

**PERSONAL POP CULTURE: AN INVESTIGATION OF FANS' EUDAIMONIC  
RESPONSES TO FAVORITE TELEVISION**

A dissertation submitted

by

**CYNTHIA JEANNE VINNEY**

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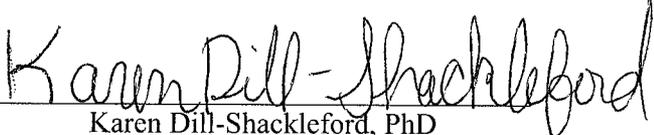
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# FANS' EUDAIMONIC RESPONSES TO FAVORITE TELEVISION

## Personal Pop Culture: An Investigation of Fans' Eudaimonic Responses to Favorite Television

by

Cynthia Jeanne Vinney

### Abstract

Popular media fans are becoming increasingly visible. However, psychological researchers have rarely investigated fans' relationships with and responses to their favorite entertainment. At the same time, a growing body of literature shows that people often react to media with eudaimonic appreciation, an experience marked by feelings of deep and profound meaning. The purpose of this study is to explore how an individual's personal identity as a fan impacts cognitive and affective eudaimonic responses to a favorite popular culture text. Fans of the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ( $N = 790$ ) completed an online survey in which they answered questions about their personal fan identity, watched a montage video of key moments from the series, and then completed items about their reactions to the video as well as the show in general and about their motivation to search for meaning in life. Results indicated that a stronger fan identity was associated with fans' enhanced cognitive and affective eudaimonic responses to the show in the form of increased reflective thoughts and higher levels of mixed and meaningful affect. In addition, a stronger fan identity led to more self-related thoughts, which in turn led to increased perceptions that the show was meaningful. Finally, fan identity negatively interacted with the motivation to search for meaning in life, such that when fan identity was weak a greater desire to search for meaning in life enhanced fans' perceptions that the show was meaningful, but when fan identity was strong, fans found the show meaningful regardless of the intensity of their motivation to search for meaning in life. These findings point to the personal connection

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fans make with their favorite popular media and how one's identity as a fan can impact individual responses to a text. Such meaningful experiences with popular culture may offer benefits to fans that result in personal growth and enhanced psychological wellbeing.

*Keywords:* fans, television, popular culture, media, eudaimonic appreciation, meaning, reflective thoughts, mixed affect, meaningful affect

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CHAPTER ONE

**Introduction**

Popular culture fans are everywhere these days. A fan is defined here as anyone “who is an enthusiastic, ardent, and loyal admirer” (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010, p. 177) of a work of popular media. Today, fans can be seen doing everything from cheering at a movie premiere, to attending a popular culture convention, to debating the plot of their favorite television show over social media. As a result, fans are more visible now than ever before. What is behind movie and television fans’ drive to declare their allegiance to a specific property? What is it about these fictional worlds that inspire fans to devote their energy to thinking about, debating, analyzing, and even making fan works about them?

Despite their increased visibility and acceptance in mainstream culture, popular media fans have not received much attention from psychological researchers (Schimmel, Harrington, & Bielby, 2007). Instead, when psychologists have devoted their energies to research with fans, they have typically investigated sports fans. Moreover, when psychologists focus on media, they have generally characterized it as a stimulus that contributes to social problems like violence and antisocial behavior (Okdie et al., 2014). Further, psychological investigations of media fans have often emphasized the potential for pathology (e.g., see the research on celebrity worship, including Giles & Maltby, 2006; Maltby, Day, McCutcheon, Houran, & Ashe, 2006; McCutcheon, Lange, & Houran, 2002), while overlooking the experiences of the average, healthy individuals who consider themselves movie or television show fans (Stever, 2011).

Consequently, it is humanities scholars who have primarily undertaken research on popular culture fans, and it is the social and communal aspects of the fan experience that have generally attracted their attention (e.g., Bielby, Harrington, & Bielby, 1999). Reysen and

Branscombe (2010) dubbed this kind of social identification with others in a fan community “fandom.” While fandom has been the focus of a great deal of scholarship, there is far less literature on the connection between fans and their favorite popular culture texts. Reysen and Branscombe (2010) called this personal identification with a fan object “fanship.”

The lack of research on the psychological experience of identifying with a specific piece of popular culture and the personal fan identity that comes with it represents a clear gap in the literature. Although fan experiences are problematic for some, many fans incorporate their fannish activities and involvements into their lives in a healthy way. Psychological research can provide insight into what psychologically healthy fans gain from their interactions with the media they love. Hills (2002) observed that “fan” is an identity one must claim. As more people identify themselves as fans of various works of popular media and these fans and their activities become increasingly mainstream, the ability of media psychologists to provide an understanding of why people become popular culture fans and what they get out of the experience is more important than ever.

Recently, social science studies that investigate personal and social fan experiences have made strides towards acknowledging that media fanship and fandom are important aspects of normal human experience (e.g., Dill-Shackleford, Hopper-Losenicky, Vinney, Swain, & Hogg, 2015; Groene & Hettinger, 2015; Taylor, 2015; Tsay-Vogel & Sanders, 2015; Vinney & Dill-Shackleford, 2016). At the same time, a growing body of scholarship is investigating audience perceptions of meaning in response to media and the gratifications such perceptions engender (e.g., Oliver & Bartsch, 2010, 2011; Oliver & Hartmann, 2010; Oliver & Raney, 2011). The purpose of the present study is to add to and bring together these lines of research. In particular, this study investigates how the strength of one’s fanship for a favorite television show influences

one's meaningful cognitive and affective responses to that show. The way self-related thoughts mediate these responses and the motivation to search for meaning in life moderates them will also be explored.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Eudaimonic Appreciation

Media psychologists often attribute the desire to watch movies and television to the enjoyment they offer (e.g., Bartsch, 2012; Bartsch & Hartmann, 2015; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010, 2011; Oliver & Hartmann, 2010; Wirth, Hofer, & Schramm, 2012). Such research contends that audiences seek entertainment in order to increase positive emotions while decreasing or distracting from negative emotions—what scholars call hedonic motivation (Bartsch & Hartmann, 2015; Oliver & Raney, 2011). This perspective characterizes viewers as passive consumers whose interactions with entertainment lack thought and meaning (Bartsch & Hartmann, 2015).

However, researchers have recently taken strides towards demonstrating that people are often motivated to consume media by gratifications beyond simple pleasure. Uses and gratifications theory contends that people deliberately choose the media they consume based on their belief that a given offering will satisfy specific wants and needs (Rubin, 1993). This perspective characterizes media consumers as active and aware of what they wish to gain from a given media experience. While sometimes distraction or pleasure is the goal of media consumption, media consumers may also seek out deeper or more meaningful experiences when interacting with media. For example, several scholars claim entertainment use could be motivated by its ability to satisfy higher order needs like competence, autonomy, and social affiliation, the needs specified by self-determination theory (Cohen & Metzger, 1998; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006; Tamborini, Bowman, Eden, Grizzard, & Organ, 2010).

Oliver and Raney (2011) contend that entertainment consumption can also be driven by more transcendent considerations, such as a desire for insight into what makes life valuable and meaningful—what scholars call eudaimonic motivation. Oliver and Bartsch (2010) label the audience response to such meaningful media experiences “appreciation,” which they define as, “An experiential state that is characterized by the perception of deeper meaning, the feeling of being moved, and the motivation to elaborate on thoughts and feelings inspired by the experience” (p. 76). Thus, eudaimonic appreciation is distinguished by a combination of both cognitive and affective components, including reflective thoughts, mixed positive and negative affect, and feelings of meaning and inspiration (Bartsch, Kalch, & Oliver, 2014; Oliver et al., 2015; Oliver, Hartmann, & Woolley, 2012).

An expanding body of research supports the notion that eudaimonic appreciation is a gratification audiences seek when selecting sad or difficult entertainment content. For example, Bartsch and Hartmann (2015) found that cognitively and/or affectively challenging entertainment resulted in higher levels of appreciation. Likewise, Bartsch and Mares (2014) showed that people were more likely to watch a violent film when the potential for appreciation was perceived to be high. In another study, Oliver (2008) demonstrated that people experiencing tender affective states—feelings characterized by empathy, warmth, and connection—preferred to view sad films, dramas, and entertainment focusing on human connection. The researcher speculated that this association was reflective of participants’ desire for their entertainment consumption to produce eudaimonic gratifications.

Furthermore, studies indicate that when viewers respond to a media text with eudaimonic appreciation, they often consider the content in terms of what it says about the things that are meaningful and valuable in life, not only for the media characters but also for themselves

(Bartsch, 2012; Bartsch et al., 2014; Oliver & Hartmann, 2010; Wirth et al., 2012). As a result, such entertainment experiences can foster personal growth (Bartsch, 2012).

Given that personal connection and the perception of deep meaning are characteristic of the experience of eudaimonic appreciation, it would seem that this response to media consumption is an important reason many people would become, and remain, fans of a specific work of popular culture. One of the major objectives of this study is to investigate whether fanship enhances eudaimonic appreciation.

### **Beneficial Outcomes of Consuming Fiction**

Although much past research has focused on the negative effects of media consumption (Okdie et al., 2014), studies on eudaimonic appreciation demonstrate that meaningful fictional narratives can lead to positive outcomes, such as personal growth (e.g., Bartsch, 2012; Bartsch & Hartmann, 2015; Wirth et al., 2012). If fan identity enhances eudaimonic appreciation, then fans may benefit from these positive outcomes. Research has shown that fiction can enhance people's lives in other cognitive, emotional, and social ways (e.g., Black & Barnes, 2015; Mar & Oatley, 2008; Oatley, 1999b). These benefits represent additional positive consequences of media use that may drive fanship and improve the wellbeing of fans.

One thing fiction does especially well is show people different aspects of the human experience. This is because fiction simplifies and distills events down to their essentials. As a result, stories focus only on the most fundamental and important parts of life, causing the events in a story to be more coherent and comprehensible than the same set of experiences would be in real life (Mar & Oatley, 2008; Oatley, 1999a, 1999b). Consequently, fiction is like a cognitive and emotional simulation of reality (Djikic, Oatley, Zoeterman, & Peterson, 2009; Oatley, 1999a, 1999b). While viewers are aware they are not watching real people or events when they consume

a fictional story, their emotional reactions are as spontaneous and unfiltered as they would be in a real-life social situation (Mellmann, 2002). Thus, running a story simulation in one's mind enables an individual to explore his or her emotions, mentally rehearse possible actions, consider values, engage in social interactions, and access many other parts of the human experience that one might not otherwise encounter in everyday life.

For example, evidence suggests that fiction can help people learn how to interpret the emotions and mental states of other people. This ability, called theory of mind, has been linked to empathy and helps people navigate social situations (Black & Barnes, 2015; Mellmann, 2002; Zunshine, 2008). While many studies show that reading literary fiction can enhance theory of mind, Black and Barnes (2015) found watching fictional television dramas can also augment this skill. In two studies, participants watched either award-winning fictional programs such as *Mad Men*, *The West Wing*, *The Good Wife*, and *Lost* or a television documentary. Participants who watched one of the fictional shows significantly outperformed the documentary watchers in a test of theory of mind, suggesting that viewing fictional television can help people better understand others, even when exposure is limited.

In addition, fictional narratives often elicit autobiographical memories and other thoughts about the self. Larsen and Seilman (1988) found that reading fiction generated more memories of experiences in which readers actively participated than ones they heard about second hand. These scholars suggested that when fictional stories triggered such memories, individuals would feel the stories were especially pertinent and meaningful to them. Recent research by McDonald, Sarge, Lin, Collier, and Potocki (2015) provides some empirical evidence for this idea. Across three studies, these researchers demonstrated that watching television shows and movies sparked autobiographical memories in viewers' minds, which included thoughts related to events from

the past as well as thoughts about current situations and anticipated future events. Results also showed that those who experienced more autobiographical memories were more likely to feel that the content they watched was meaningful and moving. In contrast, viewers who reported more specific autobiographical memories, defined as memories that referred to an exact time and place, were more likely to feel that the content was less meaningful and moving, but more fun. The researchers speculated that this result could indicate that meaningful content prompts more negative autobiographical memories, whereas fun content may prompt more positive autobiographical memories. These findings suggest that when people view media content, it can result in a deep connection to the self. Furthermore, although autobiographical memories were only elicited about 10% of the time during viewing, this percentage is far greater than the percentage of autobiographical memories researchers have found people experience in other parts of their lives.

