COVID-19 Stress Moderates the Mediational Pathway of Fandom Identification on Well-Being through Problem-Focused Coping

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Abstract

Ongoing research about the pandemic has shown how stress about COVID-19 and its resulting lockdowns have been detrimental to our collective well-being. Studies on how people cope with stressful situations suggests that problem-focused coping strategies are especially effective, while other studies suggest that people often turn to their social support networks—from families to fan groups—for social support. In the present study we synthesize this research to develop and test a model of moderated mediation, one where fans' identification with their fandom is associated with greater well-being as mediated by greater use of problem-focused coping strategies. This mediational pathway is predicted to be especially strong for those experiencing the greatest amount of COVID-19-related stress. We test this model in a cross-sectional study of two different samples of fans ($N = 374$) recruited through online fan websites. Results suggest support for the pathway in the more stigmatized, decentralized of the two fan groups. We discuss the results in the context of research on the COVID-19 pandemic, problem-focused coping, and the association between fandom and well-being, as well as limitations of the present findings and fruitful directions for future research.

Introduction

The detrimental effects of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic on our physical health are indisputable; to date, the deaths of more than four million people worldwide can be attributed directly or indirectly to the virus (Worldometer, July 26, 2021). Almost as agreed-upon are the detrimental psychological effects of more than a year of isolation, economic upheaval, and apprehension about the future associated with the pandemic (APA, 2020). As we continue to pick up the pieces and recover from the most recent wave of the pandemic, and with the prospect of future waves due to

variants of the virus looming on the horizon, it is increasingly essential that we better understand the mechanisms which drive resilience and well-being. Prior research suggests that many of us will turn to our friends, family, co-workers, and church groups as a means of social support (Baqutayan, 2011; Ozbay et al., 2008). Less-appreciated, however, is the potential role that our more casual, recreational groups may play in fostering resilience in the wake of pandemic-related stress. We address this oversight in the present paper, which considers the role of fan groups as a source of positive coping and well-being for those dealing with pandemic-related stress. First, we briefly review prior research on the assessment of well-being, the impact of the pandemic on well-being, and the effectiveness of different coping strategies on peoples' well-being. We then discuss the potential role of fandom on well-being, including the possibility that fandom may provide fans with the means to cope with stress more effectively. We then describe the results of a cross-sectional study using two different samples of fans, furries and *Star Wars* fans, designed to test a moderated mediation model that those suffering the most from pandemic-related stress will see the strongest association between fandom identification, effective coping strategies, and well-being.

Well-Being

Before we can assess the impact of global pandemics and fan groups on well-being, we must first define what we mean by "well-being". As it turns out, psychologists are far from having reached a consensus on the matter, having devised dozens of different measures to assess various facets of well-being (Linton et al., 2016). Some conceptualize well-being in subjective terms, considering whether a person feels happy, is generally content with the state of their life, and generally holds themselves in high regard (Veenhoven, 1991). Others have assessed the extent to which people have the means (physical, psychological, social) to address bumps in the road of life (Dodge et al., 2012). In a related vein, Kinderman et al. (2011) conceptualize well-being in a multi-faceted manner, comprised of a combination of psychological, physical, and relational components. This approach is, itself, based on other research showing these subfactors to be associated with important indicators of well-being (e.g., De Neve et al., 2013; Fernández et al., 2014; Rasmussen et al., 2009).

Amidst this glut of different conceptualizations, one that has gained noteworthy attention is that of Ryff's model of eudaimonic well-being (1989). According to this approach, well-being can be construed not in terms of a person's feelings of wellness or satisfaction, but as a product of indicators of function. Such indicators include interacting positively with others, feeling competent in one's activities, being autonomous and independent, feeling a sense of direction and purpose, personal growth, and having a positive attitude about oneself. While far from being the agreed-upon measure of well-being used by the field, Ryff's approach is noteworthy for its conceptual overlap with other important and related models (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000). It

is also ideal as an assessment of well-being in the wake of the pandemic, which has threatened to impact peoples' ability to function effectively across a wide range of domains.

