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Connecting the dots between fantasy and reality: The social psychology of our engagement with fictional narrative and its functional value

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Abstract

This essay provides an overview of research and theory on narrative and its important, functional role in human experience, including the ways people use media to interrogate their own beliefs and feelings, and derive social meaning. Thought-provoking film, television, and books can help us make meaning of our lives and grow in ways that are important for our successful social functioning. Research reviewed here demonstrates that exposure to fiction can increase empathy and social skills and reduce prejudice. Our connection to characters and stories has been studied in various ways as extensions of the self into another, while at the same time bringing the other into the self. Bringing together disparate perspectives, we propose that connecting to story worlds involves a process of "dual empathy"—simultaneously engaging in intense personal processing while also "feeling through" characters, both of which produce benefits. Because the value of entertainment narratives may not always be well understood, we explain how those experiences can be personal, social, and can serve important adaptive functions.

KEYWORDS

emotion, engagement, fiction, film, identification, meaning, narrative, psychological well-being, simulation, story, television

1 | INTRODUCTION

There is a mystery about everyday life in Western societies that scholars are just beginning to unravel. In most public spaces, you will notice that people are often looking at, interacting with, and focusing on screens. Smartphones' screens are often preferred for their pocket-sized portability, but others abound, including those of tablets, computers, televisions, movie theaters, and even wearables like smartwatches. All those screens are used in many ways, from pleasure seeking to information gathering, to communication. When people use their screens to watch or read fictional narratives, though, something interesting happens. When immersed in the stories of fictional

characters, audiences may find themselves laughing uncontrollably, screaming in terror, or crying into their popcorn. Why do people spend so much of their waking lives connected to complex fictional stories, and why are these experiences so emotional? Why do fictional narratives matter to people?

From movies that move people, to television serials that cause them to ponder what makes life worth living, this paper explores what scholars now understand about the personal—and personally rewarding—nature of the story worlds people love. This essay provides an overview of current research and theory on narrative and its important, functional role in human experience, including the ways in which people use media to interrogate their own beliefs and feelings, and derive social meaning from stories. Throughout, we argue that people gain personal insights about what makes life meaningful through their exposure to fictional narrative, and we suggest that the reasons people engage with stories is fundamentally social. In the pages that follow, we will provide an overview of important findings from a set of related literatures, articulating the value of connecting these topic areas (such as the relatively novel connection between fan studies and meaning making research) and suggesting some of the next questions this area of inquiry might address.

First, we relate a bit of the history of the study of the human connection with stories, how scholars have construed that relationship in the past, and how researchers are beginning to adjust their understanding of that relationship. Next, we move on to reporting important discoveries scholars have made about the functional value of narrative—with an emphasis on popular culture narratives—for the gratification of human needs, for social functioning, and for wellbeing. Topics reviewed include narrative engagement and persuasion, meaning making, the role of the self in the connection to narrative, and emotional, behavioral, and cognitive responses to narrative.

2 | HOW WE UNDERSTAND THE VALUE OF STORY IN OUR LIVES

Story has been part of human culture for as long as recorded history. Scholars from an array of fields have long noted that human beings have been drawn to, work to understand, and learn from story (Isbouts & Ohler, 2013). Story is tied to emotion, and emotion is tied to motivation and action (Brehm, 1999; Nabi & Green, 2014). This connection between stories, emotion, and action is why Rose (2012) calls stories, "rehearsals for life (p. 7)". Rose echoes the earlier work of scholars such as Huizinga, Caillois, and Csikszentmihalyi in the context of "play theory" (for a discussion, see Masters, 2008). One version of play theory asserts that games are simulations that help people hone life skills. For example, playing the board game "Life," teaches lessons such as the idea that going to college often leads to greater income. Likewise, people's connections to meaningful media may also help them sharpen their life skills. For instance, fictional media can introduce an individual to perspectives on social situations that would not otherwise be available to him or her. In this way, fictional stories help people consider the social situations in their own lives that need attention and practice potential solutions to interpersonal issues.

