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Fanfiction, coping mechanisms, and shifting the realities

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Abstract: The development and popularization of social media have increased social anomie, as exemplified by dissemination of fake news, stereotypes, hate, ostracism, social isolation, and ubiquitous fear of missing out. As a result, members of society are more exposed to witnessing and reading of tragedies than previously. The youth of today try to find some methods to “drown out” the reality, even if the methods they use were to be effective only temporarily. That is how, in some cases, people become addicted to and dependent on any form of mass media: social media and fiction (such as video games, books, TV shows, movies or cartoons, etc.). The present article attempts to answer the question of why the young people seek closure aided by fiction, and to provide examples to illustrate it.

Keywords: fiction, coping mechanisms, mental health

Słowa kluczowe: fikcja, sposoby radzenia sobie, zdrowie psychiczne

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to list and discuss some of the appealing factors of the social media, the literary spectrum, and the impact of social media and fiction on the behavior of youth. Article will focus on escapism into virtual and fictional reality. There is a thin line between being a fan of someone’s work and being completely obsessed with it to the point of forgetting reality. Today’s teenagers struggle with a lot of problems: filled with school stress, horrible news on television, growing mental health issues, and new phenomena that the previous generations (mostly before Gen Z) tend to underestimate (e.g. fear of missing out, social media image in the context of cyber world). Nowadays, more and more young people try to find a temporary closure within the realm of fiction: books, movies, TV shows, and fanfiction.

The issue of escapism is not something new to society due to the fact that it could be considered as a part of our nature and culture. Escapism provides a respite from burdensome norms and social control. The only thing that is constantly changing is the currently popular way of distraction, which have been evolving over the years. While the factors that

keep us on the edge, burden us with stress, and make us ready to “flee from the scene” are more or less the same: the troubling affairs of the society (political and social, including family, issues) compounded by the eagerness to find oneself. Whether at work, school, or legal institutions society is built on norms; the culture’s major task is to promote order and stability (Tuan, 1998: XIV), but where there is the norm there are always the breakaways from it.

Running away from what constricts people is a common occurrence, whether it stems from feeling utterly lost or knowing that one does not fit in the norm or canon imposed by society. Sydonia von Borck, whose life is described in *Sydonia. Słowo się rzekło* [Sidonia. The word has been spoken], a novel by Elżbieta Cherezińska (2023), came from a Pomeranian family and her tragic story shows the possible consequences of challenging the norms. Cherezińska is a Polish author and *theaterologist* who specializes in writing fantasy and historical novels as well as biographies. The eponymous Sydonia, by having rejected Prince Ernest’s marriage proposal, and by trying to have lived the way she wanted to, ended up being accused of witchcraft and separated from her people. Society turned their backs on her, tortured and considered her rebellion as political crime and, in the end, executed her. While this example might seem a bit extreme for today, it is important to acknowledge the change in society’s reaction to lack of adherence to the social imaginary. Back in the day, such behavior would result in complete isolation of the individual and, in extreme cases, even in death. Right now, being different and trying to break free from society’s norms and their expectations is still considered weird, out of the ordinary, but it is more possible to do so, since people are more open-minded to deviation from the norm.

According to Tuan (1998: 6), human beings are animals who are congenitally indisposed to accept reality. Facing reality sometimes means being forced to face their own powerlessness and problems that seem unsolvable. In response to stress factors and with newly emerged possibilities of escapism, the so-called coping mechanisms started to develop in a way that many teenagers might not have expected (especially during and after the pandemic). It grew to the point of internet addiction where some teenagers struggle with existing in the moment. So, the question that this work will explore is: Why do young people rely on fiction to feel better with themselves and in the situation they live in?