COVID-19 as a Threat to Well-Being

Regardless of how one chooses to measure well-being, there can be little doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a significant threat to it above and beyond the threat posed by directly contracting the virus. Among healthcare workers and those on the front lines of the pandemic, for example, there is mounting evidence that routinely facing bed and mask shortages, being overworked, and facing a panicking public is leading not only to moderate stress and sleep problems (Olagunju et al., 2021), but also to more severe outcomes like burnout and post-traumatic stress disorder (Norman et al., 2021).

Well-being detriments are not limited to those fighting the pandemic on the front lines either. The general population has been shown to experience a wide range of symptoms associated with the fear of the pandemic, with the lockdown, and with the uncertainty associated with these changes (e.g., Ruppanner et al., 2021), including anxiety (Cheng et al., 2021), disordered eating (Wang et al., 2021), loneliness and depression (Allen et al., 2021), decreased satisfaction of basic needs (Avsec et al., 2021), and even reductions in brain volume (Salomon et al., 2021). Aversive outcomes have been noted in the young (Varma et al., 2021) as well as in the elderly (Sirin et al., 2021), in parents and in children (Martiny et

al., 2021), in undergraduate students (Zinchenko et al., 2021), and in people with disabilities (Sakiz, 2021). In short, there is evidence that nearly everyone has been adversely affected in some way, directly or indirectly, by the pandemic. Even so, there is also evidence that not everyone experiences these reductions in well-being to the same extent. Beyond individual differences in resiliency, research shows that differences in the coping strategies people adopt in response to pandemic-related stress can alter its impact on well-being (Cattelino et al., 2021).

Coping Strategies and Well-Being

During times of high stress people often experience negative emotions that, in and of themselves, largely detract from their well-being (Bakracheva, 2019). The link between stress and reduced well-being is far from simple or perfect, however, and is often affected by the way people respond to and, most presently relevant, rally resources and devise strategies to effectively cope with the stress. As explained by Bakracheva (2019), coping has been assessed in various ways, including how people perceive the stressors themselves and the strategies they employ in service of addressing the stressor. Presently, we consider approach strategies (Roth & Cohen, 1986), which have also been referred to as active or problem-focused coping strategies (e.g., Billings & Moos, 1981). Problem-focused coping entails adopting a strategy that aims to take control of a situation (Roth & Cohen, 1986), often by preparing oneself to confront or endure the stressor itself. As expressed by Finset et al.

(2002), problem-focused strategies may include acknowledging how a stressful situation makes you feel, seeking social support, and actively searching for a solution to the problem. Such strategies are contrasted against avoidant, or passive coping strategies, which often ignore or temporarily push aside a stressor (Roth & Cohen, 1986).

Far from being a trivial or pedantic distinction, the strategies people use to cope with stressors affects their well-being (García et al., 2018; Baqutayan, 2011). As a general rule, avoidance-focused coping tends to be a less adaptive and effective means of responding to stressors (Perez-Tejada et al., 2019; Finset et al., 2002). Withdrawing from social support, distracting oneself, relying on substance use to control one's affective responses, and placing external blame on a situation that is within one's control are generally ineffective ways to ameliorate one's circumstances (Finset et al., 2002). In contrast, problem-focused coping strategies have been shown to be associated with better psychological health. For example, Seiffge-Krenke and Klessinger (2000) found that those who most frequently adopted such strategies tend to report the fewest depressive symptoms. Likewise, Bakracheva (2019) found in a sample of 350 Bulgarian adults aged 18-55 that problem-focused coping is linked to a greater sense of autonomy, happiness, and overall life satisfaction. Encouragingly, people generally tend to adopt approach strategies more than avoidance strategies (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995), while overreliance on maladaptive coping strategies can be a sign of poor physical and mental health (Perez-

Tejada et al., 2019), including depression (Seiffge-Krenke & Klessinger, 2000).

Important facets of effective problem-focused coping strategies include the use of social support for assistance with planning as well as for supplemental financial, emotional, and logistic resources, resources which, in turn, may contribute to resilience and well-being in the face of stress and anxiety (Herek et al., 2015). With this in mind, we next turn our attention to some of the conventional and less-conventional places where people may find such social support.

