Having a voice
Representation in fiction and why it matters

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Some research has been done on this subject, although sparsely. The purpose of this study is to determine how, why, and to what extent representation in fiction matters, in regard to socially stigmatized groups of people, focusing on mental health, sexuality, and gender roles. The main focus is on bonding with fictional characters, how it relates to representation and its importance. Eleven (cis)female participants shared their own experiences with this. Each written reply was condensed, eventually narrowed down to three main components considered central to this phenomenon; (1) a sense of isolation, (2) an inability to cope, and (3) relatability in characters. These components can all be connected to loneliness, which suggests that loneliness plays a large part in one's sense of self-worth. Thus, representation can be argued to be vital, due to its function of including and speaking for stigmatized groups of people, granting a sense of belonging and support.

Keywords: representation, empathy, fictional characters, adolescence, social stigma

Introduction

If you were trapped in an impossible situation, in an unpleasant place, with people who meant you ill, and someone offered you a temporary escape, why wouldn't you take it? And escapist fiction is just that: fiction that opens a door, shows the sunlight outside, gives you a place to go where you are in control, are with people you want to be with (and books are real places, make no mistake about that); and more importantly, during your escape, books can also give you knowledge about the world and your predicament, give you weapons, give you armor: real things you can take back into your prison. Skills and knowledge and tools you can use to escape for real.


Representation

Most of us have, at one point or another, felt a connection to a fictional character. Even in its most shallow form, it affects us, such as making us cry when a certain character is going through troubled times on a movie screen, or making us smile and laugh when they are going through something pleasant. It does not matter that we do not really know this person, this character. It does not matter that they do not know us, or that they do not even exist, we still feel for them. If it is not an actor simply playing the character on screen, it is even more abstract, when the character merely exists in the pages of a book, for instance. Regardless, it is nearly impossible not to feel at least something.
Although most people go through this at least to some degree, every now and then, there are those who take it further. To some, it is about more than just relating to a character for a brief time, as a source of entertainment. It goes deeper than that; it is about relating to a character when there seems to be no one else around. When reality, and the people in it, seem distant and cold, fictional worlds and their characters have been shown to have the ability to greatly enrich and help people's lives (Markell & Markell, 2008). That is the focus of this study.

*Representation* is defined as speaking/acting on the behalf of others, something that stands for something else (Merriam Webster, 2015). In this particular study, it refers to the depiction of certain groups of people in fiction (first and foremost books, TV-shows, and movies), in a positive way, and without the use of negative stereotypes. The reason we feel for—and with—people is due to *empathy*; we put ourselves in their position and essentially feel what they feel (Merriam Webster, 2015). We empathize with fictional characters much the same way as with real people, and by doing so become invested in their lives and predicaments.

A person tends to have an easier time relating to/empathizing with someone who is similar to themselves, or someone who is going through a similar experience. Humans have an inherent need to feel understood and included. We need a support system, we need to be acknowledged, and most of all, we need to feel that we matter (Ferrari, Smeraldi, Bottero, & Politi, 2014).

While most can relate to the issues and such generally portrayed in TV-shows, books, and movies, in one way or another, there are groups which are underrepresented. There are many people in the world that do not fit into the normalized ideals and ideas of how a person should be and act. These people are often marginalized and ignored, sometimes even persecuted and shunned, simply for being different, whether it is obvious on the outside, or if it is only an inner sense of not belonging (Denton, Rostosky, & Danner, 2014).

As it is, most of what we see on television and read about in books (in this case, specifically child- and young adult stories) are stories that revolve around a general type of protagonist, one who is most often a Caucasian, heterosexual cis person (cisgender; identifying with the gender one was assigned at birth) (Casteel, 1995). Although there is nothing inherently wrong about that type of protagonist, it does exclude several large groups of people. Even aside from race, gender, and sexual orientation, there are subjects like mental health, physical and/or mental disability, backgrounds, etc. to take into consideration. For instance, disabled characters are seldom portrayed in an accurate way, generally shown to be burdens or hopeless causes, sometimes with some quirk or superpower that is somehow meant to negate the disadvantages of being disabled (Prater, 2003).

*Depression, mental health, and loneliness*

Judging from personal experience, depression, mental health, and loneliness appear to be factors often brought up in the context of representation. The themes are common in personally experienced discussion. They are also addressed in previous studies (Kendra, Mohr, & Pollard, 2014; Markell & Markell, 2008; Tang & Wu, 2012).

