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‘To Boldly Go Where No Psychologist Has Gone Before’: Effects of Participation in Fandom Activities on Parasocial Relationships

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Abstract

The aim of the current research was to observe the effect that participating in fandom activities had on parasocial relationships. Research suggests that people who participate in fandom activities may feel excluded from society and experience loneliness; this is linked to symptoms of mental illness. It was further suggested that fan people often view fandom as a religion or way of life and that they are capable of forming relationships in their fandoms that mimic traditional social relationships so as to provide the same benefits. The data in this study comprised of twenty-three female participants who formed a targeted sample. They were asked to rate the intensity of their main parasocial relationship before and after they began participating in fandom activities, as well as asking the nature and frequency of which they participated in these behaviours. The data from the first set of questions was analysed using a Pearson’s Correlation, the second section, concerned with qualitative data was analysed using Thematic Analysis. Strengths and limitations of the research were discussed as well as practical applications and possible future research avenues.

Keywords: Fandom, Parasocial, Relationships, Fandom Activities

Fan domain, or as it is more commonly known 'fandom', is the culture of taking mass produced media and selecting certain individual bodies of it, such as people, movies and television shows and reworking them into outcomes of the provoke an extreme pleasure response (Fiske, 1992). More contemporary research, such as Coppa (2006), describes fandom as the process of taking mass media and transforming it into an outcome which greatly excites the creator; they discuss this using the example of the *Star Trek* fandom and the creation of images by fans that use the original source material as inspiration. Coppa (2006) goes on to state that term fandom was first applied to sports and theatre, with the first writings about the fandom dating back to the 1920's but it was in the late 1960's that the science fiction community began adopting the term and applying it to the culture they had created. It was in this culture that the participation in fandom activities first began.

Jindra (1994) states that the conversing in online chat rooms about a fandom or a person who is closely identified with a particular fandom, such as an actor or writer is a fandom activity. Although this research took place in the early to mid-1990's, it is still valid as traditional chat rooms are being replaced by blogging websites such as Tumblr. This is evident in the fact that the micro blogging site grew an astonishing nine hundred per cent in its first four years (Sandeep, 2011). Jindra (1994) states that the attending conventions designed to accommodate the needs of an individual that self identifies as being in a fandom (Fiske, 1992) is also a fandom activity. This is further supported by Gooch (2008) who also identified attendance at conventions is fandom activity as well as using 'fanspeak', which is a language that individuals in fandoms appear to have developed themselves and is universally understood within the fandoms, this is supported by (Hillman, Procyk, & Neustaedter, 2014a). Other forms of fandom activities include use of clothing and/or make up in attempt to take on the appearance of a character or celebrity, commonly known as 'cosplaying' and also the reading or creating of fanfiction (also known as fanfic) which is written by fans for other members of the fandom (Thomas 2011).

This background research has identified activities that will be used to question participants of this current study to gain an understanding of their participation in fandom activities, the frequency of the participation and the medium which they most often to participate. Furthermore, participants will be asked about their parasocial relationships and how they feel their participation in fandom activities affects these relationships. Levy (1979) defines a parasocial relationship as that of interaction from a distance between a fan and a

mass media figure. Perse and Rubin (1989) support this definition by defining parasocial relationships as the perceived interaction or relationship between a mass media personality or figure and a mass media consumer, or the fan.

Previous research has explored why people develop parasocial relationships. Spitzberg and Cupach (2008) claim that lonely people are more likely seek out this form of attachment rather than traditional social relationships; this is supported by other research (e.g. Wang, Fink & Cai, 2008). Loneliness can be associated with mental illness, D'Augelli, Grossman, Hershberger and O'Connell, (2001) found that adults that who experienced mental health issues also experienced significantly more feelings of loneliness compared to those who did not have the same mental health issues. Research also suggests that those with mental illness find it difficult to integrate into society because of these issues, and a result of this they experience a profound sense of loneliness (Granerud & Severinsson 2006). This negative experience may mean they stop attempting to form these connections and causes a cyclical effect which can affect their mental health in a negative way.

A second explanation of loneliness is living in a minority (Rokach & Brock, 1996). Fandom culture has been defined as being outside the norms of society (Smith, Fisher & Cole, 2007). The notion is supported by Leary (1990) who found that those who had thought they had been excluded from society experienced a significantly higher level of loneliness compared to those who did not feel excluded. Jindra (1994) and Gooch (2008) also found The current research will explore these themes to examine issues that might arise around mental health and loneliness.

