

MSC APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY: ECAS7013 PART II DISSERTATION RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Student Details

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Proposed supervisor	Dr Paul Hutchings	
Has your proposed supervisor approved your Expression of Interest?	NO ☐	YES ☒

Proposed Research (this section must be no longer than 2,500 words)

Current Proposed Title (20 / 30 words):
A World of Their Own: Exploring Narrative Immersion, Fandoms and Emotional Regulation Through Fictional Worlds
Background & Context (to include rationale and theoretical framework, leading to a clear research question)
Since early literature and storytelling, engagement with fictional narratives has been deeply embedded in everyday life. Across films, television, novels, video games, and multimedia franchises, many people immerse themselves in expansive fictional worlds that provide emotionally/psychologically meaningful experiences. Popular narrative universes such as <i>Star Wars</i>, <i>Lord of the Rings</i>, <i>Harry Potter</i> and <i>Marvel</i> are ongoing narrative worlds that audiences revisit over time (Wolf, 2012). This is typically described as “escapism,” which is often associated with avoidance or withdrawal from reality. However, newer media psychology research suggests that immersive fictional engagement may also serve important emotional, cognitive and social functions, including stress relief, coping, identity, and wellbeing (Barnes, 2018; Eekhof et al., 2022; Mar & Oatley, 2008). Narrative Transportation Theory is one of the best frameworks for understanding how individuals psychologically engage with story worlds. Green and Brock (2000) describe transportation as a state of cognitive and emotional immersion involving focused attention and reduced awareness of real environments. Transportation has since been linked to emotional engagement, attitude change, empathy, and self-reflection (Green et al., 2003; Van Laer et al., 2014). Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) further argued that immersive engagement with narratives involving emotional and mental simulation processes makes narratives psychologically meaningful. Within highly developed fictional worlds, repeated immersion may therefore function as emotionally significant environments that can influence mood and coping.

Mar and Oatley (2008) state that fiction can function as a form of social and emotional simulation, allowing individuals to subconsciously simulate emotional and social experiences and consider alternate perspectives. Identification with characters and perspective-taking may support the self-reflection and emotional reinterpretation associated with adaptive coping. Increased narrative engagement has been linked with increased development of empathy, emotional understanding, theory of mind and reflective thinking (Mar et al., 2011; Kidd & Castano, 2013). These are theoretically relevant to emotional regulation because immersive narratives may allow individuals to reinterpret emotional experiences and psychologically distance themselves from stressors in ways that resemble cognitive reappraisal strategies described by Emotional Regulation Theory (Gross, 1998). Fictional worlds may therefore function as emotionally meaningful “regulatory spaces” or “toolboxes” in which individuals temporarily reorganise or reinterpret emotional experiences.

Traditionally, escapism has been framed negatively as avoidant behaviour associated with problematic media use or withdrawal from real-world responsibilities (Henning & Vorderer, 2001). However, Compensatory Media Use Theory proposes that individuals frequently engage with media to compensate for unmet psychological needs and emotional discomfort (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). Within this framework, media use is not inherently maladaptive but rather reflects attempts to regulate emotions and restore positive psychological states. Reinecke (2009) similarly found that entertainment media can facilitate psychological recovery from stress and mental fatigue through relaxation, detachment, and mood management. Importantly, immersive fictional engagement may be adaptive when it provides temporary relief and emotional processing opportunities but becomes maladaptive when used chronically to avoid real-world difficulties (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014; Reinecke, 2009). Also, most escapism research focuses on problematic internet use or gaming addiction rather than immersive, lore-rich, fictional worlds and their emotional functions. Relatively little research has examined how the purpose and quality of immersion into personally meaningful worlds may relate to different emotional regulation outcomes.

Research surrounding fandoms demonstrates that engagement with fictional worlds often extends beyond passive consumption and into identity expression, community participation, emotional comfort and social belonging (Duffett, 2013). Chadborn et al. (2017) proposed that fandoms can serve several key psychological functions, including purpose, escapism and belonging. For some individuals, fandom participation may provide inspiration, creativity and self-expression, whereas for others it may serve social connection needs or emotional escape. As such, fandom functions are presented in this study as potential predictors of emotional regulation tendencies, specifically whether different motivations for fictional engagement relate differently to adaptive or avoidant coping strategies.

