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Better Together: Social Connections Mediate the Relationship Between Fandom and Well-Being

Stephen Reysen¹, Courtney Plante², Daniel Chadborn¹

¹Department of Psychology, Texas A&M University-Commerce, Commerce, Texas, USA

²Department of Psychology, MacEwan University, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

Email address

stephen.reysen@tamuc.edu (S. Reysen)

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Abstract

We examined associations between ingroup identification with one's fan community, perceived social connections gained through engagement in the fan interest, and well-being. Fans of a variety of different interests completed measures regarding degree of fandom with a favorite fan interest, functions of fandom engagement, and well-being. The results showed that ingroup identification was positively related to well-being. Fans' motivation to participate in the fan community for social connections, but not purpose in life or escapism, mediated the relationship between ingroup identification and well-being. The results support prior fan, and general group, research concerning the benefits of membership in groups. Furthermore, the results highlight the important psychological needs and well-being gained through engagement with fan communities.

1. Introduction

The groups we belong to powerfully affect the way we think, feel, and behave (Hogg & Williams, 2000). Following a social identity perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), groups can provide members with positive distinctiveness and possibly with self-esteem. Given that groups serve this important function, and given the importance of social connections for our well-being (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008) it is hardly surprising that our group memberships play a role in our subjective well-being (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). More surprising, however, is the fact that even seemingly inconsequential recreational groups, such as fan-based communities, can contribute significantly to our well-being (Wann, 2006). In the present research, we assess the relationship between fan group identification and well-being and test whether the social connections fostered by such communities underlie this relationship.

1.1. Group Identification and Well-Being

Group membership affects members' health and well-being in a myriad of ways, including promoting norms associated with healthy behaviors, providing social support, or providing coping options (Haslam et al., 2009). For example, identification with one's school is associated with better well-being in students (Bizumic, Reynolds, Turner, Bromhead, & Subasic, 2009; Huo, Binning, & Molina, 2010) and positive adjustment to college (Clopton, 2012). Similar associations between group identification and well-

being have been found in groups ranging from activist groups (Klar & Kasser, 2009) to student athletes (Miller, & Hoffman, 2009).

While a multitude of explanations have been suggested for this relationship between group identification and well-being, one of the most often-cited is that groups provide social connections with like-minded others. For example, to reduce perceived isolation among elderly men in a nursing care home, Gleibs and colleagues (2011) formed a gentleman's club that met once every two weeks. Over the course of 12 weeks, residents who joined the club increased in their identification with the nursing home, with a corresponding increase in their well-being. As another example, religious affiliation has long been known to be associated with happiness, in part because religious individuals interact with, and meet, friends at religious functions (Lim & Putnam, 2010).

1.2. Fans and Well-Being

Fans are enthusiastic and ardent supporters of a fan interest (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). Fandoms – communities of fans – are ubiquitous in U.S. society, as illustrated by the prominence and recognizability of sports fans (e.g., Cheeseheads, fans of the Green Bay Packers). It would be easy to assume, due to their recreational – and sometimes silly – seeming nature (see the aforementioned Cheeseheads) – that fan-related activities are trivial and meaningless. Yet, for many fans, their fandom is more important to them and central to their identity than other traditional connections or relationships, such as one's residential neighborhood (Chadborn, Edwards, & Reysen, *in press*). Sport fans identify more strongly with their teams than with a particular religious group, school group, or community (Smith, Grieve, Zapalac, Derryberry, & Pope, 2012). In short, despite their seemingly superficial and trivial nature, fan groups can be substantive and meaningful for those who belong to them.

Building upon prior research showing that identification with a particular sport team is associated with well-being (e.g., Wann, Inman, Ensor, Gates, & Caldwell, 1999; Wann & Pierce, 2003), Daniel Wann (2006) proposed a team identification-social psychological health model. The model posits that the relationship between team identification and psychological well-being is mediated by temporary and enduring social connections (friendships) with other fans. Within the context of sport fans, evidence has been found linking identification with a sport team to collective self-esteem and reduced loneliness (Wann, Brame, Clarkson, Brooks, & Waddill, 2008). Other research shows that participants sampled at sporting events are less lonely and more satisfied with their social life than participants sampled at home (Wann, Martin, Grieve, & Gardner, 2008), while identifying with a local team (but not distant team) is associated with greater well-being (Wann & Weaver, 2009). However, when Wann and colleagues tested whether face-to-face friendships mediated the relationship between identification and well-being they were unable to find support for the model (Wann, Waddill, Brasher, & Ladd,

2015; Wann, Waddill, Polk, & Weaver, 2011).

