

Displaying Fan Identity to Make Friends

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Abstract

This paper examines the functional benefits of being a fan as mediators between identification with the fan interest (i.e., fanship) and display of group membership to others. After a series of principal components analyses and a factor analysis on an initial pool of fandom function items, we arrived at a measure containing three factors representing the benefits of being a fan including (1) the purpose or meaning in life, (2) the escape from everyday life stressors, and (3) establishing and maintaining social connections. The relationship between identification with the fan interest (i.e., fanship) and display of fan identity was mediated by purpose in life and social connections. The results support the notion that fans display fan group membership to engender connections with friends and family.

Introduction

The purpose of the present study is to examine whether the different functions of fan participation (i.e., purpose in life, escape, social engagement) mediates the relationship between fanship, or the level of identification towards one's fan interest, and the display of fan group symbols, like the wearing of fan themed clothing. While previous research has indicated a variety of reasons fans are motivated to engage in their fan interests (Wann 1995), our focus was on examining the seeking of purpose in life, escape from stress, and seeking social connections as core motivating factors for fan engagement that would mediate the effects of identification on those displays. We hypothesise that social connections will mediate the association between fanship and displays of group identity. Specifically, displaying fan group identity may be an attempt to attract new friendships and maintain current relationships with others who share a similar fan interest.

Background

Fans are enthusiastic and ardent supporters of an interest (Reysen & Branscombe 2010). Within psychology, fan research has largely been limited to the examination of sport fans; however, outside of psychology fans and fan communities as a whole have been viewed through an expansive literature within the humanities from a number of different perspectives, including gamers (Jenkins 2006), sci-fi fans (Bacon-Smith 2000; Jenkins 1992; Hills 2002), and the rarer examinations of sport and music fans (Sandvoss 2005). These perspectives have also examined topics including the rise of academic fans (or aca-fans) (Booth 2013), active participation amongst fans within their communities and their interests (Shefrin 2004), and how increasing digital advances are influencing the nature of fan communities (Booth 2010; Jenkins 2006; Pearson 2010). These perspectives primarily view fan identification through their connection with their fan communities, or fandom. The psychological

literature, on the other hand, has primarily examined these communities through the lens of social identity (Reysen and Branscombe 2010) and the motivational factors for engagement in their interests and communities (Wann 1995). Additionally, within the psychological literature regarding fan identification there is a distinction between fandom, or identification with others who share their common interest (i.e. the fan community) and fanship, or identification with the interest itself (e.g. comics, video games, etc.).

Individuals seek out and participate in fan interests for a variety of reasons, such as entertainment, to escape the stresses of their day-to-day lives, or to fulfil a need for belonging and through this gain an array of positive benefits. One factor that may aid in achieving these various psychological needs is the display of fan related symbols, such as clothing. Research examining display and identification has been largely limited to the fields of communications (Hirt and Clarkson 2011), marketing and consumer research (Solomon 1983), business (Pratt and Rafaeli 1997; Shewer and Daneshvary 2011), and anthropology (Vigil 1988). In fan studies the display of items corresponds with cultural capital, first identified by Bourdieu (1984) and adapted to fan communities through popular cultural capital (Fiske 1992) and subcultural capital (Thornton 1995), by researchers seeking to explain how memorabilia and collectibles, including clothing and other display items, act as a means to display identity and status within fan communities (Hills 2002; Jenkins 1992). For Jones (2014, 2015), the display of fan identity through fannish tattoos, while tied to cultural capital, acts in part as an expression and tie to one's personal identity and also as a connection to one's fan community (a part of the 'collective fannish memory'). In psychology, this dual connection is understood within research on optimal distinctiveness theory. Researchers examining optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer 1991), show that displays of fan identity offer the benefits associated with ingroup belongingness (Haggard and Williams, 1992) and a sense of uniqueness (Chan, Berger, and Van Boven 2012). Within fan communities, while the use of fan displays may offer both belongingness and a sense of uniqueness, how these factors relate to the perceived functions of fandom involvement (sense of

purpose/inspiration, escape/entertainment, and belongingness) has not been examined. In the present study, we examine three functions of fan membership (purpose, escape, social connections) as mediators of the relationship between identification with one's fan interest and the display of fan symbols.

