

Finding Friends in Fiction:
Fan Writing, Parasocial Relationships and Social Belongingness

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Abstract

Consistent with the Social Surrogacy hypothesis (Derrick, Gabriel & Hugenberg, 2009), it is possible that, like television and interactive video games, writing fan-fiction may impact social functioning by way of parasocial interactions. This study explores this phenomenon using a mixed-methods approach, involving a statistical analysis of data collected through a cross-sectional survey with fan-fiction writers, and a qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interviews describing participants experiences and motivations.

Participants ($n = 526$) were recruited using a combination of the convenience and the snowball sampling methods. Quantitative findings indicate that those who spend more time writing fan-fiction experience significantly higher levels of parasocial interactions and social belongingness. Results of the correlation analyses further indicate that both greater social presence and belongingness are associated with higher levels of parasocial interactions. Finally, it was hypothesized that parasocial interactions would have a mediating effect on time spent writing fan-fiction and social belongingness, but the results were non-significant.

In the qualitative phase of this study, ten individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted and analysed using a thematic analysis, following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006). The findings indicate that the act of fan writing supports positive coping strategies especially during stressful situations (e.g., the current pandemic). Although the qualitative data brought attention to the various motivations for writing fan-fiction, fan writers engaged with the characters they wrote about using two main processes: parasocial interactions/relationships and identification. Participants' interview responses confirm that favoured media characters can mimic friendships, possibly alleviating loneliness, especially when they experience rejection or social loss. Conversely, some responses indicate that identification functions to increase self-knowledge, alter beliefs/attitudes, and guide them. These findings suggest that fan writing can give individuals the opportunity to unconsciously express personal feelings and thoughts and provide a healthy outlet to release stressors, suppressed emotions, motivations and desires through fictional characters.

Key words: Fan-fiction, parasocial interactions, social belonging, social presence

Dedication

To my mother and father, without whom I would not have begun.

To my supervisors, without whom I would have not finished.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The term “fan” originated from the Latin word “fanaticus,” which first referred to a “devotee,” “temple servant,” or “unreasoning enthusiast” (Jenkins, 1992). The term later evolved to refer to excessive madness or possession by a demon. It was only until the 19th century that the word “fan” was used in a positive light by journalists separating it from its earlier connotations to describe the devotion of sports (baseball) fans (Jenkins, 1992). However, media fans - “people who follow television shows, movies, or popular/modern books in a “devoted” manner - continued to be understood by its historical associations of religious zealotry (Mixer, 2018, p. 27). While sport “fans” were seen as people who were enthusiastic about sport, media fans were viewed as emotionally unstable, dangerous and unaware of reality (Jenkins, 1992; Mixer, 2018).

Fan-fiction (also referred to as fanfic) is “a genre of text that is comprised of original stories created by fans of a work and incorporates canon (“official” source material) elements of at least one fictional universe” (Bahoric & Swaggerty, 2015, p. 25). Fans build on existing original content as inspiration for creating their own storylines with new or modified characters/relationships, alternative beginnings or endings, and philosophies (Jenkins, 1992; Jenkins, 2012). Thomas (2011) further describes fan-fiction as a “work in progress” and fans tendency to know “what if” or “what happened next?” Fan writers expand themes and characters that have not received enough depth or importance in the original source (Barnes, 2015). In essence, fan-fiction is “the modern manifestation of an impulse to tell and retell stories” and for writers to imaginatively participate in the narrative (Barnes, 2015, p. 71). Primary sources are not restricted to classic novels; fanfics also emerge from popular television shows, comic books, anime, and mythology. Fans are actively engaged in interpreting content by extending the author’s narrative, elaborating or appropriating the text for their personal use (Mathew & Adams,

2009). These appropriations can also be a reflection of the authors' desire for the characters to appear more "real" and similar to the author's life, allowing writers a safe outlet to engage with real-life problems through characters (Mathew & Adams, 2009; Jenkins, 1992).

The most apparent distinction between fiction and fan-fiction is the notion of originality. Fan-fiction is written by fans where the author uses established elements (characters, plot, setting, etc.) of the original source (e.g., franchises like the *Harry Potter* series) to explain or fill gaps in canon. Fan writers draw insights, characters, ideas, and plots from the original source to create new stories. Angela Thomas (2006) further suggests that since, fan writers "don't have to spend all their time developing something original," they can focus on enhancing their writing skills and creative expression (p. 227). Most fan writers start their creations with a disclaimer, highlighting that they do not own the fictional property and by crediting the original source for their contribution to the entertainment world (Mathew & Adams, 2009). Moreover, because creating fan-fiction does not require cultural or financial capital (creators do not have to be expert writers or take specific classes to participate), fans can experience a "powerful sense of participatory equality" (Burt, 2017).

While original fiction in the form of novels or media is published or televised, fan writing is part of the gift economy/culture - recognized as a non-commercial activity and based on giving, receiving, and reciprocity (Turk, 2014). The circulation of fan creations is readily available with no financial cost. Instead, creators receive intangible gifts, such as validation from community members (likes, followers), feedback/recommendations, and redistribution (Turk, 2014). Content creators are fans and supportive of the original source, creating additional work to showcase their attachment and love for characters. As described by Gribben (2016), J.K. Rowling states that fan-fiction creations are flattering, encourage creativity and show appreciation. She recognizes that it should remain a non-commercial activity. As described by

Stendell (2005), many copyright holders chose to avoid or ignore cases of copyright infringement because they recognize the importance of a fan-fiction community. The thriving of a fan culture benefits copyright holders economically and intangibly. Highly engaged fans are likely to re-read or to re-watch the original source and share with their friends and family, increasing the popularity of the original work.

Historical development of fan-fiction

Little is known about the history of fan-fiction; however, scholars have identified the origins of fan-fiction since the time of Homeric scholarship (Farley, 2016). The *Aeneid*, written by famous poet Publius Vergilius Maro, is one of the earliest examples of fan-fiction's origins (Farley, 2016). Vergilius used a minor character from Homer's poem titled *Iliad* based on Odysseus in his own creation, making him the protagonist and hero who conquered all obstacles of Odysseus (Farley, 2016). Vergilius protagonist resembles modern day's "Mary Sue" character often found in contemporary fan creations, such as a self-insert character, who is described as the perfect hero and an outlet for wish-fulfillment (Chander & Sunder, 2007; Farley, 2016). More recent or modern origins of fan-fiction can be traced back to the underground production and circulation of fan creations based on the popular television series, *Star Trek* (1966-1969), which existed for over 25 years before it leaped onto the web (McCracken, 2015). Thomas (2011) highlights that fan-fiction lived in the 1920s and 1930s with the publication of science fiction magazines in the form of handmade fanzines, debates and interviews.

Fan-fiction, however, continues to evolve, crossing traditional boundaries and blurring the lines of commercial literacy. For example, the existence of fan-fiction raised significant attention, especially in mainstream media, after the worldwide success of the film *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which was adapted from fan stories based on *Twilight* novels (McCracken, 2015). Although the popularity of this film raised considerable controversy within fan-fiction

communities about the publication of fan-fictions as original fiction, it also helped eliminate certain stigma asserting that not all fan-fiction is poorly written, derivative and valueless (Flegel & Roth, 2014; Morris, 2014). Furthermore, in 2013, Amazon launched a program called Kindle Worlds that allowed fans to publish their creations and receive revenue from each sale (Lipton, 2014). Natasha Perez, as cited in Robertson (2013), argued that attempting to commercialize fan-fiction companies are actually “commodifying a community” and “misunderstanding what fandom is about.” For example, although the terms and conditions of Kindle Worlds allow writers to use original characters and receive exclusive rights for their creations, their stories cannot be published or posted anywhere else, such as forums or fandom sites. In this way, although Amazon creates a market endowed with financial incentives, it loses many of the critical characteristics of fan-fiction. For these reasons and issues related to copyright and legal protection, the program was shut down in the year 2018.

Impact of the internet

Although fan-fiction has historically existed in the form of unauthorized sequels of Sherlock Holmes and Gulliver's Travels, fan-fiction has become more popular with the prominence of the Internet (Barnes, 2015). Fans were quick to make space in the new technological world, and the 90's saw a staggering growth of fan writers and readers, fandom groups, discussion activity, and story archives (McCracken, 2015). The popularity of social media, such as LiveJournal and Tumbler, also increased the opportunities for narrative experimentation and visibility (McCracken, 2015). Furthermore, forums (e.g., Fanfiction.net, Wattpad, and Archive Your Own) became accessible online from any location, 24 hours a day, allowing anyone from the globe to participate anonymously and share their creations with users globally (Lammers & Marsh, 2015).

Fanfiction.net is one of the largest fan-fiction forums, consisting of over

500,000 fan created stories and over 10 million registered users (FNN Research, 2011). According to FNN Research (2011), Fanfiction.net has been accessed by individuals from 173 countries with Canadian users ranking third. Moreover, the average age of users was 15.8 years old and, among users who disclosed their gender, 78% users were female (FNN Research, 2010). There are fanfics based on various books, television shows and films, each sorted by genre, chapters and sequels. According to a meta-dataset analysis of the world's largest fan-fiction repository conducted by Yin, Aragon, Evans and Davis (2017), the most common fan-fictions were based on Anime/Manga (1,905,055 stories) and TV Shows (1,553,815 stories), followed by books (1,442,290 stories). Fan-fictions based on books, however, received the most reviews and engagement by community members. Furthermore, the most common genres were Romance, Humour and Drama (Yin et al., 2017).

Fan-fiction differentiates from other forms of literature as it associates with an online community that provides opportunities for both writers and readers to interact with others and seek feedback. Within these online spaces, a community of fans or “fandom” is created and participants can interact with people who share similar interests and moreover, share, collaborate, exchange and critique one another's work (Black, 2006; Jenkins, 1992). Fandom can be directly related to the psychological construct of *in-groups*, a group to which a person psychologically identifies as being a member (Everett, Faber, & Crockett, 2015). In turn, group membership (in-groups) creates a social identity - a sense of belonging to the social world (Everett et al., 2015). These web-based forums also provide opportunities for general participation in contests, sharing fan art, pictures and favourite quotes from the primary source. Furthermore, forums provide opportunities to engage in collaborative writing and fictional role-play, reflecting new styles of thinking and story-telling by breaking traditional boundaries (Thomas, 2006). For example, Middle Earth Insanity, a popular web-based forum, offers members of the

community to engage in a “role-playing game,” where “groups of members engage in online dramatic role-play, through adopting characters based on the fictional worlds and taking turns to post their contributions to the emerging narrative” (Thomas, 2006, p. 229).

Furthermore, Barnes (2015) sheds light to an interesting difference between fan-created genres and traditional fiction related genres. The author describes that some fan-fiction genres focus merely on *one* emotional experience while typical genres found in fiction are not segregated by one specific emotion. For example, angst stories focus exclusively on “heartbreak or tragedy” while “fluff” stories provide readers “a warm fuzzy feeling” (p. 75).

Likewise, “Hurt Comfort” is a type of genre in which writers examine the physical and emotional pain of a character and create a sense of healing from another character. Fans explore characters’ vulnerable situations, such as how a character may deal with humiliation or one may cope with betrayal or unpredicted death. Hurt comfort stories depict the rehabilitation of characters into more emotional nurturing and balanced characters. While these emotions can be found in parts of a novel, fan creations focus their attention on a single emotional experience that is in “high concentration, unencumbered by the need for conflict” (p. 76). Barnes (2015) further highlights that although both fiction and fan created stories focus on “characters, their mental states, and their relationships,” these areas are accentuated significantly more in fan creations, which may not necessarily be the focus of the original plot (Barnes, 2015). Fan-fiction places great emphasis on the emotional growth or unseen emotional states of characters and unfolding their inner lives. Likewise, Jones (2002) asserts that “what is of primary importance to fans is not how characters move along a narrative, but rather what narrative events can reveal about characters” (p. 86). Lanier and Schau’s (2007) analysis exploring the differences between fan-created stories based on Harry Potter and Harry Potter novels, revealed that fanfics focused primarily on the relationship between characters while the content of original novels focused on the

characters actions.

Fan writing echoes both audience members' fascination with their favoured primary source and allows writers to release frustrations over unsatisfying aspects of stories (Jenkins, 1992; Thomas, 2006). For dedicated writers, fan writing becomes a social activity and an avenue for personal expression, exploration, and collective identity (Jenkins, 1992). Feedback and support by fan-fiction communities further encourage new ideas, improving existing works and celebrating the strengths of individuals who devote to a culture that values imagination, creation and writing (Thomas, 2006).

Genres of fan-fiction

While there are many genres of fiction, such as adventure, romance, thriller etc., the world of fan-fiction has additional genres to classify stories that are more aligned with fan works. The following presents a list of common fan-fiction genres:

Crossover stories: Crossover stories include characters from two different canons or fandoms that are merged together. For example, a story that takes characters from both *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* is integrated in a shared plot. While some creations focus on the merging of characters, other writers may combine texts which share common genres.

Slash fan-fiction: A genre of fan-fiction that focuses on sexual relationships of same sex fictional characters (Barnes, 2015).

Self-insert fan-fiction: Authors insert themselves and their experiences into a story through a character avatar and interact with the canon and/or other characters.

Vent fan-fiction: A form of self-insertion in which authors insert themselves into a story to release their personal frustrations.

Alternate Reality/Universe: A creation in which some changes are made to the storyline, but other elements of the canon are left unchanged. For example, a writer may change major events from the original story line, such as putting an end to a character or changing the setting.

Alternate timeline: This refers to fan-fiction that occurs in another era or time period (that is different from the original source).

Shipping: A type of romance genre which features a character pairing based on the writers preference that differs from the original pairing depicted in the primary source.

One-shot stories: A type of fan writing that consists of only one chapter or one short story as opposed to a fanfic, which has multiple chapters that are shared overtime.

Collaboration/Collab: This type of fanfic incorporates multiple fan writers working together to produce a fanfic.

Angst fan-fiction: Fan-fictions created with themes that are described as heavy, such as characters suffering from an intense emotional break up, depression or loss.

The need to belong and parasocial relationships

The need to belong is a fundamental human motivation, and people are driven toward establishing relationships and belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). People with greater stable social connections tend to experience better overall mental and physical health, and show a better ability to cope with stress (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). Moreover, feeling excluded and lacking a sense of belonging can cause pain similar to physical pain, causing a range of negative psychological consequences (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Given the importance of feeling socially included, when an individual does not belong, through acts of ostracism or social exclusion, that is “ignoring and excluding individuals or groups,” people experience a powerful threat to belongingness that can cause pain and a range of negative psychological consequences, such as depression and anxiety (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; MacDonald & Leary, 2005).

Positive social interactions, however, can further buffer against the negative effects of social exclusion or rejection. For example, Gardner, Pickett and Knowles (2005) found that reminders of favorable social interactions protected individuals from the negative effects of rejection and reinforced successful belonging regulation. In addition, Gardner, Jefferis, Knowles,

and Dean (2008) found that excluded participants showed greater preference for symbolic reminders of their social connections in particular by giving greater preference for family photographs than looking at a magazine.

Studies suggest that when social connections are not met through human interaction, technology in the form of fiction/non-fictional television and interactive video games can provide a sense of belongingness through parasocial interactions (Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, 2009). Parasocial relationships or parasocial interactions (PSI), when used interchangeably, are referred to as a “pseudo-intimate relationship between the audience and media personalities” (Lim & Kim, 2011, p. 767). Through a series of studies, Derrick et al. (2009) examined the Social Surrogacy hypothesis (SS) that is, “can parasocial relationships provided by television programs yield the experience of belonging?” (p. 353) and found that television shows in particular present a potent vehicle for delivering parasocial relationships. Some preliminary evidence exists to indicate that thinking about a favored celebrity reduced the likelihood of aggressing after being socially excluded (Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco & Bartels, 2007). Others have found that people who watch more television believe they have more friends (Derrick et al, 2009). Therefore, it appears that, although parasocial bonds are one-sided in nature, they can mimic benefits of real relationships.

Based on the evidence that suggests that social connections can protect against feelings of rejection, it is hypothesized that, like fiction/non-fictional television shows and interactive video games, writing fan-fiction may be a vehicle to social functioning by way of parasocial relationships. Like watching television, writing fan-fiction allows writers to regularly immerse themselves in a story with familiar people and situations. As described by Derrick, Gabriel and Hugenberg (2009), engaging in narratives increases an individual’s social processing, further advancing awareness of thought and emotions. While television, however, offers a multi-sensory experience that is rich in visual and auditory experiences, writing requires individuals to use more cognitive effort to stimulate

a parasocial connection. It is, therefore, possible that individuals who write fan-fiction are putting in greater effort and hence developing a more intense parasocial connection.

Social presence can be defined as “a perceptual experience of being psychologically involved in the interaction with another in a mediated environment” (Kim & Song, 2016, p. 571). According to Gao et al. (2017), a stronger sense of social presence is more likely to meet the psychological need of users to belong. Sense of belonging, on the other hand, refers to “the feeling that one is an integral part of the social network community” (p. 350). Gao et al. (2017) found that Social Networking Site users’ perceptions of social presence were positively affected by their sense of belonging. “This suggests that social presence effectively enhances users’ feelings of belonging to Social Networking Sites (SNS) by increasing human warmth and contact” (Gao et al., 2017, p. 352). Moreover, when users’ experience high levels of social presence, they are able to temporally escape into a more pleasurable and enjoyable environment. Kim and Song (2016) found that social presence was positively associated with the development of parasocial interactions. This suggests that when fans feel that their favoured media character is socially present, they are more likely to develop imaginary interpersonal interactions. Their findings also suggest that social presence mediated the relationship between celebrities’ self-disclosure on their twitter accounts on parasocial interaction. Similarly, it is possible that fan writing, like SNS, provide fans with a “feeling of being together or ‘being connected’ with the celebrity or favoured media figure” and “through this interaction, fans might feel as if those celebrities are socially present in their life” (Kim & Song, 2016, p. 571).

Aim of the study– fan-fiction as a vehicle for parasocial relationships

While there are many technologies that provide access to narratives (e.g., television, books, and video games), no study has empirically examined *if* and *how* writing fan-fiction may strengthen parasocial connections and improve social belonging. This study aims to build on these existing studies and explore the social functioning of fan writing by using a quan-qual and

interdisciplinary approach; it employs a convergent parallel design that involves a statistical analysis of a survey exploring group differences between time writing fan-fiction and parasocial interactions, social belonging and social presence, and a qualitative analysis of fan writers' experiences and motivations.

The objectives of the current investigation are to (a) examine variation in parasocial interactions by time spent writing fan-fiction, (b) investigate how levels of social belongingness and social presence change as the time spent in writing fan-fiction increases, (c) examine whether social presence and social belongingness are related to the development of parasocial interactions, (d) examine whether parasocial interactions mediates the effect between time spent writing fan-fiction and social belongingness, (e) understand participants' motivations for writing fan-fiction, and (f) explore the impact of parasocial interactions on participants' real life.

Statement of the problem

In the last decade, student dissertations have shown interest in understanding “who or why people write fan-fiction?” (Feehily, 2007). Although knowledge in this area is limited, scholars have shed some light on answering these questions. Findings exploring the phenomenon of fan writing is largely based on qualitative data stemming from self-reported responses, subjective analysis, and small sample sizes (e.g., Lee, 2011; Feehily, 2007). Although qualitative studies provide rich data and depth to understand human experiences, the findings lack objectivity and, therefore, difficult to replicate and generalize. Interviewees reported writing fan-fiction to seek deeper insights and meanings of life or eudaemonic motivations (Vinney & Dill-Shackleford, 2016), hedonic pleasure (Feehily, 2007; Lee, 2011), mastery of writing skills and feedback (Black, 2009), social community and friendship (Lee, 2011) and participatory culture that is, having an outlet to voice issues of inclusion, diversity and representation (Jenkins, 1992). However, existing studies have focused primarily on exploring the general motivations for

writing fan-fiction without indulging in the concept of parasocial relationships explicitly.

Moreover, most of the current research on parasocial relationships has emerged from studies focusing on television exposure. Despite scholars invariably theorizing that parasocial interactions may satisfy gratification needs with increased intimacy and consistent social connections, existing studies exploring the relationship between loneliness, belongingness and parasocial developments have revealed mixed results (e.g., Rubin et al, 1985; Wang, Fink, & Cai, 2008). The mixed findings may, however, emerge from the methodological limitations in the measurement of parasocial developments and failure to distinguish between parasocial interactions and parasocial relationships. The original Parasocial Interaction Scale (PSI) developed by Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985) has been one of the most frequently used scales to measure parasocial development. However, scholars have critiqued the PSI for lacking content validity, suggesting that the test assesses for a positive attitude toward a favoured media character rather than the interactions between individuals and characters (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2015). Hartmann and Goldhoom (2011) developed the Experience of Parasocial Interaction scale (EPSI) with these limitations in mind. The EPSI scale measures mutual awareness and interaction within an exposure situation (i.e., during television viewing). However, for the present study, fan writers are not in a visual “exposure situation” (writing while viewing the character on television), and although cognitively and affectively interacting with their favoured characters through writing, the items in the EPSI scale are specific to television exposure where the “TV performer addresses them on both a bodily and a verbal level,” such as news anchors, television hosts, or characters presenting narrations to the viewers. These scales (i.e., PSI and EPSI), therefore, do not capture the diversity of parasocial interactions in different mediums, such as fan-fiction (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000; Dibble et al., 2015). Keeping in mind that not all writers are inserting themselves in their creations and could be simply writing about their favourite characters and/or interactions between

characters, the EPSI may not be the most appropriate measure. Instead, the Audience-Persona Interaction (API) scale, developed by Auter and Palmgreen (2000), is deemed more appropriate for the present study. The API scale was devised to measure parasocial interaction defined as “a positive *long-term involvement* with a favourite media character” (p. 27), and is congruent with the current definition of parasocial relationship versus a parasocial interaction.

The series of studies conducted by Derrick et al. (2009) is pivotal in the development of the social surrogacy hypothesis and provides empirical evidence to suggest that when social needs are threatened, people are more likely to recall their favoured television show to alleviate aversive emotions. However, their findings are driven by the atmosphere of watching television rather than the actual parasocial interaction. For example, it is possible that merely watching a favoured show is more enjoyable, which in turn leads to positive mood and other positive outcomes. While findings from the first two studies conducted by Derrick et al. (2009) suggest that lonely people are more likely to watch a favoured television show because they reduce aversive effects (third study) by providing a sense of belongingness (fourth study), none of these studies measured all stages together (Derrick et al., 2009). It is, therefore, possible for findings from these studies to be driven from confounding variables or external factors other than belongingness. Participants were not given specific instructions to talk about a favourite character when writing about their favoured television show. Moreover, the social surrogacy hypothesis does not indicate how “the favoured television programs characters allow social surrogacy to occur” (p. 361). For example, are individuals parasocially *interacting* with their favoured characters while they recall or write about their favoured television show? Or, are they experiencing a sense of *social presence* with their favoured characters that helps them *transport or immerse* into a narrative world (Derrick et al., 2009)? Lastly, whether parasocial relationships suppress belonging needs or facilitate belonging needs remains an unanswered question (Derrick et al., 2009).

Fan writing is often associated with counter-culture literature or archontic literature rather than academic paradigms of productivity (such as publications for curricula vitae or securing tenure). Fan creations have the reputation for being poorly written, lacking originality, and writers stereotyped as overly emotional or lacking a sense of reality (Jenkins, 1992). The stigma associated with fan writing overpowers the promotion of literacy and academic discussions among scholars further reinforcing the existing issue of stigma. For example, Chelsea Mudrock (2017) shares her own experience with the tensions of living a double role - one of an academic and another as a fan writer in graduate school. She suggests that what is required is a shift from perceiving and theorizing fan-fiction as countercultural or merely for creative play to “*making fan-fiction*” and reframe discussions toward “*decolonizing meaning making*” that is “an active critical consciousness through which understandings are carried out through which we (as readers and writers) create connections to make meaning” (p. 50).

Reconceptualizing fan writing as *making fan-fiction* would promote fan-fiction to be understood as “an act of making in a way that values not only the systems that bring into existence, but also the tools with which it is created, the communities in which it is enacted, and the practices that promote its publication, distribution, and circulation” (p. 52). From an oppressive theoretical framework, Murdock (2017) reinforces that fan writing allows for the author’s voice to be heard without waiting for dominate groups to express how fan writing or fandom studies should be understood. What is lacking in existing literature is statistical evidence that compliments existing (albeit limited) qualitative findings exploring fan creations and what impact it has on creators. In light of increasing academic discussions, awareness of other forms of creative outlets like fan writing and the possible benefits, this study seeks to become part of a larger conversation.

Research questions

- 1. Do people who spend more time writing fan-fiction develop stronger parasocial interactions than individuals who spend less time writing fan-fiction?**
 - a) Do females experience greater parasocial interaction intensity than other groups?
 - b) Does parasocial interaction intensity vary by age?
- 2. Do people who spend more time writing fan-fiction experience greater social presence and social belonging?**
 - a) Do females experience greater social belonging and social presence than other groups?
 - b) Does sense of social belonging and/or social presence vary by age?
- 3. Are social presence and social belongingness related to the development of parasocial interactions?**
- 4. Is the effect of time spent writing fan-fiction on social belongingness mediated by parasocial interaction?**
- 5. What motivates individuals to write fan-fiction?**
- 6. Do fan writers develop parasocial relationships with media characters and how do these interactions affect the real life of participants?**

Study plan

Chapter 2 presents a summary and evaluation of the available literature exploring fan writing, parasocial relationships and social belonging. This chapter begins with the theoretical frameworks used to understand fan writing followed by empirical studies exploring the psychological implications of fan writing. This chapter also entails an overview of what has been studied about the development of parasocial relationships/interactions.

Chapter 3 presents a comprehensive overview of the quantitative and qualitative descriptions of the procedures for the data collection, encompassing sample, research tools, rigour, and data analysis. The chapter ends with ethical considerations for both quantitative and qualitative phases.

Chapter 4 entails the quantitative findings examining the variation in parasocial interactions by time spent in writing fanfic, investigating how levels of social belongingness and social presence change as the time spent in writing fanfic increases, and determining whether parasocial interactions have a mediating effect on time spent writing fanfic and social belongingness. This chapter is followed by a comprehensive discussion of the quantitative results.

Chapter 5 entails the qualitative findings exploring participants' motivations for writing fanfiction, and the impact of parasocial interactions on participants' real life. This chapter is followed by a comprehensive discussion of the qualitative results.

Chapter 6 discusses an unexpected yet consistent revelation of the impact of fan writing of participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a stand-alone chapter of the results intertwined with a discussion.

Chapter 7 presents a cumulative summary of how the two data sets complemented each other while facilitating the triangulation of the qualitative findings with the results from quantitative

approach and vice versa. The chapter concludes by discussing the dissemination of findings and limitations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides an overview of existing research and the relevant constructs pertaining to the current study. The chapter begins with an overview of the theoretical frameworks applicable to understanding fan writing, followed by the psychological implications of fan writing, and the development of parasocial relationships/interactions. An exhaustive search of previous findings yields a gap in literature related to fan writing and parasocial interactions. This review seeks to establish this gap in the literature.

Theoretical framework: The power of reading and writing

Creative writing in the forms of poetry, music, and fiction or non-fiction can aid in recovery from severe mental illness (King, Neilson, & White, 2012). In “Creative Writers and Daydreaming” first published in 1905, Freud (1995) theorizes that people have the innate desire to alter existing unsatisfactory human conditions by directing their mental activity “toward inventing a situation in which unsatisfied wishes will be fulfilled” (p. 422). When this desire becomes too strong or powerful, it takes the form of pathology. The formal control of writing, however, offers writers and artists a safe outlet to overcome unfulfilled desires and release internalized anxieties and adversity (Freud, 1995). He further asserts that writing allows individuals to enjoy their “day-dreams without self-reproach or shame” (p. 428). Moreover, the benefits of creative writing are not limited to recovery associated with mental illness. For example, Eschleman, Madsen, Alarcon, and Barelka (2014) found that creative writing was positively correlated with recovery from work and job/work performance-related outcomes, such as creativity at work, mastery, control and relaxation. As described by Eschleman et al. (2014), according to the effort recovery model, engaging in activities that help gain and protect resources lead to the replenishment of resources and can later be transferred to performance-related behaviours. Creative writing in turn allows participants to experience temporary detachment from work and protect individuals from additional resource loss.

The idea that writing and reading are effective tools for mental health has a long history that aligns well with the therapeutic approach of bibliotherapy. As cited by Mazza (2017), Carolyn Shrodes (1950) is one of the first pioneers of bibliotherapy and defined bibliotherapy as “the process of dynamic interaction between the personality of the reader and literature as a psychological field which may be used for personality assessment, adjustment and growth” (p. 28). As described by Mazza (2017) the process of bibliotherapy entails a three-step process of identification, catharsis and insight. While bibliotherapy is used with the guidance or intervention of a therapist (Cohen, 1994), developmental bibliotherapy is used by librarians, educators and parents to help individuals deal with normal day problems and transitions. The therapeutic usage of literature can also be self-help, and most people do not need the intervention of a therapist (Gold, 1987). However, to engage a more complicated healing process, a therapist is required (Smith, Floyd, Scogin, & Jamison, 1997).

Gold (1987) advocates the various ways that literature can support everyday life issues and be a powerful agent towards healing and change. He argues that the educational system places greater attention on critical thinking than recognizing people’s emotional responses, prohibiting them from fully benefiting from the rewards of reading. Reading, however, is a therapeutic experience rather than a form of escapism or an act of passing time, because it can help the reader understand their emotions, identify triggers of anxiety and stress, and provide alternative perspectives or models of experience. This leads to increased self-control and awareness of one’s own life trajectory (Gold, 1987). Gold (1987) believes that reading is a “responsible and important way to grow mentally and spiritually” (p 43). There are multiple ways that literature can be an effective tool for psychotherapy. Books open themes of pain, fear, death, illness, and many other kinds of suffering that people can identify with. Reading about similar experiences provide readers’ the opportunity to find alternative and acceptable interpretations of their problems (Gold, 1987). Consequently, readers can reframe and compare unrelated ideas for their shared characteristics and make connections with their own lives. In

addition, identifying with the character, environment, and/or situation helps the reader release suppressed emotion (catharsis), join the experience, and feel less lonely and more “normal” (Gold, 1987).

Heath, Sheen, Leavy, Young and Money (2005) extend the process of bibliotherapy to five stages that include: involvement, identification, catharsis, insight, and universalism. In the first stage, readers become engaged and interested in what is happening within the story, leading to the second stage of identifying with the characters. Vicariously identifying with the character, environment, and/or situation helps the reader release suppressed emotion (catharsis), join the experience and feel less lonely and more “normal.” After catharsis, readers enter the stage of insight, in which readers are able to apply the story to their personal experiences and adapt accordingly. Readers develop new connections, perceptions, and problem-solving strategies (Heath et al., 2005). In the last stage, readers are able to empathize with others and recognize that similar problems (such as divorce, marriage, neglect, illness, and financial difficulties) are universal and common to many. This helps the reader to no longer view oneself as helpless or as a victim, but rather a survivor moving towards change (Heath et al., 2005).

Studies have found that bibliotherapy is an effective means to facilitate emotional growth, attitudinal change, and self-discovery (Lenkowsky, 1987). Furthermore, bibliotherapy has been correlated with the treatment of grief and loss (Briggs & Pehrsson, 2008), treating sexual dysfunction (van Lanveld, 1998), insomnia (Bailey, 1982), and obesity (Pezzot-Pearce, LeBow, & Pearce, 1982). Positive results have also been found in mental health treatment. For example, Smith et al. (1997) found that participants exposed to cognitive bibliotherapy showed a significant decrease in the Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression and Beck Depression Inventory from pre-treatment to a 3-year follow-up (Smith et al., 1997). Although, the effectiveness of bibliotherapy as a therapeutic tool has been examined intensively and there is greater consensus confirming the advantages of bibliotherapy, other studies have not found the same gains (Lenkowsky, 2004). For example, findings from Steven and Pfof's (1982) review of

experimental studies conducted between the years 1965 to 1982, indicate an unfavourable response of bibliotherapy's effectiveness as a psychotherapeutic or self-enhancement/self-growth intervention. The findings, however, did indicate promising results in attitudinal change. Support was not found between bibliotherapy and academic achievement, or marital accord (Schrank and Engles, 1981, as cited in Riordan & Wilson, 1989). Other studies suggest that combining bibliotherapy with other interventions (such as play therapy) can have better outcomes (Hasty, 2010).

While bibliotherapy asserts the power of reading, what is equally important is understanding the power of creative writing. Although the term is often associated with reading materials, bibliotherapy can be combined with creative or expressive writing (Gold, 2002). As Gold (2002) asserts, it is from writing that comes reading. Individuals who write have the freedom to make choices, create, and distort past experiences while readers are limited to the content presented by the original authors (Gold, 2002). This finding is supported by Grossman, Sorsoli, and Keating (2006), who specifically explored how male survivors of child abuse made sense of their experiences and the factors that helped them remain resilient. While many men reported using techniques, such as spiritually, altruistic behaviours, and creative expression, one participant reported *writing fiction and non-fiction*: "I just could sit down and think of things faster than my fingers would go" and would "go inside" and "be characters. Create characters. Fantasize. That was the safe space" (p. 438). According to Gold (2002), "creating and sharing complex stories is an adaption of language to help humans survive well" (p. 3). In writing, language allows an individual to express, bring emotions and ideas in sight, and therefore, no longer feel suppressed. Writing about negative experiences, allows individuals to distance themselves from aversive feelings (Gold, 2002).

Emotional engagement

Creative writing emerges in the same way that reading occurs. Both require imagination and deep engagement with the text (Gold, 2002). In the reader's mind, characters become alive

and readers are able to embody the characters experiences, feelings, and thoughts. As a result, readers may feel like they know characters well and can predict their behaviours and actions (Jenkins, 1992). Emotion leads to empathy, compassion, self-knowledge and imagination. Reading and writing, moreover, evoke memories that are linked to emotion and help readers make sense of the texts. Revisiting these memories allow readers to understand their experiences differently (Gold, 2002). Barner (2006) further postulates that the emotional connection with characters lead to the leap “from consuming fiction to creating” (p. 29). Characters are like imaginary friends (parasocial interactions) to the reader and readers are motivated to create new content. However, not all readers decide to take the leap of writing. Other readers may choose other outlets to engage with text, such as art (Jenkins, 1992). Cooke (2015) views creative learning as a tool for transformative learning specifically as a way to enhance cognitive development and increase psychological resilience. The author describes their own experiences, suggesting that writing provided a form of protection and an opportunity “to express and make sense of chaotic events, and also to construct fictional narratives that subconsciously reinvented myself as safe and loved” (p. 253).