People often consume and respond to the same piece of fictional media, however, studies demonstrate that the emotions and autobiographical memories prompted by audience members' interaction with a given text are specific to the individual (Oatley, 1999a, 1999b). Additionally, viewers' interpretations of a story are varied and arise from their individual circumstances (Oatley, 1999b; Larsen & Seilman, 1988), leading people to connect to stories in personal ways. For instance, in one study, Oatley (1999a) found that high school students who read either a short story with a female protagonist or a short story with a male protagonist all experienced emotions and memories in response to the story. However, female participants had significantly more emotions than male participants regardless of the story they read, and female participants had an equal number of emotions across both stories, whereas male participants had fewer emotions when they read the story with the female protagonist.

In another study, participants noted the emotions, memories, and thoughts they experienced while reading a short story by Alice Munro (Oatley, 1999a). The researcher classified the memories readers recorded based on how distanced they were. Memories fell into one of three categories: Overdistanced memories were intellectual and lacking emotion, underdistanced memories were emotionally raw and lacking reflection, and optimally distanced memories integrated thoughts and emotions in a way that was meaningful to the individual. The researcher also asked the participants to provide a response to the story itself. These responses were categorized as distanced or intellectual, autonomous or reflective, and kinetic or emotional. Results showed a relationship between readers' responses to the text and the quality of the memories they cited such that overdistanced memories corresponded to distanced responses, optimally distanced memories corresponded to autonomous responses, and underdistanced memories corresponded to kinetic responses. These studies suggest that fans' favorite movies and television shows may resonate with them for any number of reasons based on the memories, emotions, and thoughts the texts elicit for them.

Moreover, the personal nature of fiction gives viewers the opportunity to make sense of their memories, emotions, and thoughts by exploring them within the context of a fictional story, away from any real-life obstacles that might prevent them from doing so (Mar & Oatley, 2008; Oatley, 1999b). Challenging emotional experiences in one's own life are frequently accompanied by anxiety because the individual knows the effects of such experiences will be ongoing and he or she will continue to have to deal with them. Research has shown, though, that when one watches television shows and movies that depict similarly challenging emotional experiences, although the individual feels the same emotions he or she would in real life, those emotions are accompanied by less anxiety (Goldstein, 2009). These findings indicate that because viewers

know the emotions and events they encounter in a story will not affect their real lives once the narrative ends, they do not feel the need to protect themselves from those emotions (Goldstein, 2009; Keen, 2006). Thus, movies and television shows offer viewers the freedom to cry, scream, or get angry within the safety of the viewing situation. Furthermore, stories that elicit such strong emotional responses, like those that result in eudaimonic appreciation, offer opportunities for personal growth as people carry the emotional experiences from their encounters with these texts into other parts of their lives and apply what they learned (Keen, 2006; Mar & Oatley, 2008).

### **Familiarity and Fans**

As noted above, the research by psychologists and communication scholars on people's interactions with familiar media in general, and fans of fictional texts in particular, is limited. However, there is some literature that points to the reasons for and the value of fan experiences. Research has shown that familiarity with a given text and its characters can lead to positive outcomes. For example, research by Derrick, Gabriel, and Hugenberg (2009) found that people reported watching favorite television shows when they were lonely and spent more time thinking and writing about a favorite television show after their belongingness needs were aroused. Moreover, thinking about favorite television buffered participants against the feelings of rejection, negative mood, and reductions in self-esteem that would ordinarily arise from a threat to a close relationship, and reduced the accessibility of words and concepts related to social rejection. These results were attributed to the one-sided bonds, called parasocial relationships (PSR; Horton & Wohl, 1956), people engage in with the media figures they meet when interacting with media, which the researchers posited help people meet their need to belong.

Expanding on these findings, Derrick (2012) discovered that when people's self-control resources were depleted, they sought out a favorite fictional television program to watch, instead

of a novel fictional program or whatever happened to be on television. Watching a familiar fictional program restored depleted individuals' self-control. The researcher suggested that these results were due to the ability of familiar fictional worlds and the characters that populate them to act as social surrogates. The one-sided nature of interactions with favorite television enables people to meet their belongingness needs while also exerting less effort and fearing less rejection than they would in real-life social interactions, making this "a 'safe' method of seeking restoration" (Derrick, 2012, p. 300).

In another study, Young, Gabriel, and Hollar (2013) found that showing men muscular images of the superheroes Batman or Spiderman caused the men to feel worse about their bodies than those exposed to a non-muscular image of the superhero. However, when participants had a positive PSR with one of these superheroes, the negative impact of exposure to a muscular image of that superhero on body image was eliminated and their strength, as measured by a hand-grip test, was greater than that of participants exposed to a non-muscular image of a superhero or a superhero with whom a PSR did not exist.

In addition, Mares (2007) discovered that elderly fans of a television show demonstrated fewer comprehension difficulties than nonfans. On several memory measures, age differences in comprehension were reduced or eliminated for fans of the television show. Thus, elderly fans displayed better memory than elderly non-fans for characters' emotions, relationships, and occupations and more successfully recognized the main events of the show's plot. The researcher attributed these effects to the fans' familiarity with the show.

While these studies did not always ask participants about their fanship of the media they watched, it is reasonable to believe that people would not repeatedly expose themselves to a piece of media or develop PSRs with characters of which they were not fans. Consequently,

these studies demonstrate that the familiarity that comes with personal fan identity can lead to positive outcomes.

Recently, a handful of studies investigated popular culture fans. The findings of this research are especially pertinent to the present study, which seeks to expand upon this foundational work. First, Tsay-Vogel and Sanders (2015) studied the communal aspects of being a fan by looking at those involved in the *Harry Potter* fandom. They found that fandom includes two dimensions: the perception of group membership and communication with other members of the group. The researchers also discovered that eudaimonic motivation for entertainment consumption enhanced fans' perceptions of membership in the fandom and their contact with other members, while hedonic motivation for entertainment consumption was not associated with either of these dimensions. Interestingly, fans who showed a strong desire for personal growth were less likely to contact other members of the fandom. In addition, eudaimonic appreciation and hedonic enjoyment increased for those who perceived themselves as members of the fandom but decreased for those who communicated with other fans. The researchers speculated that their findings may indicate that feeling like part of a fan community can enhance one's fan experience, but real interactions with that fan community can diminish the rewards of being a fan.

Similarly, Groene and Hettinger (2015) explored the social identity that arises from media fandom by affirming or threatening the fan identities of *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* fans. They found that *Harry Potter* fans whose fandom was affirmed exerted more effort and performed better on a *Harry Potter*-specific essay-writing task than those whose fan identity was threatened. In contrast, *Twilight* fans' exertion and performance on a *Twilight*-specific essay-writing task did not differ between those whose fan identity was affirmed and those whose fan

identity was threatened. Additional findings showed that fans who were more highly identified with their fan object exerted more effort and performed better on the essay-writing task. The results indicated that *Harry Potter* fans were more highly identified with their fan text than *Twilight* fans were with theirs. The researchers reasoned that it is the degree of identification with a fan object and not the text in and of itself that led to the increased effort and performance on the essay-writing task, indicating that those who incorporated their fan identity into their self-concept are more sensitive to threats to, or affirmation of, this part of the self.

In another study, Taylor (2015) investigated the salience of fan identity for fans of a variety of fictional popular culture texts. Over two studies, Taylor found that those with more salient fan identities engaged in more fan behaviors, although these activities typically centered on interactions with the fan object through behaviors like repeat-viewing, not interactions with the fan community. In line with this finding, fans felt their fanship arose from the content of the media they loved, not social motivations. However, those participants who were motivated by social concerns engaged in more fan behaviors. Additionally, the experience of being transported, or immersed (Green & Brock, 2000), into the fan text positively predicted fan identity salience. An indirect effect of trait empathy on fan identity salience was also demonstrated. Based on these findings, Taylor (2015) concluded that fan identities are personal and arise from the fan's relationship with his or her favorite text, not the fan community.

Finally, a pair of studies investigated *Mad Men* fans and their responses to this award-winning drama. The first study was a content analysis of online fan comments in response to several different *Mad Men*-specific blog posts (Dill-Shackleford, Hopper-Losenicky, Vinney, Swain, & Hogg, 2015). The analysis found that fans discussed *Mad Men*'s characters as if they were real people whose lives continued even when they were not onscreen. In addition, fans

frequently referred to their own personal experiences in their comments and related them to the experiences of the characters. Thus, the show served as a vehicle through which fans could grapple with their values and reflect on their own lives. The second study analyzed a set of *Mad Men* fan fiction in order to determine how fan writers made meaning from the source text through their stories (Vinney & Dill-Shackleford, 2016). Findings showed that writers' motivations for creating fan fiction were more eudaimonic than hedonic. As a result, writers frequently used their stories to grapple with the complexities of the *Mad Men* characters and relationships on which their fan fiction focused. In addition, several stories included considerations of the things that make life meaningful either in a daily sense or a transcendental sense, and a number of stories were moving and poignant.

### **Research Design Considerations**

While the research reviewed above points to the various motivations and gratifications that may be pertinent to fanship, other studies point to the research methods and designs that may be utilized to study the affective and cognitive components of fans' responses to a favorite popular media text. First, Larsen and Seilman (1988) developed a method, called self-probed retrospection, to capture participants' personal memories as they are evoked while reading literature. The method encompassed two phases: In the concurrent phase, participants simply read as they would normally, with only the minimal disruption of marking the margins of their text when a memory occurred to them; in the retrospective phase, which happened after participants were done reading, participants completed a measure that asked several questions about the various memories they experienced at each point in the text they had marked. Oatley (1999a, 1999b) and his colleagues expanded on Larsen and Seilman's (1988) method by asking participants to read short stories and mark the margins with an M if they were reminded of an

autobiographical memory, an E if they experienced an emotion, and a T if they had a thought that was not a direct summary of what they had read. These Ms, Es, and Ts were then counted to measure the personal engagement of each reader with the text. Such methods demonstrate that media consumers are able to track and articulate their responses while interacting with media.

While Larsen and Seilman's (1988) and Oatley's (1999a, 1999b) methods are useful and merit consideration as ways to study audience members' personal reactions to media, their research used literature as the stimulus material. In contrast, two recent studies that are especially pertinent to the research design of the present study used audio-visual stimuli and employed thought-listing tasks. In the first of these, Bartsch et al. (2014) examined whether encounters with media that elicited moving emotions influenced the number of reflective thoughts experienced by viewers. In order to vary the emotional impact of a stimulus film while keeping all other content constant, the researchers created one version of a film with moving background music and one version without music. After participants (123 German university students) watched one of the two versions of the film, they completed a thought-listing task as well as scales assessing their affective state, reflective thoughts, and opinion of the film. In the thought-listing task, participants were asked to write down everything they thought about while watching the film, regardless of whether it was relevant to the film or not. These thoughts were then coded into eight categories. The researchers found that the moving film experience (the version with music) was more thought provoking and resulted in more reflective thoughts, which, in turn, contributed to more positive evaluations of the film.

In another study, McDonald et al. (2015) explored how often involuntary autobiographical memories—self-related thoughts about the past, present, or future that pop into one's head due to environmental cues—occurred while watching audio-visual fictional

narratives. The researchers presented 10 television shows and one movie to participants (all American undergraduate students) over three studies. The media content was considered unlikely to be familiar to participants because it mostly consisted of Australian, Canadian, and British television series. In each study, participants watched all or part of one of the television shows or the movie. At various points while watching, the screen faded to black and participants were prompted to list what they were thinking when the audio-visual content stopped. Memory was never mentioned in the instructions to participants. The researchers found that although each audio-visual stimulus elicited involuntary autobiographical memories, the amount of autobiographical memories varied across the different programs and appeared to be dependent on the content, with dramas producing more memories than comedies. The number of involuntary autobiographical memories was also associated with greater enjoyment.