Mental illness is a subject that is rarely depicted in an accurate and representative light in fiction. It can be argued that the antagonist of a story will often have some kind of mental issue, regardless of if the issue itself has any part in the character's evil ways. Give the antagonist a condition like OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder), or some kind of psychosis, and they will become more compelling, while also having the general deviation and "wrongness" about them enhanced. In real life, an individual with schizophrenia, for instance, is often stigmatized and referred to as "dangerous" and "madman" (Tang & Wu, 2012).
arguably making this illness in particular an intriguing addition to an already negatively portrayed antagonist.

In contrast, the protagonist/hero may have mental issues, but these issues are arguably very rarely portrayed as anything but a strength the character eventually uses to their advantage in their quests and endeavors. It is not often one sees a protagonist struggling with depression or anxiety, or PTSD (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder), and have it be nothing but a burden that the character has to deal with on top of everything else, throughout the story. In short, it is something that is stigmatized by society, through prejudice, negative stereotyping, and discrimination (Kendra, Mohr, & Pollard, 2014), which is why one can argue that it is generally something reserved for antagonists.

Some characters fall into a grey area; they are the anti-heroes, the wounded, tortured souls who live in self-destruction while reluctantly saving others, but they are often glorified, which essentially glosses over many of their issues. A well-known example of something similar to this is Batman/Bruce Wayne (Finger & Kane, 1939), who is undisputably traumatized by the murder of his parents, but uses this trauma and its effects to his advantage in fighting crime. He is troubled and flawed, and carries the burden of never being truly understood, while using questionable methods and morals to do the right thing.

Recently, the trend of giving only antagonists the burdens of mental issues and illness has started to turn around, showing characters like Katniss Everdeen (The hunger games; Collins, 2008) struggle with PTSD, which affects every day of her life, along with the pressure of being the symbol of a revolution. Another example is the latest live-action portrayal (Iron man 3; Black, 2013) of Tony Stark/Iron Man (Lee, Kirby, Heck, & Lieber, 1963); a confident superhero with a giant ego, who still suffers from anxiety attacks due to traumatic events. Even Bruce Banner/the Hulk (Lee & Kirby, 1962), in his most recent portrayal (The avengers; Whedon, 2012), is shown to have attempted suicide from depression, and the Disney character Elsa (Del Vecho, P., 2013) has problems with isolation, anxiety and depression, causing great destruction because of it—yet she is still portrayed as a positive character and not an antagonist. In contrast to the more traditional depictions of protagonists and heroes in fiction, this turning trend has been met with praise and encouragement (Lynskey, 2014), proving that such representation is sorely needed in mainstream fiction, especially for younger audiences.

One study (Markell & Markell, 2008) shows that for instance the Harry Potter-series has had a profound effect on children of all ages. Despite the fantastical elements of the story and the things the characters experience, some feelings are universal, especially the sense of loss. The various nurturing characters and their healing messages, helping Harry (the protagonist) deal with his grief, have been shown to offer considerable support, hope, and guidance for readers likewise going through the grieving process.

Sexuality and sexual orientation

Judging from personal experience, sexuality and sexual orientation are factors often brought up when speaking of representation. Personally experienced casual conversation and debate on the matter suggests that the themes are common. They are also addressed in previous studies (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Denton, Rostosky, & Danner, 2014; Yule, Brotno, & Gorzalka, 2014).

Studies show that people who identify as LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/Transsexual, and Asexual) have higher levels of stress and experiences of psychological distress, in very large part due to the discrimination and prejudice that accompanies a stigmatized social status (Denton, Rostosky, & Danner, 2014). Since same-sex
attractions and romantic relationships are marginalized in most cultures, stigma is a universal feature of gay, lesbian, and bisexual lives (Balsam & Mohr, 2007). Therefore, showing an LGBTQA character for any other reason than making it about their sexuality is a rarity—the sexual orientation itself is considered a big enough issue to focus on—and representation for this group is in turn, somewhat negatively, affected. Furthermore, an asexual character is often portrayed as something of an emotionless robot, often either due to, or because of, their asexuality, when in reality, this is very rarely the case. Those who identify as asexual generally don’t differ from anyone else in anything but their level of sexual interest (or, more accurately, their lack thereof) (Yule, Brotto, & Gorzalka, 2014).

