"You Had to Be There": Convention Attendance and Well-Being in Anime Fans

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Abstract

We examined the differences between participants completing measures of well-being at an anime convention and participants completing the same measures online and tested possible mediators of differences between the two groups. Participants, all self-identified anime fans, completed measures of anime convention attendance, of the nature of their engagement with anime, well-being, and loneliness, and did so either while at an anime convention or online. Participants sampled at the convention reported greater well-being, more interactions with others, and lower loneliness than participants in the online sample. Mediation analyses suggest that the association between sample source and well-being is mediated both by face-to-face interaction and loneliness. Taken together, the results suggest the importance of face-to-face interaction with like-minded others as one of the means through which convention attendance may prove beneficial for fans.

Keywords: anime, fan, well-being, loneliness, convention

Introduction

Psychological research routinely shows that people benefit from face-to-face interaction with others (e.g., Warkentin, Sayeed, & Hightower, 1997). Social identity researchers are among those who posit that face-to-face interaction improve psychological well-being (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam 2009), and have shown that such interaction with ingroup members reduces loneliness (McKenna & Gleason, 2002) and improves self-esteem (Swann, Kwan, Polzer, & Milton, 2003). Despite making these observations for a number of different social groups, there has, to date, been a relative dearth of studies testing these relationships and their underlying mechanisms within fan groups. Presently, we do exactly that, testing the relationship between convention attendance, face-to-face interaction, loneliness, and well-being.

We begin with a brief review of the relevant literature on fan groups and the underlying motivation of fans before summarizing research linking fan activities in general, and convention-going specifically, with well-being. We then describe and present the results of a large-scale test of these relationships within the anime fandom. Finally, we discuss the

findings within the context of the literature and suggest their implications for future research on well-being in fan groups.

Fans and Motivation

Fans are typically defined as passionate and loyal supporters of an interest (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). Far from being a rare subset of the general population, research suggests that much of most people's leisure time is devoted to pursuing fan interests of form or another (Jones, 2000). Sport fans, for example, represent the prototypical fan (Reysen & Shaw, 2016), and support multibillion dollar industries. That said, not all fans are sports fans, as fan groups can form around interests as diverse as television shows, scrapbooking, model railroading, and role-playing games. And while much of the research on fan groups has historically centered around sport fans, there has been growing interest in these other fandoms, with research showing that they share many of the same underlying motivations and characteristics (e.g., Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). As just one illustrative example, research on cosplayers – fans who dress up as their favorite characters from a show or game – finds that they tend to be motivated by fun, enjoyment of the character, and by the desire for creative expression (Rosenberg & Letamendi, 2013), motivations related to, but also distinct from, the eight motivations proposed by Wann (1995) to underlie sport fan participation.

Fandom and Well-Being

Research on sport fans routinely finds that participating in fandom-related activities is positively associated with well-being (Wann et al., 2008; Wann & Weaver, 2009). For example, Wann et al. (2008) found that sport fans attending sporting events displayed greater social well-being (e.g., less loneliness, greater satisfaction with social life) than they did when they were at home. Findings such as these are consistent other research showing that non-fan groups emphasizing social interaction are also associated with well-being (e.g., compassionate friends, multiple sclerosis, and overeaters anonymous, Maton, 1988). Likewise, participation in religious groups has been similarly shown to have a strong positive correlation with well-being (Ivtzan, Chan, Gardner, & Prashar, 2013). In fact, the resilience of the relationship between group participation and well-being can be demonstrated in research on members of heavily stigmatized fan groups. One would assume, given the negative stereotypes that exist for members of atypical or unpopular fan interests, that identifying with and participating in such groups would be harmful for their self-esteem. Nevertheless, Mock and colleagues (2013) found that identification with the furry fandom – a highly stigmatized fan group – was positively associated with members' well-being, counteracting the stress associated with the group's stigma.