Likewise, Van Steenhuyse (2011) characterizes the leap from reading to writing fan-fiction as an entry to a “transformed universe,” in which authors immerse themselves in an alternative version of the universe - a subjective reality where individuals can explore their hopes, dreams, and aspirations. Van Steenhuyse (2011) asserts that this submergence happens “the moment they adopt a textual world as their actual world, temporarily backgrounding their own” (p. 3).

Transformation theory entails three main constructs: cognitive engagement, emotional engagement and mental imagery (Van Steenhuyse, 2011). Cognitive engagement refers to when a writer’s thoughts and attention are so focused on the text that they lose track of time or fail to notice their surroundings. This scenario is similar to the notion of *flow* in reading that requires undivided

attention, and for thoughts to easily move one thought to the next (Van Steenhuyse, 2011). When this reading is processed in a smooth manner, readers are transferred to another universe, otherwise readers may find themselves lost in the text. In fan-fiction, however, people enter a transformed reality and choose to build or deviate from the specific texts by adding their own texts. Van Steenhuyse (2011) further elaborates on the use of schemata's created in the mind. Fan-fiction contains highly detailed schemas, which motivates fans to challenge the primary source, imagine new ideas, plots, and characterizations, and explore societal or cultural expectations etc. The immersion in fan-fiction allows writers and readers to not only be transferred in a different universe, but also offers something new and with a wide range of expectations (Van Steenhuyse, 2011).

Unfortunately, critics (and society in general) have stigmatized readers who have become emotionally immersed in fictional stories as people who are unable to distinguish between realities and imaginations (Barner, 2016). However, Van Steenhuyse (2011) suggests that fans react to characters as if they were real because they have a storage of memories about the characters from the original source, including their character development, their likes/dislikes, how they responded in certain situations, their relationships with others, etc. Fans may know more about their favoured media character than their close friends. Constant exposure and new episodes open new findings about characters and allow writers to explore or expand on the inner-life of characters (Jenkins, 1992). Emotional engagement is a crucial element for continuing stories. Viewers mimic the emotions of their favoured characters and empathize with characters from their psychological understanding of the characters' situation (Van Steenhuyse, 2011).

Writing fan-fiction can be described as a type of imaginative play that parallels with the ways individuals seek pleasure from reading and fantasizing about fictional characters (Barnes 2015). Both require an emotional investment and using personal experiences to draw meaning from the fictional stories being consumed (Barnes, 2015; Van Steenhuyse, 2011). Bibliotherapy assumes that pleasure

obtained from reading comes from the reader's active participation in the narrative. Likewise, fan-fiction writers reinterpret content and extend stories in written form. Writers are, therefore, constantly engaged in the wondering and imagining process. Given that entering a favoured fictional world through imagination, reading and writing is a pleasurable activity, individuals are likely to want to constantly reenter these spaces and interact with fictional characters (Barnes, 2015).

Self-determination theory

According to Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (2000) self-determination theory, people feel self-determined when their needs for autonomy (sense of control), competence (mastery of a task or skill), and social relatedness (sense of belonging) are met. Self-determination theory assumes that individuals thrive for growth or mastery and are motivated by intrinsic factors, such as knowledge and genuine enjoyment (vs. extrinsic factors like money, acclaim etc.). This model is often linked with motivations for media consumption. For example, Tamborini, Bowman, Eden, Grizzard, and Organ (2011) found that media enjoyment and satisfaction was linked partly to the fulfillment of autonomy, competency and social belonging. Although studies have not theorized fan writing with the self-determination theory, findings from existing studies albeit limited suggest similar motivations.

Participatory culture and autonomy: In communication research, involvement can be understood in two ways: firstly, involvement includes the preexisting knowledge that individuals bring with them and how this information influences people's responses to messages. Secondly, involvement can refer to the "direct personal experience during message reception" (Kurgman, 1966, p. 583 as cited in Rubin, 1987). Involvement, therefore, can be affective, behavioural, and/or cognitive. As described by Thomas (2011), the first wave of theory was influenced by Marxism, in which fans were viewed as powerless and passive recipients of media corporations as well as producers that were responsible for creating characters and storylines. Jenkins's (1992) *Textual Poachers* plays a crucial role in shifting this view from being perceived as passive recipients to

active producers and creators of their own culture. He borrows Michel de Certeau's (1984) concept of the "poacher" to describe fans as empowered individuals (as opposed to "dupes" or "weirdos") who are able to subvert the commodification and corporatization of media organizations. He further highlights "the ability to transform personal reaction into social interaction, spectator culture into participatory culture, is one of the central characteristics of fandom" (Jenkins, 1968, p. 473). Consistent with this statement, fan-fiction is a practice wherein readers and writers are actively engaging in making their own social, experiential, historical and cultural connections (Paul Gee, 2015). This shift from the private mind to the interaction with the social world helps individuals uncover, challenge, and/or reinforce existing ideologies about gender stereotypes, sexuality, racism and socialization patterns (patriarchy) (Jenkins, 1992).

Jenkins (1992) realizes that some writers may choose to write in order to "refocalize," that is to shift attention from the protagonist to secondary characters whose roles are limited on screen (Jenkins, 1992). Media is one of the most influential mediums to produce meanings, messages and symbols. These messages are often a reflection of societal beliefs/attitudes and have the power to not only influence the audience, but also policy makers and implementers. Moreover, marginalized groups are more likely to be misrepresented in mass media. Distorted patterns for portrayal in the media include: underrepresentation of minority groups, exaggeration of negative associations (e.g., violence, criminality, low socio-economic status, substance abuse), and missing stories (Dill-Shackleford, 2014). These misrepresentations in media can affect the self-esteem and mood of viewers ((Dill-Shackleford, 2014). For example, homosexual relationships in mainstream media are often portrayed inaccurately or presented as an object of ridicule and comedy. *Slash* fan-fiction - a type of genre that focuses on the sexual relationship of same sex fictional characters - allows authors to present their individual and complex experiences through fictional characters and release their frustrations of the negative and stereotypical portrayals of homosexual relationships in mainstream media (Jenkins, 1992).

Historically, fan writing has been a space dominated by women. According to Smith (1985), approximately 90% of fan writers are female. Generally, women are also more likely to invest considerable time making inferences, reconstructing and understating text and characters, whereas men spend more time exploring the authorial intent and the direct purpose of the text (Bleich, 1986). Jenkins (1988) explains that for some homemakers, participation in a fan-fiction provides an alternative space that offers a sense of respect, mastery and dignity. From the time of Star Trek creations, the majority of media fans were classified as middle-class, heterosexual and educated women who wishfully created spaces separate from male-owned spaces to avoid hostility (Mixer, 2018). Female fans describe themselves as “repairing the damage” of media portrayals of women as objects and demeaning treatment (Jenkins, 1988, p. 479). The segregation of gender in fan-related works continues in contemporary times. Women are still more likely to be marginalized and oppressed in the original source (book, movie etc.). According to the Media Report to Women 2002, only 28% percent of the top-grossing films entailed women in lead roles and 37% of lead roles in television. Writing fan-fiction, in turn, can be an outlet to express female ideals and the inclusion of female protagonists and themes that signify strength, sexual equality, independence, power, and resilience (Barnes, 2015). Women write to challenge the messages portrayed by media corporations and influence or inspire other readers.

These writing processes provide space for a diverse media culture where writers have the power to reflect on the stories and messages that they want society and culture to encourage. For example, Lopez (2012) documents how fans used online forums as way to oppose to the “white-casting” of characters in the film “The Last Airbender.” While in the original TV series the characters are ethnically diverse and promote the message of acceptance, in the adapted film,

white actors played the protagonists. As a consequence, fan sites advocated for a boycott and demonstrated their objection to Hollywood's history of minimizing people of colour to secondary and background roles. Protestors worked to share resources in order to educate the community of race-based casting, contributing to the race-bending movement (Lopez, 2012). Fans build partnerships and collaborated with other activists, demonstrating their discontent at screenings and through media platforms (Lopez, 2012).

Competency and mastery: Fan writing and fan-related activities are an important category of digital age literacy (literature that is not limited to print-based text) and opens avenues for participants to practice and improve their writing and composition skills (Black, 2009). As cited in Black (2009), FNN describes beta readers as individuals who “read a work of fiction with a critical eye with the aim of improving grammar, spelling, characterization, and general style of a story prior to its release to the general public.” Some fan writers work alongside beta writers with the goal of improving their writing and rhetorical skills. Fan-fiction sites encourage writers and readers to provide authors with explicit feedback and reviews. The reviews contain suggestions on elements of the plot, characterization, syntax, structure etc. In essence, the fan-fiction community encourages interactions between writers and readers allowing individuals to develop as powerful learners and masters of their own creations (Black, 2009). Interviews conducted by Lee (2011) exploring people's motivations for writing fan-fiction suggest that self-enrichment and the opportunity to learn new things through feedback is a common motivation for fan-fiction involvement. Likewise, the New London Group (2002) asserts that “when learners juxtapose different languages, discourses, styles, and approaches, they gain substantively in metacognitive and metalinguistic abilities and in their ability to reflect critically on complex systems and their interactions” (p. 15).

Similarly, Thomas (2006) examined the social practices of an online fan-fiction

community known as the “Middle Earth Insanity,” and found that community members appreciated the reviews, feedback and support from other members. It was noted that experienced writers offered skills and techniques to emerging and new writers. Littleton (2011) investigated the role of feedback in fan-fiction writers, specifically how participants experience the fan-fiction community. The results indicate that 55% of feedback focused on global praise to the author (positive and encouraging comments). The second most common type of feedback was “readers needs” in which readers expressed if they enjoyed reading the story. Through these comments, readers also provided feedback about what they found was missing in the story or regarding to characterization and plot elements. For writers, comments provided validity and encouragement especially for novice writers.

Social relatedness (sense of belonging):

Jenkins (1992) defines fandom:

as a cultural community, one which shares a common mode of reception, a common set of critical categories and practices, a tradition of aesthetic production, a set of social norms and expectations. I look upon fans as possessing certain knowledge and competency in the area of popular culture that is different from that possessed by academic critics and from that possessed by the “normal” or average television viewer (p. 144).

What differentiates fan-fiction from other forms of literature is that fan-fiction is associated with an online community that creates opportunities for both writers and readers to interact with others and build group membership. Group membership has the capacity to protect individual health and wellbeing (Jetten, Haslam, Haslam, Dingle, & Jones, 2014). According to Daniel Wann (2006) “identification-social psychological health model” team membership and mental wellbeing is mediated by temporary social connections or friendships with other fans. Consistent with this model, Reysen, Plante, and Chadborn (2017) found that the relationship

between identification with one's fan community and wellbeing is mediated by social connections. The authors assessed for three fandom functions, including (a) purpose in life, (b) escape from stressors, and (c) social connections. While purpose in life and escape from stressors did not significantly predict wellbeing, social connections significantly predicted wellbeing. Social connections in lieu of fan groups, therefore, may play an important role in facilitating wellness. The combination of group membership and creative writing may aid in developing a sense of belonging to the social world.

Intrinsic motivation (enjoyment and deeper meaning): Turk (2018) describes fandom and the related activities as a gift economy that is not based on money or acclaim. Writers share their works to maintain a sense of community. Fandom, therefore, is “not just of reciprocal giving but of circular giving.” Some writers may choose to write simply because they enjoy writing and find pleasure in writing while others write to find deeper meanings, also known as eudaemonic motivations (i.e., “the desire to seek insights into the deeper truths and meanings of life”) (Vinney & Dill-Shackleford, 2018, p. 20). Jenkins (1992) suggests that writers use fan-fiction as a medium to reflect on their feelings and engage with characters cognitively. Creators place emphasis on understanding character psychology and motivation. As described by Jenkins (1992), fans enjoy episodes in which characters are examined and analyzed. Fans further connect with episodes in which characters undergo transitions or “gut wrenching revelations.” Writing further gives fans an opportunity to share their analysis, and express their concern or compassion for characters (Jenkins, 1992).

Systems model of creativity

Challenging existing ideas using fan writing can further be understood using the Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi systems model of creativity, which highlights that creativity is a product of the interactions of three subsystems: a *domain*, *person*, and *field* with each sub-system having a unique function (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; 2003). Specifically, the domain entails “all of the

created products that have been accepted by the field in the past” (Sawyer, 2012, p. 216). The second element of the subsystem is the *person* or *agent* who is the producer and whose background, personal traits and motivation influence the person to generate creativity. It is then submitted to the *field* for consideration, where it is judged and evaluated (Fulton & Paton, 2016).

While most models of creativity focus on the individuals’ inspiration and self-expression as being the key contributors of creativity, Fulton and Paton (2016) assert that it is the interactions between the individual, domain and field that initiate novelty. There are four conditions that should be met in order for this model to work. First, individuals must be aware of the new ideas, insights and problems that arise out of the interaction with the medium. The next step is to pay attention to one’s motivations and feelings to determine whether the work is being carried out as intended. Third, individuals must maintain contact with the domain and have access to full existing information. Finally, the individual interacts with others (the field) to refine, edit and discuss the best way to present the information (Fulton & Paton, 2016).

As described by Fulton and Paton (2016), the model refers to creativity as anything that results into taking existing materials or ideas and giving them a new form. While the application of the model has historically been used to understand song writing, poetry, journalism, etc., researchers have advocated to update it to be used with new media (e.g., digital creators such as Youtubers) (Henriksen, Hoelting & the Deep Play Research Group, 2016). Similarly, fan writing is a creative activity that has become an important and empowering tool for communication in recent times, even if it often goes unrecognized as a creative outlet. The following section demonstrates how the Csikszentmihalyi systems model of creativity can be used to understand the process of fan writing.

Domain: The domain encompasses “the symbol systems, cultural conventions and artefacts of a particular area that an individual draws on to produce a creative work” (Paton,

2016, p. 118). There are three main categories within the *domain* subsystem: “developing an interest, learning to write, and idea generation and research” (p.118). Domain knowledge can include writing style, grammar, language, structure, conceptual schema, literary conventions, and understanding how audiences could interpret that work. Writing fiction can be stemmed from childhood experiences (e.g., parents and family members may encourage engagement with books, or writers are introduced to writing through formal education), or interest can be evoked after reading a favourite book, or influenced by media texts (Paton, 2016). Paton (2016) explained:

Once their interest was sparked, they learned to write through further engagement with books...Reading the works of those who had already mastered the domain of writing not only familiarized them with what has come before, but also helped to develop their own ideas about style, technique, character, rhythm and genre conventions, as well as their own feel for what ‘works’ and what doesn’t. In their own writing process, the writers drew on this accumulated knowledge of the domain and undertook additional engagement with a variety of media texts in order to generate new ideas and test existing ones. (p. 119).

Similarly, fan writers pay close attention to existing source material before developing their own creations. Media texts (i.e., books, television programmes, films, etc.) influence how writers develop new ideas and how they rearrange existing storylines. For example, fan writers are aware of the social and cultural norms that are depicted in the source material and can use fan writing as way to enable or challenge them in the production of their creative texts. Fan writers go in with information of the social practices of the *field* that includes being aware of any sensitive issues or ideologies, etiquette in the fandom community and maintaining a healthy community.

Individual: In the system of fan writing, the *individual/person* element is the fan writer. The writer brings their personal experiences, traits, talent, writing skills, cognitive structure to the creative process. In creative writing, the individuals' motivation plays a significant role, and the ability to continue writing. Familiarizing oneself with a character in depth may lead to writers feeling a sense of flow (being carried away in the process of writing) (Paton, 2016). This familiarization leads to strong concentration and decisions about plot lines, and characters begin to occur naturally or automatically. In Paton's (2016) words, flow accounts "for the writers' experience of characters that take over, hijack or guide the storyline in unexpected ways without relying on more mystical descriptions of the creative process or later models of creative thinking that focus largely on unconscious processes during idea generation" (p. 120).

Field: The social system of creativity for writing usually entails editing, publication (in the form of a manuscript, book etc.) and communication with an audience (through sales). Fan writing, however, is a non-commercial activity and based on giving, receiving, and reciprocity. Fan writers share or publish their creations on different online forums where it is evaluated by fans, writers, beta readers and readers who act as a feedback mechanism, helping writers improve their creations and shaping their future works. For example, a fan writer may publish the first chapter of their creation or at times a prologue and ask readers to comment whether this is an idea they would be interested in reading about. Based on the feedback, writers will either continue or alter their creations to meet the needs of their audience.

The domain entails a body of knowledge (past works, conventions etc.) that transmits information to the *person*, who then produces a variation for the *field* or the social group responsible for the verification of the creativity. The creative model can be used to explain that fan writing is too a result of individuals formulating decisions and acting within the social and cultural system that endowed them with the skills and resources to create. As a whole, fan writers

balance multiple factors, including the original source text, the fan community's interpretations and norms, and the personal interpretations of the writer (Vinney & Dill-Shackleford, 2016).

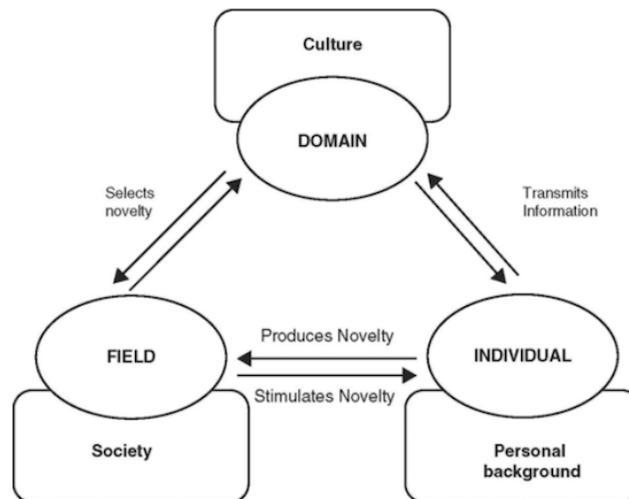


Figure 2.1: The systems model of creativity
(Source:Csikszentmihalyi 2003, p. 315)

Empirical evidence: Psychological implications

Despite the immense popularity of fan-fiction practices, fan-fiction remains an understudied phenomenon. However, fan-fiction is a form of creative writing that allows individuals to exercise their imagination and find coherence in their personal experiences. The following section summarizes the empirical findings from the studies exploring fan-fiction from a psychological lens.

In *A Psychotherapeutic Analysis of Women in Fan-fiction*, Feehily's (2017) conducted a interpretive phenomenological analysis to explore writers' motivations for writing fan-fiction, specifically: (a) to what extent fan-fiction writing is being used to emotionally regulate oneself, (b) are writers using fan-fiction as a medium to explore personal psychological issues unconsciously or consciously, and (c) how exploring personal issues through fan-fiction impacts

them (p. 6). The author conducted semi-structured interviews with three female fan-fiction writers. Three common themes emerged from this study including: exploration of latent aspects of one's personality, intimacy, and escapism, as well as sublimation. Participants reported writing about fictional characters to explore characteristics of themselves, such as confidence, assertiveness and to release unexpressed pain and anger (Feehily, 2017). Exploring issues through fictional characters allowed writers to feel more comfortable with working on their own issues. For example, a participant reported that fan-fiction was a safe place for her to understand her sexuality. In addition, all participants reported difficulties in their personal relationships and that writing about desired relationships created hope. Participants reported that writing was self-soothing and an opportunity to escape from the realities of life, something in which they had more control over. Participants shared that writing allowed them create stories with more positive outcomes or "happy endings" that were rare in television shows (Feehily, 2017).

Participants also reported that fan writing helped people connect with people who share similar values and interests without fearing rejection. Participants appreciated smaller communities and found it easier to make friends online than in college and universities. For example, one participant reported: "It was a little alienating and to have that outlet and to be with people online who were more like me, so having fan-fiction there at the time really helped to cope with all of this, because I didn't really have that in real life" (p. 44). Although the study did not explore parasocial relationships, interestingly all participants reported focusing on one favourite character. The favourite character was often described as someone who conquered difficult situations and were rewarded for the hardships they faced. Participants further described them as heroes, physically strong and intelligent (Feehily, 2017).

Albeit Feehily (2017) provides a deeper understanding of participants' experiences of writing fan-fiction, but this study poses some limitations. Firstly, the study's findings are based on

only three female participants, limiting the generalizability of the results. The limitations of conducting qualitative interviews also prevent the verification of results and causality. Given the positive outcomes found by Feehily (2017), it is necessary to examine whether these results can be replicated using a greater and mixed sample size.

Similarly, Lee (2011) conducted online interviews with five fan-fiction writers who focused their works on the popular novel, *The Time Traveler's Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger. Lee (2012) describes *The Time Traveler's Wife* as a love story about a man suffering from a genetic disorder, causing him to travel through time and leaving his partner behind who consistently awaits for his return. The study aimed to understand people from this specific fandom in order to capture the motivations for writing fan-fiction and fan-culture. Participants were recruited from www.fanfiction.net, in which the researcher explored fan-fiction creations on *The Time Traveler's Wife*, and contacted writers via email (when available online) or messaged them directly through the message function available on the forum. Five female participants agreed to participate in the study with an average age of 24 (Lee, 2011).

Key themes emerged from the data, including escapism, media celebration, an opportunity to stay with content longer, and personalization (Lee, 2011). One participant reported that a key motivator for her fanfic creations was “self-enrichment.” She suggested that the process of fan-fiction writing allowed her to learn new things through feedback. Another participant stated that writing fan-fiction was an opportunity to stay with her favourite story and the characters while other participants reported that fan-fiction writing helped them escape the realities of everyday life and personalize content. Another participant reported that the exchange of feedback and stories helped create a community and trusting bonds between people with similar interests. One participant stated that in her friends circle, people would “not want to hear my rantings don't have to anymore” (about characters, stories etc.) and thus fan-fiction was a creative outlet to talk about common interests with people who share the same passions. She also mentioned that she

made one of her closest friends on this online forum. It is important to highlight that the responses of participants indicate that community building within the fan-fiction forums is helpful in formulating a social network and support for creative writing. Many also reported the literary benefits of writing fan-fiction and conveyed their frustration associated with the lack of recognition and credibility often associated with fan-fiction as a genre (Lee, 2011).

Vinney and Dill-Shackleford (2018) research analyzed fan-fictions based on the popular TV series *Mad Men* to explore the different ways fan engage and interpret the show. The authors explored whether fans wrote for hedonic motivations (i.e. for fun) or for other deeper reasons (eudaimonic motivations). A total of 337 fan-fiction stories by 164 writers were analyzed from the sites: Fanfiction.net and Archive of Our Own. Codes encompassing eudaimonic motivation were: “Reflection/Elaboration and Character Reflection”; “Meaning of Life”, “What is Important in Life”, and “Moving” (story was written to emotionally move the reader) (p. 23). Codes encompassing hedonic motivations were “Enjoyable/Pleasurable,” “Humorous,” “Happiness, Sadness,” and “Fear, and Anger, and Angst” (p. 24). Lastly, the study explored whether writers chose to write to resolve or alter story lines, which were categorized as *character’s perspective* or for *wish fulfillment*. The results indicate fans were more likely to write for eudaimonic reasons than hedonic reasons. Reflection (88.5%) was the most frequent code, in which writers focused primarily towards reflecting on the relationships between characters. A majority of the stories focused on the perspective of a female character (75%). Finally, 21.5% of stories focused on wish fulfillment. In all, the Vinney and Dill-Shackleford (2018) study is an important contributor to understanding the ways fans engage with fan-fiction by using a larger number of fanfic stories.

Parasocial interactions and fan writing

Horton and Wohl (1956) first coined the term parasocial relationships as one-sided imaginary relationships with fictional characters, in which the viewer feels a connection strong enough to maintain a bond. Although parasocial interactions and parasocial relationships are

often used interchangeably, there is a distinction between the two that is often confused. While parasocial interaction refers to a “an intuitive feeling of mutual awareness, attention, and adjustment with a media character in an exposure situation,” parasocial relationships refer to a “longer-term association that may begin to develop during viewing but also extends beyond the media exposure situation” (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016, p. 25). As described by Giles (2002), parasocial relationships are initiated by the experience of parasocial interactions.

Parasocial relationships are ongoing bonds that develop over time with greater exposure and familiarity. Watching a character (on television) consistently or being immersed in a character from a novel may create a sense of intimacy and connection by way of shared experiences and regular interactions. While parasocial interactions are triggered by factors, such as bodily addressing (eye gazing, the media persona directly speaking to the audience such as, news reporters, television host, etc.), parasocial relationships are activated by the mediated other presenting attractive traits and behaviour that reinforces a sense of liking (Hartmann, 2017). Parasocial relationships are ongoing bonds that develop over time with greater exposure and familiarity. Watching a character (on television) consistently or being immersed in a character from a novel may create a sense of intimacy and connection by way of shared experiences and regular interactions. These interactions can strengthen and continue to exist beyond the exposure situation as individuals become affectively involved by using their imagination to be part of the social worlds of their favoured character (Rubin et al., 1985). Moreover, by reacting interpersonally with fictional characters, fans or viewers “may feel like know them” or begin to see media personalities as friends (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). These interactions become “predictable, nonthreatening, and, hence, perfect role partner for the viewer” (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985, p. 156).

Perse and Rubin (1985) suggest that parasocial bonds may satisfy gratification needs with increased intimacy and consistent interactions. Consistent with this suggestion,

Kokesh and Sternadori (2005) found that all participants reported feeling emotionally attached with characters and crying with characters during aversive developments. Others reported feeling actively involved in the lives of the characters. Moreover, participants reported that they perceived events presented in novels as realistic. One participant reported that the book characters influenced their perceptions of real people and helped them in social situations. The degree of realism increased with the level of similarity the reader shared with the character (Kokesh & Sternadori, 2015). These findings suggest that parasocial bonds are a consequence of regular, reliable, and similar encounters with textual characters.

Researchers have postulated that participating in fandom activities may increase parasocial relationship intensity. O'Donovan (2016) is one of the first studies to explore the effects of participating in fandom activities on parasocial relationships. The authors investigated the intensity of participants' parasocial relationships before and after they began engaging in fandom activities. Twenty-three female participants were recruited between the ages of 18 and 24. The results indicate that engaging in fandom participation significantly increased the intensity of the parasocial relationship. In the second part of the study, participants were asked a series of open-ended questions to understand how parasocial relationships affected their everyday lives. The most common themes found included loneliness, the use of own language, acceptance, friendship, escaping reality, and improved confidence and skills. Although this study is the first to explore the relationship between fandom activities and the intensity of parasocial interactions, the study focused on all forms of fandom activities. However, some fandom activities may have more profound effects on the intensity of parasocial relationships. Moreover, this study included a sample size of all females. It is, therefore, likely that fans who identify with media characters think of them outside of media interactions, and may extend these interactions by writing fan-fiction. Fan-fiction in turn offers a medium to explore parasocial bonds and

process personal connections. Consistent with the Social Surrogacy hypothesis (SS), it is possible that, like fiction/non-fictional television and interactive video games, writing fan-fiction maybe be related with social functioning by way of parasocial relationships.

Two key factors have been associated with parasocial interactions (PSI): companionship and personal identity (Giles, 2002). As described by Giles (2002), PSI can serve as an alternative form of companionship “resulting from “deficiencies” in social life and dependency on television” (p. 280). Media characters can remind viewers of themselves and they can vicariously identify with the character, environment, and/or situation which can help the viewer release suppressed emotion (catharsis), join the experience, and feel less lonely. Viewers are able to apply the story to their personal experiences and adapt accordingly. They can develop new connections, perceptions, and problem-solving strategies (Giles, 2002). According to Rosengren and Windahl (1972), PSIs exist when the viewer interacts with the character, but not the actor playing the character. PSIs further differ from affinity and wishful identification. Viewers can develop a liking for a character without identifying with the character or forming a parasocial relationship, such as a natural attraction or liking for a character (Rosengren & Windahl, 1972). Wishful identification is a type of identification in which an individual wishes to emulate the characteristics of the character (e.g., dressing style, behaviour or as a role model). PSI, however, does not imply that individuals will have a desire to emulate the media character (Rosengren & Windahl, 1972).

Moreover, there are important characteristics of the favoured media character that contribute to parasocial interactions, including authenticity/realism, representation, and user contexts. According to Giles (2002) although PSI can occur with characters that may not be an accurate representation of reality (e.g., Harry Potter), PSI are generally strongest when the figure is seen as credible, and a sense of perceived realism is evident towards the character. The representation and prominence of media characters on various media outlets can intensify this interaction (e.g., a film star may appear on various television shows, radio channels etc.). Lastly,

user context is described as someone who is a consistent “a television viewer, often a solitary figure, whose PSI gratifies a need for social interaction” (Giles, 2002, p. 292).

Theoretical models of PSI

The development of PSI entails cognitive, emotional, and behavioural processes that may occur among the viewers. In the book, *Psychology of Entertainment*, Klimmt, Hartmann, and Schramm (2006) present different responses to parasocial interactions including: attention, allocation, comprehension, reconstruction, activation of prior life experience, anticipatory observation, and evaluation. When people experience high levels of PSI, they are more likely to invest more attention understanding and perceiving the character, such as processing what the persona is saying, doing, and will actively try to seek new information. Based on these attentional processes, viewers are also more likely to place greater cognitive efforts to comprehend the actions and decisions of their favoured persona (Klimmt et al, 2006). This comprehension may lead to identification with the character and trigger similar life experiences or circumstances in which viewers compare themselves to the persona. Viewers may attempt to predict the consequences of the person’s action and greater time is further invested in evaluating the moral decisions. Lastly, the construction of relations between the viewer and persona lead to the viewer engaging in social comparisons looking for similarities and a sense of affiliation (Klimmt et al., 2006).

Giles’ (2002) model of PSI provides a theoretical framework to understand the development of PSI. This model consists of two components: “Continuum of Social–Parasocial Encounters,” and “Stages in the Development of the Parasocial Relationship.” The continuum of parasocial encounters is dependent on four factors. The first factor is the number of people involved. The more people involved in the interaction, the weaker the quality of the PSI. The second factor is Physical distance, which consists of different orders. The first order interactions occur when the

media figure can address the user directly, such as a talk show host who is speaking to the audience directly onscreen; second order interactions are of which the media figure is to some degree inauthentic, such as a soap character played by an actor; and lastly, third order encounters are with fantasy or cartoon characters. The third factor is social conventions. Lastly, the fourth factor is the potential relationship with the character (face to face communication is limited, but included in this model) (Giles, 2002).

To summarize, parasocial interactions conceptually differ from parasocial relationships. While parasocial interactions are initiated by the presence of a media persona during an exposure situation, parasocial relationships can be experienced without the mediated persona present. Both however, can be developed with any media/textual character and the strength of these bonds are dependent on factors such as perceived realism, similarity, affinity and reliability or exposure.

Factors affecting parasocial relationships/interactions

Building on the definition and explication of the parasocial phenomena, the following section reviewed empirical evidence to highlight the role of interpersonal characteristics and various other factors that may affect or predict parasocial relationship intensity, particularly in influencing wellbeing.

Loneliness: Loneliness and difficulty integrating in society have been argued to be significant motivators for individuals to develop parasocial relationships (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2008; Perse & Rubin, 1990). Lonely people may respond by finding opportunities for social activity or by being productive alone. For others, loneliness may lead to hopelessness, depression, boredom, and passivity (Perse & Rubin, 1990). The compensation hypothesis suggests that when face-to-face interactions are not available, individuals revert to television as an alternative way to satisfy social needs. Madison and Lance (2015) suggest that “the parasocial is complementary to normal social life...it provides a social milieu in which the

everyday assumptions and understandings of primary group sociability are demonstrated and reaffirmed” (p. 223).

Consistent with these expectations, existing studies have explored Madicon and Lance’s assumption; however, findings indicate otherwise. Perse and Rubin (1990) found that although loneliness was correlated with increased use of communication channels and reliance on television, parasocial interactions were not correlated with loneliness. Wang, Fink, and Cai (2008) found that among college students, parasocial interactions do not serve as an alternative for social or romantic loneliness. An individual who has unmet romantic needs may not find parasocial relationships as effective because, although parasocial interactions allow for imagined interactions, they lack the physical intimacy and physical presence of a partner. Similarly, family loneliness (i.e., “detachment or abandonment from family relations”, p. 90) and chronic loneliness (i.e., “is experienced dissatisfaction about relationships with others over time” p. 91) were not significant predictors of parasocial interactions. Wang et al. (2008) further explored the moderating effect of gender between loneliness and parasocial relationships. The results indicate that for women, as family loneliness increased, so did their use of parasocial interactions. In contrast, for men, chronic loneliness increased, so did their use of parasocial interactions. Therefore, it seems that parasocial interactions may be an effective alternative means for both women and men but for different motivations or types of loneliness. Wang et al. (2008) suggests the possibility that, because college students have access to other high technology media, television may not be an effective medium to satisfy interpersonal needs.

In contrast, older adults may be susceptible to loneliness, with fewer opportunities for social engagement as a result of consequence of mobility and health issues compared to young adults (Chory-Assad, & Yanen, 2005). Scholars postulate that older adults may, therefore, develop parasocial bonds to compensate for the lack of social connectivity (compensation

hypothesis). Considering these claims, Chory-Assad et al. (2005) expected that the failure to find a positive relationship between loneliness and parasocial interactions may be due to age, with previous studies focusing on a sample of younger adults. This understanding encouraged the researchers to explore the relationship between parasocial interactions and hopelessness and/or loneliness among older adults. However, in contrast to expectations that were consistent with Wang et al. (2018), loneliness did not negatively predict parasocial interactions. Loneliness, however, predicted wishful identification with media characters. Thus, it is possible that lonely people merely watch television as a source of distraction and to avoid loneliness (Chory-Assad et al., 2005).

