



‘You’re born to be brave’: Lady Gaga’s use of social media to inspire fans’ political awareness

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Abstract

Through interviews with 45 self-described Little Monsters, we explore fan identification with Lady Gaga’s interest in and messages about politics and philanthropy, Gaga’s influence on fans’ attitudes toward activism, and the role activism plays in the Little Monster community. Our findings suggest both that fans can be deeply impacted by celebrities’ political values and actions, particularly when expressed through social media, and that the online, networked fan communities that develop around celebrities are socially supportive and politically engaged. We assert that fans’ identification with celebrities’ political values and actions, and the engagement of networked fan communities, demonstrate that the enforced distinctions between ‘audiences’ and ‘publics’ are outdated.

Keywords

audiences, celebrity activism, fan activism, Lady Gaga, networked publics, social media

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Lady Gaga is known worldwide for her record-breaking music sales, ostentatious costumes, and carnivalesque performances. These characteristics often overshadow another key component of Lady Gaga's public persona: her interest in social justice and philanthropy. As 'the undisputed Queen' (Van Meter, 2012: para. 28) of social media with a huge following on Twitter (45.2 million in March 2015) and Facebook (61 million in March 2015), Lady Gaga has aggressively used social media to share her positions with fans and encourage fans to see her causes as their own (Dunne, 2012; Lee Harris, 2010). Her videos on YouTube have received 1.2 billion views (Greenblatt, et al., 2011: para. 2), and many of the over 100 videos on the 'ladygagaoofficial' YouTube site are communiqués to fans about her positions on a range of issues. Gaga's use of social media is partly responsible for the strength of her relationship with fans, who call themselves 'Little Monsters', and her 'Mother Monster' (Click et al., 2013).

In her short career, Gaga has engaged in a variety of activist efforts, including raising HIV and AIDS awareness and funding (Wilson, 2010) and charitable contributions to relief efforts for natural disasters in Haiti (Vena, 2010), Japan (Vena, 2011), and New York (Macatee, 2012). Most notably, Lady Gaga, born Stefanie Joanne Angelina Germanotta, has talked openly about her teenage experiences with bullying and bulimia (Healy, 2012), and much of her musical and philanthropic work is focused on 'telling kids it's cool to be gay or freaky or unpopular, that they're born that way' (Hiatt, 2011: para. 3). In September 2010, she attended the MTV Video Music Awards with four gay and lesbian service members in a raw meat dress, an act designed to support the U.S. Congress' consideration of the repeal of U.S. military's policy, Don't Ask, Don't Tell (O'Keefe, 2010).

Lady Gaga became outspoken about bullying after the September 2011 suicide of a 14-year-old fan, Jamey Rodemeyer (Hibbard, 2011). Shortly thereafter, Lady Gaga discussed bullying with President Obama at a reelection campaign dinner (Kennedy, 2011) and subsequently visited the White House to further discuss the topic (Jackson, 2011). In February 2012, Gaga announced her most involved philanthropic act yet: the Born This Way Foundation (BTWF), which was created 'to foster a more accepting society, where differences are embraced and individuality is celebrated' (Born This Way Foundation, n.d.).

Lady Gaga's philanthropic work and social justice activism, communicated in large part through social media, are central to her celebrity persona, and to the online, networked communities fans have built around her. Examining fans' individual perspectives on Lady Gaga's activism offers an opportunity to explore how fans identify politically with celebrities and how celebrities' use of social media affects such identification, a point skillfully made by Bennett (2014) in her study of Lady Gaga fans. While our work complements and reinforces many points that Bennett makes about the political value of the proximity and intimacy of celebrity-fan interactions in social media, we argue that the political interest Lady Gaga inspires through social media, set in the scholarship on celebrity activism, demonstrates the importance of studying audiences' identification and interactivity with political celebrities, and prompts a reevaluation of the theoretical distinctions between audiences and publics, which has become increasingly important in our changing media environment. The value of fan studies to such a reevaluation is underscored by Brough and Shresthova's call for 'case-based studies as a next step toward more nuanced understandings of how fan cultures may mobilize around political

and civic goals' (2012: para. 7.2). Responding to this call, we explore, through interviews with 45 self-described Little Monsters, how fans have reacted to Gaga's participation in and messages about politics and philanthropy, how she has influenced fans' attitudes toward activism, and what role(s) activism plays in the fan-created Little Monster community. Our findings suggest that Lady Gaga is a political role model for fans who feel marginalized from mainstream culture. Social media deepens the relationship between Lady Gaga and Little Monsters, enabling fans greater access to her philanthropic and political views, inspiring them to develop supportive social networks, formations we suggest constitute networked publics. We assert that fans' identification with celebrities' political values and actions, and their engagement in networked fan communities, demonstrate that the enforced distinctions between 'audiences' and 'publics' are outdated. Below we frame our analysis with relevant literature regarding fan identification with celebrity values, celebrity politics, celebrities' social media use, and fan activism in the new media environment.