Furthermore, Social Identity and Self-categorisation Theory propose that group memberships (being part of a fandom) contribute to identity, belonging, and wellbeing (Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Turner & Reynolds, 2012). Additionally, parasocial relationship research suggests audiences may form emotionally meaningful one-sided relationships with fictional characters (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019). These social and parasocial processes are considered secondary contributing factors in this investigation that may further strengthen emotional attachment and emotional meaning with narrative fictional worlds.

Gross' Emotional Regulation Theory (1998) proposed that individuals regulate emotions through two main behavioural strategies: Cognitive Reappraisal and Expressive Suppression. Cognitive reappraisal involves reinterpreting emotional situations to alter their emotional impact and is generally associated with better psychological/wellbeing outcomes (Gross & John, 2003). Alternatively, expressive suppression involves inhibiting emotional expression and is more associated with poorer psychological outcomes and avoidant coping. The distinction between these strategies is highly relevant within the context of fictional engagement and this study because immersive worlds may facilitate emotional processing or emotional avoidance depending on the motivations and conditions of engagement for fans (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014; Reinecke, 2009). This study uses emotional regulation theory as a core framework for examining whether different patterns of immersive fictional engagement predict tendencies toward adaptive (reappraisal) or maladaptive (suppression) coping styles.

Despite research into narrative immersion, fandom participation, escapism and emotional regulation independently, relatively little research has integrated these concepts into a single applied framework. Existing literature rarely examines whether levels of narrative immersion and different fandom motivations predict distinct emotional regulation tendencies, despite the idea that these may be correlated among many fandom-inclined individuals. Furthermore, media psychology research continues to disproportionately frame escapism as deficit-based, addictive or dysfunctional, often overlooking the possibility that it may also support adaptive emotional coping and wellbeing. As such, research is needed to identify the conditions under which immersive fictional engagement aligns with adaptive versus avoidant coping.

This study aims to address this gap by examining whether immersive engagement levels and fandom motivations relating to purpose, escapism, and belonging are associated with greater use of cognitive reappraisal or expressive suppression strategies. Through integrating narrative transportation theory, fandom function research, compensatory media use theory, and emotional regulation frameworks, the study aims to provide a more nuanced and applied understanding of how fictional worlds may be emotionally meaningful or predict adaptive/maladaptive coping in certain individuals.

Aims and Objectives

AIM

To investigate whether narrative immersion and psychological fandom functions predict differences in emotional regulation strategies among adults engaging with fictional worlds and lore. Specifically, to explore the conditions under which immersive fictional engagement may align with adaptive emotional regulation (cognitive reappraisal) compared to more avoidant emotional regulation tendencies (expressive suppression).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Primary:

- To what extent do narrative immersion and fandom functions predict more adaptive and less adaptive emotional regulation strategies among adults engaging with fictional worlds?

Secondary:

- Which fandom functions (purpose/inspiration, escapism, or belonging) most strongly predict cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression?
- How do individuals subjectively describe the emotional role of immersive fictional worlds in coping and wellbeing?

OBJECTIVES

- 1) To examine the relationship between levels of narrative immersion, fandom functions and emotional regulation strategies.
- 2) To explore participants' subjective experiences of fictional engagement and emotional coping

Methodology

RESEARCH DESIGN

This exploratory study will use a cross-sectional, mixed-methods survey design including quantitative self-report measures and brief qualitative responses. A correlational and predictive approach will examine whether narrative immersion and unique fandom functions predict emotional regulation strategies.

Data will be collected through an online Qualtrics questionnaire distributed via social media and online fandom communities to support the digital and globally relevant nature of fandom engagement and is accessible to participants actively involved with fictional worlds.

Quantitative measures will assess:

- narrative immersion
- fandom functions
- emotional regulation strategies

Open-ended qualitative questions will provide additional insight/context into how participants personally perceive the emotional role of their chosen fictional world. Combining quantitative and qualitative data will strengthen interpretation of findings by providing both statistical relationships and subjective context (Usman et al., 2025).

