

SPORT FAN AS THE DEFAULT FAN: WHY NON-SPORT FANS ARE STIGMATIZED

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Abstract

In the present study we examined the fan category prototype and associations between prototypicality of a fan, normality of fan interests, and prejudice toward fan groups. Participants reported their stereotypical image of a fan, rated fan categories (i.e., sport, music, media, hobby) concerning prototypicality, normality, and societal status, and rated 40 different fan groups on prototypicality, normality, and feelings toward fans (i.e., prejudice). The results supported the notion that sport fan is the default association with the category “fan.” Ratings of specific fan groups showed a strong association between viewing fan groups as prototypical of the category fan, perceiving the fan interests as normal, and positive prejudice toward fans in those groups. Overall, the findings suggest deviation from the fan prototype is related to viewing the fan interest as abnormal, which, in turn, predicts negative prejudice toward fans.

Keywords: fan, sport, prototype, stigma, prejudice, fandom

Sport Fan as the Default Fan: Why Non-Sport Fans Are Stigmatized

Prototypes are representations of categories that contain the various attributes and characteristics associated with the category (Smith & Zárate, 1992). For example, when asked to think of furry fans, individuals may automatically think about a person in a fursuit. In this instance the image of a fursuit is closely associated with the category “furry.” Prototypes, or the stereotypical characteristics associated with groups, highlight the within-group similarities and between-group differences (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, Wetherell, 1987). Non-furry fans most likely do not distinguish between different subgroups within the furry fandom (e.g., wolves, gamers, artists), but rather immediately imagine fursuits as prototypical of the category “furry.” Similarly, when thinking about the category of “leader,” individuals are likely to think of a male. The concept of a male as a leader in this instance is the default, or the automatic prototype associated with that category.

White is the default or prototypical association with the category “American” (Devos & Banaji, 2005). In other words, the ethnic identity most closely associated with the national category “American” is White (as opposed to other ethnic minority identities). The numerical and societal status of the default group contributes to the association within the cultural contexts in which individuals are embedded. One outcome of this automatic association is that individuals of ethnicities that are not White are viewed as less prototypical, less American, and more likely to face discrimination (see Devos & Mohamed, 2014). A second outcome is that the description of non-normative groups rely on comparisons with the default group, such as explaining why gays are different from the default heterosexual group (see Hegarty & Bruckmüller, 2013). Third, such prototypical associations can aid in legitimizing and furthering majority or high status group dominance (e.g., Sibley, 2010; Wenzel, Mummendey, & Waldzus, 2007). Thus, the default prototypes that are culturally constructed and consensually shared influence individuals’ perceptions and behaviors (Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta, 2014). In the present paper we examine the default prototype of the category “fan.”

A fan is an enthusiastic, ardent, and loyal admirer of an interest (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). This definition is broad because fans can be enthusiastic and loyal admirers of a multitude of diverse interests (e.g., rock climbing, politics, anime).

However, as suggested by Reysen and colleagues (in press), when asked to think about the category “fan,” the default prototype will likely be a sport fan. Sport is a ubiquitous fan interest with its own section of the newspaper and television news, television channels with dedicated nonstop coverage, and ever-present symbols worn by sport fans in everyday life. Being a sport fan contributes to the perceived popularity of individuals (End, Kretschmar, & Dietz-Uhler, 2004). Even within the psychological literature, sport fans are the dominant group investigated to explain fan phenomena (Schimmel, Harrington, & Bielby, 2007).

Recent research shows that fans of non-sport fandoms (e.g., anime/manga fans, bronies, furry fans) are the target of prejudice and stigmatization (Reysen et al., in press; Roberts, Plante, Reysen, & Gerbasi, 2014). Similar to research regarding the ethnic default of Americans as White, we suggest that non-sport fans are largely stigmatized because their fan interest deviates from the normative default of a “fan.” In other words, fans of interests that are further away from the default prototype of a “fan” will be viewed as abnormal, and fans of those interests will receive greater negative prejudice directed at them.