Celebrities, fans and political identities

To ground our study on the influence of Lady Gaga's philanthropic and political activism, we draw from four areas of research: scholarship that theorizes and explores the ways fans identify with celebrities, scholarship that explores political celebrity, scholarship that examines how social media impacts the relationships between celebrities and fans, and scholarship that investigates how online fan activism transforms audiences into networked publics.

Fan identification and celebrity politics

Previous research demonstrates the potential impact of identification with celebrities on fans' perceptions of the world and of their selves. Caughey (1984), whose exploration of 'imaginary social relationships' has underscored such relationships' importance in social life, describes the process of identification with media figures and celebrities as one in which 'people temporarily abandon their own identities and social roles and, by imaginatively projecting their consciousness onto the media image, take on alternate personal and social identities' (1984: 38). Many relationships that fans develop with celebrities, Caughey suggests, are based upon desires to develop in themselves qualities they admire in celebrities, highlighting that media figures have a persuasive influence over audiences' values and actions. Sandvoss (2005) asserts that the meaning fans find in celebrities and media content stems not from the object of fandom itself, but from the fans who use it to examine and extend their senses of self. As tools for reflecting upon who they are, fan objects become central components of fans' life stories they use to 'emulate and emphasize parallels between themselves and what they recognize as external qualities of the object of fandom' (Sandvoss, 2005: 111).

Fans' interest in emulating celebrities' values and qualities helps explain the growing involvement of celebrities in mediated political advocacy campaigns (Thrall et al., 2008). Yet, as Wheeler (2013) argues, traditional political approaches tend to dismiss celebrities' involvement in political activism as inauthentic and shallow, as prioritizing style over

substance, and as not being adequately representational. Wheeler points to important aesthetic and technological changes in the political process that make these dismissals seem outdated and also describes historical precedents that demonstrate that while celebrity activism may be on the rise, it is certainly not a new practice. Wheeler's assertions echo Street's (2004) arguments for the legitimization of celebrity politics and for future work to engage more deeply with politics as an aesthetic practice guided by the understanding that political representation is 'a cultural act which seeks to realise a form of political attractiveness through the gestures and images of popular culture' (2004: 449).

Following Street, Wheeler and others (e.g. Boykoff and Goodman, 2009; Huliaris and Tzifakis, 2013) have suggested a number of directions for and approaches to the study of political celebrities. Despite numerous articles that debate the impact of celebrities' activism, very few studies of political celebrities are audience-focused. This crucial absence has motivated calls for research focused on audiences' responses to celebrity politics, such as Tsaliki et al.'s (2011a: 10) assertion that to better understand the audience-celebrity relationship, 'targeted qualitative audience research is needed'.

Couldry and Markham's (2007) mixed methods study is one of the few studies that explores audiences' political engagements with and through popular media. Through the organization of their survey respondents into four clusters designated by respondents' reported interests, Couldry and Markham found that the respondents most interested in celebrity culture were the least likely to be politically engaged. Speaking to the cultural studies scholarship on celebrity activism, Couldry and Markham conclude that 'there is little evidence for some optimistic claims that this aspect of popular culture provides any potential routes into political culture, even in an expanded sense' (418).

Müller and Hermes' (2010) study of audience response to a multicultural television drama highlights what Couldry and Markham's study overlooks, namely that audience investment in popular media texts with political messages is 'an important factor in the emergence of parasocial interaction, referential readings, and, consequently, the performance of cultural citizenship' (2010: 206). In short, Müller and Hermes found that audiences that identified with the program's narratives demonstrated a deeper engagement with its ideological content. The contrast between the two studies underscores the importance of examining the impact of the political messages in popular culture texts with audiences that express identification with them. We therefore argue that the picture Couldry and Markham (2007) paint of the political potential of celebrity culture for audiences may be distorted.

