

Effect of Online Fandom Interactions in the Development of Safe Space for the Queer Community

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ABSTRACT

Media and the online world have become inseparable aspects of people's lives in the modern world. This becomes especially essential for queer people who are marginalized in the physical world and are looking for alternate sources of support or identity development. The main purpose of the study was to identify the role of fandom interactions in forming a safe space in the queer community by understanding their coping style and resilience skills. The study adopted correlational research design and convenience sampling method was used in the range of 15 to 23 years. The tools used for the study are the brief COPE inventory and the NMRQ questionnaire. Mean, t- test, ANOVA and correlation scores are analysed using statistical analysis.

Keywords: *Online Fandom Interactions, Development, Safe Space, Queer Community*

In recent years, the queer community has increasingly turned to online fandoms as a means of connecting with like-minded individuals, sharing experiences, and advocating for queer rights (Dhoest et al., 2018). Online fandoms, characterized by shared interests and the creation of virtual communities, have provided a sense of belonging and a safe space for individuals to express themselves freely without fear of discrimination (Sandvoss, 2005). The internet has become a crucial tool for the queer community to connect with others, particularly in areas where queer identities are not accepted (Gajjala, 2018). Individuals can find a sense of community and belonging through online interactions without fear of discrimination or hatred (Tziallas, 2017). While the online world provides a safe space for the LGBTQ community, it is critical to investigate the effects of these interactions on the development of safe spaces.

Fans of a particular media franchise or pop culture phenomenon create online or offline communities known as fandom spaces. Fans can connect, share their interests, and participate in discussions about their favourite topics in these spaces. Social media groups, fan clubs, and conventions are all examples of fandom spaces. They can also provide a safe space for people to express their fandom without fear of them being judged or discriminated against.

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Parasocial relationships are a type of one-sided relationship in which an individual forms a perceived connection with a media figure, such as a celebrity or fictional character, even though that figure is not physically present in their life. Due to the widespread availability of social media and other forms of entertainment, these relationships are becoming increasingly common in today's media landscape.

Online fandom interaction refers to the numerous ways in which fans interact with one another and with the object of their fandom via digital media (Jenkins, 2013). Social media posts, fan forums, fan fiction, fan art, and fan videos are all examples of this.

Fandom culture is a place where people can come together to share their love of a specific work of fiction, whether it is a book, a movie, a TV show, or a video game. It is a place where fans can express their enthusiasm for these works and form communities around them. However, fandom culture has not always been accepting of people who identify as LGBTQ.

The ability to cope with adversity and overcome life's challenges is referred to as resilience. **Resilience** is defined in psychology as "the ability to adapt and recover from stress, trauma, adversity, or tragedy" (American Psychological Association, 2021). It is a complex concept involving various factors such as individual characteristics, environmental factors, and social support.

Fandom interaction in building resilience in queer individuals Fandom interactions can also aid in the development of resilience skills in queer people. Reed and Oakley (2020) state that "fan communities provide safe spaces for individuals to explore their identities and freely express themselves, which helped to build resilience skills" (p. 11).

Coping Skills are the specific actions and techniques that people use to manage stress and deal with inconvenient situations.

Coping styles are the consistent patterns of coping that people employ over time. Various coping styles have been identified in the literature, including approach coping, avoidance coping, emotion-focused coping, and problem-focused coping.

According to research, fandom interactions are important coping mechanisms for queer people who face discrimination and isolation. Lampropoulou and Myers (2019), for example, discovered that queer fans use fandom to "escape from negative emotions and experiences and engage with positive and affirming media content" (p. 204).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In his work: *Media, Culture and Society: An Introduction*, Hodkinson states that traditionally, the media has been considered as either the shapers of society, with the ability to affect individuals (intentional approach), or as the mirror that reflects society (inadvertent approach) (reflective approach). Although, Media does not simply shape or reflect society, according to constructivists.

Jensen J, in his work *Fandom as Pathology* (1992), talks about how initially fans were depicted as abnormal people who were heavily categorized as disordered individuals suffering from mental diseases.