Despite researchers being unable to find evidence for social connection mediating the relationship between team identification and well-being in the context of sport groups, there is reason to believe that such mediation may occur within non-sport fan groups. One prominent manner in which many non-sports fans (e.g., media fans) interact is at fan gatherings such as conventions, which provide members with a sense of social connection (Stieler & Germelmann, 2016). As such, for many media-based fans, fandom is associated with such social experiences which, in turn, are associated with greater well-being (e.g., music festival fans, Packer & Ballantyne, 2011). Studies of furies – fans of media featuring anthropomorphic animal characters – reveal that despite the stigma directed toward them, which should predict lower well-being (Pascoe & Richman, 2009), fandom identification is associated with greater both self-esteem and satisfaction (Mock, Plante, Reysen, & Gerbasi, 2013; Plante, Roberts, Reysen, & Gerbasi, 2014). This is due, in part, to the fact that many furies turn toward their ingroup for social support (Roberts, Plante, Gerbasi, & Reysen, 2015). And in fans of Japanese animation (i.e., anime) participants surveyed at a convention showed greater well-being compared to those surveyed online (Ray, Plante, Reysen, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2017). Face-to-face friendships formed with other anime fans was later found to mediate the relationship between connection to their interest in anime and well-being (Reysen, Plante, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2017a).

In short, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that social connections with other fans may mediate the relationship between fandom identification and well-being – at least in media fans. In the present study we test this relationship within a broad sample of fans, rather than within a single fan community. We also test whether social connection uniquely mediates this relationship when considered alongside other motivations for fan engagement.

1.3. Motivations for Fan Engagement

A plethora of different motivations drive our engagement with groups in general (Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge, & Scabini, 2006) and in fandoms specifically (Schroy *et al.*, 2016). For example, among sports fans, escape from daily stressors has been shown to motivate fan activities (see Schroy *et al.*, 2016), assisting with coping and ultimately better well-being. Chadborn, Edwards, and Reysen (2017) have likewise suggested that purpose or meaning in life brought about by the fan interest is also a motivation for many fans. Although not a motivation mentioned often by sport fan researchers, fan groups can provide norms regarding how to deal life circumstances, reducing uncertainty and, by extension, increasing a person's felt meaning in life (Hogg, 2000).

Among these different motivations for fan engagement, however, one of the main motivators has been shown to be the sense of felt belongingness provided by fan communities (Reysen, Plante, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2017a; Schroy *et al.*,

2016). Consistent with both optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991) and Wann's team identification-social psychological health model, it may be the case that a sense of belonging and felt connection to others in one's fan community mediates the relationship between fan community involvement and well-being.

1.4. Current Study

The purpose of the present study is to test whether social connections mediate the often-found relationship between ingroup identification with a fan community and well-being. Given that different results have been found for different fan communities in the past (e.g., sports fans and anime fans), we tested our proposed model in a sample of fans of a variety of different interests. All participants completed measures of fandom (i.e., ingroup identification), motivations for fandom engagement (i.e., purpose in life, escape, social connection), and well-being. Based on prior research concerning ingroup identification (e.g., Bizumic et al., 2009; Huo et al., 2010) and team identification (Wann, 2006), we hypothesize that ingroup identification with one's fan community will be positively associated with well-being. Furthermore, given that the relationship between identification with anime and well-being in anime fans has been shown to be mediated through face-to-face interaction with other fans (Reysen et al., 2017a), we hypothesize that social connections will mediate the relationship between fandom and well-being, even when assessed alongside other common motivations for fandom participation.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and Procedure

Participants ($N = 336$, 85.7% women; $M_{\text{age}} = 21.52$, $SD = 5.20$) included U.S. undergraduate students participating for partial or extra credit in a psychology course at Southeastern Louisiana University and fans solicited from online fan websites and forums. Participants all indicated what they were fans of (e.g., sport, music, media), as well as measures of their degree of identification with the community surrounding their fan interest (i.e., fandom). Participants also completed measures of their motivations for involvement with the fandom and well-being. Unless noted otherwise,

items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type response scale, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Fandom

Three items ("I strongly identify with other fans of this interest," "I am glad to be a member of the community of fans of this interest," and "I see myself as a member of the community of fans of this interest") were adopted from prior measures of ingroup identification (Reysen, Katzarska-Miller, Nesbit, & Pierce, 2013; Doosje, Ellemers, & Spears, 1995) and combined to assess fans' degree of psychological connection to the fan community ($\alpha = .94$).