The purposes of the present study are to (1) examine the default prototype of the category “fan,” and (2) examine the associations between perceived prototypicality, normality, and prejudice regarding a variety of fan groups. Based on prior research examining the fan interests of hundreds of individuals (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010), we categorized fan interests into four types: (1) sport (fan of a team or individual playing a sport), (2) music (fan of a musical group or musician), (3) media (fan of a television show, movie, author, celebrity), and hobby (fan of playing a sport or a favorite activity, such as scrapbooking, dancing, cooking). As suggested by Reysen and colleagues (in press), we predicted that the default prototype of a “fan” would be a sport fan. We tested this prediction in two ways. First, we asked undergraduate college students to complete an open-ended writing task regarding their image of a stereotypical fan. We predicted that participants would mention a sport fan (vs. other types of fans) in their response indicating the strong association between a “fan” and sport. Second, participants were asked to rate the perceived prototypicality (i.e., the extent that the fan category is stereotypical of a fan), normality (i.e., the extent that it is normal to be a fan of that

category), and social status (i.e., the extent that fans of that category hold status within society) of categories of fan groups (sport, music, media, hobby). We predicted that the sport fan category (compared to music, media, or hobby categories) would be rated as prototypical of “fans,” viewed as more normal, would be perceived as holding higher status in society. Together, the results are expected to show that sport is the default prototype of a fan.

We also predicted that perceptions of prototypicality of a fan group, perceived normality of the fan interest, and positive feelings (i.e., positive prejudice) toward fan groups would be positively associated. Viewing fan groups as varying from the prototypical “fan” group is expected to predict viewing those groups as abnormal, which would then predict negative prejudice. In other words, perceiving fan groups as non-prototypical is expected to predict prejudice through the perception that the fan interest is abnormal. To test this notion, participants rated the prototypicality, normality, and feelings toward 40 fan groups (reflecting the four types of fan groups indicated by Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). We predicted positive correlations between prototypicality, normality, and positive prejudice. Additionally, we predicted perceived normality to mediate the relationship between prototypicality and prejudice.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants ($N = 264$, 77.3% women; $M_{\text{age}} = 22.98$, $SD = 7.93$) included undergraduate students participating for partial course credit or extra credit in a psychology class at Texas A&M University-Commerce. Participants indicated their ethnic/racial category as White (52.3%), African American (22.7%), Hispanic (15.2%), multiracial (4.9%), Asian/South Pacific Islander (3.4%), Indigenous Peoples (0.8%), or other (0.8%). Participants responded to an open-ended question regarding their perception of the prototypical or stereotypical fan. Participants then completed measures regarding perceived prototypicality and normality of fan categories and specific fan groups, followed by items regarding prejudice toward specific fan groups. Lastly,

participants rated the perceived status of fan categories within society and reported demographic information.

Materials

Open-Ended. To examine the fan categories that participants associated with a prototypical fan they were asked to describe a prototypical fan (“When you think a stereotypical or prototypical fan, what image comes to mind? e.g., What does this person look like? What is this person a fan of? How does this person express their interest as a fan?”). Responses were coded for whether the participant mentioned categories related to sport, music, media, hobby, or no specific fan category was mentioned (i.e., characteristics of a stereotypical fan were listed, but no mention of a specific fan category was mentioned).

General Category Ratings. To assess perceptions of general fan categories participants were asked to rate the prototypicality, normality, and societal status of sport, music, media, and hobby fan categories. To assess prototypicality (“When you think of a stereotypical or prototypical fan, to what extent do you think of a person who is interested in something related to each category?”) participants rated the fan categories on a 7-point Likert-type scale, from 1 = *definitely not a stereotypical fan* to 7 = *definitely a stereotypical fan*. To assess normality (“Please rate how normal you think it is to be a fan of the following interests.”) participants rated the fan categories on a 7-point scale, from 1 = *not normal* to 7 = *very normal*. To assess societal status (“Please rate the degree you think fans of the following interests hold status within society.”) participants rated the fan categories on a 7-point scale, from 1 = *very low status* to 7 = *very high status*. The categories included “sport,” “musician or musical group,” “movie,” “book,” “television show,” and “hobby.” The type of media (movie, book, television show) was combined to form an index for the media category (prototype $\alpha = .75$, normality $\alpha = .87$, status $\alpha = .83$).

Specific Fan Group Ratings. To examine the associations between fans of specific fan groups and perceptions of prototypicality, normality, and prejudice, participants rated 40 different fan groups. To assess prototypicality (“Please rate the

extent you view people who like the following things as prototypical fans.”) participants rated the fan groups on a 7-point Likert-type scale, from 1 = *definitely not a stereotypical fan* to 7 = *definitely a stereotypical fan*. To assess normality (“Please rate how normal you think it is to be a fan of the following interests.”) participants rated the fan groups on a 7-point scale, from 1 = *not normal* to 7 = *very normal*. To assess prejudice toward fans of the groups (“Please rate the degree of cold/warmth you feel toward fans of the following interests.”) participants rated each group on a feeling thermometer (Crandall, Eshleman, & O’Brien, 2002), from 1 = *cold* to 10 = *warm*. The 40 fan groups included 10 related to sport, 10 related to music, 10 related to media, and 10 related to hobbies (see Table 2 for a list of fan groups).