Each study outlined above was experimental and did not include media that participants had encountered before. However, in any study with fans, it would be necessary to utilize stimulus material with which participants are familiar. Thus, although the stimulus material may evoke specific thoughts, memories, or emotions during data collection, it would be impossible to say whether the amount, kind, or content of those reactions arose from people being fans of the material or if the elicited thoughts, memories, or emotions were what caused participants to become fans in the first place. Regardless, such reactions are an important means through which fanship may be understood, so utilizing a thought-listing method as part of an investigation of fans' responses to their favorite audio-visual stimuli as Bartsch et al. (2014) and McDonald et al. (2015) did in their studies would be fruitful. Further, distinguishing between thoughts, memories, and emotions as Oatley (1999a, 1999b) did in his studies would likely provide further depth and nuance to any evaluation of participants' responses.

### **The Present Study**

Despite the fact that cognitively and emotionally resonant experiences with entertainment play an important role in fandom, popular culture fans have rarely been studied in the context of meaningful media experiences. When psychology and communication scholars have studied reactions to fictional narratives, they have typically utilized stimulus materials with which participants are not familiar and would not necessarily consume on their own (e.g., Oatley, 1999a, 1999b; Djikic, Oatley, Zoeterman, & Peterson, 2009; Bartsch et al., 2014; Wirth et al., 2012). In other work by such scholars, study participants were asked to name a popular culture text with which they had a particular experience and complete a survey based on their memory of that experience (e.g., Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Hartmann, 2010; Oliver & Raney, 2011). In the case of the first kind of research, a consideration of fan responses is lacking, and in the case of the second kind of research, studies are limited by their reliance on participants' potentially faulty recollections of past entertainment experiences. Further, as mentioned above, popular culture fan studies have typically been the domain of humanities scholars, who have often focused on fan communities and their activities. Thus, the individual responses that may drive one to become and remain a fan of a given popular culture text has received minimal attention.

A fan's personal reactions while watching a movie or television show are likely an important part of what causes an individual to label him or herself a fan. In this study, "fan" is considered an identity an individual must choose (Hills, 2002). Research suggests that fan identity tends to center on the connection between the fan and his or her fan object instead of the fan and the fan community (Taylor, 2015). Consequently, this study will focus on personal fan identity, or fandom. Although personal fan identity is expected to be experienced in different

ways by different people, it is likely that the more important one's fan identity is to the self, the more meaningful, emotional, and thought-provoking one finds his or her fan object.

Given its focus on meaning making and its combination of cognitive and affective components, the research on eudaimonic appreciation offers a useful lens through which to examine fans' responses to their favorite popular culture text and how these responses may be related to personal fan identity. Thus, this study seeks to investigate fans' eudaimonic responses to a favorite television show. For the purposes of this research, the cognitive component of eudaimonic appreciation is defined by both the strength of one's response to a fan object as measured by a reflective thoughts scale and the number of reflective thoughts one writes in response to that fan object, and the affective component of eudaimonic appreciation is defined as the levels of both mixed affect (i.e., a combination of positive and negative affect) and meaningful affect (i.e., feeling moved, inspired, or tender) one feels in response to a fan object. I expect those with a strong fan identity will have a higher score on the reflective thoughts scale, experience greater numbers of reflective thoughts, and respond with higher levels of mixed and meaningful affect after exposure to their fan text than those with a weaker fan identity. Thus, it is anticipated that eudaimonic responses are enhanced when fan identity is stronger.

There are also many factors that may moderate and mediate the effect of fanship on eudaimonic responses. For example, research has shown that when people respond to media with eudaimonic appreciation, the experience often inspires people to contemplate their own lives and what is important and valuable to them (Bartsch, 2012; Bartsch et al., 2014; Oliver & Hartmann, 2010; Wirth et al., 2012). In addition, McDonald et al. (2015) found that watching movies and television shows can evoke involuntary autobiographical memories—thoughts about the self in the past, present, or future that spontaneously pop into one's head—and that experiencing more

involuntary autobiographical memories while watching led viewers to find the content meaningful. These reactions seem especially relevant to an exploration of personal fan identity and may mediate the effect of fan identity on eudaimonic appreciation, such that a stronger fan identity leads to increased self-related thoughts, which leads to higher levels of eudaimonic appreciation.

Further, “the perception of deeper meaning” (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010, p. 76) is an important part of the experience of eudaimonic appreciation. Scholars agree that finding meaning in life is important to wellbeing and suggest that the search for meaning is a fundamental human drive (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). Moreover, Oliver and Raney (2011) showed that a preference for eudaimonic entertainment is associated with the search for meaning in life. It stands to reason that those who are more concerned with finding meaning in life will be more likely to discover it in the entertainment they consume, and that such individuals may be especially likely to find meaning in any media of which they become fans. Therefore, it is predicted that greater motivation to search for meaning in life will moderate the positive impact of personal fan identity on eudaimonic appreciation, such that greater motivation to search for meaning in life will positively interact with fan identity to enhance levels of eudaimonic appreciation.

### **Research Question**

The overarching research question driving this study is, “Does the strength of personal fan identity predict the strength of fans’ eudaimonic responses to a fan object, and do self-related thoughts mediate this effect while search for meaning in life moderates it?” By asking participants to view a fan text and complete measurements immediately after exposure, the proposed research takes a unique approach to the study of meaningful media experiences while

at the same time building upon and extending existing research. I believe this represents a promising avenue of investigation that will provide insight into the personal responses of fans to their favorite entertainment and the way fan identity and other variables may impact these responses. Consequently, this study will provide a unique contribution to the body of research, and in particular, to the literature on meaningful experiences with fictional media.

### **Hypotheses**

In order to systematically investigate the research question, the following hypotheses will be tested:

**H1:** A stronger personal fan identity predicts greater eudaimonic appreciation of a fan object as defined by (a) a measure of appreciation, (b) a reflective thoughts scale, (c) the number of coded reflective thoughts, (d) levels of mixed affect, and (e) levels of meaningful affect.

**H2:** A stronger personal fan identity predicts increased self-related thoughts in response to a fan object as defined by (a) a single-item self-related thoughts measure and (b) the number of coded self-related thoughts, which in turn predict greater eudaimonic appreciation of that fan object.

**H3:** Greater motivation to search for meaning in life will positively interact with personal fan identity to predict greater eudaimonic appreciation of a fan object.

## CHAPTER THREE

**Method**

To investigate the hypotheses, fans of the cult science fiction/fantasy television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon, 1997-2003) were recruited to complete an online survey instrument about their experiences as a fan and their responses to the text. After participants accessed the survey via an internet-connected device, they were presented with questions about their identity as a *Buffy* fan, watched a stimulus video of moments from the show, answered questions about their responses to the video and the show in general, and completed a search for meaning in life measure.

The *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fan base was selected for this study for a variety of reasons. First, the show continues to be well-respected in both the academic and fan communities, despite the fact that its initial run on network television ended over 13 years ago. In addition, the show offers an innovative mix of genres and subject matter that may attract different fans for a variety of different reasons. Moreover, almost two decades after its premiere, *Buffy* endures as a fan favorite that maintains existing fans through conventions and online communities while bringing in new fans through television syndication and the show's availability on streaming services like Netflix (Pender, 2014; Piccoli, 2016; Schwab, 2015). Finally, the author's status as a *Buffy* fan, and resulting familiarity with the show and its fandom, facilitated the production of the stimulus video, recruitment of participants, and interpretation of the collected data.

**Participants**

In total, 834 participants completed the study (546 female, 279 male, 9 other;  $M_{age} = 35.79$ ,  $SD = 12.08$ ). There were no restrictions on the demographics of participants outside of the

requirement that they were over 18 years old and fans of the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Thus, participants self-selected based on their personal identification as fans of the show.

A number of participants were excluded from analysis because they incorrectly responded to a bogus item embedded in the survey<sup>1</sup> or because of technical difficulties that prevented them from watching the stimulus video and completing the items about it. Due to the length of the video, participants who spent less than 9 ½ minutes completing the survey were also excluded from further analysis.

This left 790 participants to be included in the analysis. Of these, 520 identified as female, 262 identified as male, and 8 identified as other (e.g., transgender, genderqueer). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 73 years old ( $M = 35.90$ ,  $SD = 11.97$ ). A majority of participants identified as White/Caucasian ( $n = 679$ , 85.9%). In addition, 27 participants identified as Hispanic/Latino (3.4%), 17 as Asian/Asian American (2.2%), 8 as African American (1%), 3 as Native American/American Indian (.4%), 30 as multiracial (3.8%), and 24 as other (3%). Most participants were single ( $n = 420$ , 53.2%). Many were married with children ( $n = 133$ , 16.8%), married without children ( $n = 82$ , 10.4%), or living with a partner ( $n = 91$ , 11.5%). Smaller numbers were divorced ( $n = 46$ , 5.8%), separated ( $n = 10$ , 1.3%), or widowed ( $n = 7$ , .9%). Finally, a majority of participants were highly educated. Most had a 4-year college degree ( $n = 230$ , 29.1%), a master's degree ( $n = 159$ , 20.1%), or had attended some college ( $n = 132$ , 16.7%) or some graduate school ( $n = 65$ , 8.2%). Several had earned a doctoral degree ( $n = 47$ , 5.9%) or a professional degree (e.g., JD, MD;  $n = 29$ , 3.7%). The rest had a 2-year college degree ( $n = 38$ , 4.8%), a professional certificate ( $n = 15$ , 1.9%), trade/technical/vocational

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<sup>1</sup> The bogus item was an easy piece of *Buffy* trivia: “*Buffy* begins when Buffy Summers moves to a small farm in Iowa.” Participants rated the item on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Participants who rated the item 4 or above were excluded from analysis.

training ( $n = 17$ , 2.2%), a high school diploma ( $n = 42$ , 5.3%), or had completed some high school ( $n = 15$ , 1.9%). Although a question about participants' nationality or country of residence was not included in the survey, it became clear from participants' responses to the thought-listing task and the question about race/ethnicity that the study attracted an international group including (but likely not limited to) participants from the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, Italy, and South America.

Many participants had been fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* since its original debut 19 years ago (21.3%). Another 42.9% were fans for between 10 and 18 years. Meanwhile 11.7% had been fans for between 5 and 9 years and 9.5% had been fans for between less than a year and 4 years. Meanwhile, 14.9% of participants did not report how long they had been fans. A vast majority of participants (97.6%) had watched all seven seasons of the show. In addition, 1.8% had watched over half of it, and .6% had watched only a season or two or a few episodes.

An a priori power analysis using the G-Power computer program (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) with alpha set to .05 and power set to at least 95%, indicated that a minimum  $N$  of 89 participants would be necessary to obtain a medium effect size for this study. The final participant sample met and exceeded this minimum.

### **Recruitment**

A recruitment message alerting fans to the study and inviting them to participate was posted online to Facebook fan pages and groups dedicated to either *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or the work of its creator, Joss Whedon. (See Appendix A for the recruitment message). The message was also posted to the author's personal Facebook account and the research participant recruitment website FindParticipants.com. The message contained information about the study, a spoiler alert warning potential participants that the study would expose them to scenes from each

season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and a link to the study, which participants selected to go directly to the survey webpage. In addition, an administrator of a major fan community posted the survey link to that community's blog, Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr accounts at the author's request. Participants and other interested parties also shared the study with their friends, family, and other contacts via their personal social media accounts and groups, as well as other digital means (e.g., email). Participants were incentivized by the opportunity to enter a drawing to win one of three \$50 amazon.com gift certificates by providing their email address at the end of the survey.