Fandom and Well-Being

As a social species, humans seek out support from others in times of need (Ozbay et al., 2008). As an illustrative example, an experimental study by Baqutayan (2011) found that participants who were permitted to use social support as a means to cope were significantly more effective at coping with stress than those who did not. We can find no better contemporary example of this than in the current pandemic, where those who perceive COVID-19 as a threat are more likely than those who do not to seek out social support from those around them as a means of coping (Klümper & Sürth, 2021). As such, it comes as no surprise that a sense of connectedness to others has been associated with resilience during the pandemic (Cunningham et al., 2021). And when it comes to seeking out connection and social support, for most people, they turn to the people closest to them: their family, friends, and the people around them. Speaking to this idea, studies suggest that

family identification in particular (alongside identification with humankind more broadly) is associated with reduced stress and fewer physical symptoms during the pandemic (Frenzen et al., 2021). However, there are those for whom their family and friends, for one reason or another, may be unavailable or undesirable as a source of social support. In the case of these people, they may turn to another available group: their co-workers, their church groups, or, most presently relevant, their fan groups.

Fans are defined as people with a passionate interest in a specific subject (Leshner et al., 2018). For most people, fan interests refer to sports or music (Reysen & Shaw, 2016), although people can be fans of almost any hobby, media, celebrity, or activity. Generally speaking, research suggests that fans with different interests seem to have more in common psychologically than they have differences; or, to put it another way, differences across fandoms tend to be fairly superficial compared to the similarities in underlying social psychological processes (Leshner et al., 2018).

When studying fans, scholars typically distinguish between two conceptually related terms: "fanship" and "fandom." The term fanship refers to the extent to which fans identify with their particular interest—the extent to which the interest, team, or show is a part of the fan themselves (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). Fandom, in contrast, refers to a fan's identification with the community of other enthusiasts who share their fan-like interest (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). The distinction is an important one, both theoretically and practically: While fanship tends to predict consumption behavior in fans (e.g., watching a show, purchasing team-related merchandise), fandom tends to be far more positively associated with fan well-being (Reysen et al., 2021). Fandom, in particular the sense of social connection that fans forge with other fans, contributes to fan resilience (Reysen et al., 2017), even when fans themselves are the subject of stigma as a result of belonging to non-mainstream fan interests (Mock et al., 2013). In short, research suggests that the social connections formed in groups, including fan groups, may be an effective way to build social connections that, themselves, bolster resilience in response to stressful events— although the link between fandom identification, problem-focused coping strategies, and well-being in fan groups has never explicitly been tested.

Current Study

The purpose of this study is to test whether the established relationship between identification with one's fandom and well-being found in prior research (Reysen et al., 2021) can be explained in part by highly-identified fans' use of more problem-focused coping strategies which, according to prior research, are associated with greater well-being in non-fandom contexts (Mayordomo-Rodriguez, 2014; Mayordomo et al., 2016). Given the prominence of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in fans' lives at the time of this study, we also aim to test whether this proposed mediational pathway is especially prominent by fans who are experiencing the most pandemic-related

stress—a model of moderated mediation. To ensure that the results of these findings generalize beyond the idiosyncrasies of one particular fandom, we are testing this hypothesis in two different samples of media-based fan groups: furries and *Star Wars* fans.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The study included two different samples of fans. The first was a sample of self-identified furries (N = 186, male = 69.4%, M_{Age} = 30.1, SD_{Age} = 9.37), defined as fans of media featuring animal characters imbued with human characteristics (Reysen et al., 2017). Furries' interests frequently manifest through the creation of furry-themed avatars, the construction of furry-themed cosplays (fursuits), and the creation and consumption of artwork, music, and writing (Plante et al., 2017b). The fandom is considerably stigmatized as a result of unfavorable media stereotypes about furries, something the fandom has responded to through its close-knit structure and norms of inclusivity and acceptance (Mock et al., 2013; Plante et al., 2014; Reysen et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2015). Furry participants were recruited through furry websites, forums, and online messaging communities.

The second sample included self-identified *Star Wars* fans (N = 188, male = 58.0%, M_{Age} = 27.8, SD_{Age} = 8.63). These fans were a mixture of fans of the original *Star Wars* trilogy, the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy, and the recent *Star Wars* sequel

trilogies. As with furries, these participants were also recruited from *Star Wars* fan websites.

