

FANDOMS AS COMMUNITIES OF BELONGING AND COPING

Yashar Anjamrooz, & Christina Ravelo

Department of Psychology, Nova Southeastern University (USA)

Abstract

This systematic review of 10 empirical studies examines fandoms as communities of belonging and coping across science fiction, fanfiction, music, television/film, celebrity, and sport fandoms. Strong evidence demonstrates that fan communities create powerful belonging effects: science fiction fans report high psychological sense of community across several dimensions (belonging, needs fulfillment, influence, shared connection, and conscious identification), and fans often rate sense of community higher for fan groups than for their local geographical communities (Chadborn, Edwards, & Reysen, 2018; Obst, Zinkiewicz, & Smith, 2001). Belonging operates through interconnected psychological processes (identification, attachment, and eudaimonic motivations), social processes (peer support, shared practices, and participation in events), and cultural processes (creative transformation of media and community narratives) (Bacon-Smith, 1991; Cavicchi, 1998; Dym, Brubaker, Fiesler, & Semaan, 2019; Tsay-Vogel & Sanders, 2017). Evidence for explicit coping functions is more limited but consistent where measured. Qualitative studies show that online fandoms provide emotional support, stress reduction, and identity-safety, especially in crisis and marginalized contexts such as LGBTQ individuals using fanfiction communities for identity work and Roswell fans mobilizing collective mourning and support after the September 11 attacks (Dym et al., 2019; Stein, 2002). The same mechanisms that create belonging—identification, peer support, and meaning-making—appear to underlie coping benefits. However, these benefits are shaped by fandom type, individual characteristics, and platform features and are constrained by challenges such as toxic behaviors and identity safety concerns. Overall, fandoms function as communities of belonging and coping rather than trivial leisure spaces, though the strength and pathways of these effects vary across contexts.

Keywords: *Fandom, belonging, coping, community, parasocial.*

1. Introduction

Fandoms are often stereotyped as frivolous hobbies, yet decades of scholarship suggest they function as meaningful social worlds in which people construct identity, find belonging, and cope with stress (Bacon-Smith, 1991; Cavicchi, 1998). In media and cultural studies, fans have been described as active producers of meaning who appropriate and transform texts, build shared rituals, and form enduring communities around television series, films, music, and celebrities (Bacon-Smith, 1991; Stein, 2002). Psychological and communication research similarly highlights that fan participation can foster social connection, identity development, and emotional regulation, particularly when communities gather online around shared interests (Dym et al., 2019; Parsakia & Jafari, 2023; Tsay-Vogel & Sanders, 2017).

Quantitative work on sense of community shows that fans report robust psychological sense of community in science fiction conventions and fan organizations (Obst et al., 2001) and that they sometimes experience stronger community attachment to fandom than to their local neighborhoods (Chadborn et al., 2018). Qualitative and ethnographic studies of music, TV, and celebrity fandoms document rich cultures of storytelling, mutual support, and everyday practices (e.g., sharing artifacts via mobile phones, attending concerts, creating fan works) that mark group boundaries and belonging (Cavicchi, 1998; Fuente & Lacasa, 2020; Stein, 2002).

However, existing research is scattered across disciplines and focal populations, with some studies emphasizing belonging and identity, others focusing on coping, and many implicitly touching both without explicitly integrating them. The present review synthesizes empirical studies that examine fandoms as communities, asking: How do fandoms function as communities of belonging and coping? We focus specifically on mechanisms (psychological, social, and cultural), empirical indicators of belonging and coping, and moderating factors (individual, community, and contextual) across fandom types.

2. Methods

2.1. Search strategy

To identify empirical studies on fandoms as communities of belonging and coping, a systematic search was conducted in major bibliographic databases commonly used in psychology and communication research. Specifically, PsycINFO, PubMed, Web of Science, and Scopus were searched, supplemented by targeted searches in Google Scholar to capture relevant work in conference proceedings and book-length ethnographies. Search strings combined fandom-related terms (e.g., fandom, fan community, fan culture, science fiction fandom, music fandom) with belonging and coping constructs (e.g., sense of community, belonging, social identity, coping, social support, well-being). Searches were limited to publications from 1990 onward and to works available in English. Reference lists of key articles were also scanned to identify additional eligible studies. This process yielded an initial pool of candidate publications that were then screened for relevance to the review questions.