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Jenkins, in his work *Convergence Culture: where old and new media collide* (2006), states that, since the Internet's invention, the power of mainstream media has been diminished, and fandom has been re-interpreted as something more positive.

Sandvoss, in *Fans: the mirror of Consumption* (2005) stated that media object is part of the fan's sense of self. Gray et. al. in *Fandom: identities and communities in a mediated world* (2007) stated that Identity is and will likely always be the core topic of research in fan studies.

Downing G, (2013) in his works states that the social minority status of queer people is not unusual. As a result, the calming effect that families may have been lacking. Furthermore, because heterosexuality is viewed as mandatory in society, being queer can be lonely even within close friendships.

Hanmer, in his work, "Xenasubtexttalk." *Feminist Media Studies* (2014) studied lesbian fans of the 1990s television show *Xena: Warrior Princess*, finds that fan reworkings of texts allowed them to explore their identities, resulting in improved "self-esteem and personal empowerment.

Consumption of queer TV programs and series can influence people's opinions towards the LGBTQ community. Exposure to this media has been proven in studies to improve empathy and lessen prejudice against the community (Murray & Joy, 2010; Russell et al., 2017). The article "Why 'boy love' TV shows have exploded in popularity across Asia," published on *Insider* in June 2022, investigates the growing popularity of "boy love" (BL) TV shows in Asia and their impact on the portrayal of LGBT storylines in the region (Furness, 2022).

Need For Study

For queer individuals, coping with the stressors and challenges of everyday life can be especially difficult due to societal stigma, discrimination, and marginalization. Fandom can be a source of social support and validation, which can help people cope and be resilient. The study might uncover ways to increase resilience and well-being within the queer community by investigating how fandom can function as a coping technique for queer persons. Furthermore, researching the effects of online fandom interactions on the coping techniques of queer people can help us better understand the function of online communities in encouraging resilience and mental health. Some people, for example, may participate in more active coping mechanisms, such as seeking social support from other fans, whereas others may use fandom to distract or avoid. Understanding these coping methods can assist researchers and mental health professionals in identifying ways to assist persons who may be experiencing mental health concerns.

Aim

To identify the role of fandom interactions in forming a safe space in the queer community by understanding their coping styles and resilience skills.

Research Question

- What is the role of fandom interactions in the queer community?
- Does the fandom interactions help in building resilience and encourages in adapting healthier coping styles for the queer community?

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Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: There is an association between an individual's coping style and resilience skills when participating in fandom interactions.

Hypothesis 2: There is a significant impact of coping styles and engagement in fandom interactions in queer individuals.

Hypothesis 3: There is a significant impact of resilience levels and fandom interaction patterns in queer individuals.

Variables

1. Gender
2. Sexual Orientation
3. Fandom Interaction
4. Coping Style
5. Resilience skill

Research Design

The study adopted Correlational Research Design. Correlational studies try to figure out the relationship between two or more variables.

Sampling Method

The sampling method used was convenience sampling. Sample Size 121 participants, belonging to the heterosexual as well as queer community took part in this assessment where 32.5% respondents were heterosexual, and 67.5% respondents belonged to the queer community.

The age range of this sample was adolescents and young adults between the age group of 15-32 years, with maximum respondents falling in the age group of 20-23 years.

Procedure and Administration

The data collection was done by circulation of google forms consisting of consent form, questions for demographic data and fandom interaction specific demographics as well as the questionnaires used for assessment, namely, the Brief COPE (Brief - Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced Inventory) questionnaire and Nicholson McBride's NMRQ resilience questionnaire. Upon completion of data collection through self-report method by the participants, the data was analyzed and interpreted using the SPSS software and the results were arrived at.

Tools for Assessment

- The Brief COPE inventory.
- The NMRQ Questionnaire

Analysis of result Descriptive:

The mean of collected data was measured and presented through line graphs. Inferential: Correlations and Independent Sample t- tests and One way ANOVA were used for analysis of data and was presented in a tabular form.

