

The Psychology of Fan Engagement: A Quantitative Investigation of Fanship and Escapism among South Indian Fans

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ABSTRACT

Background: Background: In today's world, fan psychology can be considered an important phenomenon, where the individuals identify emotionally with celebrities and their storylines. Although being a fan usually results in positive effects such as identity formation and integration into a community, sometimes it can also work as a defense mechanism for dealing with daily problems through escape. However, there have not been enough empirical studies regarding fanship and escapism together from the perspective of self-expansion and self-suppression among South Indian fans. **Aim:** This study sought to explore the link between fanship and escapism in South Indian fans and determine how the variable of fanship predicts self-expansion and self-suppression. **Methodology:** The present research followed a quantitative correlational approach using a purposeful sample of 113 respondents aged between 18 and 45 years living in Chennai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Kerala. Online and offline surveys, administered via the Fanship Scale (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010) and the Escapism Scale (Stenseng et al., 2012), were used. **Results:** Significant correlations were found between fandom and self-suppression ($r = .242, p < .01$) as well as between fandom and self-expansion ($r = .207, p < .05$). According to regression analysis, the former was significantly positively predicted by fandom ($\beta = .242, p = .010, R^2 = .059$), while the latter was significantly positively predicted by fandom ($\beta = .207, p = .028, R^2 = .043$). **Conclusion:** The research results show that fanship can be related to escapist behavior both in terms of growth and in terms of avoidance. Nonetheless, its low prediction power shows that some other psychological determinants of escapist behavior should also be considered.

Keywords: *Fanship, Escapism, Self-expansion, Self-suppression, Media psychology, Fan engagement*

With the advent of the current digital age, fan culture has become a notable part of society, with people evolving from mere consumers to engaged entities that establish psychological relationships with personalities on media and stories presented therein. Parasocial relationships are instrumental in helping people develop intimate relationships with remote performers (Duffet, 2013; Giles, 2018). Within the context of the above scenario, fanship may be understood as a psychological connection

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with the content of a specific fan object (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). It is different from fandom, whereby the latter denotes social connections within a group of fans.

Escapism can be defined as one of the significant psychological mechanisms that underlie media use in the modern world. Escapism entails the process of seeking respite from daily hassles by engaging in various pursuits (Katz et al., 1973 Stenseng et al., 2012).

Modern scholars have categorized escapism into two motivational orientations, namely self-expansion and self-suppression (Stenseng et al., 2012). The former involves a positive-oriented strategy, where people indulge in particular engagements to develop themselves positively, expand their views, and learn new things (Aron & Aron, 1986). On the other hand, the latter is based on negative motivation, where people engage in certain activities to alleviate negative thoughts (Baumeister, 1990). A central mechanism underlying these experiences is “action attention,” a state characterized by deep task absorption, reduced self-evaluation, and temporary detachment from immediate concerns (Stenseng et al., 2012). This immersive state enables individuals to become fully engaged in their fan interests.

While such engagement can contribute to well-being and psychological enrichment, it may also resemble forms of cognitive narrowing when primarily used to avoid reality. As a result, fan engagement can produce a range of psychosocial outcomes, from enhanced self-esteem and emotional fulfillment to potential withdrawal from real-life challenges (Hirt & Clarkson, 2011).

Although there has been increasing focus on the study of fans' psychology, most studies conducted to date have studied fans' behavior independently or viewed it in black-and-white terms: either as a good thing or a bad one (Duffet, 2013). Little attention has been devoted to the fact that fanship can be at the same time both related to development and avoidance-based types of escapism (Stenseng et al., 2012).

South Indian fans of celebrities from cinema are known for their deep devotion to media personalities. Such cultural settings provide a great opportunity to investigate fanship as a form of psychological behavior connected with escapism. Conducting the present study within such a cultural setting is crucial for providing a better insight into the complexities of the fanship concept.

Rationale of the Study

In this regard, the current study aims to fill critical gaps in the extant literature regarding fan engagement and escapism. While there is growing recognition of the impact of fanship in the modern world, most of the available literature examines its sociological aspects, with insufficient emphasis being placed on its use as a coping strategy (Reysen & Branscombe, 2017).

One of the key drawbacks of prior research involves the assumption that escapism represents a single concept. Modern theories point out the importance of two motivational directions in which escapist engagement can take place: one associated with self-enhancement and positive emotions and another related to avoidance of negative self-experiences and stress (Stenseng et al., 2012). However, the simultaneous examination of these perspectives in connection with fanship has been rather neglected.

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Another drawback of prior research involves the binary nature of the relationship between fanship and psychology. In other words, the focus on whether fan engagement is considered to be positive or negative does not allow one to consider the possible multiple roles of fan behavior in terms of individual motivations (Hirt & Clarkson, 2011).