Jindra's (1994) research also suggested that those people who participate in fandom activities see this as a way of life or a religion; the research found that elements of the *Star Trek* fandom resembled a civil religion and those who were a part of it felt its effects in terms of their mental health which improved after joining. The theme of fandoms becoming or resembling religions is not limited to just one fandom. Doss (1999) stated that the fandom formed around American singer Elvis Presley resembled that of a religion as those who were a part of it used spiritual words when talking about or describing their idol. The possible idea of fandoms being as important to fan people as can be is relevant to this as it is possible, for some members, that they reap the same rewards as being in a recognised religion; for example being healthier and living longer as well as having higher level of subjective wellbeing, (Mochon, Norton & Ariely, 2011). However, Duffett (2003) claims that fandoms

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are not religions because it is impossible to reliably test the notion whilst also suggesting those in favour are more preoccupied with criticising contradictory research.

Jediism is the registered religion that originates in the *Star Wars* fandom, they believe in the power of the force, the source of the power the Jedi in the movies have. They claim that they can feel the presence and the effects of the force in their everyday lives. The religion is in fact the seventh most popular registered religion in the United Kingdom (Collman, 2013). Considering the argument around this debate, it is a theme that will be looked for within the fandom discussions in the current study.

Research has explored the differences in experiences around parasocial and traditional social relationships. Cohen (2003) researched participant's reactions to the breakup of both real life social relationships and parasocial relationships, due to death or cancellation. It was suggested that the breakup of both social and parasocial relationships are equally as traumatic to a person but it was also found that despite the disintegration of these relationships that in both cases, social and parasocial there was always another person or media outlet waiting in the wings to fill the void left by the previous relationship. This is supported by Schiappa, Allen and Gregg (2007) who also found that the loss of a parasocial relationship from the cancellation of a television show was just as traumatic a loss to the participants as losing a real life social relationship. This suggests that social and parasocial relationships have significant similarities, and that the loss felt from the end of these relationships causes a sense of loneliness which in turn may prompt the use of fandom activities. The evidence appears to suggest that social and parasocial relationships and the use of fandom activities could be seen to form a sort of triad of experience.

As previously discussed the real life social relationships that stem from those created by participating in fandom activities are often still contained within the fandom or at least contained within other individuals that participate in fandom activities. Grossman and Tucker (1997) found that individuals that belonged to different groups used language and words in different ways and contexts. Leppänen, Kirchhofer and Hotz-Davies (2009), found that fan people have their own language that they have developed themselves where one word has a meaning in everyday language but has a totally different meaning in the fandom universe. The authors provide examples of this citing that the word 'slash', in the fandom world this is used to depict a romantic relationship between two male characters or celebrities. Leppänen, et al. (2009), discuss the use of the word 'fluff' when being used in the fandom universe, the O'Donovan, R. (2016) 'To Boldly Go Where No Psychologist Has Gone Before': Effects of Participation in Fandom Activities on Parasocial Relationships. *Journal of Applied Psychology and Social Science*, 2 (1), 41-61

word fluff refers to a piece of work that depicts a loving and romantic relationship between the main characters, usually a couple. The emerging trend of fandom having its own developed language demonstrates the reliability here. For example, Hillman et al. (2014b), after investigating why fan people prefer the blogging site Tumblr to other forms of social media such as Twitter found that fan people have a system when referring to the relationships between characters in the media. They described their favourite relationship as their 'OTP' which is shorthand for One True Pairing, meaning that they are most passionate about this pair than any other, they also stated that they refer to relationships as 'ships' and that wanting the relationship between two character to prevail is known as 'shipping'. This distinction between an OTP and a ship is very important; it demonstrates that within their own culture and using their own language fan people have developed a hierarchy of what these terms mean, the fact that an OTP is more important than a ship shows that fan people are not only developing their own language but have complex systems within it which shows how invested they are and how committed they are to its development.