Results

Open-Ended

To examine whether sport fans were referenced more often than other fan categories in the open-ended responses regarding the stereotypical fan we examined the frequencies of categories in responses. As expected, sport fans were mentioned more often than the other fan groups: sport ($n = 127$, 50.8%), music ($n = 38$, 15.2%), media ($n = 28$, 11.2%), hobby ($n = 5$, 2.0%), characteristics of fans (e.g., devoted, emotional), no specific groups mentioned ($n = 52$, 20.8%). The results show that for just over half of participants sport fan was automatically activated when asked to think of the category “fan.”

General Category Ratings

To examine whether sport fans, in general, were perceived as a high status prototypical default category when thinking of fans, we conducted a series of repeated-measure ANOVAs. Sport fans were rated as more prototypical, more normal, and holding a higher societal status position than fans of other categories (see Table 1). Within-subjects contrasts showed that sport was rated significantly higher on the measures than

the other fan categories. Thus, when thinking of a “fan,” sport fans are the most prototypical, fans of sport are perceived as most the normal, and sport fans have higher status compared to fans of other interests.

However, because which sports or specific fan groups that are viewed as prototypical may differ depending on the cultural context, we also examined participants’ perceptions of specific fan groups. For example, in America, basketball and football may be popular sports, while in other cultural contexts cricket (e.g., India), volleyball (e.g., Bulgaria), or golf (e.g., business and political circles) may be more popular.

Specific Fan Group Ratings

To examine the associations between perceived prototypicality, normality, and positive prejudice toward fan groups, we first examined the correlations between the variables (see Table 2 for means and standard deviations of ratings of each specific fan group). Collapsing across all the fan groups, the measures ratings of prototypicality ($\alpha = .96$), normality ($\alpha = .97$), and prejudice ($\alpha = .96$) showed adequate reliability. Prototypicality was positively correlated with normality ($r = .42, p < .001$) and prejudice ($r = .35, p < .001$), and normality was positively related to prejudice ($r = .45, p < .001$).

To visualize these moderate to strong positive associations we constructed scatterplots of each. As shown in Figure 1, there is a clear trend showing a positive association between the perceived prototypicality of the fan groups and the perception of the fan group as normal. Four sports (i.e., football, basketball, baseball, soccer) were shown to be high on both prototypicality and normality. However, sports not commonly associated with high fanship in the cultural setting in which the participants were embedded (i.e., Texas), were found to be lower on both prototypicality and normality (e.g., cricket, tennis). Furthermore, specific music (e.g., Beatles, Michael Jackson), media (e.g., Hunger Games, Harry Potter), and hobbies (e.g., video games, hunting) were also rated relatively high on both prototypicality and normality.

As shown by the correlations between the variables collapsed across the fan groups, both perceived prototypicality and normality were positively associated with positive feelings toward fans of those fan groups (i.e., positive prejudice). As shown in

Figure 2, the greater the perceived prototypicality of the fan group the more positive feelings toward fans of that fan interest. Furthermore, as shown in Figure 3, the more normal the fan interest the more positive feelings participants expressed toward fans of that interest. The results tend to show that fan groups that are perceived as prototypical of the category “fan” and those fans that are perceived as normal are more liked than fans of groups that are not prototypical of fans in general and are perceived as abnormal. Furthermore, the visual representations show that not all fan groups are viewed as equivalent. For example, although sport was rated high on prototypicality and normality, when examining perceptions of specific sports, non-normal sports for participants (i.e., cricket, golf) showed low ratings. Thus, the results support the notion that what is prototypical is culturally situated.

To examine whether the perceived normality of fan interests accounts for the association between perceiving fan groups as prototypical of a “fan” and positive feelings for fans, we conducted a mediation analysis using Hayes’ (2013) PROCESS macro (bootstrapping with 5,000 iterations, 95% confidence intervals). The perceived prototypicality of the fan groups as “fans” predicted positive feelings toward fans in those groups ($b = .56, p < .001, CI = .377 \text{ to } .741$) and the perceived normality of the fan interests ($b = .42, p < .001, CI = .312 \text{ to } .536$). The perceived normality of fan interests predicted positive feelings toward fans ($b = .59, p < .001, CI = .400 \text{ to } .771$). When normality was included in the analysis, the association between prototypicality and positive prejudice was reduced ($b = .31, p = .001, CI = .123 \text{ to } .499$). The perceived normality of fan interests significantly mediated ($CI = .129 \text{ to } .392$) the association between prototypicality and positive prejudice (see Figure 4). In other words, perceiving a fan group as prototypical of the category “fan” predicts viewing the interest as normal, which then predicts positive feelings toward those fan groups.