The next gap to address deals with the cultural extent of previous studies. The majority of the empirical research done in the field of fanship and escapism uses Western samples, which reduces the applicability of their findings. The culture of fans in South India, especially in relation to the movies, involves intensive emotionality and identification with fictional characters; hence, this would be an excellent environment to explore the phenomenon in question in a non-Western society.

Finally, knowledge regarding the predictive nature of the connection between fanship and types of escapism would prove useful from a practical perspective. The implications of this study can be applied in the areas of psychology and education in order to understand the positive vs. negative aspects of consuming mass media content.

Objectives and Hypotheses:

To ensure the theoretical congruence of your paper, it is imperative that this part of the discussion highlights the two-dimensional perspective of escapism that has been identified by (Stenseng et al. 2012) and the theoretical construct underpinning the Regulatory Focus Theory.

Objectives:

The main aim of this study is to investigate the correlation between fanship and the two dimensions of escapism in South Indian fandom.

In particular, the study is designed to:

1. Investigate the degree of fanship that will predict self-expansion as an expansionary escapism that is characterized by positivity and self-development.
2. Investigate the degree of fanship that will predict self-suppression as an avoidance escapism that involves regulating negative stimuli.
3. Determine whether self-expansion and self-suppression are indeed two independent facets of escapism.

Hypotheses:

Based on the theoretical perspectives outlined above, the following hypotheses have been generated:

- H1: Fanship will predict self-expansion among South Indian fans.
- H2: Fanship will predict self-suppression among South Indian fans.
- H3: Self-expansion and self-suppression are independent dimensions of escapism.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational research design to examine the relationships between fanship and the two dimensions of escapism.

Participants

The study consisted of 113 participants aged between 18 and 45 years who identified as active fans and engaged in fandom-related activities.

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Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants who met the criteria for active fan engagement.

Inclusion Criteria:

1. Individuals aged 18–45 years
2. Self-identification as a fan of specific media content or celebrities
3. Engagement in fan-related activities at least once per week
4. Willingness to participate voluntarily

Exclusion Criteria:

1. Individuals outside the specified age range
2. Participants with minimal or no regular engagement in fan activities
3. Individuals who did not meet the screening criteria for active fandom engagement
4. Participants who experienced difficulty understanding the questionnaires

Procedure

The data was gathered in August 2025 in selected cities of South India, which include Chennai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Kerala. The methodology used was a combination of both offline and online data collection. About 80% of the information was acquired by conducting an offline survey of printed forms in college and transport facilities, while the remaining 20% of the data was collected using an online survey in Google forms.

Each respondent had to go through a screening process to determine his or her involvement in fandom activities. Guidelines were issued to ensure that the respondents answered truthfully. On average, it took about 15 to 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Measures / Instruments

Two standardized instruments were used:

1. **Fanship Scale (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010):** A unidimensional measure assessing psychological identification and emotional investment in a fan interest.
2. **Escapism Scale (Stenseng et al., 2012):** This scale assesses two dimensions of escapism:
 - **Self-Expansion:** Growth-oriented engagement associated with positive affect and personal development
 - **Self-Suppression:** Avoidance-oriented engagement associated with the regulation of negative thoughts and stressors

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed of the aims of the research before the experiment took place. Informed consent was sought. Participants chose whether or not to take part. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the process of data gathering and analysis.

Statistical Analysis

The data obtained were coded and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Correlation coefficients (Pearson's r) were computed to determine the presence, direction, and magnitude of relationships among variables. Regression analysis was done to measure the impact of fanship on self-expansion and self-suppression. The significance of

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differences in statistics was determined using p-values, while R^2 values were used to assess the strength of the association between two variables.

Data Analysis

All collected data were analyzed via the use of IBM SPSS Statistics software package to guarantee that the results of the quantitative analysis were precise. Before running the main analysis, the process of data cleansing was performed to eliminate any possible inaccuracies, while those participants who did not fit into the selected criterion of being active in terms of fan activity were eliminated from further analysis.

The following sequence of statistical procedures was undertaken to accomplish the purpose set out before carrying out this study:

- **Descriptive statistics:** It included computation of descriptive measures to determine the distributions of variables and obtain information about the demographics of the sample. Means and standard deviations for fanship, self-expansion, and self-suppression were calculated.
- **Correlational Analysis:** Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) was used to measure the strength of the relationship between fanship and both types of escapism—self-expansion and self-suppression.
- **Regression Analysis:** Linear regression models were used to test the power of prediction of fanship for self-expansion and self-suppression.
- **Statistical Indicators:** Standardized beta (β) served as the measure of strength. Coefficient of determination (R^2) represented the variance explained. Significance level was set at $p < .05$.