Studies on the fandoms that surround celebrities offer specific instances of celebrity influence on fans' political values and on their behaviors. For example, Fraser and Brown (2002) observed that Elvis fans consciously emulated a number of the qualities they associated with Elvis, 'including being generous, respecting authority, being loyal, having good manners, being a gentleman, caring for others, having patriotism, believing in racial equality, and being a spiritual person' (2002: 201). That celebrities can influence fans' values and behaviors also resonates in Trier-Bieniek's (2012) study of Tori Amos fans. Interviews revealed that the outspoken feminist beliefs Amos expresses through her musical performances, and in her work with the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN), influenced long-term fans' volunteer activities, fundraising efforts, and career choices.

Interactivity, in addition to engagement, is a characteristic of celebrity activism explored by Thrall et al. (2008). Their scholarship on celebrity advocacy emphasizes that 'Many Internet users, especially younger ones, play a far more active role in seeking out celebrity-oriented information and entertainment than consumers of traditional mass media news' (2008: 380). Thrall et al. also indicate that young people use the internet to engage with other like-minded people and advocacy groups. Given this, they assert that online celebrity advocacy has the potential to encourage young people's engagement with political topics, and to encourage the growth of active communities of citizens who share political interests.

Thus, while some scholarship on celebrity politics debates celebrities' influence on the political process, few studies have explored such questions from the audience's perspective. Fan studies, however, has shown that identification can influence fans' adoption of celebrities' values and actions. Further, and as we explore in detail in the next section, the interactivity offered by online media may encourage younger fans, especially, to engage with political issues through celebrities online. We assert that audience studies with invested audiences can help to develop an understanding of the impact of celebrity activism. Yet, as Jenkins and Shresthova (2012) indicate, even in fan studies, scholarship in this area is limited and there remains an 'urgent need for scholars to explore more fully the many different potential relationships between fandom and political life' (2012: para. 1.9). Our present work with Lady Gaga fans provides one example of such a relationship. Next, we show how fans' identification with and emulation of celebrities' political values and behaviors can be amplified in social media, which facilitate and intensify celebrities' communication about political topics with fans.

Social media, celebrity, and fans

While research on celebrities' political advocacy work demonstrates fans' interest in engaging online with celebrities' political values and beliefs, scholarship also demonstrates that celebrities increasingly use social media to communicate with their fans (Marshall, 2010), impacting fans' perceptions of celebrities and enabling them to feel they have greater access to celebrities. Ellcessor (2012: 51), for instance, asserts that celebrities' social media use heightens a sense of intimacy by permitting 'access to private, backstage behavior'. Celebrities create a sense of closeness through social media by disclosing what appears to be personal information, using language and cultural references to create or increase affiliation with fans, and publicly acknowledging fans and responding to their concerns (Marshall, 2010; Marwick and boyd, 2011). This sense of intimacy is heightened, Marwick and boyd (2011) argue, when celebrities are perceived to communicate without the use of gatekeepers, such as publicists. The strong sense of authenticity built through celebrities' use of social media makes them seem more accessible and approachable, tempering their extraordinary traits such as talent and beauty with their ordinary personalities (Petersen, 2009).

Research has also suggested that the increased potential for celebrity–fan interactions in social media, even if illusory, allows fans to create or reinforce feelings of 'knowing' celebrities, ultimately creating strong social bonds (Bennett, 2012; Marwick and boyd, 2011). Marwick and boyd (2011) argue that Twitter, in particular, de-pathologizes fans'

deep interests in celebrities by making fan–celebrity conversations public and visible, and by positioning celebrities as ‘real people’ (2011: 148) with whom fans can interact. Similarly, Kassing and Sanderson (2009) argue that fans’ social media interactions with celebrities transform conceptualizations of parasocial relationships because, while such relationships are mediated, fans increasingly experience them as real and authentic, which enhances their feelings of truly ‘knowing’ celebrities. Celebrities’ communication with fans through social media, therefore, gives a greater impression of two-way communication, which deepens fan-celebrity relationships and creates new expectations of intimacy not possible through traditional media forms (Bennett, 2014; Click et al., 2013; Marwick and boyd, 2011).

Scholarship on the impact of contemporary celebrities’ social media use demonstrates the importance of digital media in the creation of communication between fans and celebrities that feels real and reciprocal, blurring the boundaries that once separated ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ relationships in traditional media. Because Lady Gaga’s social media use is a crucial aspect of fans’ relationships with her, we underscore Bennett’s (2014) point that the increased sense of closeness created by social media influences fans’ adoption of her political values and behaviors. In the next section, we explore how the growth and function of online communities centered around celebrities and media texts engender fan activism and facilitate the development of networked publics.