Based on this notion, we contend that the motives for viewing entertainment fiction have often been misunderstood. In Western cultures, consuming narratives in the form of books, films, and television shows is often considered "killing" or "wasting" time—an activity (or non-activity!) done by so-called "couch potatoes." People are sometimes loathing to admit that they watch television at all, referring to watching TV as a "guilty pleasure" (Dee, 2016). As a result of these cultural stereotypes, there can be shame associated with media consumption, such as the shame sometimes associated with being a fan of a piece of popular media (K. Larsen & Zubernis, 2013).

With so much recent focus on new media, one might think that television viewing has gone out of style. Youth increasingly access media through their digital devices, yet they are not watching less television—they are watching more. The latest report from the Kaiser Family Foundation puts TV consumption at an average of 4 hr and 29 min per day, up about 40 min a day from their previous report (Rideout, Foehr, & Robers, 2010). Most television is still watched live on TV sets (59%) versus online, on digital devices, or time delayed (41%) (Rideout et al., 2010).

As viewing evolves, the television industry is shifting from mass media to a focus on narrower and narrower segments of the audience. "Niche casting" means catering to niche audiences, and has resulted in television that

features more complex narratives (Dee, 2016). These narratives exemplify what Oliver, Bartsch, and others have described as the thought-provoking media that support meaning making (see, for example, Bartsch, 2012; Bartsch & Oliver, 2011; Oliver & Bartsch, 2011; Oliver & Raney, 2011). Research is beginning to reveal how meaningful fictional narratives fulfill important psychosocial, cognitive, and even existential needs. In lay terms, TV and movies can be good for you.

In fact, many adults' favorite story worlds are just these sorts of places—worlds where they can vicariously experience trials and sorrows, but also triumphs and joy. One of the original questions that sparked some of the foundational research on why people like challenging, thought-provoking media was, "Why do viewers enjoy sad movies?" also called the Sad Film Paradox (e.g., Bartsch, Kalch, & Oliver, 2014). Oliver and Bartsch (e.g., Bartsch & Oliver, 2011; Oliver & Bartsch, 2011) reasoned that it is better to say that we "appreciate" sad films because they fulfill fundamental psychosocial needs. One way in which sad films fulfill such needs is through the meta-emotions they evoke: people make the calculation that experiencing sadness can be valuable because it can lead to personal transformations. Another way sad films fulfill psychosocial needs is by simulating the experience of hardship and resolution in people's real lives. Not only do viewers find this process gratifying, but they can also grow from the experience of "feeling through" others, which can lead them to feel their own emotions and revisit autobiographical memories (Djikic & Oatley, 2014; Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004; Kaufman & Libby, 2012; Oatley, 1999).

For example, think of a scene from a favorite film or television series that caused you to cry. What was going on in that scene? Did you, perhaps, cry when Captain Kirk said goodbye to a dying Spock in *Star Trek*? How about when Rose dropped the necklace into the ocean at the end of *Titanic*? When did you cheer? Maybe when the prisoner escaped in the rain in the *Shawshank Redemption*? Maybe you shed tears of joy when George Bailey realizes that *It's a Wonderful Life*? Or when Elizabeth Bennett accepts Mr. Darcy's proposal in *Pride and Prejudice*? Did you feel mixed emotions when Darth Vader declared, "I am your father!" to Luke Skywalker in *The Empire Strikes Back*? Though they are fictional stories, the basis of believable fiction is reality because it is written by real people to evoke real social thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. As a result, we argue that the experiences people have when they connect to characters and story worlds are social—they relate to relationships or to social thoughts and feelings while fulfilling specific needs and gratifications.

2.1 | The gratifications of story: a functionalist approach

We can look at the sheer amount of time people spend with media as being a sign of its emotional appeal. Uses and gratifications theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973), which states that people actively choose what they watch and make those choices in order to fulfill specific desires, offers one way to understand how people derive meaning from and why they react emotionally to story worlds. This theory enables us to present a functionalist approach to people's relationship with fictional narratives. This approach explores the psychological processes that happen as people sit on their sofas and interact with their favorite fictional narratives. In other words, by addressing the question of what needs a particular habit gratifies, we are also able to ask what function it serves for the person: for instance, what does watching a favorite television show do for an individual?

