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INGROUP IDENTIFICATION AND INGROUP PROJECTION IN FANFICTION AND *STAR WARS* FANS

Ingroup projection is the tendency of ingroup members to project characteristics of their subgroup onto a larger superordinate category which can lead to bias favoring the ingroup over an outgroup. In the present research we examined ingroup projection as a mediator of the association between ingroup identification and ingroup bias in two fan communities. Fanfiction fans (Study 1) and *Star Wars* fans (Study 2) completed measures of group identification (subgroup and superordinate group), ingroup projection, and ingroup bias. The results showed that for members of both communities, subgroup identification predicted ingroup bias. Furthermore, the association was mediated by ingroup projection. The results provide new evidence supporting the increasingly-substantiated notion that the group processes driving fan communities are the same as those driving non-recreational and well-researched groups.

Key words: fanfiction, Star Wars, ingroup, identification, projection, bias

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1. Introduction

Fans are enthusiastic supporters of a particular interest and can range from fans of a particular sport team to fans of musicians, video games, or television shows (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). Indeed, there is no shortage of things that individuals can be a fan of, as even within these interests are a myriad of more specific or spin-off interests (e.g., fantasy sports, amateur sports, sports history). Little research has examined these groups beyond sport fandom, despite the fact that fan communities are important for one's identity. Fans of various interests report a stronger psychological connection to their fan group than to their local neighborhood community (Chadborn, Edwards, & Reysen, 2018). Moreover, researchers find that many of the same dynamics governing the behaviour of oft-studied groups like racial or occupational groups have also been found to operate in fan groups (Edwards, Chadborn, Plante, Reysen, & Redden, 2019; Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). In the present research we examine one such phenomenon—the relationship of group identification with ingroup bias—and propose a potential mediator in the context of two distinct groups of fans.

1.1. Ingroup Identification and Ingroup Bias

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that people are motivated to belong to and maintain positive and distinct group memberships. In service of these goals, when people categorize themselves as group members they tend to show ingroup bias, favoring their ingroup over comparable outgroups. The result of such biased comparisons is a sense of positive and distinct social identity. The psychological literature abounds with studies showing this tendency to give preferential treatment to one's ingroup with respect to the group's attitudes, behaviors toward group members, and thoughts about the group and its members (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002). For example, a meta-analysis showed that people are more cooperative with ingroup (vs. outgroup) members in cooperative decision-making tasks (Balliet, Wu, & De Dreu, 2014). In another study, people preferred to date ingroup Jewish (vs. non-Jewish) members (Brown, McNatt, & Cooper, 2003). People have been found to attribute more secondary emotions (which are associated with a tendency to humanize) to the ingroup than to the outgroup (Leyens et al., 2000) and to ascribe ingroup (vs. outgroup) flaws to human nature (Koval, Laham, Haslam, Bastian, & Whelan, 2012).

While much of the research on the subject of ingroup bias has been done in the context of non-volitional groups—that is, groups whose membership one has little to no control over—some researchers have begun to study the same processes in the context of fan groups.

For example, Wann et al. (2012) found that college basketball fans reported greater trust with fellow fans of the ingroup team than with fans of a rival team, despite their shared interest in sport. Sport fans are also more likely to offer help to an injured ingroup (vs. outgroup) fan (Levine, Prosser, Evans, & Reicher, 2005) and to give more to a charity associated with an ingroup (vs. outgroup) team (Platow et al., 1999). In fact, as is the case with other types of groups, the more strongly one identifies with their particular sport team, the more pronounced these biases are (Wann & James, 2019).

Outside the context of sport fans, Reysen, Plante, Roberts, and Gerbasi (2015) examined ingroup bias among furries—fans of anthropomorphic animal characters. The vast majority of furries have a fursona—an anthropomorphic representation of self—that is typically a specific species of nonhuman animal (e.g., wolf, fox, bear, mouse). Researchers asked furries to rate positive attributes (sociable, fun-loving, admirable) for the 10 most popular species, which often included their own species. The results showed that furries rated their fursona's species more favorably than any of the other species—a sign of ingroup bias. Various mechanisms have been proposed to account for this tendency toward ingroup bias (e.g., Hewstone et al., 2002). In the present research we examine one such mechanism: ingroup projection.

