

Collective Identity, Organizational Structure, and Framing in Fan Activism

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by

Jamie Puglin

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PREVIEW

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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Fan activist organizations have participated in a variety of human rights and social justice projects over the last 15 years. However, the concept of fan activism has been used to describe a wide array of different occurrences. More recently, scholars of social movements have begun to debate whether fan activism is political activism, but there is still a dearth of literature on social movements organized around a fandom. In this project, I examine the different events that fan activism has been used to describe. I focus on three organizations—the Harry Potter Alliance, Racebending, and the Hamilton Alliance—and their social justice work to demonstrate how fan activism is developed. Using 52 interviews with fan activists, content analysis, and organizational histories, I show how activist identity develops from fan identity and how fan organizations use these identities to support ongoing recruitment and mobilization. I show how fan activist organizations use intentional frames and framing to recruit and develop the collective identity of their participants. I also analyze the different structures of these organizations to ascertain which organizational structures best support the development and maintenance of fan activism. By closely examining fan framing, collective identity, and the organizational structures of fan social movements, I find that these organizations open the door to social justice work for their participants by making issues accessible and reframing definitions of activist work.

Dedication Page

For Dave, my partner who kept me going through it all. For the best bear. Thank you.

PREVIEW

Table of Contents

List of Tables	vii
Acknowledgments.....	viii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Literature Review.....	3
Fan Activism.....	5
Fandom Cases	14
Methodology	20
Demographics	26
Outline of the Dissertation	28
Chapter 2: The Harry Potter Alliance: History, Organizational Structure, Collective Identity....	30
Introduction.....	30
History: The Harry Potter Alliance.....	31
Organizational Structure: The Harry Potter Alliance	33
Strength of the Organization: Success and Failures	35
Methods.....	40
Development and Recruitment	41
Campaigns.....	44
Chapters	47
Collective Identity: The Harry Potter Alliance	49
Education and Training.....	51
Activist Identity	53
Conclusion	61
Chapter 3: Comparing Racebending and the Hamilton Alliance.....	64
Introduction.....	64
Methods.....	64
Racebending: History, Development, and Recruitment	66
The Strength of Collective Identity: Successes and Failures.....	74
Racebending: Organizational Goals and Maintenance of Collective Identity.....	76
Next Steps for Racebending.....	78

The Hamilton Alliance: History, Development, and Recruitment	78
Discussion and Conclusion	87
Chapter 4: Framing in Fan Activist Organizations	89
Introduction	89
Recruitment: Frames and Frame Resonance	91
Harry Potter Alliance: Master Frames and Recruitment	92
Racebending: Master Frames and Recruitment	101
Hamilton: Master Frames and Recruitment	105
Weaknesses: Master Frames and Recruitment	108
Conclusion	112
Chapter 5: Conclusion	114
Building Dual Collective Identities	115
Framing Collective Identity for Recruitment and Mobilization	117
Contributions of the Research	119
Limitations of the Research and Future Research	121
References	123
Appendix A: Interview Protocol	130

List of Tables

Table 1. Gender Breakdown	27
Table 2. Race and Ethnic Identity Breakdown	27
Table 3. Age of Participants at the Time of Interview.....	27
Table 4. Country Breakdown.....	27
Table 5. Harry Potter Alliance Campaigns	46
Table 6. Activist Identity Across Members	55
Table 7. The Best Experience Participants Have Had while in the HPA	98
Table 8. Recruitment Methods across Interviews with 46 Respondents	99
Table 9. Response Themes to What Should Outsiders Know about the HPA?.....	108

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“Welcome to the Academy! Although I can’t join you in person this weekend, I wanted to let you know how very, very proud I am of you for making this commitment. If my journey has taught me anything, it’s that anyone can be a hero by simply deciding to be so. By being here, you’ve made the most important step in your own journey, and I can’t wait to see what you accomplish. Be brave and be kind,”