Inclusion Criteria

1. Individual between the age of 15-32 years.
2. Belonging to a fandom space.
3. Indulge in fandom interactions

Exclusion Criteria

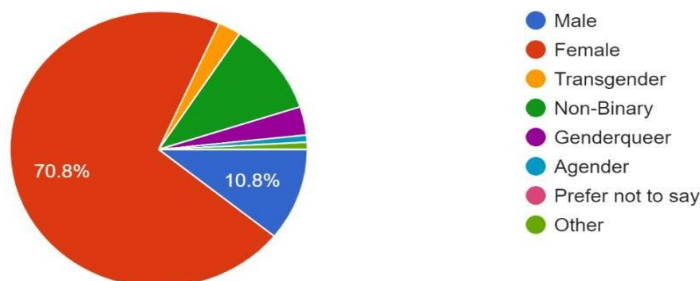
1. Individuals who do not participate in fandom interactions

RESULTS

1. Participant Gender Distribution Graph

Gender

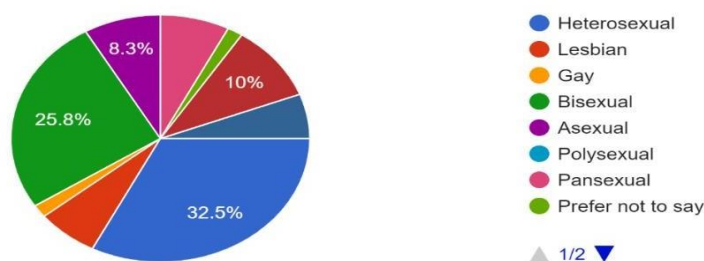
120 responses



2.. Participant Sexual Orientation Distribution Graph

Sexual Orientation

120 responses



correlation of all the variables measured and suggested a significant correlation between resilience and problem focused coping as well as a significant correlation between problem focused coping and emotion focused coping at 0.01 level

3. Correlation of all the variables measures

Table 1.

Correlations

		Problem Focused Coping	Emotion Focused Coping	Resilience	Sexual Orientation
Problem Focused Coping	Pearson Correlation	1	.327**	.272**	.068
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.003	.458
	N	121	121	121	121
Emotion Focused Coping	Pearson Correlation	.327**	1	-.046	.108
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.614	.238
	N	121	121	121	121
Resilience	Pearson Correlation	.272**	-.046	1	-.123
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	.614		.178
	N	121	121	121	121
Sexual Orientation	Pearson Correlation	.068	.108	-.123	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.458	.238	.178	
	N	121	121	121	121

***. Correlations is significance at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)*

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Table 1 represents the correlation of all the variables measured and suggested a significant correlation between resilience and problem focused coping as well as a significant correlation between problem focused coping and emotion focused coping at 0.01 level.

4. Independent Sample Test for Emotion Focused Coping Vs Sexual Orientation

Table 2. – Independent Sample Test for Problem Focused Coping Vs Sexual Orientation

		Independent Samples Test								
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper	
Problem Focused Coping	Equal variances assumed	.116	.734	-	119	.458	-.816	1.097	-2.988	1.355
	Equal variances not assumed				29.609	.454	-.816	1.075	-3.014	1.381

Table 3.- Independent Sample Test for Resilience Vs Sexual Orientation

		Independent Samples Test								
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper	
Resilience	Equal variances assumed	1.585	.211	1.357	119	.178	2.510	1.850	-1.154	6.174
	Equal variances not assumed				25.096	.266	2.510	2.208	-2.038	7.058

Table 3. show the result of independent sample t-test for the three variables: Emotion focused coping, problem focused coping and resilience against the sexual orientation of the participants. The data suggested that there is no significant difference between the two groups assessed.