1.2. Ingroup Projection

Building upon a social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), Mummendey and Wenzel (1999) proposed the ingroup projection model. Put succinctly, the model proposes that subgroups of a larger, more inclusive superordinate group will project attributes of the subgroup onto the superordinate group. This projection results in the subgroup appearing to be more prototypical and, as a consequence, affords the group the status and validation needed to derogate an outgroup. For example, psychology students are motivated to view themselves as better than business students as a means of maintaining a positive and distinct social identity. However, an individual psychology student may struggle to find ways to strategically compare themselves to business students in a way that validates their belief that psychologist students are superior. Instead, the psychology student

can convince themselves that psychology students are more prototypical—that is, they are a better representation —of the student body in general. Prior research has shown that the more prototypical a group is seen as being, the more positively it is rated (Reysen & Shaw, 2016). As such, by viewing other psychology students as prototypical of the superordinate group (the general student body), the outgroup (business students) are rated more negatively (Wenzel, Mummendey, Weber, & Waldzus, 2003). Beyond viewing outgroups negatively, ingroup projection is also related to viewing the ingroup more positively (Bianchi, Machunsky, Steffens, & Mummendey, 2009; Bianchi, Mummendey, Steffens, & Yzerbyt, 2010; Lie & Verkuyten, 2012).

This phenomenon of ingroup projection has been observed across a variety of groups including nationality (Germany vs. Poland: Berthold, Mummendey, Kessler, Luecke, & Schubert, 2012), age groups (young vs. old), students versus welfare recipients (Berthold, Leicht, Methner, & Gaum, 2013), religious groups (e.g., Sunni vs. Shiite Muslims: Lie & Verkuyten, 2012), bikers (sport vs. chopper), and jobs (primary vs. high school teachers: Waldzus, Mummendey, Wenzel, & Boettcher, 2004). Beyond one study (Reysen et al., 2015) however, researchers have not examined ingroup projection in the context of fan communities or its role as a mediator in the relationship between fan identity and ingroup bias. To this end, we examined this relationship and its generalizability across two groups of fans: fanfiction fans and fans of the *Star Wars* franchise.

1.3. Fanfiction

Fanfiction is a hobby wherein fans of a particular media franchise (e.g., movie, book, television show, music group) write fictional stories containing characters and setting of those franchises (Thomas, 2011). For example, a fan of the *Harry Potter* series might write a fictional story about the titular character moving away from the United Kingdom and having adventures in the United States. Little psychological research has focused on this community of fanfiction fans. One notable exception is Vinney and Dill-Shackleford (2018), who coded aspects of *Mad Men* fanfiction to examine how fans make meaning of the source text. They found that stories tended to contain eudaimonic (vs. hedonic) content, reflecting fans' desire to obtain deeper meaning and insight from the story. Most stories contained emotion words, with angst, happiness, sadness, and anger appearing the most frequently. Almost all stories focused on the perspective of at least one character, typically female. Fully one-quarter

of the stories reflected the author's fulfillment of a particular wish, such as changing an unfavorable ending in the source material to a happier one.

The results of this limited research suggest that fanfiction writers construct meaning-filled narratives that reflect an active engagement with their preferred media. However, the study, along with most research regarding fanfiction, focuses primarily on the stories rather than on the fans (i.e., writers and readers of fanfiction). Given that fanfiction communities often involve stories from a variety of fandoms, often crossing over with one another (e.g., *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, *Star Wars*), the fanfiction community is an apt group in which to examine possible ingroup biases among subgroups within a community against other subgroups within that same community.

