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***Women in Online Science Fiction  
Fandoms: Psychological Well-Being***

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**Abstract**

A qualitative research design was used to listen to the experiences of women who engaged in science fiction fandom activities through online social media and how these experiences impacted their psychological well-being. The study targeted a specific population of science fiction fandom users who engaged in social media activities for at least one hour per week and had done so for at least one year. The sample consisted of 12 participants. Thematic analysis was used with the qualitative software program ATLAS.ti to analyze, code, and categorize data obtained via the transcripts. Five themes appeared from the data: nonjudgmental fandom culture, positive impact on personal relationships, mental health-related experiences, fandom as coping, and impact of negative experiences. Results showed that women who engaged in fandom activity were drawn to those communities due to the nonjudgmental nature of that fandom culture and the relationships that they formed. All participants felt their participation positively affected their psychological well-being and actively used it as an emotional coping skill. Future research could focus on a quantitative study to better understand how women utilize science fiction fandom for social interaction and coping. This insight may aid in generalizability to the broader comprehension of fandom engagement's perceived effect on psychological well-being. Additionally, looking at computer-mediated versus face-to-face communication to include a third category combining the methods may benefit counselors in better understanding the world of their clients.

Communities of interest have become a staple in today's modern world, including religions, sports, neighborhoods, and book clubs. The introduction of the internet, and of social media, has enhanced these communities, giving rise to virtual societies with the shared interest of celebrities, movies, and television shows, as these groups can now easily integrate fans from all over the world (Booth & Kelly, 2013; Bury, 2016). Counselors and counselor educators need to understand how

these communities may influence the lives of clients who participate.

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## Background of the Study

Research looking at the impact of involvement with various communities of interest on overall emotional health has been described and analyzed in the literature. Fandoms are a subculture of people who engage in and feel connected to a community that surrounds a passion for a common interest in an aspect or specific piece of popular culture (Obst et al., 2002; Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). Wann (2006) and Wann and Weaver (2009) explored sports fandoms and found a causal connection between identification with a specific athletic organization and social and psychological well-being. Pringle (2004) found that men identifying as being part of a soccer fandom reported feeling a sense of belonging, a cathartic release of tension, and a lift in mood. Bizman and Yinon (2002) also found a correlation between team loss and decreased mood in individuals deeply invested in that fandom, as well as a reduction in outlook regarding their own abilities and future. Additional studies have indicated that participation in sports related fandoms may also contribute to lower suicide rates (Andriessen & Krysinaka, 2009). Links between certain music fandoms and higher suicide rates and general acceptance of suicidal behaviors have also been discovered (Stack, 2000, 2002). Research on celebrity fandoms showed how Twitter involvement within the Michael Jackson and David Bowie fandoms helped fans better cope with their grief after the death of the artists (Sanderson & Cheong, 2010; Van den Bulck & Larsson, 2017).

## Science Fiction Fandom and Well-Being

Research looking at science fiction fanship has focused on fandoms as a source of identity and community. Researchers studying the *Harry Potter*, *Supernatural*, and *Star Trek* fandoms have found that many people have turned to these fandoms for a sense of self and belonging as well as moral guidance (Alderton, 2014; Felschow, 2010; Jindra, 1994). Further studies have identified that individuals that participate in science fiction fandoms may feel a strong connection with their chosen fandom, and feel more connected to other fans, even over long distances, than they do to their geographic communities (Chadborn et al., 2018; Obst et al., 2002). However, evidence also suggests that the potential for addiction lies in both fandom activity and social media use, leading to the possibility of both protective and risk factors in the behavior (Andreassen, 2015).

## Science Fiction Fandom and Stigma

Of all fandom genres, science fiction fandom appears to have the highest levels of stigma attached. The notion that science fiction fans are nerds, geeks, and that they have limited social skills has been pervasive throughout decades, dating back to the early 1960s with original *Star Trek* fans (Cohen et al., 2017; Cusack et al., 2003; De Kloet & Kuipers, 2007). Research has indicated that this may be changing, as science fiction fandom becomes more mainstream, helped along in large part by extremely popular science fiction/fantasy television shows such as *Game of Thrones*, and blockbuster super

hero movies such as *The Avengers* (Bury, 2016; Busse, 2015; McCain et al., 2015). However, for many individuals who are part of the science fiction fandom community, a majority of their time as a fan has had a negative stigma attached, especially for women (Cohen et al., 2017). When stigma is attached to fandom, it can hinder the overall positive effects of fandom identification, making this an important issue to note (Herrmann, 2008).

Analyzing these forms of connection may help researchers further our comprehension of relationships and culture, as well as giving us a better grasp of prospective links between group participation and emotional health. Deciphering the stigmas associated with this style of community may also lead to a deeper cognizance of the uses of group or fandom involvement as a potential coping skill or addiction, which could have further implications for clinical practice.

### **Research Design**

All steps in the current study were approved by Capella University's Institutional Review Board's ethical principles. No harm was caused in an effort to better understand the experiences of adult women who engage in online science fiction fandom activity, and how those experiences have impacted their psychological well-being. Permissions were gained from social media account administrators before posting recruitment requests to any online communities. Informed consent outlined all rights and responsibilities of both the

researcher and the participant. Goals and topics were identified, and participants had the ability to leave at any time. The documents were written at the 8th grade level to ensure understanding and was discussed both textually and orally with the participants prior to data collection. Confidentiality was of critical importance throughout the study as some of the interview questions asked about psychological well-being, which could have triggered responses about deeply personal experiences. Participants were assigned a number for identification purposes, rather than using given names, and encryption was employed to store data securely. Technology used to conduct the interviews conformed to HIPAA standards. However, because technology has security and shortcomings, informed consent included a discussion of these possible limitations of confidentiality to ensure transparency with participants (American Counseling Association, 2014). The researcher was able to complete 12 interviews, yielding a wide variety of experiences, each with rich, detailed information with which to gain a better understanding of the studied phenomenon.

