

Keywords

Activism,
Social Movement,
Prosocial,
Media,
Character Identification

Received: July 16, 2017

Accepted: July 26, 2017

Published: September 8, 2017

Activism, Character Identification, and Frequency of Watching *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*

Stephen Reysen¹, Daniel Chadborn¹, Courtney Plante²

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

²Department of Psychology, Iowa State University, Ames, IA, USA

Email address

Stephen.Reysen@tamuc.edu (S. Reysen)

Citation

Stephen Reysen, Daniel Chadborn, Courtney Plante. Activism, Character Identification, and Frequency of Watching *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*. *AASCIT Journal of Psychology*. Vol. 3, No. 2, 2017, pp. 12-16.

Abstract

We examined associations between activist behavior, character identification, and frequency of watching the television show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. Bronies—adult fans of the show—often reference the prosocial behavior exemplified by characters in the show and its prosocial messages and themes. Results from the cross-section study found that a history of activism predicted both frequency of viewership and identification with one's favorite character in the show. Identification with one's favorite character was also found to mediate the relationship between activism and frequency of viewing. The results reflect the prosocial correlates of media consumption, with implications for future research on prosocial television consumption.

1. Introduction

Fans are ardent and enthusiastic supporters of a particular interest (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). While the term “fan” usually conjures up images of sport fans (Reysen & Shaw, 2016), people can be fans of interests ranging from television shows to hobbies (e.g., scrapbooking, Barbie collecting). Research, particularly in disciplines such as communication and sociology, has studied activities of fans and has greatly expanded on the notion of active fans (Jenkins, 2014). However, this research tends to examine fan behavior as an outcome of fandom participation. In other words, theorists and researchers tend to treat fan activities as resulting from their connection to a fan interest. Presently, we examine whether the reverse may also hold true: That past social activism may be related to current viewership of a prosocial television show.

Activists are people who act in service of mitigating problems in the world (Barker, Martin, & Zournazi, 2008). Psychological research on activists and collective action often treats activism as an outcome, studying factors that predict activism (e.g., identity, moral concern, outrage, perceived effectiveness; Brunsting & Postmes, 2002; van Zomeren, 2013) or the factors that sustain social movements (e.g., Bettencourt, Dillmann, & Wollman, 1996). Far fewer studies address the outcomes of activism (Thomas & Louis, 2013), such as subsequent attitudes. What little research has been conducted on the subject has shown that activists are less religious, politically liberal (Sherkat & Blocker, 1997), lower in right-wing authoritarianism (Duncan, 1999), and report greater well-being (Glister, 2012; Klar & Kasser, 2009). Past activism has also been shown to be related to prosocial attitudes and behaviors, including intergroup empathy, valuing diversity, endorsing social justice, environmentalism, intergroup helping, and a felt

responsibility to act for the betterment of the world (Reysen & Hackett, 2017). In short, although there is a wealth of research examining how individuals become involved in activist movements, less research has examined variables related to activist behavior.

The idea that fan groups are associated with activism is hardly a new assertion: Fans and fan groups are often associated, directly or indirectly, with social causes (see Plante, Roberts, Reysen, & Gerbasi, 2014). Fans and content creators alike may establish community norms of helping and giving that encourage prosocial behavior among members of the fan community. As just one example, furies—fans of anthropomorphic art and cartoons—collectively raise thousands of dollars each year for environmental and animal rescue charities at fan conventions (Plante *et al.*, 2014). Beyond fans and the content creators, norm formation may also stem from prosocial messages in the media content itself. One could consider prosocial content to be a message to fans from the content creator, but it is not necessary for the creator to make a direct appeal to fans. Research on media content typically focuses on the effect that media consumption has on viewers (e.g., violent media and aggression, Anderson *et al.*, 2010; prosocial media and helping behavior, Prot *et al.*, 2014). However, a related body of literature also suggests that behaviors, attitudes, and traits may predispose consumers to prefer certain types of media (e.g., Coyne, 2016). As such, it is plausible that those with prosocial values who have participated in activist causes may preferentially seek out media content congruent with their worldview and beliefs. In the present study, we test this possibility among fans of the prosocial television show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*.