Identity and Motivation

Within psychology, the majority of research conducted regarding fan behavior focuses on sport team identification (Hirt and Clarkson 2011; Schimmel, Harrington, & Bielby 2007; Wann and Branscombe 1990). Reysen and Branscombe (2010) suggest that team identification is best captured by the concept of fanship—the degree of psychological connection with one's fan interest—and distinguish it from fandom, the degree of psychological connection with other fans. For sport fans, greater team identification is associated with a greater willingness to purchase tickets and attend games (Murrell and Dietz 1992; Wakefield 1995) even when the team is performing poorly (Wann and Branscombe 1990), purchasing licensed team merchandise (Lee and Ferreira 2011), donating to charity (Platow, Durante, Williams, Garrett, Walshe, Cincotta, and Barutchu 1999), and superstitious behaviours (Wann et al. 2013). A fan's degree of identification is also related to psychological benefits, including positive well-being, self-esteem, and life satisfaction (Mock, Plante, Reysen, and Gerbasi 2013; Plante, Roberts, Reysen and Gerbasi 2014a; Wann, Waddill, Polk, and Weaver 2011).

Beyond the benefits associated with being a fan, such as greater well-being, fans are motivated to participate in the fan interest for a variety of reasons. Early research examining sport fan motivations place entertainment and escape, through stress relief, as the strongest factors predicting identification as a fan (Fisher and Wakefield 1998; Hirt and Clarkson 2011; Wann 1995). Fans of music and media are more likely to use characters, stories, or prominent individuals within their fan interest as a focus for self-reflection to compare with their own behaviours, world views, and as a platform for emulation (Click, Lee, and Holladay 2013). Cosplayers (individuals who design and dress in costumes, often portraying characters in television or games), on the other hand, focus less on

self-reflection than on social interaction, with a majority reporting that they coordinate their costumes with others and that they strongly perceive cosplay as a social activity (Rosenburg and Letamendi 2013). Bronies (adult fans of the television show *My Little Pony*) report fandom as an outlet for creativity and inspiration (Edwards, Griffin, Chadborn, and Redden 2014), as a place to find answers and meaning in their lives (Griffin, Edwards, Langley, Redden, and Chadborn 2015), and some as a means to cope with stress and maintain positive psychological health (Redden, Edwards, Griffin, Langley, and Chadborn 2015). Moreover, research examining furry fans (those interested in anthropomorphic art and cartoons), has shown fandom to be a place to seek self-acceptance and affiliation to reduce stress concerning their own social identities through interpersonal interaction (Mock et al. 2013).

These factors all represent ways in which participation in a fan interest can offer benefits to fans. For some fans this participation provides a purpose in life and inspiration. In some this is generated through the source material which may inspire the production of art, music, or other works (Hernández 2011; Hills 2014; Manifold 2009), from both the fandom itself as both a model for behavior and a source for new ideas (Edwards, Griffin, Chadborn, and Redden 2014) and from celebrities (e.g. music artists, voice actors) fans admire or may want to emulate (Click, Lee, and Holladay 2013). Additionally, participation in a fan interest may also provide fans a means of escape from the stresses of everyday life. Experiencing the positive emotions and thrills that come when a team is victorious offers fans an outlet and motivating factor for engaging in their fan interest, which additionally boosts personal self-esteem in relation to one's social group in the process (Gantz and Wenner 1981; Wann 2006). Furthermore, some fans look to their interest to feel positive stress (or eustress) which comes in the form of uncertainty and suspense before a crucial play in sport, a cliffhanger at the end of a television episode, or a challenging moment while playing a game (Hirt and Clarkson 2011; Wann 1995).