PARTICIPANTS

Participants aged 18+ will be recruited through online fandom communities and social media platforms, including Reddit, Discord and Instagram. Due to the online nature of fandom participation, responses are expected globally. Participants will be required to identify a preferred fictional world or fandom (e.g., *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Marvel*), to provide a contextual reference for the participant and researcher.

Basic demographic data, including age, gender, and country of residence will also be collected. Online fandom recruitment provides direct access to individuals actively engaging with immersive fictional worlds in naturalistic settings. The study aims for a large sample size of approximately 200 participants.

MEASURES/MATERIALS

Participants will complete an online questionnaire hosted on Qualtrics containing three validated self-report measures alongside qualitative questions.

An adapted **Narrative Transportation Scale** (Green & Brock, 2000) will measure levels of cognitive and emotional absorption/transportation participants experience within their preferred fictional world. The scale assesses the attentional focus, emotional involvement, and mental imagery associated with immersive engagement. Higher scores will indicate greater levels of narrative immersion.

The Fandom Functions Scale (FFS) (Chadborn et al., 2017) assesses three primary psychological fandom engagement functions in subscales of:

- purpose/inspiration
- escapism
- belonging/social connection

Subscales will be analysed separately to observe whether different motivations for fictional engagement predict distinct emotional regulation tendencies.

Emotional regulation strategies will be measured using the **Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ)** (Gross & John, 2003), which assesses preferred use of **Cognitive Reappraisal** and **Expressive Suppression**.

Outcomes of these will provide the framework for examining adaptive versus avoidant emotional regulation tendencies.

Finally, participants will complete brief open-ended qualitative questions to explore the perceived emotional role of their chosen fictional world and whether engagement is experienced subjectively as supportive, comforting, or avoidant. These responses will provide contextual insight into participants' subjective experiences and support the interpretation of quantitative findings.

VARIABLES

The primary **predictor** variables of this study are:

- Narrative Immersion,
- FFS - purpose/inspiration,
- FFS - escapism,
- FFS - belonging/social connection.

Narrative immersion scores will be derived from the adapted Narrative Transportation Scale (Green & Brock, 2000), while fandom function predictors will be derived from the separate subscales of the Fandom Functions Scale (Chadborn et al., 2017).

The primary **criterion** variables will be measured using the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003):

- Cognitive Reappraisal
- Expressive Suppression

Cognitive reappraisal is conceptualised as a more adaptive emotional regulation strategy, whereas expressive suppression is considered a more avoidant or less adaptive strategy.

Several exploratory demographic **moderators** may be explored, including:

- age
- gender
- fandom type

These variables may influence the relationship between immersive fictional engagement and emotional regulation tendencies and will therefore be considered during the analysis of findings.

PROCEDURE

When accessing the questionnaire, all participants will follow the following procedure;

- 1) Access the study through an online Qualtrics link distributed via social media platforms and online fandom communities.
- 2) Read a participant Information Sheet outlining:
 - Purpose of the study
 - Eligibility criteria
 - Confidentiality procedures
 - Right to withdraw
- 3) Provide informed consent electronically before accessing the questionnaire.
- 4) Enter demographic information including:
 - Age
 - Gender
 - Country of residence

- 5) Read a brief instructions page that outlines the general concept of the study, key terms and encourage participants to begin considering their chosen narrative world which will be used throughout the study.
- 6) Complete:
 - The adapted Narrative Transportation Scale
 - The Fandom Functions Scale
 - The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire
- 7) All quantitative items will be completed using Likert-scale responses and is expected to take approximately 15–20 minutes in total.
- 8) Finally, complete a few brief open-ended qualitative questions exploring:
 - The subjective emotional impact of their chosen fictional world
 - Reasons for engagement
 - Whether engagement is experienced as supportive, comforting, or avoidant
- 9) Following completion, participants will receive a debrief sheet explaining the aims of the study in greater detail alongside contact information for relevant support services, the researcher and academic supervisor, should participation raise emotional concerns. Participants will be thanked for their participation.

DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative data will be analysed using SPSS by the researcher. Descriptive statistics and reliability analyses (Cronbach's alpha) will first be conducted to assess scale consistency and overall response patterns.

Pearson correlation analyses will then examine relationships between:

- narrative immersion,
- fandom functions,
- cognitive reappraisal,
- and expressive suppression.