Discussion

The purposes of the present study were to (1) examine the default prototype of the category “fan,” and (2) examine the associations between prototypicality, normality, and prejudice. We predicted, and found, support for the notion that sport fans are the default

prototype of a fan. Sport fans were spontaneously mentioned more often than other types of fan categories in open-ended responses describing the stereotypical fan. Furthermore, sport fans were rated as more prototypical of the category “fan,” being a sport fan was rated as more normal than fans of other categories, and sport fans were viewed as holding more societal status than fans of other categories. Additionally, we predicted, and found, moderate to strong positive associations between ratings of prototypicality of specific fan groups, perceived normality of fan interests, and felt positive prejudice toward fans of specific fan interests. Furthermore, the perceived normality of the fan interest mediated the relationship between the prototypicality of the fan interest for the category “fan” and prejudice toward fans of the interests. Together, the results support the notions that sport is the default category for a fan, and deviation from the prototype is related to prejudice toward non-prototypical fan groups.

Prior research examining default prototypes show the automatic association between values and categories has an impact on individuals’ perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (see Devos & Mohamed, 2014; Hegarty & Bruckmüller, 2013; Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta, 2014). Within American society, sport is a ubiquitous presence, not only in American media and everyday contexts, but also in the role sport plays in shaping social relations (End et al., 2004) and academic research (Schimmel et al., 2007). As shown in the present research, sport is mentioned more often than other fan interest categories (music, media, hobby) when describing a stereotypical fan. This result suggests the automatic association participants have between sport and the concept of a fan. Sport fans (vs. music, media, hobby) were perceived as more prototypical of a “fan,” participants perceived being a sport fan as more normal than being a fan of other fan interests, and sport fans were viewed as holding a higher status position in society than fans of other interests. Together, these results provide strong initial support for the notion that at least in American society, sport is the default fan. However, as noted in prior research examining ethnic-national prototypes (see Devos & Mohamed, 2014), what is prototypical is dependent on culture and can change over time.

To examine the associations between prototypicality, normality, and prejudice participants rated perceptions of 40 different fan groups representing the four types of fan interests. Moderate to strong correlations were found between the variables, and

normality was shown to mediate the association between prototypicality and prejudice. Importantly, as shown in scatterplots between the associations, not all fan groups within each type of fan interest were viewed equally. Rather than finding all of the sport groups rated higher than all of the other fan groups, the results showed variability in ratings within each category. For example, football, baseball, basketball, and soccer were near the top of the ratings. However, sports that are less popular within American society (e.g., cricket, golf) were rated as less prototypical and normal, and fans of these sports received less positive feelings. Hobbies that have gained popularity in recent years (e.g., video games, cooking) were rated highly, while hobbies that were once popular (e.g., stamp collecting, quilting), but no longer largely practiced in American society, received lower ratings. These results highlight both the cultural and temporal variability of perceptions of what is prototypical. Despite this variability, overall, the results show that what is prototypical is normal and liked, while what is non-prototypical is seen as abnormal and stigmatized.

Although the results of the present study aid in explaining why some fan groups (e.g., bronies, anime, furies: Reysen et al., in press; Roberts et al., 2014) are stigmatized, there are limitations to consider when interpreting the results. First, the present study relied on explicit ratings of fan categories and fan groups. Future research, similar to studies examining the default ethnic prototype of one's nation (Devos & Banaji, 2005), can utilize measures of implicit associations to examine the strength of the relationship between sport and the category "fan." Second, the present research is correlational. Thus, we are unable to make causal claims regarding the associations. Third, the results are from a single sample at one university. As prior theory and research suggests (see Devos & Mohamed, 2014), and we concur, what is prototypical depends on the cultural context in which participants are embedded. For example, if this study was conducted in India, cricket rather than football may be rated highest in prototypicality. Furthermore, the sample in the present study was limited to undergraduate college students. Older populations may hold different perceptions of hobbies such as stamp collecting than the participants in the present sample. Notwithstanding the sample's limitations, we suggest that the general associations between prototypicality, normality, and prejudice will be observed in different populations.

To conclude, sport fan is the default prototype of a fan. The results of the present study show that fan groups that are stigmatized are those that deviate from the fan category prototype. Deviation from the prototype is related to viewing the fan interest as abnormal, which, in turn, predicts greater negative prejudice. Although sport is a dominant fan interest in American culture, individuals indicate a wide variety of interests. Efforts to examine programs to increase the normality of “deviant” fan groups may aid in reducing stigma. Given that almost every individual is a fan of some interest, and the prominence of leisure activities in everyday life, greater research on the influence of the sport fan prototype is needed.