In both studies, participants completed an adapted version of the Rubin and Perse's (1987) 10-item Parasocial Interaction Scale (PSI-Scale), one of the most frequently used scales to measure the existence of PSI. Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen (2015) compared Rubin and Perse's (1987) PSI-Scale with a newer measure - the Experience of Parasocial Interaction Scale (EPSI-Scale) - and found that the EPSI-Scale was a better predictor for PSI. PSI-Scale is better used to assess users' short term (vs. long-term) liking of media characters. Dibble et al. (2016) highlights that the items in the PSI-scale reflect the users liking or positive attitude towards the media character. They suggest that items need to tap on the "give-and-take" in a media exposure situation instead (e.g., "When I'm watching the newscast, I feel as if I am part of their group", p. 6). Therefore, it is possible existing studies that examined loneliness and parasocial interactions actually assessed a positive interpersonal experience and not the actual parasocial process referring to the "intuitive feeling of mutual awareness, attention, and adjustment with a media character in an exposure situation" (p. 27). The EPSI-scale aims to determine whether viewers feel they are "being directly addressed" by the media character (Dibble, 2005). The PSI-scale is often confused between identification and interaction, and thus difficult to operationalize. Moreover, the original scale was developed to measure the relationship between viewers and local television news anchors/hosts who provide greater opportunities for interpersonal interaction (Dibble, 2005; Rubin et al., 1985). Newscasters are trained to address audience

members directly and encourage a bond of familiarity and dependency (Rubin et al., 1985). Authors have, however, modified the PSI scale to meet the requirement of their studies, possibly affecting the validity of the scale. Psychometric improvement, therefore, may lead to greater accuracy to detecting the association between parasocial relationships and loneliness.

Greenwood and Long (2009), examined different types of solitude experiences and the need to belong as possible predictors of media involvement and transportability (i.e., the “general tendency to become emotionally and mentally absorbed with TV programs and the characters that inhabit them” p. 645). The findings suggested that self-discovery (gaining insight about oneself such as goals, values etc.), diversion/engaging in distracting activities and loneliness (desire for interpersonal contact) were all significantly related to increased PSI. In addition, self-expansion/discovery and other-oriented solitude (absence of others - intimacy and loneliness) *predicted* both PSI and transportability while diversion only predicted PSI (Greenwood & Long, 2009). This finding is consistent with the idea that people who are watching television to experience diversion or sense of escapism are not necessarily involved with the media character or immersed in the narrative. The authors also explored the role of belongingness and found that the high need to belong was predictive of PSI and transportability. This relationship was mediated by other-oriented solitude. It can be concluded that PSI served as social surrogates that have helped individuals feeling loneliness feel connected to others (Greenwood & Long, 2009).

Whitenack (2015) found that among people with down syndrome (DS), parasocial relationships with their favourite media character helped foster self-talk. Whitenack (2015) describes that people with DS are more likely to have difficulty experiencing interpersonal relationships with others due to cognitive delay and language barriers. Thus, parasocial interactions through self-talk and imaginary companions can be a way to cope with feelings of

social exclusion or isolation. For example, some participants believed the characters were real and, through roleplay, maintained parasocial interactions. Media characters further helped people with DS to express themselves (e.g., vent their anger, frustrations, and happiness) and create an environment in which people understood them. All of the participants reported they viewed their favourite character as the friend and that perceived similarity enhanced attachment with characters. Out of 18 interviews, no participants reported negative effects (Whitenack, 2015). Some participants reported that they used parasocial interactions as way to improve their communication skills. Overall, the findings of this study indicate that, among people who are more susceptible to loneliness, PSI can be used as a coping mechanism (Whitenack, 2015).

Belonging Needs: Although both belongingness and loneliness are connected to each other, loneliness is an emotional response to the perceived lack of social contacts (perceived social isolation), whereas belonging is the desire or drive to build social connections (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The inherent desire to belong and maintain positive social relationships has an evolutionary basis and is a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). When people's needs for belonging are threatened via ostracism or social exclusion, people are likely to experience emotions like grief, abandonment, loneliness and longing for others (MacDonald & Leary, 2005).

Given the importance of feeling socially included, when social connections are not available through human interaction, people will search for alternative means to obtain social needs (Derrick et al., 2009). Through a series of experimental studies, Derrick et al. (2009) examined the Social Surrogacy hypothesis (SS) that is, "can parasocial relationships provided by television programs yield the experience of belonging?" (p. 353). Derrick et al. (2009) postulated that the lack of belonging encourages individuals to seek out relationships - both real and parasocial relationships. They hypothesized that if television evoked a sense of belongingness,

then events that threatened belongingness (e.g., rejection experience) would elicit the desire to watch a favoured television program. Moreover, thinking of favoured a television show would reduce feelings of loneliness and act as a buffer against conditions threatening social belongingness (Derrick et al., 2009). The findings indicate that participants were more likely to write about their favoured television show after their needs for belonging were threatened than the control condition (Derrick et al., 2009). Comparing non-favoured versus favoured television confirmed that the results were not a result of escapism and rather a sense of connection to the favoured television show. One of the studies found that recalling a favoured television show after being triggered to remember a fight with a close other buffered against self-esteem, mood and feelings of rejection. Although the research by Derrick et al. (2009) is pivotal in the development of the social surrogacy hypothesis, their findings are driven more by the atmosphere of watching television rather than the actual parasocial interaction. It is possible that merely watching or writing about a favoured show is more enjoyable, which in turn leads to positive mood and other positive outcomes. The last study, therefore, addressed this concern by examining whether thinking about favoured television show (vs. thinking about a positive academic achievement experience) alleviates belonging needs. Findings suggest that thinking of a favoured television show reduced activation of rejection-related words.

Introversion: The process of forming interpersonal relationships with others depends on the individual's desire and propensity to do so. Thus, introverts who are generally known to be socially withdrawn and participate less in social activities may have fewer opportunities to form interpersonal relationships compared to extroverts (Hamburger & Benartzi, 2000). Extroverted personalities prefer face-to-face social interactions whereas, introverted personalities are more likely to prefer fewer stimulating situations to meet people such as Facebook (Luchies, 2013). In addition, introverts are likely to date less than extroverts and have fewer romantic encounters (Gute & Eshbaugh, 2008).

Given the aversive effects of unmet social needs, introverts are more susceptible to these negative effects. Consistent with the skill deficit model, researchers suggest that “those who have difficulties with social relationships because they lack either the ability to relate to the feelings of others or are extremely shy also have trouble developing relationships with television characters” (Cohen, 2004, p. 192). Findings, however, indicate otherwise: for example, as cited in Hartmann (2017), Vorder and Knobloch (1996) found that participants who were not motivated to interact with others developed the strongest parasocial interactions. Similarly, Tsao (1996) found that introversion was unrelated to parasocial development while extraversion was related to parasocial development. In summary, these findings indicate that people with heightened (and not “weaker”) interpersonal skills experience greater parasocial relationships (Hartmann, 2017).

Attraction: Rubin and McHugh (1987) posit that the more a television character was perceived as attractive, the more the viewer liked the character, and this attraction was correlated to parasocial development. Interpersonal attraction includes: (a) social attraction (i.e., the degree to which the viewer feels similar to the media character and desires a friendship), (b) physical attraction captures how physically attractive the viewer perceives the media character to be, and /or (c) task attractiveness is how “able, credible, or reliable” a media character appears to the viewer (Rubin & McHugh, 1987, p. 233). Rubin and McHugh (1987) found that task and social attraction were stronger predictors than physical attraction of parasocial developments with television celebrities. Similarly, Kurtin, Brien, Roy, and Dam (2018) explored interpersonal attraction and the development of parasocial interactions with Youtubers (content creators on the social networking site, YouTube). As described by Kurtin et al. (2018), Youtubers mimic face to face interaction and aim to build connections with viewers through their personalities and unique content. The results suggest that greater Youtube exposure was related to the development of parasocial relationships. Moreover, social and physical attraction were positively related to parasocial relationships (Kurtin et al., 2018).

As described by Turner (1993), “people are attracted to others who share similar attitudes, values, and beliefs” (p. 444). Consistent with the similarity-attraction principle, the more perceived similarity there is between the favoured character and individual, the stronger the parasocial relationship will be. Bui (2015) examined whether (a) parasocial interactions (PSI) are a stronger predictor than identification for selecting a favoured celebrity; (b) similar physical characteristics (such as age, gender and ethnicity) influenced their choice of media celebrity; and (c) if PSI, celebrity identification and participant characteristics predicted gender, age, ethnicity of the chosen favoured celebrity. The results indicate that participants reported greater PSIs than identification with their chosen celebrity. Furthermore, although ethnicity was not a salient predictor for selecting a favourite celebrity, age and gender significantly predicted choice of favoured media celebrity. Male participants were more likely to select male celebrities while female participants selected female celebrities slightly more than male celebrities. Furthermore, lower scores on the PSI, greater celebrity identification, and being female predicted the selection of a female celebrity. Lastly, lower scores on the PSI, greater celebrity identification, and being older predicted the selection of an older celebrity (Bui, 2015). Although the findings suggest that PSI’s are a better predictor than identification, and common physical characteristics play a strong role in selecting a celebrity figure, the author did not explore reasons for why participants choose their favourite celebrity, such as similarities in values, hobbies, personalities etc. Keeping this limitation in my mind, the current study aims to utilize both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to collect more detailed information about why people develop parasocial relationships.

Romantic Relationships: Although romantic parasocial relationships are one-sided, they can aid with the transition into real relationships. The insertion of the self in fan-fiction can create a sense of connection and safe haven for individuals to experiment and conquer their fears. For example, individuals with social anxiety may benefit from interacting with fictional characters to practice their social skills and how to behave in social/romantic situations (Gannon, 2018). Gannon

(2018) found that it is common for adolescents to develop romantic relationships with fictional characters to help understand their sexuality and what kind of partner they want in the future. These parasocial relationships can be explored without fearing rejection and social anxiety. Furthermore, through fantasies involving the character and themes of unconditional positive regard and acceptance, adolescents may feel like their needs are being met through these faux relationships (Gannon, 2018).

Attachment: According to the attachment theory based on the works of John Bowlby, early childhood experiences with the infant caregiver influence the development of attachment behaviour in adult relationships (Bretherton, 1992). Cole and Leets (1999) explored the relationship between Bowlby's Attachment theory and the development of parasocial relationships. The findings suggest that individuals with an anxious-ambivalent style of attachment are the most likely to develop parasocial relationships with their favourite television personality. In anxious-ambivalent relationships, people are likely to seek constant approval. Many respond with angry feelings when attention and reassurance is not received, and are more likely to fear rejection and thus, have difficulty trusting their partner. It is postulated that, imaginary interactions with television personalities is a means of satisfying unmet relational needs (Cole & Leets, 1999). Avoidant individuals are the least likely to develop parasocial relationships. Interestingly, when secure individuals experienced distrust or turbulence in their relationship, they were more likely to turn to parasocial relationships; however, avoidant individuals did not (Cole & Leets, 1999). This is consistent with the nature of avoidant individuals who are distant and fearful of becoming too close to others and fear being abandoned. Cole and Leets (1999) suggests that it is possible that avoidant individuals have come to terms that no one can be trusted, including TV personalities.

Self-control: According to the Self-Control Strength Model, the depletion of self-control is a consequence of a limited resource and one method to restore self-control is through social

interaction (Derrick, 2012). Research suggests that thinking of close others can be energizing, and can facilitate self-control (Derrick, 2012). Simultaneously social interactions can have aversive effects, such as exclusion and rejection, depleting self-control in turn (Derrick, 2012). Thus, people may use social interactions for different goals. It is, therefore, possible that when people experience a lack of self-control, they seek an alternative to social interaction to restore self-control, also known as the social surrogate restoration hypothesis (Derrick, 2012). Derrick (2012) explored this phenomenon in a series of experimental studies. In the first study, confirming the manipulation check, participants who were given a regulated writing task (a rather difficult test) spend greater effort in completing the task and showed greater negative mood than participants in the free writing condition. The next participants were asked to write about their favourite television program while participants in the neutral condition wrote about items found in their room. The social surrogacy essays were assessed using the software Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count to code the content of the essays, including word count, positive/negative mood words, and self-references. Depleted participants wrote longer essays about their favourite television program than participants in the free writing condition, and no differences were found when writing about items in their room (Derrick, 2012). Lastly, participants completed the Remote Associates Test (RAT) to further test whether thinking about a favourite television show restored self-control. Regulated writers completed fewer RAT questions correctly than free writers, but these results were no longer significant when they wrote about their favourite television program. The findings confirm that recalling a favourite television show restored feelings of self-control (Derrick, 2012).

To summarize, the reviewed literature indicates that parasocial interaction is related with participants' satisfaction and enjoyment, and can have a profound impact on fostering wellbeing, such as by influencing self-control, feelings of loneliness etc. The social benefits of fan writing are promising, given the findings stemming from studies that found parasocial relationships serve a social function and can help in coping with threats or the need to belong. However, the reviewed

literature in this chapter highlights the lack of empirical data exploring the interaction between fan-fiction and parasocial interactions/relationships. It is possible that fan-fiction can act as a vehicle for parasocial relationships and allow writers (like television viewers) to repeatedly immerse themselves in a narrative in which the social world becomes familiar and comfortable. Using a mixed-methods approach to analyze data collected through a cross-sectional survey and semi-structured interviews, the present study seeks to address this gap by examining the impact of fan writing on social functioning by way of parasocial interactions/relationships.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This chapter describes the methodological choice and the research design. In this study, a mixed methods design was used with data collection occurring in two phases – quantitative and qualitative. This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of each of the research phases, including sampling procedures, data collection methods and analytical techniques. The chapter ends with ethical considerations for both quantitative and qualitative phases.

The philosophical paradigm of the study design

A paradigm consists of a shared set of beliefs, values, and assumptions about how to conduct research (GoldKuhl, 2012). Acquiring knowledge has traditionally been understood using a positivist, interpretivist or pragmatist approach. While the positivist approach is dominated by quantitative research and focuses on empirical hypothesis testing and the generalization of findings, the interpretative approach is qualitative and focuses on human experiences that cannot be predetermined by probabilistic models (GoldKuhl, 2012). The positivist approach deems research to be of good quality based on internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity. Interpretivists, on the other hand, explore the meanings of people's behaviour, and it is their thoughts that motivate behaviour. As described by Bryman, Bell and Teevan (2012), the difference is reflected in the "division between the positivist emphasis on the explanation of human behaviour and the interpretive preference for an empathetic understanding and interpretation of human behaviour" (p. 9). The current study design is, however, derived from the pragmatism paradigm, which integrates both the positivist and interpretivist approaches accommodating the diverse nature of the current study. In this way, pragmatism permits the researcher to deviate from the boundaries and "forced choice dichotomy between post-positivism and constructivism" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 27).

Mixed method approach

Creswell (2013) identified three designs of mixed research: the convergent

design, the exploratory sequential design, and the explanatory sequential design. In a convergent design, modules are conducted in parallel and are consolidated after completion. Meanwhile, in a sequential design, modules are done after one another, in which the first module informs the latter. Finally, in an embedded design, modules are intertwined, where the results of one module depend on the other (Creswell, 2013; Tobi & Kampen, 2017).

This study employs a convergent mixed methods design involving a quantitative design, entailing a cross-sectional survey, and a qualitative design, comprising of semi-structured interviews with fan writers focusing on their motivations and experiences. Davis and Leppo (2010) assert “the mixed methods research design capitalizes on the uniqueness of quantitative and qualitative differences, while also capitalizing on the synergy between the two approaches” (p.61). Few researchers have used qualitative studies to explore fans’ personal experiences and motivations for fan writing (e.g., Feehily, 2007 & Lee, 2011). Additionally, quantitative data used to statistically verify the possibility of mediating variables remain scarce. Much of the existing studies on fan-fiction have used interviews with fan-fiction writers or analyzed message board discussions on fan-fiction forums (e.g., Larsen & Zubernis, 2012). Qualitative interviews have illuminated to the idea of social connections and friendships being a motivator for engaging in fandom activities. However, empirical data using rigorous methods remain limited. The goal of this study is to provide an exhaustive and integrated exploration of fan writing and its relation to parasocial experiences and sense of belonging.

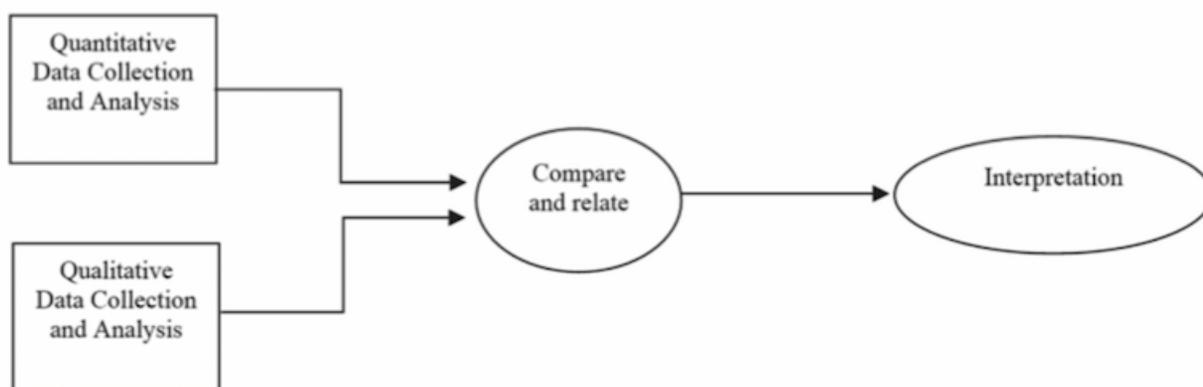


Figure 3.1: Convergent mixed-parallel design
 (Source: Demir & Pismek, 2018, p. 124)

Data collection and integration

The research project is conducted into two distinct phases: a quantitative phase (Phase One) and a qualitative phase (Phase Two). In the quantitative phase, questionnaires were administered to individuals for the purpose of collecting information on time spent writing fan-fiction, parasocial interactions, sense of belonging and social presence. Specifically, participants completed the Audience-Persona Interaction (API) Scale (Aute & Palmgreen, 2000) from Communication and Media studies and the Belongingness Theory of Social Networking Site Addiction Measure (modified) (Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett, 1985) from Psychology. In the follow-up qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explain and deepen understanding of the quantitative results. Finally, findings from survey questionnaires (quantitative) and semi-structured interviews (qualitative) were integrated to interpret the data. The details of the two methods of data collection and analyses are discussed in the following sections.

Quantitative Phase

Inclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria for the quantitative study comprised of individuals who were: (a) over the age of 16; (b) identified themselves as active fan-writers; (c) had access to a computer with Internet and (d) were able to read and understand English to complete the online survey.

Procedures and data collection

Participants were recruited using a combination of convenience and snowballing methods. The study was advertised on social media platforms, specifically Facebook including Fan-fiction Facebook group pages, such as the “Fanfiction Writers United” and “Fanfiction Page.” The study was also advertised on Fanfiction.net, an online fandom forum. Potential participants were invited to participate in the online survey and encouraged to share the survey with their family and friends on social media platforms (*Appendix C*).

Study-related questionnaire data were collected using the REDCap online data collection and survey platform from November 2020 to January 2021. Upon completing participant informed consent form (*Appendix D*), respondents were directed to complete the following survey instruments: Demographics and Time Spent Writing Fanfic Survey (*Appendix H*), the Audience-Persona Interaction (API) Scale (*Appendix I*) (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000), and finally the Modified Belongingness Theory of Social Networking Site Addiction Measure (Gao, Liu & Li, 2017) (*Appendix J*).

Instruments used

Demographics and Time Spent Writing Fanfic Survey. Participants were asked to indicate their age, ethnicity, and gender. For gender an open-ended question was asked: “what is your gender?” This demographic information was used to describe the sample and compare groups. To measure the

amount of time spent writing fan-fiction in a week, participants were asked an open-ended question: How many hours do you spend writing fan-fiction in a week?

Audience-Persona Interaction (API) Scale: The API scale taps into the various dimensions of parasocial interactions predicted and observed by many theorists in previous research. The API scale entails 22 items with four sub-scales, including (a) identification with favourite character (Cronbach's alpha .81), (b) interest in favourite character (Cronbach's alpha .82), group identification/interaction (Cronbach's alpha .73), and (c) favourite character's problem solving ability (Cronbach's alpha .70) (Aute & Palmgreen, 2000). Cronbach's alpha for the entire measure was .84. Aute and Palmgreen (2000) found positive correlations between the API scale and TV series affinity, indicating that people develop parasocial relationships with their favorite sitcom character. The scale uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). All items were summed to form a single score to measure the strength of the parasocial interaction with higher scores indicating a more intense parasocial relationship (Aute & Palmgreen, 2000).

Belongingness Theory of Social Networking Site Addiction Measure (modified). Gao, Liu and Li (2017) developed this measure to explore the impact of social presence on addiction to Social Networking Sites (SNS). The measure assesses various factors including: social presence, sense of belonging, escapism, pleasure, arousal, and SNS addiction. For the purpose of this study, only items pertaining to social presence and social belonging were administered. Items were modified to include instructions as if participants were writing fan-fiction instead of use of SNS. For example, "There is a sense of human contact in this SNS" was modified to "There is a sense of human contact with writing fan-fiction." Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The Cronbach's α for social presence was 0.819, and 0.852 for social belonging, indicating strong reliability. Convergent validity was also evaluated and results indicated that all constructs ranged

between 0.538 and 0.745 suggesting optimal discriminant validity (Gao et al., 2017).

Data analysis

To determine statistically significant group differences between time spent writing fan-fiction and parasocial interactions and parasocial bonds (i.e., social presence and social belonging), the Kruskal-Wallis *H* test - a nonparametric alternative to the one-way ANOVA - was conducted. This test was used because the data was not distributed normally, and therefore, did not meet all the requirements of the ANOVA test.

According to MacFarland and Yates (2016), the Kruskal-Wallis *H* is most appropriately used when there are more than two groups of an independent variable and the dependent variable is measured at the ordinal or continuous scale. As described by Chan & Walmsley (1997), the *H* test uses ranked data instead of the original observations. The Kruskal-Wallis *H* test is an omnibus test statistic, and thus, post-hoc tests specifically pairwise comparisons using the Dunn-Bonferroni approach were used to determine which specific groups of the independent variable were significantly different. Further, correlation analyses were conducted to determine whether both greater social presence and belongingness are associated with higher levels of parasocial interactions. Finally, a simple mediation analysis was used to determine if parasocial interaction mediates the relationship between hours spent writing fan-fiction and social belongingness.

Qualitative Phase

Inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria for the qualitative study comprised of individuals over the age of 16, (b) who identified themselves as active fan-writers, (c) had access to a computer with Internet, (d) who were able to read and understand English, and (e) were willing to participate in an audio recorded phone interview for approximately one hour with the researcher.

Procedures. Phase II of the study involved qualitative interviews to complement and extend the findings of phase I. Interested participants were emailed a copy of the consent form that ensured

that their participation was voluntary, informed and ongoing (e.g., if the participant changed their mind, they had the right to withdraw) (*Appendix G*). A contact number and email address were provided to participants for contacting the researcher if they had any additional questions and to make sure they understood what their participation would involve. Interested participants received a follow up email acknowledging receipt of their email and form, and options to schedule a date and time to interview.

Data collection. The collection of data comprised of the semi-structured in-depth interviews. A total of ten interviews were completed over the telephone and the iPhone Facetime audio function (when applicable) between the months January – March 2021. Two additional interviews were conducted in October 2021. Interviews lasted between 18 minutes (shortest interview) to 53 minutes (longest interview). Answers to all the interview questions were audio recorded. All identifying information was removed prior to analysis. After the completion of each individual interview, the interview recording was immediately copied, password protected into the personal laptop of the researcher and backed in the LU Google Drive. Using the functionality of iTunes to pause and scroll back the interview recording was transcribed verbatim as much as possible. Once the transcriptions were completed, they were verified one final time in entirety to ensure any inconsistencies or missed ideas were captured. Member checks were also completed to ensure credibility and accuracy of themes.

Research tools. Questions were based on the literature discussed in the literature review (Chapter 2). The interview guide comprised of predetermined questions, and probing questions for the researcher to inquire and dig deeper into participants responses (*Appendix K*). Probing questions included, “Can you tell me more about that” or, “What did you mean by that” (Rosenthal, 2016, p. 320). The sections in the interview guide were thematically created, specifically, by the type of information that was being collected. Section A questions asked for

more factual information on participants' writing habits. Section B introduced questions that required more reflection and were related to the impact of fan writing on emotional wellbeing and participants' motivations. Finally, Section C asked participants to reflect on the effect of fan writing on their relationships. The interview guide was structured in this way to allow the interviewee to share factual information first, and develop rapport and comfort with the researcher, followed by questions that require greater reflection and thought (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). When conducting the actual interviews, some of the questions were slightly reworded or complied together to evoke answers that would form a more cohesive and natural narrative.

Role of the researcher. The researcher has an academic background in Counselling Psychology and is a registered Clinical Counsellor. She has experience providing counselling using a combination of person-centered and solution-focused therapy to individuals of varying ages and cultural backgrounds. She has also worked with individuals presenting with issues ranging from depression and adjustment problems to interpersonal relationship difficulties and substance abuse. During her career, she learned that it is important for clients to feel empowered in sessions, and not overpowered, in order to feel safe and comfortable. This process of fostering safety occurs when therapists encourage openness to explore all perspectives while giving the client's voice priority. While talk therapy is powerful in itself, she found that journal writing and play therapy have significant positive outcomes. As a counsellor and someone passionate about research, she often wondered whether there were other ways to strive for personal change, and that did not require the presence of a therapist.

The researcher was introduced to the phenomenon of "bibliotherapy," which led to the development of the present topic. Bibliotherapy infers that reading for pleasure, as well as the narrative being read, can both help people develop positive coping skills. Through this work, the researcher hopes to make a noteworthy contribution in the interdisciplinary field of Human

Studies as it presents a link between fan writing and belonging not previously examined by the disciplinary fields of Media Studies/Mass Communication and Psychology.

Since qualitative research requires significant interpretation by the researcher, bias is salient. The researcher in this study recognizes her positionality, and was reflexive throughout the study (Chenail, 2011). Although the researcher is not a fan-fiction writer or part of any fandom groups, the researcher is aware of their own biases, assumptions, and perceptions shaping the research process. Moreover, the researcher constantly questioned their motives, interpretations and practices in an effort to enhance the perspectives and the voices of participants. Personal bias was also minimized by ensuring that member checks are utilized (Simpson & Quigley, 2016). Lastly, the researcher has included relevant quotes from participants to support the findings of the study.

Rigour. Nowell et al. (2017) recommend the following constructs to ensure soundness of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility refers to the “fit” between informants’ perspectives and the themes that the researcher identifies. For the purpose of this study, credibility was achieved through the process of member checking to confirm respondent validation. Member checking also assists in ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative studies (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). Furthermore, to increase dependability (i.e., replicability of the findings) and transferability, the researcher provided detailed descriptions of how the data was collected, how themes were selected, and how decisions were made throughout the study (Nowell et al., 2017). To ensure confirmability, the researcher aims to control for bias throughout the interview process by being aware of their own assumptions, obtaining multiple perspectives, and rechecking data.

Member checks. To seek respondent validation and ensure creditability of responses, member checks were conducted from November – December 2021. Findings and interpretations were summarized and shared with participants to check for accuracy and resonance with their

experiences. Once the data was analyzed, participants were emailed to ask their preferred method (phone or email) of contact so that their responses and themes identified may be verified by the researcher. Participants who preferred email were emailed a member checking document (using the template described in Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016, *Appendix L*) in a password protected file. The password was sent in a separate email. The member check document entailed a description of the main themes found and the following questions:

1. Does this match your experience?
2. Do you want to change anything?
3. Do you want to add anything?

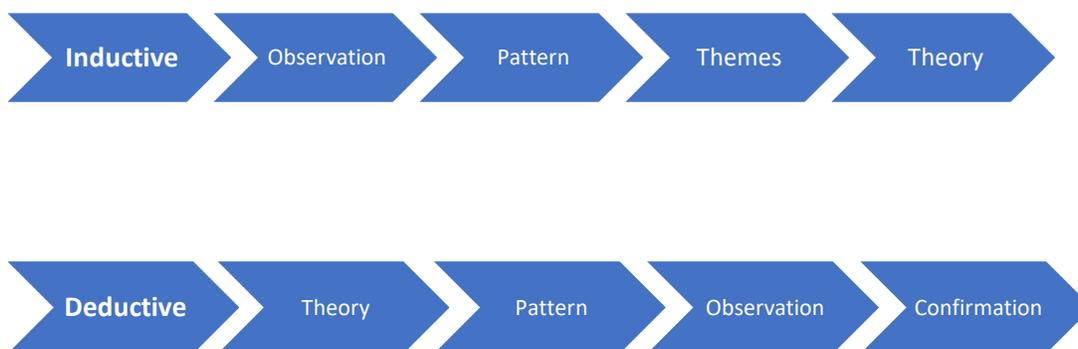
Out of ten participants, five participants followed up to discuss the themes of their interviews. All participants verified the themes as accurate. Two participants elaborated on their initial responses, providing more depth to their answers. These responses were added to the analyses.

Data Analysis. Ten individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted and analysed using a thematic analysis, following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006). As described by Braun and Clarke (2016), the thematic analysis (TA) model is a method “for developing, analyzing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves a systematic process of data coding to develop themes” (p. 4). Thematic analyses are flexible and effective in summarizing key patterns and themes within a large data set. Thematic analyses entail two approaches: inductive (exploratory) and deductive (confirmatory). The inductive method is content-driven and codes are derived directly from the data. Inductive or exploratory analyses are used to further create hypotheses for future studies. In contrast, the confirmatory approach is hypothesis-driven and codes are pre-generated from hypotheses and existing data/research.

An inductive analysis is encouraged when there is minimal knowledge of the

phenomenon in question, and therefore, the researcher is unable to derive codes from previous text data (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). The literature review conducted for the purpose of this study highlighted that, while a few studies have explored the general motivations behind fan writing, no study has explored the effect of fan writing on real and reel relationships (i.e., parasocial development). It should be noted that conducting a detailed literature review can bring light to a theory or framework for collecting and analysing data. However, there is no commitment to staying within the boundaries of the initial framework. The knowledge gathered prior to conducting the study functions to support any consistencies or discrepancies found in the data (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). Thematic analyses do not focus on the frequency of codes to identify significant themes like in a content analysis, allowing for greater depth of perspectives and minimizing the possibility of missing the context. The current study, therefore, employs an inductive thematic approach, in which codes and themes are derived from the content of the data.

Figure 3.2 Inductive versus deductive reasoning



The inductive TA approach is described as “experiential in its orientation and essentialist in its theoretical frame-work, assuming a knowable world and “giving voice” to experiences and meanings of that world” (Barun & Clarke, 2012, p. 59). Using an essentialist approach, the

researcher reports on participants' reality, experiences, and meanings with the goal of theorizing participants' motivations and experiences in a linear fashion.

Semantic versus latent analysis: The current analysis focused on a semantic analysis and latent analysis of the transcripts. While semantic analysis gathers "pure descriptions of people's experiences," latent analysis focuses on meaning-making. Interpretation seeks to go beyond mere description and instead explores meanings that are embedded within human experiences (Lopez & Willis, 2004; Reiners, 2012). The focus is on inquiring "what humans experience rather than what they consciously know" (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 728). These interpretations focus on describing the meanings behind the choices individuals makes.

Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software, was used to organize, manage and analyze data. Participant interviews were manually transcribed and uploaded directly into NVivo for coding. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step guide to conducting a thematic analysis was used to support the coding procedures:

1. *Familiarizing oneself with the data:* Transcripts were read multiple times while noting early impressions of the data set and pieces that were captivating about the data were highlighted.
2. *Generating initial codes:* Initial codes were created by systematically organizing data. Codes "identify and provide a label for a feature of the data that is potentially relevant to the research question" (p. 61). Coding allows researchers to separate data into meaningful units or sections. In contrast to line-by-line coding, segments of data that were relevant or evoked something interesting were coded. Codes that were identified are both descriptive and interpretative in nature. While descriptive codes are an exact summary of the participants' experience, interpretative (latent) codes provide an interpretation of the participant's experience.

3. *Identify themes*: Themes capture “something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 82). In this step, codes were collated into potential themes. I identified broad topics and issues around which the codes were clustered. If the codes shared a unifying pattern, a theme to describe the pattern was created. A miscellaneous theme was also created to include themes that did not appear to sit well anywhere else, but may be important. These themes were either discarded or became part of a new theme.
4. *Reviewing the themes identified in step 3*: At this point, I determined whether the themes made sense, supported the data, and checked for overlap or possible missed themes. I focused on quality inspection, which entailed checking whether the data aligns in relation to the theme or if it is too diverse. Revisions included creating new themes, and tweaking initial themes.
5. *Refining and defining themes*: This step’s purpose is for “identifying the ‘essence’ of what each theme is about (as well as the themes overall) and determining what aspect of the data each theme captures” (p. 92). Each theme was described in a few words to capture the main essence of the captured data. In some cases, sub themes were also identified to showcase the overarching patterns.
6. *Write up of the researcher’s findings*: The final step was to provide a cohesive story of the data based on my analysis.

Ethical considerations

Ethics approval. The research project was approved by Laurentian University’s Research Ethics Board (REB) on October 13th, 2020 (*Appendix A*). Approval for REB renewal was obtained on September 29th, 2021 (*Appendix B*). In accordance to the TCPS, the probability and magnitude of possible harms or level of risk implied by participation in this research was minimal. Participants were asked to fill out questionnaires about the role of

fan-fiction in their lives, and the benefits and costs of participating in the narrative. Had participants experienced any discomfort or distress from participating in this study, they were given the following options: (a) decide not to answer a particular question, (b) take a short break from answering questions, and/or (c) withdraw from the research at any time.

Informed consent. Participants were directed to complete an online consent form prior to completing any measures (*Appendix H*). Individuals who wished to participate in the qualitative phase of the study were asked to share their email address. Those who indicated interest were contacted via email with a separate informed consent form for review (*Appendix G*). Participants were given as much time as necessary to review the study information and ask questions before being asked to give consent. Informed consent was obtained from respondents before participation. Consent forms described the study and its objectives in lay terms, outlined potential benefits/risks to participants, and that participants were free to withdraw at any time. The consent form also informed participants that their participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. The time commitment for the quantitative phase was approximately 20 minutes and 30-45 minutes for the qualitative phase. There was no incentive or reward for participating other than having access to results and interpretations.

Confidentiality and anonymity. The surveys were hosted on RedCAP, a mature, secure web application for building online surveys and data collection. To further ensure privacy of participants, participants were requested not to “tag” or “comment” or publicly name anyone on Facebook. The recruitment poster included the following: “If you meet the above criteria and would like to participate, please follow this link to the study website. Please do not respond directly or comment on this post, to protect your privacy. Also, if you think you know anyone who might fit these criteria, we encourage you to pass this along to them! Please do not ‘tag’ or publicly name anyone whom you are recommending for this study, to protect their privacy.”