Multiple regression analyses will subsequently be conducted to determine whether narrative immersion and fandom functions significantly predict emotional regulation strategies. Two regression models will be used:

- predictors of Cognitive Reappraisal,
- predictors of Expressive Suppression.

This approach allows examination of the unique contribution of each predictor variable.

Qualitative responses will be analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify recurring themes relating to emotional coping, comfort, escapism, and wellbeing. These findings will be used to contextualise and support interpretation of quantitative results.

Proposed plan of work including timetable or Gannt Chart

The proposed study is feasible within an MSc dissertation timeframe due to its low-cost online design and use of established psychometric measures. Ethical considerations will be approved before recruitment and data collection, with enough time allowed for potential changes following ethical review. Questionnaire construction and pilot testing will be completed well before participant recruitment to ensure clarity and functionality of survey materials.

Data collection will take place online, allowing scalable and time-efficient recruitment from a potentially large and diverse participant pool. Following data collection, time will be given for quantitative statistical analysis, qualitative thematic analysis, interpretation of findings, and thesis write-up.

A detailed project timeline outlining each key stage of the research process is provided in the Gannt chart below:

Applied Research Project Timescales	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUG	SEP
Initial Project Conception												
Early Literature Search												
Seek Supervisor Support (EOI)												
Finalise Project Idea												
Deep Literature Search												
Identify core theory and materials												
Proposal Submission												
Ethics Submission												
Create Qualtrics Questionnaire												
Thesis - Literature Review												
Thesis - Methodology												
Data Collection												
Data Analysis												
Thesis - Results												
Thesis - Discussion & Conclusion												
Final Thesis Submission												
Showcase Event												

Anticipated Outcomes and Real World Impact

The study is expected to identify meaningful relationships between narrative immersion, related fandom functions and emotional regulation strategies. It is predicted that high narrative immersion in association with fandom functions relating to purpose, inspiration and belonging will be positively associated with cognitive reappraisal, whereas escapism-oriented engagement may show stronger associations with expressive suppression under certain conditions (Gross, 1998; Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). Regression analyses will determine which aspects of fictional engagement uniquely predict emotional regulation tendencies and if narrative immersion contributes independently of fandom functions.

Qualitative findings are expected to provide additional insight into how individuals personally perceive the emotional role of fictional worlds, with themes potentially including comfort, emotional

relief, identity, belonging, involvement with lore, and coping. These findings will contextualise quantitative relationships and provide an understanding of how participants engage with fictional worlds firsthand.

The study hopes to contribute to media psychology, fandom research and emotional regulation literature by integrating these multiple concepts within a single applied framework. By identifying the conditions under which immersive fictional engagement aligns with adaptive emotional regulation versus avoidant coping, the findings may provide a more nuanced understanding of fictional involvement than existing deficit-focused perspectives. This research may inform future work on digital wellbeing, media-based coping, and the unexpected psychological benefits and limitations of engagement with fictional worlds as they become increasingly popular (Chadborn et al., 2017).

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Facilities and resources available for the investigation: please indicate which resources you will require for your project (<i>not included in word count</i>)
N/A

	Tick ✓	
	YES	NO
Proposal requires additional external approvals	☐	☒
Proposal includes vulnerable groups	☒	☐
Research is part of a group project	☐	☒
Research is to be undertaken outside of the UK	☒	☐
Is a bar on access being sought?	☐	☒

Training Needs

Please include any specific training needs that have been identified for this project:
N/A

Ethical Issues

Following approval of the Full Research Proposal an application must be made by ALL research students to the Institute Ethics Committee through the form PG2 prior to any data collection taking place.	
I have understood the above statement and will make an application to the Ethics Committee via my supervisor following approval of the Full Research Proposal	☒

Student Signature

Student Signature		Date: 28/5/2026
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Supervisory Team

Comments on the proposal by the supervisor (or programme director if no supervisor agreed)(approx. 300 words):
Comments on the progress made so far by the supervisor (approx. 300 - 500 words)

Authorisation

To be completed by Supervisor and Programme Manager
Supported: ☐ Not Supported: ☐

Supervisor	Signature or Print Name:	Date:
Programme Manager	Signature or Print Name:	Date: