

# Fandom During the Pandemic: Impacts of COVID-19 on People's Fandom Experiences

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*The video that accompanies this essay can be found at:*  
<https://www.mpcaaca.org/v11i1-video-essays>

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an immense global impact. When it comes to fandom, it essentially stopped all opportunities for physical experiences and expressions, requiring fans, fan communities, and the organizations that serve them to alter traditional modes of engagement. Large-scale conventions had to revise their offerings to create digital experiences. Celebrities took to social media accounts on Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Twitch, Cameo and more to both maintain and build their relationships with fans. All these changes were attempts to maintain fandom experiences as they had been with the hope that the pandemic, and thus the changes, would be relatively short-lived.

At the same time, people's fandoms may provide the escapism needed to cope with the unknowns and pandemic induced stress. Consumption and production of goods associated with fandoms could provide the relief and balm to manage the uncertainties, isolation, and feelings of emptiness during this time (see Ferrari; Lindgren and Lundström; McInroy and Craig). Fandom has also been a means by which people connect. Diverse and vast digital communities form as the Internet affords geographically dispersed fans to find one another. Fans may rely on these communities and virtual relationships as substitutions for their physical

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communities and relationships (see Kelsner and Wann; Peterson, Speer and McMillan). With such ideas in mind, the study was conducted to answer this question: How have fans responded to the pandemic, and how do they see the pandemic impacting their fandoms?

To understand the impact COVID-19 has had on people's fandoms, we deployed a mixed-methods questionnaire that used a Sense-Making Methodology self-interview and a questionnaire consisting primarily of Likert attitudinal items. Convenience and snowballing sampling methods generated a sample of 115 respondents that, admittedly, was not as diverse as possible. The largest area of diversity came in the nature of the fandoms: these fandoms ranged from more traditionally studied ones (e.g., Harry Potter, Marvel, kpop, and video games) to more niche or obscure ones (e.g., tacos, *MasterChef*, *Queen's Gambit*, and Rene Magritte). The average age was 35, spanning from 19 to 62. That majority were located in North America before (76%) and during the pandemic (77%). The respondents tended to be: well educated with many obtaining at least a master's degree (47%); single and never married (56%); employed full-time (57%) or a student (33%); and white (84%). Additionally, the majority indicated being cisgendered (84%), although sexual identity demonstrated more diversity: 51% heterosexual, 18% bisexual, 10% gay or lesbian, and 12% queer or fluid. A limitation of this study is in its diversity: the sample largely reflects an educated white, heterosexual ciswoman's experience and perspective.

In analyzing the results, it appears that in times of uncertainty and lack of control over one's life, people will turn to their fandoms to gain power, at least the perception of power, over something. According to the analysis, the majority agreed that their fandom helped them both escape and understand the world as well as cope with their lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. The exploratory factor analyses and correlations demonstrated some significant relationships suggesting how fans were helped by their fandoms during the pandemic. The exploratory factor analysis resulted in five factors: Physical Fandom (Table 1), Fandom as Helping (Table 2), Art & Fic, Online Community, and Embarrassed.

Variable: Physical Fandom	Eigenvalue	Mean (S.D)
I talk to other fans in-person.	0.509	5.17 (1.72)
<b>I attend conventions related to my fandoms.</b>	<b>0.528</b>	<b>3.78 (2.24)</b>
I like to attend live events related to my fandoms.	0.717	5.07 (1.79)
<b>I cosplay in relation to my fandoms.</b>	<b>0.448</b>	<b>2.83 (2.09)</b>
I collect items related to my fandoms.	0.558	5.13 (1.80)
I like to wear clothes that reflect my fandoms.	0.570	4.87 (1.96)
I like to wear accessories that reflect my fandom.	0.498	4.78 (1.89)
I purchase merchandise related to my fandoms.	0.465	5.40 (1.65)
I am not getting everything I want out of my fandoms right now.	0.437	4.14 (1.64)
<b>I wish I could do more to express my fandoms to others right now.</b>	<b>0.558</b>	<b>3.49 (1.62)</b>
I wish I could do more to participate in my fandoms right now.	0.534	4.90 (1.62)
I would feel lost without my fandoms.	0.432	4.33 (1.87)
It has been hard to not experience my fandoms as I wanted to lately.	0.569	3.96 (1.68)

Table 1. Physical Fandom Factor Loads

Physical Fandom appears to have two subfactors. The first one reflects fan external behaviors that would occur during physical fandom activities and events, such as attendance at conventions or concerts. This subfactor includes a desire to cosplay, collect items, and talk to other fans. The second subfactor reflects the impact of the pandemic on such physical activities and events, as fans indicated agreement with more negative sentiments. These sentiments include not getting everything they want out of the fandoms and wishing they could be doing more. Overall, the Physical Fandom factor suggests where a significant negative impact of the pandemic was experienced for the fans.