### **Participants**

Recruitment for this study was done using purposive sampling (Creswell, 2013). Participants were recruited through Facebook and Twitter. The first 12 individuals who met criteria, returned the signed informed consent, and attended the scheduled interview were the ultimate study participants. Participants ranged in age from 19-54, and were from five different

countries, including the United States, Mexico, Poland, England, and Canada. All had some college education, with the highest level being a completed master's degree. Participants were all self-identified adult women who engaged in science fiction fandom activities through social media for at least one hour per week and had done so for at least one year. Fandom activity through social media was described as engaging with other individuals through either Facebook or Twitter. All 12 participants accessed fandoms through Facebook, and 11 also used Twitter. Eleven participants identified as being part of the *Supernatural* fandom, 7 were part of the *Doctor Who* fandom, 5 were part of the *Marvel/DC* fandom, and 4 were part of the *Star Wars* fandom. Once data saturation was achieved participant recruitment was stopped at 12 interviews.

### **Researcher**

The lead author and researcher was the primary instrument utilized within the study. The researcher was the sole person to interact with participants, and conducted all interviews, as well as completing all transcription and analysis of the data. Throughout the interviews, the researcher asked the interview questions which had been chosen with help from an academic advisor. The researcher asked probing and clarifying questions, as needed, to ensure the interviews yielded rich and detailed information. The researcher gained these skills through multiple years working as a licensed clinical counselor, working with mandated youth and adult clients.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection was done through semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted through an online video chat application. At the beginning of each interview, informed consent was reviewed, including all key aspects of the document. All participants were asked if they had questions about informed consent, and none did. Participants were asked to give spoken confirmation of their willingness to participate in the study before the interview began, which all agreed to. After informed consent was confirmed, the interview questions were asked, with clarifying follow up questions being asked as necessary. Twelve interviews were conducted until saturation was obtained. Saturation was reached when no additional data or themes arose from the analysis (Guest et al., 2006). Interviews typically lasted one hour.

### **Data Analysis**

To aid in analyzing the collected data, a thematic content analysis was utilized. This method is often used within qualitative research to help the researcher with identification and analysis of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All phases of this approach were followed as instructed, including transcription and review of all interviews, initial identification of codes, refining of themes, definition and naming of themes, and finally producing a report. To become familiarized with the data, transcription of each interview was done by the researcher. The transcripts were read and

reread, during which initial thoughts were documented, and emerging topics and ideas within the data were noted. Initial codes were identified and then tweaked and refined upon further examination of the transcripts. Once codes were finalized, they were used to detect themes which fully captured the essence of the interviews. Thematic mapping was used to help the researcher clearly understand and define the most essential components of the participants' experiences.

Throughout the data collection and analysis process, the methods of phenomenological reduction and bracketing were employed (Birks et al., 2008; Cope, 2014; Hycner, 1999). This was done through a combination of techniques. While reading through the interviews, the researcher kept a reflexive journal to help process the data, and identify any biases present within the interpretation of others' lived experiences. This also allowed for reflection on the researcher's own experiences, so that they could then be disregarded as much as possible through the process of analysis. Additionally, the researcher consulted with colleagues frequently throughout data collection and analysis to process thoughts and feelings surrounding the data, the researcher's bias, and the true essence of the data.

### **Presentation of Data and Results of the Analysis**

In applying thematic analysis to the collected data, five themes emerged. These themes are identified and discussed here,

using the words of the participants themselves when appropriate to fully illustrate the essence of each theme. Special consideration was given to hearing the voices of the participants through the perspective of social information processing and social identity theories, and with the understanding that this study sought to discover what the experiences of these women were within online science fiction fandom, and also how these experiences may affect their psychological well-being.

### **Theme 1: Nonjudgmental Fandom Culture**

Every single participant interviewed stated that they felt that their participation within fandom was almost entirely positive, which was due in large part to the supportive and nonjudgmental ethos of the science fiction community. It was also repeatedly noted that this feature of the culture was not just present online, but was also experienced at conventions, meet ups, and other activities that take place outside of social media.

Fandom being nonjudgmental seemed to be important to participants for a number of reasons. First, many of the women within the science fiction community stated that they had dealt with stigma as a result of their interests, their gender, or a combination of both. Participants frequently described feeling alone as children, with no one else around them (or no other girls around them) that enjoyed what they did. There was a pervasive need to hide their interests, and to dampen their enjoyment and even their

personalities for the comfort of those around them, which led to many feelings of isolation and abnormality. Finding communities of other women who enjoyed what they did was in many ways healing, but the added element of having the traits that used to make them feel weird now be celebrated seemed to lead to profound positive changes in identity and overall confidence for these women. Participant 2 described this open nature in the *Doctor Who* fandom as:

It's also about promoting the weirdness and being yourself. Um, and basically all of the friends that I do like, that's the ethic of it. And especially when I work with people with disabilities, and I have my whole life and now I have two [family members] with autism, it's, to see that type of fandom completely embrace people, regardless of what's going on, that's what makes it really positive.

Participant 4 further illustrates the idea that online science fiction fandom is a community where being yourself is encouraged:

The people I've met within these fandoms, when I come face to face with them if I do at conventions, they always tend to be who they are. And I think that, because of the community that's cultivated online, it really allows you to be who you are.