- Hermione Granger

These were the words handwritten on a card given to all conference attendees at the 2016 Granger Leadership Academy. This was the second iteration of the conference organized by the Harry Potter Alliance. The conference gathered *Harry Potter* fans from across the U.S. and sometimes other countries to develop leadership skills and educate attendees about social justice issues and how to organize around them. Upon arriving, all attendees are assigned a group to work with over the course of the four-day experience. When I enter the conference space as an attendee, I meet my first assigned group member, Telly. Telly tells me she is a volunteer on staff here, and I watch as she greets people with whom she works closely but has never met in person before. This is because nearly all the work for this organization is conducted online and over vast distances. In fact, most members of the professional and volunteer staff live in different states and some in different countries. Despite never having met, these people come together to promote social justice. One of the major things that holds them together, in addition to a commitment to social justice, is their collective identity as fans of *Harry Potter*.

Collective identity has helped social movement scholars have a better understanding of social movement actors (Melucci 1985). Scholars of social movements have focused on the role of collective identity when people join movements (Melucci 1985), how identity is sustained over

time (Taylor and Whittier 1992), how collective identity changes within movements (Robnett 2002), and how movements may develop different identities (Corrigall-Brown 2008). Yet, collective identity has yet to be studied in relation to fan activism. Fan activism adds a new layer of identity, as the activists see themselves as part of a fandom in addition to wanting to contribute to social change. One reason that prevents a focused analysis on fan activism is that current understanding and usage is too broad—from protesting the cancellation of a television show to collecting money for a celebrity-endorsed charity or rallying for social change organized under the name of a famous character. This prevents a focused analysis on how fan activist movements work.

For social movement scholars, it is important to break down some of these existing studies to best understand when and why it is important for us to examine cases of fan activism. As discussed below, for the purpose of my study, I limit fan activism to organizations that use fandom to recruit people for social justice activism. In the last ten years, two examples of fan activism have emerged that focus on social justice and mobilizing young people through the use of fan identity: The Harry Potter Alliance and Racebending. In part because of their unique use of collective identity, these organizations have been particularly successful in terms of longevity, accomplishing goals, and reaching a large number of participants (Jenkins 2011; Lopez 2012; Harry Potter Alliance Website; Racebending Website; Martin 2012). The longevity of the organizations and their multitude of campaigns offer insights regarding both the successes and failures of their approaches. In November 2016, a third organization was established in response to the election of President Donald Trump—the Hamilton Alliance. In light of the fact that this group is new, it makes it a fitting comparison with the two aforementioned groups. The Harry Potter Alliance and Racebending are more established and as a result, their trajectories are a known quantity as of the start of this study. In contrast, the emergence of the Hamilton Alliance positioned this study to

track its progress from inception. Due to variation within and across these three organizations, they provide ideal case studies to examine how collective identity contributes to fan activism related to social justice issues.

Broadly, this research project adds to the existing literature investigating how fan activist organizations that focus on social change contribute to current understandings of social movements. Specifically, I add to the literature by asking the question: “What are the characteristics that are conducive to creating fan mobilization that can lead to social justice activism?” I specifically seek to answer the following:

- How do fan activists reconcile dual collective identities as both fans and activists? Does one identity trump another and is this different for rank and file members compared to leadership?
- How is collective identity used and framed within fandom to recruit and mobilize support for social justice concerns?
- When does collective identity and fan framing fail to recruit or mobilize social justice concerns?

Literature Review

Fans as change agents warrant attention from social movement scholars. In an increasingly globalized world, calls for social change and global outreach are ongoing and this underscores the importance of research toward understanding how organizations can successfully mobilize in different ways around issues. In order to study fan activist movements, it is important to bring together the literature of collective identity, frame analysis, youth mobilization, online activism, and fandom.

Social Media, Youth, and Activism

In the last decade, many people have grown to rely on social media as a method for communication and information. In light of this, having a social media presence is now essential for organizations (Paulin et al. 2014). Social movements, like other organizations, thus use social media platforms like Facebook pages, Facebook events, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram to promote causes, raise awareness of issues, and recruit activists. These sites have proven their effectiveness in organizing protests in the cases of the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and more recently, the Women's March (Castells 2012; Milkmen 2017; Akin et al. 2012).