2.2. Screening and eligibility criteria

Titles and abstracts were screened against predefined inclusion criteria. Studies were eligible if they (a) included participants who actively engaged in fandom communities of any type (e.g., media, sports, music, fanfiction, celebrity); (b) conceptualized fandom as a social group or community rather than focusing solely on individual fan behavior; and (c) examined at least one construct related to belonging or coping, such as psychological sense of community, social identity, community attachment, emotional support, coping strategies, or well-being within fan contexts.

Only empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods) and peer-reviewed conference papers, journal articles, or scholarly books were included; purely theoretical pieces and commentaries were excluded. To maintain focus on psychosocial processes rather than consumption, studies were excluded if they centered primarily on marketing, consumer behavior, or economic aspects of fandom. In addition, studies had to consider the community or social aspects of fandom participation (e.g., conventions, online forums, fan clubs) rather than individual preferences in isolation. Decisions were made holistically, taking all criteria into account when determining whether to retain each study.

2.3. Data extraction and synthesis

For each included study, information was extracted on (a) fandom type and focal property (e.g., science fiction, transformative media fandom, music fandom around a specific artist, fanfiction, teen celebrity fandom); (b) study design, methods, and sample characteristics (e.g., survey vs. ethnography, sample size, demographics, duration of fieldwork); and (c) the main constructs and measures related to belonging and coping (e.g., psychological sense of community scales, perceived membership, qualitative indicators of emotional support or identity work).

In addition, key mechanisms and contextual factors were coded. These included psychological processes (e.g., identification, attachment, eudaimonic motivation), social processes (e.g., peer support, shared experiences, conventions, interaction patterns), and cultural processes (e.g., creative meaning-making, community narratives, ritual practices). Moderating factors—such as age, gender, community structure, and online versus offline settings—were also noted when discussed, along with any reported challenges (e.g., toxic behaviors, identity safety concerns).

Because many works—especially ethnographies and HCI conference papers—were accessed primarily through abstracts and summaries rather than full open-access texts, data extraction emphasized the main findings and theoretical claims authors themselves highlighted. The heterogeneity of designs, fandom types, and outcome measures precluded formal meta-analysis; therefore, a narrative synthesis approach was used to integrate convergent themes and to map how different mechanisms of belonging and coping operated across fandom contexts.

3. Results

3.1. Characteristics of included studies

Ten empirical works met inclusion criteria, spanning science fiction, transformative media fandom, fanfiction, music fandom, teen celebrity fandom, and TV/film franchises. Designs ranged from large-scale surveys of fan communities (e.g., Obst, Zinkiewicz, & Smith, 2002; Chadborn, Edwards, & Reysen, 2018) to multi-year ethnographies of specific fan cultures (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Cavicchi, 1998; Fuente & Lacasa, 2020) and mixed-methods studies of online transformative fandoms and fanfiction communities (Dym, Brubaker, Fiesler, & Semaan, 2019; Fiesler & Dym, 2020). Fan settings included conventions and concerts, local meet-ups, and online spaces such as forums, social media platforms, and fanfiction archives.

3.2. Evidence of belonging effects

Across methods and fandom types, findings consistently indicated that fandoms function as powerful communities of belonging. Survey work showed high psychological sense of community among science fiction fans and, in some cases, stronger sense of community in fan groups than in local geographic communities (Chadborn et al., 2018; Obst et al., 2002). In *Harry Potter* fandom, perceived membership was linked to greater enjoyment, appreciation, and engagement with the media text (Tsay-Vogel & Sanders, 2017). Ethnographic accounts of television, music, and teen celebrity fandoms described dense networks of practices—such as conventions, zine and tape circulation, and everyday sharing of media via mobile phones—that built enduring relationships, “insider” identities, and a sense of home in the fan group (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Cavicchi, 1998; Fuente & Lacasa, 2020).