My motivation for choosing such a topic is connected mostly to being involved in fanfiction culture and fandoms for many years, as well as seeing how much the issue of coping mechanisms appears on social media these days, and is repeatedly trending. Having been exposed to various fandoms and social platforms at a young age myself, I started to notice a pattern of behavior of people in a similar situation to mine. Moreover,

in recent years (until 2024) the number of users (especially on TikTok or Twitter, currently rebranded as X) on the internet who choose to talk about their experience while reading, watching, etc., whether they liked something or not, was it exciting, was it something funny, has been constantly increasing. Although the article focuses on listing and discussing the attractive aspects for users/readers of mass media and fiction, it also creates some questions for the future to answer. It is worth mentioning that the state of mind that I had at the beginning of writing this article has now changed. There are things that I might have done differently, with a more proper and broader perspective. This article, for now, can serve as an opening for much wider discussion about troubled teenagers and young adults who have chosen to find closure in virtual reality, rather than face the world by themselves.

Most of the research was collected thanks to social media content observations, and personal life experience, as well as from various articles and books on topics such as: fandoms, social media, and fanfiction. As for the data connected to mental health, it was obtained from the websites and reports from global organizations such as UNICEF, WHO and other, smaller ones that are responsible for recordings on mental health and publishing the gathered and interpreted data in their studies.

Terminology

Fiction can be simply defined as a narrative that does not present the facts and actual reality. It may be based on a real-life situation, place or event, but it usually (not always) presents all of the things listed in ways that are imaginary or inconsistent with history and facts. An author might be inspired by a historical period, era or event, but does not have to strictly follow it. They might consider changing the story for the sake of the plot and in accordance with their will. Moreover, an author can follow specific time period and have a historical grounding for their story, but follow the story of fictional character or take a well-known person and write a story around what they (author) thinks happened.

Fanfiction, which is simply a story that is created by a specific fanbase (circle of people interested in specific fields: fiction, sport, music industry, etc.), which involves real or fictional people or/and the world they live in. Take the series of Harry Potter, written by J. K. Rowling, which has one of the most popular fandoms (fanbase) to this day. Fandom is a sociocultural phenomenon largely associated with modern capitalist societies, electronic media, mass culture and public performance (Duffett, 2013: 5). The name describes a large group of people who consider themselves a fan of any type of entertainment industry. They are con-

ected via interactions on social media or in real life: memes, discussions, fan meetings, sports events, concerts, etc.

When one checks the statistics on websites like AO3, Wattpad or Tumblr, Harry Potter's world building is still used as a basis for other stories which do not even include the characters the original author wrote or follow the story of the book series. The characters are usually "shipped" ("shipping" being a term derived from the words: relationship – "relationshiping"; which describe the emotional/romantic/sexual pairing of two (or more) characters (Riley, 2015: 10)) with each other and are sometimes portrayed in queer romantic (or not) relationships. Furthermore, fanfiction is usually created because of dissatisfaction with the original story or maybe because the individual found it difficult to move on and started to create a sequel for a specific character. Francesca Coppa in her introduction to anthology *The Fanfiction Reader: Folk Tales For the Digital Age* lists five things that fanfiction is, which creates a broad and detailed definition of fanfics (short for fanfiction).

Coppa starts with the fact that this kind of fiction 1) is available for free and mostly written by people who aspire to be professional writers and chose to practice and experiment with already published fiction, outside of literary market (2017: 2); 2) it "rewrites and transforms other stories," and also 3) "rewrites and transforms stories currently owned [in terms of copyrights] by others" (2017: 46) – so, engaging with other texts, taking the original story and remaking it for their own satisfaction, or interpreting it differently; 4) fiction written and shaped within and to the expectations of a particular fan community (2017: 7), which is connected to culture of fandom, to the interpretation of already interpreted work, and to changing view on what is canon; lastly, 5) "fanfiction is speculative fiction about character rather than about the world" (2017: 12), because the work written by the amateur writers mostly focus around specific character(s) that one enjoyed the most and their story. The "canon" can be defined as "the events presented in the media source that provide the universe, settings, and characters," while the "fanon" (combination of fan and canon) is composed of "the events created by the fan community in a particular fandom and repeated pervasively throughout the fanfiction particular details or character readings" (Hellekson, Busse, 2006: 9). As an example, in canon a character who plays volleyball wears two different looking kneecaps, but in fanon it is said that it is because of knee injury that character suffers from (in the source story no such thing is said). Fanon is a loose interpretation of already given information.

Coping mechanisms according to *Psychology* by Sandra K. Ciccarelli and J. Noland White are described as the actions that people can undertake to master, tolerate, reduce, or minimize the effects of stressors, and

they may include both behavioral strategies and psychological strategies (2015: 445). For example, a young adult after a long, stressful week at university relaxes by meditating or doing a movie marathon. Some other examples could include an older person taking their time to bake for themselves or others as a means of stress relief or an adult smoking cigarettes on a break due to everyday stress.

As for the concept of comfort characters/movies, most teenagers and young adults grow up with some sort of role model at one point of their life. It might be the person they look up to or thanks to whom they have found some passion and/or a goal along with the motivation to pursue it. It could be a musician, actor, politician, writer, even a teacher or family member. They probably had an outstanding personality that drew everyone around them to them and some trait that one felt the need to possess one day. The concept of comfort characters is really similar to role models. Usually, it describes a character that a person identifies with or just takes pleasure in watching, because of some traits they (readers) feel familiar with. By definition, created by today's youth, it is a fictional person that one relates or feels a strong connection to, even feel inspired by.

Comfort character could be a teenager with passion for volleyball that has trouble finding oneself in the world, a single mum who works two jobs, a comic-relief (a character who provides relief from the tension through jokes) in a sitcom or maybe even a villain, since villains are known for tragic backstories that the viewers or readers might empathize with in some way. It is nothing new that people enjoy the story more fully when a character with background similar to them or with similar way of thinking as them is involved. Especially the teenagers whose mental health is dangerously deteriorating and who need representation and someone who just feels familiar, even when they are fictitious.

When it comes to comfort movies/TV shows, it is an analogous phenomenon. Comfort movies/TV shows (any type of films, animations, series, etc.) that are just, for some reason, relaxing to watch. The thing one might rewatch constantly to make themselves happy or make themselves cry. It can be compared to comfort food. Stereotypically, people in times of sadness or heartbreak tend to eat ice-cream to calm themselves. Maybe when we are happy, because of achieving the long-term goal, we reward ourselves with a big favorite meal, which we usually cannot do due to our busy daily lifestyle. Perhaps we miss the dish that our family members used to make in our childhood, because we have strong, positive memories of it. Comfort movies are similar, we feel the specific emotion while watching it, or possibly the TV show has a plot (story) that describes something relatable to us.

Alternative Universe (in short AU) and shifting are the last subjects regarding terminology. Both of those terms were popularized on social

media, especially on TikTok. AU is an idea of an existing parallel universe outside our own in which events may unfold differently. It is mostly used in fanfiction to describe the canon divergence, like Coffee shop AU, University AU, Fantasy AU, etc. An amateur writer can take two celebrities and write the story where they are not famous. They might be in some fantasy world where the realm of magic exists. That sort of thing is considered an alternative universe, and it is also used in studying the idea of multiverse. On the other hand, shifting is a method of moving your unconsciousness from this current reality (CR) to another, desired reality (DR) (which when described sounds like a process of dreaming). One can script their whole life before doing so: write themselves a new childhood, job, social class, love life or looks, and then “move” into a new reality. AU and shifting concepts are based on multiverse theory, where our universe is supposed to split every time an observation is made, so one rapidly generates a huge number of parallel worlds (Carr, Ellis, 2008: 2–29). Most will call it an exuberant imagination about a non-existent world, and it is true that it can be difficult to believe in. This raises concerns about how today’s generations play not only with fiction, the virtual world, but also with their own minds.

Idea of shifting and alternative universe has also been used in the cinematic industry for years, with the *Matrix* series, or in *Alice in Wonderland* (dir. Tim Burton, 2010) based on the classic book written by Lewis Carroll, where Alice falls down the rabbit hole and ends up in different world, but also quite recently in *Don’t Worry Darling* (dir. Olivia Wilde, 2022), where girls are held captive by their partners in the virtual world, or the newest movies from Marvel Cinematic Universe with various versions of superheroes from alternative timeline. All of the movies listed include some form of alternative universe that hero or/and heroine ends up in, where they struggle with (sometimes) similar surroundings, or where they fight against the dark side in completely unknown setting. Examples of these movies are shown as a template of how the AUs can be created in media.