1.4. Star Wars

Star Wars fans are passionate and loyal followers of George Lucas' *Star Wars* cinematic universe. Beyond the movies, the franchise has grown to include books, comics, animated series, videogames, and collectables, all of which provide additional elements to the story across mediums and adaptations (Consalvo, 2009). Indeed, there exists such a breadth of pieces of story that fans often distinguish varying degrees to which each piece of media is considered part of the existing canon (Parker, 2013). Fans express their interest in a variety of ways including cosplaying (e.g., dressing as characters), writing fanfiction, creating their own videos and art, constructing spaces and characters in the online game Second Life, and even spawning the fandom's own religion—Jediism (Davidsen, 2016; Lyden, 2012). The fandom contains various subgroups, such as those who prefer to watch only the original series versus those who also enjoy the prequel and / or the sequel films (Lyden, 2012). Given the various subgroups the *Star Wars* fandom, it too is a likely place in which to find ingroup bias among subgroups within the same broader fan community.

1.5. Overview of Present Research

The purpose of the present research is to examine ingroup projection as a mediator of the relationship between ingroup identification and ingroup bias. Fanfiction fans (Study 1) and *Star Wars* fans (Study 2) completed measures of subgroup and superordinate group identification, ingroup projection, and ingroup bias. In line with prior research (Hewstone et al., 2002) we hypothesize that subgroup identification will be positively related to ingroup bias among the various subgroups of a particular fan group. Identification is also predicted to be associated with ingroup projection (e.g.,

Wenzel et al., 2003). Lastly, we hypothesize that ingroup projection will mediate the association between ingroup identification and ingroup bias.

2. Study 1

The purpose of Study 1 was to examine ingroup projection as a mediator between ingroup identification and ingroup bias. We predict that we will find evidence of our proposed mediation model in a sample of fanfiction fans.

2.1. Method
2.1.1. Participants and Procedure

Self-identified fanfiction fans (N = 380, 58.9% male; M_{age} = 23.68, SD = 5.39) were recruited from various fanfiction related websites (e.g., r/fanfiction, r/wormfanfic). As part of a larger survey regarding the fanfiction, participants rated superordinate and subgroup identification, ingroup projection, and intergroup bias.

2.1.2. Materials
2.1.3. Superordinate identification. Three items ("I strongly identify with other fanfiction fans in the fanfiction community," "I am glad to be a member of the fanfiction fan community," "I see myself as a member of the fanfiction fan community") were adapted from prior research (Doosje, Ellemers, & Spears, 1995; Reysen, Katzarska-Miller, Nesbit, & Pierce, 2013) to assess participants' degree of identification with the superordinate fandom (see Table 1 for means, standard deviation, and Cronbach's alphas). The measure used a 7-point Likert-type response scale, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

2.1.4. Subgroup identification. After listing one subgroup within the fanfiction community that participants felt most attached to (e.g., *Harry Potter*, *Naruto*, *RWBY*, *Worm*), participants rated the same three identification items referencing the subgroup (e.g., "I strongly identify with other fans in this subgroup community"). The measure used a 7-point Likert-type response scale, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

2.1.5. Ingroup projection. Three items ("Fans who identify with my subgroup are prototypical of fanfiction fans in general," "I feel that fanfiction fans (in general) possess characteristics that are prototypical of my subgroup," "Fans who identify with my subgroup are more prototypical of fanfiction in general than are people from other subgroups") were adapted from prior research (Adelman, 2010; Machunsky & Meiser,

2014; Reysen et al., 2015) to assess participants' degree of projection of the subgroup onto the larger fanfiction fandom. The measure used a 7-point Likert-type response scale, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

2.1.6. Ingroup bias. Two items ("My subgroup is better than other subgroups in the fanfiction community," "Fans who identify with my subgroup do more to help the fanfiction community than people who identify with other subgroups") were adapted from prior research (Reysen et al., 2015) to assess ingroup bias. The measure used a 7-point Likert-type response scale, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

2.2. Results and Discussion

As a preliminary analysis, we first examined correlations between the assessed variables. As shown in Table 1, all of the variables were positively related to one another. The ingroup projection model suggests that both superordinate and subgroup identities should be relevant to participants (Waldzus, Mummendey, Wenzel, & Weber, 2003). This criteria has been met in other research by ensuring the mean ratings on both super and subgroup identification measures are significantly above the midpoint of the scale (Kessler et al., 2010; Waldzus, Mummendey, & Wenzel, 2005). The mean ratings of both superordinate identification, $t(379) = 7.30$, $p < .001$, $d = .75$, and subgroup identification, $t(379) = 11.16$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.15$, were significantly higher than the midpoint of the measure.