### **Media Stimulus**

A 6-minute, 30-second stimulus video was utilized in this study in order to prevent participants from being completely dependent on their memories of previous interactions with the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* for their responses. The video consisted of a montage of key scenes from the series.<sup>2</sup> The research reviewed above by McDonald et al. (2015) indicates that people readily experience memories when viewing television shows. For fans who have had many experiences with a show that they have watched multiple times, some of the memories brought to mind when encountering that show again are likely about the show's characters and plotlines, as well as personal past experiences with the show. Thus, I reasoned that, while showing participants all 144 episodes from the show's seven seasons would be impossible and showing a single episode or scene would restrict the breadth of fan responses based on the salient emotions and themes of the clip shown, a montage video that highlighted moments considered favorites by the fandom could help remind fans of the varied thoughts and emotions the show provoked in them as a whole. Moreover, because participants were self-identified fans, and were therefore likely familiar with the scenes shown, I believed they would

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<sup>2</sup> The stimulus video can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqBtPZkjVfA>

not require lengthy exposure to the show in order to experience cognitive and affective responses to it. Consequently, the video was not meant to be representative of the series as a whole and it was not expected that participants' personal favorite scenes would always be featured in the video. Instead, it was hoped that by focusing on widely agreed upon fan-favorite episodes and scenes from many parts of the show, the montage video would aid participants in recalling what they personally appreciated most about the show by triggering memories of it, even if those parts of the show were not featured in the montage. At the same time, the montage prevented participants from being solely reliant on their memories in the absence of any external stimulation to gauge those reactions.

Given the difficulty of creating a brief video from numerous television episodes and the subjectivity typically involved in undertaking such a project, specific criteria were adopted to ensure that the moments included in the video were selected in as objective a manner as possible. First, a list of fan-favorite episodes was created based on lists by critics, bloggers, and fans ranking the best episodes of the program (Budowski, 2014; Fox, 2015; Hall, 2014; Mammano, 2015; Rifaat, 2014; Roberts, 2012; Sandwell, 2016; Thurm, 2015; Tilford, 2015; VanDerWerff, 2012). Episodes that received a crowd-sourced rating of 9 or better on the Internet Movie Database (imdb.com) and tv.com were also identified and included in the list. Best-of lists were found via the Google and Yahoo search engines. The first five links that led to best-of lists in both search engines' results were utilized to compile the episode list for the stimulus video.

To be included in the final list, episodes had to be highly ranked by at least three sources. This resulted in a list of 26 fan-favorite episodes. Each episode on the list was then screened and key moments were identified. In addition, lists of best scenes from the show were referenced (B., 2013; Bowen, 2012; d'Arbonne, 2011; Poloff, 2013; Storm, 2004; Tyley, 2011), and when a

best-scenes list identified a moment from an episode that appeared on the list of 26 fan-favorite episodes, that scene was flagged for inclusion in the montage. This list of episodes and scenes was provided to a professional editor who compiled the final video with an eye towards making sure the montage was cohesive and comprehensible. Episodes and moments from every season of the show were included and presented in the order they appeared on the series.

Due to length concerns, the clips in the video had to be short and require little context or set-up to establish the scene or make it understandable to fans. Because participants were all *Buffy* fans, it was anticipated that their familiarity with and memories of the show would help provide them with context for most, if not all, of the moments chosen. In addition, poignant, meaningful moments that fell in-line with this study's focus on eudaimonic entertainment experiences were featured over funny, light moments. These parameters resulted in the elimination of alternative universe and flashback episodes and scenes that were longer and funnier from the video, although a couple humorous moments from some of the show's most popular episodes were included in order to nod to the breadth of genres the show encompassed.

**Pretest.** A pretest of the stimulus video was conducted to ensure it was able to evoke eudaimonic responses and that no formal characteristics of the video distracted from viewers' ability to have such responses. The pretest was conducted via amazon.com's Mechanical Turk service. Participants were compensated \$1 in exchange for their participation. Thirty-five participants completed the pretest survey. Of this group, 15 participants were excluded from analysis because they either took less time to complete the survey than the total running time of the stimulus video, they incorrectly responded to a bogus item embedded in the survey, or they answered "No" to the question "Are you a fan of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*?" This left the responses of 20 participants (11 male, 9 female; age: 21-62,  $M = 33.80$ ,  $SD = 11.00$ ) for analysis.

Eudaimonic responses were assessed based on several measures: (a) a measure of appreciation, (b) levels of meaningful affect, and (c) levels of mixed affect, which was calculated based on a combination of levels of positive and negative affect. After watching the stimulus video, participants completed an affect response scale in which they rated how well each of six affect terms described their emotions while watching the video (Oliver et al., 2012, 2015; Oliver & Raney, 2011). The scale contained two affect terms from each of three categories intended to measure meaningful and mixed affect: positive affect (assessed with the terms “happy” and “amused”), negative affect (assessed with the terms “sad” and “melancholy”), and meaningful affect (assessed with the terms “moved” and “introspective”). Then, to measure eudaimonic appreciation, participants completed a three-item appreciation scale (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010, see the Eudaimonic Appreciation section below for further details on this scale). All items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *Not at all/Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Very much/Strongly agree*).

Responses in each category were averaged to create a single composite score. Participants experienced high levels of eudaimonic appreciation ( $M = 5.82$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) as well as meaningful affect ( $M = 5.3$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ) in response to the video. Participants also experienced high levels of positive affect ( $M = 5.13$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ), although their levels of negative affect were slightly below the midpoint ( $M = 3.9$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ). Positive and negative affect composite scores were utilized to create a mixed affect score based on the operationalization outlined by Ersner-Hershfield, Mikels, Sullivan, and Carstensen (2008). Their procedure specifies that a mixed affect score is the minimum of positive and negative affect scores such that the lesser of the two scores is also deemed the mixed affect score. Based on this, participants' mixed affect as a result of exposure to the video was around the midpoint ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ) indicating participants responded to the video with an average level of mixed positive and negative affect. Taken

together, these results demonstrated that, for the most part, participants responded to the video with eudaimonic appreciation.

### **Procedure**

Participants followed a link to the online survey via recruitment messages encountered on social media, a fan community blog, and other digital means. Participants were first presented with an informed consent form (see Appendix B for the informed consent form). Given the online nature of the survey, asking for a signature was not possible. Consequently, participants checked a box to signify their understanding of their rights and their consent to participate in the study. Participants then advanced to the first page of the survey where they were asked if they are fans of the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. After participants supplied their yes or no answer, they responded to questions about the duration of their fandom (from less than a year to 19 years) and how much of the show they had watched (from all seven seasons to just a few episodes), and then completed a Fanhood measure (Groene & Hettinger, 2015) to assess fan identity (see below for details on all measures). They were subsequently presented with a short montage video of key moments from all seven seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

After watching the video, participants completed a thought-listing task by writing down all the thoughts they had while watching and immediately after they viewed the video. Open-ended responses to this task were coded to assess reflective thoughts. Participants were then presented with an affect response scale, consisting of positive, negative, and meaningful affect terms (Oliver et al., 2012, 2015; Oliver & Raney, 2011), which was completed based on the emotions participants experienced while watching the video.

Next, participants referenced their experience watching the stimulus video and their experience with the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in general to complete measures of

eudaimonic appreciation (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010), hedonic enjoyment (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010), and reflective thoughts (Bartsch, 2012). This was followed by a search for meaning in life scale (Steger et al., 2006), as well as several additional measures that were not included in the analysis for the present study. Finally, participants provided demographic information, were asked if they would be willing to be interviewed about their experiences as a *Buffy* fan at a later date, and provided an email address in order to enter the gift certificate drawing. See Appendix C for the survey measures.

### **Predictor Variable Measure**

**Fan identity.** Groene and Hettinger's (2015) Fanhood Measure was used to assess personal fan identity. Item wording was adjusted to refer to the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The original 20-item Fanhood Measure was created to assess the strength of media fans' personal identification with their fan object as well as their social identification with other fans. Given the present study's focus on television fans' personal identification with their fan object, questions that referenced fans' interactions with other fans or with the fan community were eliminated from the measure for this study's survey instrument, leaving 14 items for participants to complete ( $\alpha = .92$ ,  $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = .74$ ). Items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree/Never*) to 5 (*Strongly agree/Very often*). Example items include "I am emotionally connected to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" and "I strongly identify with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*."

Groene and Hettinger (2015) found their original scale to be unidimensional. In order to assess if the scale could be treated as unidimensional for this study, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted using Maximum Likelihood as the extraction method and no rotation method, the same specifications utilized by Groene and Hettinger (2015) when analyzing the

scale for their study. This procedure produced results similar to those of the original study. The analysis indicated a dominant first factor, which accounted for 51.22% of the variance. All 14 items loaded strongly onto this factor, with loadings between .53 and .83. These findings suggested that it was appropriate to treat the scale as unidimensional. Consequently, responses were averaged to create a single composite fan identity score.

### **Outcome Variable Measures**

The outcome variables for this study's hypotheses all relate to facets of eudaimonic appreciation. All three hypotheses refer to the outcome variable of eudaimonic appreciation as measured by an appreciation scale. In addition, H1 separates eudaimonic appreciation into two cognitive component variables—a reflective thought scale and number of coded reflective thoughts—and two affective component variables—level of mixed affect and level of meaningful affect.

**Eudaimonic appreciation.** To assess the construct of eudaimonic appreciation as a whole, participants completed three items adapted from the moving/thought-provoking dimension of Oliver and Bartsch's (2010) audience response scale ( $\alpha = .83$ ,  $M = 6.50$ ,  $SD = .75$ ). Items were rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) and included, "I find the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to be very meaningful," "I am moved by the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," and "*Buffy* is thought provoking."

**Reflective thoughts.** The cognitive component of eudaimonic appreciation was assessed in two ways. First, a reflective thoughts scale was utilized. The scale consists of four items adapted from Bartsch's (2012) contemplative experiences scale as well as items from the same pool that loaded on the contemplative factor ( $\alpha = .83$ ,  $M = 5.9$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ). The items were rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) and examples include, "*Buffy*

helps me better understand other people” and “*Buffy* inspires me to think about important issues.”

Second, the number of reflective thoughts written by participants in a thought-listing task was utilized. After watching the stimulus video, participants were asked to list all the thoughts that occurred to them during and immediately after watching the video in an open-ended text box. Following the procedure of Bartsch et al. (2014), the instructions to participants were, “Please write down everything that crossed your mind during the [video] and after, even if it had nothing to do with the [video]” (p. 132).

Thoughts were coded based on the coding scheme for reflective thoughts created by Bartsch et al. (2014). This coding scheme rates reflective thoughts in four thought categories: (a) thoughts about character psychology, (b) thoughts about abstract moral messages, (c) self-related thoughts, and (d) thoughts about social reality. The final category was expanded from Bartsch et al.’s (2014) original coding scheme to include thoughts about personal, individual reality, as well as social reality. Consequently, it was labeled “thoughts about personal and social reality.” See Appendix D for the complete definition for each code in the reflective thoughts coding scheme.

Before coding commenced, the data from the thought-listing task were cleaned to eliminate any participant who did not list at least one thought that fell into one of the coding categories. Thus, thought-listing comments that focused solely on emotional reactions, formal aspects of the show, bodily states, musings about the nature of the study, or critiques, descriptions, evaluations, or opinions about the video or the television series were eliminated from further analysis. In addition, thought-listing tasks that were not written in English, were vaguely expressed (e.g., simply the words “high school”), or were difficult to interpret as fitting

into the coding scheme were also excluded. This left 336 participants' thought-listing tasks to code.

A trained, independent rater and the author coded the data. Initially the coding scheme was applied to a subset of the data in order to confirm agreement in code application between raters. Wimmer and Dominick (2013) suggest coding “a subsample of the data... between 10% and 25%” (p. 175) to establish interrater reliability. In keeping with this recommendation, both coders rated 71 participants' thought-listing tasks, approximately 21% of the dataset. Each thought-listing task was divided up by individual thoughts and each thought that fell into one of the coding categories was rated accordingly. The combination of the straightforward nature of the coding scheme and the raters' past experience coding together resulted in relatively high interrater reliability. Cohen's kappas ranged from .76 to .95, indicating substantial to almost perfect agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). In addition, the interrater agreement for each category was above 90%. (See Table 1 for the individual codes, Cohen's kappas, agreement percentages, and examples of thoughts from each coding category).

After interrater reliability was established, 265 participants' thought-listing tasks remained to be coded. The author coded approximately two-thirds of this remaining data and the other rater coded approximately one-third. Throughout the coding process, raters discussed how to apply the coding scheme and talked out discrepancies. Following Bartsch et al.'s (2014) procedure, the total number of thoughts across the four categories was counted to create one reflective thoughts score for each participant ( $M = 2.22$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ).