In both samples, participants read and agreed to a consent form before completing a brief demographic questionnaire. They then completed, as part of a broader survey of fan groups, the four measures of the present study: a measure of their fandom identification, their use of problem-focused coping strategies, their well-being, and the stress they had been experiencing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Materials

Fandom

To measure participants' degree of identification within the furry fandom, they were asked to respond to three items adopted from Reysen et al. (2017): "I strongly identify with other fans of this interest," "I am glad to be a member of the community of fans of this interest," and "I see myself as a member of the community of fans of this interest." Their responses were assessed using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*), which were aggregated to form a composite measure.

Problem-Focused Coping

Participants were administered the 28-item Brief COPE Inventory, altered to assess their use of various coping strategies specifically in response to the pandemic (Carver, 1997). Most presently relevant were the six items used to assess participants'

active, problem-focused coping, including their use of active coping strategies (e.g., "I've been taking action to try to make the situation better"), instrumental support from others (e.g., "I've been getting help and advice from other people"), and planning (e.g., "I've been trying to come up with a strategy about what to do"). In response to each item, participants were asked to choose one of four response options (1 = *I haven't been doing this at all*, 2 = *I have been doing this a little bit*, 3 = *I have been doing a medium amount*, and 4 = *I have been doing this a lot*). Participants' scores were aggregated and used to form a six-item composite measure of problem-focused coping.

Well-Being

Well-being was assessed using six items adapted from prior research by Ryff (1995) and used in other research (e.g., Reysen et al., 2020). The measure was developed to assess well-being multidimensionally and covers six facets of well-being: autonomy ("I make choices by myself without the help of others"), environmental mastery ("I have been able to create a lifestyle for myself that is much to my liking"), personal growth ("I seek out new experiences to grow as a person"), positive relations with others ("I have warm and satisfying relations with others"), purpose in life ("I feel I have purpose in life"), and self-acceptance ("In general, I feel confident and positive about myself"). The six items were assessed using the same 7-point Likert-type scale used in the fandom measure and was aggregated as a measure of participant well-being.

COVID-19 Stress

In a final measure, we assessed the extent to which participants had been experiencing stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This measure was adapted from a scale used by the American Psychological Association in a May 2020 study on this very topic. It assesses, on a 10-point Likert-type scale (1 = *little or no stress*, 10 = *a great deal of stress*), the extent to which participants were stressed out about managing fallout from the pandemic (e.g., "Adjusting to new routines"), about potentially contracting COVID-19 (e.g., "Getting coronavirus yourself"), about being able to address their basic needs (e.g., "Access to health care services"), and about future prospects (e.g., "The economy"). Scores on the 15 items were aggregated and used to form a single measure of stress related to the pandemic.

Results

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations between all assessed variables are presented in Table 1. As predicted, problem-focused coping strategies were associated with well-being in both fan groups. Additionally, COVID-related stress was associated with the use of problem-focused coping strategies in both samples, possibly reflecting an increased need for their use in response to the pandemic. Finally, and rather unexpectedly, fandom scores were only related to well-being as we had predicted in the furry sample; in the *Star Wars* sample, fandom scores were positively, though not statistically

significantly, associated with well-being scores.

To test our hypothesis that problem-focused coping may mediate an association between fandom scores and well-being, we next conducted a pair of mediation analyses—one for furries and the other for *Star Wars* fans—wherein well-being scores were entered as the dependent variable, fandom identification as the predictor variable, and problem-focused coping as the mediating variable.[1] This was done using Hayes' 2018 PROCESS macro for SPSS, which uses bootstrapping to generate 95% confidence intervals for direct and indirect pathways. As indicated by the significant indirect pathway in Table 2, problem-focused coping significantly mediated the association between fandom identification and well-being in furries. This was not the case in *Star Wars* fans, where the magnitude of the indirect pathway did not differ significantly from zero.

