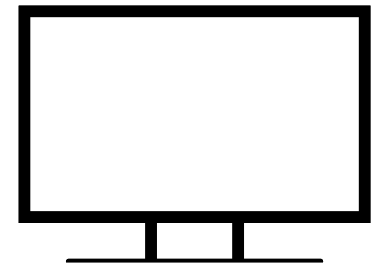
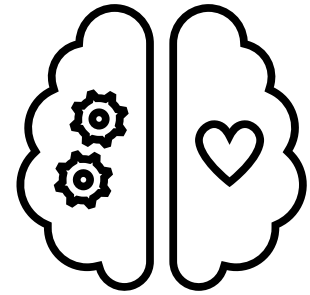


A WORLD OF THEIR OWN

EXPLORING NARRATIVE IMMERSION,
FANDOMS AND EMOTION REGULATION
THROUGH FICTIONAL WORLDS

AARON YOUNG

MSc APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY



RATIONALE

STORYTELLING IS A FUNDAMENTAL PART OF HUMAN CULTURE, BUT MODERN AUDIENCES OFTEN ENGAGE WITH **ENTIRE FICTIONAL WORLDS**.

WORLDS CAN SPAN BOOKS, FILMS, TELEVISION, GAMES AND FANDOMS, ALLOWING PEOPLE TO **REVISIT THEM REPEATEDLY OVER MANY YEARS**.

INVOLVES IMAGINATION, EMOTIONAL INVESTMENT, IDENTITY, PERSONAL MEANING AND SOCIAL CONNECTION.

PSYCHOLOGY HAS TRADITIONALLY FOCUSED MORE ON **INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVES, CHARACTERS OR MEDIA TEXTS** THAN ON FICTIONAL WORLDS

(BARNES, 2018; MAR & OATLEY, 2008; WOLF, 2012)



RATIONALE

PEOPLE CAN BECOME PSYCHOLOGICALLY **“TRANSPORTED”** INTO NARRATIVE WORLDS.

FANDOM CAN PROVIDE PURPOSE, ESCAPE AND BELONGING.

MEDIA USE DURING STRESS IS NOT NECESSARILY UNHEALTHY AVOIDANCE: EFFECTS MAY DEPEND ON **WHY, HOW AND WHEN IT IS USED.**

OPPORTUNITIES FOR REFLECTION, PERSPECTIVE-TAKING AND EMOTIONAL MEANING-MAKING

RESEARCH GAP:

COULD THESE FORMS OF FICTIONAL-WORLD ENGAGEMENT ACTUALLY RELATE TO THE WAY PEOPLE REGULATE THEIR EMOTIONS?

(CHADBORN ET AL., 2017; GREEN & BROCK, 2000; KARDEFELT-WINTHER, 2014; MAR & OATLEY, 2008; OLIVER & RANEY, 2011; REINECKE, 2009).



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Four aspects of fictional-world engagement were examined:

1. Narrative Immersion

2. Escapism
3. Purpose / Inspiration < **(Fandom Functions)**
4. Belonging

Could these predict differences in everyday emotion regulation?

- **Cognitive Reappraisal**
- **Expressive Suppression**



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK



1

Narrative Immersion

- Becoming cognitively and emotionally absorbed in a fictional narrative.
- Involves Focused attention, mental imagery and emotional involvement.
- Mentally simulate experiences and consider perspectives beyond their own.
- Immersion does not automatically produce psychological benefits.

(Green & Brock, 2000; Mar & Oatley, 2008; van Laer et al., 2014)

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2

Escapism

- Temporary psychological distance from everyday demands or stress.
- Traditionally framed as **avoidance or problematic media use**.
- Media may compensate for stress or unmet needs (Compensatory Media Use Theory)
- Depends on **motivation and context**
- Temporary relief may be helpful, whereas persistent avoidance may not be.

(Kardefelt-Winther, 2014; Reinecke, 2009; Wolfers & Schneider, 2021)



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3

Purpose / Inspiration

- Fiction and fandom may support **creativity, self-expression, reflection and personal meaning**.
- Stories and characters can model personally valued qualities
- Repeated engagement with meaningful fictional worlds may influence people's **values, interests and sense of identity**

(Barnes, 2018; Chadborn et al., 2017; Mar & Oatley, 2008)



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

4

Belonging

- Fictional interests can become **shared social identities**.
- Group memberships can contribute to self-concept and belonging (Social Identity Theory).
- Fandom can provide shared interests and opportunities to build or maintain relationships.
- However, not all fans seek community: it can also remain **private and individual**.

(Chadborn et al., 2017 ; Tajfel & Turner, 1979)



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Emotion Regulation

- The ways people influence which emotions they experience, and how those emotions are expressed.
- Two common strategies:
 - **Cognitive Reappraisal** – changing how a situation is interpreted to alter its emotional impact.
 - **Expressive Suppression** – inhibiting or hiding the outward expression of an emotion
- Are immersion, escapism, purpose and belonging associated with either strategy?

(Gross, 1998; Gross & John, 2003; Hu et al., 2014)



RESEARCH QUESTION & OBJECTIVES

RQ1: Do narrative immersion, purpose/inspiration, escapism and belonging predict **cognitive reappraisal** or **expressive suppression**?

RQ2: Which aspects of fictional-world engagement make the strongest unique contribution?