Fan activism, social media, and networked publics

While traditional notions of audience and fan activism have centered around collective efforts to protect, extend, or resurrect their favorite group, television show, or film (Hinck, 2012; Jenkins, 2012), recent scholarship has focused on a new dimension of activism, exploring fans’ politically motivated efforts and organizations (Jones, 2012). Because fan activities and communities are increasingly common components of online, networked culture, scholars assert that the changing nature of engagement in our contemporary media environment requires that scholars rethink the distinctions commonly made between audiences and publics. For instance, van Zoonen, through an examination of fan engagement with participatory reality TV programs, argues ‘for the equivalence of fan practices and political practices’ (2004: 46). Brough and Shresthova question the disconnectedness of the theorization of the political and cultural spheres, and assert that ‘defining political participation as explicitly linked to legislative processes or traditional political institutions alone obscures the role of culture in social and political change’ (2012: para 3.4). Livingstone similarly addresses the eroding distinctions between audiences and publics by calling for ‘a transcendence of the audience/public opposition for, as a growing body of literature makes clear, such binary thinking no longer fits either the subtleties of media texts or the complexities of media power in late modern societies’ (2005: 36).

Social media has forced this reevaluation of the conceptualization of audiences and publics, as it allows fans to receive direct, personal guidance and encouragement from celebrities (Bennett, 2012), and to collectively organize and publicize their campaigns, even without direct prompting from celebrities or media producers (Jenkins, 2012; Phillips, 2012). Lim and Kann (2008) agree that the internet enables multiple, overlapped, and

diverse networked political spheres to emerge, and suggest that the most innovative political activities emerge where politics and culture overlap, such as in blogging and remix culture – activities that are common in fan communities. Lim and Kann assert that these activities flourish on the internet, creating ‘a sphere of networked politics’ (2008: 93).

Clark argues that in networked digital spaces, ‘People come in as participants in a media project and leave recognizing themselves as *members of a public* – a group of people commonly affected by an issue’ (2009: 11). It describes the collectively organized communities that develop in social media as ‘networked publics’ and suggests the term is a workable alternative to ‘audiences’ and ‘publics’, because it ‘references a linked set of social, cultural, and technological developments that have accompanied the growing engagement with digitally networked media’ (2008: 2). Underscoring the role social networking sites play in the creation of such communities, boyd describes ‘networked publics’ as publics transformed by networked technologies that consist of ‘(1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice’ (2011: 39).

Not all online fan communities constitute networked publics, but Brough and Shresthova argue that even celebrities or media content that are not ‘explicitly political’ can still ‘can offer resources or spaces for political engagement’ (2012: para. 3.10). In fan communities that do engage fans politically, fans’ affective commitments and emotional investments in celebrities and media content intensify the collective discussion and organization of activist work online (Phillips, 2012), making activism ‘fun, imaginative, and sexy, yet truly effective’ (Slack, 2010: para. 7). Underscoring the political potential of the kinds of fan communities we might describe as networked publics, Jenkins suggests that fan communities can be ‘a particularly powerful training ground for future activists and community organizers’ (2012: para. 15).

Scholarship on celebrity-focused fan activism demonstrates that celebrities can impact the attitudes and behaviors of the fans who identify with them, and deepen their commitments to activist causes through networked communication and actions. For example, Jones (2012) explores how fans of *The X-Files* actress Gillian Anderson who saw her (and her character Dana Scully) as a role model adopted Anderson’s habits of charitable giving. Focusing on the Harry Potter Alliance’s charity work, Hinck (2012) reveals that fans have used the popular franchise’s characters to provide a familiar starting point for becoming involved with real-world social issues. Despite the growing body of fan activism research focusing on media fans’ successful mobilizations (Phillips, 2012), the examination of celebrity-focused fan activism still remains sparse (Jones, 2012) and rarely focuses on the impact of celebrity activism on fans’ identities and political attitudes in the context of social media.