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Table 1

Repeated Measures of Ratings of General Fan Categories

Variable	Sport	Music	Media	Hobby	<i>F</i> (3, 261)	<i>p</i> -Value	η_p^2
Prototypicality	5.98 (1.67)	5.65 (1.62)	4.77 (1.45)	4.66 (1.86)	55.57	< .001	.174
Normality	6.55 (0.95)	6.37 (1.09)	5.94 (1.22)	5.79 (1.61)	41.21	< .001	.135
Societal Status	6.18 (1.23)	5.91 (1.25)	5.08 (1.21)	4.66 (1.76)	105.59	< .001	.286

Note. Higher scores indicate higher prototypicality, normality, and status (7-point response scale). Within-subjects contrasts show all means significantly ($p < .01$) lower than sport.

Table 2

Specific Fan Group Means (Standard Deviations)

Fan Group	Prototypical	Normal	Prejudice
NASCAR	4.92 (2.08)	5.63 (1.76)	5.53 (3.08)
Football	6.03 (1.60)	6.58 (1.00)	7.25 (2.84)
Basketball	5.75 (1.62)	6.53 (0.99)	6.94 (2.75)
Baseball	5.59 (1.79)	6.46 (1.10)	7.08 (2.80)
Soccer	5.33 (1.90)	6.17 (1.38)	6.59 (2.85)
Hockey	4.81 (1.99)	5.81 (1.59)	5.88 (3.00)
Volleyball	4.16 (1.87)	5.43 (1.77)	6.13 (2.94)
Golf	3.86 (1.99)	5.22 (1.92)	5.44 (3.05)
Tennis	3.82 (1.89)	5.16 (1.92)	5.52 (3.01)
Cricket	3.13 (1.98)	4.25 (2.23)	4.48 (3.03)
Grateful Dead	3.41 (2.03)	3.82 (2.19)	4.07 (2.97)
Insane Clown Posse	3.38 (2.11)	3.43 (2.22)	3.65 (2.86)
Bruce Springsteen	3.84 (1.95)	4.65 (2.03)	4.93 (2.94)
Lady Gaga	4.97 (1.76)	5.31 (1.79)	5.71 (2.85)
Justin Bieber	5.01 (2.08)	4.92 (2.13)	4.51 (3.07)
Jimmy Buffet	4.03 (1.88)	4.87 (1.87)	5.11 (2.74)
Michael Jackson	5.25 (1.83)	5.98 (1.48)	6.87 (2.63)
David Bowie	4.04 (1.86)	4.90 (1.86)	5.35 (2.80)
The Beatles	5.21 (1.83)	5.86 (1.57)	6.66 (2.73)
Pink Floyd	4.73 (1.93)	5.39 (1.76)	6.06 (2.85)
Anime	4.77 (2.11)	4.50 (2.07)	4.75 (3.18)
Comic Books	4.96 (1.95)	4.98 (1.88)	5.14 (3.04)
Star Trek	5.12 (1.95)	5.11 (1.85)	5.09 (3.01)
Harry Potter	5.50 (1.75)	5.53 (1.71)	6.42 (3.07)
Doctor Who	4.90 (2.02)	5.09 (1.89)	5.29 (3.14)
Hunger Games	5.21 (1.72)	5.63 (1.58)	7.17 (2.72)
My Little Pony	3.62 (2.08)	3.50 (2.08)	3.84 (2.80)
Lord of the Rings	4.91 (1.86)	5.27 (1.76)	4.09 (2.80)

Star Wars	5.44 (1.81)	5.37 (1.80)	6.19 (3.02)
Game of Thrones	4.81 (1.93)	5.14 (1.80)	5.44 (3.10)
Furries	3.91 (2.18)	3.68 (2.16)	3.84 (2.93)
Barbie Dolls	3.60 (1.98)	3.78 (2.07)	4.09 (2.80)
Video Games	5.17 (1.87)	5.63 (1.67)	6.19 (3.02)
Hunting	4.72 (2.02)	5.22 (1.84)	5.50 (3.13)
Cooking	4.31 (1.98)	5.51 (1.67)	7.34 (2.58)
Crafts	4.00 (1.99)	5.02 (1.82)	6.66 (2.82)
Lego Building	3.54 (1.91)	4.20 (1.94)	5.27 (2.93)
Scrapbook Making	3.55 (2.00)	4.48 (1.97)	5.90 (2.93)
Stamp Collecting	3.13 (1.96)	3.73 (2.08)	4.52 (3.00)
Quilting	3.18 (2.01)	4.02 (2.11)	5.05 (3.02)

Note. Prototypicality and normality (7-point scale), higher prejudice scores indicate positive feelings (10-point scale).