Reysen and Branscombe (2010) suggest that fans who are passionate about the same thing often group together and find themselves in an imagined community, such as individuals who are a part of a Sci-Fi ordinated fandom such as '*Supernatural*' which is based in myth and lore, do not actually meet face to face for the most part (Sandvoss, 2005). This is important as it appears to support the theme of group themes (a group of individuals who have a common cause or theme). Farmer, et al. (2003) suggests that people who group together because of a common cause or theme will also exhibit the same behaviour, whether this is because of the cause or theme, or because of peer pressure. Pinantoan (2013) refers to the belonging element of group theory, stating that humans have the innate need to belong so they conform to the groups' norms, expectations and peer pressure. This could explain fan peoples' willingness to conform to a group that is going to accept them, for them it seems that the reward of acceptance is worth the risk of being excluded from the rest of society, this will be important in interpreting the possible causes if this theme presents its self in the analysis.

The aim of this research was to investigate the effect of participating in fandom activities on parasocial relationships. Prior research suggests that participating in fandom activities does have an effect of intensifying parasocial relationships and that it further affects other areas of fan people's lives. This mixed methods study asked participants about the intensity of their parasocial relationship with their favourite character before and after they

began participating in fandom activities. Participants were then asked a series of open ended questions aimed at understanding how participating in fandom activities had affected their everyday lives and how those effects relate back to their parasocial relationships. Prior research has identified what is meant by fandom activities and parasocial relationships yet there is minimal research that looks at any existing connections between the two.

Method

Design

The current study was mixed methods in its design. In an attempt to observe any relationships between fandom participation and parasocial relationships, a scale devised by Rubin and Perse (1987) that measured the intensity of the parasocial was adapted for this study. It was administered to participants to record the level of intensity of their parasocial relationships at different stages of their participation in fandom activities. A second part of the analysis was of a qualitative nature. It was in attempt to gain understanding of the thoughts, feelings, beliefs and experiences of the participants in the study that a qualitative method was selected to analyse part of the data gathered.

Participants

There were 23 female participants within this study; previous research has indicated that females are significantly more likely to respond to questionnaires and surveys than males (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004). Of the 23 participants, 78.3% of them were between the ages of 18 and 24 with the remaining 21.7% being between the ages of 25 and 36. All participants were at the time of the study, actively participating in fandom activities and had voluntarily completed the questionnaire.

Measures and Procedure

After being uploaded to Bristol Online, a service which hosts online questionnaires with the aim of making them as accessible as possible, the questionnaire was posted to the researchers social media outlets, Facebook and Tumblr although responses were only gained from Tumblr, the original post was made by the researcher. Once they has accessed the questionnaire participants were presented with an information sheet which was designed to answer any questions that they may have, including why they has been asked to take part in the study and that their participation was not mandatory and that they could withdraw at any

point in the study but after submission this would be impossible to the anonymous nature of the data. Participants were then presented with a consent form which if they accepted meant that they were at least 18 years of age and therefore able to give full consent to take part in the study.

Participants were then asked to complete the adapted Rubin and Perse, (1987) scale designed to measure intensity of parasocial relationships. Participants were asked to think of the character/celebrity who they had the strongest relationship with and complete the scale which contained questions such as ‘My favourite celebrity’s/character’s personality makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends’ based on their feelings towards the figure before they began participating in fandom activities. Participants were then requested to answer a set of questions around how often they participated in different types of fandom activities. This part of the questionnaire was composed of questions involving fandom activities previously identified, such as ‘How often to you use Tumblr to participate in the reading of fanfiction?’ Participants were then required to answer the adapted Rubin and Perse, (1987) scale again, this time thinking about their relationship with their favourite character/celebrity after they began participating in fandom activities.

Participants were then asked to complete a series of open ended questions around how their participation in fandom activities and their parasocial relationships have affected their everyday lives, examples of these questions include, ‘Can you describe how participating in fandom activities has affected/developed your relationship with your favourite celebrity/character?’ and ‘Do you feel as if your participation in fandom activities has affected your real life relationships with people who don't participate? (i.e parents/friends)’

Results and Discussion

As a mixed methods approach was applied to this research the analysis of the data was undertaken in two separate stages. The first of these was the use of a Pearson’s Correlation to explore the relationship between fandom participation and parasocial relationships. The data concerning the participants scores on the scale used to measure their parasocial relationship intensity and their responses to their participation in fandom activities were entered into SPSS and analysed, the following are the results that were produced.