Some films and television shows float in the shallow end of the pool of viewing entertainment. This simple and fun fare would include Super Bowl counterprogramming such as the Kitten Bowl (See Figure 1a). The motive for watching this kind of entertainment is labeled "hedonic," or using media "just for fun." This enjoyment and pleasure is the motive many people are likely to cite when asked why they engage with media (Brenick, Henning, Killen, O'Connor, & Collins, 2007; Oliver & Raney, 2011).

On the deeper end of the media pool is entertainment that fulfills "eudaimonic" needs—narratives that satisfy "individuals' search for deeper insight, meaning, and purpose in life" (Bartsch, 2012, p. 273). This is thought-provoking entertainment that moves people and drives them to consider what makes life worth living (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Bartsch & Oliver, 2011; Oliver & Raney, 2011; See Figure 1b). Of course, sometimes fare that is primarily "just for fun"
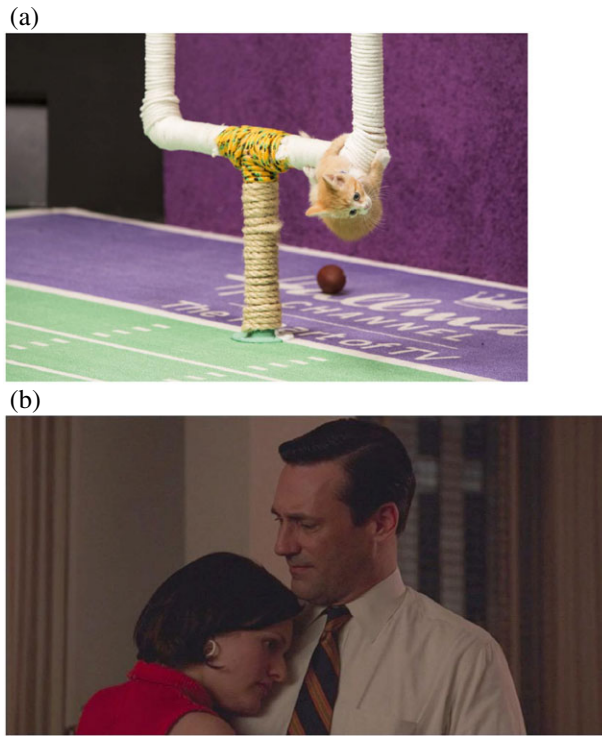
(a)

(b)

FIGURE 1 a) Superbowl counterprogramming such as this image from the Kitten Bowl is an example of hedonic entertainment—television watched "just for fun." b) Complex dramas, such as *Mad Men*, are an example of eudaimonic entertainment – watching can be personally transformative and can help people make meaning in their lives. Adapted from Figure 2.1 from *Mad Men Unzipped*: *Fans on Sex, Love, and the Sixties on TV* (Dill-Shackleford, Vinney, Hogg, & Hopper-Losenicky 2015b).

can have elements that are meaningful or thought provoking, and in turn, meaningful fare can contain elements that are fun. Even Shakespeare put some laughs in his tragedies for the groundlings.

To delve into personal motives for seeking and enjoying particular films, Bartsch (2012) asked viewers to describe what they felt while watching their favorite scenes, whether they liked having those feelings, and why. Participants reported the following motives: contemplative emotional experiences ("because it makes me think about myself"), fun, thrill, emotional engagement with characters ("because I like to feel with characters"), vicarious release of emotions ("because I cannot act on these feelings in everyday life"), empathic sadness ("because I like to have a good cry"), and social sharing of emotions ("because it inspires me to talk about the movie with others") (Bartsch, 2012, pp. 280–281). Further exploration revealed that films that left lasting impressions were those that evoked contemplative emotional experiences, elicited emotional engagement with characters, and allowed for the vicarious release and social sharing of emotions.