While this trend of stereotyping LGBTQA characters is very slowly turning, it has done so to great effect and appreciation. More and more LGBTQA characters are being depicted in a way that does not revolve around their sexuality or a need to fulfill certain stereotypes. Instances of this are characters like Mickey Milkovich (Shameless; Wells, Abbott, & Stearn, 2011), who defies the stereotypes of what it means to be a gay man, as well as Bo Dennis (Lost Girl; Firestone & Piazza, 2010), a female protagonist whose bisexuality is never once used as a plot device or main storyline. She also has a very strong sexual appetite, something which is never mentioned negatively, or shown in a negative light. Recently, the series finale of the Nickelodeon animated series The legend of Korra (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2012) showed the main character in an implied romantic relationship with another female character (a relationship which has been confirmed by the show’s creators), something which has been applauded especially by the LGBTQA community, many voicing how they wished they could have seen something like that on a kids’ show in their own childhood (Cornet, Nicholson, Goldman, Yehl, & Sanchez, 2014).

**Gender roles**

Gender roles and gender identity are themes often brought up in the context of representation, according to personal experience. They are also addressed in previous studies (Griffiths, Murray, & Touyz, 2015; Ingalls, 2012). The themes are common in personally experienced casual conversation, and observed media debate. There has long been a skewed view on gender and gender roles in fiction (Griffiths, Murray, & Touyz, 2015), something which has been challenged by several characters, a notable example being Buffy Summers (Buffy the vampire slayer; Whedon, 1997). The influence of this particular character seems to be a rather widespread occurrence; one study (Ingalls, 2012) discusses said influence. Being one of two strong female protagonists/heroes particularly grabbing the attention in the 1990s, Buffy was at the time praised and applauded for being a strong, female role model for girls and young women—something there had been a great lack of, before. The other notable character in the 1990s praised for the same thing was Xena (Xena: warrior princess; Raimi & Tapert, 1995), who shows strength and independence, as well as a deep emotional center, concerning those she loves. Both characters’ determination to do the right thing, to protect those who need protecting, has been cited as a main reason for their inspiring of not only girls and young women, but people of other genders, as well (Ingalls, 2012).

**Purpose and hypothesis**

Out of the many themes and aspects of this issue, the ones addressed in the introduction have been deemed the most relevant to the study; depression, mental health, loneliness, sexuality
and sexual orientation, as well as gender roles. They were deemed relevant due to the fact that one or more of them have been addressed in previous studies on subjects similar to the one of representation and empathizing with fictional characters. They are also the factors most relevant and widespread within this issue, according to personal experience on the matter, making it reasonable to assume that they would come up in most, if not all of, the participant replies.

The purpose of this study is to find if representation in fiction has a positive impact on those exposed to it, how it does, and why. It deals with fictional characters and the bonding some people do with them, but focused on teenagers and young adults, especially concerning the relevant themes.

The hypothesis for this study is that, due to the nature of bonding with fictional characters (the way it occurs when there are no alternatives for it in one's vicinity/real life), representation can help people feel accepted, loved, and understood. If the hypothesis were to be supported by this study, it could have an impact on how representation and its effects are viewed.

Method

This study was conducted using the phenomenological method (Langemar, 2008). It therefore focused on personal, subjective experiences of each individual participant. Due to the very personal nature of the subject, it seemed to be the most appropriate method, to properly capture the feelings and emotions behind such deep bonding with fictional people.

Participants

An announcement was sent out through the website Tumblr, which is a site used all over the world, and which is rich with fandom culture (fandom; being emotionally invested in a piece of entertainment, such as movies, books, and TV-shows, as well as being involved in the community surrounding it). The announcement clearly described the thesis and its purpose of studying the phenomenon of bonding with fictional characters and, in turn, of representation. The announcement also asked for participants that fit certain criteria; at least 15 years of age, as well as having had personal experience with the phenomenon in question, between the ages 15 and 25. The announcement was spread, and after a few days, ten people had shown interest. Out of the ten, only seven were able to go through with the study (three dropped out for various reasons), and they were sent the questionnaires. They had a week to fill them out and send them back. At a later date, four more participants were acquired for a better spread, all of which were also sent the questionnaire and given approximately a week to fill them out. This gave a total of eleven participants. Along with the questionnaire, the participants were informed what the thesis was about, what kind of questions they would be answering, that their information would be confidential and not shared outside of the study, that they had the right to quit at any time, and that they would have the opportunity to read the published thesis. They were also given contact information to use if they had any questions about the thesis and the study. None of them used it.