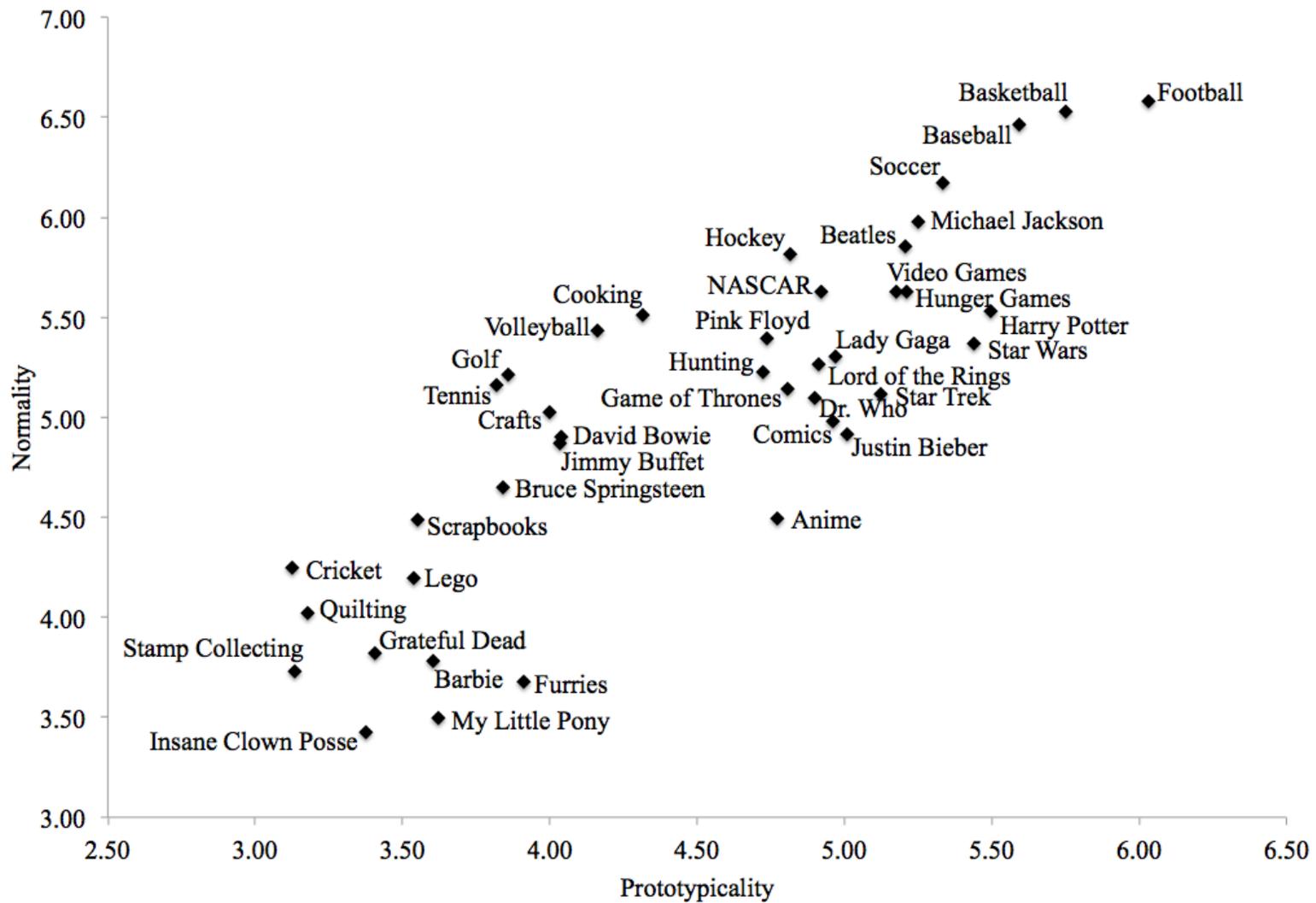


Figure 1. Scatterplot of the perceived prototypicality and normality of fan groups.