All identifying information was removed from transcripts and participants' initials were used in the analysis. In addition, before beginning the interview, participants were informed of their rights and made aware that their identifying information was kept confidential, and that their participation was voluntary and they may withdraw from the study at any time. Once oral consent was obtained, the interview started.

Debriefing. Upon completion of the online survey, participants were directed to the debrief page. The debrief page acknowledged participants for their contributions and explained the nature of the study. Lastly, the debrief page included information at which the results would be available once the study was completed.

Chapter 4: Quantitative results

The following chapter starts with the demographic characteristics used to describe the sample. It is then followed by a detailed presentation of the quantitative findings examining (a) the variation in parasocial interactions by time spent in writing fanfic, (b) how levels of social belongingness and social presence changes as the time spent writing fan-fiction increases, (c) whether social presence and social belongingness are related to the development of parasocial interactions, and (d) whether parasocial interactions has a mediating effect on time spent writing fan-fiction and social belongingness. The chapter ends with a comprehensive discussion on the findings of the survey.

Characteristics of participants:

A total of 603 participants volunteered to participate in the study, but 526 participants actually completed the survey. Five hundred twenty-four participants identified their gender: female (66.4) or cis-female (6.7%), male (4.8%), non-binary (12.0%), genderqueer (2.3%), trans-male (2.5%), agender (1.9%), demi-woman (0.4%), transgender (0.4%), transmasculine nonbinary (0.4%), trans nonbinary (0.2%), genderfluid (1.1%), genderfluid and genderqueer (0.2%), and other (0.8%). Due to the limited number of participants in many gender specific categories, gender was converted into three broad categories: female ($n = 383$), male ($n = 25$) and non-binary ($n = 116$) (*Table 4.1*). The mean age of participants was 31.1 years. More than half of the participants were between the ages 25-44 (59.9%), followed by age 16-24 (29.3%), and finally over 45 (11.6%). Participants predominately identified as Caucasian (79.8%), followed by Southeast Asian (7.9%), Black (1.9%), South Asian (1.7%), Arabic (0.4%), and Indigenous (0.4%). Another 1.0% belonged to other groups and 6.9% preferred not to answer their racial or ethnic origin (*Table 4.1*).

Table 4.1: Demographic and ethnic characteristics of participants.

Gender (<i>N</i> = 524)	%	<i>n</i>
Cis/Female	73.1	383
Male	4.8	25
Non-binary	22.1	116
Age (<i>N</i> = 526)		
Less than 25	29.3	154
25 to 44	59.1	311
45 and over	11.6	61
Ethnicity (<i>N</i> = 521)		
White/Caucasian	79.8	416
Black	1.9	10
Southeast Asian	7.9	41
South Asian	1.7	9
Arabic	0.4	2
First Nations	0.4	2
Other	1.0	5
Prefer not to answer	6.9	36

On average, participants spent 5.9 hours (*SD* = 6.57) hours a week writing fan-fiction, ranging from 0 hours to 60 hours a week. Hours spent writing fan-fiction were converted into three categories (less than 5 hours, 5-10 hours, and 11 or more hours) (*Table 4.2*).

Table 4.2: Time spent writing fanfic in hours/per week

<i>(N = 450)</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>
Less than 5 hours	50.0	225
5-10 hours	35.6	160
11 or more hours	14.4	65

Participants completed two primary questionnaires, the Audience Persona Interaction (API) scale and two subscales (“social presence” and “sense of social belonging”) from the Modified Belongingness Theory of Social Networking Site Addiction questionnaire. The API scale entailed 22 items on four sub-scales, including (a) identification with favourite character, (b) interest in favourite character, (c) group identification/interaction (i.e., feeling a part of the “TV family group,” and (d) favourite character's problem-solving ability (i.e., how reliable the media persona appears to be) (Aute & Palmgreen, 2000, p. 83). The scale used a 5-point Likert scale. All items on the APS scale were summed to form a single score that measures the strength of the parasocial interactions with higher scores indicating a more intense parasocial experience (Aute & Palmgreen, 2000). Items for each factor on the APS scale were also summed to form a single score. Results indicated that mean scores were highest for participants’ interest in favorite or liking towards a character ($M = 24.9$; $SD = 4.40$) while lowest for favorite character’s ability to solve problems ($M = 12.7$; $SD = 3.33$) (*Table 4.3*). The sub-scale for social presence included five items and social belonging entailed four items. Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Items were summed to form a single score with higher scores indicating greater social presence and belongingness. The findings indicate a mean score of 29.7 ($SD = 4.38$) for social presence and 21.7 for social belonging ($SD = 4.64$) (*Table 4.3*).

Table 4.3: Parasocial interactions and bonds

Measures:	# of items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Observed Range</i>
Parasocial Interactions (<i>N</i> = 468)				
Identification with fav character	6	19.7	4.38	6-30
Interest in fav character	6	24.9	4.40	6-30
Group identification/interaction	6	15.2	3.29	5-23
Fav character problem solving ways	4	12.7	3.33	4-20
Total	22	72.5	10.2	40-98
Parasocial Bonds (<i>N</i> = 456)				
Social Presence	5	29.7	4.38	5-35
Social Belongingness	4	21.7	4.64	6-28

Note: *Fav* refers to favourite character. Parasocial interactions were measured using the Audience Persona Interaction Scale (Auter & Palmgreen, 2002) and parasocial bonds were measured using the Modified Belongingness Theory of Social Networking Site Measure (Gao, Liu & Li, 2017).

Analytic results

The following section provides a detailed analysis of the research questions explored in the present study. The Kruskal-Wallis *H* test was used to determine statistically significant group differences between time spent writing fan-fiction groups, and parasocial interactions and parasocial bonds (i.e., social presence and social belonging). Post hoc tests were used to determine which specific groups of the independent variable were significantly different. Correlation analyses were further conducted to determine whether both greater social presence and belongingness are associated with higher levels of parasocial interactions. Finally, a simple mediation analysis was used to determine if parasocial interaction mediates the relationship between hours spent writing fan-fiction and social belongingness.

Research Question (1): Do people who spend more time writing fan-fiction develop stronger parasocial interactions than individuals who spend less time writing fan-fiction?

It was hypothesized that greater time spent writing fan-fiction will lead to more intense parasocial interaction. Participants' responses for time spent writing fan-fiction were divided into three groups (< 5, 5-10 and 11 or more hours). The median values of parasocial interactions were 73.0 for less than 5 hours and 5-10 hours, and 78.0 for 11 or more hours spent writing fan-fiction. The mean values for parasocial interactions were greater for individuals who spent more than 11 hours writing fan-fiction ($M = 76.2$) than those who spent less than 5 hours ($M = 72.1$) and 5-10 hours ($M = 72.2$). Mean ranks were 191.0 for less than 5 hours, 192.4 for 5-10 hours, and 237.6 for 11 or more hours groups (*Table 4.4*). As predicted, the Kruskal-Wallis test showed significant group differences between time spent writing fan-fiction and a parasocial interaction $H(2) = 8.11, p = .01$, suggesting that people develop greater parasocial interaction as they spend more time writing fan-fiction.

Follow-up tests were conducted to evaluate pairwise differences among time spent writing fan-fiction and parasocial interaction intensity as measured by the APS total score (*Table 4.4*). Adjusted significance levels using the Bonferroni correction for multiple tests were employed. The Bonferroni correlation is an adjustment that is applied when multiple analyses are performed on the same sample of data to reduce the possibility of familywise error or type 1 error. The parasocial interaction scores were not statistically different for those who spent less than 5 hours and 5-10 hours writing fan-fiction. However, the results indicated a significant difference between less than 5 hours and 11 or more hours spent writing fan-fiction ($p = .006$; adjusted significance level $p = .019$). In addition, the tests indicated a significant difference in parasocial interaction between those who spent 5-10 hours and who spent 11 or more hours writing fan-fiction ($p = .011$; adjusted significance level $p = .032$). Therefore, we can conclude that a greater time writing fan-fiction elicits a statistically significant increase in parasocial interaction intensity.

Table 4.4: Intensity of parasocial interaction by time spent in writing fan-fiction

Intensity of parasocial interaction (<i>N</i> = 396)	Weekly hours spent writing fanfic		
	Less than 5 hours	5-10 Hours	11 or more hours
Median	73.0	73.0	78.0
Mean	72.1	72.2	76.2
Mean Rank	191.0	192.4	237.6
Kruskal-Wallis Test:	<i>H</i> = 8.11 (<i>p</i> = .017)		
Results of Post-Hoc tests (comparison of groups)	Less than 5 and 5-10 hours	Less than 5 and 11 or more hours	5-10 hours and 11 or more hours
Difference between Mean Ranks	-1.45	- 46.6	- 45.1
Sig. (p)	.908	.006	.011
Adj. Sig. (p)	1.00	.019	.032

Of the four factors (i.e., identification, interest in favorite character, problem solving abilities, group identification/interaction) of the API scale, *group identification /interaction* was the only factor that proved to be significantly different when the four subscales were compared across time spent writing fan-fiction (Table 4.5). Items assessing group identification /interactions included whether participants felt that their interactions with their favorite reel characters were similar to their real-life friends. The median values of group identification/interaction were 15.0 for less than 5 hours and 5-10 hours, and 17.0 for 11 or more hours spent writing fan-fiction. The mean values for group identification/interaction were greater for individuals who spent more than 11 hours writing fan-fiction (*M* = 16.5) than those who spent less than 5 hours (*M* = 14.8) and 5-10 hours (*M* = 15.1). Mean ranks were 188.4 for less than 5 hours 197.0 for 5-10 hours, and 244.9 for 11 or more hours spent writing fan-fiction. The Kruskal-Wallis test showed significant group differences between time spent writing fan-fiction and group identification/interaction, $H(2) = 11.07, p = .004$. These findings indicate that those

who spend more time writing fan-fiction are more likely to have greater identification/interaction with their favourite characters.

Follow-up tests were also conducted to evaluate pairwise differences among time spent writing fan-fiction groups and *group identification/interaction* (Table 4.5). No significant difference was found in the groups of those who write fan-fiction for less than 5 hours and 5-10 hours. However, the results indicated a significant difference between less than 5 hours and 11 or more Hours spent writing fan-fiction ($p = .001$; adjusted $p = .003$). In addition, findings suggest a significant difference between 5-10 hours and 11 or more hours spent writing fan-fiction ($p = .007$; adjusted significance level $p = .02$).

Table 4.5: Index of group identification/interaction by time spent writing fan-fiction

Group identification/interaction ($N = 399$)	Weekly hours spent writing fanfic		
	Less than 5 hours	5-10 Hours	11 or more hours
Median	15.0	15.0	17.0
Mean	14.8	15.1	16.5
Mean Rank	188.4	197.0	244.9
Kruskal-Wallis H Test	$H=11.07$ ($p = .004$)		
Comparison of groups	Less than 5 hours and 5-10 hours	Less than 5 hours and 11 or more hours	5-10 hours and 11 or more hours
Difference between Mean Ranks	-8.56	-56.5	-47.9
Sig. (p)	.496	.001	.007
Adj. Sig. (p)	1.00	.003	.020

1a) Do females experience greater parasocial interaction intensity than other groups?

It was hypothesized that females would experience a higher level of parasocial interactions than men and non-binary groups. No significant group differences were found between gender and

parasocial interactions, $H(2) = 1.29, p = .524$ (mean rank of 226 for females, 224 for males and 243 for participants who identified themselves as non-binary).

1b) Does parasocial interaction vary by age?

Mean scores indicated that parasocial interaction was slightly higher for participants less than 25 years of age ($M = 73.50$) than participants aged between 25-44 ($M = 72.46$), and 45 and over ($M = 70.00$). With a mean rank of 247 for participants less than 25 years old, 230 for 25-44 and 195 for participants over 44, this difference was not statistically significant $H(2) = 5.66, p = .059$.

Research question (2): Do people who spend more time writing fan-fiction experience greater social presence and social belonging?

Separate tests were conducted to assess this difference between the two components of parasocial bonds that is, social presence and social belonging. It was hypothesized that people who spent more time writing fan-fiction experienced greater social presence. The median values for social presence were 30.0 for less than 5 hours and 5-10, and 31.0 for 11 or more hours spent writing fan-fiction. The mean scores indicate that social presence was slightly higher for participants who write fan-fiction for 11 or more hours ($M = 30.1$) than participants who write fan-fiction for 5-10 hours ($M = 29.7$) and less than 5 hours ($M = 29.5$). Mean ranks were 187 for less than 5 hours, 190 for hours between 5-10, and 223 for 11 or more hours. However, no significant difference was found between time spent writing fan-fiction and social presence, $H(2) = 4.64, p = .093$, suggesting that those who spend more time writing fan-fiction are not likely to experience greater social presence.

It was also hypothesized that people who spent more time writing fan-fiction experienced greater social belongingness. The median values of social belonging were 30.0 for less than 5 hours and 5-10 hours, and 31.0 for 11 or more hours spent writing fan-fiction. The mean scores indicate that social belonging was higher for participants who write fan-fiction for 11 or more hours

($M = 23.0$) than participants who write fan-fiction for 5-10 hours ($M = 21.7$) and less than 5 hours ($M = 21.2$). A Kruskal-Wallis test showed significant group differences between time spent writing fan-fiction and sense of belonging, $H(2) = 9.14$, $p = .009$, with a mean rank of 181.8 for less than 5 hours, 194.0 for 5-10 hours, and 223.1 for 11 hours or more hours. These findings indicate that those who spend more time writing fan-fiction are more likely to experience greater social belongingness. Follow-up tests were also conducted to evaluate pairwise differences among time spent writing fan-fiction and social belonging. No significant difference was found between less than 5 hours and 5-10 hours spent writing fan-fiction and social belongingness, $p = .325$ (adjusted significance level $p = .974$). However, the results indicated a significant difference between less than 5 hours and 11 or more hours spent writing fan-fiction ($p = .002$; adjusted significance level $p = .007$). In addition, a significant difference was found in the sense of belonging of those who spent between 5-10 hours and 11 or more hours writing fan-fiction ($p = .024$; however, adjusted significance levels were insignificant $p = .073$) (see *Table 4.6*).

Table 4.6: Sense of belongingness by time spent writing fan-fiction

Social belongingness ($N = 387$)	Weekly hours spent writing fanfic		
	Less than 5 hours	5-10 Hours	11 or more hours
Median	30.0	30.0	31.0
Mean	21.2	21.7	23.0
Mean Rank	181.8	194.0	223.1
Kruskal-Wallis H Test	$H = 9.14$ ($p = .009$)		
Comparison of groups	Less than 5 and 5-10 Hours	Less than 5 and 11 or more hours	5-10 hours and 11 or more hours
Difference between Mean Ranks	-12.2	-51.3	-39.1
Sig. (p)	.325	.002	.024
Adj. Sig. (p)	.974	.007	.073

2a) Do females experience greater parasocial bonds (i.e., social belonging and social presence) than other groups?

It was hypothesized that women would experience a greater sense of belongingness than men and other groups. The median values were 23.0 for participants who identified as female, 20.0 for male, and 23.0 non-binary participants. Mean scores indicated that participants who identified as non-binary ($M = 21.8$) and female ($M = 21.6$) experienced greater social belonging than male ($M = 19.0$) participants. Participants who identified as female (mean rank = 229.5) or non-binary (mean rank = 231.0) experienced a greater sense of belonging than participants who identified as male (mean rank = 156.4). A Kruskal-Wallis test showed a significant difference between at least two of the three gender groups for belonging, $H(2) = 6.39$, $p = .041$. Follow-up tests were conducted to evaluate pairwise differences. Adjusted significance levels using the Bonferroni correction for multiple tests were also employed. Significant differences were found between participants who identified as male and participants who identified as female ($p = .013$). Significant differences were also found in the sense of belonging of participants who identified as male and non-binary ($p = .017$). However, when significance levels were adjusted, this difference was no longer significant ($p = .051$). Lastly, no significant differences were found between participants who identified as female and non-binary ($p = .923$, adjusted $p = 1.0$).

Table 4.7: Sense of social belongingness by gender

	Gender		
Social belongingness ($N = 452$)	Females $n = 329$	Males $n = 21$	Non-binary $n = 102$
Median	23.0	20.0	23.0
Mean	21.6	19.0	21.8
Mean Rank	229.5	156.4	231.0
Kruskal-Wallis H Test:			$H = 6.39$ ($p = .041$)
Comparison of groups	Male vs. female	Male vs. non-binary	Female vs. non-binary

Difference between Mean Ranks	73.1	-74.6	-1.43
Sig. (p)	.013	.017	.923
Adj. Sig. (p)	.038	.051	1.00

It was also hypothesized that women would experience a greater sense of social presence than men and other groups. The median values of social presence were 30.0 for participants who identified as female, 28.0 for male and 30.0 non-binary participants. Mean scores of social presence indicated that participants who identified as non-binary ($M = 29.9$) and female ($M = 29.8$) experienced greater social presence than male ($M = 27.4$) participants. Mean ranks were 226 for participants who identified as female, 239 for participants who identified as non-binary, and 164 for males. However, significant group differences were not found between gender groups and social presence, $H(2) = 5.78, p = .055$.

2b) Do parasocial bonds (social belonging and social presence) vary by age?

The median values of social belonging were 23.0 for participants less than 25, 22.0 for participants between 25-44 group, and 24.0 for participants over 45. Mean scores indicated that social belonging was highest in the 45+ age group ($M = 22.9$), followed by the less than 25 age group ($M = 21.4$) and 25-44 age group ($M = 21.3$) (Table 4.9). A Kruskal-Wallis test showed significant differences between age groups in terms of social belonging, $H(2) = 6.11, p = .047$. Participants over the age of 45 experienced the greatest level of social belongingness (mean rank = 270) compared to participants less than 25 (mean rank = 222) and 25-44 (mean rank = 222). Follow-up tests were conducted to evaluate pairwise differences among age and social belongingness. Significant differences were found in social belonging of participants between 25-44 and 45 and over ($p = .017$; adjusted significance level $p = .050$). Significant differences were found between participants who were less than 25 and over 45 years of age ($p = .023$). However, adjusted significance levels were not significant ($p = .071$). Scores on social belongingness were not

statistically significantly different for participants who were less than 25 years old and participants between 25-44 ($p = 0.953$).

Table 4.8: Sense of social belonging by age-groups

	Age groups		
Social belongingness ($N = 455$)	Less than 25 $n = 135$	25-44 $n = 269$	45 + $n = 51$
Median	23.0	22.0	24.0
Mean	21.4	21.3	22.9
Mean Rank	222.0	222.8	270.7
Kruskal-Wallis H Test:			$H = 6.11$ $(p = 0.047)$
Results of Post-Hoc tests:	Less than 25 and 25-44	Less than 25 and 45+	25-44 and 45+
Difference between Mean Ranks	-.814	- 48.7	- 47.9
Sig. (p)	.953	.024	.017
Adj. Sig. (p)	1.00	.071	.050

The median values of social presence for all three age groups were 30.0. Mean scores indicated almost no difference in social presence for all age groups. Specifically, mean scores for participants less than 25 years was 29.7, followed by 29.8 for participants between ages 25-44, and finally, 29.3 for participants over age 45. Mean ranks include: 231 for participants between the ages 25-44, 224 for participants less than 25, and 219 for participants over 45. No significant group differences were found between the age groups for social presence $H(2) = .487, p = .784$.

Research Question 3: Are social presence and social belongingness related to the development of parasocial interactions?

A Spearman's rank-order correlation was run to determine the statistical association of parasocial interactions with social presence and belonging. This test was used because the data was not normally distributed, and therefore, did not meet all the requirements of Pearson's correlation. Spearman correlation does not assume normality of variables and analyzes the strength of association

between ranks of two variables. Findings indicate a positive albeit weak correlation between ranks of social presence and parasocial interactions $\rho = .360, p < .001$, and social belongingness and parasocial interactions, $\rho = .305, p < .001$ respectively. It can, therefore, be concluded that both greater social presence and belonging were likely associated with higher parasocial interactions.

Research Question 4: Is the effect of time spent writing fan-fiction on social belonging mediated by parasocial interaction?

A simple mediation analysis following the bootstrapping method with PROCESS (macro for SPSS) was used to determine if parasocial interaction mediates the relationship between hours spent writing fan-fiction (x) and social belongingness (y) (see Figures 4.1 & 4.2). Bootstrapping is a non-parametric approach used when the given data does not meet the distributional assumptions of traditional techniques (Demming, Jahn & Boztug, 2017). Moreover, the bootstrap method is suitable for accurate testing of the indirect effect, or when samples include outliers, or small sample sizes (less than 50) (Demming, Jahn & Boztug, 2017). The four causal step method (Baron & Kenny, 1986) was used to test the mediational hypothesis. The first step is to show that the total effect of X (independent variable) on Y (dependent variable) is related, followed by the second step to show that X is related to M (mediator variable). Step 3 entails showing that the effect of M is related to Y (controlling for X). Finally, step 4 looks at the direct effect of X on Y after controlling for the mediator variable, which should no longer be significant (Baron & Kenny, 1986). If all four conditions are met, then mediation can be confirmed.

As described by Baron and Kenny (1986) the first step is to determine whether there is a direct relationship between the independent and dependent variable (total effect). The direct effect between time spent writing fan-fiction and social belongingness was assessed (Fig. 4.1). The findings indicate a significant relationship between time spent writing fan-fiction and social

belongingness (*path c*), $b = .0724$, $SE = .0346$, $p = .0372$. Since Step 1, the mediator variable, is significant, parasocial interactions were introduced and the next steps of the mediation test were employed. Figure 4.2 demonstrates the mediation model, including the direct effect of time spent writing fan-fiction on parasocial interactions (pathway *a*), the direct effect of parasocial interaction on social belonging (pathway *b*), and the direct effect (mediator removed) of time spent writing fan-fiction on social belonging (path *c*).

Further results in step 2 indicate that time spent writing fan-fiction is not related to parasocial interactions (*direct path a*), $b = .1460$, $SE = .0756$, $p = .054$. The findings in step 3, however, confirm that the mediator, parasocial interaction, was related to social belonging (*direct path b*), $b = .1185$, $SE = .0227$, $p < .001$. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), if one or more of these relationships are nonsignificant, it can be concluded that mediation is not likely and only when there are significant relationships from Steps 1 through 3, one proceeds to Step 4. Given that path *a* was not significant, based on Baron and Kenny's four step analysis, it is concluded that mediation is not likely. However, it is of importance to note that the significance value of path *a* ($p = .054$) is slightly higher than the cut off value ($\alpha = .05$), and therefore, "marginally significant" (Pritschet Powell & Horne, 2016). It might be possible that a bigger or randomized sample could have reduced the *p* value and made the relationship significant.

Although path *a* was found to be non-significant, to demonstrate all pathways for the purpose of this research study, the mediation test was completed. In step 4, full mediation is supported if *X* is no longer significant when *M* is controlled (Baron and Kenny, 1986). Step 4 of the analyses revealed that, by controlling for the mediator (parasocial interactions), time spent writing fan-fiction was not significantly related to social belongingness (path *c'*), $b = .0551$, $SE = .0337$, $p = .1024$. The indirect effect is tested using the non-parametric bootstrapping method. The

findings confirm that the indirect effect (IE = .0173) between time spent writing fan-fiction and social belongingness is non-significant (bootstrap 95% confidence interval LL of -.0006 and an UL of .0394).

Based on Baron and Kenny’s (1986) four step mediation process, it can be concluded that, although time spent writing fan-fiction is related to social belonging, this effect is not mediated through the development of parasocial interactions. The mediation test, however, reveals that parasocial interactions are related to social belongingness. The interpretations of these findings are further discussed in the next (discussion) section.

Figure 4.1: Total effect

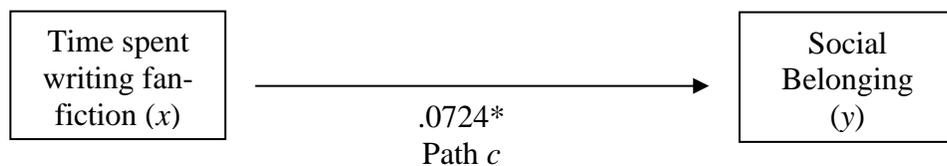
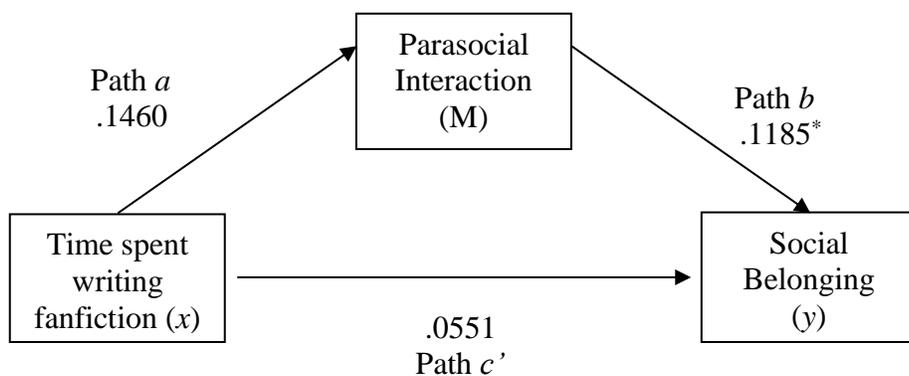


Figure 4.2: Mediation model



*p < 0.05 level.

Mediation model for the total effect (Fig. 4.1) and direct and indirect (Fig 4.2) effects of **time spent writing fan-fiction** on **social belonging**. Note: The causal steps method (e.g., Baron & Kenny, 1986) was used to test the mediational hypothesis. Regression coefficients are reported for the total effect of time spent writing fan-fiction on social belonging (c), the direct effect of time spent writing fan-fiction on parasocial interactions (a), the direct effect of parasocial interaction on social belonging (b), and the direct effect (mediator removed) of time spent writing fan-fiction on social belonging (c').

Discussion

Researchers have found that loneliness and difficulty integrating in society are great motivators for individuals to develop parasocial relationships (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2008). Studies have also found that when individuals are lacking social interactions with real people, they feel less lonely when watching their favourite television shows (Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, 2009). When needs for belonging and inclusion are not met through human interaction, television and media persona can provide a sense of belongingness. This is referred to as the *Social Surrogacy (SS) hypothesis* (Derrick et al., 2009). Temporary or alternative forms of acceptance and belonging that is experienced from television characters can help alleviate feelings of adversity, loss of control, and loneliness. Accordingly, it is possible that writing fan-fiction, similar to watching a favourite television character, can provide alternative forms of social bonds and connections. It was, therefore, posited that, whether individuals are developing parasocial interactions or experiencing belongingness from their fan community (or both), they are possibly fulfilling the need for social connections and relatedness.

Significant group differences were found between time spent writing fan-fiction and parasocial interaction intensity with mean scores indicating that greater time spent writing fan-fiction increased parasocial intensity. Given that fan-fiction allows writers to regularly immerse themselves in a story with their favoured characters, writing consistently may allow participants to feel closer and build a connection with the mediated persona. These findings confirm that the development of parasocial interactions can extend from watching characters on mass media or through reading books to fandom activities, further intensifying these relationships. These findings further align with previous research by O'Donovan (2016), who found that engaging in transformative practices (e.g., editing and creating fan vides, cos play, fan writing) significantly increased the intensity of parasocial relationships. Although the current findings do not suggest

causation, it is of interest to note that if an individual experiences greater intensity in parasocial relationships due to their participation in fan writing, then this may consequently increase the desire to write more frequently, intensifying the parasocial relationship and lead to a continuous cycle.

Findings from the APS subscales also indicate group differences between greater time spent fan writing and group identification and interactions (feeling a part of the TV/original source's family group, e. g. "[PERSONA]'s interactions are similar to mine with friends." Auter & Palmgreen, 2000, p. 81). Interestingly, significant group differences were only found for the group identification and interactions factor. Although parasocial interactions are one sided, they may employ similar psychological mechanisms as real friendships. It is possible that writing repeatedly about their favored media persona allows participants to feel like they knew them, like the development of a real friendship (Horton & Wohl, 1956). For example, in the New York Times (Groose, 2021), a Youtuber star, Tara Tsukamoto, shared her experience of parasocial connections stating that "I know we aren't really friends, but I do kind of feel like I know her...also even though we've never met she provides a lot of what a real friend would: advice, funny stories, inspiration to become a better version of myself" (paragraph 4). Furthermore, according to Bond (2021), people form bonds with TV characters in much the same way they do with real life friends. Bond (2021) concludes that the distinction between real and reel friends may have been blurred especially during the COVID -19 pandemic, which induced greater reliance on screens to engage with others. Likewise, given that data collection for this study unprecedentedly took place during the pandemic and with active social distancing measures, people may have relied more on reel interactions to make friends and feel a sense of companionship. Moreover, the findings suggest that the social aspect of parasocial interactions may be of most importance to writers compared to their "interest in favorite character" or

“problem solving abilities,” aligning with the human need to feel socially connected (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and this may particularly be true during the pandemic.

Fan-fiction is dominated by women and, like previous studies exploring fandom activities, the sample for the present study also entailed primarily women. From a gender studies perspective, writing fan-fiction can be an outlet to express female ideals, and the inclusion of female protagonists and themes that signify strength. Moreover, Hollywood is dominated by male directors and creators, in which stories are often told from a male gaze. Writing fan-fiction, therefore, allows females to redirect the camera and the point of view of stories (Jenkins, 1992). It was, thus, predicted that female participants would show higher levels of parasocial interaction than men and non-binary groups. The results, however, indicate no significant differences contradicting extant literature. For example, Wang et al (2008), found that men and women may have different motivations for developing parasocial bonds. Specifically, they found that men who experienced chronic loneliness were more likely to develop parasocial relationships while women were motivated by romantic and family loneliness. However, an unequal sample size (dominance of female writers) and preselection of participants from a marginalized population may have influenced the non-significant findings in the present study. While self-identified females and non-binary individuals are more likely to experience greater marginalization, men are also prone to the stigma associated with being fan-fiction writers and the interaction between race and gender may heighten this experience (i.e., being a fan-fiction writer and also a person of colour). It is also possible that during the COVID-19 pandemic parasocial proximity to media personalities increased over time, suggesting that parasocial interactions became more important during the during the social distancing protocol (Bond, 2021). Therefore, perhaps irrespective of gender, all individuals may have been affected by the limited opportunities for social engagement, and fan-fiction helped to intensify these interactions with mediated personae, and hence no differences were found between gender groups.

Social presence captures “the feeling of being psychologically involved in an interaction with others in a mediated environment” or “the mental state in which a user feels close to another person in a virtual environment” (Gao, Liu & Li, 2017, p. 349). Social presence provides a feeling of being together, human warmth, and intimacy with the mediated personae (Kim & Song, 2016). The findings, however, indicate no significant group differences between time spent writing fan-fiction and social presence. It is possible that, when people answered the questionnaire assessing social presence, they were thinking about their writing experiences retrospectively, and therefore, consciously *aware* that their interactions with characters are not with real people (hence the non-significant results), and rather are psychologically meaningful. However, consistent with the findings of Kim and Song’s (2016) research, a positive albeit weak correlation was found between the ranks of social presence and parasocial interactions. It is, thus, postulated that when fans feel that their favoured media character is socially present psychologically, this fosters a sense of imagined intimacy, which enhances the parasocial experiences with the mediated personae.

Social belongingness is defined “as the experience of personal involvement in an environment that causes the individual to feel like an integral part of that environment” (Gao et al., 2017, p. 347). Gao et al. (2017) refers to social belongingness, in the context of social network sites, as the “involvement in and perception of belonging to SNS communities” (p. 348). The instructions for the subscale derived from Gao et al. research (originally suited for social networking sites) was modified to include a sense of belonging within fan-fiction communities. The findings derived from the Kruskal-Wallis test indicate significant group differences between time spent writing fan-fiction and social belongingness. It can be concluded that participants who spent more time writing fan-fiction were connected to fan-fiction communities more strongly, which provided a greater sense of belonging, a feeling of togetherness and comfort with a specific fandom community. Studies have consistently found that group membership is related to wellbeing by way of

providing members social support, encouraging healthy coping strategies, and reinforcing social connections (Everett, Faber, & Crockett, 2015; Reysen, Plante & Chadborn, 2017). For fan writers, fandom can be central to their identity and online forums can be a meaningful way to connect with people who share likeminded interests. For many fans their connections built from their fandom communities are more important to them than other traditional connections (Chadborn, Edwards, & Reysen, in press). To summarize, the findings of the current study are consistent with the growing body of evidence that indicates group membership facilitates social connections with other fans. Given the popularity of fandom activities, such as fan writing and the advent of the Internet, studies that examine the impact of fandom participation are increasingly important.

Furthermore, Spearman correlations also confirm that social belongingness is related to parasocial interaction intensity. Online communities may provide supplementary ways of understanding characters deeper, through conversation, analysis and sharing of stories. Greater knowledge of characters may heighten feelings of closeness and consequently strengthen parasocial intensity. Alternatively, the reverse is also possible. Parasocial connections are already formed, and thus, people are more motivated to participate in fandom communities to explore characters, the relationships between characters, and character construction with other fan writers and readers, further intensifying the parasocial connection.

In addition, significant group differences were found between age groups and social belonging, with participants over the age of 45 experiencing greater social belonging than participants less than 25 and between 25-44. According to the Pilkington, Windsor and Crisp (2012), social media usage has tripled since 2010 among midlife to older adults. Middle-aged people often go through transitional changes and, consequently, are more likely to seek new ways to feel socially connected, such as volunteering (Pilkington et al., 2012). It is possible that mid-age adults are more vulnerable to social isolation than younger adults, and therefore, fandom

communities may play a more valuable role in reinforcing a supportive social network. By frequently engaging with each other and sharing ideas, social ties are built, helping individuals feel like they are part of a group and increasing feelings of intimacy and belonging.

Furthermore, statistically significant group differences have been found between gender and social belonging with participants identifying as female and non-binary experiencing greater belongingness than their male counterparts. Marginalized groups (such as women, people of colour, people with disabilities, or members of the LGBTQ community) are traditionally more likely to experience exclusion than males, and therefore, may seek other alternatives to feel included. Fan-fiction incorporates the experiences of marginalized groups into source texts that are generally by men and about men, challenging gender and sexuality norms (Jenkins, 1992). Furthermore, online communities offer marginalized groups an outlet to express themselves, and in turn, feel supported by like-minded people. Furthermore, gender differences can also be explained in the mode of expressing the need to belong. According to Baumeister & Leary (1995), women may be more oriented towards maintaining relationships while men may focus more on forming relationships. Women, consequently, may then put greater effort in developing the characters they write about, digging deeper into their personalities and emotions, and are likely further motivated to discuss their creations with people in the fandom communities, allowing for frequent and stable social connections that reinforce a greater sense of belonging.