The experiences used and analyzed reflect the age 15-25, to capture how and why this type of bonding may be vital at that age in particular. All participants were female due to availability.

The participants were between 15 and 31 years old. Although the phenomenon of profoundly bonding— and being affected by—fictional characters is something that occurs in
all ages, this age group was selected largely for the sake of simplicity. It is also an important age group (given the developmental changes during those years), and although the experiences were requested to have occurred between certain ages, even older participants were encouraged to apply, for the sake of acquiring more participants and more data. The lower age limit was set at 15, due to the sensitive nature of the study's subject, and the need for parental approval for any younger participant. Given that the participants would be spread out all over the world, and have the benefit of anonymity, contacting parents of participants for permission would be a very complicated and drawn-out process. All (cis)female, the ages of the participants were in the end 15, 16, 18, 18, 20, 20, 23, 25, 28, 28, and 31, and included the nationalities American, Canadian, English, French, German, Spanish.

**Material and procedure**

A questionnaire was sent out to the eleven participants, asking for details about age, gender, and nationality. The participants were then asked to, in their own words and as freely as they liked, share stories which were to be told in 500-1200 words, detailing the emotional and mental experience of these instances. The filled-out questionnaires were to be sent back after one week, giving the participants the time they needed to formulate and write down their thought-out and inclusive answers.

This method of asking the questions was selected due to the fact that as wide a range as possible of participants was desired; face-to-face interviews would have limited the range to a certain geographic area within Sweden, while this method allowed for a spread of participants throughout the world. Another reason for this method was that the subject itself is rather sensitive for most, especially when having personal and profound experiences with it; replies written anonymously were assumed to be a better way of making the participants feel safe to reveal these personal experiences and details (Maxwell, 2013). No compensation was offered for their participation.

**Data analysis**

Each written reply/story was 500-1200 words long. They were each condensed into approximately 300 words, by eliminating repetition, as well as redundant words and descriptions. Several phenomena could be described using different words, and were combined to describe each phenomenon in a more succinct manner. For instance, descriptions of feelings of isolation and loneliness, as well as neglect and lack of understanding and support, could all be combined into the same category of emotion (*sense of isolation*). The content of each filled-out questionnaire was further condensed, until each of them resulted in a list of points and emotions, which covered the central theme (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2013).

The eleven lists were then combined into one, which resulted in a list of eleven components which were all mentioned in three or more replies. A test of inter-rater reliability was carried out to determine the stability of the analysis, by allowing another person, as well as the author of the thesis, to determine whether or not these eleven components were present in each participant reply. The second appraiser went through the summarized list separately from the author, in order to form an accurate understanding of the content. The two appraisers agreed upon the presence of a certain theme in each reply, to an extent of 75%. After further condensation, three components were found to be shared by all accounts, and could thus be identified as the primary components of why a person would strongly bond with fictional characters in a positive way.
Results

Each participant was asked to freely describe instances and experiences of having bonded with fictional characters, and how this affected them in a profound and positive way. Each participant described feelings of isolation and loneliness, i.e. a lack of understanding and support from people around them, prompting a desire to escape from it all ("escaping to fictional worlds"). Each participant also described being drawn to characters in similar predicaments as themselves, with similar backgrounds, personalities or issues ("weaknesses").

The three components that thus occurred in all participant accounts were: (1) a sense of isolation and loneliness, (2) an inability to cope with this, and (3) relatability in characters (see Table 1).

Table 1  
The three main themes which occurred in all accounts  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Participant example quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of isolation</td>
<td>&quot;I was the silent giant [...] I knew I was different.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inability to cope</td>
<td>&quot;I dealt with depression [...] I spent days locked in my room, just reading my favorite books over and over.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatability in characters</td>
<td>&quot;She [Buffy] clearly had depression and a detachment from the world, another issue we shared. [...] I found strength in myself as I watched her.&quot;</td>
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Lastly, each participant described having pulled through hardships (such as depression) due to seeing how the characters they bonded with coped with the same things as themselves—a result of the three main components found.

Sense of isolation

This can be described as a (perceived or actual) lack of understanding and support from people around oneself, a sense of being alone and different, the feeling of being an outsider. Based on the results of this study, the feeling of belonging and support is something that all participants feel, or have felt, that they do not have. Each of them describe feelings of loneliness and exclusion, for some reason or other, and have attributed their deep bonding with certain fictional characters to these sensations.