To return to our earlier question, then, sometimes an individual watches a favorite television show because it simply makes him or her feel happy, thus satisfying a hedonic need. Other times, one's favorite show might help an individual understand what he or she truly values, what constitutes a good decision, and even what leads to a life well lived. In the latter case, that show has served an adaptive function for the individual—it has helped him or her understand life better, particularly in ways that might inform social thinking, feeling, and decision-making.

2.2 | Narrative persuasion

Much of the existing research on our connection to story worlds focuses on the experience of getting lost in a story and the narrative persuasion that can arise from the experience, changing one's attitudes, beliefs, and even behavioral intentions to be more in line with the story world. Media psychologists have offered a number of terms to describe this feeling of absorption in a narrative, including transportation (Green & Brock, 2000; Mazzocco, Green, Sasota, & Jones, 2010), immersion (Neuendorf & Lieberman, 2010; Rose, 2012), engagement (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008, 2009), flow (Nabi & Green, 2014), and presence (Neuendorf & Lieberman, 2010). A significant body of literature supports the notion that ideas that people find in a story world can influence them to alter their perspective in the direction of the story (Appel & Richter, 2010; Green, Garst, Brock, & Chung, 2006; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). Mechanisms of narrative persuasion include empathy (putting oneself into the character's shoes) and mental imagery (using the imagination to experience the story world oneself) (Van Laer, do Ruyter, Visconti, & Wetzels, 2014).

Being absorbed in a story world makes the ideas that are presented in that world more persuasive. Attachment to the characters in the story world—through identification or parasocial interaction, for example—further aids the persuasion process. For example, in one study, participants watched movie clips and were asked to describe traits they possessed and traits the characters in the clips possessed. People who experienced more identification with the characters they watched, defined as adopting the characters' perspectives while viewing (Cohen, 2001), were more likely to describe themselves as having the traits of those same characters, as long as those traits were already considered self-descriptive (Sestir & Green, 2010). In other words, exposure to likeable film characters, at least temporarily, changed viewers' self-concepts to be more in line with the characters they just watched. This finding is not unlike those of a study of media violence that demonstrated that people often emulate the behaviors of characters in the films, shows, and games that they consume (Media Violence Commission, 2012).

Similarly, parasocial interaction—the simulation of a real-life social interaction during a viewing situation (Horton & Wohl, 1956)—and the related concept of parasocial relationships—one-sided relationships a media consumer simulates with a media character that psychologically resemble real-life social relationships (Giles, 2002)—have also been shown to have persuasive effects. For example, Tian and Hoffner (2010) found that viewers who had parasocial relationships with characters from the television show *Lost*, attempted to change their attitudes and behaviors to be more like those of the characters. In that way, the "other" of the character influences the self.

2.2.1 | Experience taking

In fact, people's engagement with fictional characters can be an especially potent means through which people become engaged in a narrative. Kaufman and Libby (2012) call what a media consumer does when connecting with a fictional character in a story "experience taking." They theorize that the more one lets go of his or her grip on the self, the more one slides into the role of the character in the story, thus sharing in that fictional person's experiences. Experience taking goes deeper than identifying with a character—feeling that the character is likeable or "like me." Experience taking means feeling what the character feels, sharing her goals, traits, and emotions "as if they were one's own" (Kaufman & Libby, 2012, p. 1). Experience taking is spontaneous rather than a conscious decision.

As Kaufman and Libby (2012) delineate—people slide across a self-other continuum and back depending on how deep they are "into" a story. When one is transported into a narrative, the individual may let go of her personal experience of the world, and move into an experience of the world as a character in a story. Scannell (1996) describes these experiences as "doubled spatiality" and "doubled temporality." In other words, one is both in the room and in the story; in both one's present reality and the story's setting. We would add to Scannell's conception the idea of "doubled personality:" that is when people become immersed in a story they are both themselves and the character that engages them.

The experience of social connection via entertainment media is dynamic. For instance, the "doubled personality" concept can be multiplied across a number of characters. For instance, in a complex drama such as *Mad Men*, one might inhabit the character Don Draper—ad executive, drinker, womanizer, and perhaps lost soul worthy of salvation.