Social media is now regarded as a key tool in recruiting and mobilizing movements in the 21st century (Xiong, Cho, and Boatwright 2019; Earl, Maher, and Elliot 2017; Zuckerman 2014; Castells 2012; Eaton 2010; Palfrey and Gasser 2008, Earl and Schussman 2003). One such method of recruitment that has proven itself useful is fandom. Unfortunately, literature in these areas, particularly on fan activism, is limited and will benefit from further research by social movement scholars (Earl, Maher, and Elliot 2017). Fan activism provides a unique method for activists to recruit and engage rank and file members. Instead of creating solidarity around a single cause, fan activists mobilize around their love of a fictional universe and use that as a motivator for sustained political participation. Often, these fictional universes provide a setting of good-versus-evil where good has triumphed by fighting against injustice, a similar scenario to that which the movement wants to achieve. In this dissertation, I will examine this phenomenon and highlight the role collective identity plays in these processes.

Collective identities are formed differently through online platforms and social media than they are formed through real life participation. To begin, social media offers a different type of platform to perform social activism. For example, Eaton (2010) explains in his work how protests in the 21st century have not been as far-reaching as they were in past decades. However, once

platforms like MoveOn.org were introduced, groups can spread their messages further and make a wider impact. Online platforms have opened new spaces for social activism, particularly in relation to social media. These spaces amplify voices, offering a new and often broader audience.

However, what fan activism brings to social movements is beyond the use of online platforms in their organizations. In order to evaluate the specific contributions of fan activism, I first discuss how this concept has been used in the literature. In some ways, the many uses of fan activism become confusing and cast shadows on some of the social justice work for which organizations are responsible. To resolve this, I discuss how the literatures of social movements, communications, and culture have used fan activism to explain distinctly different types of activism. I then turn my attention to highlighting how collective identity shapes movements by shaping movement actors and in turn, how movement actors shape collective identity. In the next section, I review the literature on framing and discuss why framing and framing processes are needed in the development of collective identity and as a mechanism for both recruitment and mobilization.

Fan Activism

Definition

The term “fan activism” has been used quite broadly across the literature. This makes it necessary and important to clarify how fan activism will be used in this research. Here, fan activism specifically refers to movements that use traditional organizing tactics and fandom to organize around social justice or political issues. From the literature, it currently appears that fan activism is used to discuss different types of fan phenomena: activism when it is spearheaded by an entertainer or other well-known person or persons, activism in the name of a well-known person, activism that rallies against changes within fandom or media consumption of their fandom (such

as cancelling a television show), and lastly, the type we focus on here, which is activism that uses a well-known fandom as the basis of collective identity for a social movement. By drawing the distinction of the type of fan activism, I hope to encourage social movement scholars to acknowledge the important contribution that fan activists can make to social justice movements. In addition, in reviewing the other types of fan mobilizations, I demonstrate the power that culture and media have in developing communities that rally together and take action.

When activism is spearheaded by a celebrity, the celebrity supports the actions of a campaign by either becoming the face of a cause or vocally supporting a cause and encouraging their fans to join. One example of this is Sarah McLachlan's well-known campaign with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA). McLachlan lent her music and persona for a commercial that first aired in 2007. Its goal was to raise money for the ASPCA and spread awareness of its work. McLachlan's heartbreaking commercial raised 30 million USD within the first two years of its airing, which changed the way the organization fundraises (Strom 2008). The success of this campaign in part shows how celebrities can spearhead calls for action.

Another prime example of spearheaded activism is Lady Gaga. In addition to developing her own nonprofit, the Born This Way Foundation, which promotes kindness, mental health, and social justice, Lady Gaga has been quite vocal about a number of causes and has asked fans to become involved (Click, Lee, and Holladay 2013). In 2017, she met with Prince William for an interview where she talked about her experiences with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Their meeting was for the Heads Together campaign to raise awareness about mental illness (Chavez 2017). Lady Gaga has also spread awareness and support on issues such as LGBTQ* rights and sexual assault. She has used Twitter and YouTube to mobilize her fans around these issues and to draw attention to these causes, even addressing Senators by name in her videos

(Bennett 2013). In her 2010 video, which addresses Senator McCain, she spoke out against the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” repeal, encouraged fans to call their own senators, and posted some videos of fans doing so (Bennett 2013). These examples show that spearheaded fan activism can be highly impactful. Fans of a specific celebrity can be inspired to action through online requests and consciousness raising.

