over, we're moving on with life. That's how it felt.

**Nichol:** Yeah, and I feel like that's pretty accurate. It was there, everyone was super bonded, we were all speaking in *Twilight* lingo for like a month. So we were all in on the joke, we were all insiders, and then it just kind of fizzled out, and we moved on to the next big thing. But, to wrap up, what are your lasting thoughts on the Twilight Renaissance, as a Renaissance woman yourself now?

**Kathryn:** I guess my lasting thoughts are just that it's kind of nice to go back and look at things that we experienced when we were younger, but from a different lens, like from that kind of fresh perspective. There's a lot of things that I think many people didn't experience but were at least aware of happening. So, if they go back and kind of revisit it with the minds of them now, it can be really interesting and I think it could rightly result in really interesting conversations. And so that's probably what I would take away from the Renaissance.

Kathryn's experience seems quite representative of this group who is just now watching the *Twilight* series. They do not have the same nostalgic and emotional connection to the *Twilight* films as prior fans, but they are still able to enjoy different aspects of the movies and participate in the community



discourse. In particular, I'd like to focus on the catalyst for Kathryn's decision to binge the series: TikTok.

## The Power of TikTok

Leading up to the release of the *Twilight* films on Netflix, there was a surge in *Twilight*-related videos on TikTok. Whether this is because of the publication of *Midnight Sun* or a pandemic-driven need for nostalgia, we may never know. But these videos targeted certain demographics—such as twenty-something working women, like Kathryn—and pulled them into the *Twilight* community. However, TikTok played an important role on both ends: bringing people into *Twilight* but also engaging with *Twilight* as a response to the films.

This is where **reception** comes into play. The ISU Writing Program defines reception as “how a text is taken up and used by others . . . [it] is not just who will read a text, but takes into account the ways people might use or repurpose a text (sometimes in ways the author may not have anticipated or intended).” I can tell you right now, I sincerely doubt Stephenie Meyer ever anticipated the way that *Twilight* would be repurposed on TikTok. In her interview, Kathryn mentions a variety of TikTok trends related to *Twilight*, but truly the trends are endless. From cosplayers to memes to theories to behind-the-scenes trivia, people have taken up the text in a wide variety of ways. This represents the nuance with which the audience receives the text: acknowledging its flaws while also enjoying its entertainment value. For example, when *Midnight Sun* was released, many fans made sure to simultaneously promote the Quileute Move to Higher Ground movement, which is working to relocate the Quileute Tribe out of a tsunami zone in order to protect their community and preserve their culture. The audience and fans are not mindlessly reading a text, but engaging with the greater networks, communities, and ethics involved in that text.

The development of the memes on TikTok also reflect the evolution of reception over time. Sabrina—one of the creators behind Twitter's *Twilight* Renaissance account—shares, “Many of the memes we post are from lines in the movies that have become huge jokes within the fandom and the public in general. However, back in the day, as a thirteen-year-old, I never thought much of ‘Bella, where the hell have you been loca?’ as a joke but today, it's the

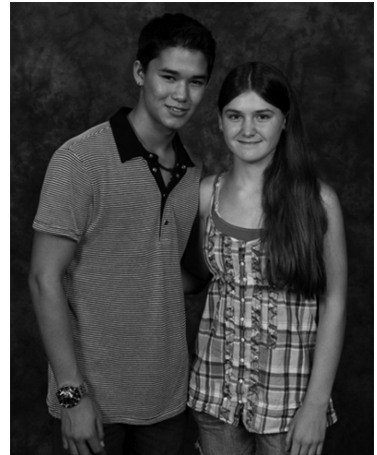


Figure 5: Middle school Nichol with Booboo Stewart, who played Seth.



Figure 6: Middle school Nichol with *Twilight* cosplayers at a convention hosted by Creation Entertainment.

funniest thing ever. I often see people referring to *Twilight* as a comedy and I'm pretty sure if you go into watching the movie with that in mind, you will likely enjoy it more" (Gillespie). She points out that the reception when the films first came out was very different from the reception now, as we perhaps took the films more seriously or did not notice the humor of some of the lines from our romantic tween perspective. I doubt Stephenie Meyer intended us to view *Twilight* as a comedy, like Sabrina suggests, as opposed to a high-stakes immortal romance, but that is nonetheless how many people have received it.

It is social media platforms like TikTok that have created an opportunity to receive and repurpose the text in a wide range of ways, which opens the text up to more audiences, like Kathryn. For example, Vee Elle has cosplayed as Alice Cullen since 2013, but only created a TikTok account in 2019. For *Vice*, Emma Kershaw writes, "Vee's cosplay TikTok—@maryalicebrandon—has grown by 10,000 over the last month, and with just under 150,000 followers, it makes her the largest TikTok creator who posts solely *Twilight*-focused content. She believes . . . that TikTok has exposed the franchise to a younger audience who may have missed its release and popularity the first time round." She cites Vee herself, who thinks that "TikTok has allowed *Twilight* to reach Gen Z who have connected with it in their own way . . . Their interpretation of the Saga is different to what millennials got out of it. New generations can still connect with the story despite how much the world has changed since its release and without that infusion of fresh blood—no pun intended—the fandom would die" (Kershaw).

TikTok has given us the opportunity to foster a sense of community—to reunite the community that existed ten years ago and to invite new members

into the community. To reconnect with our inner teenage girl and embrace nostalgia. To find comfort where we can and reject judgment, while also thinking critically about the texts we're engaging with.

So, to bring us back to my initial question: Why does the world hate teenage girls so much? Why do we judge everything they love? I don't know that I can give you the answer to that. But I'll leave you with the same words I ended my conversation with Kathryn on: "Teen girls, man, teen girls. Love them. Scared of them, but love them. Teen girls are the future." This one's for you, middle school Nichol.

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