2.2.2. Fandom Functions

To assess the different motivations underlying participants' engagement with their fandom, we adopted 14 items from previously published research (Chadborn et al., 2017). The measure contains three subscales assessing different reasons for participating in the fandom: purpose in life (7 items; e.g., "My involvement with this fandom provides me with a focus or sense of purpose;" $\alpha = .93$), escape from stressors (4 items, e.g., "My involvement with this fandom provides me with a break from life's stresses;" $\alpha = .86$), and social connections (3 items; e.g., "My involvement with this fandom provides me with a chance to expand my circle of friends;" $\alpha = .84$). Responses were made on a 7-point scale, from 1 = *not at all true* to 7 = *very true*.

2.2.3. Well-Being

To assess well-being, we included Kinderman, Schwannauer, Pontin, and Tai's (2011) BBC well-being scale. The measure contains 24 items (e.g., "I feel that I am able to enjoy life," "I am satisfied with my physical health") that assess three dimensions (physical, psychological, relationships) of well-being which, when combined, form an overall index of well-being ($\alpha = .96$).

3. Results

As a preliminary analysis, we first examined all correlations between the assessed variables (see Table 1 for correlations, means, and standard deviations). All variables were positively correlated with one another.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations.

Variable	Fandom	Purpose	Escape	Social	Well-Being
1. Fandom	--	--	--	--	--
2. Purpose Function	.48**	--	--	--	--
3. Escape Function	.52**	.67**	--	--	--
4. Social Function	.56**	.70**	.65**	--	--
5. Well-Being	.12*	.12*	.16**	.21**	--
Mean	5.03	4.36	5.31	4.62	5.04
Standard Deviation	1.57	1.67	1.47	1.62	1.14

Next, to examine whether motivations for participating in a fandom mediated the relationship between identification with the fan community and well-being, we conducted a

mediation analysis Preacher and Hayes' (2008) SPSS macro (bootstrapping with 5,000 iterations). As shown in Figure 1, purpose in life ($\beta = -.09$, $p = .277$) and escape ($\beta = .07$, p

= .356) did not significantly predict well-being, while social connections did ($\beta = .22, p = .009$). Inclusion of the three fan motivation variables as mediators significantly influenced the association between fandom and well-being (Direct effect: $\beta = .00, p = .968$) as indicated by the absence of zero in the 95% confidence interval ($CI_{\text{Indirect}} = .026$ to $.149$). Purpose ($CI = -.094$ to $.033$) and escape ($CI = -.038$ to $.092$) were not significant mediators, while social connections was ($CI = .002$ to $.176$).

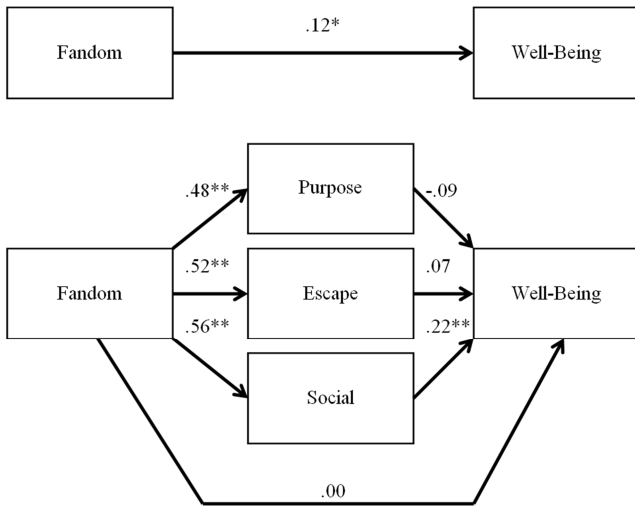


Figure 1. Functions of fandom engagement mediating association between fandom and well-being. Standardized betas presented. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

4. Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to test whether the social connections fans formed within their fan communities mediate the relationship between identification with their fan community and well-being. In line with our predictions and much of the existing fan literature, fans’ degree of fandom (i.e., ingroup identification) was positively associated with their well-being. More presently relevant, we also found that social connection uniquely mediated this relationship.