Attending Conventions and Well-Being

While the amount of research on the motivations and outcomes of non-mainstream fan groups has been slowly growing in the past decade, there has nevertheless been little research to date directly testing the importance of face-to-face interaction among members of said fan communities. The little research which does

exist has suggested that people benefit from face-to-face interaction with other members of one's group, including one study which compared fans' well-being during, and in the days following, a fan convention (Plante, Reysen, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2016). In this work, convention-going participants reported significantly greater well-being during the convention as compared to the days following the convention – a phenomenon commonly referred to by fans as "post-con depression." Findings such as these should not be taken to mean that fan interaction is *only* associated with well-being in convention settings, however. Instead, evidence suggests that, at very least, face-to-face interaction with others in one's fan community may be especially beneficial for well-being, above and beyond the benefits associated with online or other long-distance interaction. Illustrating this point, several studies have shown that online groups can offer a sense of belonging and a place to gather information, foster empathy, and attain social status (Baym, 2006; Kollock, 1999; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). That said, dependence on computer-mediated communications has also been shown to be associated with depression and social isolation (Kraut et al., 1998). Cummings, Butler, and Kraut's (2002) argue that while computer-mediated communication can be useful for supplementing offline interactions and relationships, it is not as beneficial as face-to-face contact with their social group.

Present Study

A growing body of research suggests that fan communities, despite differing in content and in the way their interests manifest among members, all share in common the fact that they are beneficial for the well-being of their members. There may, however, be important differences in fan behavior that moderate the nature of this relationship, including the extent to which one's participation involves face-to-face interaction with other fans. Based on this premise, the present research aims to test whether convention-going fans and online fans differ with regard to their well-being and to assess possible mechanisms underlying this difference. Employing a cross-sectional survey design, the present study assesses self-identified anime fans either online or attending an anime convention, with regard to their frequency of convention attendance, how their interest in anime manifests, and their self-reported well-being and loneliness. Although this study is exploratory, we predicted, based on prior research (e.g., Plante et al., 2016), that those completing the survey at a convention (vs. online) would score higher in measures of subjective well-being and lower loneliness. Due to the lack of existing research assessing this relationship in particular, we had no a priori hypotheses regarding possible mediators of this relationship.

Participants and Procedure

Participants ($N = 967$, 55% male (4.5% non-binary/other); $M_{age} = 25.95$, $SD = 7.78$) included 328 self-identified anime fans recruited at A-Kon (an anime convention in Dallas, TX) and online through anime-related websites ($n = 639$). As part of a longer questionnaire, participants completed measures of their involvement in anime and their well-being.

Measures

Face-to-face interaction. To measure face-to-face interaction with others, we constructed three items ("This past year, how often did you talk about anime with anime fans offline (face-to-face)," "This past year, how often did you talk about anime with non-anime-fans offline (face-to-face)," "This past year, how often did you watch anime with friends") that were combined to form a moderately reliable composite measure ($\alpha = .74$). Responses were made on an 8-point response scale, from 0 = *never* to 7 = *many times each day*.

Loneliness. We adopted the 10 positively worded items (e.g., "How often do you feel alone," "How often do you feel left out") from the UCLA loneliness scale ($\alpha = .95$; Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980) to assess participants' felt loneliness. Responses were made on a 4-point response scale, from 1 = *never* to 4 = *always*.

Well-being. To assess psychological well-being, we employed Kinderman, Schwannauer, Pontin, and Tai's (2011) BBC well-being scale. The measure contains 24 items (e.g., "I feel that I am able to enjoy life," "I am satisfied with my physical health") that assess three dimensions (physical, psychological, relationships) of well-being which, when combined, form an overall index of well-being ($\alpha = .94$). The items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type response scale, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

Convention attendance. A single item ("How many anime conventions did you attend this past year") was included to control for frequency of convention attendance for both samples of participants.

Responses ranged from "0" to "10+" ($M = 1.54$, $SD = 1.87$).

Results

As a first step, we compiled the descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations of all variables assessed in the present study (see Table 1). To test our hypothesis that convention-going participants would score higher in well-being and face-to-face interaction and lower in loneliness than online participants, we conducted a MANOVA, entering sample source as the independent variable, the other assessed variables as dependent variables, and the number of anime conventions participants had attended in the last year as a covariate. The omnibus test was significant, Wilks' $\Lambda = .93$, $F(3, 962) = 23.89$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .069$. As shown in Table 1, convention-going anime fans (vs. online) reported greater interactions with others, less loneliness, and higher well-being while controlling for frequency of convention attendance in the past year.

A hierarchical linear regression showed that the source of the sample (0 = online, 1 = A-Kon convention) predicted greater well-being (see Table 2, Step 1). However, when the proposed mediators were included in the analysis, the association between sample source and well-being was reduced (see Step 2), and face-to-face interactions and loneliness were significant.

