Always already Nerdfighters: Constitution of an activist fan community through interpellation

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Abstract:
Applying Althusser's concept of interpellation, this study proposes a discourse theoretical approach to help understand the constitution of activist fan communities. In a discursive process, an ideology (defined as a framework of ideas through which we understand social existence) opens up a specific subject position that some people recognise and identify with. They are thus drawn into a certain way of thinking, speaking, and acting – as well as into a group or a community. The paper extends ideology theory by arguing that interpellation involves two stages: 'recognition' and 'reaction'. Recognition involves ideology grabbing someone's attention, and reaction, in turn, refers to that person either accepting or rejecting the 'call' of that ideology. The metaphor of interpellation helps make sense of how discourses and ideologies are acquired and spread and how groups and communities form around them. It is also suggested that ideology, in this sense, can inspire fan activism and empower members by making them aware of the possibility to act collectively. Empirically, the interpellative constitution of communities is demonstrated using the case of Nerdfighteria, an activist fan community formed around the YouTube channel Vlogbrothers.

Keywords: fan communities, fan activism, Nerdfighters, ideology, interpellation, discourse, social media, YouTube

Introduction

In recent years, fan studies scholars have become interested in fan communities that engage in social activism (e.g. Bennett, 2014; Jenkins & Shresthova, 2012; Lopez, 2012), noting that there are similarities between fan communities and political constituencies around candidates, parties or ideologies (Sandvoss, 2012, 2013; Van Zoonen, 2004, 2005). In

this study, I set out to contribute to our understanding of how such fan communities are constituted by drawing on ideology theory and specifically the concept of interpellation.

In doing this, I take a discursive approach and apply a 'descriptive' understanding of ideologies as fundamental social beliefs, systems of ideas that control and organise other socially shared beliefs (van Dijk, 2006b). As Hall (2003 [1981]) put it, ideology refers to 'those images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand, and 'make sense' of some aspect of social existence'. I will focus on the concept of interpellation, a key idea in Althusser's (2008 [1971]) theory of ideology. Interpellation refers to a metaphorical 'hailing' by ideological discourse, a call that individuals recognise as directed specifically to them and that they react to (see also e.g. Curran, Gurevitch, & Woollacott, 2005 [1982]; Hall, 1985; Hesmondhalgh & Toynbee, 2008; Holmes, 2005). Thus, ideology 'recruits' individuals as followers (Althusser, 2008 [1971]). Although Althusser was referring to a monolithic state ideology, the idea can be applied to other circumstances as well. Particularly with the current global, fragmented and participatory media environment, there is less exposure to that type of monolithic ideology; now, particularly in online spaces, there are many diverse and competing discourses and ideologies that interpellate people.

Empirically, I analyse Nerdfighters, a fan community with activist features that was formed primarily around the YouTube channel Vlogbrothers and its authors, John and Hank Green (see also Escobar, Kommers, & Beldad, 2014; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016a, 2016b; Wilkinson, 2011). Since its beginnings in 2007, the Vlogbrothers channel has progressively gained a following of over three million people, which is probably partly due to the community situating itself as part of a larger cultural phenomenon rooted in American culture and media. The 'nerd' stereotype was once very negative, and it was clearly stigmatising to be labelled as a nerd (L. J. Coleman & Cross, 2014 [1988]; Kinney, 1993). In recent years, however, there has been a change in the way that nerds or geeks are viewed, as noted by several scholars regarding both media representations (Eglash, 2002; Farnall, 2003; Kendall, 1999a, 2011; Lane, 2017b) and the real life of young people (Bucholtz, 1999, 2001; Cross, 2005). Thus, being a nerd has become less a 'stigma imposed by others' and more a 'purposefully chosen' alternative identity (Bucholtz, 1999). While some scholars argue that 'nerd' has become neutral (Cross, 2005), or even 'cool' (Hoppenstand, 2009; Quail, 2011), there still seems to be some way to go. For example, in terms of changing popular culture references, several commentators mention the popularity of *The Big Bang Theory*, an American television series whose main characters are nerds (Bednarek, 2012; Hoppenstand, 2009; Lane, 2017a). However, the image of the nerd in that series, while ironic, is still very much in line with the old stereotype. As argued by Kendall (2011, p. 506), even the most playful and ironic reconfigurations of the image of the nerd 'fail to dispel the original negative tone of the stereotype'. Therefore, it seems that there is still a cultural demand for the core 'ideological' message of Nerdfighters – social acceptance for nerds.

Taking a discursive approach (Fairclough, 2003; Gee, 1999; Wodak & Meyer, 2009), this study examines how the Nerdfighter community was constituted in an interpellative

process that proposes a subject position fans are able to identify with. I also discuss the extent to which ideology can, through interpellation, sometimes not only constitute *individual* subjects, as argued by much of previous research (in particular, see Dean, 2016), but also *collective* ones (see also Charland, 1987). I argue that it is possible for ideology, in some circumstances, to empower people by forming communities and convincing individuals that they are able to act collectively to effect change.