One of the study participants said: "I wasn't outwardly teased [for it], but I knew that I was different". Another expressed that: "I was never an orphan, but my parents never understood me (or so I felt until much later in life). I played games even my friends didn’t really understand". Yet another said: "I connected with feeling ostracized from your own family. Growing up, and throughout my teen years, I was the black sheep of the family, with differing opinions and views, and it caused endless conflict between us. I often felt that they didn't actually want me around".

This study shows that this sense of isolation is a major contributor to turning to fictional characters and fictional worlds. Regardless of if this feeling is founded or not, it is not uncommon, especially among adolescents and young adults. This sense of isolation can, in part, even lead to depression, which in turn is greatly helped by a sense of being understood, and belonging with others. Among marginalized groups and minorities, this seems to be especially important. Due to the connection between depression, anxiety, and the sense of isolation and exclusion, these feelings have here all been combined into this one theme.
Inability to cope

An inability to handle and deal with troubles and unexpected circumstances, causing high levels of anxiety and stress, can be referred to as an inability to cope. In regard to the participants of this study, due to the sense of isolation, and lack of understanding and support from the world and people close to them, there arises a desire and need to escape. People who bond closely with fictional characters therefore seek refuge and solace somewhere else. Stepping into a fictional world gives a sense of control and safety, where the problems are someone else's, and where the characters are people with similar issues to the perceivers themselves. It is a type of escapism, which helps them manage and cope with the painful and difficult world around them. A deep sense of comfort and understanding can be found among people who technically do not even exist.

One participant said: "I had problems at home, ones that I struggled to cope with, and I felt like I couldn’t talk about it". Another participant details having discovered her sexual orientation as panromantic (potential of being romantically attracted to any gender) asexual (lack of sexual interest), something which she found to be both exciting and terrifying: "It [discovering my asexuality] was one of the best yet scariest moments of my life". She describes turning to TV-shows like Supernatural (Kripke, & Singer, 2005) and Sherlock (Vertue, Gatiss, & Moffat, 2010), both of which she says heavily feature the theme of being different not necessarily equating with bad. She only feels comfortable talking to a select group of people about her sexuality, and had a hard time dealing with it, at first, finding solace and comfort in the fictional worlds and characters she took part of when watching these TV-shows.

Relatability in characters

This refers to feeling a sense of recognition and empathy for someone else based on their similar experiences and feelings to oneself. Being able to relate to the characters (see examples of such characters below) seems to be the most important part of this phenomenon—the ability to empathize. Seeing someone deal with the same issues as oneself can be inspiring, and if the character in question is portrayed in a positive way, this sense of inspiration intensifies. If a hero who beats any enemy, and fights through every challenge and struggle, also has problems the perceiver has, the perceiver gets a new perspective on their own issues. Seeing someone they relate to and admire overcome the same obstacles teaches them that they can do it too, and it teaches them how. Essentially: "If this character can do it—while simultaneously dealing with all these other difficult things—so can I". Some even represent an apparent lack of empathy, which can be something a person struggles with, the tendency of others to believe them to be heartless, when they actually only have a difficult time expressing themselves or showing emotion, instead controlling how and what they feel. One such character mentioned in a participant reply is Spock (Star Trek; Roddenberry, 1966).

One participant said: "I think a big theme in both of these shows [Supernatural and Sherlock] is that it isn’t a bad thing to be different". Another said: "In my worst days, during 11 years of depression, I stayed strong because a fictional character taught me that even in the darkest days, there is nothing more beautiful than being alive". One expressed it: "To know that my favorite character would not only accept me, but be able to relate, always made me feel less alone". A fourth said:
Spock [*Star Trek*] was this figure that let me know that I could find a new way to deal with what was going on in my internal world that didn’t result in the destruction of my mental and physical health. I needed someone to help give me a framework to put all the pieces of me back together again, and I needed that person to be a steady point that I could move around. Spock became this kind of Platonic ideal self that I could aspire to, but that I didn’t have to worry about failing or disappointing. I found that concept comforting.