Based on the pattern of zero-order correlations observed, we tested a possible mediation model whereby differences in well-being between the two samples were mediated in a serial fashion by face-to-face interaction and felt loneliness. The model was tested using the PROCESS SPSS macro

with 95% confidence intervals and 20,000 bootstraps (Hayes, 2013). The total effect (i.e., association between source of the sample and well-being) direct effect (i.e., association between source of the sample with well-being partialling out the potential mediators and covariate), and all indirect effects are shown in Table 3. The indirect pathway through face-to-face interaction was significant, as indicated by the absence of zero within the confidence intervals of the indirect effects (see Table 3). In contrast, the indirect pathway through loneliness by itself was not significant, as indicated by the inclusion of the value zero within its confidence interval. Finally, we found evidence of serial mediation, as indicated by the non-inclusion of zero within the confidence interval of the indirect pathway containing face-to-face interactions and loneliness was significant (see Figure 1 and Table 3). This final pathway suggests that anime fans sampled at a convention (vs. those sampled online) may experience greater well-being as a result of face-to-face interaction with others, which in turn reduces experienced loneliness.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine whether there were differences between convention-going and online fans with regard to their interaction with others, experienced loneliness, and their well-being. We hypothesized, based on prior research (Plante et al., 2016), that those who attended the convention (vs. those sampled online) would report greater well-being. This hypothesis was supported, as anime fans completing the survey at a convention reported greater general well-being

compared to fans completing the survey online. Furthermore, the results showed that this difference was significantly mediated in a serial fashion by face-to-face interaction and loneliness.

The present findings suggest that face-to-face interactions may play an important role in the relationship between convention attendance and well-being for fans. First, participants at the anime convention reported significantly greater well-being, greater interactions with others, and less felt loneliness than participants that were sampled online. These findings are consistent with research on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which suggests that individuals seek to belong to groups for the purpose of maintaining a positive sense of identity. To this end, anime fans may seek out fan conventions and other face-to-face forms of interaction with anime fans because such activities allow them to form and foster a positive identity as a member of the anime community. Second, mediation analyses revealed that face-to-face interaction and experienced loneliness mediate the relationship between convention-going and well-being, a finding consistent with the idea having fewer face-to-face interactions may be an indicator of, or precursor to, reduced psychological well-being (Cummings, Butler, & Kraut, 2000; Kraut et al., 1998). In sum, the results suggest the importance of face-to-face interactions with similar others as a potential mechanism underlying the previously-found relationship between fandom participation and the well-being of fans.

Several limitations of the present research are worth noting. First, the present study employs a cross-sectional design. As such, it is impossible to draw causal

conclusions from the data. While we offer an intuitively appealing causal direction through which to interpret the results, future research is needed, employing longitudinal or experimental designs, to directly test these and other causal directions. Second, some of the measures used in the present study consisted of a single item. As such, one can challenge the validity of such items, which may be assessing something other than what we have intended. To this end, future studies may want to employ more thorough and empirically-validated measures of the constructs in question. Third, the individuals who completed the survey at the convention may be meaningfully different with respect to well-being. Finally, though the sample of the current study consisted of both convention-going fans and fans solicited online, the sample was largely comprised of individuals from Western countries, and represented members of a single fan group. While we would hypothesize that similar mechanisms underlie members of other fan groups and fans from other countries, additional studies are needed to determine whether the present findings generalize to all fan groups, or whether they are idiosyncrasies of anime fans in from Western cultures.

The present study provided a novel test of the differences between convention-going and online fans and well-being and the possible mediators underlying this difference. Overall, our results suggest that face-to-face interaction may play a key role in fan well-being due to its possible effects on reducing felt loneliness. Exploratory in nature, the present research suggests numerous potentially fruitful directions for future researcher, including testing the generalizability of the present findings to other fan groups and more directly testing the mechanisms revealed presently.

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Author Note

Table 1

Means (Standard Deviation) and Differences by Sample

Variable	Online	Convention	$F(1, 964)$	p	η_p^2
Face-to-Face	2.61 (1.46)	3.69 (1.74)	67.53	< .001	.065
Loneliness	3.45 (1.55)	3.09 (1.63)	11.37	.001	.012
Well-Being	4.67 (1.14)	4.94 (1.09)	10.57	.001	.011

Note. Controlling for frequency of convention attendance in past year.