A longtime toy-marketing tool in the 1980s, *My Little Pony* is a television show that was rebooted in 2010 (Gilbert, 2015). The show contains themes regarding the importance of friendship, caring, tolerance, and empathy (Gilbert, 2015), and contains numerous feminist themes (Pramaggiore, 2015). As such, the content of the show can be considered prosocial in nature, given its emphasis on helping others, cooperation, and personal growth. Fans of the show who identify with the term “bronies,” are typically adult males (Gilbert, 2015) who are often stigmatized by non-fans for being non-prototypical of fans (Reysen & Shaw, 2016). Stigma toward fans often stems from those who mock adult male fans for enjoying a show meant primarily for young girls (Jones, 2015; Robertson, 2014). Despite considerable stigma, however, the fandom maintains the positive, prosocial norms of love and tolerance promoted by the show (Robertson, 2014).

Consistent with prior research on media effects, more frequent viewing of *My Little Pony* is associated with felt empathy and helping behavior among fans (Plante, Chadborn, Groves, & Reysen, 2017). Consistent with a social identity perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), identification with the bronie fandom is also associated with prosocial behaviors and charitable giving in accordance with the fandom’s norms

(Chadborn, Plante, & Reysen, 2017). To this end, consumption of the show and a sense of shared identity with other fans of the show are both related to helping behavior. In accordance with these findings, we hypothesize that the extent of one’s prior activism will also be positively correlated with the extent to which they view the show, given the match between their own attitudes and beliefs and the show’s prosocial content.

In addition to identifying with the show’s prosocial themes, it may also be the case that activists identify with individual characters within the show. To this point, character identification has been found to mediate media effects in other contexts (e.g., violent content, Lin, 2013).

Consistent with a social identity perspective, identification is commonly used to describe one’s degree of psychological connection to a group (Reysen, Katzarska-Miller, Nesbit, & Pierce, 2013). However, within fan research, individuals may be psychologically connected to both other fans (fandom) and to the object of the fan interest (i.e., fanship: Reysen & Branscombe, 2010) or a particular character (see Klimmt, Hefner, & Vorderer, 2009). Similar to identification with a group, greater identification with a show’s character means the character becomes part of the self. Viewers thus construe events happening to the character as if they were happening to themselves (Cohen, 2001; Sestir and Green, 2010; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2015).

Identification with a show’s character may also be associated with various outcomes. For example, identification with video game characters is associated with greater enjoyment of the game (Li & Lwin, 2016; Trepte & Reinecke, 2010) and with empathy and a variety of different motivations for playing (Van Looy, Courtois, De Vocht, & De Marez, 2012) and with the sheer amount of time players spend playing a game (van Reijmersdal, Jansz, Peters, & van Noort, 2013). The degree of similarity, particularly attitudinal similarity, is one of the key predictors of consumers’ identification with a character (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2015). In a non-game example, Eyal and Rubin (2003) assessed viewers’ trait aggression and identification with characters in a show. Participants’ degree of trait aggression predicted identification with more aggressive characters. In other words, viewers tend to identify with characters who are similar to themselves. Together, the results of the above research suggest that individuals are likely to select and identify with characters that match their own attitudes, which may in turn relate to the extent to which they consume and are influenced by the media which contain those characters. As such, there is reason to believe that identification with a character in the show may mediate the relationship between a person’s prior activist behavior and show-viewing behavior.

2. Present Research

The purpose of the present research is to examine the associations between prior activist behavior, identification with a character in a prosocial television show, and frequency

of show consumption in a sample of bronies. As noted in the above literature, activists not only work for the betterment of the world by seeking to mitigate injustices, but also endorse prosocial values such as intergroup empathy and helping. These values are exemplified in the television show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. Given the overlap in values endorsed by both activists and bronies, we hypothesize that greater past activist behavior in bronies will be associated with more frequent viewing of the show. Furthermore, we hypothesize that this association will be mediated by fans' degree of identification with a favorite character in the show. Each of the main characters in the show represents different prosocial values, such as friendship, honesty, and generosity (Robertson, 2014). To the extent that activist fans identify with these characters, they should find themselves more drawn to the show and thus view it more.

3. Participants and Design

Participants ($N = 564$, 88.8% male; $M_{age} = 24.78$, $SD = 6.96$) were self-identified bronies solicited from online fan related message boards and websites. As part of a larger survey regarding the brony community, participants completed measures regarding prior activist behavior, identification with a favorite character from the show, and frequency of viewing the television show.