RQ3: How do participants describe the emotional role and personal meaning of fictional worlds in their everyday lives?

Objectives

1. Examine relationships between fictional-world engagement and emotion regulation.
2. Compare the unique contribution of each engagement factor.
3. Use participants' own accounts to provide context for the quantitative findings.



METHODOLOGY, FINDINGS & INTERPRETATION

An exploratory mixed-methods survey combined statistical patterns with participants' own accounts of what their fictional worlds meant to them.

RESEARCH
DESIGN

QUANTITATIVE
FINDINGS

QUALITATIVE
PATTERNS

INTERPRETATION

METHODOLOGY, FINDINGS & INTERPRETATION

RESEARCH DESIGN

200 adults - Aged **18–72** | **26 countries**

Recruited through online fandom communities and social media.

Each participant chose one personally meaningful fictional world.

Measures

- Adapted Transportation Scale (Green & Brock, 2000)
- Fandom Functions Scale (Chadborn et al., 2017)
- Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) (Gross & John, 2003)
- Five brief open-ended questions

Analysis

- Correlations + two multiple regressions
- Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Anonymous online survey | UWTSD ethical approval



(British Psychological Society, 2021)

METHODOLOGY, FINDINGS & INTERPRETATION

QUANTITATIVE PATTERNS

In both models:

- Only **3.1% of the variance** was explained.
- **no significant unique predictors.**

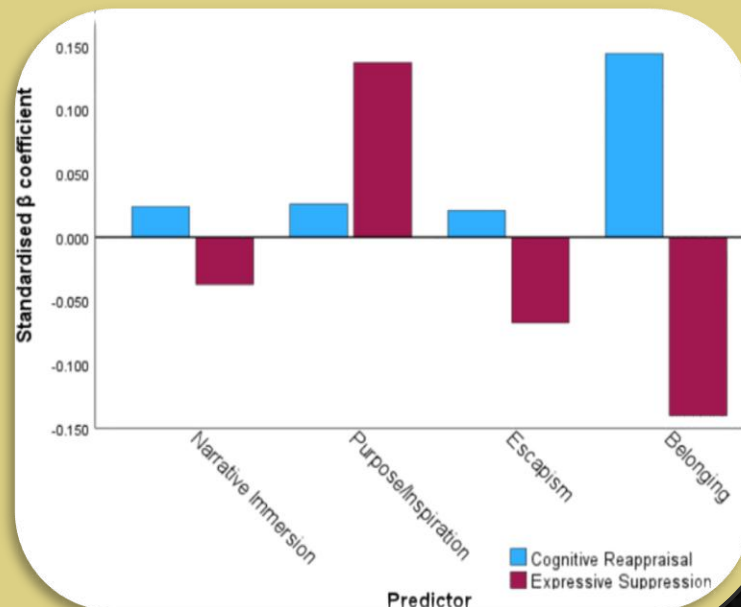
Fictional-engagement variables were related to **one another**, but generally not to habitual emotion-regulation style.

Belonging showed the clearest small correlations, but was not an independent predictor

*Standardised Regression Coefficients
Predicting Cognitive Reappraisal and
Expressive Suppression.*

Cognitive Reappraisal - $R^2 = .031$
 $p = .185$

Expressive Suppression - $R^2 = .031$
 $p = .190$



METHODOLOGY, FINDINGS & INTERPRETATION

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Comfort & Emotional Refuge

Stress relief, relaxation, familiarity and temporary distance from everyday pressures.

Meaning & Inspiration

Values, perseverance, creativity, identity and personal goals.

Reflection & Perspective

Reconsidering emotions, morality and life experiences.

Connection & Belonging

Shared interests, family bonds, friendships and fandom communities.

METHODOLOGY, FINDINGS & INTERPRETATION

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

**“a home away from home that i can come back to no matter
where i am in real life”**

— R56

“Rather than an escape, it is my anchor.”

— R15

**“The story of Anakin Skywalker and his redemption makes me want
to be a better person”**

— R75

“I have made many friends and even met my partner.”

— R137

**“My wife understood me much more after watching it, and I have
annual watch parties with my friends”**

— R135:

**“It helps me regulate by escaping my everyday emotions that I
generally cannot hide or not express”**

— R24

METHODOLOGY, FINDINGS & INTERPRETATION

INTERPRETATION

Emotionally meaningful ≠ habitual emotion-regulation style

Many described fictional worlds as sources of comfort, perspective, inspiration and emotional relief.

A possible explanation:

Fictional worlds may operate as **situational and personal emotional resources**, rather than determining how somebody generally regulates emotion.

Emotion regulation is known to vary with context, individual needs and circumstances.

What should future research do?

1. Measure emotion during engagement
2. Use diary or longitudinal methods
3. Examine broader coping strategies

(Bonanno & Burton, 2013; Troy et al., 2013)

CONCLUSION

1. Narrative immersion, purpose, escapism and belonging did **not** predict habitual cognitive reappraisal or expressive suppression.
 2. Participants nevertheless described fictional worlds as meaningful sources of comfort, escape, inspiration, reflection and connection.
 3. Their psychological value may therefore be **personal and situational**, depending on how, why and when people engage.
- “For many adults, these worlds can still provide something meaningful to return to when everyday life becomes difficult.”**



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