Participant 9 described the overall positive nature of science fiction fandom, and the depth of connections it can lead to:

And along the way, through doing that and going to events, I met some great people, and they were at my wedding, they were wanting to meet the [baby], so it's a bit like having a family of awesome people that will be there whatever happens.

The community is also described by many participants as a place where people help and support each other consistently, which also contributes to the positive nature of interactions and experiences. As an author of fan fiction, participant 7 described her feelings about the tone of the community towards its members:

The fandoms are very supportive. And they just... maybe I'm just very very lucky, but I've noticed they tend to be supportive and even just like... on fanfiction.net or AO3 just like, reading back through comments and stuff that I've received, it's wholly positive and very celebratory in that sense, just like... here you are fandom, you're awesome. And things like that, and it does tend to be quite, you know, a celebratory atmosphere. It's quite loving.

Further highlighting the influence the lead actors have had on the experiences of the participants with the fandom, six participants referenced the Always Keep Fighting campaign, which was a t-shirt campaign launched by Jared Padalecki to raise awareness about mental health issues, due to his own struggles with depression. Three participants referenced Misha Collins' Random Acts organization, which hosts a

yearly scavenger hunt aimed at encouraging random acts of kindness in creative ways. One participant also referenced a crisis hotline the actors had set up for fans, as well as a foundation aimed at helping fans afford to go to conventions. Each of these organizations was mentioned by participants as being meaningful to their positive experiences within the Supernatural fandom community. Participant 5 described the actor's influence on the fandom by saying, "I love how, they... the actors make it a family. Like, they fully embrace us and make us part of it." Participant 12 summed up her feelings on the entire Supernatural fandom as, "I find it... I find it quite... it's a pretty easy fandom. There's a lot of warm fuzziness that goes on."

## **Theme 2: Positive Impact on Personal Relationships**

The positive effects of relationships within fandom were brought up by each participant in some way. In general terms, each participant identified fandom as being a way to connect with other people, developing, rekindling, deepening, and maintaining relationships through online social media that have been originally formed both through online and face-to-face interactions. These relationships were meaningful in some way to each participant, but were especially momentous for five participants who indicated having various levels of anxiety which typically made it harder for them to have their social needs met. Online science fiction fandom gave them a way to interact with other people in a positive and comfortable way.

Participant 8 discussed how online science fiction fandom has given her tools to connect with other people which has traditionally been difficult for her:

To me, I feel like the positive of being part of a fandom... Like you'll meet somebody and just automatically have so much in common with them, which is something I've kind of struggled with. Because I don't make friends. I just... especially here. I don't have friends.

She went on to discuss the primary support system she now has due to fandom:

I have two friends I talk to all the time. One's in [large Southern city], one's in [a different large Southern city]. And it's basically like our little support group. We'll talk about fandom stuff, and just like stuff that's going on in our lives.

She stated that she met these women in person years ago as casual acquaintances through different activities, and stayed in distant contact with them through social media. Her relationship with one was rekindled as, "she started posting *Doctor Who* stuff, and I started commenting and I'm like, well, you know, all this stuff... so we ended up becoming friends again I guess." The second friend:

She saw me posting all these *Doctor Who* things, and I got her into it. So she's all about *Doctor Who* now, and



when she needed a hug one time, I sent her the exploding TARDIS blanket. This was just like a couple months ago. Yeah. And I'm trying to get her into *Supernatural* right now, but she's busy with her kids.

Participant 4 shared a similar feeling about science fiction fandom being a significant part of her support system, and a way to connect with others despite social anxiety:

I find that I like meeting people online through these fandoms. They all sort of end up feeling the same way, so you have that ability to relate to each other, you know, when you have social anxiety, but hey I want to talk to you, but it's weird to be in the same space, it gives you that common ground... So yeah, some of the best friends I have now I've met through fandoms online or in person.

Participant 10 shared similar feelings about relationships she built through online science fiction fandom: "These are like my best friends in the world. It was so much fun."

Participant 5 has a very different view of relationships formed through online science fiction fandom. She stated:

Well, it's weird because... you get to know these people, but you don't really know them. And you think you're like best friends, but you really only have this one thing in

common. But I don't... I don't feel that I've... well, I guess I have made some friends from there that have, like... I like to keep them separate. Like on my Facebook, I'm friends with, like I have my friends in the group, but then on my friends on my actual profile, I don't have those friends there. But there are some that have come over!

Despite feeling detached from most online friends she has formed through social media, Participant 5 went on to talk about how online science fiction fandom helped her stay connected with friends she has made through more traditional means, that she cannot see often:

I have another friend who is mostly house bound like I am, and she's a huge fan. And so we always send each other links when there are cons nearby. Like there was one in Pennsylvania I think, and she was like, oh we should go! And so we were like, we're going to go! We know we're not going to go. Because we're too afraid to step out our front door! So it's kind of nice to have, because we can only go so far in this fandom with our problems. So, it's nice to know I'm not the only one not being able to make it to a con. So.

Participant 1 shared a similar way in which fandom helped her form relationships:

I don't really have a lot of, I'm going to call them organic relationships, where it's like, hey, we bump into each other at a party, or we're introduced through a mutual friend and we, you know, talk about things and we talk about everything and life. That's not how my friendships run. I meet somebody because of a specific thing. We bond over that specific thing. And from that point, that's where our relationship grows. It grows around that specific thing... it's kind of like a spiral, with fandom being the point, and life radiating out around it.

Participant 9 also spoke of lifelong relationships she has formed through fandom:

I probably speak to them almost as much as I do my family, some of them. So that, there's probably a core of oh, about 20 people? That I'm really close to that I've probably known for about 10 years now. Some of them 10 years, some of them it's probably five. Some of them it's about 10 years now. Because that's around when Torchwood started and I started doing the fandom stuff, so I've got a group that I've known longer through my partner and his fandom. It's quite... it's good. It's nice that we've got the technology now that we can interact on a daily basis.

These are people that, if something happens, they'd take you in and look after you. If that makes sense. If your relationship broke down, or your partner died, if your house was flooded, someone would help... It's a very strong bond that we seemed to have achieved. I'm not quite sure how we managed it, but it's a pretty awesome friendship. And I don't really have that with anyone that's local to me, other than the people that are part of this group. Which is lovely, really. Yeah. So there is a lot of real positive that comes out of fandom, because you can make friends like this and friends for life, and I doubt if I'll ever lose touch with these people, unless an apocalypse happens. [laughs]

Participant 3 described a purely online relationship she has maintained with another individual that she met on Twitter, and the impact of that relationship on her life:

Uh, well, there's like one... there's this one girl, we actually started talking because we have a mutual favorite singer, but we found out that we're both into *Lord of the Rings* and *Doctor Who*. And like, she's not even into *Supernatural* but she knows about it because you're going to find out about it if you're into all that. So we just started talking and stuff, but then I found out, um, personally we share, like, the same values and we're the same religion. And I just found like, she was just this totally wise, mature girl that you could just tell anything literally

anything about and she'll just give this wise answer and just always be there for you. And like, I see her as like my big sister. I can tell her like, anything.

For a majority of participants, online social media relationships did not exist only online. For 11 of the 12 participants, science fiction conventions or events were discussed as being part of their fandom experiences, even if they were not interested or able to physically attend any of them. Eight of 12 participants stated that they had been to a convention or event, and that they either met people there that they had existing relationships with through social media, or they met people there for the first time that they continued to build and maintain relationships with through social media going forward.

Participant 12, who suffers from anxiety, discussed her experience with meeting a new friend at a convention she attended:

And, at the convention I met someone who, it was a really really lovely coincidence. She's about my age, and we're very similar, and she lives in [my city]. Yeah. Of course I met people from all over the world, but this person.. so now we've been... we watch episodes together, and are planning to go to a convention next year together. And that's brought it all... actually have someone to share the enthusiasm with. As well as someone else, which

again is a completely unique event in my life.

Participant 11 described how interacting with the online science fiction fandom community encouraged her to attend a convention for the first time:

I didn't... I would've never... I knew there were conventions out there, but I never even thought about going to one before until I found how many people were out there, you know, that felt just like I did and everything. And then after I saw, you know, all of that and talked to some of the people online, I was like, that was when I decided I had to go. I'm like 49 years old, never been to a convention in my life, and finally because of becoming a part of the fandom, decided yep, I gotta go. [laughs]

At the convention, she met several other fans, and utilized social media to strengthen and maintain those relationships, which went on to become deep, meaningful friendships:

Well, there were two girls that I met at my very first convention in [Southern city]. And then we actually both went for the next two years. We keep in touch on Facebook. One lives in [Southern state], that's why she went to the [Southern city] one because that was closest to her. And we keep in touch on Facebook.

The girls that I met at the conventions, that's basically true friendship. We talk about lives and share pictures of our kids and me my grandkids and things. You know, all of that.

Participant 2 described how science fiction fandom, and conventions specifically, help her form new relationships with individuals she has met through online fandom, while strengthening relationships made through more conventional means:

At the *Supernatural* [conventions], yes, I'm usually meeting up with people who I meet through social media. Um, and then, uh, sometimes at the other conventions if I know people from social media, I'll meet up with them. That happened in [Eastern city], actually, I met a few people from social media. But I also met my best friend there, we were going to go together, so. She lives in [a different city], so we met in [Eastern city].

Participant 7 described how online science fiction fandom also helps her stay in touch and interact with her family who does not live nearby:

And it was really nice, because my sister lives in [a large English city] so I don't see her that often so we just went to message on Facebook as well, just like sharing gifs of people's faces just like, OMG

reactions! TV episodes of *Sherlock*... *Sherlock* was the really big one.

Participant 6 described the relationships she has formed through online science fiction fandom, and how her involvement with the fandom community is intrinsic to her social life.

I have also really best friends from other areas of my life which are in fandom with me. So, it's, for me, it's really difficult to put this border on who are fandom friends and who are other friends, which also are in fandom, and who are the fandom friends who are not only in fandom anymore, and who are also my personal friends, which kind of blurred.

But... we still, like, we have this anecdote when somebody, when we have some kind of meet up in the town, somebody asks us where are you from. The answer is always "you know, we are from the Internet."

### **Theme 3: Mental Health Related Experiences**

Mental health was a topic discussed by each participant in some way. Ten out of 12 participants stated that they had experienced mental health issues themselves. Of the two participants who did not identify as having a history with mental health issues, one specifically stated she felt she had not experienced mental health problems due to her involvement with

fandom (Participant 11), and the other was a mental health professional (Participant 6, “psychologist”). Diagnoses reported by participants included Major Depressive Disorder (1), social anxiety (2), agoraphobia (1), Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (2), and Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) (1), as well as general reports of depression (7), anxiety (1), and eating disorders (1).

Four participants also reported a history of suicidal ideation. Participant 1 stated that she was “close to a suicide attempt,” but that this was many years ago, when she was a teenager. Participant 3, who also struggled with depression somewhat recently, reported that, “honestly thank God... I really feel like God gave me fandoms and a lot of times I kind of feel like I’m still alive in a way because of all of them.”

Participant 5 had experienced mental health issues since her adolescent years, including suicidal ideation, requiring her to actively seek purpose within her life. She shared that her feelings about the Always Keep Fighting campaign by Jared Padalecki were that, “I feel it. I live it.” She further shared that she had an Always Keep Fighting t-shirt, and, “I wear it on my worst days. I do. And I feel it gives me strength. To know I’m not the only one. I’m not the only one out there.”

Participant 2 shared her experiences with PTSD and suicidal ideation, while being part of the *Supernatural* fandom:

Yeah. Because I’m a... I have PTSD from some crap, and it, there’s times when I just don’t want to be around anymore, and ya know, to have somebody especially like Jared Padalecki telling you we’re here for you, and then just the show in general, you know, you get a, you know, it’s all about loving your family, whether that’s blood or not, and caring for one another and being there for one another so it really helps pull my mind out of it.

Participant 11, while not having a history of mental illness or suicidal ideation, did share her experience with struggling to continue with lifesaving medical treatment for psychological reasons:

But after a couple of years of being on dialysis I got to the point to where I couldn’t hardly sit in the chair anymore. It was like I was crawling out of my skin. I wanted to get up. And I started not wanting to go in for treatments because of god, do I have to go through this again? And, you know, for half way through the treatment thinking, oh, do I really want to stay here for the whole thing? I could make them get me off and I don’t have to, you know? And so I know this is going to sound silly but *Supernatural* actually saved me with that.

Another way in which mental health was part of the positive experiences of several participants was noting the mental

health issues of others within the fandom. Participant 3 talks about how her experiences listening to others within fandom have changed her views on mental health:

But then you know, there's a lot of awareness online over mental health and stuff. So, I started getting into like, oh that makes sense and personally, also really believe like at school when they talk to you about anorexia and bulimia and drugs, you kind of think that must happen somewhere, but it doesn't really happen. I don't see it. And then I went online and I noticed, since it's just like, such a place where you can express yourself openly and with no compromise. You can be anonymous out there, like you see all these people express themselves openly, and you're just like, holy crap that happens a lot. And... they need help.

Participant 12 shared how seeing other fans share their stories about their struggles with mental health has positively affected her:

And then, some, you know, I was already involved, but when Jared came out with his sort of Always Keep Fighting mental health focused campaign, that was of course very very personal to me. Discussions that came up around that, and the discussions fans were having around that, and fans working through issues sort of overcoming anxiety and self-

esteem issues to go to conventions, and to present themselves. People describe struggles they have with body image in terms of being photographed with actors from the show. People, again, openly discussing how their interactions with the show's affected their mental health issues. And then just Jared being so courageous and public about his own struggles has been really, uh, a lot of that has been quite inspirational for me.

Participant 7 shared a similar experience, also incorporating the shows themselves, and how the shows, the actors, and the fandom worked together to influence her:

In the fandoms you do advocate like positive mental health, and they do, you know you get characters that a lot of these shows and films who struggle and they suffer and they're often quite open about it. There's one thing I started watching recently which was *Daredevil*, and I did see a lovely post online which was actually discussing the representation of men crying and friendship. And that, you know, that makes me feel better about myself. And I guess *Supernatural* guys do the Always Keep Fighting charity, they're very open about mental health. They're very open about it's okay to struggle, even if you're super famous and super happy, and appear to be super

happy, you know, you can have mental health issues.

Several other participants shared their own experiences with their own mental health, and how it related to initially becoming involved in fandom. Participant 10 shared that she found fandom due to needing distraction from her depression after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001: “It was right after September 11. The whole country was depressed. I was living by myself, and I was depressed. So I fired up AOL, and went into a chat room that said *Star Trek*”. Participant 8 stated that her involvement began during a time where she was unable to leave the house and was managing depression and anxiety as a result, and science fiction shows and fandom gave her access to positive and hopeful messages, and to the outside world. When she had nothing else to do, it was “something to encourage me to get out of bed.” Participant 9 shared that she got involved in fandom as her husband was dealing with mental health issues, which emotionally affected her:

The point at which I started watching Torchwood, and getting into the fandom, my partner had a nervous breakdown, which was not good. So, at the time, I was using it as my escapism, so I’d get 45 minutes of escapism and then I felt better able to deal with what was going on with him.

The *Supernatural* fandom was most frequently associated with positive mental health related experiences, primarily due to

the Always Keep Fighting campaign, which made mental health a focus of the fandom. As Participant 4 shared, in the *Supernatural* fandom “there is a very strong idea of supporting each other... knowing that [Jared Padalecki]’s struggling... and being able to be comfortable with each other, because we’re all struggling.” However, mental health was not only discussed within the context of the *Supernatural* fandom, as multiple participants stated that online science fiction fandom culture overall appeared open to talking about mental health, and was less likely to embrace any kind of stigmas associated with mental illness.

#### **Theme 4: Fandom as Coping**

All 12 participants in the study identified online science fiction fandom as positively affecting their overall psychological well-being. While this was a universal message from all participants, the ways in which they utilized fandom as an effective coping strategy varied widely.

**Subtheme 1: Escapism.** One of the most consistent ways that participants stated that fandom helped them effectively cope with emotional difficulty was through escapism and distraction from issues. While some participants did acknowledge that there is a balance between fandom activities and responsibilities that must be managed for this to remain a useful tool, most stated that they found the distraction of fandom life to be almost entirely positive for their overall psychological well-being. Participant 2 shared that due to having a very stressful

job, she turned to online science fiction fandom for a positive outlet and an escape from reality, which for her includes watching science fiction shows, talking to other fans, and collecting and displaying fandom merchandise. Participant 12 discussed how online fandom activity helped her with emotional regulation:

It is a welcome and needed distraction. It just takes me out of myself and my own head space in a way that I find really beneficial. And whether that's spending time perusing my Twitter account, or watching YouTube videos like fan videos, or videos of conventions, or reading fan fiction, that's all very helpful in kind of emotional regulation or distraction from emotionally difficult experiences or relaxation or something to sort of try to get my mind off of difficult thoughts or difficult emotions. Self-soothing in a sense. Being able to distract away from a lot of anxiety. That's been helpful.

Participant 9 shares how she feels fandom activity works as a therapeutic tool for her:

I think there probably is a lot to be said for using your fandom and your geekery to help you deal with mental health difficulties, because that's one of the things that they teach you quite early on in [cognitive behavioral therapy] is that it's important to have your own outlets.

And this is a really good, and a really accessible outlet that you can get to, and a big distraction to help you come to term with any difficulties that you have. And if you have difficulties with certain things, it can give you tools as well.

**Subtheme 2: Not alone.** Another frequently cited way that online science fiction fandom worked as an effective coping strategy was through helping participants feel like they were not alone, even if they were not physically proximate to other people. Participant 7 shared that even though she does not verbally interact with other fans frequently, being able to read and relate to other people is still helpful for her:

I guess I just find it very supportive and even if like, on my fan pages, even if I don't interact necessarily, or like talk to people, I'm always liking comments or liking posts and it's nice to see how other people react, because a lot of the time somebody, if people react positively, that's usually something I'd react positively too. If we all react the same, it's nice to know that people feel the same as me. That I don't feel alone.

Or if I'm having watched an episode and it's traumatic, or if I'm dealing with something that's kind of traumatic, fandom seems to be fairly open about mental health issues about like struggling and or like



having bad days, it's you know fandom is very open about that. It's nice to know that fans go through that as well.

Participant 5, who struggled with agoraphobia, explained her experiences with how online fandom activities have helped her cope:

I can come on any time, day or night, and find someone there. And we can always talk about *Supernatural*. So if I'm up late because I'm in pain from my illness, or if I'm stuck at home because of my agoraphobia and I'm lonely, I can always reach out and find someone. So, I think that helps. It helps me to not feel alone or be too lonely.

Participant 11 described how fandom influenced her when she was housebound during her own physical illness, and caring for her elderly mother:

For years I was kind of stuck here in the house with just me and Mom. I mean, most friends kind of faded into the woodwork... And I couldn't leave Mom, you know... I couldn't go out with friends. I couldn't do anything. But I could talk to people online. I mean, it would be real easy to get lonely or depressed or have a lot of psychological issues, you know, being stuck in that situation. But being able to reach out to people online, you know, and talk to them about Mom and about life and about

just you know, the show even, even just sitting down and having a conversation about the show every week after the show went off the air, you know, I mean, that interaction with other people, it just, it kept me from getting depressed or getting down or you know, feeling sorry for myself or my situation. I never did. They always say in dialysis, they said you have such a good outlook, and I said I don't know. I never really understood why, I never even thought about it, until I read some things about fandoms and stuff, and I thought, you know what, I'll bet that probably is one of the reasons why I don't have these issues, because I do have people to talk to outside of the house. Because of that. You know?

### **Subtheme 3: People like me.**

Participants frequently reported that science fiction fandom allowed them to find other individuals like them, helping them cope with lifelong struggles surrounding feeling isolated and different than other people in their lives, and feeling more positive and comfortable with their own identities. Participant 1 described how each fandom built upon another to help her feel better about who she was, and feel a sense of community with others like her:

*Firefly* was really the one that was like, hey being geeky is kind of cool. And I feel special because I'm quirky and weird and this show is quirky and weird and the people who like it are quirky and weird. There's

people like me, and it's okay to be me. And then *Doctor Who* just solidified that, and *Supernatural* was like, okay these people are quirky and weird, but also cool and sexy, so it's okay to be quirky and weird, but cool and sexy too at the same time.

Participant 4's experience in finding fandom helped her become more comfortable in her own beliefs:

Getting to the community, getting to know a group of people that felt the same way, made me not feel so lonely in the idea there are other people who believe these things. I just was sheltered, I haven't been around enough people. It gave me that sense of, it's okay to believe this and share it with other people. Because not everybody is going to think you're a crackpot. There's going to be... your Dana Scully is out there somewhere. Your person who's going to believe you and go on these ghost hunts with you. They're out there. So it helped me find them. Find the other weirdos.

**Subtheme 4: Creative fandom activities.** Embedded in online science fiction fandom culture are additional creative fandom activities, such as reading and writing of fan fiction, blogging, analysis of television and film, fan made art and videos, role-playing as fictional characters, and cosplay (making and wearing costumes of fictional characters). Three participants reported that they write fan fiction, and

described it as helping them to process and cope with challenging emotions. Participant 3 described how writing fan fiction helped her express and manage her experiences:

You find all these new methods of creativity that you didn't even know you had inside of you. And then that's just the way to express yourself and to deal with things and stuff. Personally I'm writing a fan fiction right now. And I notice, even though it wasn't my original purpose, when I'm writing, I'm like, expressing putting a whole bunch of things that I've lived, like taking them out and taking that on paper and dealing with it there. And I'm like, this is just really good for me!