Finally, participation may offer fans increased social engagement. In both sport and non-sport fans,

a need for companionship and a sense of group affiliation act as strong motivators for fan identification and membership and the ability to maintain or grow social connections and friendships as a result (Hirt and Clarkson 2011; Mock et al. 2013; Wann 1995). Within fan studies, a connection to one's community or interest has a long history regarding its relationship with the display of that identity. Hills (2002) describes displays of cultural capital, which can include artefacts and display items as a means for emerging or proto-fans, those who may be entering fandom or be new to the interest, as utilising display in order to achieve group status and bolster identity and recognition from others. Additionally, the displays become less about displaying identity to the world, but with more distinct or obscure displays, they mark the individual as a fan only by others who share the appropriate knowledge to recognise them (Norris and Bainbridge 2009).

Displaying Fan Identity

Fans often display to others, through clothing or other artefacts (e.g., pins, buttons, clothing), their membership within fan communities (Borer 2009; Levine, Prosser, Evans, and Reicher 2005). These fan displays act as an important factor regarding both personal and group identity creation (Banister, Hogg, Decrop, and Roux 2005), offering a level of personal connection and ability for one to stand out while offering a distinct connection to one's in-group, consistent with optimal distinctiveness theory. Concerning display, this is supported in fan studies literature as well by Laurence Grossberg's (1992) argument that these displays of identity show an emotional investment with a fan's interest that exists not only as expression but as a physical tie to one's personal identity and past experiences as much as it exists as they are a connection to the community as a whole. Additionally, these displays also show group connection and the vast literature by Lincoln Geraghty (2014) who notes that the collections and displays of memorabilia, including clothing and other display artefacts, are a distinct way for fans to display their identities in the same way that a collector may use social media to show off the expansiveness of their collection; in a sense, this is a display of group knowledge, or cultural capital. It

allows group members immediate cues that the individual is a fan, has knowledge of the interest through their display, and based on how distinct, obscure, or specific that display is, also bestows status in line with the expression of cultural capital (Jones 2014).

Essentially, these displays of fan membership allow for the rapid transmission of those identities to other fans as well as allowing fans to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance as part of the group even when physical closeness to the larger group of fans is limited (Wann and Branscombe 1990). Previous research regarding consumer choices in brand names shows that the mediating factor in participant choice was the desire to signal one's identity and a need to be associated with their signalled group (Chan, Berger, and Van Boven 2012). The display of social symbols transmits information about one's tastes to others and serves as both approach (social identification) and avoidance (distinction) motivators for social interactions (Banister and Hogg 2004). Clothing, for example, provides important communication cues to others and is related to greater identification (Pratt and Rafaeli 1997), increased awareness of social norms regarding appropriate ingroup dress (Holt, 1995; Vigil, 1988), and influences positive attributions in others who may perceive one as similar (Byrne and Griffitt 1973; Chan et al. 2012; Derbiach, Decrop, and Cabossart 2002).

Current Study

To examine the interaction between these processes, fans from a variety of interests (e.g. sport, music, hobbies) completed a survey including measures of fanship, functions of fan interest (purpose, escape, social connections), and the extent to which they display their fan group identity to others. Prior research shows that fanship is related to greater display of group symbols (Plante et al. 2014b). Although there are many reasons that fans participate in their fan interest (Wann 1995), we focus on three motivations or functions of being a fan. We hypothesise that social connections will mediate the association between fanship and displays of group identity. Specifically, displaying fan group identity may be an attempt to attract new friendships and maintain current relationships with others who share a similar fan

interest.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants (N = 2525, 73.6% women; $M_{\text{age}} = 22.49$, $SD = 7.14$)¹ included undergraduate students participating for partial course credit or extra credit in a psychology class at Southeastern Louisiana University and fans solicited from a variety of online fan websites and forums. Participants indicated their ethnic/racial category as White (70.5%), African American (14.7%), multiracial (8.3%), Asian (2.5%), Hispanic/Latino (2.1%), Indigenous Peoples (1.3%), or other (0.8%). All participants were given informed consent, explaining the nature of the study and their rights as participants in regards to the guidelines set forth by the American Psychological Association. Following the informed consent, the participants indicated their favourite fan interest, participants rated their degree of identification with their fan interest (fanship), perceived functions of being a fan, and the level of display of fan identity.