3.4. Moderating factors and overall pattern

The strength and form of belonging and coping varied by individual, community, and contextual factors. At the individual level, eudaimonic motivations and high narrative exposure predicted deeper communal involvement (Tsay-Vogel & Sanders, 2017), while developmental stage shaped how adolescents used fandom for friendship and identity work (Fuente & Lacasa, 2020). Community norms, inclusion–exclusion dynamics, and moderation practices influenced whether spaces felt safe and supportive or conflictual (Dym et al., 2019; Parsakia & Jafari, 2023). Platform affordances and long-term migration across technologies showed that social bonds and shared practices, rather than specific tools, sustained fan communities over time (Fiesler & Dym, 2020). Overall, the corpus suggests that fandoms reliably provide strong belonging and, especially in marginalized or crisis contexts, meaningful resources for coping, even though formal mental-health outcomes were rarely quantified.

4. Discussion

This review suggests that fandoms reliably function as emotionally significant communities of belonging and, in many cases, as informal coping networks that can feel as cohesive as or more cohesive than local neighborhoods or workplaces (Chadborn et al., 2018; Obst et al., 2001).

4.1. Belonging as a core function of fandom

Across quantitative and qualitative work, belonging emerged as a central psychological function of fandom rather than a secondary benefit. Identification with fan groups, social support, and shared cultural practices jointly provide a framework for relationships, meaning-making, and creative participation (Bacon-Smith, 1991; Cavicchi, 1998; Dym et al., 2019). Context matters: dispersed media fandoms often build “chosen family” through online platforms and transformative works, whereas music fandoms embedded in local scenes can blur boundaries between “fan” and “local” communities (Cavicchi, 1998; Chadborn et al., 2018).

4.2. Belonging and coping as intertwined processes

Although coping was rarely measured directly, the same mechanisms that foster belonging—peer support, shared narratives, and collective meaning-making—also appear to support coping. LGBTQ fanfiction communities illustrate how feeling embedded in a supportive fan network is inseparable from managing minority stress and identity-related challenges (Dym et al., 2019), and Roswell fans’ response to September 11 shows how pre-existing community ties provide infrastructure for rapid collective coping in crises (Stein, 2002). Belonging and coping are therefore better understood as interdependent outcomes.

4.3. Platform design and community management

Platform affordances and community management shape whether fandoms enhance or erode well-being. Anonymity, pseudonymity, and selective visibility can promote identity exploration and safety for marginalized fans (Dym et al., 2019; Fiesler & Dym, 2020), yet the same environments can enable harassment and “toxic fandom” that undermine belonging (Parsakia & Jafari, 2023). Long-standing transformative fandoms show that communities endure platform shifts by prioritizing social bonds and shared practices over specific technologies, highlighting the value of inclusive moderation, clear norms, and member agency (Fiesler & Dym, 2020).

4.4. Limitations of the evidence base

The evidence base remains limited by cross-sectional designs, ethnographic work without standardized mental health measures, and partial access to full texts, making conclusions about coping more tentative than those about belonging. Future research should incorporate validated well-being and coping

measures, longitudinal designs, and comparative work across fandom types and demographic groups, while examining both benefits and harms, including exclusion, burnout, and harassment within fan communities.

5. Conclusions

Across ten empirical studies, fandoms emerged as communities where people find strong belonging and, in many contexts, resources for coping with personal and collective challenges. Psychological identification, peer support, and shared cultural practices work together to create social worlds that can rival or exceed traditional local communities in perceived connection. Although explicit measures of coping are scarce, qualitative accounts point to fandoms as informal support systems that aid identity work, emotional regulation, and crisis response.

These findings suggest that fandoms should be taken seriously as communities of belonging and coping rather than dismissed as trivial leisure pursuits. For researchers, practitioners, and platform designers, understanding how fandoms foster or hinder belonging and coping can inform efforts to build healthier online and offline communities more broadly.

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