Participant 7 experienced writing fan fiction as both an emotional outlet, and also a way to increase self-esteem:

And yeah, it's an outlet definitely. Like, a spiritual outlet. Because it's... I think sometimes I use it as a little boost, like when I post a chapter, I'll hopefully get to watch the count go up on people who have read my story, and I'll get follows or favorites or uh, things it's just the same as getting likes on Facebook. I guess it's the same reason people post selfies on Facebook. People want the like. They want the follow. And that's in fan fiction too. My own ego. [laughs]

Beyond those that write fan fiction, three additional participants stated that they read fan fiction regularly, and that this has also helped with coping and self-reflection. Participant 12 described reading fan fiction as a way that she has learned more about her own emotions:

Because, before the first type of fan fiction, and still my favorite really, on a purely emotional level, is uh, kind of the hurt/comfort genre. And I hadn't really known there was a name for it. For that. But it had actually been something that I'd been drawn to for a very long time... And I hadn't even realized that myself. That that resonated... resonates with me really deeply. And I think it's because it's a dynamic that I have largely never had in my life? And um, and it doesn't... it has far less to do with what was offered than what I was able to accept, in terms of, you know, asking and receiving comfort in situations. And so somehow, reading about it, where that dynamic is so grandly fulfilled, even in a really kind of exaggerated way, that um, that's somehow very moving for me.

Participant 6 expressed that she enjoys writing about "the psychology of pop culture," and that this has led her to new friendships within fandom, both online and off, which she credits as positively influencing her overall psychological well-being. Participant 10 shared that she has engaged in multiple types of creative fandom activities throughout her

involvement in online science fiction fandom, and that these activities have shaped and directed the course of her life. She participated in an online text based role-playing game based on a science fiction television show many years ago, due to feeling depressed and needing a positive outlet. This led to her finding a group that she gamed with for almost a decade, and the formation of a community of friends that she still keeps in contact with today. Her role-playing also led to her creating backstories for characters, which turned into fan fiction writing, and ultimately publishing novels. She states that she feels that, "My healthy outlet is writing. When I feel [pissed off], I don't go on and attack people. I attack the page."

**Subtheme 5: Connection with control.** As most participants reported experiencing significant anxiety in some way, finding ways in which they can engage with other people while still feeling safe is something many of them reported as being a meaningful part of fandom for them. For Participant 5, who suffered from agoraphobia, online fandom activities gave her a way to get her social needs met, while still feeling physically safe:

I think on the days that I do get to have discussions, I'm more, it does satisfy that need to communicate and I don't know, reach out? Because I'm a very... solitary person anyway, so it's hard to... I was bullied real bad when I was little. So I never really felt safe around people. And then I was assaulted when I was

older, so... it's hard for me to be around people. So I think the Internet is less scary to me because they can't get to me.

I like it because you can go at your own speed, your own level, you don't have to give too much if you don't want to... like, it's all on you how far you want to go. So that I think is the most important thing of fandom.

Participant 8 shared how her life changed when she discovered fandom, as she was in a situation where several issues, including anxiety, rendered her unable to leave the house:

So I discovered this, and it was like a whole new world opened up. And I was like, I don't have to be alone! Even though I was still physically alone, you know? So um, I think that was the biggest impact for me. Was just the sense of community without actually having a community.

### **Theme 5: Impact of Negative Experiences**

While the vast majority of reported experiences with online science fiction fandom involvement were positive, there were some issues that participants reported were negative. The most common negative experience shared was that of in-fighting of fans within the fandoms, typically either about favorite fictional characters within the television shows, or through so called "ship wars," which are arguments over who fans believe fictional characters should be in

romantic relationships with. Participant 9 described this from her experience:

I'll find that I come across more hostility now because people out there have very firm beliefs. Like, in *Supernatural* there's people into Destiel or the Wincest, and it's mainly pairings in *Supernatural*. With *Doctor Who*, it's about the Doctor, whereas with *Supernatural* it's about who they think's shagging who, when in reality no one's doing any shagging.

Beyond the standard in-fighting between fans, participants also describe the existence of trolls, who are people that are purposefully negative to try to get an emotional reaction from others, or other fans who interact in a significantly rude way. While several participants discussed having some direct experiences with trolls or rude fans, none of them described having directly negative interactions within the science fiction fandom community. All significantly negative interactions experienced by participants online were in non-science-fiction fandom communities, such as *Disney* (Participant 1), music fandom (Participant 3), or other genres of television fandoms (Participant 4).

A final negative element experienced by many participants stemmed from the stigma experienced due to being a member of the online science fiction community. Several participants shared experiences related to keeping their interests in "geeky" activities secret during their childhoods, as

they did not know anyone else who shared their interest. Currently, two participants specifically stated that they have faced stigmatization from their families due to their fandom involvement, while two others discussed their propensity to downplay their enthusiasm about fandom when talking to someone they do not know well, so as not to be stigmatized. Participant 1 summed up her irritation with the stigma surrounding science fiction fandom involvement, especially as a woman:

I hate society and I love society at the same time because I find that fandom, while containing a lot of negative, contains the best of society. Because a lot of people in fandom have been stigmatized at some point or another in their life, whether it be because of fandom and what they love, or because of something else. And fandom is where they turned to get support. And that's why I love fandom.

Because loving something makes you happy. *Glee*, another fandom I'm kind of a part of but not much anymore, there's a line in the show, it says loving something special makes you special. And that really resonates with me. In this case, the fandom being something special. Because again, it introduces you to people you would never have met otherwise, especially because there's a lot of stigma around fandom, especially being a female in fandom. Even if your particular fandom

doesn't have a stigma against females, the rest of the world does.

Participant 9 also shared her frustrations, both with the double standard of cultural acceptance of extreme sports fandom, and the stigma of being a fangirl:

I don't mess with fans who are like, you are allowed to be openly fandomy about things like normal things like sport. You know you can spend thousands of pounds, thousands of dollars on things like going to pit and merchandise and tickets and trips to meet players and autographs and stuff like that, but if I do it for fandom stuff that's really weird and nerdy. But if you do it for a sports team, that's cool. That's.. what's the difference here? It's just normalization of culture is all.