Materials

Fanship

To assess identification with one's fan interest we adopted 11 items from prior research (Reysen and Branscombe 2010). The measure contains 11 items (e.g., 'I am emotionally connected to my fan interest', 'My fan interest is part of me') using a 5-point Likert-type response scale, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* ($\alpha = .89$).

Fandom Functions

To assess dimensions of functions that fandom provides, we constructed 21 items. This initial pool of items included a variety of possible functions such as escapism, friendship, purpose in life, inspiration. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, from 1 = *not at all true* to 5 = *very true*.

Display

Two items ('I purchase and/or wear/display items associated or identified with the fandom [dvd, toys, clothing, etc.], 'I share my experiences and/or fan interest with nonmembers of the fandom [nonfans]')

were combined to assess the degree that participants display their fan identity to others ($r = .40, p < .001$). Participants rated the items on a 5-point scale, from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very frequently*.

Results

Fandom Function Dimensions

To explore the possible underlying factors concerning the functions of fandom items referenced above, we first split the dataset randomly in half, creating two samples. In the first sample we conducted principle components analyses to reduce the number of items. In the second sample we conducted a factor analysis. Because we expected the factors to be related, we used oblimin rotation for the analyses. After removing items with low loadings or loading on multiple factors, we arrived at a final scale containing three factors as suggested by eigenvalues and scree plot (see Table 1 for factor loadings). Factor 1 contained items reflecting fandom providing a sense of

purpose in life (eigenvalue = 6.47, percent of variance accounted for = 46.18). Factor 2 contained items reflecting fandom providing an escape from everyday life and stress (eigenvalue = 1.53, percent of variance accounted for = 10.89). Factor 3 contained items reflecting establishing and maintaining social connections (eigenvalue = 1.17, percent of variance accounted for = 8.33). In the second sample the factor structure was replicated, offering support for the three factors initially described: Factor 1, purpose (eigenvalue = 6.57, percent of variance accounted for = 46.94), Factor 2, escape (eigenvalue = 1.51, percent of variance accounted for = 10.75), and Factor 3, social connection (eigenvalue = 1.18, percent of variance accounted for = 8.40).

Preliminary Analyses

Having constructed three subscales relating to seeking a sense of purpose in life (Factor 1, $\alpha = .91$), escaping stressors (Factor 2, $\alpha = .80$), and seeking social

Table 1

Factor Loadings for Fandom Functions Scale

Item	Sample 1			Sample 2		
	F1	F2	F3	F1	F2	F3
1. Provides me with an opportunity to grow and discover more about aspects of myself.	.911	.009	-.096	.900	-.015	-.065
2. Provides me with answers/information/guidance I need to face situations in my life.	.801	-.106	-.030	.680	-.053	.059
3. Provides me with an experience of captivating beauty and inspiration.	.800	.136	-.090	.837	.053	-.128
4. Provides me with a sense of fulfillment as I feel like something is missing when I am not involved.	.747	-.073	.153	.636	-.034	.211
5. Provides me with an opportunity to express myself and my uniqueness.	.733	.073	.122	.714	.037	.126
6. Provides me with an outlet for my creativity.	.697	.168	-.034	.676	.140	-.034
7. Provides me with a focus or sense of purpose.	.689	-.048	.273	.588	-.005	.296
8. Provides me with a break from life's stresses.	-.079	.898	.080	-.053	.924	-.009
9. Provides me with an engaging and entertaining experience.	-.092	.841	.145	-.077	.763	.140
10. Provides me with a good laugh and/or cry.	.160	.651	-.183	.186	.521	-.056
11. Provides me with a chance/way to retreat from difficult life situations.	.319	.571	.040	.340	.460	.010
12. Provides me an opportunity to share with my family and bring us closer.	.014	-.106	.826	.058	-.069	.593
13. Provides me with an activity to share with my existing friends/ ways to stay connected.	.065	.287	.668	-.008	.240	.657
14. Provides me with a chance to expand my circle of friends.	.290	.206	.532	.246	.211	.437

Note. Sample 1 principle components analysis, Sample 2 factor analysis (both using oblimin rotation).