Table One:

Descriptive statistics for intensity of parasocial relationships before and after participation in fandom activities as well as the overall intensity of the relationship

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Before Fandom Participation	23	39.48	7.13
After Fandom Participation	23	43.13	7.52
Overall Relationship Intensity	23	31.34	4.84

The descriptive statistics for this analysis suggest that the after participation intensity was higher than before participation intensity. A Pearson's Correlation was performed to determine if there was a positive correlation between the variables, however the results were found to be not significant ($r = .39, p=.069.$)

The second phase of analysis used Thematic Analysis (TA) to interpret the qualitative data. Braun and Clarke, (2006) define TA as a method employed by researchers to be able to identify, analyse and report themes or patterns in qualitative data. It provides the opportunity to organise and describe the data collected as part of a study in rich detail, whilst allowing interpretation what the present themes could mean in relation to previous literature.

Data gathered provided a rich sample from which several themes were identified that have been seen previously in the literature, these were: loneliness, fandom as a religion, development of own language, acceptance and having friends. However there were a number of new themes that were found, these were escaping reality, improved confidence and skills, participation making it easier to relate to people in real life, the willingness to share the object of their parasocial relationship and most significantly, participation in fandom activities leads to feeling closer/understanding the object of their parasocial relationship more and that having this closeness/understanding leads to more fandom participation.

The implications of these themes were recognised as loneliness, online relationships being more than adequate replacements of social relationships, fandom people make better friends, confidence, comfort and beginnings of stalker tendencies. These implications are discussed further in the following themes.

Loneliness

One of the most apparent themes that presented during the analysis of the data was that of loneliness and this can be demonstrated in the following quotes:

‘My participation in fandom has made my relationships with some friends not as strong as they do not understand how fandom can affect your life and how important it is.’ (*Participant 1*)

‘They tend not to listen to me anyway’ (*Participant 7*)

‘They don't get it so it's put up a wall between us, they used to ask about it but it just went over their heads and as fandom is my life so it takes over’ (*Participant 8*)

These comments appear to indicate that participants feel a pronounced sense of loneliness as a direct result of their participation in fandom activities, the participation results in alienation from their ‘real life’ friends. This is something seen within the literature (e.g. Jindra, 1994; Gooch, 2008) with several studies suggesting that the theme of loneliness could be a cause or symptom of mental health issues in those that experience it (D'Augelli, Grossman, Hershberger & O'Connell, 2001; Alpass & Neville, 2003; Granerud & Severinsson, 2006). Rokach and Brock (1996), and Leary (1990) propose that another reason for the theme of loneliness is due to fandom participation being shunned as an element of society, (Smith, Fisher & Cole, 2007).

The implication of this finding is that fandom is a culture that is vulnerable to loneliness due to their participation in activities. The wider impact of this is that it may prompt fan people to stop participating in fandom activities which is a risk for fan people because shutting out that possible in fandom support and finding it hard to make social connections in the real world could leave them with an even more pronounced sense of feeling alone. This could have further mental health implications. A possible route to challenging this would be to organise fan events more frequently. Comic Con is the biggest fan event and takes place in a number of cities however it is only San Diego and London which attract the highest number of star guests the result being that these are the conventions that provide the greatest opportunity for fans to make real life connections. However the fact that there are only two main conventions excludes a number of fans. Organising more frequent comic cons with the big stars would help form more real life social relationships

between the fan people which would lower the risk of them being excluded from society and experiencing loneliness.

Fandom as Religion

A second theme that was identified was that of the participants seeing fandom as a religion in regards to preferring fanfiction to conventional media, being part of fandom life since a young age as well as feeling no choice but to follow this lifestyle all of which are elements of most religious orders. This can be seen the following extracts.

‘I have been part of fandom since I’ve been a kid’ (*Participant 6*)

‘I didn't choose the fandom life it chose me!’ (*Participant 11*)

These comments suggest the participants feel as though the fandom life is something that reflects elements of religion. Indeed, Jindra (1994) found evidence that the *Star Trek* fandom resembled a civil religion and despite conflicting evidence from (e.g. Duffett, 2003) the fact still remains that some fandoms have produced recognised religions such as the *Star Wars* Jedi religion of Jediism. From a critical view point this finding highlights the similarities between the fandom and religious activities. Religion is often a motive for hate crime and similarly participation in these activities could be seen as a motive for similar discrimination and prejudice.

Use of own language

The third theme that appeared during the analysis was that of the participants using their own language displayed in the following examples:

‘Expand beyond the created cannon’ (*Participant 6*)

‘My OTP could end up together’ (*Participant 16*)

It was apparent from the responses gained that the participants used this developed language as second nature as there was no concern from the participants as to whether the researcher would be able to interpret the meaning of such words. Grossman and Tucker (1997) found that when people belong to groups they use words differently. Indeed, Leppänen et al. (2009) found that individuals who participated in fandom activities changed the meaning of

everyday words and Hillman et al. (2014b) discuss the meaning of the acronym 'OTP', which was one of the terms used by the participants. It is stated that according to group theory the need to belong and accepted means that individuals will do whatever it takes to achieve this, including adopting a language that will cut them off from a large portion of society but almost always guaranteed them acceptance to a small group of likeminded people (Farmer, 2003; Pinantoan, 2013).

This finding is important, the implication is that fan people use a self-developed language because they are members of a group, a group whom live outside of the norms of society which could exclude them, possibly resulting in loneliness. A method of challenging this possible outcome would be to try and integrate more people into fandom life. Failing this the effort for the fandom language to be understood by those closest to fan people should be taken. Being able to engage in a conversation in which they feel that they are being understood may reduce an individual's perceptions of exclusion and loneliness which could reduce the likelihood of them developing issues around health and well-being.

Acceptance

Another theme that occurred in the data was that of acceptance in which the participants stated that through the relationships that they have made through their initial participation in fandom activities they have felt as though they have been accepted by their fellow fan people, evidence of this theme can be found in the extracts from the data as followed:

'A feeling of comradery between myself and these other people.' (*Participant 16*)

'You can talk about these things that are really important to you without worrying that they won't understand or judge you.' (*Participant 4*)

Hillman et al. (2014b) found that when members of Sci-Fi fandoms feel as though they are being excluded from society they turn to blogging sites like Tumblr as they feel more accepted there. Reysen and Branscombe, (2010) found that as members of Sci-Fi fandoms often never meet in real life they rely on the acceptance of others via the internet.

The implication that fan people often find meaningful relationships online from inside their own fandoms is important as it demonstrates that despite sometimes lacking real life social relationships they are finding a way around this and forming relationships that fill all

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the needs of a traditional social relationship. The implication is that online relationships are an adequate replacement, and therefore to encourage their formation. This issue requires further exploration as it could have a wider impact around issues such as social anxiety, mental health issues and well-being.

Having Friends

The final theme that emerged from the analysis that was supported by prior research was that of people who have intense parasocial relationships having friends:

‘I met my best friends from participating in fandom activities.’ (*Participant 1*)

‘I am happier, i love the enthusiasm of other fans and it's like a big family - lots of new friends!’ (*Participant 2*)

‘I have met so many people because of fandom, normal people don't get me, other fan people do.’ (*Participant 12*)

‘I have met several people on the Internet that think in a similar way, and love the same things, which is lovely and can stop you from feeling lonely.’ (*Participant 18*)

Engle and Kasser, (2005) found that those who reported more intense parasocial relationships on average had more dating experience and Chia and Poo, (2009) found that those who had intense parasocial relationships were more satisfied with their lives than those who did not.

It is apparent that fandom people are likely to have more intense parasocial relationships than those who do not participate and this shows in the data, the participants talk about how passionate and close the relationships they have formed from participating in fandom activities which in turn may have developed the intensity of their parasocial relationships. The implication of this finding is that fan people would be more devoted friends to those that they care about when compared with people who do not participate in these activities. However this conclusion has a wider impact, saying that people who do not participate in fandom activities are inferior friends could have wider reaching social implications. To challenge this possible action it should be made abundantly clear that although a percentage of research suggests that people who participate in fandom activities make more intimate friends, the process of intimacy can be an issue for some individuals and that those people may require some solitary time to address these concerns. Having a friend

who high level of intensity in the relationship may lead to wariness about the relationship as well as having to time to yourself and diverting attention away from other commitments such as academic endeavours or work related enquires resulting in under performance and the following effects of this. To combat this possible route it could be wise to run classes and courses on how intense certain relationships are where to draw the boundaries, these simple ideas could stop people become too annoyed when confronted with an intense friend and as result the friendship will not be over which means that the fan people would not be left out of the social circle.