In an instant, while watching a scene where Don interacts with his advertising protégé Peggy Olsen, the viewer might leap from an empathic connection with Don to one with Peggy. Furthermore, throughout one's viewing of the unfolding story, the viewer may ride back and forth on Kaufman and Libby's self-other continuum. One moment, the individual may be deep in "experience taking" mode with Don Draper. The next moment, the viewer's consciousness may shift back into his or her own self-perspective as he or she evaluates Jon Hamm as an excellent actor or an attractive man. Thus, people's connection with fictional narrative is at once a merging with the "other" and an opening of personal memories, thoughts, and feelings.

2.3 | Approaches to studying fantasy–reality connections

2.3.1 | Story as social simulation

Given the way one may become immersed into a story in which one forms relationships with or has vicarious experiences through the characters, stories may be considered simulations of social worlds. In fact, of the five areas of the brain typically associated with processing stories, four are also associated with social processing (Mar & Oatley, 2008). Much like the body of work on narrative persuasion, the idea of "fiction as social simulation" is based largely on literary fiction, but is explicitly proposed to apply to other media such as television, film, and video games (Oatley, 2008). Thus, Oatley and colleagues propose that immersion into a story via numerous mediums allows one to simulate the experiences of thinking, feeling, and acting in social contexts.

2.3.2 | Social processing

Lieberman (2013) explains that when human beings are not actively engaged in a specific task, their brains default to social processing. For Lieberman, the novel idea is not that we are interested in the social world, but that, "we are interested in the social world because we are built to turn on the default network [which engages in social processing] during our free time" (Lieberman, 2013, p. 19). This default network in the brain, "…directs us to think about other people's minds – their thoughts, feelings, and goals…" in order to promote, "empathy, cooperation and consideration" (Lieberman, 2013, p. 19).

Lieberman suggests that the reason people function this way is that sociality is adaptive—it is of primary value for one's survival, meaning it is to one's advantage to become an expert in social relationships. Further, when facing their mortality, people almost universally report that the most important things in their lives were social. Indeed, people's greatest fears often involve social rejection or loss of a social connection (Brown, 2015). Although Lieberman did not apply his work to narrative, it follows that a forum that allows people to practice their social-cognitive and emotional skills would be highly valuable and would attract attention.

2.3.3 | Developing social skills

Thus, we suggest connecting with a narrative is attractive and gratifying for us, in part because it is a rich and novel way of simulating social processing, including exploring and processing our social thoughts and emotions. There are a number of recent studies that support the view that the social processing of narrative has adaptive value. For example, Oliver and colleagues (Oliver, Dillard, Bae, & Tamul, 2012) found that when news stories were presented as narratives, greater empathy, compassion, positive thoughts, and behavioral intentions towards the people described in the stories were produced than when the stories were presented in a non-narrative format. Similary, Bal and Veltkamp (2013) asked participants to read a Sherlock Holmes story called *The Adventure of the Six Napoleons*, or some non-fiction newspaper articles. Results showed that those who read fiction, as opposed to non-fiction, were more empathic, but only when they were emotionally transported into the story. Further, Mar, Oatley, Hirsh, dela Paz, and Peterson (2006) found that reading fiction, but not non-fiction, was predictive of empathy and social acumen. In a follow-up study, it was found that reading fiction rather than non-fiction, as well as the ability to be transported into a story, predicted empathy (Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009). This relationship remained even when controlling for other

related factors such as gender, age, and personality. Reading fiction, as compared with non-fiction, was also associated with having greater social support.