Variable: Fandom as Helping	Eigenvalue	Mean (S.D)
My fandoms help me escape the real world.	0.414	5.75 (1.49)
My fandoms help me cope with life.	0.533	5.67 (1.37)
My fandoms are important to me.	0.578	5.97 (1.25)
My fandoms help me feel in control of my life.	0.604	4.52 (1.62)
My fandoms help identify me to others.	0.305	4.97 (1.56)
<b>My fandoms give me joy.</b>	<b>0.495</b>	<b>6.11 (1.12)</b>
My fandoms give me comfort.	0.595	5.80 (1.48)
My fandoms make me feel fulfilled right now.	0.626	5.31 (1.36)
I am satisfied with my fandom experiences right now.	0.423	5.30 (1.29)
My fandoms have helped me during the pandemic.	0.706	5.78 (1.37)

Table 2. Fandom as Helping Factor Loads

The second factor Fandom as Helping also had two subfactors. Here, the fans' internal behaviors were captured, with the first subfactor collecting the sense of being helped by the fandom and the second collecting more positive sentiments about their fandom experience during the pandemic. These two primary factors suggest that their experience of physical activities and events were impacted by the pandemic, but that their entire fandom experience was not and was, indeed, helpful to them during the highest times of uncertainty.

A closer examination of the relationships through correlations further explains this pattern. When correlating various Likert items with the attitude "My fandoms have helped me during the pandemic," various significant relationships emerged (Table 3). These positive correlations suggest that fans were more likely to say their fandom helped them during the pandemic if: they were reading fan fiction and looking at others' fan art online; felt that their fandom provided them with joy, comfort, and fulfillment; and thought that their fandom provided a sense of both escapism and control during the uncertainty.

Variables: External Fannish Behaviors	r-score	p-value
Share information online	0.207	0.026
Write fan fiction	0.226	0.015
<b>Read fan fiction</b>	<b>0.274</b>	<b>0.003</b>
<b>Look for others' fan art</b>	<b>0.280</b>	<b>0.002</b>
Like to wear accessories	0.223	0.017
Follow social media accounts	0.206	0.027
Variables: Internal Fannish Behaviors	r-score	p-value
Important to me	0.30	0.001
<b>Give joy</b>	<b>0.387</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
<b>Give comfort</b>	<b>0.376</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
<b>Feel fulfilled now</b>	<b>0.414</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
Satisfied with fandom experiences now	0.295	0.001
Wish could do more to participate now	0.280	0.002
Feel lost without fandom	0.245	0.008
Variables: Helping Fannish Behaviors	r-score	p-value
<b>Help escape real world</b>	<b>0.364</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
Help cope with life	0.288	0.002
<b>Help feel in control</b>	<b>0.373</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
Help identify to others	0.222	0.017
Help understand the world	0.272	0.003

Table 3. Correlations with “My fandoms have helped me during the pandemic”

What fans discussed in the self-interview portion supports these quantitative findings. For example, as of writing this abstract, folx somewhat to strongly agreed that their fandoms helped them during the pandemic. Additionally, when asked about their emotions they experienced during the pandemic about and their fandoms, people indicated a range of affectations. Some folx focused on from longing and missing what they had done before, while others discussed to seeing fandom as more of an escape from the world now than they had done in comparison to before the pandemic. Many respondents indicated hoping to do something physically in-person and physical in relation to their fandom after the pandemic, from seeing their “fandom friends” to attending live events. They also expressed concerns for the future of their fandoms and those whose work builds the objects of their affection.

Overall, while the pandemic negatively impacted their physical fandoms, the fans still found a multitude of means by which to experience their fandom and thus receive benefit from it. Many found their fandoms to have online components that could replace the absent physical, while others were still able to engage with and consume materials related to their fandom from their homes. Many indicated using their fandom as a way to manage the stress of the pandemic, such as by connecting with others and even just escaping the uncertainty and depressing news. The fans found that their fandoms provided them a sense of calm and comfort during this time of upheaval, suggesting the importance of fandom to a person’s mental health during times of crisis.

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