**The relations between the three major themes**

Some characters mentioned in the participant replies even fit the participants' own sense of isolation, as well as other shared experiences and circumstances. As mentioned in the introduction, Buffy Summers (Whedon, 1997) has had a large impact on popular culture. She is a character that defies the traditional gender roles of what it means to be a woman, as she is very feminine in appearance and interests, while simultaneously possessing traditionally strong and masculine traits like stubbornness, independence, and leadership (Griffiths, Murray, & Touyz, 2015). All mentions of her in the replies of this study (she is mentioned in three out of the eleven) refer to her as an inspiration, and a character that said participants grew up idolizing, and still strive to emulate. The fact that she is also a teenager throughout most of the series seems to enhance this sense of relatability, as the participants mentioning her were teenagers themselves, when first discovering the show (*Buffy the vampire slayer*; Whedon, 1997).

One participant cites Buffy as an inspiration she turned to during her own depression; ultimately a very lonely, in many ways isolated, character, Buffy is shown to be deeply depressed during a portion of the series, even contemplating suicide, and attempts to drown her pain with alcohol and destructive habits and relationships. It is only after some time that she pulls through, once again seeing the beauty and purpose of life, which inspired the mentioned study participant to do the same. It seems that the human nature of such a fantastical and strong character, her flaws and weaknesses, is part of what makes her so compelling.

Another participant turned to the character of Gaara (*Naruto*; Kishimoto, 1997), with whom she shared feelings of anger and loneliness, as well as a sense of being misunderstood by and isolated from those close to her:

He [Gaara] was an antagonist for a long time, seemingly heartless and needlessly violent, silent and withdrawn and with powers that terrified even his family. [...] To me, Gaara came to represent rage and pain, and I felt oddly protective of him. He was profoundly misunderstood, shunned because of powers he had been cursed with and couldn't control, and shaped by his circumstances and the cold treatment from others.

One participant in the study shares experiences of being taught to fear homosexuality and homosexuals, due to her upbringing, which was centered in Catholic religious beliefs. She details actually being afraid as a child, seeing people with different sexual orientations as something wrong and frightening, and that it was only when she first read a series of books portraying a gay couple (*The mortal instruments*; Clare, 2007) that these views started to change. She explains the feeling of seeing gay characters portrayed in a positive, normalized, and relatable way for the first time, and how this was the starting point for her new way of
thinking, as she became heavily invested in these characters and their relationship. Thanks to them, she explains, her heteronormative views started to change for the better, and that she has become a better and more open-minded person because of it:

If it weren’t for the way I bonded with these characters, I would most likely still be trying to discover my own views instead of already knowing and becoming comfortable with them. I’m therefore thankful for these characters, because they have truly made me a much better person.

Another participant said, regarding the character of Jacky (Bloody Jack; Meyer, 2002), and her own sexuality and gender:

Her [Jacky's] love life is complicated and often heart breaking but she doesn’t let others define her. She is implied to be gender fluid, disregards gender roles, and she never even bats an eye at having suitors of multiple genders, something that made me feel so safe as I was questioning my own sexuality and gender expression.

Other characters are cited to have the same kind of influence and provide the same kind of inspiration to other participants. Among these characters are rugged, masculine monster hunters, who have nothing in common with the young females of this study, aside from a deep sense of self-loathing and lack of self-worth. One such hunter in particular, namely the character of Dean Winchester, from the TV-series Supernatural (Kripke & Singer, 2005) is mentioned in more than one participant's reply, citing these feelings, specifically. Seeing this character from an outside, objective standpoint, made these participants realize that his conviction of being unworthy and useless was entirely in his own mind. As they express it, it taught them to look at themselves through the same lens, essentially making them realize that they in fact were worth so much more than they had been led to believe by society and people around them, as well as themselves.

One participant mentions the Hulk (Lee & Kirby, 1962) as an inspiration and a character she has bonded with, due to her ability to relate to him. Despite Bruce Banner being fictional, male, and a superhero/scientist, the participant felt, at the time, that they both shared the feeling of being a silent, misunderstood giant. This shows that even though there might not be much in common on the outside, even the smallest things can create a bond. She felt that the Hulk used his abilities—abilities he never wanted, can barely control, and which bring mostly destruction—to do good things. She learned that different does not necessarily equal bad—another thing which is mentioned in several participants’ stories in this study. She expressed it thus:

For me, characters such as Bruce [The incredible Hulk], Bobby [Supernatural], and Dean [Supernatural] are the first instances where I saw what I had gone through presented in a relatable way. Sure, researchers talk about children of divorced parents, anxiety, or depression in statistics, but characters bring it to life. There is something that clicks between viewer/reader and character that doesn’t always get to happen. A moment of clarity where you do not have to struggle to articulate how something made you feel, because they know. They get it.