4. Materials

Prior activist behavior. We adopted a measure of social activism behavior, from prior research (Reysen & Hackett, 2017). Participants indicated how active they have been throughout their life on five social causes and issues (poverty, women's issues, peace issues, civil rights issues, and human rights) on a 7-point scale, from 1 = *not active* to 7 = *very active* ($\alpha = .92$; $M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.61$).

Identification with favorite character. To assess participants' degree of identification with their favorite character from the show, we adapted three items ("I am emotionally connected to my favorite character," "I strongly identify with my favorite character," "My favorite character is part of me") from a prior measure of fanship (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). The items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type response scale, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* ($\alpha = .80$; $M = 4.74$, $SD = 1.54$).

Frequency of consumption. Participants completed a single item, adapted from past research (Reysen, Katzarska-Miller, Plante, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2016), to assess how frequently they watched the show. Response to the item "This past year, how often did you watch *My Little Pony*" included: 0 = *never*, 1 = *almost never*, 2 = *several times a year*, 3 = *once a month*, 4 = *once a week*, 5 = *a few times a week*, 6 = *once a day*, 7 = *many times each day* ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.13$).

5. Results

First, we examined correlations between the assessed

variables. Prior activist behavior and frequency of watching ($r = .11$, $p = .008$), activist behavior and identification ($r = .20$, $p < .001$), and identification and frequency of watching ($r = .23$, $p < .001$) were all positively correlated with one another. Next, we examined the hypothesized mediation model using Preacher and Hayes' (2008) SPSS Macro (with 95% confidence intervals and 20,000 iterations). As shown in Figure 1, prior activist behavior significantly positively predicted frequency of watching the show ($\beta = .11$, $p = .008$) and identification with one's favorite character ($\beta = .20$, $p < .001$), and identification with one's favorite character predicted frequency of viewing ($\beta = .22$, $p < .001$). The addition of identification significantly reduced the relationship between prior activist behavior and watching the show ($\beta = .07$, $p = .103$) as indicated by an absence of zero within the confidence interval of the indirect effect (.015 to .051). In short, identification with one's favorite character significantly mediated the relationship between bronies' prior activist behavior and frequency of watching the program.

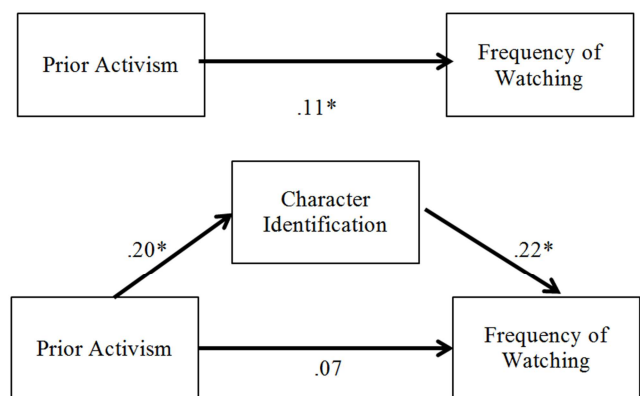


Figure 1. Mediation model of prior activist behavior predicting frequency of watching *My Little Pony* through identification with one's favorite character. * $p < .01$.

6. Discussion

The purpose of the present research was to test the association between prior activist behavior, character identification, and frequency of show viewing in a sample of bronies. Our first hypothesis, that prior activist behavior would be positively associated with frequency of viewing the show was supported. Activism was positively correlated with how often bronies watched the show. The second hypothesis, that character identification would mediate this relationship, was also supported by the data. When bronies' degree of identification with their favorite character was included in the model, the relationship between prior activism and frequency of viewership was reduced and the indirect effect was significant.

The results of the present research provide insight into an understudied fan community while extending prior research on activism and identification with media characters. While a large body of research has studied factors which predict activism and social movements, the present results hint at a possible outcome of prior activism. Building upon the

overlap between attitudes endorsed by activists (e.g., intergroup empathy and helping; Reysen & Hackett, 2017) and bronies (Plante *et al.*, 2017), we hypothesized that bronies with more past activism experience would watch the show more frequently. The results supported this notion and suggest a previously-unstudied, but theoretically-consistent outcome of activist behavior.

The present results also add to the growing literature on identification with media characters. Building upon Eyal and Rubin's (2003) work showing that participant characteristics predict identification with attitudinally-congruent characters, we predicted that prior activist work would predict identification with characters from the show. Given that the main characters in the show all represent prosocial values associated with harmonious social interaction, we suspected that bronies with prior activist work would more strongly identify with such characters, due to the perceived similarity of the characters to themselves. Prior activism was associated with character identification, which in turn mediated the association between activism and frequency of viewership.