Past research with a variety of different groups shows that members’ degree of ingroup identification is associated with better well-being (Bizumic *et al.*, 2009; Huo *et al.*, 2010; Klar & Kasser, 2009). Similarly, sport fans’ degree of team identification (Wann, Brame, *et al.*, 2008; Wann & Polk, 2007), and anime fans’ degree of identification with anime (Reysen *et al.*, 2017a), are associated with well-being. The results of the present research are in-line with such studies in that identification with one’s fan community (fandom) was positively associated with well-being. However, the present results also expand upon past findings, which were specific fan groups (e.g., sport, anime) to show that the relationship is not an idiosyncrasy of any particular fan group.

Although there exist a variety of motivators for engaging in groups (Vignoles *et al.*, 2006), we reasoned that social connections should mediate the association between fandom

and well-being. Social connection is closely related to the concept of belongingness, which has been shown to be strongly associated with ingroup identification for furries (Reysen *et al.*, 2017b), anime and fantasy sport fans (Schroy *et al.*, 2016), and groups in general (Vignoles *et al.*, 2006). While Wann (2006) predicted, but was unable to find supporting evidence, that social connections with others is a likely mechanism of the identification and well-being association, we found, in accordance with Reysen *et al.* (2017a) and with Wann’s (2006) model, that social connections mediate the relationship between identification and well-being. It should be noted, however, that ingroup identification (i.e., fandom) was assessed in the present study rather than identification with one’s fan interest (i.e., fanship). In future studies, both fanship and fandom will need to be assessed to determine whether the present model differs when both facets of fan identity are considered.

The present findings yield several implications regarding fan groups. First, the results reinforce what fan researchers have said for years – that fan groups are a source of individual well-being. Presently, we highlight social connections as the mediating mechanism behind this relationship, but it should be noted that specific fan groups may provide other means of support, such as social support, practical aid (e.g., money, advice), and coping resources. Further research regarding specific types of aid and resources provided to fans across different fan groups is needed in future studies. Moreover, while prior research shows that fans in stigmatized groups (e.g., furries, anime) report adequate well-being due to social connections with others, the present results suggest that these trends operate in non-stigmatized fan groups as well. In other words, both stigmatized and mainstream fans may benefit from the social connection provided by their fan groups. Reysen and Branscombe (2010) argue that fan groups, regardless of specific fan interest, are more similar than different with respect to such psychological processes, and the present results add further support to this notion.

The present study is limited in several important respects. First, the study design is correlational. As such, we cannot make causal claims about the assessed relationships – that is, whether social connections are a consequence of fandom identification and, in turn, cause improvements in fan well-being. Future studies may experimentally manipulate the salience of one’s fan group membership or their felt sense of connection to their group to more directly test the causal relationship between these factors and perceived well-being. As noted in the introduction, sport (Wann, Martin, *et al.*, 2008) and anime fans (Ray *et al.*, 2017) report higher well-being when in the presence of other fans. Making one’s fan group salient may change reported well-being in a similar fashion.

The present study is also limited in its generalizability. While the study’s findings do generalize across different types of fan groups, given the broadness of the sample obtained, it should be noted that the present findings only assessed fans in the U.S. Given cross-cultural differences in

constructs such as independence or interdependence, it is entirely possible that the significance of social connection as a mediator of the relationship between fandom and well-being would tend to be stronger in East Asian cultures. It may thus prove fruitful to replicate the present study in a broader, more culturally diverse sample.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of the present research show, consistent with the existing literature, that there is a positive relationship between identification with one's fan community and well-being. Furthermore, social connection with other fans was shown to mediate this relationship. The results highlight the importance of fandom engagement and social connections for well-being and the benefits of being a fan. Given the importance of fan groups in individuals' lives and the growing prominence of fan communities with the advent of the Internet, studies such as the present one, which assess the outcomes of fandom participation are becoming increasingly important.

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