This study shows that when feeling alone and isolated, having someone to relate to, someone who is similar to oneself, can make a world of difference—but such a person does not always
exist in one's real life. Fictional characters help fill in that gap, granting a place to go, someone to turn to, a friend of sorts, who understands. Even though one cannot interact with these fictional characters, we empathize with them because we recognize ourselves, and watching them handle the same issues as us can be inspiring. Depicting already stigmatized and marginalized groups in a positive light, through fiction, is shown to have a positive effect on these groups' ability to cope. The accounts of experiences in this study alone tell a story of fictional characters being able to mean so much more than one would expect, having the power to change a person's entire perception of themselves.

Discussion

The hypothesis for this study is that, due to the nature of bonding with fictional characters (the way it occurs when there are no alternatives for it in one's vicinity/real life), representation can help people feel accepted, loved, and understood. The results of the study, as well as previous studies done on similar subjects, show support for this hypothesis. Three main components were found to explain the phenomenon of bonding with fictional characters; (1) a sense of isolation, (2) an inability to cope with this, and (3) relatability in characters, all of which cause a sense of great emotional investment.

While few studies have been done on subjects similar to the one of empathizing with fictional characters on a profound level, those that exist appear to come to very similar conclusions. The fictional characters act as surrogates for an emotional support system, becoming outlets for fears, feelings, and other sensations one might have trouble coping with (Kendra, Mohr, & Pollard, 2014; Markell & Markell, 2008). In essence, the process can prove to be healthy, and this study reached much the same conclusion, the results clearly showing that the (perceived or actual) lack of a real-life support system made the participants bond with characters the way they did, in turn helping them overcome issues and difficulties in their lives.

Due to the fact that no other study found focused on the same aspect as this one, it is difficult to pinpoint differences. Each study referenced in the introduction had another area of focus, with only similarities to this one. The main differences were among the participants, some of the studies focusing on children, others exclusively on males, etc., and also the narrow subjects, namely children handling grief through a specific book series (Harry Potter) (Markell & Markell, 2008), or the way young-adult males perceive themselves and their body-image through exposure to media and its portrayal of their peers (Griffiths, Murray, & Touyz, 2015).

One major detail, however, about both this study and a similar study before it (Ingalls, 2012), is that the participants generally report no issues with separating reality from fantasy. None report thinking that the fictional characters they bond with and feel for are real, in any sense, or that they can reasonably replace any real-life relationships and support systems. Participants describe the phenomenon as an escape, as a way of dealing with the troubles and burdens of real life, and that they are fully aware of the abstract and fictional nature of the people they bond with. This goes against the pre-conceived notion that people who spend much time in fictional worlds are somehow disconnected from the world around them, simply arguing that it is a temporary method for coping, rather than a delusional disconnection.

Why, then, did this study produce these particular results? What about these participants has made them bond with fictional characters in a way that most people do not? There could be several reasons for this, but the most likely one could perhaps be that the traits and aspects they felt set them apart were large enough for them to feel fundamentally different from those around them. One participant reports the awkwardness and isolation that came with entering
puberty at a very early age (age 8), vastly setting her apart from other children her age. This led to her feeling alone and different, without anyone to turn to for guidance, understanding, or support. This sense of incredible loneliness and otherness made her silent and withdrawn, further isolating her from her peers. Only when she came across fictional characters that were the same—large, quiet, and different—did she feel a sense of comfort and belonging. The same could be said for depression, for instance, which more than one participant details going through, ultimately finding solace and support in someone who, while fictional, was going through the same thing.

Perhaps it is the fundamental nature of a person's differences that causes one to bond so strongly with someone who does not even exist. If you do not like the same sport or activity as everyone else, for instance, it can be difficult to belong and fit in, but it is not something that defines who you are. If the same trait occurs with something as basic for one's character as for example sexuality, physical appearance, race, mental/physical health, or gender identity, it becomes a different, more profound matter. When something so fundamental to who you are is not recognized or understood by people around you, it can cause an intense sense of loneliness and isolation, even a deep sense of being "wrong" (Casteel, 1995; Ingalls, 2012). Due to the human nature of desiring and needing social contact and belonging, this can be devastating, causing a person in such a position to latch on to any lifeline they can find. If such a lifeline consists of a fictional character, then so be it—just the feeling of not being alone, of being understood, can be enough to change one's life and self-perception.