I just think that fandom is so underestimated. We're all fangirls, we're all seen as so weird and clingy and silly and childlike and actually I just think fandom in itself is such a positive force. They do a lot of good.

Ultimately, no participant shared an experience within online science fiction fandom that was negative enough to decrease their enjoyment of the community, or cause any kind of question about their desire to continue being an active fan. Most participants stated that they consciously and purposefully worked to avoid negative encounters within the fandom, either by refusing to engage with rude individuals,

knowing their triggers and avoiding them, and being self-aware enough to pull back from interactions when they feel themselves getting upset. This has insulated them from negativity within the fandom, and ensured that they have been able to enjoy their time within the community.

### **Implications for Practice**

The results of this study raise awareness for the benefits of both social media interactions and fandom in general, both for researchers and mental health practitioners. While going out into the physical world and having face-to-face interactions with other people is generally thought to be important for mental health, for individuals who may not be able to engage in that behavior, online science fiction fandom can be an avenue through which those individuals can get some of their social needs met. For individuals with social anxiety or trauma, it can be a way in which individuals become more comfortable interacting with others, while still feeling safe, which could be used in treatment planning for mental health professionals. While online fandom involvement can have disadvantages, overall, it has a significant potential for positive psychological effect. Fandom through social media has provided social, creative, and emotional opportunities for many people who struggle with participating in or navigating through the physical world. Online fandom provides encounters which would not have been available to them years ago.

Another practical implication of the current study is for mental health providers to understand the ways in which online science fiction fandom involvement can be used as a coping skill for those in that community. Learning how to cope effectively is a key part of recovering from trauma (Vogel-Scibilia et al., 2009). As mental health clinicians are guiding their clients through recovery or helping them build new coping skills, being aware of the benefits of fandom involvement as coping can be useful to understanding clients who are already engaged in these activities. It can also be a community or skill that therapists can suggest to clients if they are looking for new outlets.

Previous literature has noted that adolescents appear to feel most comfortable interacting with others online, which extends to mental health professionals (Evans, 2014). The current research would indicate that many adults also feel most safe and comfortable interacting through social media, adding evidence that mental health therapy offered through the Internet may also be of value to many adults.

Another implication from the findings of this study may be in education. Society, and even our body of research as mental health professionals, spends a significant amount of time looking at social media as a potential for psychopathology (Caplan, 2003; Davila et al., 2012; Van Rooij et al., 2017), rather than as a platform for enhancing mental health (Pouwels et al. 2021). The data from the current study, which shows how online science fiction

fandom involvement can foster positivity when active avoidance of negativity is employed, could be useful in educating others about how to have healthier interactions online. This can be especially useful for teens and adolescents, as that is where people their age are doing much of their social interacting (Evans, 2014). Educating young people about the massive scope of the Internet, and the countless numbers of communities of interest online may help foster understanding that, with parental guidance and consent, there are individuals that they can interact with beyond their local geographical area, and online communities that they can become part of that can encourage and expand their already existing strengths. Education on the importance and appropriateness of utilizing blocking features to stop negative interactions could also be useful to preserve the positive and healthy nature of time spent online.

Another implication of the findings relates to the therapeutic application of fan-fiction in a narrative therapy context. In Narrative Therapy, the counselor and client work together to co-author aspects of the client's story (Gu, 2018). Participants in this current study would often incorporate emotional challenges they were facing into their stories, resolving them with their characters. Using a similar fan-fiction approach, clients could create stories involving themselves from their chosen fandoms to work on issues of identity, esteem, efficacy, and empowerment.

One final significant implication is that the current study adds to the existing body of knowledge on social media, providing additional evidence that the boundary between online and *real life* is disappearing. The Internet is no longer its own confined space, but is instead just another environment for individuals to communicate, form relationships, and engage in activities with other people. Activity taking place through social media compliments what happens in the physical world and is no longer separate from it. This may change the way that both researchers and clinicians understand relationships, how they are built, and how they are maintained.

## **Conclusion**

The results showed women from a variety of backgrounds, ages, countries, and emotional health having overwhelmingly positive experiences which they felt enhanced their lives and improved their mental health. The overarching themes that emerged in the study were that online science fiction fandom better the lives of those in it through having a nonjudgmental culture, developing and enriching relationships with others, being accepting of mental health issues, use of fandom participation as coping, and active avoidance of negativity. The authors recognize that there could be negative consequences about having online relationships in lieu of face-to-face interactions however, this possibility is outside the scope of this research question. It is possible that online relationships are not as healthy as in-person relationships or online friendships inhibit the

development of community relationships. However, the authors sought to explore and consider the experiences that those in fandoms observed in their own lives.

Overall, this research shows that social media is deeply ingrained in how people in society now communicate with each other, which is therefore worthy of continued research. It also shows that, while there are certainly problems with this new reality, there are also new possibilities for positive activities and outcomes which should also be further explored and encouraged. Science fiction fandom involvement may just be one online community of many that could have a positive impact on the psychological well-being of its members.

Science fiction as a genre is one that speaks to people through its inclusivity of others who are different, and explores what it is to be human. Individuals who belong to this fandom community are interested in exploring these topics, both through watching fictionalized scenarios in which humans are put in extraordinary situations beyond what happens in our current world, and through processing their own thoughts about who they are and what they might do in those same circumstances. Ultimately, women who are part of the online science fiction community are simply people who love something and want to share it with others who also love it, just as a sports fan might enjoy a Superbowl party, or a music fan might make friends at a concert. At its core, fandom is about loving something, and bringing people together through that shared

love and enjoyment, making it an excellent candidate for future research and application in the field of mental health.

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