Some people share funny stories or memes connected to the world they shifted to. There are also some examples where the script was not “detailed enough” and something went wrong, like the person who was supposed to be our friend betrayed us or we did terrible on the exam, even though we scripted that we are excellent students. Whether or not it should be considered unhealthy, “weird,” “crazy” or just pure imagination, is still not clear. Actually, some people might have heard of a similar phrase that is connected to vivid imagination and mental health – maladaptive daydreaming. The way that both, maladaptive daydreaming and shifting, are described are not that much different from each other, the ideas themselves could be considered alike. It is a mental health con-

dition where a person daydreams excessively, sometimes for hours at a time. It is an extensive fantasy activity that affects and interferes with a person's life and daily functioning (Somer, 2002: 197–212). The adjective “maladaptive” describes any type of behavior that keeps one isolated from the negative feelings; in this example, type of daydreaming that is an unhealthy or negative attempt to cope with or adapt to a problem. Some of the symptoms and behaviors connected to maladaptive daydreaming are intense, vivid and detailed daydreams, complex plots of them, long periods of strong disconnection from the real world and sometimes people even try to do it intentionally.

The contemporary reality and its effect on mental health

Another crucial topic in need of introduction are the conditions in which today's society operates and its effect on mental health. The world we live in has its history of being cruel, unfair even now, in 2024, as well as full of negative news that are shared through mass media every day. Firstly, the 2020 COVID-19, which was a horrible experience for those who had to go through the disease itself, or other struggles created by the outbreak (financial struggle, loneliness). Additionally, lockdown that was forced onto people had an impact on their mental and physical condition for those who had to live alone or with (sometimes) abusive family members. The data from *The COVID-19 pandemic and mental health impacts in 2020* and *UNICEF. The State of the World's Children from 2021* reports bring up the issue that pandemic has affected everyone in some way: mental health, finances, relationships. UNICEF comments on children lack of social activities, due to being locked out of classrooms (2021: 4) which results in social anxiety, as well as lack of funding in “promoting, protecting and caring for mental health of children and their caregivers” (2021: 12). Furthermore, health care was not prepared for such number of patients and therefore, most of health care workers did not receive the proper training beforehand (Xiang et al., 2020: 228–229) or did not finish it yet. In 2020, we have also witnessed the Black Lives Matter demonstration in the US, followed by women's strike protests in Poland. People took to the streets, in many of the cases they also got themselves hurt while trying to protest, trying to fight for what they believe in.

All of these cases are valid, since everyone feels and reacts to the external stimuli differently. They might not feel affected by the outside conflicts, but have their own within themselves: inferiority complex, high demands from themselves and family members, lack of satisfaction with life, long-term stress. One might have their own issues, connected

to the family, low self-esteem, school or financial problems. All those stressful factors can interrupt the somewhat balanced life; thus, the mental health of an individual can deteriorate to dangerous level, especially if no professional help is available to them.

During those days, people were scared, stressed and would love to help themselves by finding a way to silence their troubled minds somehow. With the development of social media, easy access to the internet, e-books or streaming platforms (Netflix, Twitch) or online video sharing platforms (YouTube, TikTok), the idea of fiction, captivating stories behind it, as well as just simple social media with access to the forums, chat and internet memes (or humor in general terms) was getting more and more compelling. Watching the story unfold, sharing it with everybody to be discussed, reading more happy or sad alternatives of the story, gives an individual some sense of control, when they feel like they cannot keep up with real world news anymore. Struggling with mental health, a horrible reality at the time, is leaving people vulnerable and escaping into any form of media and fiction gives them a sense of temporary safety.

The usage of popular culture in any shape or form is considered by some as a distraction and way of avoiding problems, but it can also be an activity which enables an individual to learn something new about themselves. Seeking refuge in fiction might be connected to the fear of not fitting into the social imaginary and social norms imposed on us.