**Limitations and future research**

One weakness of this study is that there are only eleven participants, as well as the fact that the participants are all (cis)female. Strengths of the study include the age variance and geographical spread, despite the low number of participants (low due to availability), as well as the relatively high level of agreement between two different interpretations of the data, when carrying out a test of inter-rater reliability.

More research could be done into the relevance of gender, as well as biological sex (of the perceiver), within the phenomenon of representation and bonding with fictional characters. This study presents the thoughts and experiences of only eleven female participants, all of them cisgender, and their experiences may differ from for instance males the same age, or transgender, as well as non-binary (identifying with neither traditional gender, male nor female), individuals. Furthermore, sexual identity and sexual orientation could be further studied in terms of their relation to this phenomenon, given that belonging to a minority/stigmatized group puts one in an especially vulnerable position. The relevance of race and ethnicity could also be further researched, for the same reasons, as well as that of social background, religion, and culture. How does one's surroundings and cultural norms affect one's self-image and sense of self-worth, and would this for instance increase, decrease, or simply not affect the way which a person bonds with a fictional character? Will a strong, healthy support system cause a person to spend less time in fictional worlds and with fictional people, instead choosing the real-life equivalent?

Aside from the spread and variation of participants, the aspect of the subject itself could be further studied, that is, the stigma surrounding the phenomenon of bonding in such a profound way with people who do not exist. Relating so deeply to fictional characters seems to often be met with prejudice and mockery, with accusations of not being able to tell fantasy from reality, of "living in a dream world", and of being immature, pathetic, and essentially a child. In that sense, focus could be put on not just the importance of representation in regard to the people being represented, but also in regard to educating others on the importance of it. What
are the thoughts on the matter from the point of view of people who have no experience with this type of profound bonding? Is there indeed such a strong prejudice toward it as there seems to be, and if so, is it because of disrespect, ignorance, or simply a lack of knowledge and understanding about what deeply bonding with fictional characters can truly mean for those who do it?

Delving deeper into why certain people bond so strongly with fictional characters can have several benefits for society as a whole. Aside from the importance of allowing minorities and marginalized groups to be represented, granting them the understanding and respect given to those who fit the ideals and norms, studies like this could be used to fight prejudice and false stereotypes among others. By portraying minorities and marginalized groups in a more accurate, positive light, not only do the groups in question get the support and understanding they need, but those outside of those groups gain a greater understanding of them, as well. Prejudices and negative pre-conceived notions and ideas are perpetuated, and in some ways caused, by the lack of representation for certain groups, allowing societal norms to remain at a status quo that can be downright harmful to a large number of people. By educating others on these groups and the individuals that belong to them, a greater sense of understanding and acceptance may arise toward them, remedying some of the negative attitudes that exist in our society. Stereotypes about for instance homosexuals, transgender individuals, the mentally ill, the disabled, can only be changed if they are challenged, and this study, as well as previous ones, show that portrayals in fiction can clearly have a large impact on how we perceive and interact with the world around us.

Fictional characters don't exist, and therefore have the benefit of being able to be shaped into any kind of character needed. They can be of any race, gender, sex, nationality, background, sexuality, even species, and with this freedom, anyone has the ability to create characters that represent groups in a positive way. These characters aren't limited by reality, or by any actual, existing people or rules. They have free reign, the freedom to be whatever one wants them to be, and this is something that can evidently be very powerful. Regardless of if such power is used to enlighten, inform, or support, it is clearly not to be ignored. The fact of the matter is that fictional characters are creations, and those who create and control them have the potential to really make a change.

Conclusions

Profoundly bonding with fictional characters is according to the present study something that can in some ways be life-changing, in some cases even life-saving. There is no confusion with fantasy and reality in the cases within this study, no belief that the characters in question are real, or that they actually exist; it is simply a sense of being understood, by finding someone, albeit fictional, who shares the same or similar struggles as oneself. Watching them overcome these struggles inspires and teaches one to do the same, and seeing the character's struggles from an outside, objective standpoint gives a new perspective one might not have had before, concerning oneself.

With this study's focus being on representation in fiction and why it is important, this conclusion is vital. Knowing that people bond with fictional characters, whether deeply or in a shallow way, gives the concept of representation a whole new meaning. If one were to feel isolated and alone, without support or understanding, seeing just one relatable character in a positive light (or in a position of power and benign influence) could change that sense of isolation. Watching a character, a person, go through the same things as oneself, and win that fight, lets one know that winning is actually possible.
References