**Mixed and meaningful affect.** To assess mixed and meaningful affective responses to the stimulus video, participants rated 17 affective terms that could describe their emotional

Table 1  
 Thought-Listing Task Codes, Cohen's Kappa Scores, Percentage of Intercoder Agreement, and Example Thoughts for Each Category

Codes	Cohen's kappa	% Agreement	Example Thoughts
Thoughts about Character Psychology	.76	94.49	"Buffy is such a great leader, and yet so vulnerable." "Jenny's death always gets me, as I can just feel the pain it would [have] caused Giles."
Thoughts about Abstract Moral Messages	.93	97.25	"Life is hard. But worth it." "[ <i>Buffy the Vampire Slayer</i> ] focused on personal (female) empowerment."
Self-Related Thoughts	.95	97.25	"[The episode 'The Body'] always make[s] me wonder how I will react once I lose my parents." "I thought about where I was in my own life as the show unfolded."
Thoughts about Social and Personal Reality	.94	98.17	"How much the plot of the show accurately depicts situations the fans struggle with, including myself. The characters fight demons that can represent so many different things." "Season six...really captures the feeling of life post graduation when you start having to make it on your own, everything seems hard, and everything's a struggle."

experiences while watching the video. Affective terms were selected from items specified by Oliver and colleagues (Oliver et al., 2012, 2015; Oliver & Raney, 2011) to explore emotional responses to meaningful entertainment across three categories: positive affect, negative affect, and meaningful affect. Items were rated on a scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Very much*).

An exploratory factor analysis was performed on these terms using principal axis factoring as the extraction method and promax rotation, the settings utilized by Oliver et al. (2012, 2015) in their studies. As expected, the analysis suggested three factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, accounting for 60.23% of the variance. Items with loadings lower than .5 across all factors were removed from further analysis. This resulted in the elimination of just two affect terms: *sad* and *tender*. The three factors fell in line with the anticipated affect categories. The first factor was labeled “positive affect” with items including *happy, joyful, cheerful, amused,* and *upbeat* ( $\alpha = .88, M = 4.79, SD = 1.28$ ); the second factor was labeled “meaningful affect” with items including *moved, introspective, touched, compassionate,* and *inspired* ( $\alpha = .83, M = 5.39, SD = 1.26$ ); and the third factor was labeled “negative affect,” with items including *gloomy, melancholy, depressed, angry,* and *tense* ( $\alpha = .78, M = 2.42, SD = 1.16$ ). Responses in each category were averaged to create positive, negative, and meaningful affect scores.

Like the pretest analysis, mixed affect scores were calculated based on the operationalization specified by Ersner-Hershfield et al. (2008) in which mixed affect is equivalent to the lower of the positive or negative affect scores. Consequently, a high mixed affect score is the result of high positive and high negative affect scores, and a low mixed affect score is the result of low scores for positive affect, negative affect, or both. This formula ensures that a high mix of positive and negative affect receives a high mixed affect score and a low mix of positive and negative affect receives a low mixed affect score. Mixed affect scores calculated

by this method were fairly low ( $M = 2.36$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) indicating that participants did not experience a strong mix of positive and negative emotions, but instead experienced substantially more of one kind of emotion than the other or a weak mix of both positive and negative emotions.

### **Mediator Variable Measure**

**Self-related thoughts.** Self-related thoughts were measured in two ways. First, one of the items from the reflective thoughts scale, “*Buffy* makes me think about myself,” was utilized. Cook and Perri (2004) and Robins, Hendin, and Trzesniewski (2001) provided evidence that a single item measure can be as reliable and valid in assessing a construct as a multiple-item measure. Thus, this single item was chosen to measure the level to which the fan text inspires participants to think about themselves ( $M = 5.86$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ).

In addition, one of the codes included in the reflective thoughts coding scheme, self-related thoughts, was employed. Of the 336 participants whose thought-listing tasks were coded, 239 included at least one self-related thought ( $M = 1.23$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ).

### **Moderator Variable Measure**

**Search for meaning in life.** Search for meaning in life was assessed with the 5-item Search subscale of Steger et al.’s (2006) Meaning in Life Questionnaire ( $\alpha = .94$ ,  $M = 5.11$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ). Items were rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (*absolutely untrue*) to 7 (*absolutely true*) and included, “I am looking for something to make my life feel meaningful” and “I am always searching for something that makes my life feel significant.”

### **Additional Measures**

In addition to the above measures, hedonic enjoyment was assessed as another form of audience response with three items adapted from the fun dimension of Oliver and Bartsch’s

(2010) audience response scale. Items were rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) and included, “It is fun for me to watch the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,” “I have a good time watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,” and “*Buffy* is entertaining.” Several additional measures were also included in the survey instrument, including a Fan Activities measure (Taylor, 2015), the 18-item need for cognition scale (Cacioppo, Petty, & Kao, 1984), the 10-item need for affect scale (Appel, Gnambs, & Maio, 2012), and an open-ended question about the impact *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* had on participants. These measures assessed additional variables that may be used in future studies of this dataset.

### **Data Analysis**

Regression models were employed to test each hypothesis and SPSS statistical software was used to run the analyses. To investigate H1, which posited that strength of personal fan identity predicts the cognitive and affective eudaimonic responses to the fan object, simple linear regressions between strength of fan identity and the various specified measurements of appreciation were utilized. To determine if self-related thoughts mediate the expected positive relationship between fan identity and eudaimonic appreciation, two mediation analyses using the two specified measurements of self-related thoughts as the mediation variables were performed with the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2015). The PROCESS macro was also employed to perform a moderation analysis to determine if greater motivation to search for meaning in life moderated the predicted positive effect of fan identity on eudaimonic appreciation. See Table 2 for each hypothesis, its variables and measures, and the statistical analysis utilized to test it.

Table 2

*Hypotheses, Associated Variables, Measures, and Analyses Used*

<b>Hypothesis</b>	<b>Variable</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Measured by</b>	<b>Analysis</b>
<b>H1:</b> A stronger personal fan identity predicts greater eudaimonic appreciation as defined by (a) a measure of appreciation (b) a reflective thoughts scale	Fan identity	Predictor	Fanhood Measure (Groene & Hettinger, 2015) composite score	Simple linear regression between fanhood composite score and eudaimonic appreciation scale composite score
	Eudaimonic Appreciation	Outcome	Eudaimonic Appreciation scale (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010) composite score	
	Fan identity	Predictor	Fanhood Measure (Groene & Hettinger, 2015) composite score	Simple linear regression between fanhood composite score and reflective thoughts scale composite score
Reflective thoughts	Outcome	Reflective thoughts scale (Bartsch, 2012) composite score		
(c) the number of reflective thoughts	Fan identity	Predictor	Fanhood Measure (Groene & Hettinger, 2015) composite score	Simple linear regression between fanhood composite score and number of reflective thoughts
	Number of reflective thoughts	Outcome	Coded thought-listing for reflective thoughts (Bartsch, Kalch, & Oliver, 2014)	
(d) levels of mixed affect (i.e., combination of positive and negative affect)	Fan identity	Predictor	Fanhood Measure (Groene & Hettinger, 2015) composite score	Simple linear regression between fanhood composite score and mixed affect score
	Levels of Mixed Affect	Outcome	Mixed Affect scores (Ersner-Hershfield et al., 2008)–(Lowest number of total Positive or Negative Affects)	
(e) levels of meaningful affect (i.e., feeling moved, inspired, or tender)	Fan identity	Predictor	Fanhood Measure (Groene & Hettinger, 2015) composite score	Simple linear regression between fanhood composite score and meaningful affect composite score
	Levels of Meaningful Affect	Outcome	Meaningful Affect scale (Oliver & colleagues) composite score	

<b>H2:</b> A stronger personal fan identity predicts (a) stronger agreement with a single-item self-related thoughts measure, which in turn predict greater eudaimonic appreciation.	Fan identity	Predictor	Fanhood Measure (Groene & Hettinger, 2015) composite score	Mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro for SPSS
	Eudaimonic Appreciation	Outcome	Eudaimonic Appreciation scale (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010) composite score	
	Self-related thoughts item	Mediator	Item from reflective thoughts scale about self-related thoughts (Bartsch, 2012)	
(b) greater number of self-related thoughts, which in turn predict greater eudaimonic appreciation.	Fan identity	Predictor	Fanhood Measure (Groene & Hettinger, 2015) composite score	Mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro for SPSS
	Eudaimonic Appreciation	Outcome	Eudaimonic Appreciation scale (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010) composite score	
	Number of self-related thoughts	Mediator	Coded thought-listing for self-related thoughts (Bartsch, Kalch, & Oliver, 2014)	
<b>H3:</b> Greater motivation to search for meaning in life will positively interact with personal fan identity to predict greater eudaimonic appreciation.	Fan identity	Predictor	Fanhood Measure (Groene & Hettinger, 2015) composite score	Moderation analysis using the PROCESS macro for SPSS
	Eudaimonic Appreciation	Outcome	Eudaimonic Appreciation scale (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010) composite score	
	Search for meaning in life	Moderator	Search for meaning in life subscale of Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006)	

**Outliers and influential points.** Regression models can be quite sensitive to outliers and other influential points. This issue became of particular concern in this investigation because, upon reading many of the responses to the open-ended thought-listing task, it became clear that

some participants were frustrated by the stimulus video's neglect of the scenes or characters they loved the most. Such reactions had the potential to disproportionately impact these participants' responses on subsequent survey items. One participant even contacted the author to express concern over the fact that his or her responses were negatively colored by his or her reaction to character omission in the video. (This issue will be covered in detail in the Discussion section.) Consequently, it was especially important to screen the data for outliers and influential points.

This was done in two ways. For H1, which involved simple linear regression, regression models were first run with all data and then screened for bivariate outliers and influential points using Cook's *D*. Cook's *D* assesses the influence one data point has on a regression model as a whole (Aquinis, Gottfredson, & Joo, 2013; Field, 2013). Cases with a Cook's *D* above the low cutoff point ( $4/n$ ) specified by Bollen and Jackman (1990) were removed from each analysis, and the regression model was calculated without these values. This resulted in between 3.57% and 7.47% of the cases being removed from each regression model. Interestingly, Cook's *D* never exceeded the high cutoff point of 1 specified by Bollen and Jackman (1990) in any model. Moreover, when the analyses were re-calculated without influential points, this did not alter the results in meaningful ways. In particular, significant p-values did not become nonsignificant in these models. Consequently, only the analyses involving the complete dataset will be reported here.

For H2 and H3, univariate outliers for each variable in the model were identified by converting these variables into z-scores. Any case with a z-score over  $\pm 3$  was removed from analysis. This resulted in the removal of 2.53% of cases from H2a, 4.46% of cases from H2b, and 1.65% of cases from H3. Again, the analyses without outliers did not typically change the results in meaningful ways. In all but one case, significant p-values were not altered.

Consequently, outside of the case where there was a change in significance, only the results of analyses involving the complete dataset will be presented.

## CHAPTER FOUR

**Results****Fan Identity Predicts Appreciation**

H1 predicted that a stronger personal fan identity would lead to greater eudaimonic appreciation of one's fan object as defined by a number of cognitive and affective variables, including (a) a measure of appreciation, (b) a reflective thoughts scale, (c) the number of reflective thoughts coded in a thought-listing task, (d) levels of mixed affect, and (e) levels of meaningful affect. A series of simple linear regression analyses were conducted using 95% bias corrected and accelerated confidence intervals and 1,000 bootstrap samples.

Analysis showed that strength of fan identity significantly predicted eudaimonic appreciation as assessed by an appreciation measure, which accounts for both the cognitive and affective dimensions of this response,  $\beta = .52, p = .001$ , and the model explained a significant amount of the variance in eudaimonic appreciation,  $R^2 = .27, F(1, 788) = 287.61, p < .001$ . Thus, a stronger fan identity was associated with greater appreciation of the fan text.