Similar to this type of activism are instances in which activism occurs when fans start a campaign in honor of a celebrity based on what they have either observed or assumed they might support. Examples of this type of fan behavior is common surrounding K Pop (Korean pop music) fandom (Jung 2012). Fans of K Pop star U-Know Yunho (a member of the idol boy band, TVXQ) began fundraising and ended up donating 8,700 USD to an orphanage in his name (Jung 2012). In another example, fans of another K Pop band called Rain held a charity gala and raised money for the Singapore Disability Sports Council in Rain's name. Both of these examples demonstrate how fans use their network to contribute to a cause. It is distinct from other types of fan activism because it is separate from the celebrity. This is a direct contrast with the aforementioned activism in which the celebrity is the leader or instigator.

Beyond substantive issues, fans also mobilize to defend a celebrity or television show (Savage 2014). In this type of activism, fans protest for or against something directly related to the subject of their fandom, such as the cancelling, casting, changing, or remaking of a particular show. This is the most common definition people think of when they hear fan activism. For example, fans of the television show “Firefly” had a wide reaction to the cancellation of the show. They signed petitions, wrote letters, held conventions, and even took out a one-page ad in the magazine *Variety*. Although they did not succeed in keeping the show on the air, the fans did succeed in securing a major motion picture based on the show. Although with this type of fan activism, fans

are responsive to a change or cancellation, leading to the defense of their show, these protests and actions do not turn attention to anything beyond the fandom.

Social justice fan activism, however, uses the collective identity of a fandom to frame grievances and subsequently, mobilize fans for social justice. Here, the best examples thus far are the Harry Potter Alliance, Racebending, and the Hamilton Alliance, as discussed in detail below. This kind of fan activism is different from the aforementioned types because although rooted in fandom or pop culture, the goals extend into social justice and the political. Each of the three organizations fit this criterion. For example, the Hamilton Alliance focuses on resisting policy created by the Trump administration; Racebending focuses on representation of Asian people in the media and combats whitewashing of roles in Hollywood; and while the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) is not single-issue-focused, each campaign that they support has a similar focus on social justice. In 2017, for example, the HPA began the “Protego” campaign in response to laws passed restricting use of bathrooms by transgender people.

To be considered social justice fan activism, the criteria are having both a social justice theme or goal and a strong tie to a fandom. To be included here, there must be a distinction between fundraising or charity-based work and work that uses additional tactics to create change. Tactics may include fundraising but also include protest, phone banking, petition signing, social media activism (Tweet storms, Facebook posts, Hashtags), and awareness education programs.

It is also important to parse out what situations are most suited for fan activism to arise. It is clear that in some cases, simply having fans and issues is not enough. At this point, successful instances of fan activism (groups with longevity) have the following conditions: a fan connection to a fandom with multiple pieces of content (multiple movies, books, episodes); the fandom has a theme of social justice; the fandom is widespread and accessible (no or low barriers for fans); long-

term existence of the fandom is necessary for long-term existence of a fan activist base; and activists provide framing to translate fandom into goals oriented to social justice. In this research, I have investigated each of these situations to address what factors are necessary for fandom to develop activism and what criteria fandoms must have to sustain activism.

Fan Activism and Collective Identity

Jenkins (2012) defines fan activism as, "...forms of civic engagement and political participation that emerge from within fan culture itself, often in response to the shared interests of fans, often conducted through the infrastructure of existing fan practices and relationships, and often framed through metaphors drawn from popular and participatory culture" (1.8). Fan activism employs tactics and structures from other social movements to achieve organizational goals. The major difference between fan activism and activism is how fan activism uses fandom collective identity as a frame for both recruitment and mobilization, while collective identity in most movements is issue-based.