Table 2
Means (Standard Deviation) and Correlations

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	Mean (SD)
1. Fanship	--	--	--	--	--	3.26 (0.89)
2. Purpose	.67	--	--	--	--	2.92 (1.11)
3. Escape	.57	.56	--	--	--	3.94 (0.94)
4. Social	.60	.58	.47	--	--	3.06 (1.07)
5. Display	.68	.48	.42	.56	--	3.18 (1.06)

Note. All correlations significant at $p < .001$.

connections (Factor 3, $\alpha = .70$), we next examined the relationships between the assessed variables. As shown in Table 2, all of the assessed variables were positively correlated with one another.

Mediation

Finally, to examine whether establishing and maintaining friendships (face-to-face and online) mediates the relationship between fanship and dimensions of fan display we conducted a series of mediation analyses using Preacher and Hayes' (2008) macro (bootstrapping with 5,000 iterations). This procedure examines whether or not a third variable mediates or influences the relationship (β) between two variables (e.g. identification and display). Fanship significantly predicted displaying fan display ($\beta = .68, p < .001$), the purpose function ($\beta = .67, p < .001$), the escape function ($\beta = .57, p < .001$), and the social function ($\beta = .60, p < .001$) showing that increases in identification also increased likelihood for displaying fan identity and the motivations for joining a fan community as predicted in previous research. The purpose function negatively predicted display ($\beta = -.05, p = .022$), social function positively predicted display ($\beta = .25, p < .001$), while the escape function did not significantly predict display ($\beta = .01, p = .708$). The results show that while a motivation to belong increased willingness to display fan identity through a positive relationship, a motivation for seeking purpose reduced display,

through a negative one, and seeking catharsis or escape from stress showed no relationship between the two factors. Inclusion of the mediators (see Table 1) significantly reduced the association between fanship and display of symbols ($\beta = .56, p < .001$) as indicated by the absence of zero between the 95% confidence interval (CI) at the $p < .05$ (two-tailed) level (CI = .105 to .185). Furthermore, seeking a sense of purpose (CI = -.070 to -.005) and social connections (CI = .150 to .206) functions were significant mediators, while escape (CI = -.022 to .029) was not. When controlling for the influence of the motivations for joining a fan community, while the escape function did not change, the influence of identity increasing display, both the purpose and the social functions, did, showing that they influence the strength of the relationship between identification with one's interest and willingness to display fan artefacts, offering support that social motivations for belonging account for a statistically significant portion of why individuals display fan artefacts.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess the motivating factors of fan involvement and to examine their relationships as potential mediators between identification in fan interests (fanship) and the display of those interests in clothing or other symbols. The current study supports previous research (Plante et

al. 2014b), indicating that greater fan identification is related to a greater likelihood of displaying group symbols. The present findings suggest that the need to maintain and seek out new friendships is the mediating factor in this relationship. The results support our hypothesis that increasing displays of one's fan interest is due to a motivation to attract others who share similar fan interests.

Clothing and other displays of identity are associated as both signals for group membership and individual uniqueness (Jones 2015; Vigil 2015). For fans, they in part serve a purpose to attract others who share their interest to increase their chances for new friendships. These new friendships are likely to further facilitate the other reported purposes of fan involvement as well, allowing more opportunities to engage in fan related activities with an expanded social group. And while entertainment/escape and purpose/inspiration do not appear to act as mediating factors between fanship and display, increased opportunities for fan related activities, through new friendships, may help to meet these additional needs as well. These new friends allow for more opportunities to interact with one's fan interest increasing entertainment/escape or to discuss new ideas and works to increase inspiration.

Previous research has examined the relationship between clothing and other displays and how they impact sense of identity and uniqueness, by seeing one's group as distinct. The feelings of distinctiveness can increase a fan's sense of belonging and, through that, offer the psychological benefits of group membership (e.g., well-being) (Reysen, Plante, Roberts, and Gerbasi 2015). However, while the previous research shows that sport, music, and furry fans seek out membership in a fandom based on the potential for distinctiveness, they also suggest that belonging was a stronger predictor for identification (Reysen et al. 2015), consistent with our findings. This need for belonging and to seek out new friends through fan displays, helps to increase group identity through the approval and support of like-minded individuals one interacts with (Reysen et al., 2015). And it is through the increase in ingroup identification, seen in a variety of fandoms, that opportunities for benefits such as self-esteem (Plante et al. 2014a),

well-being (Wann et al., 2011), and stress reduction (Mock et al., 2013) are afforded.

