

OPTIMAL DISTINCTIVENESS NEEDS AS PREDICTORS OF IDENTIFICATION IN THE ANIME FANDOM

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Abstract

As a test of optimal distinctiveness theory, we examined the opposing motivations of inclusion/belongingness and differentiation/distinctiveness as predictors of group identification in a sample of anime fans. Participants were recruited from an anime convention and from anime-related websites and completed measures of inclusion, intergroup distinctiveness, and identification with the anime community. The results were in line with optimal distinctiveness theory, as participants who felt a sense of belongingness and who perceived the anime fandom as distinct from other groups reported the highest degree of identification with the fandom. The results illustrate the relative normality of the anime fandom, insofar as its group identification is driven by the same motivations that underlie identification with other groups.

Keywords: optimal distinctiveness, belonging, inclusion, distinct, anime, identification, fandom

Introduction

People are motivated to create and maintain a positive and distinct identity, and

more than three decades of research has shown that people do this, in part, through the groups they belong to (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Building on this premise, Brewer (1991) proposed a model of optimal distinctiveness, which posits that individuals have opposing psychological needs. On the one hand, people seek to belong to groups of like-minded others. On the other hand, people also seek to differentiate themselves and assert their distinctiveness. The groups that people belong to may provide members with both of these seemingly incompatible needs simultaneously, allowing them to feel included with other ingroup members while also being distinct when compared to other groups. Groups that satisfy both of these needs should elicit the strongest ingroup identification (i.e., psychological connection to the group) from members, a prediction which has been well-tested (see Leonardelli, Pickett, & Brewer, 2010). For example, members of numerically smaller groups identify more strongly than members of larger groups (Abrams, 1994; Callan et al., 2007) because, while both groups provided sought-after inclusiveness, only the smaller group provided members with a sense of distinctiveness. Other research has shown

that making people feel *too* similar or *too* distinct influences their desire for products that are unique (e.g., limited edition) or common (e.g., He, Cong, Liu, & Zhou, 2010).

Researchers have examined optimal distinctiveness (i.e., need for inclusion/belongingness, intergroup distinctiveness) within the context of fan groups, testing whether these needs predict the extent to which fans identify with their fandom. For example, Andrijw and Hyatt (2009) interviewed hockey fans who supported a nonlocal team and found that the fans used their unusual support for the nonlocal team as a way to express their uniqueness while still belonging to a group of fans via online message boards. Furthermore, Abrams (2009) found that, when it comes to music preferences, people were the most committed (e.g., buying records, attending concerts) to moderately popular music, rather than extremely popular or unpopular music. Finally, Reysen, Plante, Roberts, and Gerbasi (in press) tested optimal distinctiveness needs as predictors of fan identification in a group of furies – people who are fans of stories and art that ascribes human traits to animals and animal traits to humans (Plante, Roberts, Reysen, & Gerbasi, 2015). Furies consider themselves to be a relatively unique fandom (Plante, Roberts, Snider, et al., 2015), and, in line with optimal distinctiveness theory, furies who felt both a high sense of belongingness to the furry fandom and distinctiveness from other groups expressed the strongest degree of identification with the furry fandom.

The present research aims to test the optimal distinctiveness model within the context of anime fans. Anime fans

(enthusiastic consumers of Japanese animation and manga novels) are psychologically comparable to furies (Reysen, Plante, Roberts, Gerbasi, & Shaw, in press). For example, belongingness was the strongest predictor of ingroup identification (e.g., relative to other motivations like self-esteem and entertainment) for both anime fans and furies (Schroy, Plante, Reysen, Roberts, & Gerbasi, in press). This study was limited, however, in that it did not include intergroup distinctiveness as a predictor of group identification. Other research has found that anime fans' feelings of distinctiveness predicted the extent to which they identified with the fandom, but suggested that belongingness only mattered for female fans, not male fans (Ray, Plante, Reysen, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2016). While this study did measure both felt belongingness and felt distinctiveness, the measures were single items, and the interaction between the two was not examined. We seek to overcome these limitations in the present study.