Fan activists are using tactics of social movements to achieve social justice goals (Earl and Kimport 2009). Like movements before them, they employ the use of petitions, protest, letter writing, education, fundraising, and consciousness raising. However, they also bring new methods of recruitment and utilize collective identity differently in how they recruit, train, and mobilize their members. This combination of new and old tactics has allowed them to reach people in a different way. Instead of beginning with a grievance or issue, these groups begin connecting to people through fandom. Those who self-identify as fans are quickly able to connect to the movement and other participants. This makes it easier to recruit what McCarthy and Zald call both constituents and conscience adherents, or those who are directly affected by campaign goals and

those who are not, respectively (McCarthy and Zald 1977). What is of particular importance is that existing collective identity allows for the recruitment to address social justice concerns.

According to Melucci (1985), “A *collective identity* is nothing else than a shared definition of the field of opportunities and constraints offered to collective action: ‘shared’ means constructed and negotiated through a repeated process of ‘activation’ of social relationships connecting actors” [*Emphasis is original author’s*] (p. 793). He further states, “...a collective identity is built through a complex system of negotiations, exchanges, decisions: how action can occur as a result of systemic determinations and of individual *and* group orientations” (Melucci 1985, p. 794). Boundaries, consciousness, and negotiation become essential to maintaining this sense of collective identity (Taylor and Whittier 1992). For example, boundaries act as a way to distinguish the in-group versus the out-group by creating separate spaces and setting the community apart from other groups and identities (Taylor and Whittier 1992). In fan activism, collective identity already exists, and the negotiations aren’t about creating that identity but relating to it and bringing social justice issues into the fold to encourage activism. This, in turn, begins to create the activist identity, or second collective identity. These dual identities are what make up fan activist movements.

Collective identity plays a key role in the development of fan activism. The framing of issues using fan collective identities must be used correctly in order to be successful in recruiting fans. Fan identity needs to be used within the accurate rhetoric of the original book, television series, film, universe, etcetera and its goals should fit within that universe as well. For example, in her *New York Times* article on March 21, 2012, Courtney Martin made this point regarding a campaign that invoked *Harry Potter* fandom in a counterproductive way: “...in 2002, the Association of American Publishers and other institutions tried to galvanize fans to fight

censorship attempts by creating a campaign called ‘Muggles for Harry Potter.’ But as non-fans, they missed an important point. Fans didn’t want to identify as ‘muggles’—unmagical people in the world of *Harry Potter*; they wanted to be wizards” (Martin 2012). It is typical of fans to identify with any of the numerous witches and wizards in the series but rarely as muggles, who are depicted as the “other” or as non-essential or even cruel to the main character. What this shows is that simply campaigning for social change in the name of a series is not enough. Organizers seeking to recruit fans should engage with the fandom in ways that are meaningful and show they understand the content of the collective fan identity.

In contrast to Courtney Martin’s example, the first stated value on the HPA’s website is, “We believe in magic” (Harry Potter Alliance Website). Other slogans on their website and merchandise read, “We are the Eighth Book,” “Wizard Activist,” and “Books Turn Muggles into Wizards.” The term Wizard Activist was used often when members identified themselves and when staff talked about the organization as a whole. By engaging fans through the idea that they can create change and fight injustices as wizards, the Harry Potter Alliance garnered a large recruitment, and remained active for at least 15 years. This is in contrast with what was experienced in Martin’s example. What Martin shows is that having a loyal and engaged fan base and using symbols from a fandom is an insufficient foundation for activist mobilization. Understanding the collective identity of the fandom and building on this identity to attach issues in a way that is meaningful to fans is essential for recruitment.

When developing fan activism and fan activists, collective identity is an essential part of the process. Building on an existing collective identity as members of a fan community allows for more direct induction into a fan activist movement. Members join already feeling as though they

are part of the community. Through education, awareness, and training, social movement organizations have the ability to create activists.

Social media lends itself well to this process at every level of movement development. First, it provides an entry point where movements can recruit fans to causes. Once members are recruited, social media allows for organization and a space to continue using fandom framing to mobilize fan activists for causes. Without an established collective identity as fans, these methods of recruitment using social media would be less effective. While we understand the role of collective identity in social movements, we are still trying to understand the interaction of activist collective identities and fan identities.