Table 4.- Independent Sample Test for Emotion Focused Coping Vs Gender Orientation

		Independent Samples Test								
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper	
Emotion Focused Coping	Equal variances assumed	.241	.624	-	119	.021	-2.884	1.234	-5.326	-.441
	Equal variances not assumed			-	30.13	.030	-2.884	1.269	-5.476	-.292

Table 5.- Independent Sample Test for Problem Focused Coping Vs Gender Orientation

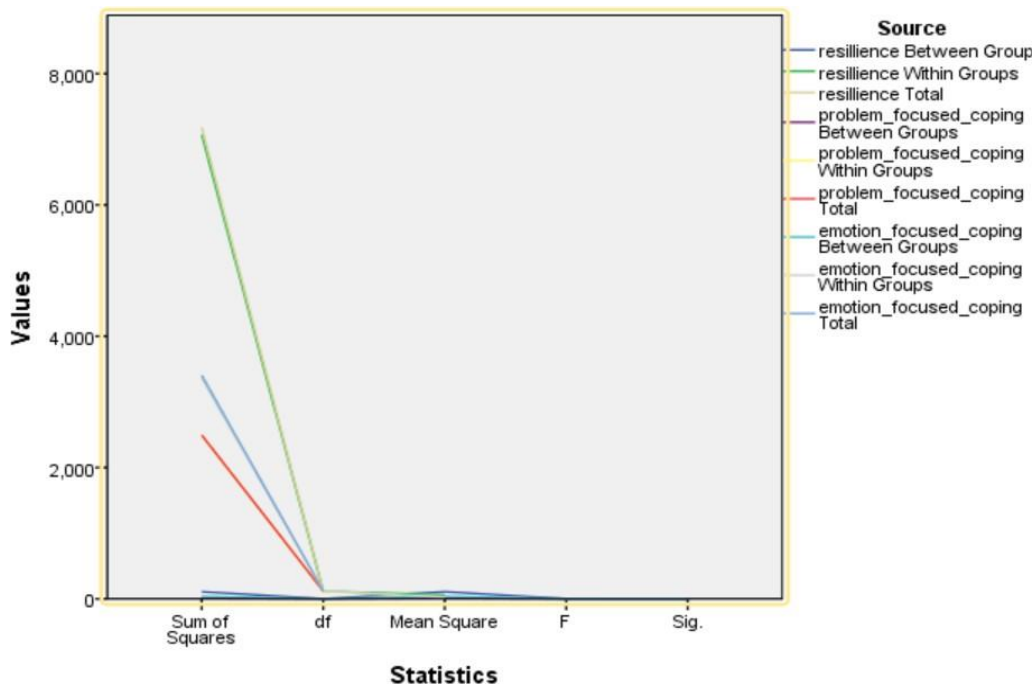
		Independent Samples Test								
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper	
Problem Focused Coping	Equal variances assumed	6.840	.010	.534	119	.594	.576	1.078	-1.559	2.710
	Equal variances not assumed			.413	25.215	.683	.576	1.396	-2.297	3.449