The present study examines optimal distinctiveness needs (i.e., inclusion/belongingness and intergroup distinctiveness) as predictors of ingroup identification among anime fans. Anime fans' degree of belongingness (Schroy et al., in press) and distinctiveness (Ray et al., 2016) is predicted to independently increase their felt connection to the group. Optimal distinctiveness theory also suggests that these two variables should interact with one another (Brewer, 1991), such that fans who both feel included in the group and who view the group as distinct from other groups should identify particularly strongly with the anime community (Reysen, Plante, Roberts, & Gerbasi, in press). As such, we predict

that anime fans' ratings of felt inclusion and intergroup distinctiveness will interact to predict greater identification with the anime fandom.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

Participants ($N = 967$, 55% male (4.5% non-binary/other); $M_{\text{age}} = 25.95$, $SD = 7.78$) included self-identified anime fans recruited at A-Kon (anime convention in Dallas, TX) and through online anime-related websites. As part of a longer questionnaire, participants completed measures of optimal distinctiveness variables (belongingness and intergroup distinctiveness) and their identification with the fandom.

Measures

We measured belongingness or inclusion in the group by combining two items ("I feel like I am interchangeable with other anime fans (i.e., indistinguishable from other anime fans)" and "I feel included and well-integrated into the anime community"; $r = .33$, $p < .001$). Intergroup distinctiveness was also measured by combining two items ("The anime community is very unique when compared with non-anime groups" and "The anime community is different and distinct compared to non-anime groups"; $r = .86$, $p < .001$). Both pairs of items were adapted from prior research (Reysen et al., in press; Sheldon & Bettencourt, 2002). Participants also completed three items ("I strongly identify with other anime fans in the Anime community," "I am glad to be a member of the anime community," and "I see myself as a member of the anime community") adapted from prior research

(Doosje, Ellemers, & Spears, 1995; Reysen, Katzarska-Miller, Nesbit, & Pierce, 2013) to assess the extent to which participants identified with the anime community ($\alpha = .90$). All measures used a 7-point Likert-type response scale, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

Results

As a preliminary analysis, we first examined correlations between the assessed variables (see Table 1 for correlations, means, and standard deviations). Belongingness was positively correlated with perceived intergroup distinctiveness, a finding that replicates prior research (see Leonardelli et al., 2010). In addition, belongingness and distinctiveness were both positively related to ingroup identification. Next, to examine whether belongingness and distinctiveness interacted to predict ingroup identification, we conducted a hierarchical regression. After centering the independent predictors, we constructed a two-way interaction. The main effects were entered in Step 1 and two-way interaction in Step 2, with ingroup identification as the dependent variable.

As shown in Table 2, greater belongingness and intergroup distinctiveness were associated with greater ingroup identification. However, these main effects were qualified by a significant two-way interaction (Figure 1). Simple slopes analysis showed that distinctiveness was related to ingroup identification both when belongingness was high ($b = .48$, $p < .001$) and low ($b = .67$, $p < .001$). Similarly, belongingness predicted greater ingroup identification when intergroup distinctiveness was high ($b = .65$, $p < .001$)

and low ($b = .83, p < .001$). Taken together, the results support our hypothesis – and optimal distinctiveness theory more broadly – that the highest degree of ingroup identification would be reported when both belongingness and intergroup distinctiveness needs were met.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine optimal distinctiveness needs as predictors of anime fans' identification with the fandom. In line with optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991), anime fans' felt inclusion/belongingness and intergroup distinctiveness interacted to predict their identification with the fandom. The results support the notion that anime fans are motivated to participate in the fandom, at least in part, because it provides them with a sense of being part of a large, but distinct, group.

The present findings are in line with a growing body of research showing that individuals identify with groups that satisfy the opposing needs of inclusion and differentiation (see Leonardelli et al., 2010). The present data replicate prior research showing that belongingness (Schroy et al., in press) and distinctiveness (Ray et al., 2016) predict identification with the anime fandom, while extending this research by showing that these motivations interact to predict ingroup identification. Similar to other fan groups (music fans: Abrams, 2009; furies: Reysen, Plante, Roberts, & Gerbasi, in press), the anime fandom satisfies its members' psychological needs, fostering a sense of connection to the group. The results also highlight the psychological similarities between anime fans and other fan groups,

illustrating how the same social psychological processes operate in groups with dramatically different content (e.g., fans of a particular media, political parties; Abrams, 1994).