In a final pair of analyses, we assessed the possibility that any observed mediation in the two samples is conditional—that is, moderated by the extent to which participants experience significant stress related to the pandemic. Using the same PROCESS macro, we tested a model wherein the indirect pathway between fandom identification and well-being through problem-focused coping was assessed at three different levels of COVID-related stress. As Table 3 illustrates, the

indirect pathway in furries was statistically significantly different from zero at moderate and high levels of COVID-related stress, but not at low levels of stress, with a statistically significant overall index of moderated mediation of .041 (*SE* = .017, 95% CI [.011, .076]). In contrast, there was little evidence suggesting that the magnitude of the indirect pathway changed significantly at different levels of COVID-related stress in the sample of *Star Wars* fans, with an overall index of moderated mediation of .002 (*SE* = .012, 95% CI [-.022, .028]).

Discussion

In the present study we sought to replicate prior findings showing that fandom identification is associated with fan well-being. More novel, we also assessed whether the use of problem-focused coping strategies may mediate this relationship, especially in fans for whom COVID-19 related stress was high. Analyses revealed partial support for our hypothesis; we found evidence of our predicted moderated mediation model in the furry sample, but not in the sample of *Star Wars* fans. Among *Star Wars* fans, fandom scores did significantly predict problem-focused coping and problem-focused coping, in turn, was associated with higher well-being scores, as predicted. Fandom scores were unexpectedly non-significantly related to well-being in *Star Wars* fans, however, nor was there evidence of either mediation or moderated mediation.

In trying to account for the observed differences between our two samples, we note that while the magnitude of the relationship between problem-focused

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[1] While fandom scores were not significantly associated with well-being scores in the *Star Wars* sample, this does not preclude the possibility that a statistically significant indirect effect may be present, albeit suppressed by other indirect effects. For this reason, we chose to run the mediation analysis for both samples.

coping and well-being was comparable in both samples, the association between both fandom and well-being and fandom and problem-focused coping was notably smaller in *Star Wars* fans than it was in furries. As such, we must consider whether there are fandom-level differences between the fandoms themselves to explain why *Star Wars* fans may not experience the same well-being benefits that furries experience from their participation (e.g., Roberts et al., 2015) and why *Star Wars* fans may not rely as strongly on their fandom for support with problem-focused coping. One plausible difference between the fandoms stems from the differing degrees of stigma they experience; at least one study has shown that furries are perceived as far less prototypical and therefore more deviant (and subject to condemnation and stigma) than *Star Wars* fans (Reysen & Shaw, 2016), in part due to *Star Wars* being a far more mainstream and socially-accepted fan interest, judging from its success at the box office (IMDbPro, March 19, 2020).

At first glance, this difference in stigma would seem to suggest just the opposite, that identifying with the furry fandom should predict reduced well-being due to the well-established detrimental effects of being subject to stigma (Park et al., 2014; Turner et al., 1979). According to the rejection-identification model, however, in some cases—particularly when group members are unable or unwilling to change or conceal their group membership to avoid stigma, they may instead "double down" on group identification, finding resilience through the social support provided by similarly-suffering others (Branscombe et al., 1999).

Evidence for this phenomenon has been found both in fandom (e.g., Mock et al., 2013; Reysen et al., 2017, 2019; Vinney et al., 2019) and non-fandom (e.g., Fernández et al., 2014; Herek et al., 2015) contexts.[2] In short, because of their more stigmatized nature, furries and other heavily-stigmatized fandoms may more strongly identify with their fan groups and, in turn, may rely more strongly on their fandoms as a resource for problem-focused coping than do less-stigmatized, more mainstream fan groups. Of course, without having directly assessed stigmatization in the present study, this possibility remains speculative, and it remains an open question to be tested in future research.

Another possible explanation for the difference observed between the furry and *Star Wars* samples stems from the extent to which the two fandoms rely on a centralized canon or decentralized, fan-based content. In the case of *Star Wars* fans, their interests lie primarily in canonical content produced by a small group of "official" content creators (i.e., Disney). Interest and engagement in the fandom may thus ebb and flow heavily depending on the release schedule of *Star Wars* films or television shows—something which may have been impacted by the ongoing pandemic. In contrast, the furry fandom is a largely decentralized fandom without a central canon: Thousands of small, independent content creators produce content in a relatively stable, steady fashion for the fandom, even during the pandemic. As such, *Star Wars* fans may rely less on

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[2] The present study would also seem to support this interpretation, given that furries scored significantly higher than did *Star Wars* fans in terms of fandom identification ($t(372) = 4.48$, $p < .001$).

their fandom during the pandemic because they are in a period of relatively low engagement with respect to official content as compared to furries, who may be more consistently engaged with the fandom. While again speculative and needing to be tested in future research, this possibility, like the preceding one, makes it clear that researchers may need to better understand the idiosyncrasies of a given fandom to better predict when it is most and least likely to contribute to fans' resilience in the face of stress.