RESULTS

This study conducted statistical analyses to investigate the relationships between fanship and the two aspects of escapism, namely self-suppression and self-expansion, among 113 South Indian fans.

Correlational Analysis

A correlation analysis using Pearson's correlation was employed to test the relationships between variables. As illustrated in Table 1 below, fanship had a significantly positive relationship with both self-suppression ($r = .242, p < .01$) and self-expansion ($r = .207, p < .05$). The relationship between self-suppression and self-expansion ($r = .170$) was not statistically significant.

Table 1: Correlation Analysis between Fanship, Self-Suppression, and Self-Expansion (N = 113)

Variables	1 (Fanship)	2 (Self-Suppression)	3. (Self-Expansion)
1. Fanship	—		
2. Self-Suppression	.242**	—	
3. Self-Expansion	.207*	.170	—

*Note: ** $p < .01, p < .05$ (two-tailed).

Regression Analysis

To evaluate the predictive role of fanship, two separate linear regression analyses were conducted.

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1. Fanship Predicting Self-Suppression

The regression model was statistically significant, $F(1, 111) = 6.93$, $p = .010$. Fanship significantly predicted self-suppression ($\beta = .242$, $p = .010$), accounting for 5.9% of the variance ($R^2 = .059$).

Table 2: Regression Analysis – Fanship Predicting Self-Suppression

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	R	R ²	F
Fanship	.100	.038	.242	2.63	.010*	.242	.059	6.93*

Dependent Variable: Self-Expansion; Note: $p < .05$.

2. Fanship Predicting Self-Expansion

The regression model was also statistically significant, $F(1, 111) = 4.95$, $p = .028$. Fanship significantly predicted self-expansion ($\beta = .207$, $p = .028$), explaining 4.3% of the variance ($R^2 = .043$).

Table 3: Regression Analysis – Fanship Predicting Self-Expansion

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	R	R ²	F
Fanship	.097	.044	.207	2.23	.028*	.207	.043	4.95*

Dependent Variable: Self-Suppression; Note: $p < .05$.

Summary of Findings and Hypothesis Testing

All hypotheses were confirmed. H1 and H2 received support due to significant correlation between fandom and self-expansion, as well as self-suppression. Furthermore, lack of correlation between self-expansion and self-suppression supports H3, suggesting independence of those dimensions.

DISCUSSION

The main purpose of this study was to establish the predictive relationship between fanship and both types of escapism—self-expansion and self-suppression—among South Indian fans. As seen from the results of the current study, the established model holds true since fanship turned out to be correlated with both self-expansion and self-suppression.

The Dual Nature of Fan Escapism

From the results, it can be concluded that fanship positively influences both self-expansion ($\beta = .207$, $p = .028$) and self-suppression ($\beta = .242$, $p = .010$) of respondents. Hence, fanship can be regarded as an activity involving different kinds of motivations since the same kind of fanship can both promote development and help avoid negative states. Therefore, rather than being inherently positive or negative, fanship depends on how the person engages in it (Stenseng et al., 2012; (Hirt & Clarkson, 2011).

- **Self-Expansion:** At this stage, fan activity promotes positive emotions, personality development, and gaining new views on things (Aron & Aron, 1986).
- **Self-Suppression:** Fan activity can also serve as a kind of an avoidance technique that allows people to escape certain unpleasant experiences or thoughts (Baumeister, 1990).

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Independence of Escapist Constructs

An important discovery of this analysis is that self-expansion and self-suppression showed no significant correlation between each other ($r = .170$), which suggests that both constructs work independently from one another. This implies that the same individual can pursue escapist actions for two different purposes based on situational and psychological factors (Stenseng et al., 2012).

Interpreting Predictive Strength and Variance

Despite the statistical significance, the explained variance by fanship in terms of self-suppression ($R^2 = .059$) and self-expansion ($R^2 = .043$) is quite low. Thus, it can be stated that fanship influences the development of escapist behavior as one of several factors that determine the process. Emotional regulation, personality, and level of personal stress play a more decisive role in how fans use fan activities for their purposes (Schimmenti et al., 2020).

Cultural Context and Practical Implications

It is crucial to note the high intensity of South Indian fan culture, especially in connection with cinema. Intense emotional connection with media celebrities will probably lead to greater usage of these techniques by fans. In this case, fanship will be considered a way of discovering identity and coping with personal stress at the same time (Duffett, 2013; Giles, 2018).

In a practical sense, the findings would imply that fan engagement should not be regarded simply in terms of being beneficial or detrimental. Rather, it is crucial for individuals to take into consideration the motivation behind fan engagement. While growth-oriented fan engagement can facilitate wellness, the fact that avoidance-oriented fan engagement dominates can prove to have less adaptive outcomes.