With years going by, being different is still sometimes considered “weird” and out of ordinary but, in contrast to the real world, the world of fiction does not discriminate. Sometimes it even provides the solutions and gives “truths” that can be later on used by one to better understand themselves. Escapism behavior helps in coping with the reality that does not accept one, it is something that has been in human nature throughout the centuries.

Relatable characters and representation in media

Novels, comic books, TV shows, and anime are known for various cultural and social group representations that are considerably more adequate now than they were 20–40 years ago. To illustrate, LGBTQ+ or race representation in media can be regarded more and more detailed now, for example: *Heartstopper* (2022), with relatable coming-of-age stories of queer teenagers. For the people who grew up without or with poor representation it is almost like a dream. However, the reflection of culture and its assets, as well as the life experiences of being part of a specific demographic group, is still not perfect, sometimes even

exaggerated by directors. Both, producers and authors are in a process of learning boundaries of what is considered desirable and acceptable for other people to watch.

A good example of what people wish to see more is the transformation of female roles in the movies. Many women enjoy watching new movies where a female protagonist is something bigger than just a love interest of hero without having a deeper connection to the story. Or perhaps, their role as main character is based on stereotypes on what a woman should be (innocent, obedient, and caring), just like in Disney movies (e.g. in adaptations of the Brothers Grimm stories) with princesses that project such image onto children: Cinderella, whose beauty is the most important asset for her love story and who does not have good relationship with their stepmother and other women due to their jealousy (Budidarma et al., 2023: 14).

In fact, the representation of women in the media has become the topic of discussion for many journalists and fans. As a response to various controversies on whether or not female representation is satisfactory to the audience, the Bechdel Test has been created. This test can be associated with gender studies, especially male-female equality in numbers in cinema. It was first created by American cartoonist Alison Bechdel, in the 1985 comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*. For the movie to pass such a test, it has to answer “yes” to three questions: 1) Are there at least two women in the film who have names? 2) Do those women talk to each other? 3) Do they talk to each other about something other than a man? (Agarwal et al., 2015: 830–840). *Women in Fiction: Bechdel-Wallace Test Results for the Highest-Grossing Movies of the Last Four Decades* is the study of representation of female characters in the 30 highest grossing movies per year. Statistics in the analysis show an increase of 20 percentage points within the period of studied decades, starting in 1980 (42.28%), and ending in 2019 (62.59%), where the movies passed the test. It is a huge difference that can be considered a progress (Appel, Gnambs, 2022: 9). To reiterate, even if there is still room for growth, the role of women in the media is definitely improving in previous years.

Unfortunately, one can still sometimes spot cultural appropriation, gender inequality or queerbaiting that young people tend to fix by making their own version – fanfiction, fanon, imagines. Queerbaiting is defined as a marketing technique for fiction and entertainment in which producers and purveyors of media imply queer content in order to lure in viewers and then not follow through with it (Nichols, 2020: 2). Nichols mentions Borgerson’s observation that queerbaiting is composed in a way that targets homosexual consumers, but may go unnoticed by a straight one (2020: 5). The purpose is to attract the audience with

the suggestion or possibility of relationships or characters that appeal to them.

Culture of fanfiction

Fanfiction took over the world quite quickly thanks to increasing fan activity on social media. With FanFiction.net launching in 1998, many others followed: Wattpad, Archive of our own, Blogspot, Tumblr. So-called fanon has been getting more popular. In other words, people who do not agree with the authors' vision of specific ending or character's decisions finally had an opportunity to express it via different social media. Fanfiction and original short stories created by amateur writers can be also considered as an answer to the question "What If?" For instance: What if Harry Potter shook the hand of Draco Malfoy in *Harry Potter and Philosopher's Stone* (by J. K. Rowling)? What if Midoriya Izuku from manga (comics or graphic novels originating from Japan) *My Hero Academia* (by Horikoshi Kohei) was not chosen by the favorite hero to be his successor? What if Anne from *Anne of Green Gables* (by L. M. Montgomery) was sent away on her first day or stayed but never met Diana Barry? We can also take into consideration the real-life events and their outcome: battles, old kingdoms, celebrities (contemporary or from the past), etc. – similar to historical novels, where authors can only speculate about the events around specific character in chosen historical period.