Consistent with Baron and Kenny's (1986) mediation step process, the results of the mediation analysis indicates that time spent writing fan-fiction is related to social belongingness. However, this effect was not due to the development of parasocial interactions. Furthermore, parasocial interaction intensity is related to social belonging. It is possible that, when participants develop strong parasocial interactions, they are more motivated then to participate in fan-fiction communities to explore these relationships with "real" people, which in turn provides a strong sense

of belonging with fan-fiction communities. Perhaps fandom communities encourage the continuation of parasocial interactions with characters. Further discussions (theorizing, analyzing character motivations, etc.) with the fandom community allow for greater knowledge and understanding of characters, which deepens the parasocial relationship.

In summary, the findings confirm group differences between greater time spent writing fan-fiction and parasocial interactions (including group interaction/identification) and social belongingness. Gender and age group differences were also examined and results indicate that participants who identify as female and non-binary experience greater belongingness than male participants. Moreover, participants over the age of 45 experience greater social belonging than participants less than 25 and between 25-44. Findings from the mediation analysis also confirm that time spent writing fan-fiction is related to belongingness, although this effect is not due to the development of parasocial interactions. Overall, the findings suggest that more time spent writing fan-fiction allowed for greater opportunity to build a friend like connection with favorite characters. It is further possible that when interactions with real life friends are limited by social barriers, media personae may serve as social surrogates (Bond, 2021; Derrick et al., 2009).

Chapter 5: Qualitative results

This chapter starts with the demographic characteristics of participants in the second phase of the study and describes the sample. It is followed by a detailed presentation of the results of the qualitative analysis, exploring (a) participants' motivations to write fanfiction, and (b) the development of parasocial relationships with media characters and how these relationships affect participants. Finally, a comprehensive discussion of the findings is presented.

Demographics of participants. Eight fan-fiction writers participated in the qualitative component of the study. Two additional interviews were conducted later when these participants volunteered for participation during the pandemic related lockdown. These additional interviews helped to obtain greater insights related to the effect of the pandemic on writing behaviours (discussed in detail in Chapter 6). The average age of participants was 31.6 years, ranging between ages 24-39. Of the ten participants, one person self-identified as a male, one as non-binary and eight as female (*Table 5.1*).

Table 5.1: Demographics of participants

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
01	24	Female	White
02	32	Female	Filipino
03	38	Female	White
04	26	Female	White
05	39	Non-binary	Black multiracial
06	34	Male	White
07	26	Female	Indian
08	29	Female	White
09	33	Female	White/Native American
10	35	Female	White

Participant IDs are used instead of initials to avoid possible identification.

Contextual background

The first section of the interview consisted of questions that elicited factual information, followed by questions related to their motivations behind their participation in the study, what they hoped to achieve, and what inspired them to start writing fanfic. All participants reported that they were actively engaged in writing fan-fiction, ranging from the past 1.5 years to 20 years. Two participants were unable to quantify how many hours they spent writing fan-fiction a week. According to the results, time spent writing fan-fiction ranged between 2 and 30 hours per week. Participants reported writing fan-fiction based on characters from television shows, movies, books, videogames, etc. Almost all participants reported writing fan-fiction using characters from TV shows. It is possible that soap operas offer greater opportunity to build affinity and attachments with characters due to repeated exposure. While films tend to be restricted in duration, TV shows tend to extend for a longer period of time. The TV show format allows fans to (a) see their favorite characters more often, (b) learn more about characters as the show develops, and (c) continued viewing increases predictability of the characters, in which the character is seen as reliable. With greater time to bond, the fan becomes a loyal viewer. For example, one participant shared in her responses that TV allows for exposure to more diverse characters and the accessibility of online digital platforms, such as Netflix, allows for greater access to these TV shows. She shared, "I watch more TV shows than I do movies especially with Netflix being so accessible you come across more diverse characters that way and a lot more characters to develop that relationship with."

Table 5.2: Writing fanfiction and preferred media characters

Participant	Hours spent writing fanfic per week.	Years since started writing fanfic	Preferred media characters
C.C.	2-3 hours	15 years	Movies and books
L.S	5 hours	NA	TV shows and movies
S.C.	5-6 hours	8 years	Harry Potter fandom, American TV shows and Indian TV series
R.S.	A couple of hours	20 years	Lamaze (musical), videogames, comics, movies, books and web games
M.E.	Several hours	12 Years (on and off)	TV shows
J.R.	10 hours	1.5 years	TV shows
S.M.	10-15 hours	20 years	TV shows, books, and movies
J.	10-12 hours	20 years	TV shows, movies and books
A.W.	10-12 hours	10 years	TV shows and movies
B.E.	30 hours	16 years	TV shows and videogames

Motivations for participating in the current research study

As described by Carrera, Brown, Brody and Morello-Frosch (2018), for research studies that offer no real therapeutic benefits or financial compensation for participation, it is assumed that participants engage in studies for altruistic motives. They suggest that exploring participants' motivations can help in "better recruitment and retention" and more science democracy. By asking participants to explain their motivations for their participation in the current study, the researcher seeks to obtain a better understanding of participants' intrinsic motivations. The following section discusses participants' motivations for participating in the current study.

In providing answers to Question 1, *Please explain why you wanted to be a part of this research study*, two main themes emerged from participants' responses:

(1) *Altruistic reasons*

- a. Desire to help the researcher

b. Contribute to academic literature

(2) *A medium to tackle misconceptions*

Altruistic reasons. Altruism can be defined as an “intentional, voluntary behavior that is meant to improve another’s, but not one’s own, condition with no expectation of personal reward” (Carrera et al., 2018, p. 3). Participants frequently commented that they found the study topic interesting and their desire to participate in the research study was motivated by wanting to help the researcher. S.M. shared, “I would be happy to share my opinions, share my perspectives on things if they’re useful. I just thought it will be interesting.” Similarly, J expressed: “It really intrigued me because it was something that I identified with and related to, so it fascinated me that someone like yourself was actually doing a full-on study on this. When I read about, it was like yeah, I wanna help because this has been part of my life for over half of life growing up on the internet. So yeah, just an interesting, fascinating thing to me and glad that I could help out.”

Other participants shared their personal connection to research, identifying as academics, and therefore, wanting to support participation in research studies to contribute to scientific knowledge. Specifically, C.C., L.S and M.E. reported that they felt that participating in this research study was a unique opportunity and recognized the limited academic work available on understanding fan writing, and therefore, wished to contribute to this breadth of knowledge. The participants expressed that a greater unbiased scholarly understanding of fandom and fan-fiction is needed, and that they support this effort. One participant recalls her experience as an undergraduate student, highlighting the lack of academic literature focused on understanding fandom. L.S. expressed:

When I was in undergrad many years ago and I was somewhat interested in fandom studies and Jenkins was the only person out there who had studied it and I enjoyed writing my own undergrad papers about it and so since then when I see surveys in similar things like

this, I would love to be part of it as I believe the scholarly understanding of fandom and fan-fiction is needed and I support that effort.

Similarly, M.E. stated, “I guess as a fellow academic I was fascinated, this is something that isn’t studied very often so I saw it as a cool opportunity.” C.C. echoed, “I am interested in furthering academic research so I thought that is something I can talk about.” In the responses from participants, it was evident that they believed their involvement in research had a positive impact and contributed to the scientific knowledge of fan-fiction.

A medium to tackle misconceptions. Another participant reported a strong desire to tackle the misconceptions and stereotypes associated with fan writers. S.C. conveyed, “I thought it would be a good idea to sort of educate people why we write fan-fiction. There’s a big misconception of why people do this and about who we are as writers, so any opportunity to get people to listen or to just understand us better – I am all for that.” She highlighted that fan writers are often seen as erotic creators and have the reputation of being amateur writers. S.C. further shared her frustrations around the idea that fan writers are not given enough credit for their time and effort to create and share stories. Both J.R. and S.C. emphasized that fan creations are of high-quality, counter to what many believe, and many writers spend hours creating without expecting a momentary compensation. Moreover, while the quality is frequently ample enough to sustain a fandom community, fan work is often looked down upon for not being truly original.

Researcher: You mention misconceptions, tell me more about that.

Participant S.C: Yeah sure, usually its people think that it’s not a real genre of writing that we do and so they do not see us as real writers in some cases. Other people think that all we do is write graphic sex novels, that’s not what we do either and a lot of people who come across fan-fiction like amateur writers they sort of think that’s all they’re capable of. We really take our time when we do this and put ourselves into it. The biggest factor

is that we don't get paid, it's our choice, its voluntary and it's a lot of our time and a lot of our energy. People don't take that into consideration when making these decisions or ideas about us...like I have said a lot of people don't consider fan fiction a real genre and therefore, they don't consider them writers and that's not the case we really are all of us are writers. Whether you start with masterpieces or not you're still a writer. It's a place where you can grow your talent.

S.C. brings attention to the preconceived notions people have about fan writing as she recalls an incident where she read a post on social media, stating it was disrespectful to write fan-fiction and that writing fan-fiction suggests that writers do not value the original works. She hoped that, through this study, people will understand: "that's not the case we are not undermining what the writer has given us, we love it so much that we want to build on it or we love what you have given us, but we also think it could have gone this way and it's all about exploring the options that are there." Another participant echoed similar motivations, highlighting the stigma associated with fan writers and their work.

Cause there is a stigmatization generally about fanfic writers and reading it and so it was nice to see that there's positive going on out there and when I saw it on Twitter I was like - hey I am writer, I would love to help with this kind of stuff...It's almost like it's an unspoken thing, no one ever mentions outside of the community or fandom - hey, I am fanfic writer. You don't go tell your family, what are you doing tonight, I am writing my fanfic tonight. You know it's one of those really quiet things unless you're in the community, you don't talk about it. It's not like I write children's books and everything it's more like I am writer and then you glance pass it. It seems generally mostly outside of the community it's less than writing which I have read writers that have wrote longer than the Harry Potter, 10 times better than half the things that's being published. There's

always this vibe when you talk to people who don't know anything about it that are like – oh so you just play. You don't actually create anything and I don't like that stigma.

Another participant alluded to a similar idea, suggesting that she wanted to help people understand what fan writing is and how impactful it can be.

I was very intrigued when I first saw the study someone had sent it to me knowing that I was a writer and I thought it was really interesting that someone was conducting this type of research. And I wanted to contribute to this overall topic that can help people understand it more and how impactful it can be.

As a teacher, C.C. shared with her students that she is an active fan writer and incorporates elements of fan writing in her teaching curriculum. In turn, she received a lot of respect from students and the shared interests help increase connectivity with students. This response is in contrast to what many researchers have indicated. Despite the popularity of fan-fiction practices in the youth, the implementation of fan-fiction in more formal institutions is often dismissed and carries the stigma of being frivolous or irrelevant. Student learning is usually dictated by the expert knowledge of the instructor, who is constrained by curriculum standards and mastery of certain constructs of writing. However, C.C. recognized the many ways that fan-fiction is similar to fiction, allowing students to exercise their imagination and normalize fan writing. She expressed, “I get a lot more respect from my students when they find out I write fic like an uncanny amount of respect across the board when they find out I write fic and participate in fandom, conventions and I know what there talking about and then there's the very savvy ones who will listen to me.”

The analyses indicate that many participants felt motivated to participate in the current study because they felt that their involvement may contribute to a broad social benefit. Specifically, altruism, the desire to help the researcher in a topic they were passionate about, was an important factor in their decision to participate in the research. Furthermore, participants

expressed that their connection to academia as a student or researcher motivated them to participate in the study. Finally, participants hoped to create awareness of why people create fan-fiction and challenge the existing stereotypes (e.g., being characterized as amateur writers). Participants' motivations relate to how they, as fan writers, would like to be perceived. These findings give us a deeper awareness of the importance of studying fan-fiction and fandom research.

Table 5.3 presents an overview of the responses received by participants to the question regarding what inspired them to start writing fan-fiction. Since these questions asked for more straightforward information, the responses are summarized in the table. The thematic analysis of the responses revealed three main reasons that elicited what inspired writers to start fan-writing: (a) to try something new that excited them, (b) the desire to fill in missing gaps and extend canon, and (c) were influenced by friends.

Table 5.3: Overview of the influence for writing fanfic

Participant	Theme	Description (quote)
S.C.	Try something new	I think I just wanted to try. I am reading all these stories and it's like let me try. I had an idea and no harm in trying and I started.
M.E.	Try something new	I guess I had read fanfic online and I realized as I was watching like TV or whatever I realized had my own stories, I could play with these characters. I just had a moment of realization of like it's not just other people who can do this, I can do it too.
S.M.	Extend canon + Fill in gaps	I started writing fanfiction to bring the stories that I wanted like where I thought there were gaps or possibilities or shows that didn't explore, I wrote stories to sort of bring things to life that I thought were interesting.
L.S.	Extend canon + Fill in gaps	I think is when I started is there is a gap in the story or fictional content something within the canon that was missing...so I am the person whose going to write the alternative story that happened here vs the boring canon here.
J	Extend canon + Fill in gaps	Well when I was younger it was because "Oh I have this idea that this TV show never actually did but I think it would really be a good idea" so what would happen if I wrote it. That's how it started it was literally a what if this happened with these characters and wanting to see that story line that never happened which is still a driving influence now, even at 32. It's like what if this storyline happens that never happened in the actual canon.

A.W.	Extend canon + Fill in gaps	Sometimes I'll watch something to read something and it would just really hit me and impact me and I'll get an idea of side story or an alternative ending to something. Sometimes I'll even have a dream about characters or something and I'll write based on that. Or I'll listen to a song that will remind me of a character from a story and kind of flutter off from there.
C.C.	Extend canon + Fill in gaps	Well, I am a writer by trait, one of the things I do I write original fiction and am writing coach. I do a lot of original non-fiction. I identify as a writer and fanfic is different from original fanfic in that you have to think but you have to think about different things... You want to hear more stories about them, or you want to explore things that are presented in there, canon so it gives for me it's been ok what if and also a bit of exploring more personal issues through the characters.
R.S.	Friends and Family	A particular fandom. In 2000, there was a forum on the (name) website, it was official it was run by the musical...and there were fan fiction forums on that, a lot of fanfiction forums and role play forums too. So, people would write fanfic, people would do role plays and post them.
B.E.	Friends and Family	My older sister wrote Dawton's Creek fan fiction as a child when she was 13 and I was 6 or something. So, I like you know you want be like your older sister. I knew what she was doing, she asked me for my help for a title once, you know and so then when I got old enough to engage in fiction on my own, it was a natural thing to do.
J.R.	Friends and Family	Well, a friend of mine wrote fanfic and I was starting to read a little bit of theirs. I was waiting for the hiatus to come over and the characters prolonged and then a friend of mine were joking I am a writer and was gonna write something and no matter what, and we were joking back and forth about careful I am going to write a new story and she told me her idea about the fic and we become co-writers and it went from there. Now it's so much more, I write short stories, long stories, have 6 more in progress cause I have ideas for them.

Motivations and rewards of fan writing

The second part of the interview guide included questions exploring the impact of fan writing on participants' motivations and wellbeing. The questions asked participants to share how fan writing makes them feel, their motivations, and what they enjoy most about writing fan-fiction. The questions were left as broad and open-ended as possible so as to not lead the participants' responses.

Motivations

Escapism: The theme of escapism was one of the most common themes identified in participants' responses. Participants use fan-fiction to escape "the here and now" and remove themselves, albeit temporarily, from their current situation. One participant shared, "it's a complete release for me to escape and not you know when you're having a rough day and you escape into this world and have the control and you're creating something that just feels more real." Likewise, J. expressed, "it felt like if I was stressed from homework or wasn't in the mood to deal with writing was actually like soothing in a way, escaping into that world and I could just think about that world for a while. I would say that was definitely the motivation for me when I was younger."

Escapism allows individuals to transfer into imaginary fictional worlds that are pleasurable. This was clearly evident in R.S. responses. R.S. uses fan-fiction to enter into worlds that are, although unreal, exciting to be immersed in temporarily. She explained, "I am not putting in my experiences or myself in a story it was I'm putting myself in a fictional world almost like a portal fantasy. It was more I am Alice, and this fictional world is my wonderland."

Sense of Control: Two participants shared that fan writing helped them regain a sense of perceived control. Both participants revealed that, when they felt a lack of agency at work or in their everyday life, writing about a character whose experiences they could control gave them a sense of agency:

L.S: In writing these characters, you can become a hero such as Supergirl or Rey from Star Wars. Where in my own life I may feel out of control, have a lack of agency, or don't have as much power in my job or at home, when I'm writing these strong female characters, they can be in control, have agency, have power – all because I am in control of writing them. That is freeing to do. I also think that's why I write villains because it

gives you a controlled and safe way of giving them power. The villain only goes as far as you let them.”

Likewise, A.W. shared:

There have definitely been situations where I have pulled from my life into my work and write about what you know. I am so out of control of things that happen to me in the real world, but you can control what happens to your character and that’s helpful.

Extending a universe I love: Participants described writing fan-fiction as an outlet to extend their favorite characters and storylines. Seven of the ten participants expressed their desire to prolong the original sources through their imagination and fan writing. A.W. shared that her main motivation is to be able to extend the universe and content that she loves most. She further shared, “I want to give it more to myself and give it to other people... mostly just to keep being indulged in a universe.” Likewise, S.C. echoed the same sentiment and adds that fan writing allows her to explore different scenarios. She stated, “We love it so much that we want to build on it or we love what you have given us, but we also think it could have gone this way and it’s all about exploring the options.” R.S. explained that, as a fan, she is supportive of the original source and creates additional work to showcase her love for the content and characters rather than trying to critique or “fix” the original source: “I am not saying oh there’s something wrong with the original or needs to be fixed. I don’t feel like the original is incomplete or is insufficient but sometimes you just still want more of it. You want more content related to it...I think when we enjoy a piece of media and we want more of it and sometimes there isn’t more of it. Fan works exist to create more that is adjacent.”

J. expressed that, when she was younger, she was the only one who watched *Star Trek* and fan-fiction gave her a way to bring her cognitive ideas on paper and bring to life what she enjoyed most. She explained, “when I was younger, the TV show I first wrote fan-fiction for was *Star Trek*

and none people of my age or in school watched *Star Trek*. So, I had this whole universe in my mind, you know have these ideas in my head and yet no one to talk to about this. So, then I started writing out, I don't care if no one see's this but I think it's cool that I can create this story in my head."

What if scenario and missing gaps: Six participants revealed that fan writing enabled them to create "what if" scenarios, and fill in missing gaps from the original source. This further allowed writers to experiment with different styles and genres. Writers explored different possibilities and solved unaddressed mysteries in the original source, allowing them to widen their imagination while appreciating the originality of characters and the plot. One participant describes fan writing as "what they call most of the time the *voice* of the text or the author. Not sure if there's a term for it...I like to fit the feel and the tone of whatever the source material is. I like feeling like I can fit something in a fictional world that feels like it should be part of that fictional world..."

S.M. conveyed, "I started writing fanfiction to bring the stories that I wanted like where I thought there were gaps or possibilities or shows that didn't explore, I wrote stories to sort of bring things to life that I thought were interesting." Similarly, M.E. shared her appreciation for the original source material and how fan writing allows her to explore the emotional characters and plots:

M.E: I think that so what the source material has done so well is that they have kind of built these really excellent really well-formed characters, but the thing is that obviously there's not enough time to go into the finer emotional points of things. There isn't enough time to explore all of those human sides you know it's a science fiction show and there's a lot of very human emotion at the core and I think that writing and all that hurt comfort stuff is a way you know sometimes fill in gaps.

R.S. made an interesting comparison by pointing out the similarities between MidRash as part of the Jewish tradition and fan writing. She explained that MidRash, in some ways, is biblical fan-fiction, but conducted for holy purposes. She shared, “it is Rabai and scholars are sort of filling in gaps with biblical texts...it’s not part of canon but it’s imagining why did Mozart or Joseph Abraham do this but not this other thing. What was the motivation behind it and what was going on in their head and there’s a lot of very good fan-fiction where nothing really happens, but it is an exploration of a character’s mindset at a particular critical moment.” Likewise, C.C. used fan writing as a medium to “explore characters emotions, their trauma and their histories. How do they, or why is this character reacting in this manner, what informs their decisions.” Furthermore, participants shared that writing fan-fiction enables them to focus on secondary characters that are given minimal space in the original source. Others shared that they enjoyed going into depths about characters and creating scenarios (e.g., relationships) different from the source material.

L.S: When I started writing fanfiction in the mid 1990s, I would identify a gap in the story to fill. For example, I wanted Luke Skywalker to have a girlfriend, and I thought, well, I’m going to be the person who writes the story of Luke having a girlfriend. A few years ago, I’m watching Supergirl and thinking - oh no, this scene should have ended with making out instead of storming out. Fanfiction allows me to be the creator who writes an alternative to the “boring” canon.

S.C. expressed that she writes fan-fiction to explore characters that she develops affinity for and who are sidelined in the source material. She explained, “I simply developed a strong liking for John Sobs even though he was completely useless in season 8, I have a strong urge to explore him as a character of what he is meant and supposed to do.” C.C. provided more insight and

shares that writing fan-fiction is about character exploration, “how the persons past and how they are shaped today, how affected they were and how they grow and change.” She recounted her previous work that focused on the *Beauty and the Beast* and described how her fan creations focused on exploring the beast’s transformation from a child to an adult. She explained, “in the action film, he’s an adult, in the original he’s a child and I wanted to know - this is an adult person who goes to a big transformation – what does he have to deal with from his past...if this character who was an asshole goes through this redemption what would that look like.” Another participant B.E. echoed similar interests of exploring characters in depth: “I am drawn to characters with interesting psychological problems and so I write a lot of things where I have seen the text as something up, and I really want to dig into it and the complexity of it so not a lot of plot heavy stuff.” She further explained that fan-fiction allowed her to create endings of stories that she resonated with: “I had this vague idea stuff that I would do with Donna, stuff that I would fix, not undo her ending as it is presented in the story, but present it in a way that made me more okay.”

Challenging stereotypical portrayal of minority characters: Three participants explained that their motivations stem from a desire to counter the misrepresentations of marginalized groups in mass media. The participants referred specifically to individuals who identify as Queer, who are often underrepresented or sidelined in the original sources. Among media representations of marginalized groups, stereotypes remain a significant concern. J.R. expressed that fan-fiction provides an outlet for individuals to create characters and story lines that marginalized groups can identify with, which are often discounted or portrayed incorrectly in popular film and TV shows.

J.R: I think it really makes a big difference for anybody that reads and is writing it (fanfic), but I also think it makes an unmeasurable difference for people like minorities like the Queer

community. Having that...outlet where you get to experience what they can't show or won't show on TV. To know you're seen by other people and that is a big thing for me being in the Queer community, I never had that support system.

Similarly, R.S. shared, "I am Queer. I write and read a lot of Queer fiction. Certainly, one thing I got out of fanfic it's hard to get any other way is that Queer content in the media is fairly shallow, a little bit side lined, side characters not focusing on the same things or a breath of emotional situations like heterosexual romances in the media and fan-fiction is defiantly here to fill in that gap." Finally, although M.E. did not provide a comprehensive answer, she stated that when "I am writing this fandom in particular its known for its very strong representation of women and the LBGQTQ community."

While J., R.S., and M.E. shared the lack of stories and complexities related to marginalized groups in the original source material, C.C. shared a different insight and spoke about the portrayal of men in popular media. She explained that it is rare to see men depicted as emotionally vulnerable in mass media. She provided the example of the film, the *Mummy*, describing the protagonist as "extraordinary in terms of representations of positive masculinity." C.C. shared that she used fan-fiction to understand how the protagonist became to be who he is, and what made him different from other male characters.

He's what women want because he's this big strong guy, emotionally available and fully willing to admit when he's wrong and that's not something you see in media very much even now. So, writing that character for me, part of me what got me to start writing this fandom was the beginning of COVID. I needed a warm hug you know we were all just losing our mind, we're all so afraid so I watched that movie which is just absolute gold and I was like you know this is a very interesting character – why is he like this, how, what happened to him that made him like this so a lot of that has been exploration. If we have a

positive representation of masculinity – how did he become that way, why is he like that and so that was something I started writing.

A sub-theme labelled “*creating strong female characters*” was also identified. Many participants reported a desire to write and create strong female characters with characteristics that they would like to emulate.

L.S: I love to write strong women characters and I would hope that I would be a strong women and I admire again you know the bravery, courage and honour that these women go through and also the complexities of lives that they have. I would hope they have similar leadership skills and their hope for something good. I enjoy really getting in their heads.

S.C. further expressed this observation towards creating female characters who are “strong willed independent female characters, but I also like to write chapters that are cheeky and a little naughty who like to break the law now and again should I say (laughs) who are a little daring then I am, but perhaps what I’d like to be and characters who express themselves more openly that is something I would like to do but I find for me, that is awkward, but my characters don’t seem to have that problem.”

Sense of Community

a. Feedback and instant gratification

Participants also revealed being strongly motivated by the online fan-fiction community, in which individuals interact with other writers and readers. It is a group that feeds on comments, sharing and receiving feedback. Both J.R. and C.C. highlighted the distinction between traditional publishing and fan writing. J.R. explained that, while reviews are big part of traditional publishing, sharing fan stories allows writers to receive instant feedback, engagement and gratification from fans. She emphasized how the community makes it a safe place to “play and practice.” She revealed:

It's the community, it really is. The occasional one will drop into my DMs and not exactly cuss me out, but oh my god why did you leave this as a cliff hanger, a lot of it is the fan reactions, its instant feedback, instant gratification. Traditional publishing you don't get that, you get an anonymous review on Amazon or something. Its instant feedback and engagement...something you don't get in any other writing context.

Like J.R., C.C. also pointed out the importance of instant gratification: "knowing that I am getting immediate gratification like I put this out there and I don't have to wait." J.R. also suggested that the community aspect of fan writing is invaluable for people who identify as part of the LGTBQ community. She stated that fan writing allows individuals to "write about things that I can't talk to my family about, can't talk about women loving women stories so to have a community that says – hey we know how you feel and understand where you're coming from becomes a sanity thing, gives you that peace of mind."

C.C. also emphasised the positive impact of the fan-fiction community as it allows individuals to interact with people with similar interests. She stated, "I am a sucker for feedback and positive feedback and so writing fanfic and being in a community...It's like an old-fashioned literary salon, we all read each other's work and comment on it and play games with each other...I get Christmas cards every year and several people who I have befriended in real life. It's a wonderful community and so I do it to feel less alone I think...and apart from that it's fun to be part of a community of likeminded people."

Both J. and A.W. acknowledged fan writing as being part of the gift economy, thus recognized it as a non-commercial activity based on giving, receiving, and reciprocity. She, therefore, highlighted the importance of providing feedback to other content creators to encourage and keep the community going.

J: The validation of that is a huge part of how fanfic propagates...I think the

commenting on people's work is such a huge pay off whether I receive it or giving it someone. You're literally doing this for free, their writing things that are novel length and here J.K. Rowling is making a million dollars, my 25-year old friend wrote this thing that is just as long questionably better than Harry Potter doing it for zero dollars...So commenting, giving kudos, feedback or cheering them on is the least that I could do.

A.W. similarly shared the importance of appreciating and providing validation to other writers. She expressed that she found great joy in reading other people's work and providing feedback to authors, showing her appreciation and encouraging their work. As a writer, she also appreciates receiving comments and learning how her writing has impacted her audience. She shared, "it's really nice and empowering thing to see and that's definitely something I want to express to other writers." She also explained that it is not uncommon for people to criticize their own work, and therefore, sometimes sharing it with others can provide reassurance and validation that their work is being liked. M.E. highlighted the fan-fiction community as a way to bounce ideas with one another and encourage each other: "I really like sharing what is bouncing around in my head and having a whole community, knowing that a whole community of people are going to go and read it...I have made some really incredible friends through fanfic writing."

L.S. shared that commenting is an important way to keep the fan community going and touches on the sense of safety linked to interacting with people who hold similar passions, normalizing fan-fiction. She explained:

I know how important that makes people feel so I love to comment, love to write, recommend fic and love to you know lift up our community cause you know that's just such a strong way to get the word out about great stories and get those writers to write more things and interact with writers...I think the more you can surround yourself by people in fandom and in the fan writing community the safer you'll feel and the more

inspired you will feel.

R.S. shared a different insight. She explained that, when she was younger, the fan-fiction community was an important part of her life. With age came greater stable connections and less energy to formulate relationships with a whole new community. She also alluded to not making the best relationships online, contrary to most participants, explaining, “some people I don’t talk to anymore because that wasn’t actually great relationships but some of them, vast majority of them people I met there we still talk...It sort of fell out of the fan- fiction community. I wouldn’t say I’m part of a community now...to be fair, fanfic communities, every community can get dramatic and that can be real serious.” She further shared that fan communities tend to be filled with younger people, and as someone in her late thirties, she feels that it can be a misfit. She explained it is important to “give kids the space to do their thing and I do not want to be a creepy old person.” R.S. touched on an important idea, and that is the possibility of fan communities being more valuable for younger fans. She also highlighted that it is possible to lose relationships when writers disagree or have conflicting perspectives regarding the writers’ content. During the member check interview, R.S. elaborated on the tensions she has witnessed as a fan writer. For example, she shared that, when the fandom community disagrees with the writer’s interpretation of the characters, it can cause conflict or “ship wars.” Fans are passionate about the characters and can quickly begin to question writers understanding of characters and create a toxic environment. She further shared that it is also common for writers develop real relationships with other writers, leading to collaborations with each other. However, if the relationship ends, it can create a split between fans. L.S. also added during her member checks review, “a person’s participation in fandom as well as feeling passionate about certain media can elicit negative responses in others. Being able to share this passion in a safe space is meaningful community building and brings personal joy.”

Therefore, connecting with online communities is a balancing act entailing one’s own

preferences and the audience (readers and writers). She shared, “I have several friends that are writers and part of being a fanfic writer is respecting how theyw feel about fanfic for example, if I were to write fanfic about that stuff, I would lose friendships and then there’s others who really enjoy fanfic about their works that impacts my relationships with them.” Finally, like most participants, she also expressed the importance of comments, likes and feedback sharing, that it can be “very satisfying...being a fan and getting fans is really rewarding.” She shared another observation, explaining that when fan writers have fans, and take a leap to write original fiction as part of their collective creations, they do not receive as many comments or appreciation. Therefore, she noted that the love for fanfic writers is directly related to the content that they create only when driven by the original source material.

Improving my writing skills

Four participants reported that creating stories consistently allowed writers to practice their craft and become better authors. J.R. enthusiastically shared, “getting into fan fiction has become a whole another level of how different it is, and I have never felt as confident when it comes to writing as I do now, some days I am too darn arrogant about it.” Likewise, A.W. revealed that writing fan-fiction not only helped her strengthen her skills, but also helped push herself out of her writing comfort zone and attempt different writing styles. She further explained with an example:

Challenging myself with writing and seeing you know working on areas of writing that I struggle with, writing emotionally intent dialogue scenes which I have noticed that dialogue writing isn’t my strongest suit when it comes to writing so fan writing allows me to challenge myself and create a good dialogue scene or really action-packed scenes.

Another participant, S.C., shared that it can be frightening to create original stories and expresses, as an amateur writer, that fan writing allows her to create with existing characters and stories that she is comfortable and familiar with. She discussed, “it can be very intimidating and for me writing

fanfic is something familiar and I get to play around with what's there and just a lot of write as well." Finally, B.E. shared that fan writing allows the experimentation of different writing styles of and "pushes my boundaries."

Improved mood

Of the ten participants, six participants reported feelings of happiness and joy when writing fan-fiction. One participant shared:

The beautiful thing about being a fanfic writer is that there is a story for every mood and every event to trauma that you could have experienced in your life...it usually helps to know that other people understand what you're going through.

J.R. expressed that writing allows her to feel "happier, more mellow, no stress." She further shared that the act of writing was calming and a way to distance herself from stressful situations, allowing her to return with a "clear mind." She reported that, "even if I am writing an antsy chapter or high emotional chapter, I am emotional writing it, but once I am done, I feel happier. It's an euphoria, it feels better." Similarly, another participant (A.W.) shared, "I would say it definitely brings me a lot of joy and pleasure." L.S. also expressed a deeper fulfillment, stating, "the act of creating solves a longing inside of me and brings me joy and completion to that longing." Another participant expressed that she started writing fan-fiction a year and a half ago, and it had a significant effect on her mood, strong enough that others have noticed this change: "my wife notices I am a lot happier, my therapist does too." While J.R., A.W., and L.S. expressed feelings of joy, S.M. explained that he used fan writing as a way to destress while completing his graduate studies, describing fan writing as a "very relaxing" activity.

One participant shared that, if she does not write for too long, she feels depressed and that writing helps her get "back on track." She reported, "If I go too long without writing I go into a bad space and so it's a way of being part of myself that I need, without having to jump all the

hoops that I would for like in original fiction which I write, but that's not always somewhere I am at." Another participant also echoed a similar sentiment, suggesting there is less "confusion" when creating fan stories. She shared, "with any writing you go through the same hey, this is a great idea or this is a terrible idea. What am doing, oh no what am I doing. Is this working or not. I would say that its less severe with fan work then it is with original writing cause you have more existing canon to fall on instead of having to figure it out. You have more structure..." Lastly, another participant expressed, "it's not easy to write fanfic, but it's a different kind of challenge, one of the things you don't have to worry about is world building and character-building cause you have these characters there."

C.C. found the overall process of writing a story to be a very enjoyable experience. She discussed enjoying the entire process of creating a story from brainstorming ideas, going into the details of scenes and then evaluating her stories. C.C. further explained how the joy that comes from fan writing is related to the fact that it is a hobby rather than a job. She described that fan writing is written for fun and not a "real job," in which there is momentary compensation, thus there is less pressure to consistently showcase your best work. She also alluded to a more accepting community that is gracious in their feedback and constantly motivates others. She described fan writing as "it's just a game, just for fun I know people will like it. I know people will read it cause there is that community and so there are no risks really. I can just sit down and play and that's where a lot of the emotional fulfillment comes from – it's just a game, no stakes, I can do what I like and get pretty much instant feedback from people." S.M. also echoed a similar opinion, saying, "writing fanfiction is where the stakes are much smaller and you know it's really a safe space to make things."