Taken together, these strands of research demonstrate that audience identification and online engagement with celebrities are fruitful directions through which to explore the impact of celebrity activism. Through identification, audiences look to celebrities for social and political conduct cues. Further, because social media enhances the opportunities for disseminating messages and deepening the connections between celebrities and members of the public (Bennett, 2012), celebrities are increasingly visible agents for capturing attention and motivating change. Moreover, fans’ intense identification with popular culture figures and texts can encourage activism within fan communities, and

social media provides a space where fans can access, discuss, and engage with other like-minded individuals on issues they care about, creating networked publics. Tapping into these activities, our project explores how identification with Lady Gaga influences fans' reception of her political messages, as well as how her monumental social media presence impacts this process. We also examine how Little Monsters use Gaga's activist messages to ground their own philanthropic and political values and guide the development of online communities. In short, we counter Couldry and Markham's (2007) claim that celebrity culture may create a chasm instead of building a bridge to democratic engagement. We argue that our interviews with Little Monsters demonstrate that audience research has much to offer to scholarship exploring political celebrity and we believe our study addresses 'the urgent need for scholars to explore more fully the many different potential relationships between fandom and political life...' (Jenkins and Shresthova, 2012: para. 1.9).

Current study

To understand the role activism plays in Little Monsters' relationships with Lady Gaga, we recruited self-identified Little Monsters by posting a request for participation and a SurveyMonkey link to a number of Gaga blogs and online fan sites via their site administrators, including Gaga Daily, Gaga Stigmata, Gaga Media, and Dream Of Gaga. Our survey prompted participants to indicate whether they identified as a Little Monster, and to provide demographic information, answer questions about their media use relating to Lady Gaga, and provide contact information and availability. Because we were primarily interested in the relationships that develop between Lady Gaga and her fans, we conducted one-on-one interviews with those Little Monsters who would speak with us.

In total, we spoke to 45 Little Monsters on six continents. Each author conducted an equal number of interviews between January and March 2012 by phone or through communication software such as Skype, Google Chat, and Microsoft Messenger, recording them with the participants' consent. All but three interviews were conducted in English; the remainder were conducted in Korean and later translated to English. The semi-structured interviews ranged from 15 to 90 minutes, and focused on questions about what it means to self-identify as a Little Monster, fans' feelings about Lady Gaga, and the impact of social media on fans' interest in and relationship to Lady Gaga; we discuss our more general findings about Lady Gaga's relationship with Little Monsters elsewhere (Click et al., 2013). Because we suspected that Lady Gaga's social activism would be an important component of fans' interest in her, our interviews also incorporated questions about activism, including questions about what issues participants perceived to be important to Gaga, what media they used to learn about Gaga's activism, how important Gaga's activism was to participants, and what impact participants believed Gaga's activism had on their political positions as well as on the culture at large.

The international population meant a more diverse group of participants, however, the interviews were conducted with Little Monsters who were mostly White ($n=29$) and mostly American ($n=31$). Participants ranged in age from 14 to 53 (the mean age was 21.67), were equally female and male, and equally LGBTQ and heterosexual. To ensure participants' anonymity, we did not ask their names, but instead provided each with a

pseudonym. We used our research questions to develop a framework for coding the transcripts, and applied this coding scheme using Creswell's (2007) constant comparative method to identify emergent themes in the data. In our discussion below, we highlight the most salient themes that emerged regarding Little Monsters' understanding of and participation in Lady Gaga's community of activism.

Lady Gaga, social media, and the politicization of Little Monsters

Identification with Mother Monster through social media

An awareness of the role Lady Gaga, and the fan community built around her, play in fans' everyday lives is necessary for understanding Lady Gaga's political influence on fans. Many of the self-described Little Monsters we interviewed suggested that feeling like an outsider was a common characteristic of Little Monster identity. For instance, Jane (22, German) shared that, 'most of the Little Monsters had problems in their past and struggled with themselves and [were] not accepted by society'. Daniel (17, American) similarly offered, 'I would describe a Little Monster as someone who uses Lady Gaga to ... find themselves. She does promote self-love ... so I think a lot of people, especially me, we look to that to find that acceptance.' Because some Little Monsters feel like outcasts, Lady Gaga's messages about self-acceptance in her songs, social media posts, and activism affirm and empower them. In many ways, Lady Gaga serves as a source of support for her fans, and, as Brittany (19, American) asserted, she is 'the leader for people who need a leader and who don't have one'.

In addition to feeling supported by Lady Gaga's messages, Little Monsters also felt support from the like-minded and sympathetic online community that has developed around Lady Gaga. Cheryl (19, American) described, 'We all care about each other. We don't want to see ... any of us get hurt or try to commit suicide.' Eric (14, American) indicated that social media was an important part of the Little Monster community, 'You make so many friends and you know that you're not alone, and if you're talking to another Monster on Twitter, they'll try to help you or something. So it's kind of like a big family.'