Fan identity also significantly predicted the cognitive component of eudaimonic appreciation as measured by a reflective thoughts scale,  $\beta = .54, p = .001$ , with the model explaining a significant amount of the variance in reflective thoughts,  $R^2 = .29, F(1, 788) = 317.11, p < .001$ . In other words, participants with a stronger fan identity experienced greater cognitive eudaimonic appreciation in response to the fan text.

On the other hand, strength of fan identity did not predict the cognitive component of eudaimonic appreciation as measured by the 336 participants' thought-listing tasks that were coded for reflective thoughts,  $\beta = -.01, p = .85$ , and the model did not explain any of the variance in reflective thoughts,  $R^2 = .00, F(1, 334) = .03, p = .86$ . According to this analysis, then, those

with a stronger fan identity did not experience greater cognitive eudaimonic appreciation in response to the fan text than those with a weaker fan identity.

Strength of fan identity did significantly predict the affective component of eudaimonic appreciation as measured by levels of mixed affect,  $\beta = .15, p = .001$ . Additionally, the model accounted for a small but significant amount of variance in mixed affect,  $R^2 = .02, F(1, 788) = 18.01, p < .001$ . That is, those with a stronger fan identity reported feeling greater affective eudaimonic appreciation, in the form of higher levels of mixed affect, in response to the fan text.

Finally, strength of fan identity significantly predicted the affective component of eudaimonic appreciation as measured by levels of meaningful affect,  $\beta = .34, p = .001$ , and the model accounted for a significant amount of the variance in meaningful affect,  $R^2 = .12, F(1,788) = 102.35, p < .001$ . Therefore, a stronger fan identity was related to greater affective eudaimonic appreciation, in the form of higher levels of meaningful affect, in response to the fan text.

Thus, outside of the results for H1c, H1 was supported. For complete model coefficients and summaries for each regression analysis, see Tables 3 and 4.

### **Self-Related Thoughts Mediate the Fan Identity - Appreciation Relationship**

H2 predicted that a stronger personal fan identity would lead to increased self-related thoughts when viewing one's fan object as defined by (a) a single-item measure of self-related thoughts and (b) the number of coded self-related thoughts, and that self-related thoughts would lead to greater eudaimonic appreciation of that fan object. To investigate this hypothesis, separate analyses with the two mediation variables were performed using model 4 in the PROCESS (Hayes, 2015) macro with 95% bias corrected confidence intervals and 1,000 bootstrap samples.

Table 3

*Coefficients of Regression Models Showing the Effect of Strength of Fan Identity on Outcome Variables Related to Cognitive and Affective Eudaimonic Responses to a Fan Object*

Outcome Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	$\beta$
Eudaimonic Appreciation ( <i>N</i> = 790)	.52 [.45, .59]	.04	16.96	.52*
Reflective Thoughts Scale ( <i>N</i> = 790)	.77 [.68, .88]	.05	17.81	.54*
Reflective Thoughts Coded ( <i>n</i> = 336)	-.02 [-.24, .19]	.10	-.17	-.01
Mixed Affect ( <i>N</i> = 790)	.22 [.12, .32]	.05	4.24	.15*
Meaningful Affect ( <i>N</i> = 790)	.53 [.42, .63]	.05	10.12	.34*

*Note.* Reported in brackets are 95% bias corrected and accelerated confidence intervals. Confidence intervals and standard errors are based on 1,000 bootstrap samples.

\*  $p = .001$

Table 4

*Summary of Regression Models Showing the Effect of Strength of Fan Identity on Outcome Variables Related to Cognitive and Affective Eudaimonic Responses to a Fan Object*

Outcome Variable	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> <sub>adj</sub>	<i>F</i> <sub>chg</sub>
Eudaimonic Appreciation ( <i>N</i> = 790)	.52	.27	.27	287.61*
Reflective Thoughts Scale ( <i>N</i> = 790)	.54	.29	.29	317.11*
Reflective Thoughts Coded ( <i>n</i> = 336)	.01	.00	-.00	.03
Mixed Affect ( <i>N</i> = 790)	.15	.02	.02	18.01*
Meaningful Affect ( <i>N</i> = 790)	.34	.12	.11	102.35*

\*  $p < .001$

When the single-item self-related thoughts measure was the mediation variable, strength of fan identity significantly predicted self-related thoughts,  $b = .90, p < .001$ . Strength of fan identity also significantly predicted eudaimonic appreciation,  $b = .52, p < .001$ . Meanwhile, self-related thought significantly predicted eudaimonic appreciation,  $b = .27, p < .001$ . Finally, the indirect effect of fan identity on eudaimonic appreciation through self-related thoughts was

significant,  $b = .24$ , 95% CI [.19, .30], a large effect size,  $\kappa^2 = .25$ , 95% CI [.21, .29] (Preacher & Kelley, 2011). This analysis indicates self-related thoughts mediate the relationship between the strength of fan identity and eudaimonic appreciation (see Figure 1). These findings supported H2a.

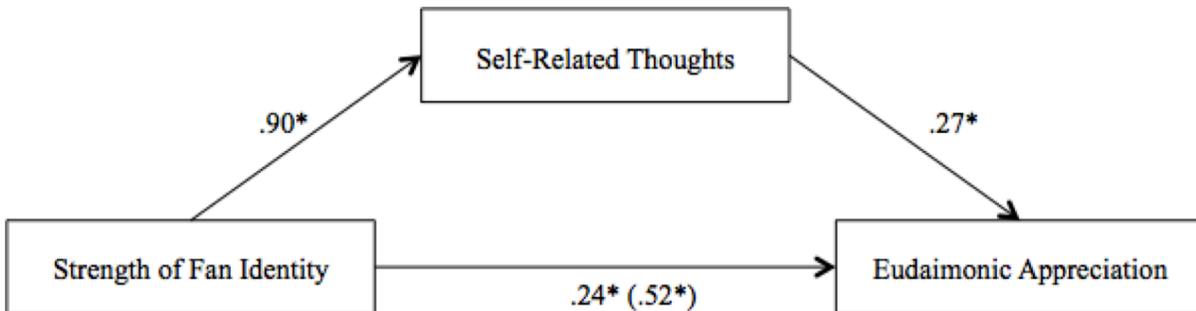


Figure 1. Model of strength of fan identity as a predictor of eudaimonic appreciation in response to a fan object, as mediated by a measure of self-related thoughts. Numbers are unstandardized betas. Total effect of fan identity on eudaimonic appreciation appears in parentheses.

\* $p < .001$ .

The analysis with the number of coded self-related thoughts utilized as the mediation variable was conducted on the subset of the data ( $n = 336$ ) that was coded for reflective thoughts. In this analysis, strength of fan identity did not predict self-related thoughts,  $b = .08$ ,  $p = .37$ ; however, it significantly predicted eudaimonic appreciation,  $b = .39$ ,  $p < .001$ . Self-related thoughts did not predict eudaimonic appreciation,  $b = .03$ ,  $p = .31$ . Finally, the indirect effect of strength of fan identity on eudaimonic appreciation through self-related thoughts was not significant,  $b = .00$ , 95% CI [-.00, .01], representing no effect,  $\kappa^2 = .00$ , 95% CI [.00, .01] (Preacher & Kelley, 2011). In this case, self-related thoughts did not mediate the relationship between the strength of fan identity and eudaimonic appreciation (see Figure 2). Consequently, H2b was not supported.

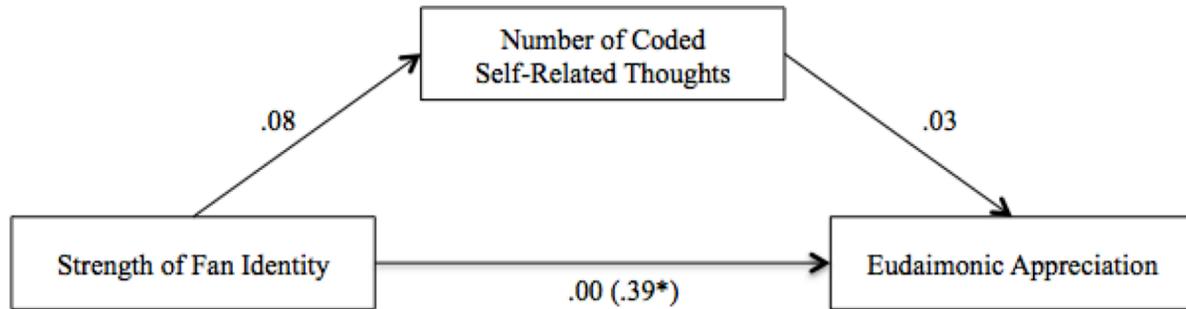


Figure 2. Model of strength of fan identity as a predictor of eudaimonic appreciation in response to a fan object, as mediated by number of coded self-related thoughts. Numbers are unstandardized betas. Total effect of fan identity on eudaimonic appreciation appears in parentheses.

\* $p < .001$ .

### Search for Meaning in Life Moderates the Fan Identity - Appreciation Relationship

H3 predicted that greater motivation to search for meaning in life would positively interact with personal fan identity, leading to greater eudaimonic appreciation of one's fan object. A moderation analysis was conducted to explore this hypothesis using model 1 in Hayes' (2015) PROCESS macro with 95% bias corrected confidence intervals and 1,000 bootstrap samples. Prior to analysis, the variables measuring strength of fan identity and search for meaning in life were mean centered. As can be seen in Table 5, analysis found a significant negative interaction between strength of fan identity and search for meaning in life,  $b = -.07$ , 95% CI  $[-.13, -.01]$ ,  $p = .022^3$ , accounting for a significant amount of the variance in eudaimonic appreciation,  $R^2 = .301$ ,  $p < .001$ . When fan identity was weak, greater motivation to search for meaning in life enhanced eudaimonic appreciation of the fan text, but when fan identity was strong, motivation to search for meaning in life no longer played a role in fans' responses of eudaimonic appreciation. Therefore, while the interaction between fan identity and search for meaning in life was significant, it was not in the hypothesized direction. While Johnson-Neyman analysis was attempted, the output said "there [were] no statistical significant transition point

<sup>3</sup> Without outliers included in the analyses, however, this interaction becomes nonsignificant:  $n = 777$ ;  $b = -.04$ , 95% CI  $[-.08, .01]$ ,  $p = .09$ .

within the observed range of the moderator” (Hayes, 2015). Consequently, this analysis failed to produce results.

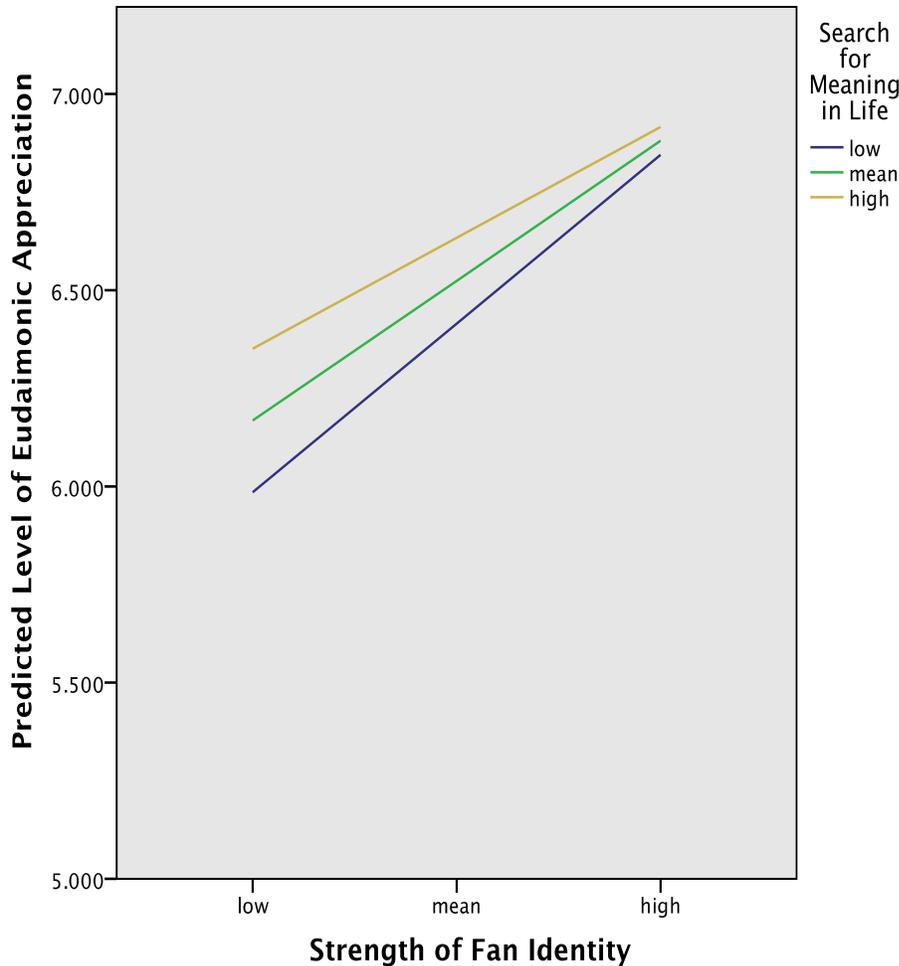
Table 5

*Search for Meaning in Life and Strength of Fan Identity as Predictors of Eudaimonic Appreciation in Response to a Fan Object*

Variable	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
Search for meaning in life	.08** [.04, .11]	.02	4.29
Strength of fan identity	.48** [.40, .56]	.04	12.19
Search for meaning in life X Strength of fan identity	-.07* [-.13, -.01]	.03	-2.29
$R^2 = .30^{**}$			

*Note.*  $N = 790$ . Reported in brackets are 95% bias corrected confidence intervals. Confidence intervals and standard errors are based on 1,000 bootstrap samples. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ .

Simple slopes analysis probed the effect of the interaction between strength of fan identity and search for meaning in life at three levels: one standard deviation below the mean, at the mean, and one standard deviation above the mean. As shown in Figure 3, at each level of search for meaning in life, there was a significant positive relationship between strength of fan identity and eudaimonic appreciation, low search for meaning in life:  $b = .58$ , 95% CI [.45, .71],  $t = 8.87$ ,  $p < .001$ ; average search for meaning in life:  $b = .48$ , 95% CI [.40, .56],  $t = 12.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ; high search for meaning in life:  $b = .38$ , 95% CI [.28, .48],  $t = 7.47$ ,  $p < .001$ . The level of search for meaning in life was more important for eudaimonic appreciation to those with weaker fan identities and less important for eudaimonic appreciation to those with stronger fan identities. Thus, search for meaning in life moderated the relationship between strength of fan identity and eudaimonic appreciation, but meaning in life and strength of fan identity interacted negatively.



*Figure 3.* Simple slopes analysis showing the interaction effect of search for meaning in life and strength of fan identity on eudaimonic appreciation of a fan object.

This unpredicted result may reflect a ceiling effect for responses of eudaimonic appreciation among those with a strong fan identity. As can be seen in Figure 3, levels of eudaimonic appreciation approached the maximum rating on the 7-point scale for participants with the strongest fan identities, leaving little room for the motivation to search for meaning in life to explain the minimal remaining variance. While eudaimonic appreciation was still quite high at lower levels of fan identity, there was more room there for search for meaning in life to explain some of the variance. These findings did not support H3.

## CHAPTER FIVE

**Discussion**

This study is the first to demonstrate that the strength of one's personal identity as a popular media fan is related to enhanced eudaimonic responses to one's fan object. These findings provide initial evidence that a personal fan identity can lead one to perceive a favorite popular media text as especially cognitively and emotionally meaningful. These results also support the supposition that the stronger one's fan identity, the more likely one's fan object is to trigger thoughts about the self, which in turn enhance fans' eudaimonic responses to the text. Moreover, the findings indicate that while the motivation to search for meaning in life may be vital to one's ability to find meaning in a fictional text when fan identity is weaker, for those with strong fan identities, this motivation may no longer be as important to one's ability to derive meaning from favorite entertainment.

These results suggest that when one is a fan of a piece of media it can enrich one's responses to the text. Moreover, the stronger one's identification with a fan text, the more likely one is to have cognitive and affective eudaimonic experiences with that text. In particular, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fans with a stronger fan identity found their fan object more thought provoking and experienced higher levels of mixed and meaningful affect than those with a weaker fan identity. In addition, greater identification with a fan object led to more self-related thoughts, which in turn led to greater eudaimonic appreciation. Finally, fan identity negatively interacted with the motivation to search for meaning in life to produce greater eudaimonic appreciation. That is, those with a weak fan identity but greater motivation to search for meaning in life responded to the fan object with greater eudaimonic appreciation than those with a weak fan identity and less motivation to search for meaning in life. In contrast, fans with a strong fan

identity responded to the fan object with high levels of eudaimonic appreciation regardless of how motivated they were to search for meaning in life.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the adoption of a strong and salient fan identity arises from a deeply personal connection to a popular culture text and that this personal connection can result in a highly personal response to that text. Scholars propose that exposure to meaningful media can result in personal growth (e.g., Bartsch, 2012; Bartsch & Hartmann, 2015; Keen, 2006; Mar & Oatley, 2008; Wirth et al., 2012). Consequently, when one has developed a strong personal fan identity in relation to a meaningful fictional text, that text may serve as a touchstone as one considers his or her values, makes decisions, and determines what is important and worthwhile in life. The experience of watching a television show is richer, more meaningful, and more emotional to a highly identified fan than to those with weaker fan identities. This means that when fans have a personal connection to a show, when it becomes part of their identities, it enhances the experience of watching the show and the benefits derived from the experience.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Interestingly, in this study, the results involving scale measures produced significant findings, but the two analyses that included the coding from the open-ended thought-listing task as a variable both resulted in nonsignificant findings. Strength of fan identity was not associated with the cognitive component of eudaimonic appreciation when it was measured by the number of reflective thoughts coded in the thought-listing task. Nor did the number of coded self-related thoughts mediate the association between fan identity and eudaimonic appreciation.

These outcomes speak to the somewhat unexpected way participants reacted to the stimulus video. The use of a stimulus video to remind established fans of the different cognitive

and affective responses a fan object evoked in them was unique to this study. To my knowledge, stimulus videos have typically been utilized in other studies when participants were unfamiliar with the material shown. In studies where participants were asked to respond to a piece of media they were already familiar with, participants' responses were usually based on their memory of their past media experiences. Consequently, the present study's use of a stimulus video to elicit responses to a fan object from participants was novel. It was believed that using fan-favorite episodes and scenes in the video would enable *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fans not only to react to the scenes shown in the video itself, but also remind them of other scenes that they personally favored. In the open-ended thought-listing task that participants completed immediately after they viewed the video, many participants mentioned and described scenes, characters, or plotlines they loved that had not appeared in the video. This indicates that the video worked as intended.

However, the video was presented with minimal context or explanation and the instructions for completing the thought-listing task were very general. As a result, participants were left to reach their own conclusions about why they were watching the video and many participants spent a great deal of time critiquing it in their thought-listing tasks. In particular, a number of participants were frustrated that their favorite characters, scenes, or storylines were excluded from or underrepresented in the video. While their reactions spoke to their passion for, extensive knowledge of, and investment in the show, it also channeled their attention in an unexpected direction. This led to a high number of thought-listing tasks that could not be coded with the coding scheme employed in this study, leading to the inclusion of far fewer participants in the analyses involving the thought-listing task.

Moreover, participants' focus in the thought-listing task on comparing the video's representation of the show to their personal understanding of the show, both positively and negatively, indicates that, ultimately, the thought-listing task captured something different than the scale measures. While the scale measures asked participants to rate specific cognitive or affective responses, the thought-listing task enabled participants to put their thoughts in their own words. Watching a video that only represented a small portion of the series may have caused many participants to reflect on discrepancies or parallels between what the video captured and the parts of the show each fan favored. Thus, these comparisons may have become salient to many participants—a reaction revealed in the thought-listing tasks. In fact, the lack of a relationship between strength of fan identity and coded reflective thoughts implies that the participants with the strongest fan identities were among the most opinionated, and consequently their thought-listing tasks were among the least coded. While this was not anticipated, it may demonstrate fans' investment in their favorite media in a different way. It would be useful to further examine this phenomenon in future research.

In addition, the fact that the video resembled a fan-created video may have primed participants to respond to the thought-listing task in specific ways. Fan videos are one kind of creative fan work that can be found on various websites, including YouTube and the fan-work repository, Archive of Our Own ([archiveofourown.org](http://archiveofourown.org)). In these short videos, fans edit together scenes from a popular culture source text in order to critique, comment on, or revise that text, often based on a certain theme and accompanied by a single song. Other fans can comment on the videos, offering opinions, critiques, or encouragements. The combination of presenting a stimulus video that resembled a fan video and completing the study digitally may have activated fans' schema for online fan interactions. This may have resulted in their use of the thought-

listing task to offer responses to the video that were similar to the comments written after watching a fan video on YouTube.

In any future research with fans employing stimulus videos, researchers might consider including a disclaimer before the video to explain that the short video is not representative of the entire piece of media and, given time constraints, may not represent all characters and storylines. The researcher might also explain the context for the video in greater detail by describing why participants are being asked to watch it. Alternatively, a choice of several videos could be offered that emphasize different characters, relationships, or plotlines from a popular media text. This may deactivate any schemas that could otherwise be primed due to fans' previous exposure to or knowledge of online fan videos. On the other hand, instead of relying on stimulus videos to trigger responses to a fan object, future investigations might employ still images from the fan text, written synopses of several episodes, or simply fans' memories of their fan object in order to avoid a stimulus video's potential pitfalls.

In regards to the results that did not involve the thought-listing task, it is interesting to note that small to medium effect sizes were obtained in the analyses involving affective responses, while the effect sizes for the analyses involving the reflective thoughts and eudaimonic appreciation scales were larger. Following the thought-listing task, participants were asked to rank how much they felt various emotions after watching the video. They then completed the reflective thoughts and eudaimonic appreciation scales, which they were instructed to respond to with both the stimulus video and the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as a whole in mind. Both the order of the presentation of the questions and the varying emphasis on participants' responses to the video versus to the show in general may have influenced the way participants responded to these items. In particular, participants may have

experienced more robust affective responses if they had been instructed to think about the show as a whole and not just the stimulus video. Future research should attempt to assess affective and cognitive responses more evenly by including uniform instructions for questions and by randomizing which set of items participants complete first.

In addition, the eudaimonic appreciation and reflective thoughts scales contained an overlapping item (“The television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is thought provoking”) and the eudaimonic appreciation scale and the meaningful affect scale contained a similar item (asking participants to rate how moved they were by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*). While these overlapping items surely influenced the H1 results, because reflective thoughts and meaningful affect are both part of the construct of eudaimonic appreciation, these overlaps should not compromise the validity of the findings.

Similarly, to some degree, the single-item self-related thoughts measure used to mediate the relationship between fan identity and eudaimonic appreciation could be a confound for eudaimonic appreciation. One of the eudaimonic appreciation items asked if the show was thought provoking, and self-related thoughts might be a specific kind of thought that was provoked. However, this overlap is only partial and additional mediation analyses using self-related thoughts as the mediator variable and each of the three items from the eudaimonic appreciation scale as separate outcome variables produced significant results<sup>4</sup> lessening any cause for concern. Additionally, given both personal fan identity and self-related thoughts speak

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<sup>4</sup> Results for these analyses were as follows: The indirect effect of fan identity strength on the eudaimonic appreciation scale item, “Buffy is very meaningful,” through self-related thoughts was,  $b = .23$ , 95% CI [.18, .30]; the indirect effect of fan identity strength on the eudaimonic appreciation scale item, “I am moved by Buffy,” through self-related thoughts was,  $b = .29$ , 95% CI [.23, .37]; the indirect effect of fan identity strength on the eudaimonic appreciation scale item, “Buffy is thought provoking,” through self-related thoughts was,  $b = .19$ , 95% CI [.14, .26]. For all models,  $p < .001$ .

to fans' personal investment in a fan text, it is theoretically valuable to understand how important self-related thoughts are to the association between fan identity and appreciation.