Although the present research offers several modest additions to the existing literature, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the present research is correlational. As such, while we suggest that prior activism may play a causal role in future viewing of prosocial media consistent with existing research (e.g., Coyne, 2016), we cannot directly test this possibility with the current data. Given that the new version of the show has been airing since 2010, it is possible that watching the show has encouraged viewers to participate in activist behaviors in the recent past. We believe this is less likely, given that the wording of the activism question asks about lifelong activist behavior, but such a possibility cannot be ruled out. Future research could address this possibility by trying to retrospectively assess activism and frequency of show-viewing at multiple points in time, or, should the resources be available, by employing a longitudinal study design.

A second limitation of the present findings surrounds the limited assessment of activist work. There are a multitude of ways to participate in activism ranging from low-risk behaviors such as giving to charities to higher-risk behaviors such as sit-ins. Future research may distinguish between these different types of activist behaviors to determine whether there are meaningful differences in the type of activism a person engages when it comes to the relationship between activism and show viewing.

A third and final limitation of the present study involves its limited focus on fans of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. To be sure, we have little theoretical reason to suspect that the results of the present study would not generalize to other fandoms based around prosocial media. Nevertheless, we cannot rule out the possibility that the findings are idiosyncratic to the brony fandom. Future research may expand on the present research by testing for the present relationships among fans of other prosocial media or in fandoms with similarly prosocial community norms.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, we examined associations between prior activism, character identification, and frequency of show viewership in a sample of bronies. Given the prosocial nature of both the content of the television program and the efforts of activists, we hypothesized, and found that, prior activism was associated with frequency of viewing the show. Additionally, identification with one's favorite character from the show was shown to mediate that relationship. Given the ubiquity of fan communities centered around media, further research is needed to examine how individuals' past experiences may play a role in fan motivation.

References

- [1] Anderson, C. A., Shibuya, A., Ihori, N., Swing, E. L., Bushman, B. J., Sakamoto, A., Rothstein, H. R., & Saleem, M. (2010). Violent video game effects on aggression, empathy, and prosocial behavior in eastern and western countries: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, *136*, 151-173.
- [2] Bettencourt, B. A., Dillmann, G., Wollman, N. (1996). The intragroup dynamics of maintaining a successful grassroots organization: A case study. *Journal of Social Issues*, *52*, 169-186.
- [3] Brunsting, S., & Postmes, T. (2002). Social movement participation in the digital age: Predicting offline and online collective action. *Small Group Research*, *33*, 525-554.
- [4] Chadborn, D., Plante, C. N., & Reysen, S. (2017). *Perceived stigma, social identity, and normative behavior as predictors of prosocial behavior in a fan community*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- [5] Cohen, J. (2001). Defining identification: A theoretical look at the identification of audiences with media characters. *Mass Communication and Society*, *4*, 245-264.
- [6] Coyne, S. M. (2016). Effects of viewing relational aggression on television on aggressive behavior in adolescents: A three-year longitudinal study. *Developmental Psychology*, *52* (2), 284-295.
- [7] Duncan, L. E. (1999). Motivation for collective action: Group consciousness as mediator of personality, life experiences, and women's rights activism. *Political Psychology*, *20*, 611-635.
- [8] Eyal, K., & Rubin, A. M. (2003). Viewer aggression and homophily, identification, and parasocial relationships with television characters. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, *47*, 77-98.
- [9] Gilbert, A. (2015). What we talk about when we talk about bronies. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, *20*. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0666>
- [10] Glistler, M. E. (2012). Comparing neighborhood-focused activism and volunteerism: Psychological well-being and social connectedness. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *40*, 769-784.
- [11] Jenkins, H. (2014). Fandom studies as I see it. *Journal of Fandom Studies*, *2*, 89-109.
- [12] Jones, B. (2015). *My Little Pony*, tolerance is magic: Gender policing and the Brony anti-fandom. *Journal of Popular Television*, *3*, 119-125.