These themes presented a significant overlap with the findings of previous research, however the next themes to be discussed were more novel. These themes included escaping reality, improved confidence and skills, participation in fandom activities has made it easier to relate to people in real life and a willingness to share the person with whom they had a parasocial relationship. A significant finding was that the data suggests that participation in fandom activities leads to an increase in the intensity of parasocial relationships as it makes the individual feel closer to the person they idolise or that they understand them more. The final theme that presented its self was of this increase in intensity of relationships leading to further participation in fandom activities.

Escaping Reality

The first theme that was presented without having any prior research was that of the participants using fandom as a means of escaping their everyday realities.

‘It gives you a chance to really get involved and lost in the magical world of fandoms, and the people are really great!’ (*Participant 2*)

‘I began participating in fandom as a medium for escape during difficult times of my life.’ (*Participant 1*)

‘First as a means to escape reality’ (*Participant 7*)

‘It gives me an escape from my health issues and depression. It brings me comfort, and the sense that I'm not alone.’ (*Participant 14*)

One possible explanation for this finding is that fan people use fandom which is often based on fictional worlds as a method to escape their own living situation because, as previously

suggested by a large amount of data, fan people are often excluded from mainstream society which can result in a sense of loneliness. It is possible we could interpret this drive for a path into another world as an attempt to escape the lonely path they are likely to be on in this one.

Improved Confidence and Skills

Participants reported that they felt as if their participation in fandom activities had improved their confidence and skills. They reported feeling more confident in themselves and that their continued participation in fandom acts such as fanfiction writing had had an impact on their skills.

‘The fanfiction aspect has greatly improved my writing technique.’ (*Participant 6*)

‘I’ve really improved my English, as I’m not a native speaker.’ (*Participant 9*)

‘I’ve become more confident and outgoing personally’ (*Participant 10*)

‘More confident, more outgoing’ (*Participant 6*)

Possible reasons for this finding could include the fact that participating in fandom activities and the intense parasocial relationship which could result from it, appears to make fan people good friends that are likely to give support and encourage one another to do well. Overtime, it is possible that this encouragement could have a lasting effect and therefore making individuals feel more confident in themselves. The possible explanation is that participating in the act multiple times while also observing other individuals work will vastly improve the skills one is practicing. It is also reasonable to assume that once again the encouragement aspect of the formed friendships plays apart in the improvement of skills in the respect that people will encourage one another to keep trying the act until they get better at it.

Participation in fandom activities makes real life relating easier

The third theme that presented without any previous research around it was that of participating in fandom activities make it easier to relate to other people in real life or the outside world.

‘It has brought me closer to my sister as we now have more things to talk about’
(*Participant 4*)

‘Gives us something to talk about.’ (*Participant 22*)

‘I am quite shy with new people so it has helped to start conversations with people.’

(Participant 2)

‘It helps me connect to people.’ *(Participant 5)*

The implication of fandom making it easier to relate to people is that it is a comfort blanket as well as a way of knocking down barriers. It could be that fan people find comfort in fandom as they know everything about it and when you are trying to connect to someone it could be beneficial to have confidence in and it is this that gives the fan people the confidence to try to make new relationships or repair old ones.

Willingness to Share

Another theme that arose from the data was the participants’ willingness to share the person with whom they had the parasocial relationships with.

‘Happy that other people recognise his talent and hard work.’ *(Participant 4)*

‘It makes me excited because I am able to connect to that person through said character.’ *(Participant 5)*

‘I would probably be totally excited’ *(Participant 9)*

One possible explanation for this finding supports the finding of participation in fandom activities making it easier to relate to people, if two individuals shared a parasocial relationship with the same figure it would give them something to bond over and their friendship could develop from there. A second explanation could be that they are excited that someone else recognised this figure as special for all the same reasons that they do and they want to experience a bond like that.

Participation in Fandom Activities Increases Parasocial Relationship Intensity

It is clear that participation in fandom activities increases the intensity of parasocial relationships after participants reported feeling closer and as if they knew the figure on a personal level after participating in fandom activities:

‘I feel like I am closer with my favourite celebrity because I relate to them more.’