While there were differences between the two different samples of fans, we did find evidence in at least one group to support the assertion that fandoms are a source of resilience and well-being in the face of pandemic-related stress. While prior research has long suggested that fandom identification and well-being go hand-in-hand (e.g., Mock et al., 2013; Reysen et al., 2017; Reysen et al., 2019; Vinney et al., 2019), the present study suggests a relatively novel mechanism through which this may occur: fandoms facilitating problem-focused coping. To the best of our knowledge, this is a novel finding in the context of fan groups, at least as a direct test of this hypothesis: This possibility has been suggested in qualitative research (Roberts et al., 2015). It is also a finding that coincides with prior research on problem-focused, approach-oriented coping strategies and well-being (e.g., Bakracheva, 2019; Seiffge-Krenke & Klessigner, 2000), although this work has not, to date, been applied to the context of fans or recreational leisure groups. It not only reinforces the idea that problem-focused coping is associated with better

well-being, but also demonstrates the utility of considering possible antecedents of problem-focused coping, such as relying on one's social group for resources—material and otherwise—to facilitate this form of coping.

The present findings also coincide with research on the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic which have, to date, overwhelmingly shown how stress about COVID-19 itself and about the lockdowns and long-term impact of the pandemic have been detrimental to our well-being (Allen et al., 2021; Avsec et al., 2021; Cheng et al., 2021; Ruppanner et al., 2021; Salomon et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). Evidence for significant moderated mediation in the furry sample provides preliminary evidence for the fact that those who are under more stress may rely increasingly on their social support networks as a means of coping and resilience. And while many people imagine turning to their family and friends in trying times, the present studies suggest that one's fan group may be a viable source of support, especially for those who may be alienated from their families or who may struggle to make or regularly see their friends during the lockdown. With studies suggesting that more maladaptive coping strategies (e.g., alcohol use) are on the rise in response to the pandemic (e.g., Nordeck et al., 2021), alternative sources of resilience against COVID-19-related stress are both welcome and needed.

Limitations

Despite its ties to existing theory, the present study is not without its share of

limitations. Looming largest among these limitations is the study's cross-sectional design, which limits our ability to discern the causal direction of any of our observed associations. As such, it should be just as plausible that furries' well-being causes them to use more problem-focused coping strategies and to identify more strongly with the furry fandom as it is that fandom identification leads to greater problem-focused coping and, ultimately, better well-being. Having said that, we note that our model is grounded on a significant body of research which, itself, includes experimental studies that have suggested the plausibility of the directionality hinted at in our model. Moreover, we see no reason why the pathways in our present study cannot be bidirectional: Fandom identification may yield better well-being which, in turn, makes fans more enthusiastic about identifying with their fan groups. Likewise, fans who lean more heavily on their fandom for social support and, as a result, engage in more effective problem-focused coping may learn that this is effective and, as such, do so to a greater extent in the future. Nevertheless, at present, we do not aim to make strong claims about the directionality of the observed effects.

Another limitation of the present study was our failure to include measures which might explain the differences we observed between *Star Wars* fans and furries. We have suggested at least two plausible differences between these groups—differences in perceived stigmatization and differences in present engagement—which, at the moment, remain untested. Future studies attempting to conceptually replicate

and extend our research would do well to assess these and other potential moderating variables. They would also benefit from considering additional fan groups beyond the two assessed presently. In doing so, we would be better able to understand how and when the observed mediational pathway operates across fan groups which, in turn, could help us predict limitations in the generalizability of the present findings.