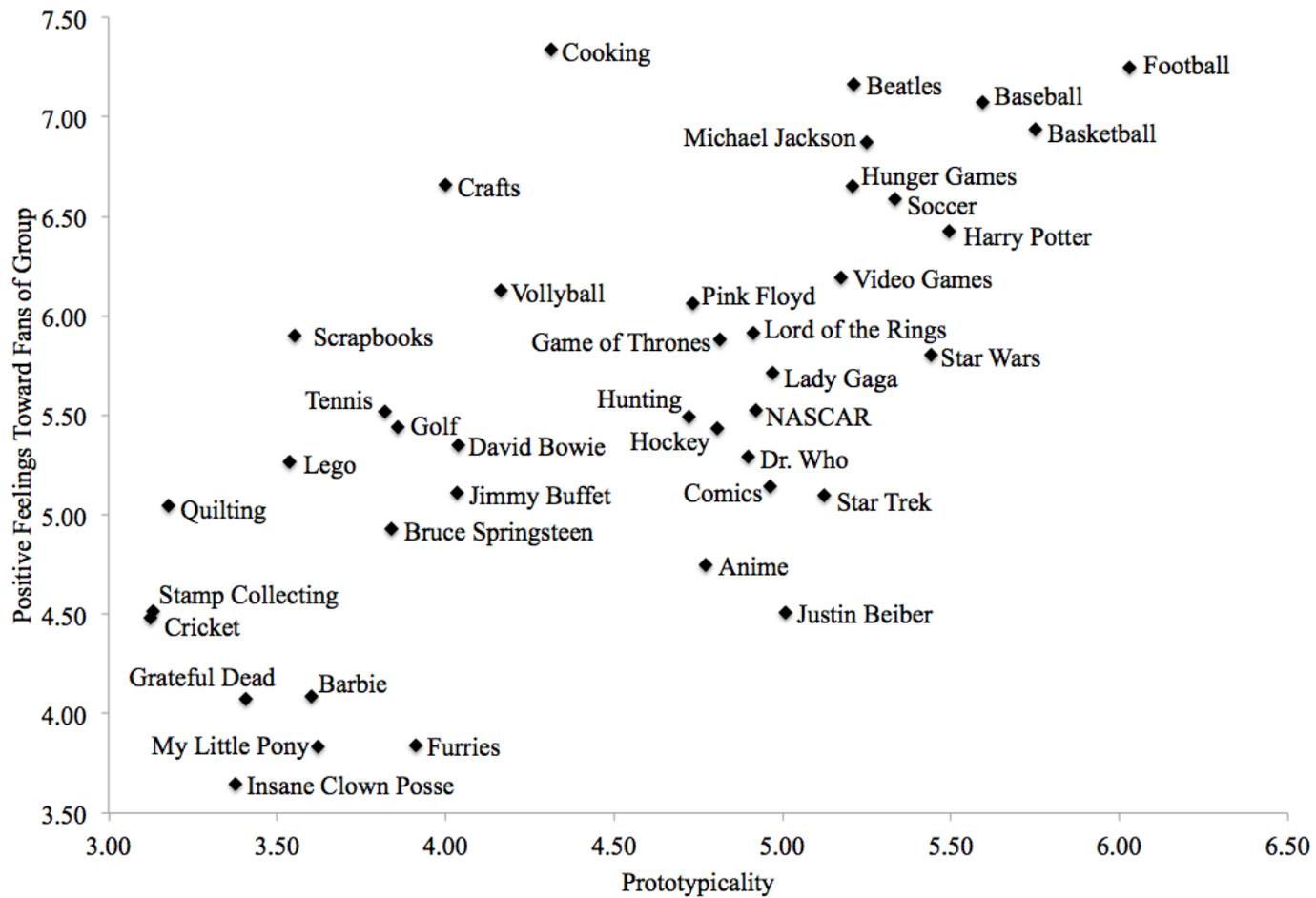


Figure 2. Perceived prototypicality of fan groups and positive prejudice toward members of those groups.

Prototypicality on 7-point scale, positive prejudice rated on 10-point scale.