Table 2

Unstandardized Coefficients for Regression showing Association of Source of Sample (Online vs. at Convention), Face-to-Face Interactions, and Loneliness with Well-Being

	Step 1			Step 2		
Variable	b	SE	t	b	SE	t
Sample Source	.26	.08	3.25**	.05	.07	0.80
Face-to-Face Interactions				.06	.02	2.97**
Loneliness				-.41	.02	-21.96**
R^2 Change	.01			.35		
F Change	6.77**			266.42**		
df Change	(2, 964)			(2, 962)		

Note. ** $p < .01$. Controlling for number of conventions attended in past year.

Table 3

Bootstrap Analysis of Indirect Effects Through Face-to-Face Interactions and Loneliness

	b	*SE*	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower	Upper
Total Effect	.26	.08	.102	.412
Direct Effect	.05	.07	-.077	.181
Face-to-Face	.05	.02	.017	.082
Loneliness	.09	.05	-.011	.183
Face-to-Face + Loneliness	.07	.02	.042	.104

Note. The ratio of the indirect effect to the total effect of the serial model is .80. Controlling for frequency of convention attendance in past year.
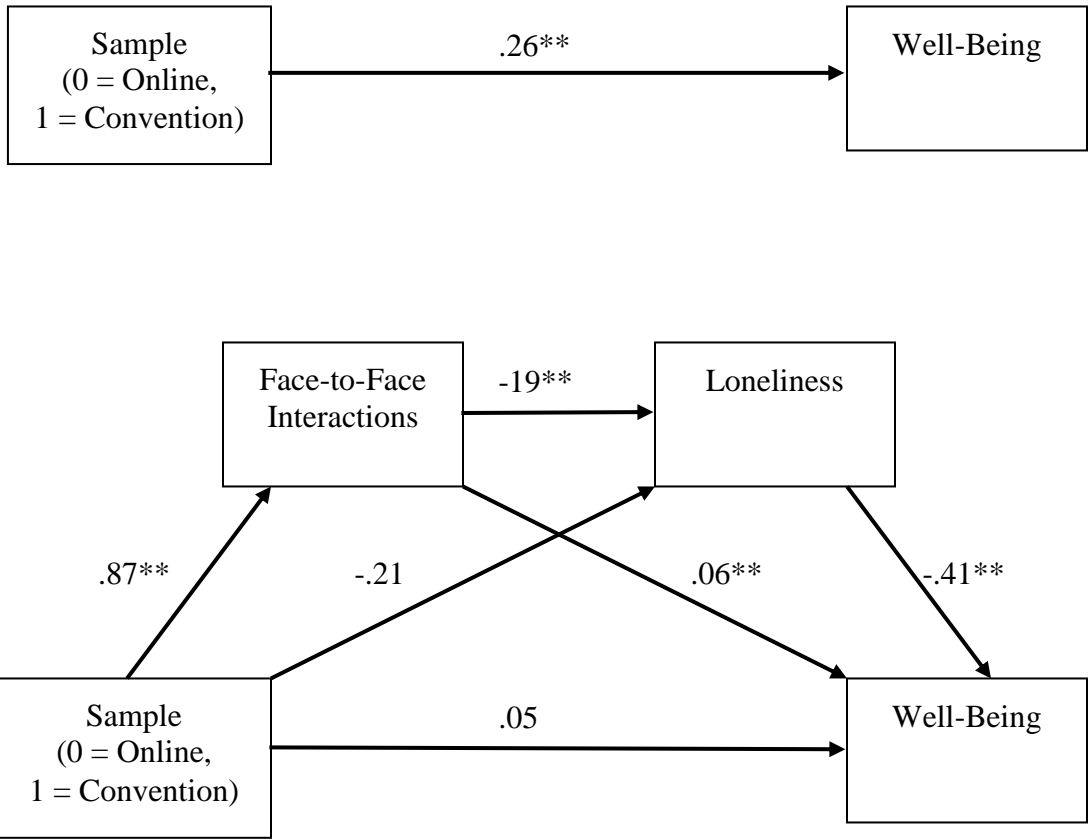
Figure 1. Serial mediation model of source of sample predicting well-being through face-to-face interactions and loneliness. Unstandardized betas presented. Controlling for frequency of convention attendance in past year. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.