The purpose/inspiration factor showed a negative relationship with displaying one's group identity, and was a significant mediator. The results suggest that displaying one's fan identity is not due to participation in the fandom for purpose or inspiration. While it is unclear exactly why this relationship is present, examining the two sides to the purpose factor may offer some explanation. One explanation may be apparent regarding the presence or searching for meaning in life, which may change the nature of willingness or need to display fan identity if meaning in life is already well established. This is not to say that it would cease the display of fan identity, but this could change the likelihood or extent to which individuals display their identities, as individuals who have a stronger sense of their own self and place in the world may have less of a need to show that identity off. Although using displays to increase social interaction focuses more on the development and strengthening of group identity, seeking purpose or meaning may focus more on affective involvement or the connection to past experiences and nostalgia regarding collecting and display noted in previous fan studies research (Geraghty 2014; Grossberg 1992; Jones 2014, 2015) or correspond more towards the development of personal identity. This may also be similar to religious quest motivation, in which the individual is more concerned with the examination of existential questions and the development of one's views rather than a focus on intrinsic/extrinsic motivators (Beck and Jessup 2004). On the other hand, the motivation to seek purpose may also be expressed through displays other than clothing and worn symbols. With fans reporting increased inspiration to create art, music, and literature related to their fan interest or through the collection of memorabilia, these works could be seen as displays that our current study did not utilise in our definition and while this focus could offer promising findings within psychology, the study of creative engagement of fan members has both a rich history and an expansive body of research within sociological and cultural studies that should not be overlooked (Hills 2014; Jenkins 1992; Manifold 2009; Pearson 2010).

Beyond showing that seeking friendship is the mediating factor between fandom and displaying one's identity, the present results also inform our understanding of motivations, or functions, of fandom membership and participation. The factor analyses of the various possible motivations to participate in a fandom showed three factors: (1) purpose in life, (2) escape from everyday life, and (3) social connections. The escape and social connections factors that emerged are consistent with previous research, which has focused heavily on fans' needs for entertainment and escape, through stress relief (Hirt and Clarkson 2011) and to seek out and maintain friendships through a need for belong (Mock et al. 2013; Wann, 1995). Additional support was also found for a third factor for fan interest involvement, seeking purpose, a sense of meaning in life, and inspiration from either the interest itself or other fans. This third factor, which has been shown in limited research in the past (Edwards et al. 2014), may also correspond to larger reports of fans using their interests to produce new works of music, art, and literature. The present results also showed that fans' degree of identification with their fan interest is strongly related to each of these three motivations.

Despite the novel findings of the present research, there are limitations to consider when interpreting the results. First, we only examined clothing and other visible artifacts (e.g. pins or buttons) as displays of fan group membership. Future research may also examine other ways in which fans may display their interest through gestures, language, or through works of physical or online displayed art, music, or literature. Second, the participants sampled in the present research were recruited from online fan communities and a single university. This may limit the generalisability of the results as fans in other cultural spaces may report different attitudes. Future research may also examine specific fan communities rather than fans in general. Third, the present research is correlational. Thus, we are unable to examine causal relationships. Future researchers may manipulate one's degree of fandom to examine the effect on friendship motivation and intention to display one's fan identity.

In conclusion, the results of the present

research show that fans' desire to make and maintain friendships mediates the relationship between the degree of psychological connection with the fan interest (i.e., fandom) and the extent fans display ingroup symbols. Displays of group symbols may help fans seek out like minded individuals in order to increase positive social interactions and make new friends. Furthermore, the present results suggest three motivations to participate in a fan interest: purpose in life, escape from everyday life, and social connections. Given the importance of fan interests in individuals' lives, further research examining the underlying motivations for fan engagement is warranted.

Notes

¹ N represents the total number of participants; M_{age} represents the mean or average age of participants; SD represents the standard deviation from the mean.

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