We next tested our hypothesized mediation model using Hayes' (2018) SPSS PROCESS macro (bias-corrected bootstrapping with 20,000 iterations), entering subgroup identification as the independent variable, ingroup projection as a mediator, and ingroup bias as the dependent variable (see Figure 1, standardized betas presented). Identification significantly predicted participants' degree of ingroup projection and ingroup bias, and ingroup projection predicted ingroup bias (see Table 2 for direct and indirect effects, and Sobel's Z, unstandardized betas presented). The indirect pathway was significantly different from zero as indicated by the lack of zero in the 95% confidence interval. Thus, ingroup projection accounts for some (i.e., partial mediation) of the relationship between subgroup identification and ingroup bias.

Although Study 1 provided preliminary evidence that ingroup projection mediates the relationship between subgroup identification and ingroup bias, the study did so only within the context of fanfiction fans. To examine whether the results would generalize to another fan community we constructed a second study.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviation, Alpha, and Correlations between Assessed Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	Mean	*SD*	α
1. Super ID	--	.63**	.19**	.17**	4.56	1.49	.86
2. Sub ID	.51**	--	.17**	.27**	4.77	1.34	.81
3. Project	.33**	.33**	--	.17**	3.99	1.19	.75
4. Bias	.19**	.43**	.28**	--	3.35	1.48	.72
Mean	4.52	5.20	3.99	4.01			
SD	1.47	1.42	1.36	1.80			
α	.87	.88	.83	.80			

Note. Study 1 fanfiction top of diagonal, Study 2 Star Wars bottom of diagonal. ** *p* < .01.

Table 2
Direct and Indirect Effects of Relationship between Subgroup Identification and Ingroup Bias Through Ingroup Projection

Path	Effect (*SE*)	*t*	*p*	CI$_L$	CI$_U$	*Z*
Study 1						
Sub ⇒ Project	.15 (.04)	3.40	< .001	.064	.241	
Project ⇒ Bias	.16 (.06)	2.61	.009	.040	.284	
Total	.30 (.05)	5.42	< .001	.189	.404	
Direct	.27 (.06)	4.93	< .001	.163	.380	
Indirect	.02 (.01)	--	.044	.005	.059	2.02
Study 2						
Sub ⇒ Project	.32 (.02)	15.38	< .001	.277	.358	
Project ⇒ Bias	.21 (.03)	7.35	< .001	.153	.265	
Total	.55 (.03)	21.12	< .001	.500	.603	
Direct	.48 (.03)	17.76	< .001	.431	.539	
Indirect	.07 (.01)	--	< .001	.046	.090	6.62