Although the results are consistent with prior theory (Brewer, 1991) and research (Leonardelli et al., 2010; Reysen, Plante, Roberts, & Gerbasi, in press), the current study does have several important limitations. First, the survey was administered in English, to samples of anime fans attending one anime convention and participants self-selecting to participate online. As such, the sample was predominantly a Western one, and results may not necessarily generalize to different cultures. For example, in Japan, where anime and manga are more prevalent, fans may not gain intergroup distinctiveness through participation in the anime community. Moreover, the collectivist nature of Eastern cultures such as Japan may moderate, or even eliminate, the relationship between distinctiveness and group identification.

It is also worth noting that the results of the present research are correlational. As such, while the data speak to relationships between the studied variables, we are unable to make causal claims about the results. To overcome this limitation and extend the present work, future researchers may want to manipulate felt inclusion and distinctiveness in an experiment, to test whether such manipulations influence group identification and provide evidence for a causal relationship.

To conclude, optimal distinctiveness theory was supported by the present study of anime fans. Fans' felt inclusion/belongingness with the fandom

and perceived distinctiveness from other groups interacted to predict their identification with the anime fan community. In other words, highly identified anime fans feel a strong connection to the community because it satisfies the psychological needs posited in optimal distinctiveness theory. These findings show that anime fans are like other psychological groups in that group identification is driven by the same underlying factors that motivate identification with other fan groups specifically, and other groups more generally.

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Table 1

Correlations and Means (Standard Deviation)

Variable	Belong	Distinct	Identification	Mean (SD)
Belong	--	--	--	3.93 (1.46)
Distinct	.41*	--	--	4.53 (1.85)
Identification	.61*	.56*	--	4.86 (1.60)

Note. * $p < .01$.

Table 2

Regression Analysis for Optimal Distinctiveness Predicting Identification with Anime Community

Predictor	<i>b</i>	Step 1		<i>b</i>	Step 2	
		<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>		<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
Belong	.73	.04	17.89*	.74	.04	18.12*
Distinct	.59	.04	14.45*	.58	.04	14.05*
Belong X Distinct				-.09	.03	-2.72*
R^2 Change	.481			.004		
<i>F</i> Change	445.84*			7.40*		
<i>df</i> Change	(2, 964)			(1, 963)		

Note. * $p < .01$.

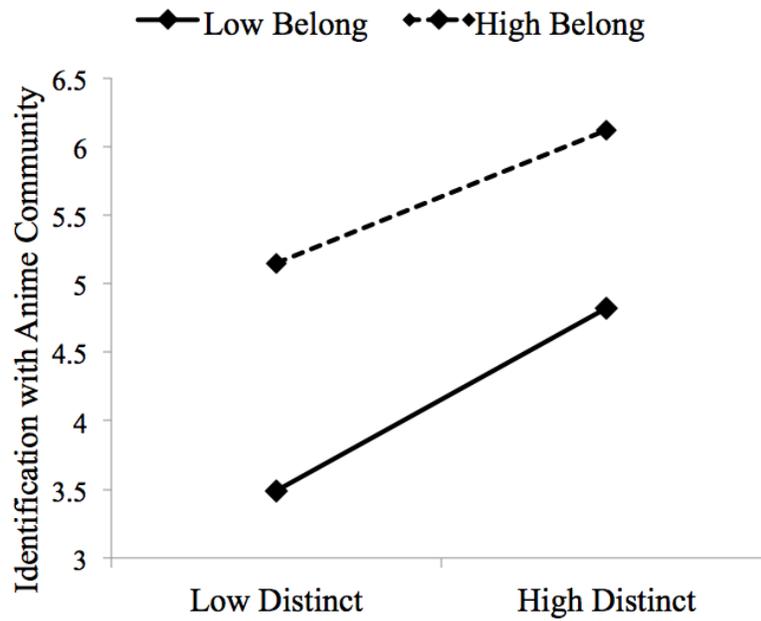


Figure 1. Interaction between inclusion (belongingness) and differentiation (intergroup distinctiveness) predicting identification with the anime community.