R.S. shared that she feels a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction from being able to go back and reviewing her collection of fan creations: "The satisfaction of being able to look

back at it and going hey, this is really good, I think that's not uncommon to want that feeling...and I don't know how I feel about it entirely, but I'm more likely to get that out of fanfic than the other stuff." Participants' answers convey that fan-fiction authors write for pleasure and make time to freely maximise their mood.

While some participants alluded to the positive emotions, a few also expressed the challenges of writing fan-fiction. M.E. reported that the process of creating fan-fiction can be both frustrating and enjoyable sometimes. She expressed:

"I think it depends. You know obviously there are times when I am trying to write and I just like get really annoyed and have to walk away, we have to close this down, I am going to do something else, play some video games...so, there are obviously those moments but overall, it tends to make me feel like very good, good is a vague word, but I very genuinely love doing creative stuff."

Another participant L.S. shared, "writing can also bring sadness for reasons such as the story is sad, the process of writing is difficult, or the fandom reaction to your story doesn't meet your expectations. I once spent a lot of time writing a story that I very much enjoyed, but it didn't fare well when I posted it – that brought on depression and writer's block." Therefore, it can be interpreted that, because fan writing is often shared with others, it can be associated with added pressure to create content that will be appreciated in the fandom community. This observation is in contrast to a response from C.C., who expressed the lower stakes of writing, suggesting that fan-fiction allowed her to create freely and without external pressures. B.E. shared that having the template of original sources can be a lot easier and allows one to create alternative versions. She explained, "sometimes it's just easier than writing original fiction like it's a way to let myself go with my writing. When I write I have a hard time like lots of people when they give you advice they say don't worry about your first draft it's a draft you can come back to it. I have such a hard time getting into that mindset. I can't really do it but with fanfiction I kind of can." Therefore, while fan writing may be less pressurizing for some fan writers, others may experience

disappointment when stories are not well received by the fandom community.

Therapeutic nature

Both R.S. and A.W. described fan-writing as being a therapeutic activity and an escape from everyday pressures. However, R.S. expressed a more detailed thought, reporting that using fan-fiction as a therapeutic tool was more prominent for her when she was younger than it is in her current adult years. When questioned about the change, she clarified that, as she grew older, she had greater access to other outlets and resources to destress, such as seeing a therapist. She also stated that, as an adult, she is juggling various life tasks, which make it challenging to take out time to write fan-fiction for therapeutic reasons. She explained: “I still enjoy writing, but I had other outlets. I didn’t need it to be therapy I am definitely not saying if you take therapy then people don’t need fanfic. I still wanted to write fan fiction and still have written fanfiction.” She further described herself as a “big catharsis person” and using media as way to “make me feel a certain way.” She explained using fan-fiction as a medium to evoke certain emotions or working out certain problems by writing about them.

A.W. echoed similar sentiments, suggesting that fan-fiction has been “very very very therapeutic and over the period of my life, I have written and read fanfics that has helped me get through a lot of stressful times in my life.” Likewise, J.R. explained how certain characteristics of the main characters helped her cope and writing about them was a pathway to manage her mental health. She revealed, “some people work out, and that’s how they help their mental health. For me, its writing and to feel like I can always have a safe place even if I don’t put my original characters through something because I am confused, just put it in a fanfic.”

M.E. revealed that, in her case, the therapeutic nature of fan writing comes from her ability to project her own emotions on characters and further feel a sense of control. She expressed, “I have found that the ability to project emotion for me is very therapeutic for me. Because then I am the

writer and I am in control of the situation and if the characters are feeling a similar way to how I'm feeling I can then also write what I need to receive as far as comfort goes which sounds really odd but it's very therapeutic." Another participant reported, "now in my more mature years its sort of an outlet for my mental health like if I can't cope with something or I feel I need to sort of work through something, I go to fanfic which usually helps my emotional state as well."

In contrast, another participant described that, while she uses fan writing as a creative outlet, only in rare exceptions does she use fan writing to deal with her own problems. She reported:

Most fanfic is not therapeutic for me in the sense that I don't know that all that often I work out my own particular specific issues in fanfic, although there's always exceptions...but do think just the act of writing and being able to get something down on paper is just psychologically healthy for me and fan-fiction absolutely facilitates that.

S.C. brings attention to the cathartic relief from both reading and writing fan-fiction. S.C. shared that the generous amount of fan-fiction that exists allows individuals to read stories that resonate with the individuals' emotions, experiences or environment, and reinforces a universal experience. S.C.'s responses indicated that she is aware of using fan writing to release her emotions as she empathizes with the experiences of fictional characters. S.C. added, "in terms of writing it, sometimes it's a very cathartic process to sit there and write even if no one is going to read it. Just write everything that you feel in that moment and put it away. It really helps with my mental stability." Likewise, J.R. also stated that writing fan-fiction helps her release feelings and return with a clear mind: "I've gotten feelings out...I can come back with a clear head."

B.E. shared that writing allows her to remove or distance herself from difficult situations, and use characters to project her emotions. She explained, "it almost allows a slight sense of remove from the thing you are thinking about it. It might be very personal and almost too personal to think about if it's just you. But if you can think about these other characters, I would

openly acknowledge that I am identifying with them or projecting on to them.” Participants responses demonstrate that fan-fiction writers recognize that the act of writing and creating is an important tool that can help mitigate the unfavourable effects of situations that elicit stressful responses.

Discussion: Motivations and rewards of fan writing

The current narratives revealed a strong theme of hedonic motivations (“desire for enjoyment and pleasure”) behind fan writing (Vinney and Dill-Shackleford, 2016, p. 2). While mixed emotions were reported, most participants revealed that fan-writing was a pleasurable activity that made them feel happy, joyful and relaxed. Furthermore, participants' responses indicated that, because fan writing involves taking inspiration from the source material (which entails already developed plots, characters and settings), writers can create without being flustered or thinking from scratch, making fan writing a more enjoyable and easy experience. Another participant shared that being able to revisit her creations provided a feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment. Fan writing allows writers to continuously reinterpret and extend the text in written form, which “can be seen as providing a written record” of their participation (Barnes, 2015). Being able to then revisit existing works when needed can, therefore, be both functional and gratifying. Gold (1987) refers to this as a kind of “photo-fixative to thought,” suggesting that text can be altered, referred to or remain in its original form as a physical record of how the author felt or thought in that particular moment or situation (p. 221). While most participants discussed the positive impact of fan writing on their mood, one participant reported that, although fan-fiction is a pleasurable activity, the process of writing can also be frustrating and evoke a sense of sadness, especially when creations do not fair well amongst other members within the fan-fiction community. Writers may, therefore, feel pressured to create content that is well received and live up to the expectations of their online

followers.

Vinney and Dill-Shackleford (2016) further postulate that pleasure-seeking behaviour can be explained by other deeper level motives, such as eudaimonic motivations that is, defined as the “perception of deeper meaning, the feeling of being moved, and the motivation to elaborate on thoughts and feelings inspired by the experience” (p.3). Consistent with this idea, many participants expressed that writing fan-fiction allowed them to elaborate and reflect on the details of a specific storyline, character and/or, relationship. They recognized that the lack of time and space in the source material make it difficult for the original source creators to go into the depth of all aspects of a storyline. Thus, fan writing helped extend imagined plot lines and characters’ lives deeper. For many, writing fan-fiction is an opportunity to grapple with the unexplored events and emotions of characters or relationships, and further create meaning from their perspectives.

Writing fan-fiction also allows momentary escape into other worlds and to experience the lives of others before returning to reality. One participant described becoming Alice from *Alice in Wonderland* in her creations. This experience can be characterized as entering into a “transformed universe,” in which authors immerse themselves in a subjective reality where individuals can explore their hopes, dreams, and aspirations. Van Steenhuyse (2011) asserts this happens “the moment they adopt a textual world as their actual world, temporarily backgrounding their own” (p. 3). As a result, writers can seek pleasure from fantasizing about fictional characters while escaping everyday stressors. When writers returned, they were refreshed and recharged, ready to mentally engage with the stressor again. Gold asserts that life experiences can be over-whelming and fiction allows people to “get outside of *content* and into *process*” (p. 53). This experience can be related to Rutter’s (1987) concept of *protective process* as cited in Brockerhoff-Macdonald (2017), which explains that:

Protection is not a matter of pleasant happenings or socially desirable qualities of the individual. The search is not for factors that make us feel good but for processes that

protect us against risk mechanisms... The protection stems from the adaptive changes that follow successful coping (p. 318).

Participants' responses indicate that they recognize that writing fan-fiction was a conscientious way to remove themselves from a situation and regain the mental capacity to engage with their everyday activities. Many participants commented on the calming effect of writing fan-fiction and recognized writing as a therapeutic coping mechanism to help them overcome stressful situations.

A few participants brought attention to regaining a sense of control through fan writing. For example, one participant shared that, when she felt stuck at work and felt a lack of agency, she wrote about strong characters that elicited greater control. According to the Self-Control Strength Model, the depletion of self-control is a consequence of a limited resource and one method to restore self-control is through social interaction (Derrick, 2012). Research suggests that thinking of close others can be energizing, and can facilitate self-control (Derrick, 2012). Aligned with this, Derrick (2012) found that participants depleted of control wrote longer essays about their favorite television program than participants in the free writing condition. Similarly, it is possible that when people experience a lack of control, a way to regain control consciously or subconsciously is to create (interact) with fictional characters that give them control.

The act of writing fan-fiction can also be seen as a strategy for supporting an adaptive system aimed at managing emotions. According to Gold (2002), "the pleasure emotion is important not only as a motivation, but because it produces a kind of emotional health" (p. 91). Writing can, therefore, be described as a protective factor since it helped participants work through their own problems and recognize the universality of their problems. Moreover, the act of writing allows individuals to work on things because "it stays there on paper," providing them opportunities to reorganize thoughts at different time points (p. 22). It is possible that writing about a character who experiences similar adversity can help understand one's emotions better and encourage

believing in oneself to tackle challenging situations. Gold (1987) further asserts that to change the story means to change the language, changing the reality, in turn. When participants report using fan writing as a therapeutic tool, it is possible they are changing their story to understand their experiences, as well as their self, better. Different perspectives can be experimented by writing about one's point of view, followed by exploring opposite opinions. Writing in the voice of a character (e.g., she vs. I) can also help individuals understand their way of thinking and promote greater self-discovery (Bolton, 1992). For example, J.R. shared that when she is confused, she explores her thoughts through fanfic characters, by re-seeing and reordering her experiences. Writing, therefore, allows individuals to understand, order, recognize emotions and “turn them into information” (p. 95). Both J.R. and C.C. referred to fan writing as their “safe space” to work through sensitive and challenging issues in an honest way while processing their emotions. Like mapping, personal growth requires “sorting out, ordering and putting together from separate pieces of experience” (Gold, 1987, p. 51). Individuals live through events that elicit a Pandora of happenings, pleasures and disappointments that can lead to feeling lost or confused. Fiction works by creating a parallel experience, allowing readers and writers to figure out their life experiences through other people (characters) (Gold, 1987). Writing fan-fiction helps provide a distanced view of the big picture. Gold (1987) adds that “characters in fiction are often confused and lost in content...and that is how they help us, for they take on our confusion, bear our burdens and leave us to see the larger picture they cannot see, being too close to it” (p. 53). As a technique of self-exploration and growth, fan writing can be used to give a voice to and confront erroneous beliefs, encouraging the authenticity and knowledge of one's own experience.

Jenkins (1992) also postulated that writers “do not so much reproduce the primary text as they rework and rewrite it, repairing and dismissing unsatisfying aspects, developing interests not sufficiently explored” (p. 162). This observation was also evident in the participants' responses.

A common consensus among researchers is that most fan-fiction writers are female, and this was also evident in the current study. Of the ten participants interviewed, eight self-identified as female. Jenkins (1992) posits that the gender disparity can be related to a more “female style of meaning-making” that is more emotional and due to the common marginalization of women in the source material. This observation was also apparent in the current interviews. Many participants indicated a strong desire to create female characters who were brave, confident and “badass.” Furthermore, participants from marginalized groups shared that fan writing was an avenue to challenge stereotypes and gave them a voice to create stories that were more reflective of their experiences and interests. In Jenkin’s (1992) words, fans are “textual poachers,” a term originated by Michel de Certeu, to emphasize that they are active creators (as opposed to passive recipients), and continually create social, experimental, historical, and cultural connections of their own. Fan writers respond by altering the unsatisfying aspects of the original source and developing unexplored themes, following their needs. The shift from the private mind to the interaction with the social world helps individuals uncover and challenge existing ideologies about gender stereotypes, sexuality, race and socialization patterns that benefit dominant groups (Jenkins, 1992).

Participants reported that fan writing helped them connect with people who share similar values and interests without fearing rejection or stigma. The notion of familiarity is associated with comfort, and while expressive writing and reading books can offer the same kind of familiarity, fan-fiction is more compelling as it is written to have emotional resonance or “to appeal to the Id of some other like-minded person” and is, therefore, a much more immersive experience (Romano, 2021). The participation in fan-fiction or fandom groups can be related to the psychological construct of *in-groups*, a group to which a person psychologically identifies as being a member (Everett, Faber, & Crockett, 2015). In turn, group membership (in-groups)

creates a social identity - a sense of belonging to the social world (Everett et al., 2015). The building of group membership was evident in participants' responses. For example, one participant described the fan-fiction community as "an old-fashioned literary salon, we all read each other's work and comment on it and play games with each other, sent prompts and little challenges..." Another participant brought attention to an important point, highlighting that although fan communities are great way to interact with people who have similar passions, strong feelings toward a particular figure and differences in character or story conceptualization can feed drifts and adverse behaviour between people. Moreover, fandom communities tend to have more control over content than the content creators. When fandoms are not satisfied with how the content has been adapted, they voice strong opinions and writers may feel pressured to alter their creations. This reaction can also be aligned with another participant, who also shared that there is pressure to create "good" content or content that is appreciated by the fandom community.

Finally, not only are fan writers finding their voice through their creations, writers are *mastering* their composition and rhetoric skills. Members of fan communities provide each other with feedback and suggestions on elements of the plot, characterization, syntax, structure, etc. Participants reported that writing fan-fiction is an opportunity to "play around with what's there," allowing them to explore, experiment and test the limits of their skills without having to worry about the "rules of writing" or literary traditions. The participants' desire to "play around" was consistent with the three types of participatory responses identified by Gerrig (1993). As cited in Barnes (2005), Gerrig asserts that readers' experiences of a narrative are influenced by the readers (a) hopes and preferences, (b) a person's anticipation of how events will unfold, and (c) mentally revising how things would have turned out if things had gone differently. These participatory responses are not limited to reading. Participants reported that stories aligned with the desire to focus on preferred characters, alter content, explore what-ifs and missing gaps. Fan writing

allows writers to create in a non-linear fashion, allowing for genre-blending and mixing memoir with fiction. For example, in a qualitative study by Lee (2011), one participant described fan writing as “sort of like Mozart’s variation on Twinkle Twinkle—there’s nothing wrong with the original Twinkle Twinkle, it’s just fun to play with it” (p. 259). As a whole, writing fan-fiction gives people the “invitation to imagine,” which extends beyond consuming sources (Barnes, 2005, p. 69).

Creating stories consistently allows writers to practice their craft and become better writers. Receiving feedback and suggestions on elements of the plot, characterization, syntax, and structure was a vital motivation for many participants. The majority of participants reported that fandom communities were a safe place to share their creations and receive feedback. In addition, interacting with the fan-fiction community helped normalize fan writing and create an exchange of creativity, trust and compassion.

The effect of fan writing on real relationships

The questions posed by the researcher did not directly ask about parasocial relationships. The questions attempted to ascertain whether writing fan-fiction would make or had made a lasting effect on participants’ real or reel relationships with characters. Participants’ responses suggest that fan writers can engage with characters in two ways: feeling a sense of friendship to a character, forming a parasocial relationship, or by becoming a part of the character’s fictional world, identifying with the character.

1. Parasocial relationships

- a. Friendships*
- b. Unrealistic expectations*

2. Identification

- a. Characters guide me*
- b. Wishful identification*

3. Real relationships

a. Normalizing fan writing

Parasocial relationships/friendships. J.R. shared that, during the fall out with her father, she used fan writing as a way to self-soothe and seek comfort from her characters. J.R. described her relationships with characters similar to real-life friends, expressing that fan writing gave her the opportunity to “hang out” with characters similar to hanging out with real friends during periods of stress. She further described how the social interaction with her characters improves her mood and how she views the world positively:

J.R: I knew if I wrote this chapter and if I talked about characters, it’s like how you hang out with your friends. You go talk with your characters and hang out with them and suddenly either your world doesn’t look that bad or at least you know you’re not the only one there...and yes, I am using someone else’s character, but I can still control the environment.

When J.R. experiences writers block, she expressed it is her “imaginary friends” not talking to her and that she can make new friends by creating characters, and these characters “become a part of you.” J.R.’s responses suggest that real and reel relationships have similarities and that parasocial relationships can provide a sense of comfort and love when real relationships are not available. J.R. stated, “I find if I need extra love, I can give it to my characters, extra love.” It is possible that, when J.R. experienced a falling with her father, the loss of the relationship may have caused feelings of loneliness which may have consequently prompted interactions with characters through fan writing and an opportunity to receive and give love. She shared it was “a big thing” to get through Christmas without her father and her characters helped her escape the hardships she was experiencing. J.R. further elaborated that she feels protective of the characters she writes about. The attachment extends, not only to the characters, but also to places.

Surrounding herself with material culture that reminds her of her favourite characters allows her to feel close to her characters and evokes an optimistic feeling.

J.R. It's protective, you start to see them in everyday things. I have written fan stories where I suddenly see something or makes me think of that story, well now I want to add that to my house. You know my current story has cabins and now I want a cabin's tattoo. You become attached to the characters but also the places. So, if I find something that makes me think of that character where they did something it just makes me remember something positive.

Similarly, A.W. described her relationships with the character she writes about as "real people." A.W. further expressed, "when you get so invested in the story your telling, you feel like that their your own babies... you get more protected and passionate then you first saw in whatever content...I would say I get more attached to the characters that I create within this fanfic world than the ones that already exist." A.W. highlighted that the prolonged investment of creating stories and your own characters can intensify or reinforce more intimate feelings towards characters, that is "you care about them and you want them to succeed, you don't want to hurt them."

S.C. stated that she shares similarities between her real friends and her characters: "I think my friends share some characteristics that I write about," and that her family and friends read a lot of her stories and identify with a lot of the characters in them.

J.R. explained that while sharing strong attachments with characters is helpful, it can also be confusing at times having multiple voices or options in your head, describing it as having a "split personality." She felt as though multiple characters were guiding her through similar struggles and that can be confusing in real life. It is possible that when relationships are built over time, fans believe they can predict how characters behave and project that into their real

life. When asked to elaborate on this experience, she shared:

The split personality thing, it's almost like just as a writer, you got all these, like the friends I have talked to, we all kind of talk about the bunch of voices in your head and you have to narrow out which ones you want to listen too. It's confusing sometimes...it makes it difficult sometimes cause you have all these ideas running through your head all the time and it's like you can't tell people oh I have all these characters in my head cause that's what they are characters, but their voices can be really strong to be on the paper, it's almost like you're just the vessel on paper, to bring them to life. It can make you feel like you're insane.

While J.R. expressed feeling “insane” when the interactions become too intense, most participants revealed that they are able to separate their reel and real relationships. A.W. shared, “I think it is important to have relationships with your content in the most basic non-superficial way if you will.” J. expressed, “I am pretty de-attached in a sense that (a) I know that they're not real and (b) I know I wasn't an original...I am trying to articulate like there's definitely an attachment...it's not emotional like I know they're not real. I am attached because in my head I want them to be happy, but I still know its' a work of fiction and I can walk away from that.” While J. expressed that she is able to distance herself from fictional characters, she simultaneously wants them to be happy, which makes her feel happy. Likewise, J.R. expressed that her personal interest for writing fan-fiction has “always leaned towards to giving them a happy ending as opposed to people who write angst. I have always been the one I want them to be happy.” These findings indicate that individuals are aware that reel connections can be helpful and meaningful, but should not be mistaken for real relationships.

In contrast, L.S., S.M. and M.E shared that writing about characters does not affect their real relationships. In fact, M.E shared, “I don't know if I do see that kind of similarity. That is a

very interesting question, but I don't know at least right now." Similarly, L.S. also expressed that, although she is drawn towards certain characteristics of the characters' she creates, she can keep her fictional world separate from her real life. On the other hand, S.C. explained that, when she was younger, she believed that her real life had to be the way she wrote her stories are, and that "it was very difficult to break that mould of what is actually happening." However, she is now more accepting of her reality versus her fictional world, and stated she is able to distance herself "a little better" and is aware "its fiction and it's not always going to be that way."

J. raised an interesting point and explained that her attachment is not limited to the characters that she writes about, but also extends to the content creators. She explained that it is common for people to become a fan of the works of different writers/authors and develop a fascination for the creator in a similar way to a celebrity. She described, "I think it's fascinating cause you see friendships that are kind of one-sided and definitely these fans keep subscribing and keep coming back. Readers get validation, like they replied to my comment. Like almost talking to celebrities on Instagram like their friends. You feel like they are cause you get a glimpse of their home life and their posting about real life and you're like oh my god, relatable."

Unrealistic expectations. Like, J.R, S.C. also shared the challenges of these reel connections. She explained that her interactions with characters prompted unrealistic images of romantic relationships. She expressed, "I was not really in a relationship but sort of periphery of one. It just or it always felt a little flat. This wasn't as exciting as it was in my stories." S.C. described how she was "constantly waiting for something to happen" and that she found herself feeling bored in the relationship. After introspecting, she realized her expectations were driven by the stories and characters she created. Once she learned the impact it had on her, she learned to distance herself from her characters: "I kind of understood what I had done, and it was a misconception or unrealistic expectations I had of him and that relationship had a very deep

learning curve for me.” On the other hand, J. indicated that she is more aware of the unrealistic expectations imposed on the characters she writes about. She reported that “it’s the very human flaws but also the badass streaks, like man...I could totally see myself being friends with this person and inspired by how they go on with all this even though it is not ideal.”

Identification. While in parasocial interactions, writers maintain “their sense of self.” Identification is when the writer adopts “the perspective of a character and experiences the events” of the text as if it is occurring to oneself (Vinney & Dill-Shackleford, 2018, p. 20). A.W. described that she identifies with the vulnerabilities of the characters she writes about and states that “I definitely most of the time will put a lot of my vulnerabilities in them, but still keep their authentic selves in mind.” She suggested that identifying with the characters she writes about is important as it helps her find ways to relate to them and explains “that it feels easy for me to connect with their emotions.”

One participant reported that it was essential for her to “tap into or find something in common” in order to create stories, even if the reliability quotient was “really small,” allowing the participant to write extensively and introspect. It is possible that the degree of realism increased with the level of similarity the writer shared with the character. On the other hand, S.C. shared that her identification with characters is an unconscious experience and more of a projection of herself. She stated: “I think recently, I am in the process of writing a story and the main character is delusional from her real life, she is questioning a lot of the things she has accepted as normal. You know people’s behaviour that she never looked for closely, the kind of routine she keeps, people she invites in her life, she’s questioning all of that and that was something I was doing. I didn’t realize I was doing that until I wrote her, she’s kind of mirror of me. She’s doing what I took too long to do.”

Another participant, C.C. recapped a personal experience where she had to move back home

with her family and was targeted by emotionally abusive parenting that made her question her identity. She explained how she used fan writing as a way to identify with the characters of “Beauty and the Beast” and further understand her self-worth. In her creations, she questioned “could a woman who is, wants to be single, wants to read, is a scholar who doesn’t really care for the traditional 1950s housewife path- can she have an emotionally fulfilling life and can she be valued for who she is, as opposed to what other people want her to be.” Her creations entailed “the beast,” who took her feelings of anxiety and depression. Identifying with the beast’s experiences allowed her to work on her own problems:

I had the beast feeling with anxiety and depression, and an abusive parent and what could be the worst-case scenario. What could that do to a person and then how to recover from that when you hit rock bottom and in his case he would literally curse but the curse became a blessing in disguise cause it allowed him to shed that identity that he build for himself, this trauma identity and that’s what she came to respect and love and then so it was these two people learning to be that if they’re just who they are, their just themselves, they can be loved and respected so that is something that I worked through myself in fiction.

C.C. further shared that she sees herself in the characters she writes about and “we want to explore that world through those characters. You know if I was in that situation what would I do and then have them do that.” Playing with characters allows C.C. to trial-and-error situations and reflect on the different outcomes.

Wishful Identification: Wishful identification occurs when an individual desires to emulate the characteristics of a character (Rosengren & Windahl, 1972). Like parasocial interactions, wishful identification extends beyond the moment of viewing and writing, in which the individual desires to be like the mediated character (Rosengren et al., 1976). C.C. shared that,

although she does not find similarities in the characters she writes about, compared to her real relationships, she does find herself trying to emulate the qualities of the characters she writes about. She shared, “for me that’s a woman that many of us want to be like, she’s rich, kind, she only uses her money to help people, she solves the mystery, she wears glamorous clothes, goes to the opera. . .you want to be more like them. I think that can influence you.” J.C. discussed “Mary Sue” as a self-insert character, who is described as the perfect hero and an outlet for wish-fulfillment. J.C. described Mary Sue as a very idealized version of the person she hopes to become. She described her characters to have traits that she wishes to develop, which could influence her in a positive manner or could “emulate their traits more in real life or day to day situations.”

In contrast, J.C. shared that there can be feelings of disappointment when individuals are unable to match up to the characters they write about. She stated, “On the flip side of that there’s the disappointment that I am not like Steve Rogers and I wish I could be.” Moreover, these expectations are not limited to how she perceives herself, but also to her social interactions, in that she wishes that her real friends shared the same characteristics as her characters. J.R. explained that, at times, she has to remind herself that her real friends can have imperfections and it is unrealistic to compare her characters with her real relationships:

Or, if I argue with someone why can’t they be like this character because they would understand me better. It’s a catch 22, you can use it positively, but it’s definitely happened where I fall into that comparing a friend to a fictional character like can you be more like so and so, and then catch myself like holy crap, that person is not real and this person in front of you has flaws, doesn’t agree with you, 100 percent of the time which is how real life works it’s because you didn’t write them. That’s happened also, I tried to avoid it and as much as possible use the positive end of it and not have the negative hit

back at me.

Characters guide me: Multiple participants brought attention to writing about characters as a way to guide them in real life situations. A.W. explained that an individual's creative side can "also help you with your physical relationships in that creative outlets can help you understand better and how you interact with other people." When probed further, she explained that, in her creations, she is able to distance herself from the situation, yet be present by inheriting her emotions into a character and that can be helpful to re-evaluate her own experiences. Similarly, J. shared that, in challenging real-life situations, she would step away and think about how her characters would deal with a specific situation. L.S. also reported that "by connecting with a fictional character, I can sometimes better understand my own perspective or improve my point of view." During her member checks review, L.S. provided s more detailed insight, sharing:

I learn about myself while writing; my biases, some of my traumas I need to process, and the emotional connections I yearn for. My fanfic is not an open window to my psyche or my soul, but there are little pieces of me in my stories. There's a comfort in relating to a character or a fictional concept and pulling on those threads to better understand myself such as a character's desire to pull away from their loved ones, an act of sadism, or a character's blindness to an open truth. I can explore these difficult feelings that I share with characters in the safety of creating fanfic about it.

J. added that she writes stories in ways that she hopes to deal with her own challenges, so that when she is stressed at work, she can reflect on her creations and take inspiration from her characters. For example, in stressful situations, she would engage in self-talk: "Ok what would Steve Rogers do in this situation? Would he be calm? Focused? He'd get through this... it's been like a nice little reminder coaching me on how to be better."

Characters do not only provide guidance, but appear to create a motivating inner voice for participants.

B.E. shared, “fiction is part of how I process the world” and alludes to how fan writing allows her to reflect on the complexities of her values, beliefs and relationships, reinforcing the state of harmonious coexistence. She explained:

Like sometimes when there is a thing in my life that is big and difficult to get my head around whether it is a positive thing or a negative thing it becomes easier to understand it by sort of using fiction as a proxy...when I think about fanfiction I think about parent child relationships you know if you examine this character and their relationships which are complicated and have really positive elements but also damaging relationships.

Writing about those relationship, thinking about those relationships is a safe a way to examine the idea of you know how they interact with their children and can they both be harmful and loving at the same time, how things co-exist.

Real Relationships. Fan communities bring opportunities for writers to interact with others through feedback, reviews and encouragement, creating group membership and a social identity in turn. Many participants shared that, through their interactions with the fan-fiction community, they developed real lasting relationships. L. shared, “I met my fiancé through fanfiction writing. We met online in 2005 and we’re engaged now...so the fanfic community is another app for online dating. I actually know quite a number of people who have found their significant other or marriage partner through the communities.” Likewise, J.R. explained, “I have got some really amazing friendships that are super strong even though we’re from different countries or different worlds there’s that level of it.” Finally, J. expressed that she met her best friends on Live Journal and that she is still friends with three of them. She elaborated on her experience, sharing that there are different levels of friendships. While some remain in close contact,

others are individuals whose work she appreciates and follows:

Like we were all writing, sharing with one another so that's how we build our friendship, this fandom, and these shared interests. Translating that to now, I am on twitter and have a lot of friends. I follow quite a bit of people who are fanfic writers and I follow them cause their good writers therefore, I wanted to know more about them as human-beings and now I consider them friends.

On the other hand, J. also shares that there have been friendships that she made online, but drifted once she stopped writing fan-fiction about a specific show, as the common interest no longer existed. She explained, "I was writing something and I became really good friends with someone because they were following my work and we started talking and became good friends, they were also writing. Maybe then my fandom interests changed and I stopped writing about that show and started writing about something else and then we drifted apart because we didn't have that shared interest."

M.E. suggested that being able to find people that share similar interests gave her the confidence and reassurance to talk about her passion for fan writing with both people from within and out of the fan-fiction community. M.E. discussed that interacting with others from the fandom community also helped minimize stigma and normalize fan writing. M.E. shared:

I think it has only very recently begun to bleed over my actual life. Honestly, I particularly credit this community for normalizing fic writing to the extent that I am much less hesitant to share that it's something I do because for a very long time and even now people react, oh fanfic like what!... I am thinking of my university friends who would have seen me go from like not writing at all to being very open about it.

M.E. further shared the importance of the fan-fiction community to normalise fan work: "It's really important to normalize fan works and fan creations in 2021 because when you really think

about it, just about everything is fan-fiction. Like everything is bible fan-fiction. I think that it's very important to break the stigma around it. It can be so enjoyable, a wonderful bonding experience. I bonded with person who I refer to as my adopted little sister."

Lastly, A.W. shared that, although people have been supportive of her writing fan-fiction, for the most part, she alluded to the stigma associated with fan-fiction beyond the online community. She expressed, "I have had some of my friends read my work to kind of get a second opinion. I know people who are good writers to help me, such as to help with my grammar or my work. Sometimes people get weird about fan-fiction. You never know how people were going to respond." The online community can, therefore, be a safe place to openly and unapologetically receive comments and improve one's writing skills.

Discussion: The effect of fan writing on parasocial relationships

Four participants alluded to the idea of parasocial bonds. When an individual perceives a character beyond viewing them on television or in books, "their interest can develop into a parasocial relationship" (Vinney & Dill-Shackleford, 2016). Although these interactions are one-way, they appear to buffer against the losses of social contacts and feelings of rejection (Derrick et al., 2009). J.R.'s responses indicate that, during the fallouts with her father, she was drawing emotional support from her fictional friends. She expressed that writing gave her a sense of control, and when she needed to feel loved, she gave it to her characters. According to the uncertainty reduction theory, relationships develop based on increased certainty, that is relationships are built through the processes of learning to predict the other's behaviour (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Therefore, it is postulated that, when real relationships appear to be unpredictable, fan writing may allow individuals to gain greater control and predict the behaviour of their characters, which decreases uncertainty and increases liking or deepens intimacy.

Watching a character (in film or television) consistently or being immersed in a

character from a novel can create closeness and connection by way of shared experiences and regular interactions. These interactions are further strengthened beyond the exposure situation as individuals become affectively involved via fan writing, which may allow writers to use their imagination to be part of the social worlds of their favoured character. Rubin and McHugh (1987) suggest that, by reacting interpersonally with fictional characters, fans or viewers “may feel like know them” or begin to perceive characters as friends. This pattern is evident in J.R.’s responses. She feels protective of the characters she writes about, and the attachment extends, not only to the characters, but also to places. Surrounding herself with material culture that reminds her of her favourite characters has allowed her to feel close to her characters and evoked an optimistic feeling. Two other participants echoed similar beliefs, suggesting that the characters felt as they were “real people,” and shared traits that were similar to their real friends. Participants’ responses indicate that, although they are consciously aware that parasocial relationships are not real relationships, they can feel “psychologically real and meaningful” (Derrick et al., 2008, p.262).

It appears that perceived similarity and friendships are an important aspect of parasocial bonds and this is consistent with items found in quantitative instruments that assess for parasocial developments. For example, Cole and Leets’ (1999) Parasocial Interaction Scale focuses specifically on “capturing the long-term, relational or friendship-like nature of parasocial relationships” (p. 2799). An example of an item includes: “I think my favorite TV personality is like an old friend.” Similarly, the Audience Personal Interaction Scale developed by Auter and Palmgreen, (2000) entails four sub scales with one of them focusing on Group Identification/Interaction, capturing an individual’s sense of belonging to a particular group. Examples include: “Favorite character’s interactions are similar to mine with friends” or “I’d enjoy interacting with favorite character and my friends at same time” (p. 83).

J.R. brings attention to the struggle she experiences between the separation of her

own thoughts and the characters she wrote about, explaining that it can be difficult to shut down the multiple voices of different characters. J.R. also explained that characters can help guide individuals, but having multiple favored characters may prompt different ideas and cause confusion (similar to having a “split personality”) of how to behave or respond in real life situations. The literature exploring parasocial developments has brought attention to the “concerns of intense parasocial connections,” but the literature remains scarce. Focus group interviews conducted by Mostaghimi (2019) indicate that participants are conscious of the “oddities” of their parasocial relationships while another participant reported that they refrained to address their relationship as an obsession due to the negative connotation associated with the term. There is, therefore, the possibility that parasocial relationships could, in rare cases, take extreme forms and hamper rather than improve wellbeing (Hartmann, 2017). As cited in Hartmann (2017), Horton and Wohl (1956) asserts that “it is only when the parasocial relationship becomes a substitute for autonomous social participation, or when it proceeds in absolute defiance or objective reality, that it can be regarded as pathological” (p. 223). Hartmann (2017) further suggests that parasocial relationships can be argued to become dysfunctional when individuals enter the realm of celebrity worshipping (“exaggerated devotion”) - that is when individuals become more alienated or the short-term benefits (social support) begin to outweigh the long-term negative effects (alienation and disconnection from the real world) (p. 139). Hartmann (2017) further suggests parasocial relationships can become debilitating when individuals become delusional and begin to demand reciprocity from their parasocial connections, hindering an individual’s ability to maintain inclusion in the real world.

While J.R. shared the challenges regards to developing strong connections with characters, others also expressed feeling a sense of attachment, but being able to separate their real and reel relationships more seemingly. J. expressed that she wants the characters she writes about to

be happy, which allows her to be happy in turn. The development of parasocial interactions may be unconscious here. While J. expressed that she is able to distance herself from fictional characters, she simultaneously wants them to be happy which in turn makes her feel happy. When parasocial bonds are formulated, participants are more likely to feel emotionally attached with characters and crying with characters during aversive developments, or feeling actively involved in the lives of the characters (Kokesh & Sternadori, 2013). Likewise, A.W. shared that the characters she creates are like her “babies” and that, because creating your own characters took greater effort and more time spent writing about characters, may possibly strengthen the parasocial bonds. Other participants also expressed it was important for their characters to not feel hurt, to instead be happy and successful.

Participants' responses also brought attention to the unrealistic expectations of relationships in their creations. S.J. learned that her stories and characters depicted an unrealistic view of her ideal relationship that should be exciting, passionate and adventurous as portrayed in films and novels. This finding is consistent with Segrin and Robin (2002) research, which supports that television viewing is negatively correlated with idealistic marriage expectations while watching romantic genres is positively associated with high expectations. As discussed by Segrin & Robin (2002), television viewing can perpetuate unrealistic ideals, such as how one's partner should act or care for them, or knowing each other's needs without overt communication, etc. (Segrin & Robin, 2002). Furthermore, mass media often romanticizes the idea of love, intimacy, physical beauty and the notion of “love at first sight” while minimizing conflict and the “boring” aspects of being in a relationship - in all, projecting a distorted representation of relationships. While writing about idealistic relationships can reinforce this desire further, having awareness of its effects on an individuals' real relationships can also motivate individuals to alter and modify their creations to reinforce more realistic expectations. Hence, fan writers can use

their stories as a vehicle to determine what makes a good relationship.

C.C. sheds light to an interesting point that aligns with Gold's (1987) concept of modelling. Her responses show awareness to the fact that life is not like fiction. The author reports comparing her real friends to fictional characters and stating that fictional characters "would understand me better." Writing, therefore, allows authors to create characters who are *idealized* while a real person "has flaws" or may have different opinions, values and ways of responding. Between the creation and the readership, there falls a shadow of negotiation. People model and explore the possibilities of life in this shadow of discrepancy. She further shares that she tries to "keep the positive." This thought could be attempting to accept human flaws as they exist and learning to adapt. Similarly, television viewing also appears to be an effective method to direct focus away from oneself and making people less aware of their perceived short comings (Moskalenko & Heine, 2003). Like television, writing fan-fiction helps writers escape the disappointments of the idealized self and others to create characters that align with their ideal selves/standards. The desire to create idealistic relationships was also evident in J.R.'s interview. Through fan writing, she was able to create characters who accepted her without any conditions and made her feel loved, perhaps what was missing in her relationship with her father.

The thematic analysis of the responses indicated a strong theme of identification with the experiences, goals and emotions, and personalities of characters. When people experience high levels of PSI, they are more likely to invest more attention into understanding and perceiving the character, such as processing what the persona is saying, doing, and will actively try to seek new information (Klimmt et al, 2006). As described by Brown (2012), it is less likely for identification to occur before forming a parasocial relationship, which develops over time as the writer or viewer learns more about the character's attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. Based on these attentional processes, writers are also more likely to place greater cognitive efforts to

comprehend the actions and decisions of their favoured persona. Identification allows individuals to experience the life events of characters vicariously, but the emotions felt through the events are of their own (Vinney & Dill-Shackleford, 2018). These emotions can be empathic responses for the character and/or personal memories that arise. As a result, being able to immerse oneself in fictional narratives allows writers to “distance themselves from their real lives and consider their emotions through the less personally fraught lens of the text” (p. 21). It is possible that, when fans identify with characters, they are thinking about them outside of the media interactions, and writing fan-fiction allows writers to further identify with characters. J. and C.C. reported that identifying with characters allowed them to apply the story to their personal experiences and adapt accordingly. Writing about similar experiences allowed them to envision and take inspiration from a character and learn how they dealt with a specific situation. Moreover, feeling the experiences that the character is writing about through their own perspective can enhance a stronger connection to the character.

Identification allows writers to adopt the character’s identity and undertake their perspectives and point of views, allowing for the merging of the writer and character’s minds (Cohen, 2014). C.C. provided an in-depth example of identifying with characters from *Beauty and the Beast* to separate her emotions of anxiety and the pressures of society. While the *Beast* represents her family, *Beauty* symbolizes who she hopes to become and the acceptance of her true self. Through the characters, she is speaking indirectly about herself as represented by a model of experience written and directed by someone else. In this way, C.C. wrote to obtain information about her feelings and that it was possible to survive her pain like the *Beast*. She used existing characters and language to take control of unmanaged emotions, and experiences of helplessness and suffering, enabling her to (a) release her emotions, experiencing a sense of relief, and (b) visualize her experience differently. C.C.’s experience can further be related to Joseph

Gold's phenomenon of abreaction, a type of catharsis, defined as "an emotional release or discharge after recalling a painful experience that has been repressed because it was consciously intolerable" (Gold, 2002, p.20). When people experience stories as if they were one of the characters, they begin to connect with the character at a deeper level, which becomes intertwined with their sense of self. It is possible that writing helps individuals bring a problem or moment into focus through characters, releasing repressed effects in a safe way. Like reading, fan writers make connections with characters to find what they need at a particular time, making their feelings conscious and memories accessible for mental discussion. Gold advocates, "when we write about ourselves we are both author and reader. We create ourselves and learn who we are" (p.287).

One participant explained that writing helps her understand and interact with people better while another participant used her creations and characters as an inner voice to "coach" her in real life situations. It is possible that writing about characters serves as a way to rehearse real life interactions and reflect on their own social life. This idea is consistent with Gold (1987), who asserts that literature explores universal themes that people can identify with, such as pain, fear, illness, life transition, etc. Likewise, writing provides a similar opportunity to find alternatives and acceptable interpretations of experiences. Writers can reframe and compare unrelated ideas for their shared characteristics and make connections with their own life. One participant shared that it "kind of becomes this mini pep talk and it's like "I got this" or "if I am taking to a friend and were sharing something really personal or heartbreaking or I am getting into a fight with someone, it almost helps me like ok (name), this character dealt with it in this way." As described by Gold (2002), the objective of reading is not to only experience pleasure or enjoyment, but to "cultivate an awareness of the emotion and what it can tell us about ourselves" (p.82). While Gold (2002) refers to reading, writing can also be a powerful tool to help individuals recognize their emotions and to become aware

of their own responses to their life experiences. Fan writing gives individuals the opportunity to rewrite their narrative, or help people understand their world and experiences better. As one describes, being able to place “ourselves in stories and examining the stories we inhabit – is life changing.” Writers are, therefore, communicating with themselves and improving their skills for communication with others. C.C. expressed that she was writing about a character who was “kind of mirror of me, she’s doing what I took too long to do.” The character’s development brought awareness of her ideal self. Writing about the character guided her to visualize similar situations and relationships in her life and reflect on moments where she could have acted differently.

J.R. shared an important insight, saying, “we see ourselves in those characters and we want to explore that world through those characters. You know if I was in that situation what would I do and then have them do that.” Consistent with Gold’s ideas, it is possible that J.R. uses fan-fiction to process difficult emotions from a distance - that is through a character, which can be safe way to experience emotions during struggling times and ultimately be a healing experience. Like reading, writing allows individuals to think or perceive differently, and therefore, be “transformed.” Gold (2002; 1987) describes this transformation as a “second order change,” in which the mindset changes along with new learnings.

Participants alluded to the idea that writing about characters that an individual admires can lead to subconsciously adopting or mirroring the personalities or mannerisms of characters. This is congruent with the modelling process, which goes beyond the imitation of simple behaviour, but leads to changes in values, attitudes and aspirations to match the character (Bandura, 2001). Hence, writing about desirable characters is a long-term consequence of media exposure and can reinforce the aspiration to be like the character (Hoffner, 2005). This observation is congruent with the notion of “experience taking,” which refers to the act of taking on an experience, attributes or traits of fictional characters unconsciously over time (Kaufman & Libby, 2012). It is possible that fan-writing

allows individuals to get “lost” in their creations and one may actually begin to change their own behaviour and thoughts to emulate or match their favored character.

Finally, participants also shared that their engagement in fan writing included interacting with other readers and writers in the fan-fiction community, which has led to formulating real friendships across the globe. Fan-fiction communities are vital in helping writers meet others who share similar interests and minimizing the stigma associated with fan-fiction. One participant shared her observations of noticing herself and other writers and readers developing one sided “friendships” with the authors of their favored fanfics and compared it to celebrities.

The findings indicate that most participants are aware of the fictional nature of characters, to which they feel close or connected to, and there were a few indications of confusing fiction and reality. It is possible that writing about problems through characters, or “hanging out with my imaginary friends,” can mitigate the psychological distress among individuals who are experiencing a loss of social connections. The findings suggest that a sense of social belongingness can be acquired in multiple ways: Writers may become emotionally invested and develop strong “parasocial” relationships (i.e., one-sided imaginary relationships) with fictional characters and or, by identifying with their favored media and textual character(s) reinforcing a sense of self-discovery. Finally, fan communities can help create opportunities for both writers and readers to interact with others through feedback, reviews and encouragement, creating group membership and a social identity in return.

Chapter 6: Coping through Fan writing during the Lockdown

The “COVID-19 virus” struck the world in December 2019 and was announced as a public health emergency in March 2020 by the World Health Organization. The outbreak of the COVID-19 virus led to multiple lockdowns and social distancing in an attempt to prevent the spread of infection. The impact of the global pandemic affected many areas of life, including the economy, agriculture, health care and the global market (Kumar & Nayer, 2020). The increased measures of quarantining and self-isolation have affected everyday activities and livelihood, negatively affecting the mental health of many people. The pandemic affected many spheres of life including health, food and economic security, traditional markers of celebration (e.g., weddings, graduation ceremonies etc.), social interactions and communication. People experienced the loss of loved ones, deprived sense of freedom, and changes in working and academic environments. From rising rates of morbidity, job loss, and isolation, the unexpected disease continues to radically change lives of the people globally (Kumar & Nayer, 2020).

The effect of the pandemic has been immense, especially among the youth and young adults (Statistics Canada, 2021). With fewer job opportunities for new graduates, closures of schools and cancellations of academic placements/internships, the youth has been prone to worse outcomes than older adults. Researchers have explored the impact of the pandemic and brought attention to the increased feelings of loneliness, depression, self-harm, drug use, and domestic violence (Kumar & Nayer, 2020). Recognizing the negative effects of the pandemic on mental health, researchers have brought attention to the strong need for psychological interventions and preparedness. As described by Hancı-Azizoglu and Alawdat (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis that has inspired researchers to explore the many influences and effects of the pandemic, including *writing disciplines*. As described by Hancı-Azizoglu and Alawdat (2021), the foreign travel bans’ and restrictions posed great challenges to all fields of academics, as well as the cancellation of social events, conferences, and classes. Many

writers were unable to channel their creativity through travel and inspiration. Many individuals turned to social media to share their feelings of frustration and anger in their struggles. Posting on different social media outlets allowed individuals to connect with others who were experiencing similar emotions, reinforcing a sense of connectivity and solidarity (Hancı-Azizoglu & Alawdat, 2021). Individuals also used writing and digital communication as a medium to share their opinions and attitudes towards the changing regulations (vaccines, masks, etc.) introduced by the authorities to control the pandemic. Given the powerful impact of writing and communication, Hancı-Azizoglu and Alawdat (2021) propose the need to generate creative spaces for people's "well-being and growth by using writing as a skill to express their emotions for easing feelings related to stress, turmoil, and crisis" (p. 239). Furthermore, they encouraged teachers to motivate expressive writing, stating that "surviving the pandemic crisis of the year 2020 required a pen and a paper or a digital tool to maintain the wellbeing with writing for staying rational and well balanced" (p. 238).

In the current research study, data collection took place during the pandemic, and the researcher asked, "*Please think about a stressful situation you have experienced in the last 12 months and tell me how you used fan-fiction to deal with this.*" The discussion brought awareness to two things: (1) how the pandemic was commonly perceived as a stressful experience by the participants, and (2) the protective impact of fan writing during the strict confinement (lockdown) measures imposed by the government. Interestingly, in the initial eight interviews, five participants discussed the pandemic as their stressful experience, and three out of these five participants were under the age of 30. The following section is included to explore this phenomenon further. Using fan writing to cope with the pandemic was a consistent theme that came across all interviews. In light of these findings, the interview guide was revised to include a specific question around how people's fan writing behaviours may have changed prior and during the pandemic. Two additional interviews were conducted with the refined questions and the goal to understand the impact of writing fan-fiction during the pandemic.

The two new participants were asked the following additional question: How do you think the pandemic has affected your writing behaviours (mood, frequency, content etc.)? Prompt questions followed to evoke greater insight and responses from participants. In comparing the participants' individual interviews, specifically to this question, one common meta-theme and four subthemes were identified. Each common theme was notable across interviews and represents the commonality of shared experiences by the participants.

Getting through the pandemic:

- a. Sense of productivity or purpose*
- b. To manage my stress*
- c. To switch off my brain and escape*
- d. Sense of community*

Sense of productivity/purpose: At the individual level, the coronavirus changed the way many individuals, work globally and their everyday daily routines. One of the biggest changes is the switch to remote work, forcing people to adopt new ways of communicating and structuring resources. While working from home has given workers much flexibility and greater autonomy, studies have found that employees were facing a much greater workload than prior to the virus (Kidwai, 2020). Employees have reported that time saved on commuting has been replaced with longer periods spent on the computer, responding to emails and attending virtual meetings. Furthermore, people have reported “more meetings and less face time,” leaving them feeling stressed, over worked and angry. Others have brought attention to new challenges related to childcare, technological difficulties, and adapting a new work-life balance (Kidwai, 2020).

The pandemic has created two distinct experiences. On the one hand, the virus has led to remote work and/or an increased workload. On the other hand, some people found that the virus has led to reduced work hours, deployment and unemployment (due to the closure of non-essential

businesses). According to Statistics Canada (2021), due to the new public health measures, employment has declined primarily in three main sectors: accommodation and food service, retail, and recreation. Conversely, given the strong need for the health care sector to address the prompt response to COVID-19, employment has increased in health care and social assistance fields (Statistics Canada, 2021).

The pandemic has affected people differently. However, for many people, these changes have contributed to a lack of routine, feelings of guilt, and unproductivity. Common coping methods (such as gyms, socialization with friends and travel) were closed and people were required to find new coping skills. Furthermore, there was a huge push for people to make the most of the extra time, bringing in suggestions for picking up new hobbies to feel productive. In the current interviews, participants echoed similar concerns. Participants expressed feeling unproductive. Creating fan stories during the pandemic was a way to maintain productivity that contributed to their mental wellbeing. One participant shared, “especially now in the middle of a pandemic where we all feel, I don’t know, super stuck and unproductive all the time. It felt nice to have something.”

Similarly, J.R. explained that the pandemic not only led to the loss of her job, but also seized her of a role that she heavily identified with - a breadwinner. She further described that fan writing became an outlet to regain productivity and a sense of control during the pandemic. She reported, “I would have gone crazy if I didn’t have a purpose... I wasn’t working and I don’t do well with not being the breadwinner, I don’t do well with being the unemployed one kinda thing. With fanfic I would sit and write, I had a job, a legitimate purpose”. J.R. also mentioned that her level of productivity and success could be measured by the word count and number of comments she received from readers. She shared that the process of writing evoked an optimistic feeling and strong sense of accomplishment. These sentiments were echoed by another participant, C.C., who also shared that fan writing provided a sense of productivity, stating “the sense of actually doing

something.” During the pandemic, especially when she was feeling pressured to work by close family members, she expressed, “I needed a creative outlet and since then I probably write very regularly, it’s been a lot more intense during the pandemic. I had a lot more time and a lot more need to think about current events.” She further shared:

During the height of the pandemic, let’s say March – October 2020, I wrote a fic a week, sometimes two because I was at home, unemployed, lost my job due to the pandemic. I had nothing to do. I needed an escape, I needed an outlet and I needed to feel like I was doing something worth-while so I started writing these stories... early April 2020 and then I wrote a whole series like an 18 part series, that took me a couple of months but I did it and then wrote a whole bunch of scenes like short pieces like I am at, let me go look actually, I have an unholy amount of stories here...I was only able to do that because of the pandemic... it was very necessary for me as I was unemployed and you know when you have the voices of your parents – you should be working and I literally can’t.

J.R. shared that she could now produce fan-fiction for 8 hours a day and receive feedback from people who were in similar situations. She explained, “knowing that people who are going through crappy situations in the world are getting at least a few minutes of relief because they got to read a fic and it was the highlight, the joy for me!” She also expressed that this experience provided insight about herself and skillset, showing her that “if I wanted to professionally write all the time, I have the discipline to write consistently on a regular schedule rather than oh I’m bored or distracted. For me, I love the opportunity. I read a lot more fic, wrote more, published more because I had the time. It was a dream!”

To manage stress. Another participant talked about writing fan-fiction as a coping tool during the quarantine period (rather than an act of productivity). She shared the challenges of being diagnosed with COVID-19 and how fan writing allowed her to destress during that period. It is

possible that writing fan-fiction created a space for her to quietly think, reflect and revise her experiences. She expressed:

S.C.: It's been a really stressful 2020 for everyone (yes). I was actually teaching in South Arabia and I got stuck there for two months and I couldn't come home and couldn't go anywhere. It was very very stressful and very emotionally exhausting. I had fanfic during that time, and I did a lot of writing and did a lot of research into my writing. During busy work I didn't think about where I don't want to be. That was one of the stressful incidents. I recently also tested positive for COVID and it was horrible. During my recovery process...I couldn't do anything but after my 14 days I started picking myself up and routine and one of the things I fell back into was reading fanfic.

S.C.'s responses indicate that she is aware that she is using fan-fiction as a medium to cope by escaping from where she didn't want to be. Likewise, A.W. revealed that fan writing allowed her to escape from stress by allowing her to enter another world. She shared, "Yeah! I would definitely say this whole pandemic in the past year was obviously very stressful. I started writing a fanfic and worked on it for better part of the year. It helped me put my stress into something and help me deal with everything that was going into the world and I can go into this tiny world of my own and just exist and take it all and put it somewhere."

Another participant also described the pandemic as "very stressful" as she lost her job due to the illness. C.C. reported using fan-fiction as a way to write about similar situations that allowed her to navigate or "fix" how she was feeling by vicariously learning from how others dealt with similar circumstances and taking inspiration to cope better. She brought attention to the historical Spanish flu and used her fan-fiction to navigate the effects of the current pandemic.

C.C.: Like everything just went heads up and being able to put that in fic is very cathartic cause you can explore different ways of fixing a situation and so like one of my fandoms

takes the back story of some of these characters right during the Spanish flu epidemic or Spanish flu pandemic I should say and so I was able to write some back stories like pre-canon stories like how did these characters deal with that situation like historical situation, how did they work out and that was a way of soothing myself.

To switch off my brain and escape. Participants' responses also shed light to the understanding of how fan writing helped create a private space to reflect on their experiences through self-dialogue, letting them think and cope with the unrest caused by the pandemic. J. shared that, while she was able to keep her job, she was working longer hours and writing fan-fiction allowed her to "switch off her brain" and *escape* the increased anxieties of her work pressure and the everyday fears associated with the COVID virus.

J: Perfect example right now - living in a COVID world and my real-life job I have had because the company had to lay off several people, I was lucky enough to stay employed, but it meant that I was doing more work because I was doing the job of 1.5-2 people. That in itself was stressful and you working from home, and I am in (location), I go back to work so even the stress of like I don't drive and take public transit and the stress of wearing two masks and being around strangers, that increases the level of anxiety of the work-load, the exposure of people you don't know where they have been, if their responsible so all of those things over the last year but especially the last 6 months have been very personally stressful so coming home at the end of the day and being able to okay now I am going to switch my brain to real life work to think about the marvel cinema. It's almost a relief in a way - I am just going to think of these characters in this fandom in that you enjoy, and I don't have to worry about that other thing until 9 AM tomorrow again.

Similarly, A.W. shared that fan writing allowed her to go in her own world, leaving behind the external chaos. Her responses highlight self-awareness of how writing can be used to reduce

stress and process her own emotions.

R.S. reported that she was writing more fan-fiction during the pandemic. She explained that, while fan writing was an escape or distraction, it was also an avenue to work out problems that were different from hers. Placing herself externally from the problem on hand allowed her to listen to the self and brainstorm ideas to navigate challenging situations.

R.S: For me writing in general is about emerging yourself in a world with different problems than the one you're in. Fanfic is a short cut to that, there's already lots and lots of existing problems...for me it's very much an escape and a distraction from problems like that.

Sometimes depending on the piece, it can be used as a way to work out some of the problems and challenges for me it's more this is somewhat different. This may be related to problems I am aware of, but its sufficiently different that it feels interesting to engage with instead of stressful (almost placing yourself externally from the problem).

Likewise, S.M. discussed how fan writing was a way to escape and create a better reality. He stated, "escapism, not just this past year but the world sucks, it sucks little bit less since November, but the world still sucks... Yeah you know where you can create a better reality...writing fan-fiction is where the stakes are much smaller and you know it's really a safe space to make things."

Writing fan-fiction, therefore, helps individuals escape from their social milieu and enter a better future, letting individuals distract themselves from the stress related to the pandemic. For others, fan writing provides an escape to create a space where they can engage with problems that are similar or different from theirs, expanding their understanding of the world around them. In view of these findings, fan writing can be seen as both an escape from reality and an opportunity to engage with the world at large.

Sense of community: The changing norms of the pandemic have led to questions of how to cope with distant relationships and increased loneliness. Despite the negative impact of the

coronavirus, we are seeing a restoration of the community, mutual aid, and togetherness. Around the globe, people have come together to support each other through increased volunteerism, community engagement, and bonding of community members. As described by Bowe et al. (2021), communities are essential during times of crisis and create a sense of unity or shared identity.

This pattern is evident in participants' responses as well. Fandom communities are known to create inclusivity, bringing people of shared interests together. However, during the pandemic, fandom communities have been even more vital in enabling social support, and empowering writers and readers. S.E. described her experience of how members supported each other by exchanging stories, discussing their problems, and encouraging each other. For many, the bond translated into meaningful connections over other mediums, such as social media.

S.E. I actually got on to one of the Facebook groups and asked people to send me their stories, I need something to make me feel better and was indebted with all these options and pick me from this very dark place...A lot of people have commented in my stories and tell me that what they're reading at the moment, my story is the only thing keeping them through the lockdown. It so humbling to hear, to receive and know that what your writing is making someone's day, just a little better and helping them carry themselves forward just a little more. It's really really amazing.

J.R. further shares that being able to create stories and then to share them with other readers within the fandom community allowed herself and others to feel less isolated, building friendships in times of the pandemic. She further conveyed, "my escapism allowed someone else to escape and we both got to be happy because of it". C.C. similarly shared, "we all needed a little escapism and so being able to host stories and hearing people say this is just what I needed today – it created a sense of solidarity cause a lot of people started writing fanfic again." She further shared that she was publishing one chapter a week, and that kept her engaged with others who were providing appreciation and feedback

consistently. She expressed that a “person who became friends with me because omg I didn’t know you wrote that story and they figured it out and like in your DMs their fan “girling” and all of sudden you have a friend and you don’t feel as isolated.”

While it is well documented in existing studies that marginalized groups (such as people with diverse sexual orientation and gender identities, people with disabilities, and low-income status, are deeply affected by systems of oppression, power and privilege), these disparities may have been further exacerbated due to the impact of the coronavirus. One participant expressed, “I am part of the LGTB community, I am Queer so for me having stories, you know to be able to write about things that I can’t talk to my family about, can’t talk about women loving women stories so to have a community that says – hey we know how you feel and understand where you’re coming from becomes a sanity thing, gives you that peace of mind.”

Writing fan-fiction offers individuals the opportunity to access their inner worlds and share it with like-minded people, providing a sense of inclusion and calmness. In addition, writers are able to have conversations about representation and diversity, allowing for group cohesion and empowering individuals to reflect on their own interests, ideas, plot and characterization.

Made me feel calm. The rise of the pandemic also brought attention to different political views, racial tensions and systematic inequalities. Mass media, news, and social media outlets were bombarded with contrasting views and information. C.C. expressed that the constant news about the pandemic was depressing and anxiety provoking. Having fan-fiction was a way to switch her focus and think about something positive. She explained that writing made her “feel calm and creative.” She further stated, “I stopped reading all the headlines because it was so much despair and so much confusion...people screaming loudly all the time. It (fanfic) gave me something to focus on that was positive and that helped me feel better and helped me get through it.”

“Doomscrolling,” introduced by Ariane Ling, is defined as “the act of endlessly scrolling down one’s news apps, Twitter, and social media and reading bad news,” a behaviour that has been heightened during the pandemic (Curly, 2020). With greater fear and anxiety, people are more likely to be alert or hyper-vigilant to keep up with the most current updates. Although the increased uptake of the news may be informative or protective, threat and fear associated with new knowledge can amplify the concerns and lead individuals to enter a vicious cycle of prolonged stress. Moreover, the pandemic saw an increase of mortality and morbidity, thus the news overwhelmingly focused on stories that are classified as negative. Negativity bias has been particularly true in American news (Sacredote, Seghal & Cook, 2020). It is possible then, as C.C. shared, that fan writing can be used as a distraction during the chaos, and as a medium to focus on more optimistic aspects of life, improving mental wellbeing.

To project my emotions. Projection allows writers to tap into their inner emotions and create characters who will represent their sorrows, joys, and passions. Gold (1987) asserts, “the best device for removing you from your story long enough is to see it differently, and to see what must be changed, is literature. Changing the literature is to change the story and changing the story is our reality” (p. 127). It is possible that projecting emotions into characters allows writers to experience their feelings in third person, which not only helps create distance from the feeling, but can also provide alternative perspectives. By giving a voice to the emotions and moods through characters, writers can increase writers’ self-awareness and bridge the gap between the conscious and the unconscious thought processes. One participant shared:

It definitely allowed me to escape to an extent but also, I have found that the ability to project emotion to be very therapeutic for me. Because then I am the writer, and I am in control of the situation and if the characters are feeling a similar way to how I’m feeling I can then also write what I need to receive as far as comfort goes which sounds

really odd but it's very therapeutic.

Participants' responses indicate that people use fan writing as a protective process that allows them to remove themselves from stressful situations. Several participants commented on the calming and relaxing effect fan writing provides by recognizing its therapeutic value as a coping mechanism during stressful situations. Participants who continued to work throughout the pandemic used fan writing as a way to escape and manage the stress induced by the increased fears of possibly being exposed to the virus. On the flip side, participants who experienced having more free time as a consequence of the stay-at-home order used fan writing as a way to feel productive and manage their mental health. Fan writing isn't just used to cope with the pandemic. Other participants reported that fan writing was equally helpful in managing other life stressors, such as loss and physical injuries. An interesting finding was most participants revealed that the amount of fan writing they wrote increased during the pandemic or during other stressful conditions. It is possible that writing fan-fiction itself is healing and, unconsciously, the act of writing allows individuals to develop parasocial closeness.

To summarize, while the pandemic has separated people from their real-life relationships, participants' responses indicate that fan writing and the fandom community can be an alternative way to make up for what is not available in reality. Although fan writing is normally a solitary exercise, the opportunity to share, comment, and interact with other writers allows fan writing to be a communal experience. In addition, fandom communities have been described as supportive communities that help individuals express themselves and their creativity in a safe place. Moreover, interacting with others through fandom communities and the increased frequency of fan writing during the pandemic became more important, people became more motivated to write about stories that gratify needs and desires for social contact. Finally, fandom communities also presented opportunities to interact with real people going through similar circumstances promoting a sense of solidarity and togetherness.

Chapter 7: Summary and conclusion

This study aimed to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how fan-fiction may strengthen parasocial bonds and improve social belonging. A convergent mixed methods design was employed for the current study. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected concurrently, and then analyzed independently, using quantitative and qualitative analytical approaches. The goal of a convergent design is to integrate both data and help create a wholesome understanding of the issue being explored as well as to validate the findings (Dawadi, Shrestha & Giri, 2021). Quantitative data from a survey and qualitative data from interviews were conducted and examined to see if the findings obtained from these two different data sets converge or diverge. The quantitative data examined group differences between time spent writing fan writing and parasocial interactions/relationships, social belonging and social presence. Meanwhile, the qualitative data provided rich data to explain how these interactions affect participants' well-being and the general motivations for writing fan-fiction. This chapter discusses how the two data sets complement each other, along with facilitating the triangulation of the qualitative findings with the results from quantitative methods, and vice versa.

Convergence of Quantitative and Qualitative Components

Interview questions were categorized into three sections: Questions in *Section A* provided factual information on participants' writing habits, *Section B* introduced questions that were related to the impact of fan-writing on emotional wellbeing, and finally, *Section C* asked participants to reflect on the effect of fan writing on their relationships. Question 4 from Section C brought attention to a consistent theme related to the recent pandemic, and therefore, was analysed separately. The table below summarizes the themes found in Section B and C:

Table 7.1: Summary of themes

Section B	Section C	Section C (additional question)
1. Motivations Escapism Sense of control Extending a universe I love What if scenario and filling missing gaps Challenging stereotypical portrayal of minority characters 2. Sense of community Feedback and instant gratification Improving my writing skills 3. Improved mood Therapeutic nature	1. Parasocial Relationships Friendships Unrealistic expectations 2. Identification Characters guide me Wishful identification 3. Real relationships Normalizing fan writing	1. Getting through the pandemic Sense of productivity/purpose To manage my stress and escape To project my emotions Sense of community

The findings of the current research suggest that participation in fan writing can serve as a way to intensify parasocial relationships, which further impacts other aspects of people’s lives. Although the qualitative data brought attention to the various motivations for writing fan-fiction, fan writers engaged with the characters they wrote about using two main processes: parasocial interactions and identification. Whereas parasocial interactions/relationships refer to long-term one-sided relationships with characters involving imaginary interactions, identification is a form of narrative transformation, in which individuals become the character by adopting their perspectives and mental states. Participant interview responses confirm that favoured media characters mimic friendships, possibly alleviating loneliness, especially when they experience rejection or social loss. Conversely, participant responses indicate that identification functions to increase self-knowledge, alter beliefs/attitudes and provide therapeutic relief. Writing fan-fiction further gives individuals the power to elicit repressed emotion and aid in articulating difficult thoughts.

The API scale was devised to measure parasocial interaction defined as “a positive *long-term involvement* with a favourite media character” (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000, p. 27) and is

congruent with the current definition of parasocial relationship. The quantitative phase confirmed that group differences exist between time spent writing fan-fiction and parasocial interactions. Greater time spent writing fan-fiction increased parasocial interaction intensity and social belongingness. It is possible that parasocial connections are already developed when people start writing fan-fiction, but they are further strengthened during the course of writing, and potentially more during stressful times. This study affirms that parasocial relationships can be cultivated through engaging in fandom activities and does not rely solely on media exposure. Similar evidence was found in participants' interview responses, where they felt protective of their characters and described wanting them to feel happy and successful, wanting to make sure that they are not hurt in their creations and described their characters like their baby. One participant shared that she felt more attached to the characters she created because of the time invested in building the character.

In addition, the qualitative data indicates that, while individuals are aware that reel relationships can be emotionally gratifying and meaningful, they should not be mistaken for real relationships. Most participants were able to separate their reel and real relationships, suggesting that fictional characters do not necessarily compensate for friendship deficiencies, but rather complement social relationships. However, one participant explicitly stated that writing about favoured characters was similar to talking to their friends and further shared, "It's protective, you start to see them in everyday things." Participants also alluded to the challenges of their interactions with fanfic characters, suggesting that writing about characters can lead to projecting unrealistic expectations on their real relationships, and lead to confusion of how to respond in real life situations due to the different voices and perspectives of characters.

Quantitative findings using the APS subscales, measuring parasocial interactions, also suggest that greater time spent fan writing is related to the development of group identification and interactions (feeling a part of the TV/original source's family group, e. g. "[PERSONA]'s

interactions are similar to mine with friends” and “favorite character problem solving abilities”). This observation is consistent with participants’ interview responses, which also brought attention to the theme of *identification* and *group identification*. Identifying with the character meant experiencing a liking or affinity for the character and creating an empathic understanding of characters. Most participants reported that they included a piece of themselves or their lives in their creations, which allowed them to shift roles and explore different perspectives while being immersed in the text. It is plausible that being able to relate to characters increased similarity and realism while also reinforcing identification. Secondly, writers also shared the desire to emulate the characteristics of their favourite media characters or wish fulfillment and gain control over the relationships in their creations. Writing about characters who signified strength, power, and kindness also inspired writers to inherit those qualities. As described by Cohen (2014), the reward for identification is pleasure, which comes from the ability to forget about realities and be involved fully in the writing experience.

When the four subscales from the APS scale were compared across groups individually, no statistically significant differences were found between fan writing and problem-solving abilities. More than half of the interviewed participants reported that writing about similar characters helped guide individuals in their real life. This observation is congruent with items found in the APS subscale that measured *Problem Solving Abilities*, which included items such as “I like the way favorite character handles problems” or “I would like to be more like favorite character.” Participants shared that writing fan-fiction helped provide insight to understanding their realities better and deal with everyday problems. For example, one participant shared, “by connecting with a fictional character that I am better able to understand my own perspective or able to improve upon my point of view.” Another participant shared that when she experienced conflict at work, she would imagine how her favored character dealt with a similar situation and as feedback to guide her.

The inconsistencies found between the quantitative findings within the APS scale and qualitative findings can be partly explained by the unequal sample size in both phases. While the quantitative findings included over 500 participants, the qualitative phase incorporated interviews with only ten participants. While it is possible that some participants may have interpreted the quantitative items differently, given the large sample size, these findings may be more representative of the larger fan-fiction population.

Significant group differences were found between time spent writing fan-fiction and social belongingness (i.e., feeling a strong sense of being part of this fan-fiction community; feeling committed to the fan-fiction community). Participants' interview responses echoed the importance of fan communities in all sections of the analysis. Fan communities helped create opportunities for both writers and readers to interact with others through feedback, reviews and encouragement, creating a sense of group membership. Fan communities played an especially important role during stressful times, such as during the pandemic that halted individuals' ability to socialize in person. During the pandemic, participants reported spending greater time interacting with other writers and readers, finding a sense of universality of their emotions and experiences.

The quantitative findings indicate significant group differences between gender and social belongingness. Participants who identified as non-binary and female experienced greater social belongingness than participants who identified as male. Two participants in the qualitative interviews brought insight to the importance of fandom communities particularly for marginalized groups suggesting that fandom engagement allowed participants to be surrounded by people who understand or "get it" and to be supported by a loving community that encouraged self-expression. Fan communities foster strong group cohesion and also play a crucial role for marginalized identities as a safe and creative place to articulate feelings that they could not share with others. Fan-fiction also normalized Queer relationships, minimizing internalized fear and shame with the help of a

supportive community. Having access to stories with a strong and accurate representation of Queer identities was perceived as comforting and allowed for exploration of the complexities within diverse relationships.

Spearman's correlations indicate that social presence is positively associated with parasocial interactions. Social presence was apparent in participants' qualitative responses as well with some participants describing their characters similar to real people, inheriting qualities that resonated with real relationships. For example, one participant shared, "I think my friends share some characteristics that I write about." Another stated, "I knew if I wrote this chapter and if I talked about characters, it's like how you hang out with your friends." Therefore, it is possible that a high level of social presence allows users to escape the pressures of the real world and enter a fun, stimulating mental state through warm and personal interaction with other users (Gao, Liu & Li, 2017). This experience may be unconscious. It is possible that, when participants were asked whether their favored characters resembled real people or real relationships directly as in the quantitative measures, these questions may have appeared "bizarre" or confusing. However, when participants shared their narratives, they naturally spoke about their experiences with characters and interviews gave them the opportunity to articulate their connections without categorizing their thoughts.

The qualitative interviews brought attention to the various motivations behind fan writing beyond the need for social belongingness. The social context in which the individual lives had an impact on their motivations. For many, fan writing served as a way to remove themselves from stressful situations, escape, improve their writing skills, extend plotline and character lives, and challenge stereotypical portrayals of characters. Aligned with the Csikszentmihalyi systems model of creativity (1997; 2003), participants' responses provide evidence to suggest that media text transmits societal and cultural norms. The creature of a story encourages one to reflect on whether the thoughts and behaviours of characters are representative of their own beliefs.

In turn, fan writing is an outlet to adapt this belief system and give “voice to those who could not affect the source text directly, empowering fans to transform the source text in ways that were more reflective of their desires and interests” (Vinney & Dill-Schackl, 2018, p. 24).

Participants' responses also indicated that the global pandemic led to an unprecedented opportunity to write more frequently. For many, writing was an avenue to cope with the negative effects of the pandemic (e.g., social distancing, isolation, fear and anxiety, loss of control, etc.), which aligns with research that states priming individuals who think about their favorite celebrities/fiction characters can buffer negative emotions when they are in distress (Derrick et al., 2009; Twenge et al., 2007). Similarly, fiction served as a form of escapism during the national conflict between the Israel and Palestine populations, and was used to examine how the colonial violence was also evident in the recent study conducted by Quevillion (2021). Quevillion refers to the notion of “speculative fiction,” defined as the “the ability to escape a troubled present and dream of a better future” (p.17). Quevillion (2021) explains that, during the ongoing Israel and Palestine national conflict, fiction encouraged “cognitive estrangement” which is the opportunity to distance oneself and use imagination to explore new ways to navigate social changes, to gain a greater understanding of one’s struggles. Similarly, in the current study, fan- writing helped individuals create a spatial distance between the writers’ world that is flooded with consequences of the pandemic and the world being created on the page. This allowed individuals to manage their emotions, identify triggers of anxiety and stress, and provide alternative perspectives or models of experience. Similar to the process of reading, this path led to increased self-control and awareness of one’s own experiences (Gold, 1987). Participants were able to cope with the pandemic either through the act of fan writing for pleasure or the engagement with a narrative. These findings extend our understandings of the role of fan wiring on mental well-being, especially during times of global distress.

Recommendations

While the quantitative part of this study confirmed that parasocial relationships can be developed via fan writing, the participants' qualitative responses suggest that these reel relationships can be a supplementary source of social connections during times of distress. This statement is consistent with the social surrogacy hypothesis. Investigating the underlying motivations for writing fan-fiction can offer new ways for individuals to address these needs. The present study is of central interest to educators, mass media professionals, and mental health professionals (i.e., counsellors, psychologists, social workers, etc.), and intends to contribute to a novel research area that emphasizes the value of exploring fan writing as an outlet to fulfill the desire to belong. Writing fan-fiction further allows individuals to create spaces to listen to oneself and the choice to share stories is both freedom and power.

Attention to mental wellbeing and healthy coping mechanisms is increasingly important with growing evidence that identifies the magnitude of mental health concerns among young adults, including anxiety, stress, and depression (Anderssen, 2018). This fact is especially true during the ongoing effects of the pandemic on mental health. As social gatherings are limited, economic shutdowns, uncertainty, and unsafe environments have channelled fear and anxiety. With the high rise of mental health issues, more individuals are likely to seek treatment, coping mechanisms, and support. The findings of the current study provide some evidence to suggest the psychotherapeutic benefits of fan writing including coping, intimacy, self-reflection, and improve mood. Fan writing can further give individuals the opportunity to unconsciously express personal feelings and thoughts and be a healthy outlet to release stressors, suppressed emotions, motivations and desires through fictional characters.

This study also highlights the positive impact of participating in fandom communities. Online fandom communities provide a way to (a) connect with real people, and (b) encourage and

deepen parasocial bonds - both contributing to a sense of belongingness. Fan communities can be encouraged in school and therapeutic settings as a way for people to make friendships, encourage validation and normalization, and help improve participants' writing skills. Online communities may play a more prominent role for minority groups, but further comprehensive research is needed to examine the implications of the online fandom for socio-demographically diverse groups.

Parasocial relationships can also be encouraged in a therapeutic setting. Identifying with characters going through similar experiences provides opportunity for insight and information. For example, Gannon (2018) encourages clinicians to use characters and stories as metaphors for courage and strength. Similarly, fan writing may be used as a method for clients to understand why they are attached to specific characters. Participants' responses suggest that fan writers are likely to subconsciously adopt admirable characteristics of fictional characters, such as their behaviour, attitudes, and style. This is also known as "experience-taking, in which people shift from being observers and evaluators of characters to altering their own behaviour to match the behaviours of their favoured fictional character" (Kaufman & Libby, 2012). Therefore, sharing a sense of identity with a fictional character can motivate readers to engage in vicarious dissonance and alter or reinforce their behaviour or attitudes.

Despite the immense popularity of fan-fiction practices in the youth, the implementation of fan-fiction in more formal institutions (e.g., classroom) is often dismissed and viewed as "frivolous" or irrelevant (Black, 2009; McWilliams, Hickey, Hines, Conner, & Bishop, 2011). Student learning is usually dictated by the "expert" knowledge of the instructor, who is constrained by curriculum standards and mastery of certain constructs of writing. However, participants shared that fan-fiction is similar to fiction in many ways, allowing them to exercise their imagination and find coherence in their personal experiences. Participants'

responses also indicate that multimodal literacies like fan-fiction motivate young writers, capture their strengths, and can help build vocabulary and improve language skills. It is, therefore, important to advocate for the incorporation of fan writing in classrooms to support struggling writers. Therefore, instead of perceiving digital learning as a type of deviation or distraction from traditional literacy methods, teachers should be encouraged to help students use their existing knowledge and passions to strengthen their creative and witting skills.

Undoubtedly, exploring the value of fan writing is insightful and contributes to the growing phenomenon of fandom studies. The dissemination of findings is not limited to a therapeutic setting and can contribute to achieving diverse goals. Increased research exploring the impact of writing can help eliminate stigma and advocate for an outlet that allows writers to openly engage in exploring varied literacy activities.

Limitations

Quantitative phase:

According to the SS hypothesis, parasocial relationships in favored television shows can yield a sense of belongingness. This is especially apparent when people experience adversity, such as loneliness, low self-esteem or lack of control (Derrick et al., 2012) Although the current study confirms group differences between time spent writing fan-fiction and stronger parasocial relationships, participants were not exposed to an experimental condition, in which they were made to feel rejected. It is possible to be involved in a narrative or character for many other motivations, such as enjoyment, self-expression, and ongoing companionship. The findings however, suggest that writing fan-fiction allows writers, similar to television viewers, to regularly immerse themselves in a narrative and connect with favoured media/textual characters, and in turn, develop stronger parasocial bonds.

Another limitation involves the gender of the participants. More than half of the participants surveyed were female. As described by Eagly (2009), compared to males, females

are generally more likely to hold values or traits consistent with connectivity, empathy, and emotional closeness to others. This is likely to affect participants' response behaviour. Although gender differences were not the focus of the current study, it is possible that having so many females surveyed could bias the results.

The wordings of the items on the (Modified) Belongingness Theory of Social Networking Site Addiction Measure scale were adapted to include instructions as if participants were writing fan-fiction instead of interacting on social networking sites (SNS). For example, "There is a sense of human contact in this SNS" was modified to "There is a sense of human contact with writing fan-fiction." It is possible that this could have altered the reliability and validity of the instruments. Utilizing self-reported measures also has some shortcomings. As described by Rosenman, Tennekoon, and Hill (2011), response bias is a common limitation in self-reported data. Given that many participants did not complete all measures and missing data is apparent, it is possible that some participants may have misunderstood the questions, or assumed the questions were too personal. It is also possible that answering the questions took longer than intended and participants ended surveys prematurely. Social-desirability bias is also possible, where the respondent wants to appear positively in the survey or help the researcher.

Qualitative phase:

The researcher was the principal coder, which could have reinforced researcher bias, but member checks were conducted to minimize any possible unfair assumptions. Another limitation of the study was that participation was dominated by female participants. As described by Jenkins (1992), compared to males, females are generally more likely to write fan-fiction, and this observation was evident in both phases of the study. Participants were active fan writers who were eager to share their fan writing experiences, many indicating their goal was to eliminate the stigma associated with fandom and fan writing, which may have impacted participants' responses.

This fact may have contributed to participating or self-selection bias. An additional limitation included English being a requirement to participate in the study, limiting any opportunity for non-English speakers to participate.

Summary:

In summary, this thesis confirmed group differences between time spent writing fan-fiction, parasocial interactions and belongingness. Gender and age group differences were also found in social belonging. The qualitative phase explored the effect of writing on human development through the engagement with textual narratives to (a) understand participants' motivations for writing fan-fiction, and (b) explore the impact of parasocial interactions on participants' real life. As demonstrated by participants' responses, media characters can emulate friendships, which may lessen loneliness, especially for those who have suffered rejection or social isolation.

Furthermore, identification with media characters functions to increase self-knowledge, alter beliefs/attitudes and guide them. Through fan writing, individuals can use fictional characters as an outlet to release stress, suppressed emotions, motivations and desires. Finally, the act of fan writing can support positive coping strategies and build resilience especially during times of distress, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. Consistent with Brockerhoff-Macdonald (2017) findings, this process of writing (like reading) facilitates the growth of resilience as writers choose to engage with characters that either support them in the manner they see themselves. Writing helps people adapt in ways that are more meaningful, and/or allow the writer to move away from the stressor, either to recuperate or to gain the strength to positively interact with the stressor.

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Appendices

Approval for conducting research involving human subjects:



APPROVAL FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS Research Ethics Board – Laurentian University

This letter confirms that the research project identified below has successfully passed the ethics review by the Laurentian University Research Ethics Board (REB). Your ethics approval date, other milestone dates, and any special conditions for your project are indicated below.

TYPE OF APPROVAL / New X /	Modifications to project / Time extension X
Name of Principal Investigator and school/department	Twinkle Arora, Human Studies PHD program, supervisor Parveen Nangia
Title of Project	Finding Friends in Fiction: Investigating the Relationship Between Fan-fiction, Belongingness & Parasocial Relationships
REB file number	6020725
Date of original approval of project	October 13 th , 2020
Date of approval of project modifications or extension (if applicable)	September 29 th , 2021
Final/Interim report due on: (You may request an extension)	October 13 th , 2022
Conditions placed on project	

During the course of your research, no deviations from, or changes to, the protocol, recruitment or consent forms may be initiated without prior written approval from the REB. If you wish to modify your research project, please refer to the Research Ethics website to complete the appropriate REB form.

All projects must submit a report to REB at least once per year. If involvement with human participants continues for longer than one year (e.g. you have not completed the objectives of the study and have not yet terminated contact with the participants, except for feedback of final results to participants), you must request an extension using the appropriate LU REB form. In all cases, please ensure that your research complies with Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS). Also please quote your REB file number on all future correspondence with the REB office.

Congratulations and best wishes in conducting your research.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Rosanna Langer".

Rosanna Langer, PHD, Chair, *Laurentian University Research Ethics Board*

Appendix B

Annual approval for conducting research involving human subjects:



APPROVAL FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS Research Ethics Board - Laurentian University

This letter confirms that the research project identified below has successfully passed the ethics review by the Laurentian University Research Ethics Board (REB). Your ethics approval date, other milestone dates, and any special conditions for your project are indicated below.

+ TYPE OF APPROVAL / <u>New X</u> /	Modifications to project /	Time extension X
Name of Principal Investigator and school/department	Twinkle Arora, Human Studies PHD program, supervisor Parveen Nangia	
Title of Project	Finding Friends in Fiction: Investigating the Relationship Between Fan-fiction, Belongingness & Parasocial Relationships	
REB file number	6020725	
Date of original approval of project	October 13 th , 2020	
Date of approval of project modifications or extension (if applicable)	September 29 th , 2021	
Final/Interim report due on: (You may request an extension)	October 13 th , 2022	
Conditions placed on project		

During the course of your research, no deviations from, or changes to, the protocol, recruitment or consent forms may be initiated without prior written approval from the REB. If you wish to modify your research project, please refer to the Research Ethics website to complete the appropriate REB form.

All projects must submit a report to REB at least once per year. If involvement with human participants continues for longer than one year (e.g. you have not completed the objectives of the study and have not yet terminated contact with the participants, except for feedback of final results to participants), you must request an extension using the appropriate LU REB form. In all cases, please ensure that your research complies with Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS). Also please quote your REB file number on all future correspondence with the REB office.

Congratulations and best wishes in conducting your research.

Rosanna Langer, PhD, Chair, Laurentian University Research Ethics Board

Appendix C

Recruitment poster:

Participants Needed for Research!

Hello Everyone,

My name is Twinkle Arora and I am currently conducting a research project as part of my Doctorate thesis at Laurentian University.

OBJECTIVES:

1. **To understand why people write fan-fiction.**
2. **To determine if fan writing is related to a sense of belonging and parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships can be defined as one-sided relationships between individuals and media characters.**

ARE YOU:

- **16 years of age or over?**
- **Able to read and write in English?**
- **An active fan-fiction writer?**
- **Able to have access to a computer and internet?**
- **Willing to participate in an online survey approximately 20 minutes in length and/or in-depth audio recorded interview with the student researcher?**

As a participant in this study, you will be first asked to read and electronically accept an informed consent form. Next, you will be asked to complete a series of questionnaires about your experience as a fan writer. This will take approximately 20 minutes. You will also be asked some demographic questions (age, gender and nationality). This information will be used to describe the sample, and will not be linked to your individual responses.

Your participation in this study will remain completely anonymous and voluntary as you are able to withdraw from the study at any point before submitting your answers. Once you complete the online survey, you will be directed to the acknowledgement page and will be given the option to indicate your interest in participating in a follow up telephone interview with the researcher. The findings that will be made available will not contain any personal or identifiable information of the participants.

If you meet the above criteria and would like to participate, please follow this link to the study website. Please do not respond directly or comment on this post, to protect your privacy. Also, if you think you know anyone who might fit these criteria, we encourage you to pass this along to them! Please do not 'tag' or publicly name anyone whom you are recommending for this study, to protect their privacy. Please do not advise me or anyone else that you have passed this link along to someone who you may think would be interested in participating, to protect their the study link or who has participated in the study, nor will I have any way of knowing who has passed the link along, or who has received the link from others passing it along.

(REDCap Link here)

If you have any questions or concerns about the survey please contact the researcher

Twinkle Arora at tarora@laurentian.ca. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Appendix D

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH SURVEY

Finding Friends in Fiction: Investigating the Relationship Between Fan-fiction, Belongingness & Parasocial Relationships

You are being asked to consider participating in a research study. This form explains the purpose of this research study, provides information about the study procedures, possible risks and benefits, and the rights of participants. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have.

The Researchers:

My name is Twinkle Arora, I am doing this research as part of my Doctorate degree in the Human Studies and Interdisciplinary program at Laurentian University.

If you have any questions about the research, you can contact me. My contact information is below:

Principal Investigator: Twinkle Arora
E-mail: tarora@laurentian.ca

Primary supervisor: Dr. Parveen Nangia
705 675 1151 Ext 4231
pnangia@laurentian.ca

Committee members: Dr. Hoi Cheu & Dr. Cynthia Whissell

This Research:

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The goal of the current study is to (a) understand why people write fan-fiction and (b) to determine if fan writing is related to a sense of belonging and parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships can be defined as one-sided relationships between individuals and media characters.

I am looking for individuals who:

- Are 16 years of age or over
- Can read and write in English
- Individuals who are active fan-fiction writers
- Have access to a computer and internet
- Are willing to participate in an online survey approximately 20 minutes in length.

As part of our research, we are asking you to:

To complete a series of survey questionnaires exploring your writing behaviours, motivations, and how you feel about your participation in writing fanfic affects your real relationships. You will be

asked to complete the demographic questionnaire which will ask you to indicate your age, gender and ethnicity. These demographic variables will be used to describe the sample.

The Research is Voluntary:

Please note that you may withdraw by not completing the remainder of the survey and/or closing the browser. However, if you submit the survey and not all questions are completed, your data will not be included in the study. Once you have completed the survey, the anonymity settings of the survey prevent your data from being withdrawn from the study because the student researcher will not know which data is yours. The student researcher and supervising researcher are the only people conducting this research and have access to the survey responses.

The Results of the Research:

As your data was never linked to your name, your participation will remain anonymous and only the data will be reported in any writing or presentation.

If you are interested in obtaining a brief report of the study results, please feel free to contact me at my email address: tarora@laurentian.ca

Risks and Benefits:

While there is minimal risk associated with the participation in this study, it is possible that these topics could trigger certain emotions or reactions as a result of increased self-awareness or reflection. The activities being asked will not subject you to more risk than you are likely to encounter in your normal daily activities.

If any distress is experienced as a result of participating in the study, you are invited to:

1. Take a short break from answering questions
2. You may withdraw or exit the study by not completing the remainder of the survey and closing the browser.
3. Refer to seek support from the list of resources outlined below.

In terms of benefits, it is possible that participants may also experience a certain degree of increased insight and self-awareness as a result of exploring and articulating their thoughts, emotions and experiences.

Are study participants paid to participate in this study?

You will not be paid for participation in this study, it is voluntary.

The Research is Confidential:

The surveys are hosted on Research Electronic Data Capture (REDCap) which is a secure web application for building and managing online surveys and databases. REDCap is compliant with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and provides a secure environment so that research teams can collect and store highly sensitive information.

You are also asked not to respond directly or comment on the Facebook post, to protect your privacy. Also, if you think you know anyone who might fit these criteria, we encourage you to pass this along to them! Please do not 'tag' or publicly name anyone whom you are recommending for this study, to protect their privacy. Please do not advise me or anyone else that you have passed this link along to someone who you may think would be interested in participating, to protect their privacy.

Once the data collection stage is complete, the data will be downloaded from the survey website and stored by the student researcher on Laurentian University's secured Google drive. The data on the survey site will then be deleted. All data (hard copies, notes etc.) will be stored in the primary supervisor office for 5 years at which point they will be shredded or deleted.

What are the rights of participants in a research study

You have the right to receive all information that could help you make a decision about participating in this study. You also have the right to ask questions about this study and your rights as a research participant, and to have them answered to your satisfaction.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or any ethical issues related to this study that you wish to discuss with someone not directly involved with the study, you may call **Research Ethics Officer, Laurentian University Research Office**, telephone: 705-675-1151 ext 3681, 2436 or toll free at 1-800-461-4030 or email ethics@laurentian.ca.

DOCUMENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT

- This research study has been fully explained to me and all of my questions answered to my satisfaction
- I understand the requirements of participating in this research study
- I have been informed of the risks and benefits, if any, of participating in this research study
- I have been informed of any alternatives to participating in this research study
- I have been informed of the rights of research participants and that I can withdraw at any point of time.
- I have read each page of this form
- By clicking on the link to the survey on this form you are consenting to participate in the research.

List of Resources for Counselling Support

General Mental Health

ConnexOntario Helpline
Toll-free: 1-866-531-2600
Live web chat

- Email

211 Ontario

- Information and referral for community, government, social and health services, including mental health resources across Ontario.

- Call 2-1-1
- Toll-free: 1-877-330-3213
- Live web chat
- Email

BounceBack®

- A free cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) program that offers guided mental health self-help supports for **adults and youth 15 and older**.
- Toll-free: 1-866-345-0224

Young people

Good2Talk

- For people ages 17 to 25.
- Toll-free: 1-866-925-5454
- Email

Indigenous peoples

Hope for Wellness Helpline

- Immediate mental health counselling and crisis intervention for all Indigenous peoples across Canada (available in some Indigenous languages).
- Toll-free: 1-855-242-3310
- Live web chat

Talk 4 Healing

Indigenous women can get help, support and resources seven days a week, 24 hours a day, with services in 14 languages.

- Toll-free: 1-855-554-4325
- Text: 1-855-554-4325
- Live web chat

In addition to resources available in Ontario, the following resources will also be listed:

Crisis Services - Canada wide

1. Kids Help Phone
 - a. Call 1-800-668-6868 (toll-free) or text CONNECT to 686868. Available 24 hours a day to Canadians aged 5 to 29 who want confidential and anonymous care from professional counsellors.
2. Hope for Wellness Help Line
 - a. Call 1-855-242-3310 (toll-free) or connect to the [online Hope for Wellness chat](#).

Resources outside Canada and the United States (Link embedded – click for contact information)

- a. International Association for Suicide Prevention
- b. International Suicide Hotlines

OR visit:

https://www.iasp.info/resources/Crisis_Centres/

<http://www.suicide.org/international-suicide-hotlines.html>

Appendix E

Acknowledgement response:

Thank you for your participation!

Thank you for participating as a research participant in the present study. The present study explores whether fan writing is related to social belonging and whether this effect is mediated or influenced by parasocial relationships (i.e., one sided relationship between the audience and media character).

Again, we thank you for your participation in this study. If you know of any friends or acquaintances that are eligible to participate in this study, we request that you not discuss it with them until after they have had the opportunity to participate. Prior knowledge of questions asked during the study can invalidate the results. We greatly appreciate your cooperation.

If you have any questions please feel free to email the researcher, Twinkle Arora (email:tarora@mylaurentain.ca). A summary of the research findings will be posted in the social media sites and recruitment locations.

We are also conducting in-depth telephone audio-recorded interviews as part of this research study to increase our understanding of how fan writing is related to belongingness and parasocial relationships.

*****If you are not interested in an interview, click on submit. If you are, click on interview information.*****

Appendix F

Invitation to participate in part 2 of study – Interview

We are also conducting in-depth telephone audio-recorded interviews as part of this research study to increase our understanding of how fan writing is related to belongingness and parasocial relationships. As a fan writer, you are in an ideal position to give us valuable first-hand information from your own perspective. The interview takes approximately one hour and is very informal. We are simply trying to capture your thoughts and views on being a fan writer. Your responses to the questions will be kept confidential. Each interview will be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write up of findings.

There is no compensation for participating in this study. However, your participation will be a valuable addition to our research, and findings could lead to a greater public understanding of fandom studies.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask. Please select the appropriate box to indicate your interest, and I will follow up with an email of more details regarding the study and consent form.

Yes, I am interested in participating in an in-depth telephone interview with the researcher. Please email me the consent form and the further details at _____(email).

No, I would not like to participate in a follow-up interview. (Insert check box here)

Appendix G

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN AN INTERVIEW FOR RESEARCH STUDY

Finding Friends in Fiction: Investigating the Relationship Between Fan-fiction, Belongingness & Parasocial Relationships

You are being asked to consider participating in a research study. This form explains the purpose of this research study, provides information about the study procedures, possible risks and benefits, and the rights of participants. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have.

The Researchers:

My name is Twinkle Arora, I am doing this research as part of my Doctorate degree in the Human Studies and Interdisciplinary program at Laurentian University.

If you have any questions about the research, you can contact me. My contact information is below:

Principal Investigator: Twinkle Arora
E-mail: tarora@laurentian.ca

Primary supervisor: Dr. Parveen Nangia
705 675 1151 Ext 4231
pnangia@laurentian.ca

Committee members: Dr. Hoi Cheu & Dr. Cynthia Whissell

This Research:

The goal of the current study is to (a) understand why people write fan-fiction and (b) to determine if fan writing is related to a sense of belonging and parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships can be defined as one-sided relationships between individuals and media characters.

I am looking for individuals who:

- Are 16 years of age or over
- Can read and write in English
- Individuals who are active fan-fiction writers
- Have access to a computer and internet
- Are willing to participate in an audio recorded interview for approximately one hour with the researcher.

As part of our research,

We are conducting in-depth telephone audio-recorded interviews as part of this research study to increase our understanding of how fan writing is related to belongingness and parasocial relationships. As a fan writer, you are in an ideal position to give us valuable first-hand information

from your own perspective. The interview will take approximately one hour and is very informal. Once your responses have been transcribed, I will email you a summary of the overall themes found in your responses and ask for you to verify if they accurately reflect your experience. We are simply trying to capture your thoughts and views on being a fan writer. Your responses to the questions will be kept confidential. Each interview will be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write up of findings.

The Research is Voluntary:

Your right to refuse to participate, your right to refuse answer questions, withdraw at any time by letting the researcher know that you no longer wish to be part of the study. This consent form indicates that only the researcher will know who does or does not participate and that findings will be reported without identifying individuals.

The Results of the Research:

As your data was never linked to your name, your participation will remain anonymous and only the data will be reported in any writing or presentation.

If you are interested in obtaining a brief report of the study results, please feel free to contact me at my email address: tarora@laurentian.ca

Risks and Benefits:

While there is minimal risk associated with the participation in this study, it is possible that these topics could trigger certain emotions or reactions as a result of increased self-awareness or reflection. The activities being asked will not subject you to more risk than you are likely to encounter in your normal daily activities.

If any distress is experienced as a result of participating in the study, you are invited to:

1. Decide not to answer a question
2. Take a short break from answering questions
3. Re-schedule your interview
4. Withdraw from the research interview
5. Refer to seek support from the list of resources outlined below

In terms of benefits, it is possible that participants may also experience a certain degree of increased insight and self-awareness as a result of exploring and articulating their thoughts, emotions and experiences. The findings from this study will contribute to a new research area that focuses on understanding the benefits and motivations of fan writing.

Are study participants paid to participate in this study?

You will not be paid for participation in this study, it is voluntary.

The Research is Confidential:

The Results of the Research I will publish the results of the research in my thesis. I may also write or speak about the research. Your name or any other information that might identify you will NOT be included in any writing or presentation.

Please be aware that this research data may be made public, even though your name, as a participant, is protected. Make every possible attempt to avoid revealing what might be considered confidential information about individuals other than yourself. You are encouraged to use pseudonyms, single letters (e.g., “X,” “Y,” or “Z”) to replace real names and to protect the privacy of others. The data (transcripts) will be further checked by the student researcher to further anonymize any dubious comments. Should you realize at a later date that a real name was used, please let me know and I will delete from your transcript.

You are also asked not to respond directly or comment on the Facebook post, to protect your privacy. Also, if you think you know anyone who might fit these criteria, we encourage you to pass this along to them! Please do not ‘tag’ or publicly name anyone whom you are recommending for this study, to protect their privacy. Please do not advise me or anyone else that you have passed this link along to someone who you may think would be interested in participating, to protect their privacy.

Electronic audio recordings and transcriptions will be transferred to Laurentian University’ secure Google drive upon completion of the interview and deleted from the audio-recording device. Only the student researcher, her Supervising Faculty, will have access to the audio recordings and transcriptions. No research material will be saved directly to a computer or portable laptop.

What are the rights of participants in a research study?

You have the right to receive all information that could help you make a decision about participating in this study. You also have the right to ask questions about this study and your rights as a research participant, and to have them answered to your satisfaction.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or any ethical issues related to this study that you wish to discuss with someone not directly involved with the study, you may call **Research Ethics Officer, Laurentian University Research Office**, telephone: 705-675-1151 ext 3681, 2436 or toll free at 1-800-461-4030 or email ethics@laurentian.ca.

DOCUMENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT

- This research study has been fully explained to me and all of my questions answered to my satisfaction.
- I understand the requirements of participating in this research study.
- I understand the phone interviews will be audio recorded and will last approximately an hour.
- I have been informed of the risks and benefits, if any, of participating in this research study.
- I understand that I can refuse to participate or chose to leave the study at any time.
- I have been informed of the rights of research participants.
- I have read each page of this form.

I agree to participate in this study

Appendix H

Quantitative demographic questions:

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Is there a racial/ethnic group with which you identify?
 - White
 - Black
 - Southeast Asian
 - South Asian
 - Arabic
 - First Nations
 - Other
 - Prefer not to answer

Time Spent Writing Fanfic Question:

How many hours do you spend writing fanfic in a week?

Appendix I

Audience-Persona Interaction (API) scale:

I would like you to think about the character you most frequently write about in your fan creations. All items are answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 Strongly Disagree to 5 Strongly Agree.

Please indicate your agreement with the following statements:

1. FAV reminds me of myself
2. I have the same qualities as FAV
3. I seem to have the same beliefs or attitudes as FAV
4. I have the same problems as FAV
5. I can imagine myself as FAV
6. I can identify with FAV
7. I would like to meet the actor who played FAV
8. I would watch the actor on another problem
9. I enjoyed trying to predict what FAV would do
10. I hoped FAV achieved his or her goals
11. I care about what happened to FAV
12. I like hearing the voices of FAV
13. CHARS interactions similar to mine with friends
14. CHARS interactions similar to mine with family
15. My friends are like CHARS
16. I'd enjoy interacting with CHARS and my friends at the same time
17. While watching show, I felt included in the group
18. I can relate to CHARS attitudes
19. I wish I could handle problems as well as FAV
20. I like the way FAV handles problems
21. I would like to be more like FAV
22. I usually agreed with FAV

Items 1-6: Identification

Item 7-12: Interest in favorite character

Items 13-18: Group identification/interaction

Items 19-22: Favorite character problem solving ways

Appendix J

Belongingness Theory of Social Networking Site Addiction questionnaire:

Social Presence

- SP1: There is a sense of human contact in this SNS
- SP2: There is a sense of personalness in this SNS
- SP3: There is a sense of sociability in the SNS
- SP4: There is a sense of human warmth in this SNS
- SP5: There is a sense of human sensitivity in this SNS

Sense of belonging

- SB1: I feel a sense of being part of this SNS
- SB2: I enjoy myself as a member of this SNS
- SB3: I am very committed to this SNS
- SB4: Overall, there is a high level of morale in this SNS

Escapism

- ES1: This SNS helps me escape from the world of reality
- ES2: This SNS helps me escape from problems and pressures
- ES3: This SNS helps me escape from things that are unpleasant and worrisome
- ES4: This SNS makes me feel as if I am in a different world of reality

Pleasure

- PL1: This SNS pleases me
- PL2: This SNS makes me happy
- PL3: This SNS makes me feel good
- PL4: I have fun in this SNS

Arousal

- AR1: This SNS makes me stimulated
- AR2: This SNS makes me excited
- AR3: This SNS makes me inspired
- AR4: This SNS makes me wide-awake
- AR5: This SNS makes me motivated

SNS Addiction

- AD1: I have difficulties in focusing on my study or work due to this SNS use
- AD2: I lose sleep over spending more time on this SNS
- AD3: This SNS use interferes with doing social activities
- AD4: My family or friends think that I spend too much time on this SNS
- AD5: I feel anxious if I cannot access to this SNS.

AD6: I have attempted to spend less on this SNS but have not succeeded

Note. Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Belongingness Theory of Social Networking Site Addiction (Modified) questionnaire

For the purpose of the present study, the original scale was modified to include writing fanfiction.

Social Presence

SP1: There is a sense of human contact with writing fan-fiction

SP2: There is a sense of personalness with writing fan-fiction

SP3: There is a sense of sociability with writing fan-fiction

SP4: There is a sense of human warmth with writing fan-fiction

SP5: There is a sense of human sensitivity with writing fan-fiction

Sense of belonging

SB1: I feel a sense of being part of this fanfic community

SB2: I enjoy myself as a member of the fanfic community

SB3: I am very committed to the fanfic community

SB4: Overall, there is a high level of morale in this fanfic community

Note. Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)

Appendix K

Qualitative interview guide:

Demographic questions:

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Ethnicity

Contextual questions:

1. To begin, could you please explain why you wanted to be a part of this research study?
2. How often do you create fan-stories?
3. How long have you been writing fan-fiction?
4. What influenced you to start writing fan-fiction?
5. What types of media do you write fan-fiction for (TV Shows, movies, books and comic books, video games, bands/musicians, anime/manga and or, other)?

Emotional wellbeing related questions:

1. Describe what motivates you to write fan-fiction?
2. Describe what you enjoy writing about fanfiction?
3. How do you think fan writing influences your mood?
4. Think about a stressful situation you have experienced in the last 12 months and tell me how you used fan-fiction to deal with this.

Effect on relationship questions:

1. Do you feel as if your participation in writing fanfic has affected your real-life relationships and everyday life?
2. Discuss the similarities you see between your friends and family and your favoured media character.
3. Tell be about any parallels with the stories you read and write with your own life?