Table 6.- Independent Sample Test for Resilience Vs Gender Orientation

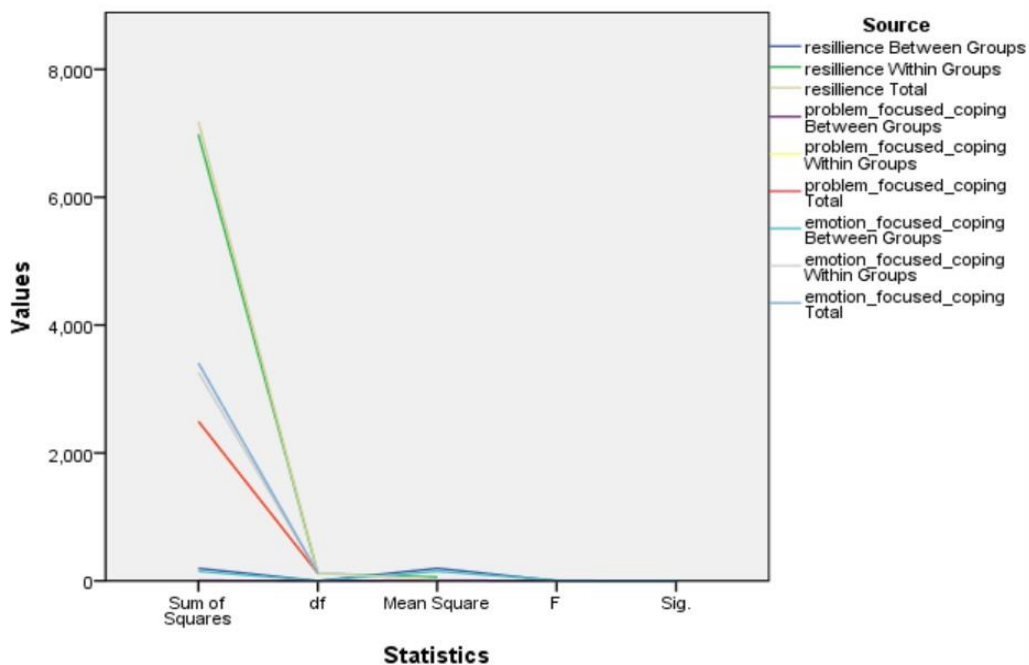
		Independent Samples Test								
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper	
Resilience	Equal variances assumed	2.157	.145	1.826	119	.070	3.298	1.806	-.278	6.874
	Equal variances not assumed			2.207	40.077	.033	3.298	1.494	.278	6.318

Table 6. shows the result of independent sample t-test for the three variables: Emotion focused coping, problem focused coping and resilience against the gender identity of the participants. The data suggested that there is no significant difference between the two groups assessed.

Graph 1 – One way ANOVA results for Emotion Focused Coping, Problem Focused Coping and Resilience against Sexual Orientation



Graph 2 – One way ANOVA results for Emotion Focused Coping, Problem Focused Coping and Resilience against Gender Identity



DISCUSSION

The three hypothesized statements were as follows: Hypothesis 1: There is an association between an individual’s coping style and resilience skills when participating in fandom interactions. Hypothesis 2: There is a significant impact of coping styles and engagement in fandom interactions in queer individuals. Hypothesis 3: There is a significant impact of resilience levels and fandom interaction patterns in queer individuals. Through the

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information presented in Tables, a significant correlation is suggested between the three variables being assessed. The correlation data table suggested that there is a significant correlation between Problem Focused Coping and Emotion Focused Coping, as well as a significant correlation between Resilience and problem focused coping, implying that higher resilience could also result in higher inclination towards having a problem focused coping style, which is a healthy coping style. The inferences from the next few subsequent tables, Table 5.2 (a); 5.2 (b); 5.2 (c) and Table 5.3 (a); 5.3 (b); 5.3 (c), where all the three variables were measured against independent variables Gender and Sexual orientation of the population sample, the results suggest that there were not many observable significant differences in the coping style and resilience levels in either group. The results from the independent sample t-test suggests that there is similar levels of resilience as well as similar levels of problem focused and emotion focused coping in the sample population. The results of One-way ANOVA tests when run for all the variables also suggested similar results and the same is reflected in the graphs 5.1 and 5.2 suggesting the similarity in the result.

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

The results suggested that the participant population, on an average, has higher resilience levels and engages in healthy coping styles like problem focused coping and emotion focused coping, but this inference was not limited to the queer participants. The heteronormative population that also engages in online fandom interactions also had similar results. These results seem to be positive for our current population, as the results suggest that at least in this sample population, people of all sexual orientations and gender identities have similar levels of resilience and coping to their environment and can use online fandom interactions, fruitfully. The results of the current study suggest that fandom interactions can help in formation of safe spaces as outlets for emotional experiences, their thoughts, as well as provide them with a space explore their own selves better and develop. These online fandom interactions can help the emerging youth of India in general, not just the queer youth, to develop coping skills and make them more resilient in ways that may be useful in dealing with stressful situations in their personal and professional lives.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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