Likewise, scholars have suggested that one thing media may do especially well is help people learn to interpret and understand others' mental and emotional states, referred to as theory of mind (Black & Barnes, 2015). This ability is thought to be assisted by the brain's mirror neuron system, which scholars believe is responsible for activating the same brain regions whether one is performing a behavior or just observing it (Lieberman, 2007). This system is credited with enabling people to both imitate and empathize with other people (Zunshine, 2008). People's theory of mind abilities are automatically triggered when they encounter another person, even people in television shows or movies (Zunshine, 2008; Mellmann, 2002), and recent evidence suggests that fictional media may trigger our theory of mind abilities even better than non-fiction. For example, Kidd and Castano (2013) found that reading literary fiction particularly improved theory of mind. Additionally, across two studies, Black and Barnes (2015) demonstrated that those who watched fictional television dramas, including *Mad Men*, *The West Wing*, and *Lost*, significantly out-performed those who watched a television documentary on a theory of mind task. These results suggest that watching or reading fictional stories can help viewers practice and hone their abilities to understand the inner-workings of others—and in turn, this may enable people to navigate their real-life social interactions and relate to others more successfully.

Rasmussen and colleagues (Rasmussen et al., 2016) found that when preschool-aged children watched the PBS program *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* and then had conversations with a parent regarding the situations on the program, the children exhibited more confidence in social situations, were better at reading the emotions of others, and were more likely to empathize with others' emotions. These are the same social responses that are used to measure readiness for children to start kindergarten. The social lessons from *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* were most effective when paired with parent-led discussion—meaning that the narrative example served as a foundation for learning and modeling.

2.3.4 | Social connection

Another way in which fiction can help us socially is through its ability to help us meet social needs. People need people, and the people one meets through fiction can sometimes serve that purpose—simulating the experience of belonging and making people feel less lonely. For example, Derrick, Gabriel, and Hugenberg (2009) found that when people feel lonely, watching favorite television shows helped them feel less lonely. In fact, thinking about a favorite program even buffered against the negative effects that can result from threats to a close relationship, enabling people to maintain self-esteem, reduce negative mood, and decrease feelings of rejection. These researchers asserted that the parasocial relationships people engage in with characters through favorite television programs enable them to meet their need to belong. Similarly, Gabriel and Young (2011) found that reading passages from fictional stories caused individuals to psychologically affiliate with the social groups represented in the narratives, enabling readers to either acquire a new sense of belonging or adjust an old one in order to connect to the fictional group. The connection people experienced as a result of this assimilation with the narrative group increased life satisfaction, which led to more positive moods. Thus, immersion in fiction can help people alleviate loneliness and meet the need to belong by providing parasocial relationships and group affiliations that are easily accessible and psychosocially rewarding.

2.3.5 | Emotional coping and memory

The social simulation offered by fictional narratives can also provide a means through which people can re-visit and re-examine past experiences. Research suggests that meaningful fiction may be especially good at evoking memories. For example, S. F. Larsen and Seilman (1988) discovered that when people read fictional stories, they found especially personally resonant, they experienced "remindings," or memories of experiences in which they actively participated. These remindings made reading especially pertinent and personal. Strange and Leung (1999) expanded on this

research to show that both fiction and news stories can prompt remindings. For instance, a story about the reasons one might drop out of high school led to remindings of both personal experiences and television shows with this subject matter (Strange & Leung, 1999). Thus, remindings from exposure to both fiction and non-fiction played a role in people's judgments about real life social issues, including how they understood the causes of the issue and how important they felt it was for the government to address it. Similarly, McDonald, Sarge, Lin, Collier, and Potocki (2015) recently demonstrated that watching fictional television shows and movies sparked autobiographical memories in viewers' minds, and that when people experienced more autobiographical memories, they found the content they consumed to be more personally resonant and moving. With these findings in mind, McDonald et al. (2015) observed, "Our 'selves' appear to be at the forefront of our media experiences as we enjoy and become involved in them" (p. 23).

Such engagement of the self through memory may enable people to utilize fictional narratives to grapple with difficult emotions. Oatley (1999) notes that the Victorians assumed that reading the classics would "equip them for life," and that fiction, in general, is "educative" and "life-enhancing." He goes on to say, "For the first time in history, there is now scientific evidence that reading fiction really does have psychological benefits," (Oatley, 2008, p. 42). More precisely, "…[I]n the simulations of fiction, personal truths can be explored that allow readers to experience emotions—their own emotions—and understand aspects of them that are obscure in relation to contexts in which the emotions arise" (p. 101). As personal emotions occur in the natural context of one's life, they can be overwhelming and, consequently, difficult to clarify or work out. Fiction can provide a safe place to process these confusing emotions as well as the ideas, values, and beliefs that go with them.