Many fans emphasized that social media play a crucial role not only in the construction and maintenance of the Little Monster community, but also in the relationships Little Monsters have developed with Lady Gaga, a point also prominent in Bennett's (2014) study of Lady Gaga's fans. For instance, many Little Monsters shared that they felt that social media closed the distance between them and Lady Gaga. Hector (17, Colombian), for instance, described that social media allowed Little Monsters 'to know Lady Gaga a little bit better ... there are so many Monsters from all over the world ... and it's only through this media that Lady Gaga gets the chance to reach out to every single Little Monster'. Sarah (19, American) suggested that social media have proven to be an excellent proxy for in-person communication, 'So many people on Twitter feel like they have some sort of personal connection to her. If she follows them, or if she retweets them ... you feel like she's talking directly to you.'

This personal connection impacts Little Monsters' recognition and appreciation of the ways Lady Gaga uses social media to share her philanthropic and political views with

them. Francesca (19, Dutch) recalled that Lady Gaga's online response to a Little Monster's suicide was important to the community, 'With the Jamie [Rodemeyer suicide] she really took it personally and she spread the word on Twitter and that made the community a lot closer ... you feel so happy to be a Little Monster at those times.' Little Monsters' comments reveal that Gaga's use of Twitter for political causes also distinguishes her from other celebrities. Selena (15, American) shared:

She uses [social media] to post things that she feels strongly about. Like a lot of the marriage equality laws and everything that she tried to overturn for Don't Ask, Don't Tell. She was posting and asking people to call their senators and to help repeal it ... so many things that she doesn't have to do but she does because she feels it's right.

Being a Little Monster helps fans embrace aspects of their identities about which they have felt shame, and Gaga's messages of self-acceptance, strength, and encouragement give them identities and a community about which they can feel proud. This reclamation of identity and re-valuation of outsider status is inherently political, with potential to encourage fans to develop social and political values, and to participate in a form of 'cultural engagement that matters to the public sphere' (Livingstone, 2005: 36). Lady Gaga's use of social media enhances the identification Little Monsters feel with her and the opportunities for sharing her political views with them. In the next section, we explore the role Lady Gaga's activism plays in fans' self-identification as Little Monsters, the social relationship they have built with Gaga, and how they employ her as a political role model.

Born to be a political role model

Participants described Lady Gaga's outspokenness about social and political causes as an important component of their interest in her. Cameron (19, Canadian) emphasized that Lady Gaga's activism deepened his feelings for her, 'I wouldn't like her as much if she wasn't as outspoken as she is ... I'd still respect her, just not as much.' Some Little Monsters also suggested that Lady Gaga's messages about human rights have become an important part of Little Monster identity. Francesca insisted that embracing Lady Gaga's values is what makes one a Little Monster, 'A real Little Monster follows the vision of Lady Gaga ... respect everything, everyone, and no judgments ... that separates Little Monsters from other fans.'

In addition to being an important quality of Little Monster identity, Lady Gaga's activism was also a source of pride. Tim (18, American) shared, 'It makes me proud to be able to say, "My favorite celebrity, my Mother Monster is fighting to make this world a better place, and I'm here to fight with her."' Brittany's assertion echoed Tim's, 'I like how she is using her power in a good way, and she's doing things to help other people ... it makes me proud to be a fan.'

These comments align with Caughey's assertion that celebrities can come 'to represent some combination of idol, hero, alter ego, mentor, and role model' (1984: 53) for fans. We frequently heard the Little Monsters we interviewed describe Lady Gaga as a role model who encourages and teaches them to become involved in political issues they

care about. Jonathan (16, British) argued that Gaga is ‘more than just an artist, she’s a ... role model who everyone can look up to’. Gaga’s stance on bullying was mentioned frequently by Little Monsters who had experienced such treatment. Debbie (28, American) shared, ‘She’s a really great role model and she stands for things that are really good, you know the whole anti-bullying thing ... that really hits home for me personally, because I was bullied a lot.’ Jessica (23, American) indicated that Lady Gaga leads Little Monsters to social engagement:

[Gaga] would like us to be ... a tight-knit group that accepts people, loves people, and does good. She wants to see Little Monsters who are bullied, for example, to turn it into something positive and to use their experiences to help other people....

Little Monsters’ comments illustrate that Lady Gaga indeed functions as a role model, encouraging fans to stand up for themselves and others. In fact, many of the fans we interviewed suggested that activism is an important component of their interest in Gaga and their roles as Little Monsters, helping renegotiate their marginalized identities and their political values as a result. Below we examine how Lady Gaga’s philanthropy and activism have influenced Little Monsters’ opinions, worldviews, and behaviors, and also the role social media plays in the formation of the supportive social networks Little Monsters develop with each other.