A final limitation of the present study is its use of a single measure to assess well-being. Given the nuanced and multi-faceted nature of well-being, as well as the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a multitude of different effects on the well-being of those living through it, it may prove beneficial to use multiple different measures of well-being, including measures of subjective well-being, positive affect, eudaimonic well-being, and physical well-being. Doing so might also allow researchers to better understand whether fandom identification and problem-focused coping strategies are associated with well-being in a holistic manner or whether any benefits they might be associated with are specific.

Conclusion

The present research tested, and found partial evidence for, a moderated mediation model assessing the association between fandom identification and well-being as mediated through problem-focused coping strategies in fans dealing with varying degrees of COVID-19-related stress. In a cross-sectional study of two different fan groups we found evidence for the model in one of the fan groups, the fairly obscure and

stigmatized furry fandom, while finding little evidence for the same model in a sample of more mainstream *Star Wars* fans. The current study provides preliminary evidence that identifying with one's fan group is associated both with the use of effective, problem-focused coping strategies and with better well-being, especially for those dealing with more COVID-19-related stress. The implications of these findings for research on the pandemic, coping strategies, and research on fandoms was discussed, as well as potentially fruitful directions for future research based on the limitations of the present study's design.

In sum, as we continue to face the prospect of prolonged social isolation due to pandemic lockdown procedures, people are recognizing, now more than ever, the value inherent in their social networks. From teleconferencing to skirting lockdown laws, people are illustrating that humans, as a social species, depend on one another in times of crisis. And, as the present study suggests, people will turn to those who are available to them to get them through the pandemic—be it family, co-workers, church groups, or the people they watch cartoons and share drawings of cute, fuzzy animal-people with.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviation, Alphas, and Zero-Order Correlations Between Assessed Variables in a Sample of Furries and Star Wars *Fans*

Variable	1	2	3	4	M	SD	α
1. Fandom	--	.38**	.28**	.23**	5.30	1.32	.83
2. Problem-Focused Coping	.15*	--	.48**	.33**	2.39	0.70	.80
3. Ryff Well-Being	.12	.35**	--	.10	4.84	1.15	.82
4. COVID Stress	.05	.39**	.06	--	5.02	1.73	.87
Mean	4.37	2.51	1.85	4.15			
Standard Deviation	1.49	0.55	0.44	0.42			
α	.86	.82	.83	.88			

Note. Values above the diagonal represent correlations in the furry sample while values below the diagonal represent correlations in the *Star Wars* fan sample.
$*p < .05, ** p < .01.$

Table 2

Mediation Analysis Predicting Well-Being from Fandom Identification with Problem-Focused Coping as a Mediator in Furries and Star Wars *fans.*

Sample	Path	Estimate	SE	95% CI
Furry				
	Total	**.247**	**.061**	**[.126, .368]**
	Direct	.103	.060	[-.106, .222]
	Indirect	**.144**	**.033**	**[.081, .210]**
Star Wars				
	Total	.092	.056	[-.019, 202]
	Direct	.054	.053	[-.051, .159]
	Indirect	.038	.022	[-.004, .084]

Note. Bold pathways indicate effects considered statistically significant because their 95% confidence intervals do not include the value 0. All values presented are unstandardized.

Table 3

Conditional Mediation Analysis Predicting Well-Being from Fandom Identification with Problem-Focused Coping as a Mediator and COVID-Related Stress as a Moderator in Furries and Star Wars *fans.*

Sample	Path	Level of COVID Distress	Estimate	SE	95% CI
Furry					
	Direct				
		-1SD	.132	.071	[-.007, .271]
		Mean	.100	.064	[-.026, .226]
		+1SD	.068	.095	[-.119, .256]
	Indirect				
		-1SD	.079	.040	[-.001, .157]
		Mean	**.150**	**.032**	**[.091, .216]**
		+1SD	**.221**	**.045**	**[.137, .316]**
Star Wars					
	Direct				
		-1SD	.114	.082	[-.048, .275]
		Mean	.058	.054	[-.048, .164]
		+1SD	.005	.073	[-.139, .148]
	Indirect				
		-1SD	.033	.033	[-.037, .097]
		Mean	.067	.023	[-.009, .082]
		+1SD	.040	.031	[-.019, .101]

Note. Bold pathways indicate effects considered statistically significant. All values presented are unstandardized.