Note. Effects are unstandardized betas with 95% confidence intervals, generated using bias-corrected bootstrapping with 20,000 iterations.
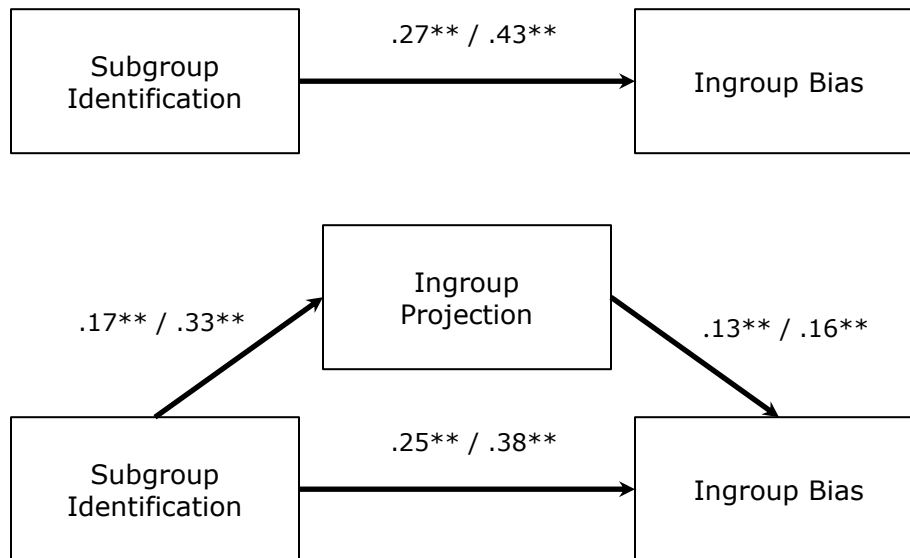
Figure 1. Ingroup projection mediating the relationship between subgroup identification and ingroup bias in fanfiction / Star Wars communities. Standardized betas presented. ** *p* < .01.

3. Study 2

The purpose of Study 2 is to replicate the mediation model observed in Study 1 in a different sample of fans. We predict the model will be observed in a sample of *Star Wars* fans.

3.1. Method
3.1.1. Participants and Procedure

Self-identified *Star Wars* fans (N = 1925, 70.1% male, 3% other; M_{age} = 24.05, SD = 6.94) were recruited from various *Star Wars* related websites (e.g., r/starwars, r/prequelmemes). As part of a larger survey regarding the *Star Wars* fandom, participants superordinate and subgroup identification, prototypicality, and intergroup bias.

3.1.2. Materials

The measures used in Study 2 were identical to Study 1 with the exception that they referenced the *Star Wars* fandom rather than fanfiction (see Table 1 for means, standard deviation, and Cronbach's alphas). Popular subgroups included fans of prequel trilogy, original trilogy, and sequel trilogy.

3.1.3. Results and Discussion

We first conducted correlations between the assessed variables. As shown in Table 1, all of the variables were positively correlated with one another. Similar to Study 1, the mean ratings of both superordinate identification, $t(1924) = 15.58$, $p < .001$, $d = .71$, and subgroup identification, $t(1924) = 37.31$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.70$, were significantly higher than the midpoint of the measure.

We next tested our hypothesized mediation model using Hayes' (2018) SPSS PROCESS macro (bias-corrected bootstrapping with 20,000 iterations), entering subgroup identification as the independent variable, ingroup projection as a mediator, and ingroup bias as the dependent variable (see Figure 1). Identification significantly predicted participants' degree of ingroup projection and ingroup bias, and ingroup projection predicted ingroup bias (see Table 2 for direct and indirect effects and Sobel's Z). The indirect pathway was significantly different from zero as indicated by the lack of zero in the 95% confidence interval. However, the association between subgroup identification and bias remained significant, indicating partial mediation. Despite this, the results provide additional support for the generalizability of our proposed mediation model and for the role of ingroup projection as a mechanism driving ingroup bias.

4. General Discussion

The purpose of the present research was to examine ingroup projection as a mediator in the relation between subgroup identification and bias in fan groups. In two different fan communities—fanfiction and *Star Wars*—we predicted and found evidence that subgroup identification was positively related to ingroup projection and bias. Furthermore, projection of the ingroup onto the superordinate group was found to significantly mediate this relationship. The results were found to generalize across fan communities and are thus not likely to be an idiosyncrasy of any specific group of fans.