Gaga’s influence on fans’ political positions

In line with Jones’s (2012) and Fraser and Brown’s (2002) findings, several fans we interviewed reported that Lady Gaga’s political activism has strengthened, reinforced, or enhanced their views. Gi-bum (14, Korean) reported, ‘My views had been very similar to Lady Gaga’s even before I came to know her. So I guess [her views and actions] have strengthened but not really changed my position.’ In addition to strengthening their political positions, many participants’ stories suggest that Lady Gaga’s activism has, as Abbey (15, Australian) shared, ‘definitely made me want to do more things about [equality and bullying] that Lady Gaga fights for’. Alex (14, American) reported that he was so inspired by Lady Gaga’s messages that he has been working to raise awareness about and support victims of bullying, ‘I did a speech at my school and I put together a video presentation ... At my school ... if there’s any bullying, I will stop it.’

Many of the Little Monsters we interviewed confirmed that their worldviews had been transformed by Lady Gaga’s political activism, which exposed them to new ideas. Selena (15, American) disclosed, ‘I was pretty young when I first heard of Gaga and she just sort of opened my eyes to different ideas.’ Similarly, Carole (19, American) noted that Lady Gaga encouraged her to rethink her position on gays and lesbians, ‘I was raised in a Christian home, and my dad always said, “being gay is wrong,” but ever since I became a fan of hers ... my eyes have opened....’ Jonathan, who suggested he used to be somewhat ‘prejudiced,’ also indicated that he has become ‘very accepting’, because Lady Gaga has ‘shone the light on the situation’.

Little Monsters also revealed that Lady Gaga’s activism not only changed their views, but also encouraged changes in their behaviors. Maria Elena (22, American) reported

that she has become 'more vocal about [social issues] now'. Hector conveyed, 'Watching Lady Gaga's activism has helped me to take a stance against inequality.... It's changed my life. If I see bullying I know that I have to stop it.' Similarly, Jin (15, American) shared how he follows Lady Gaga's example, '[Lady Gaga's activism] kind of sparked a little flame in me to stand up to bullying ... ever since, I started to step up and make my school and other environments very safe.'

As suggested by Fraser and Brown (2002), celebrities' political values can powerfully influence their fans, encouraging them to adopt and model their values and behaviors. The Little Monsters we interviewed, similar to Bennett's (2014) respondents, revealed how their identification with Lady Gaga, created and heightened by social media, has exerted a profound influence on their political positions. Their comments demonstrate that Gaga's political outspokenness and activist work inspired them to develop an awareness of and think more deeply about certain issues and develop their own political positions by embracing and adopting these fundamental aspects of her identity. For some fans, Gaga's influence was considered transformative, as her activism opened their eyes to new ideas and prompted fundamental changes to their worldviews and behaviors.

Supporting Jones's (2012) assertion that celebrities can encourage fans to follow in their footsteps, the Little Monsters we interviewed used social media to create supportive social networks and to directly help others, following Lady Gaga's aggressive use of social media to discuss her views and raise political awareness. In addition to discussing their relationships with Lady Gaga through social media, interview participants regularly commented on the significance of online interactions with other Little Monsters. Examples included personal disclosures and discussions about the death of a family member, their struggles with bullying, and the difficulties of disclosing their sexual orientation to their families. Paige (24, British) saw these disclosures as a way to build support in the community and enact the values Gaga promotes, 'If people are having a hard time, then you know sometimes they'll post about that and they'll be able to get some support from other people, which is really nice.'

Social media play an important role in the Little Monster fan community, making it easier for Monsters who may be living in isolated areas to connect with one another. Chelsea (47, American) shared that while Gaga herself may not always be available to offer support to her fans, online fan communities organized around Lady Gaga create a supportive space for fans, '[Gaga] may not be able to basically be there for every single one of us, but it's opened the door to find other people they can talk to and relate to.' For fans who need this support, like Jennifer (15, American), Little Monster communities feel like families, 'We've become friends and we talk about problems that we have ... it's about 20 or so people and they've really become like brothers and sisters to me.'