(Participant 1)

‘It makes me feel closer to him, I’ve learned so much about him and that makes me feel like I know him’ (*Participant 12*)

‘I suppose I’ve become more infatuated with them’ (*Participant 19*)

‘I feel like I know more about my favourite celebrity therefore I am closer to them’ (*Participant 1*)

‘It feels like you know them, because well,, you pretty much know everything there is to now [sic] about them :-)’ (*Participant 2*)

These quotes demonstrate that participants are experiencing an increase in their parasocial relationships, an explanation of which includes that fandom activities such as making and reblogging gifs and attending conventions with the stars sometimes contains a great amount of personal information and seeing/hearing this information repeated constantly could have the effect of making individuals think that because they know this information about a figure means that they know them. An implication of this would be that some individuals may develop too strong a parasocial relationship and it could result in unhealthy attachment patterns and behaviour.

Increase in Intensity of Parasocial Relationships Increases Participation

The final theme that was found is that increased intensity of parasocial relationships, as a result of participation in fandom activities, comes full circle to increase the participation in fandom activities.

‘Feeling closer to my celebrity means I read more fan fiction and looking for gif sets on social media on things such as tumblr’ (*Participant 1*)

‘I feel like i know more about his character(s) and his personal life, so i feel like i have a good knowledge base to be able to interact in the fandoms’ (*Participant 2*)

‘I have reblogged or looked at a lot more.’ (*Participant 3*)

‘It made me want to write fanfiction because I felt comfortable enough to share my own ideas after watching others do so.’ (*Participant 5*)

‘I actively join in more and share my opinions.’ (*Participant 6*)

Using the fandom participation to explain it seems that fan people have received favourable outcomes from participation in fandom activities, increased intensity of parasocial relationships which results in them forming strong relationships with like-minded people which promotes acceptance within the community. Fan people like all the benefits that they have received from participation which means that they are likely to keep repeating the action to continue gaining the rewards which creates a cycle effect in which parasocial relationships are going to continue to grow stronger resulting in more intense social relationships and everything else that comes along with it.

Limitations

A strength of this research was the participants used, despite a small sample, it was a targeted and it was very unlikely that true fan people would have been found if a random sampling method had been employed. Another strength of the research is the mixed methods approach that was employed, had a correlation just been run it would have shown that the relationship was not significant and nothing else whereas using Thematic Analysis allows for a deeper exploration of the subject (Sim, 1998)

However despite this there are some limitations to the study. The first of these being that while the different types of fandom activities the participations were a part of were recorded they were not factored into the analysis which has limited the opportunity to observe the effect different types of participation have on parasocial relationships. Was this research ever to be repeated it is advised that this be taken into consideration as a change to make. A second limitation comes from the fact that this research was approached with the theme of fandom as a whole when in fact it is divided into many fractions, some of which are more over powering than others, it may have been useful to investigate if certain fandoms produce more intense parasocial relationships due to factors such as figure participation, an example being that the *Supernatural*, *Once Upon A Time* and *Arrow* stars and creators are a lot more involved with their fans on social media and in person than the *True Blood* or *Vampire Diaries* stars and creators are, it may be possible that this difference in level of interaction has an effect on the intensity of parasocial relationships, should this research be repeated it would be advised that this be taken into account.

Future Research

Other considerations for future research include investigating why those previously supported themes emerged from the analysis, this could be important to unlocking more practical applications for the research. The current findings for the research have a practical use in the respect that they display the hardships that fan people often face, exclusion and loneliness which can result in mental health issues, a practical application is that there could specialised services available for support. A second practical application refers to the possible use for marketers. Marketers for things such as fandom events and merchandise would be able to target their strategies towards the people that they know would be their biggest market.

Conclusions

The overall aim of this research was to observe any effects that participation in fandom activities has on parasocial relationships, if there was any at all. The findings suggest that participating in fandom activities does in fact increase the intensity of parasocial relationships. After this initial finding it was observed that participation could also have additional effects such as the formation of alternative relationships and the building of confidence in ones' self. However perhaps one of the most interesting suggestions from the results of the research was that if an individual experiences an increase in their parasocial relationships due to their participation in fandom activities then this increase will encourage the individual to participate in fandom activities more frequently which will in turn increase the intensity of the parasocial relationship and it all becomes a cycle of cause to effect.

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