In many cases, a story evokes emotions because it brings meaningful memories to mind that in some way parallel the experiences of the characters in the narrative. As a result, a person cries, for example, about something that happens in a television show or film, in part, because of an empathic connection with the character, and in part, because it brings up important autobiographical memories. Consequently, fictional narratives can help an individual confront and even resolve the personal issues evoked by the memories the story brings up (Djikic & Oatley, 2014; Oatley, 2010; Oatley, 1999). We propose calling this experience "dual empathy"—that is, simultaneous empathy for the character and empathy for the self.

Thus, consuming meaningful media can be intimate and personal. This vision of viewers' psychological experience is quite different from the stereotypical image of the couch potato time killer, or with the colloquial wisdom epitomized by the familiar adage that "TV will rot your brain." Although there are certainly media habits that are negative, the research reviewed here suggests that there is such a thing as a media diet that can offer social and emotional benefits, and that the consumption of narratives can be an active and constructive process that is deeply personal.

2.3.6 | The fan experience

While it has been relatively understudied by psychologists, some recent research has begun to address the psychology of the fan experience with favorite narratives using social science methods. For example, Tsay-Vogel and Sanders (2015) found that when *Harry Potter* fans perceived themselves to be members of the fan community, they experienced the series as both more fun and more meaningful. Yet, when fans actually contacted other members of the fan base, fans experienced the series as less fun and meaningful. Meanwhile, Groene and Hettinger (2015) discovered that fans of different popular media texts develop a social fan identity that, like other social identities, can be threatened or affirmed based on how highly identified a fan is with their fan text. In addition, Taylor (2015) found that those with a stronger fan identity were more likely to become immersed into the fictional text. Finally, Dill-Shackleford and colleagues (Dill-Shackleford, Hopper-Losenicky, Vinney, Swain, & Hogg, 2015a; Dill-Shackleford, et al., 2015b) investigated *Mad Men* (2007–2015) fans' social media comments about the series and found that fans approached the characters as if they were real people. Fans often expressed their desires for characters to change or grow. They also felt strong emotions towards the characters and the characters' choices or behaviors, and found parallels in the storyline to their individual thoughts, feelings, and actions (Dill-Shackleford et al., 2015a; Dill-Shackleford et al., 2015b).

These studies begin to show how being a fan of fictional stories can cause individuals to adopt new personal and social identities centered around a text, how these new identities may enhance one's experience of the fictional text of which one is a fan, and how fans use what they learn in the story world to grapple with their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings, and to revise their personal narratives and plans.

2.3.7 | Narrative and prejudice reduction

Recently, new research has demonstrated empirically that story can be a vehicle for social change. The extended contact hypothesis, the idea that exposure to fictional friendships between members of different social groups can reduce prejudice against real members of the out-group in question, is foundational to this application of story to social problems (see, for example, Cameron, Rutland, Brown, & Douch, 2016; Vezzali, Hewstone, Capozza, Giovannini, & Wölfer, 2014). In order to reduce prejudice between the English and refugees living in England, Cameron et al. (2016) exposed English children between 5 and 11 years of age to stories featuring friendships between English and refugee children or to control stories. They asked the children to characterize English and refugee children using a number of traits and to think about how they might act towards out-group children in the future. Those exposed to fictional group contact characterized refugee children more positively and intended more positive contact with refugee children than did controls. This relationship was mediated by the degree to which children endorsed, "inclusion of other in self,"—those children who saw the refugees as part of themselves held more positive attitudes towards them. Similarly, Vezzali et al. (2014) exposed Italian elementary school children to passages from *Harry Potter* that did or did not relate to prejudice. Results showed reduced prejudice towards immigrants from those who had read the prejudice-related passages, compared with controls, but only for those children who identified with Harry Potter (the hero), but not with Voldemort (the villain). The researchers extended these findings to other age groups (high school and university students) and to other stigmatized groups (homosexuals and refugees).