Most of the fanfics are written to represent queer romantic relationships, whether it is about fictional characters or real-life celebrities. Authors use websites to "fix" queerbaiting that can be seen in the show for the sake of everyone to have some form of alternatives. Shows like *Merlin* (2008–2012), *Supernatural* (2005–2020), *Voltron: Legendary Defender* (2016–2018), *Sherlock* (2010–2017) or *Hannibal* (2013–2015) have their story of queer-coding and queerbaiting and the history of "furious" fans that decided to take matters into their own hands and create their own alternative stories about their favorite characters. Queer coding is similar to queerbaiting, it is the sub-textual portrayal of a queer character in the media whose identity is not explicitly confirmed within canon. This concept refers to a character that encapsulates what might be considered "queer traits" that are recognizable to the audience but are never labeled or claimed by the content creator (White, Pai, 2021).

Moreover, thanks to fanfics one can focus on a particular character or trope (tags, keywords used to describe the story) that fans specifically enjoy with a guarantee that they will like it. It is the opposite of starting a new book series or TV show, where we are not sure of whether we will

like it or not. The fanfiction stories people choose are usually connected to the character and specific scenarios that they enjoy in the content (movie, TV show, book) they are watching or reading.

It is interesting that most young people tend to read fictional stories that are just as, if not more, traumatic as the world we live in. Why do shows like *Attack on Titan* (2013–2023, Hajime Isayama), *The Walking Dead* (2010–2022), *The 100* (2014–2020), *The Last of Us* (2023), and other dystopian, horror or end-of-the-world or post-apocalyptic stories are the ones that are the most popular to watch? We already have to watch terrible news everywhere, so why would one try to make themselves cry? Perhaps, it is connected to “It can’t get worse than this” perspective – a sentence that is usually used as a manner of reassuring ourselves that we have already reached the deep end of sadness or bad luck, it can only get better. In this specific example, I think of people who read or watch dark-themed media to feel numb enough to do chores, daily routine – one watched their favorite character die, and now needs to do their class assignment to forget about this event. That is another thing that is worth studying: What drives people to do this? Why do we tend to accept the non-realistic terror on a screen more than the one that’s actually happening?

Dangers

Every action has its consequences, and the tendency of young people to escape to the realm of fiction is surely an action with potentially harmful effects. It has already been said that there is a thin line between enjoying something and being completely obsessed with it, but the question is: Where to draw the line? Some people might get addicted to consuming new types of media. They crave new stories. It is a vicious cycle in which an individual discovers, for example, a new TV show, later search for information, new music, associate the characters or celebrities with songs, imagine head canons, etc. Unfortunately, after some time, a person might start to feel bored. The feeling of “how many times can I watch the same thing?” and overstimulation (where senses are overloaded with information and content) could be observed. Then, one finds another story and the circle continues. They crave excitement and “fresh” content.

All of this combined, as well as the time one spends on watching, reading, etc. could lead to internet addiction. Just as it can be seen on the examples of teenagers who play video games, it can go both ways: healthy and unhealthy. As was stated before, there is absolutely nothing wrong with spending one’s spare time on the media. The problem starts

when one does not think about anything else, cannot restrain oneself, neglects one's duties, basically one withdraws into themselves. Such behavior might lead to ignorance of events around oneself, maybe even decreasing empathy, and giving a false sense of "getting better" or "stabilizing" one's mental health. Furthermore, there is the issue of maladaptive daydreaming, the FoMO (fear of missing out) – where a person feels desire to stay connected with / to participate in the events, happenings, because of the fear of missing out on information, events, and connections they may encounter (Przybylski et al., 2013: 23).