Framing in Fan Activism

Collective action frames support social movements in developing collective identity and recruiting supporters. Framing was first used by Goffman (1974) as a way information is organized to help make meaning. Frame analysis has been further broken down into conceptual frameworks that help scholars study these processes (Benford and Snow 2000). One such concept is that of frame resonance, which tells us whether and how much collective action frames resonate with participants. This relies on three things: "...frame consistency, empirical credibility, and credibility of the frame articulators or claims makers" (Benford and Snow 2000, p. 619). In the case of fan activist movements, they have utilized consistency and credibility to develop master frames. By being consistent about both the fan frames and human rights issues around which they mobilize, they develop the trust of their constituents. Over time, the use of specific master frames signals to participants the importance of the issue and the action to be taken.

Many movements have been successful in using framing to develop collective identity and encourage movement recruitment and retention. Through a process of meaning-making, organizers

carefully develop collective action frames that call for action and/or demonstrate the goals that in turn lead to recruitment and action (Klainot-Hess 2020; Snow 2013; Ayres 2004; Kolker 2004; Benford and Snow 2000; Snow and Benford 1988). Collective action frames that appeal to identity also played a large role in mobilizing Occupy Wall Street (Bennett and Segerberg 2011). The Occupy slogan, “We are the 99%,” is one example of this appeal. The Occupy slogan created a way for people to personally connect with the movement, making it easier to answer calls to collective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2011). Although Occupy’s slogan was easy to understand once you have learned what it means to be the 99% and who the 1% are, it was only after this explanation that the slogan could resonate with participants.

I add to the above existing literature by focusing on fandom activism. I argue that, if framed correctly, fan activism allows for a resonant understanding of movement goals that generates participation. For example, in a recent campaign called, “A World without Hermione,” the HPA asked participants to imagine the series without a core character known for her intelligence (Harry Potter Alliance Website). This was to campaign for women’s access to education around the world. The call immediately resonated with those who value or identify with Hermione. It evoked a strong response from participants who in turn raised almost 45,000 USD for “She’s the First,” which funded schooling and mentorship for underprivileged girls with whom the organization works. The HPA campaign referencing Hermione was appealing because it was understood by participants without much explanation and it made the issue of limiting women’s access to education easy to understand.

In this dissertation, I further develop the relationship between fan activism and framing by showing how framing, frame resonance, and the development of fan activist master frames are essential for fan activist movements. They help organizers describe their campaign in a way that

participants will understand in the context of taking direct action. I show how developing consistent, credible, and flexible frames supports fan activist organizations.

Fandom Cases

The Harry Potter Alliance

The Harry Potter Alliance was founded in 2005 by Andrew Slack and Seth Soulstein. At first glance, one might dismiss the group as a social movement because of its name. However, the Harry Potter Alliance has successfully engaged thousands of young people in activism and awareness campaigns during the 15 years up to 2020. Although it began as a small grassroots effort, it grew into an international organization with over 200 chapters globally. Chapters were established within communities, universities, libraries, and high schools, developing projects such as fundraising for human rights campaigns, literacy, and social justice. Additionally, each year the HPA headquarters developed a larger campaign to be conducted. Past campaigns have succeeded in raising over 123,000 USD for relief for Haiti, raising funds for genocide prevention in Darfur and Burma, bringing together 20,000 videos for Net neutrality, collecting over 250,000 books for libraries worldwide, and successfully pressuring Warner Brothers to use only fair-trade chocolate in all *Harry Potter* products (Harry Potter Alliance Website). The HPA uses the *Harry Potter* fan identity to channel collective energy into numerous social justice projects. Beginning in 2013, they established a yearly conference, based on the character Hermione Granger, to train members through providing education on issues, leadership development, and activist development.

A few scholars have previously studied the Harry Potter Alliance (Kligler-Vilenchik 2013; Earl and Kimport 2009; Kligler-Vilenchik et al. 2012; Jenkins 2012; Hinck 2012; Bennett 2012; Brough and Shresthova 2012). Earl and Kimport (2009), in their article on the HPA, note that fan activists are using similar tactics and repertoires and that the diffusion of tactics that occurred is