Implications:

The findings of this study provide important insights into the role of fan engagement as a multifaceted psychological process, with implications for clinical practice, education, and broader social understanding.

Clinical Implications

The fact that fanship can predict self-expansion as well as self-suppression demonstrates the need to understand the motives behind fan engagement within therapeutic settings. Fanship may be utilized as a means of fostering self-expressiveness, self-regulation, and explorative tendencies in patients.

Simultaneously, it is imperative to be vigilant about avoidance motivations. If fan activities become a primary escape route from stress-inducing circumstances, they may be associated with maladaptive coping strategies. The function behind fan activities is thus essential to evaluate and not necessarily its form.

Psychoeducational Implications

These findings may serve as an impetus for launching psychoeducational programs devoted to fostering adaptive media consumption practices. Raising self-awareness regarding one's reasons for engaging with media can contribute to more beneficial results – personal development and emotionally uplifting experience.

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It is vital to remember that even though fanship accounts for only a small proportion of escapism, it is necessary to take into account other psychological and situational factors as well.

Social and Cultural Implications

The contribution of this study to the discourse of fan culture lies in moving away from reductive and pathologizing notions of fans' actions toward a richer interpretation of their experiences. The results suggest that fan interactions might help develop oneself and cope with one's emotions based on one's motivation behind them.

For the fans of South Indian celebrities, who have particularly intense affective investments in media personalities, their fan interactions could be regarded as a significant means through which they form their identities and build connections.

Limitations:

Despite the useful information provided by the present study, there are certain limitations that need to be discussed.

For instance, because of using the cross-sectional research design, it is impossible to draw any causal assumptions. Even though it was concluded that fanship predicted both self-expansion and self-suppression, one cannot make sure whether the former causes the latter, or vice versa – people who already possess some escapist inclinations have higher chances to become strong fans. Longitudinal studies are required to solve this issue.

Next, self-report measures used in the study can be characterized by various response biases, particularly social desirability. Specifically, some of the participants might have underreported their self-suppressive behaviors. Moreover, even though all standardized scales were applied to assess different types of escapism, they may not entirely reflect the subjective experience of every fan.

The relatively low number of the sample (N=113) can pose a problem for further analysis. In spite of using both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data, the sample mainly consisted of the inhabitants of specific urban areas (Chennai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Kerala).

Finally, the culture-specific nature of the research cannot be ignored. The results were obtained in the framework of South Indian fandom, which is known for the intensity of its involvement with media characters. Consequently, these results cannot be generalized to different cultural settings.

Future Directions:

To build on the findings of the present study and address its limitations, several directions for future research are proposed.

To begin with, the next studies should use a longitudinal or experimental design to understand the nature of the causal relationship between fanship and escapist motivation. Longitudinal observations will allow assessing what changes occur in the motivation of fans with increasing fanship level and vice versa.

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Secondly, considering the low degree of variance in the current research, the next studies may pay attention to other possible psychological factors affecting escapist motives of fans, such as the ability to cope with emotions, personality features, and even perceived stress. Thus, additional data can be obtained regarding specific circumstances in which fans can engage in escapist or developmental activities.

Thirdly, the role of digital tools in the processes of fanship and parasocial relations should be considered separately because the strength of the last one can affect the activity and behavior of fans.

Fourthly, the findings of comparative analysis of fanship and escapist motivation within different types of fan communities can help clarify how these phenomena depend on each other.

Finally, the next studies should consider a large sample of various individuals. It is important to examine fans from different cultural and demographic environments to find out what impact these factors have on the relationship in question.

CONCLUSION

The present study looked at whether fanship had any association with either growth or avoidance-oriented forms of escapism in the form of self-expansion and self-suppression in the case of South Indian fans. As such, fanship had some sort of significant association with both kinds of engagement, thus emphasizing its multifaceted nature (Stenseng et al., 2012; Reysen & Barnscombe, 2010).

With a motivational framework used, it is possible to note that the effects of fanship are determined by an individual's way of dealing with their own needs. Thus, fanship can be viewed as a tool for achieving personal growth and having positive experiences, as well as a tool of escapism from various stressful situations (Aron & Aron, 1986; Baumeister, 1990).

At the same time, the fact that the variance explained was relatively low indicates that fanship is only one among other factors that have a certain effect on the process of engaging in escapist behaviors (Schimmenti et al., 2020).

Thus, through this research, it has been shown that it is important to look at fan engagement not only through a simplistic lens but with consideration of its multifaceted nature (Hirt & Clarkson, 2011; Duffett, 2013).

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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