A recent line of research has demonstrated that exposure to countertypes—media examples that do not fit negative social stereotypes—can also be a tool for social change. Exposure to countertypes has been associated with reduced prejudice, changed attitudes, and more progressive behavioral intentions (see Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015, for a discussion). For example, Ramasubramanian (2011) found that exposure to counter-typical media examples of African Americans resulted in more progressive beliefs about African Americans, more progressive attributions for perceived failures, and reduced prejudice, compared with controls.

3 | CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Stories, be they on the page or screen, can satisfy our hedonic needs for fun and diversion. But, as the research reviewed here suggests, when we find meaning in our favorite films, shows, and books, we can gain a host of personal and social benefits from our interactions with fiction. There is a connection between the story worlds we visit and our own feelings, thoughts, and intentions to act in our social and personal lives. Indeed, appreciating film, television, and books goes hand in hand with the feeling that the experience was important, complex, and thought-provoking.

In this essay, we have reviewed key contributions in this field, many of which have just emerged in recent years. Indeed, this area of exploration is a vibrant and growing one. Thus, bringing together disparate bodies of literature as we did here can help suggest future work that combines elements that have previously been kept separate. For example, future research could connect the work on experience taking with work on meaningful media experiences. Studies might detail the nature of the experience taking process and how aware viewers are of how this process contributes to their feelings that a story is meaningful. Future research might also elaborate on the relationship between the personal thoughts and emotions evoked by meaningful media and lasting personal growth.

Further, meaningful media and fan experiences are two areas of study that have not often been connected by social scientists. We argue that the study of fans and their connection to story worlds has advantages. Being a fan of a television or film series means viewers are repeatedly exposed to characters and story worlds. It seems

reasonable to assume that this repeated exposure has led to elaborate thought networks and long-term memories about characters and stories. Fans often discuss their favorite media with others, create or enjoy fan art and fan fiction, and read articles or books about the fan text. This ongoing interaction with the narrative adds layers of understanding and thinking to the story that only builds over time.

Thus, future research could profit from exploring the differences between fans and non-fans on a variety of outcomes. For instance, research suggests that fans fill in the details of characters' lives that are missing from a story's canon (Rose, 2012). Might fans' and non-fans' views of characters' off-screen lives be different? What about fans' and non-fans' views of the discrepancy between the actor and the role? Researchers could explore if fans' beliefs, attitudes, and personalities may coincide more with elements of the story world than those of non-fans.

On another note, up until now, the media psychology literature has generally focused on risk and harm, viewing media as stimuli that contribute to social problems such as violence (Okdie et al., 2014), high-risk sexual behavior (Bond & Drogos, 2014), or normalizing objectification, and victimization (Peter & Valkenburg, 2007). As outlined here, there is much to understand about the relationship between interactions with narrative fiction and personal well-being. A focus on well-being would help psychologists discover ways media can be used for personal benefit.

As we have suggested, one of the difficulties in understanding viewers' deep engagement with fictional stories and what this engagement does for them is that the clues to this mystery sometimes come from disparate corners of the literature. In addition, the social science methods for revealing answers to those questions have only recently been developed more fully. Thus, social scientists could contribute to this study through research that, for example, further elaborates on the ways people's social processing of attributions, social inferences, and judgments differ for those one meets in person versus the characters one meets in a story.

Furthermore, a whole area of inquiry could take shape around story worlds and counterfactual thinking. We know from the literature on counterfactual thinking that the degree to which social outcomes are viewed as easily reversible leads to greater emotional impact. For instance, if a man dies in a car crash after taking a route he did not normally drive, the emotional impact is higher than if he took his usual route because of people's ability to mentally undo his action and, therefore, his death. How does the emotional response to fiction mirror this everyday social processing?

As we have shown, entertainment media in the form of fictional narrative—like the television, films, and books that people love—are often beneficial to one's psychosocial well-being. This literature demonstrates that, rather than the ubiquity of media in people's lives uniformly signaling risk, the consumption of narratives can be deeply personal, social, and adaptive.

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