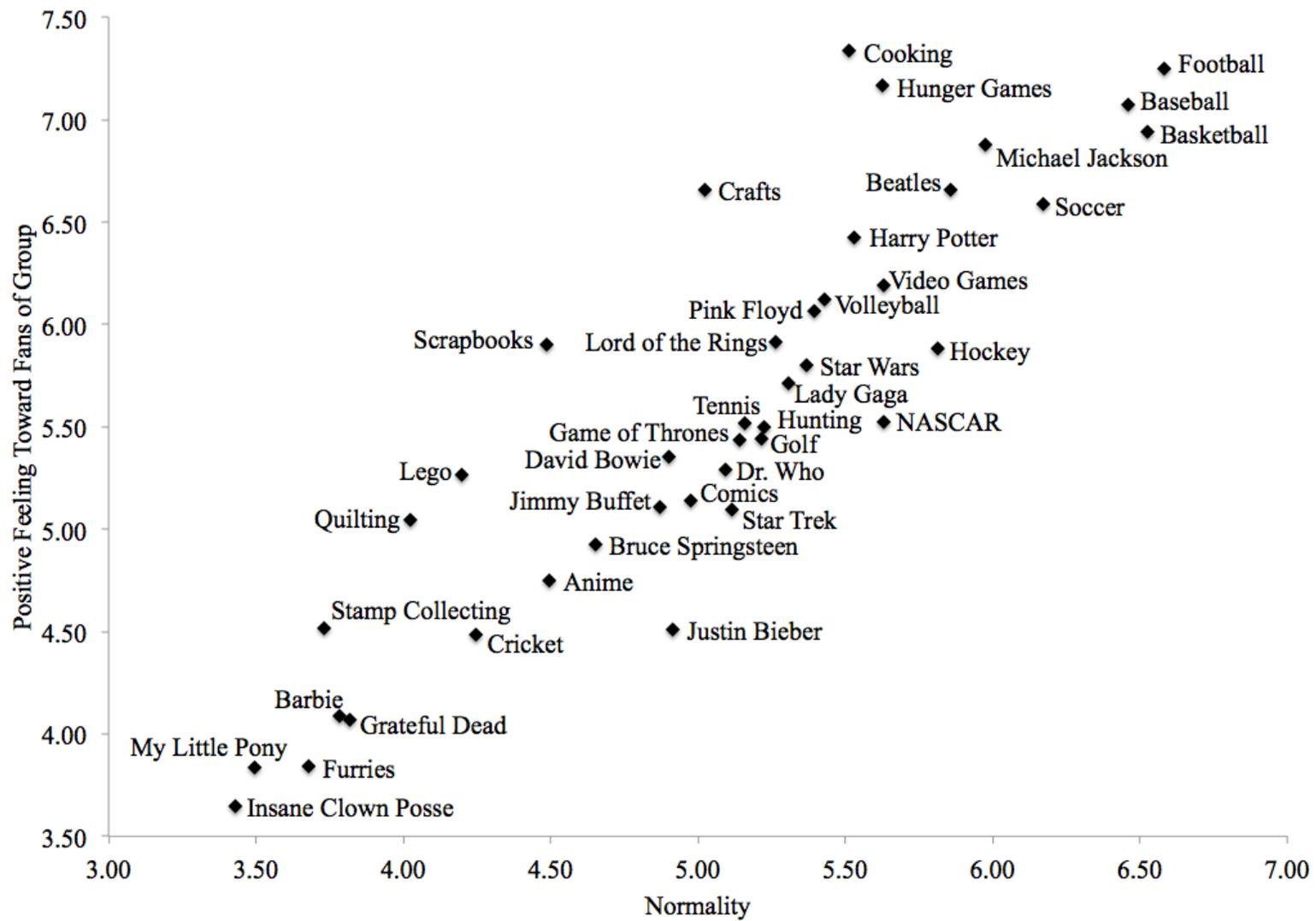


Figure 3. Perceived normality of fan interest of different fan groups and positive prejudice toward those fans.

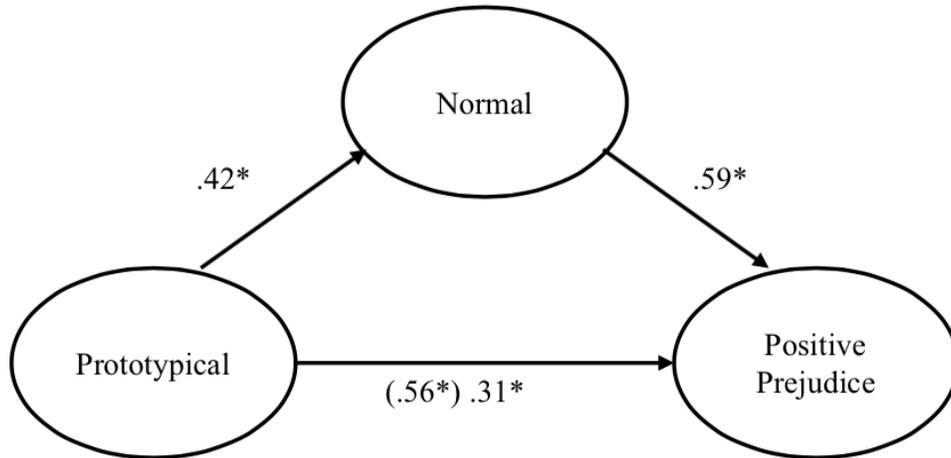


Figure 4. Perceived normality of fan interests mediating the association between perceived prototypicality of fan group and positive prejudice toward members of fan groups. * unstandardized beta is significant at $p < .01$.