Further, participants took the survey online via a digital device of their choosing. As a result, participants' experience with the quality of the video and audio, and even the survey itself may have differed. These issues as well as distractions in the environment in which participants completed the survey may have influenced the results.

Moreover, participants had varying levels of exposure to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Although all considered themselves fans, some had only seen a few episodes of the show, while others had seen the complete series multiple times. These differences in level of exposure, and consequently, familiarity, may have impacted participants' responses in ways fan identity strength did not. In future research it would be valuable to explore the impact of one's level of exposure to a favorite popular media text in addition to the strength of participants' identities as fans.

This investigation's focus on fans of only one popular media text limits the generalizability of the findings to fans of other popular media texts. Furthermore, given many participants' long-term involvement with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the fact that the show has been off the air for over a decade, this study's results may be more useful in shedding light on the responses of long-term fans to a fan object, such as *Star Trek* or *Harry Potter*, than the responses of fans to current popular media, such as *Game of Thrones* or *Mr. Robot*, which may not retain their fans when new episodes stop airing. On the other hand, even fan texts that have existed for extended periods of time continue to bring in new fans. Over one third (34.6%) of the participants in this study were between the ages of 18 and 29, and yet these young participants were still ardent *Buffy* fans. It would be interesting in subsequent research to

determine if eudaimonic responses to a fan text differ between long-term and newer fans. In particular, it would be valuable to investigate if fans' eudaimonic responses differ based on how long they have been fans. Alternatively, the use of longitudinal methods to examine the progression of fan identity and the resulting responses to a fan text over time could lead to important insights about the evolution of fans' relationships with their favorite texts.

Future studies on the influence of mixed and meaningful affect on the eudaimonic experiences of fans would also be valuable in order to parse out the role of these two kinds of emotion in fans' perceptions of meaning in their favorite media. The results of the present study indicate that although a stronger fan identity leads to higher levels of both kinds of affect, this effect is more pronounced for meaningful affect than mixed affect (i.e., the combination of positive and negative affect). Further investigation could shed light on whether meaningful affect is more important than mixed affect to fans' eudaimonic responses to other fan objects.

Likewise, it would be useful in future research to further investigate the relative influence of the cognitive and affective components of fans' eudaimonic responses to their favorite texts. This study's findings indicate that the cognitive component of the eudaimonic response is stronger for *Buffy* fans than the affective component, but it is possible this result would differ based on the fans involved in future studies.

Additionally, the interaction found in H3 between fan identity strength and the motivation to search for meaning in life was negative, the opposite of the direction predicted. While ceiling effects were a factor, this finding also suggests that traits and drives, such as search for meaning in life, may be vital to meaning-making early in the process of becoming a fan of a popular media text or if one never develops a strong enough attachment to the fan object to consider it important to their identity. However, for those whose fanship has become part of

the self, the fan object may become inherently meaningful, while other aspects of one's personality play less of a role in this perception. Additional research should explore if other drives and traits moderate the relationship between fan identity strength and eudaimonic appreciation in order to determine if the interaction effect found in this study is repeated with other variables. Furthermore, it would be interesting in future investigations to examine how eudaimonic entertainment experiences might satisfy some of the need to find meaning in life. More generally, it would be valuable to probe the role other personality traits and drives play in the development and maintenance of fan identity in future studies.

### **Conclusions**

This study adds to the growing bodies of literature on both popular culture fans and meaningful media experiences. It brings a new dimension to the scholarship on eudaimonic entertainment experiences by demonstrating that when one is familiar with a specific piece of popular media, being a fan of that media can play an important role in how one responds to the text. These findings show that a personal fan identity can enhance the cognitive and affective components of one's eudaimonic responses to a favorite television show. When interacting with a fan object, the bigger fan one is, the more one experiences the text as meaningful, moving, and thought-provoking. This is one of only a few studies to utilize social science methods and theories to understand the relationship between fans and their fan object. This approach helps shed light on how personally meaningful fan experiences with a favorite text can be.

In sum, this study takes initial steps towards better understanding the gratifications popular media fans derive from interacting with a fan object. The findings indicate that interactions with a fan object provide fans with opportunities to think about the self and others, leading fans to grapple with emotionally challenging issues, increase their social acumen,

consider their morals and values, and ponder what makes their life worth living. In so doing, fans may experience personal growth and enhanced psychological wellbeing. This avenue of investigation is ripe for future research into the ways meaningful media experiences are socially, emotionally, and psychologically beneficial to fans.

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## Appendix A

### Study Recruitment Message

The following recruitment message was posted to social media:

Are you a fan of the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*? I want to hear from you! I'm researching fan responses to the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. In this survey you will answer questions about your fandom, watch a short video montage of moments from *Buffy*, and answer questions about your responses to, feelings about, and activities related to the show. Spoiler alert! The video contains moments from all 7 seasons of *Buffy*.

Anyone who identifies as a *Buffy* fan, whether the biggest fan ever or someone who enjoys the show once in awhile, is invited to participate. Participants must be 18 years of age or older.

Please click the link below to take my survey and enter for a chance to win 1 of 3 \$50 amazon.com gift cards.

Thanks for your time and please share this with anyone you think might be interested!  
[link to survey](#)

## Appendix B

### Research Participant Information and Consent Form for Survey on Fan Responses to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

You have been invited to participate in a research study conducted by Cynthia Vinney, a Ph.D. student in the School of Psychology at Fielding Graduate University, Santa Barbara, California. The study has been reviewed and approved by the Fielding Graduate University Institutional Review Board.

#### **Why Is This Study Being Done?**

This study is being done as part of a dissertation project investigating fan responses to the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

#### **What Is Involved In The Study?**

If you agree to participate you will complete a short web-based survey in which you will watch a video montage of important moments from the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and answer questions about your responses to, feelings about, and activities related to the show. You will also answer some general questions about your motivations and preferences. It is estimated that it should take you approximately 20 to 30 minutes to complete this survey.

#### **What Are The Risks Of The Study?**

The risks of this study are considered minimal.

#### **What about Confidentiality and Protection?**

Your responses will remain confidential and will be accessed only by the researcher from a password-protected account. While the results of this study will be published in my dissertation and possibly subsequent books, journals, or presentations, your name will not be used. Only group characteristics will be published. Your confidentiality will be kept to the degree permitted by the technology used. The security of data transmitted over the Internet cannot be guaranteed as all Internet-based communications, even the most secured, have the possibility of being intercepted. The collection of these data is not expected to present any greater risk than you would encounter in everyday life when sending and/or receiving information over the Internet.

#### **Participation In Research Is Voluntary:**

You are free to decline to participate and you may discontinue your participation at any time by clicking out of the survey.

#### **Additional Information:**

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Cynthia Vinney at [cvinney@email.fielding.edu](mailto:cvinney@email.fielding.edu). If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, contact the Fielding Graduate University IRB by email at [irb@fielding.edu](mailto:irb@fielding.edu) or by telephone at 805-898-4034.

If you are 18 years of age or older, a fan of the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, understand the statements above, and voluntarily consent to participate, check the consent box below and then click the “Next” button to begin the survey.

I have read the consent form and understand that my willingness to complete the survey implies my consent.

## Appendix C

### Survey Questionnaire

Are you a fan of the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

- Yes
- No

How long have you been a fan of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*? (only shown if answer to question above is "Yes")

*Dropdown will be available from which participant can select choices between "less than 1 year" to "19 years."*

How much of the show have you watched?

- All 7 seasons
- Most of it, 5 or 6 seasons
- About half of it, 3 or 4 seasons
- Just a bit, 1 or 2 seasons
- A few episodes

Fanhood Measure (see page 71 below)

Please watch the following montage of moments from the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Before pressing play, please make sure your device's sound is on.  
(Participant watches video)

Please write down everything that crossed your mind during the video and after, even if it had nothing to do with the video or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

Mixed and Meaningful Affect Responses Measure (see page 72 below)

For the next set of responses, please think about your feelings after watching the video and your feelings about watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in general.

Eudaimonic Appreciation (see page 73 below), Hedonic Enjoyment, and Reflective Thoughts Scales (see page 74 below)

In the middle of the items from these scales, the following bogus response item will also appear:

1. The television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* begins when Buffy Summers moves to a small farm in Iowa.

Fan Activities Measure

Now please complete these additional items by thinking about your general preferences, tendencies, and motivations. Please respond to the following statements as truthfully and

accurately as you can, and also please remember that these are very subjective questions and there are no right or wrong answers.

Search for Meaning in Life Subscale of Meaning in Life Questionnaire (see page 75 below)

Need for Cognition Scale and Need for Affect Scale – Short Form

Do you feel the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* impacted your life?

- Yes
- No

[If participant answers “yes” they will be asked.]

In what ways has the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* impacted your life?

### **Demographic Information questions**

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

What is your age?

*Dropdown will be available from which participant can select choices from “18” to “100”*

How would you describe yourself?

- White/Caucasian
- Hispanic/Latino
- Black/African American
- Native American/American Indian
- Asian/Asian American
- Pacific Islander
- Multiracial
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

What is your current status?

- Single, never married
- Married without children
- Married with children
- Divorced

- ( ) Separated
- ( ) Widowed
- ( ) Living with a partner

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- ( ) Some High School
- ( ) High School Diploma/GED
- ( ) Some College
- ( ) Trade/Technical/Vocational Training
- ( ) Professional Certificate
- ( ) 2-year College Degree
- ( ) 4-year College Degree
- ( ) Some Graduate School
- ( ) Master's Degree
- ( ) Doctoral Degree
- ( ) Professional Degree (JD, MD)

To enter for a chance to win one of three \$50 amazon.com gift cards, please enter your email address below:

---

Would you be interested in participating in an interview about your experiences as a *Buffy* fan?

Please check this box if you'd be interested in being interviewed, and I'll reach out at the email address you entered above.

---

Thank you!

Thank you for completing the survey!

If you have any questions or comments about this study, please contact Cynthia Vinney at [cvinney@email.fielding.edu](mailto:cvinney@email.fielding.edu)

**Fanhood Measure**

(items selected and adapted from Groene &amp; Hettinger, 2015)

Please use the scale below to indicate how much you agree with the following:

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

1. I am emotionally connected to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.
2. I spend a lot of time studying *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.
3. I describe myself by mentioning *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.
4. I devote a lot of energy to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.
5. Being a *Buffy* fan defines me.
6. *Buffy* plays a part in my everyday life.
7. I am the go-to person for information on issues related to *Buffy*.
8. I am absorbed by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.
9. *Buffy* is the most enjoyable form of entertainment.
10. I want everyone to know I am connected to *Buffy*.
11. I strongly identify with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

How often do you do the following?

Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
1	2	3	4	5

12. Read *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*-related material (e.g., comics, magazines, etc.).
13. Think about *Buffy*.
14. Visit websites related to *Buffy*.







**Search for Meaning in Life Subscale from Meaning in Life Questionnaire**  
(Steger et al., 2006)

Please respond to the following statements as truthfully and accurately as you can, and also please remember that these are very subjective questions and there are no right or wrong answers.

Please answer according to the scale below:

Absolutely untrue	Mostly untrue	Somewhat untrue	Can't say true or false	Somewhat true	Mostly true	Absolutely true
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

1. I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful.
2. I am always looking to find my life's purpose.
3. I am always searching for something that makes my life feel significant.
4. I am seeking a purpose or mission for my life.
5. I am searching for meaning in my life.

## Appendix D

### Reflective Thoughts coding scheme

(adapted from Bartsch et al., 2014)

Code	Description
Thoughts about Character Psychology	This code denotes thoughts that refer to the psychological states and traits of a character, as well as musings about what the writer would do if he or she was a specific character.
Thoughts about Abstract Moral Messages	This code refers to thoughts that speak to or ponder morals and values.
Self-Related Thoughts	This code denotes thoughts that refer to the self, including the individual's past, perspectives, experiences, and future hopes. Thoughts may be subjective and personal. Thoughts about bodily states are not included in this code.
Thoughts about Social and Personal Reality	This code denotes thoughts that refer to the truth and outcomes of individual, historical, communal, cultural, and societal issues.