These online communities are not yet actively organizing around particular causes, like fan groups such as the Harry Potter Alliance (Hinck, 2012) or the Nerdfighters (Wilkinson, 2012), a do-good community built by young adult author John Green and his environmentalist brother Hank. Despite this, we believe that fans' demonstrations of social support and community impact suggest that Little Monster communities constitute networked publics, and thus serve as spaces for potential future collective action, particularly as they continue to develop alongside Gaga's messages of acceptance and political intervention. Overall, our interviews with Little Monsters suggest that Lady Gaga

has influenced fans to develop new, and strengthen existing, political perceptions and attitudes, and in some cases to take action to support Gaga's vision and to support others like them.

Conclusion

About her philanthropic and activist work, Lady Gaga has said, 'It's what you do when you're at the top to inspire and influence and save the people that lift you' (quoted in Robinson, 2010: para. 21). Our interviews with 45 self-described Little Monsters suggest that Lady Gaga's interest in her fans is both unique and impactful, and Little Monsters' feelings of marginalization and isolation figure prominently in Gaga's influence on them. Supporting Sandvoss's (2005) assertion that fan objects can function as mirrors, we argue that Lady Gaga functions as a tool for fans to gain comfort and strength, and build community. Because Gaga actively encourages fans to reappropriate their outcast status, with specific reference to sexual identity and bullying, fans' relationships with her inspire new, and strengthen existing, social and political values.

Social media, Twitter in particular, play a crucial role in this process, as this seemingly authentic and two-way communication with Lady Gaga deepens fans' feelings about her and encourages them, as Marwick and boyd (2011) have suggested, to feel as if they truly know Lady Gaga. We believe that, as one of the most followed users of Twitter, Lady Gaga has demonstrated how social media can change the nature of 'para-social' relationships, allowing fans to feel their relationships with celebrities in social media are 'real'.

In line with Bennett (2014), we found that social media also allow Lady Gaga to share in real time her political thoughts and encourage fans to follow her lead. Little Monsters are proud of Gaga's activist work and see activist values and actions as an integral component of Little Monster identity. Deeply impacted by Lady Gaga's model, fans turn to social media to build alliances and communities in which they discuss Gaga's activism and support each other. We suggest that while these communities have not yet spawned unified and organized community action, their blending of popular culture and political discourse suggests they certainly have the potential to do so. As Lim and Kann suggest: 'The most vibrant political activities in network culture ... emerge in the overlapping domains of politics and culture ... creating a sphere of networked politics' (2008: 92–3).

Our discussion of the relationships between Lady Gaga and Little Monsters demonstrates the importance of incorporating the identification between fans and celebrities, and the interaction offered by social media, into studies of political celebrity. We believe these are crucial components in the exploration of long-standing questions about the impact and effect of political celebrities; without consideration of identification and interaction, we suggest that audience studies, as demonstrated by Couldry and Markham's (2007) study, will be unlikely to build a full understanding of the impact of this growing practice – and there is still much to learn. As both Goodman (2010) and Tsaliki *et al.* (2011b) caution, it may be that celebrity involvement in activist campaigns may encourage audiences to participate superficially, without engaging deeply with political issues. Long-term audience studies should be used to help to parse out these questions concerning impact over time and depth of commitment.

Further, future studies should explore the relationship between identification with a celebrity and identification with a celebrity's politics. In this case, we did not encounter self-identified Little Monsters who identified with Lady Gaga but were off-put by her politics. But such an association is a distinct possibility, and work on dislike and anti-fans (e.g. Gray, 2003) could be useful for examining how a celebrity's politics may be seen by audiences and fans as inauthentic, publicity-driven, and/or manipulative. It may be unlikely that audience members would be attracted to celebrities who espouse opposing political viewpoints, but it would also be useful to explore how celebrity politics may influence negative responses to celebrities and the popular culture texts they produce.

Despite the growth of fan studies in the last 20 years, there remains an

urgent need for scholars to explore more fully the many different potential relationships between fandom and political life, since fan studies as a research paradigm has something vital to contribute to larger considerations of the relationship between participatory culture and civic engagement. (Jenkins and Shresthova, 2012: para. 1.9)

Thus, a primary goal of future work should be to explore additional instances of audiences' and fans' political identifications with celebrities and media narratives. Such exemplars can help to develop Livingstone's assertion that 'In a thoroughly mediated world, audiences and publics, along with communities, nations, markets and crowds, are composed of the same people' (2005: 17), and to support a reconceptualization of the mutual opposition between 'audiences' and 'publics'. Networked publics may prove to be a useful concept in this reconceptualization, as it demonstrates that even activities that seem inconsequential or frivolous, such as calling oneself a 'Little Monster' or discussing Lady Gaga's values with others online, can have transformative value for fans.

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