- [13] Klar, M., & Kasser, T. (2009). Some benefits of being an activist: Measuring activism and its role in psychological well-being. *Political Psychology, 30*, 755-777.
- [14] Klimmt, C., Hefner, D., & Vorderer, P. (2009). The video game experience as "true" identification: A theory of enjoyable alterations of players' self-perception. *Communication Theory, 19*, 351-373.
- [15] Li, B. J., Lwin, M. O. (2016). Player see, player do: Testing an exergame motivation model based on the influence of the self avatar. *Computers in Human Behavior, 59*, 350-357.
- [16] Lin, J.-H. (2013). Identification matters: A moderated mediation model of media interactivity, character identification, and video game violence on aggression. *Journal of Communication, 63* (4), 682-702.
- [17] Plante, C. N., Chadborn, D., Groves, C., & Reysen, S. (2017). *Prosocial media and helping in My Little Pony fans*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- [18] Plante, C. N., Roberts, S., Reysen, S., & Gerbasi, K. C. (2014). "One of us": Engagement with fandoms and global citizenship identification. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture, 3*, 49-64.
- [19] Pramaggiore, M. (2015). The taming of the bronies: Animals, autism and fandom as therapeutic performance. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 9*. Retrieved from <http://alphavillejournal.com/Issue9/HTML/ArticlePramaggiore.html>
- [20] Preacher, K. J., & Hayes, A. F. (2008). Asymptotic and resampling strategies for assessing and comparing indirect effects in multiple mediator models. *Behavior Research Methods, 40*, 879-891.
- [21] Prot, S., Gentile, D. A., Anderson, C. A., Suzuki, K., Swing, E., Lim, K. M., & Liau, A. K. (2014). Long-term relations among prosocial-media use, empathy, and prosocial behavior. *Psychological Science, 25*, 358-368.
- [22] Reysen, S., & Branscombe, N. R. (2010). Fanship and fandom: Comparisons between sport fans and non-sport fans. *Journal of Sport Behavior, 33*, 176-193.
- [23] Reysen, S., & Hackett, J. (2017). Activism as a pathway to global citizenship. *The Social Science Journal, 54*, 132-138.
- [24] Reysen, S., Katzarska-Miller, I., Nesbit, S. M., & Pierce, L. (2013). Further validation of a single-item measure of social identification. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 43*, 463-470.
- [25] Reysen, S., Katzarska-Miller, I., Plante, C. N., Roberts, S. E., & Gerbasi, K. C. (2016). *Examination of anime content and associations between anime consumption, genre preferences, and ambivalent sexism*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- [26] Reysen, S., & Shaw, J. (2016). Sport fan as the default fan: Why non-sport fans are stigmatized. *The Phoenix Papers, 2* (2), 234-252.
- [27] Robertson, V. L. D. (2014). Of ponies and men: My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic and the brony fandom. *International Journal of Cultural Studies, 17*, 21-37.
- [28] Sestir, M., & Green, M. C. (2010). You are who you watch: Identification and transportation effects on temporary self-concept. *Social Influence, 5*, 272-288.
- [29] Sherkat, D. E., & Blocker, T. J. (1997). Explaining the political and personal consequences of protest. *Social Forces, 75*, 1049-1076.
- [30] Tal-Or, N., & Cohen, J. (2015). Unpacking engagement: Convergence and divergence in transportation and identification. *Annals of the International Communication Association, 40*, 33-66.
- [31] Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33-47). Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- [32] Thomas, E. F., & Louis, W. R. (2013). Doing democracy: The social psychological mobilization and consequences of collective action. *Social Issues and Policy Review, 7*, 173-200.
- [33] Trepte, S., & Reinecke, L. (2010). Avatar creation and video game enjoyment: Effects of life-satisfaction, game competitiveness, and identification with the avatar. *Journal of Media Psychology, 22*, 171-184.
- [34] Turner, J. C., Hogg, M. A., Oakes, P. J., Reicher, S. D., & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- [35] U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2016, December 20). *Charts by topic: Leisure and sports activities*. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/tus/charts/leisure.htm>
- [36] Van Looy, J., Courtois, C., De Vocht, M., & De Marez, L. (2012). Player identification in online games: Validation of a scale for measuring identification in MMOGs. *Media Psychology, 15*, 197-221.
- [37] Van Reijmersdal, E., Jansz, J., Peters, O., & van Noord, G. (2013). Why girls go pink: Game character identification and game-players' motivations. *Computers in Human Behavior, 29*, 2640-2649.
- [38] Van Zomeren, M. (2013). Four core social-psychological motivations to undertake collective action. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 7*, 378-388.