It is safe to say that internet consumption addiction is definitely the biggest danger in this area as it has effects on both our mental and physical health. *The Dark Side of Social Consumption* study, written by Darrell Bartholomew and Marlys Mason, where the researchers show the results of several gaming consumption studies, proves the harmful effects of virtual addiction: neglecting duties, depression, sleep deprivation, etc. There is a possibility that, outside of the obvious ones, there are more problems connected to the escapism, but it still needs to be studied more. Nevertheless, this area is still hard to do research on. How many of the people who publish their stories on social media actually shift or just develop imaginary scenarios in their mind? Can we classify some of them as addicted and perhaps halfway in developing a mental disease? How do we group them? Escaping into the world of fiction, literature, mass media, and fanbase-related topics are the fields that are fascinating to do research on and collect data from, especially because of constant development of new trends, rules and standards in them.

Conclusions

Nobody should be blamed for trying to look after themselves and their wellbeing in a world full of global disasters. Thanks to, or rather because of, social media, the members of society are more exposed to everyday tragedies than they were before. Nowadays, small sources of happiness like pop idols or fiction help to provide it. The moment of serenity that shields one from the world outside, and the idea of insulating from the stress factors sounds captivating for a lot of young people who crave the sense that they have control over something. Furthermore, thanks to various representations of culture, race, gender or sexuality, teenagers feel acknowledged, heard and seen by society. Their daily struggles do not seem as something foolish and petty, they actually show them that everyone is facing problems on a smaller or larger scale.

To reiterate, escapism is not and should not be always considered bad, but it should not be treated lightly. Fan activity, writing alterna-

tive stories, watching television can bring pleasure and be a simple form of entertainment. If leisure time is dosed correctly, it can be just a relaxing way of finding the balance in life for anybody. Moreover, engaging in popular culture plays a part in culture making and social progress. Any social system needs a cultural system of meanings that serves either to hold it in place or destabilize it, to make it more or less amenable to change (Fiske, 2017: 1).

A lot of young people nowadays feel more open to sharing their traumatic experiences, or funny stories as their own way of coping on the internet via (dark) humor. Humor might be considered as one of the temporary solutions to manage through serious problems and with reality without actually facing it. It can be considered as a small glimpse into our true feelings that we experience while acting as we are completely fine. Individuals do not always wish to show all parts of themselves, rather prefer to show only the best parts. They play pretend, as if on stage, in roles assigned for a specific moment (a student in school, a daughter in household, potential work candidate), as to fit the scenario or place they are currently in. Much like in Goffman's (1980) dramaturgical perspective on interactions. The "I" that the individual wants to present can usually exclude the parts they struggle with, which involves avoiding the display of negative emotions, in order to fit into the social norm. As if the individual was to be criticized for showing the true "self" and prefers the ideal self, a term used to describe the self-concept the individual would most like to possess (Rogers, 1959: 200). It is easier to laugh about the traumatic experience that happened to one than to think about the impact it could have on us. The problems the world faces might change, as can particular defense mechanisms, but the desire to run off and shut down the issue, was and always will be visible in the individual, no matter the generation. Therefore, being completely out of touch is not healthy either, especially if it develops into addiction. One might lose the sense of reality and the ability to exist in the moment, the *real* moment. Individuals who entirely avoid confrontation with reality and do not acknowledge the issue's existence can and should be considered delusional. The procedure of escaping from the problems allows one to protect one's mental health by setting a certain barrier between "I" and the problem. Compared to the developing technology, man has not been and still is not able to develop a decent defense mechanism against such a large amount of information given to them or against the hurtful norms that they feel like they do not fit in. Humans need years to adapt to and resolve a traumatic experience. On the other hand, however, there is a massive issue of losing oneself in fiction and the resultant detachment from reality. The question arises here: What do we consider as socially acceptable limit of internet consump-

tion, and can it even be defined? Is there some definition that can tell when it is healthy and when it is not? The ways of coping and defense mechanisms differ depending on the generation, but it is still fascinating to see that they have always been there, just in different forms. In the 21st century, escapism has evolved into the issue of the participating in virtual world. Fan studies, social media and their effects on mental health are definitely themes to consider doing more research on. The issue of modern escapism is yet to be studied in depth.

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