Given the importance of fan communities to peoples' sense of self (Chadborn et al., 2018), it comes as no surprise that many of the same group processes found in other important groups can be found in fans (Edwards et al., 2019). For example, identification with one's fan group is associated with greater ingroup bias (Wann & James, 2019). Although prior researchers have examined ingroup projection in a variety of different non-fan groups (e.g., Berthold et al., 2012; Waldzus et al., 2004), little research has examined ingroup projection in fan communities. Presently, we built upon this paucity of research by proposing and testing a mediation model assessing

the role of ingroup projection as a mechanism underlying the relationship between ingroup (subgroup) identification and ingroup bias in two different, and under-researched, fan communities. The results from both samples supported our proposed mediation model and demonstrated its generalizability.

Fan communities contain various subgroups that fall under the umbrella of the larger fan community. The results of the present study show that identification with these subgroups is related to greater ingroup favoritism, and this is mediated, at least partly, through projecting subgroup characteristics onto the larger superordinate fan identity. Fan groups, like any other community, inevitably experience internal conflict and debate (DeDominicis, 2015). Subgroups (e.g., prequel vs. original *Star Wars* fan communities) are observed to argue about which is better. Ingroup projection may be a possible reason for subgroup conflicts. However, future research is needed to explore this possibility.

The present research is novel in examining projection as a mediator of the relationship between subgroup identification and ingroup bias. The placement of identification has an ambiguous history in ingroup projection research. Theoretically, we would expect identification to precede projection and bias as highly identified participants should report greater prototypicality and bias. However, researchers have used identification as an antecedent and an outcome. Researchers typically manipulate a variable and assess impact on perceived prototypicality (Berthold et al., 2013; Berthold et al., 2014) and outgroup attitudes (e.g., Waldzus et al., 2005). Often these manipulations show no effect on identification. Some researchers find that group members who are highly identified with both the subgroup and superordinate group endorse greater prototypicality (Waldzus et al., 2003; Wenzel et al., 2003). Other researchers do not find an interaction of sub and superordinate identification predicting prototypicality (Machunsky & Meiser, 2014; Reese, Berthold, & Steffens, 2016). Some researchers have examined identification interacting with prototypicality to predict outgroup attitudes to find a significant interaction (Ufkes, Otten, Van der Zee, Giebels, & Dovidio, 2012), while other researchers do not find an interaction (Wang, Wang, & Kou, 2018). Further still, researchers use identification as a moderator of a manipulation. For example, Steffens, Reese, Ehrke, and Jonas (2017) examined identification as a moderator of a manipulation of perceived superordinate group diversity, but did not find a significant interaction predicting outgroup attitudes. Further research with non-fan groups is needed to examine whether the model tested in the present research will replicate.

The present research, while novel and finding compelling evidence for our proposed mediational model, is not without its limitations. First, the design of the study is correlational, which limits our ability to draw causal inferences. Future research may overcome this limitation by manipulating the perceived prototypicality of one's subgroup relative to the broader fan community to assess its impact on ingroup bias. Second, the survey itself was conducted in English. This restricts our sampling to English-speaking members of these fandoms. Although ingroup projection has been observed in other cultural spaces (e.g., Germany: Berthold et al., 2012), it nevertheless remains a possibility that the phenomenon of ingroup projection and its association with ingroup bias in fan cultures is limited to Western cultures. Future research would do well to replicate the present findings in other languages and other fan groups. Third, while we assessed ingroup projection in two different fan communities, we can only speculate that fan groups that do not have any recognizable subgroups would presumably not show the same ingroup projection. Without a direct test of this hypothesis—or even knowing of any sizable fan communities that do not have any subgroups—it remains for future research to test this possibility. Lastly, there exist other possible mediators that were not examined the in the present research. For example, perceived group entitativity, superordinate group diversity, subgroup status, and subgroup permeability of group boundaries may mediate the relationship between subgroup identification and bias.

In conclusion, we examined ingroup projection as a mediator of the relationship between ingroup identification and ingroup bias in fanfiction and Star Wars fandoms. For both fan groups, greater identification predicted greater subgroup bias through the mechanism of ingroup projection. As fan groups consume a large amount of individuals' time and energy, greater research into the psychological mechanisms of fans is warranted. Research conducted thus far appears to suggest that fan groups operate in a manner similar to non-fan groups.

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