Most discursive studies tend to focus either on describing common discourses or on both describing and critiquing them, while little attention is typically paid to the processes by which discourses are *acquired* and *spread*. I believe it is important to reflect on how and why certain discourses are taken up by certain people and not by others. The concept of interpellation helps address this question: There is always already something in the mind of individuals (e.g. experiences, contexts, beliefs) that leads people to react to and be seduced by certain discourses and ideologies more easily than by others. This idea is echoed in research into human psychology, where it has been shown in numerous studies that people are more likely to look for, notice, believe and remember information that supports their pre-existing beliefs and expectations (e.g. Mercier & Sperber, 2011; Nickerson, 1998). The process of interpellation thus has cognitive foundations, but it is also supported by current media technology. Particularly algorithms that personalise search results and feeds, showing users content they are likely to click on and react to, expose people to a larger number of potentially interpellating discourses. The metaphor of interpellation is thought-provoking and helps us make sense of how discourses and ideologies spread and how groups and communities form around them.

The paper is organised as follows: First, I take a look at the concept of fan activism; second, I elaborate on the theoretical background of ideology and interpellation; and third, I introduce the Nerdfighter case. Next, I describe the data and method before moving on to presenting and discussing the analysis of the case.

Fan activism

Since its beginnings, the field of fan studies has recognised the importance of communality and the collective identities of fans (Busse & Gray, 2011; Jenkins, 2013 [1992]). Fandoms are formed around common interests, and they involve 'a sense of collective or subcultural identity around shared tastes' (Brough & Shresthova, 2012, ¶2.1). While early scholars focusing on fans marvelled at how their research participants were not merely *consumers* of media but also actively and often critically engaged with it (e.g. Baym, 2000; Jenkins, 2013 [1992]), more recently an interest in a more specific kind of participation, namely 'fan activism' (Bennett, 2012; Earl & Kimport, 2009; Jenkins, 2012; Lopez, 2012), has emerged. This form of activism that takes place at the intersection of consumer culture and political engagement (Lopez, 2012) has been defined as 'intentional actions by fans, or the use of fanlike strategies, to provoke change' (Brough & Shresthova, 2012, ¶2.4).

The two main types of fan activism that have been distinguished are celebrity-led, 'top-down' models and participatory, 'bottom-up' ones (Jenkins & Shresthova, 2012). Celebrity-led fan activism has the advantage that fans can be empowered by the celebrities they admire, and the encouragement can be important particularly for those who have little previous experience in the activist realm (Bennett, 2014). Social media is a key factor that enables celebrities' ideological influences through direct interaction with fans and also fans' interactions with each other (Click, Lee, & Holladay, 2017). The Nerdfighter community, which is the focus of this article, combines elements of both top-down and bottom-up models (Jenkins & Shresthova, 2012; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016b), although Wilkinson (2011, ¶1.8) interprets it as more top-down, as 'created and curated by the Green brothers' (see also Smith, 2016). I argue that the concepts of ideology and interpellation can help make sense of the constitution of such groups.

Ideology and interpellation

The concept of ideology has been a subject for considerable, long-standing debate within media and cultural studies. Some authors support a 'critical' understanding of ideology as a negative force upholding existing power relations through 'misrepresentation' (e.g. Corner, 2016; Downey, Titley, & Toynbee, 2014). This is not the view taken in this article; instead, I align myself with scholars who adopt a 'descriptive' definition of ideology according to which ideology is an *organising system of ideas* (van Dijk, 1998) that is potentially but not necessarily problematic. As Hall saw it, ideology is 'the mental framework […] which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works' (Hall, 1986). As Hall's approach has demonstrated, critical approaches can also be compatible with such a descriptive definition of ideology.

What is largely lacking in existing research on ideology is an empirical interest in ideologies that are not somehow oppressive in nature. In his criticism of van Dijk (1998), Corner (2001) notes that van Dijk argues for a descriptive definition but still empirically analyses racist ideology: '[p]erhaps examples of 'good' ideology are harder to find after all' (Corner, 2001, p. 530). Perhaps, but maybe there is also a sense of urgency connected with such negative cases that causes researchers to focus on them. In this study, however, I set out to analyse a case where ideology theory can act as a useful theoretical lens, without understanding ideology as oppressive but rather as a mental and discursive construct connected to collective identity and community formation.

Particularly, I focus on the idea of *interpellation* by ideological discourse. A specific ideology grabs hold of us; interpellation is about being drawn into a certain way of thinking, speaking and acting. Althusser (2008 [1971]) describes interpellation using the analogy of a hail from a police officer followed by the hailed individual turning round. This 'physical conversion' also converts the person into a self-conscious subject, as he recognises that it actually was he who was hailed (Althusser, 2008 [1971]). Ideology, therefore, tells us who we are and where we belong; it puts us in our place – into available subject positions.

Althusser further argues that ideology has 'always already' interpellated individuals as subjects. In one sense, this can be understood as there being no escape from the influence of ideology-in-general; we cannot put ourselves outside of all ideology. In another sense, it can be interpreted as meaning that, exposed to ideology, people become (aware of) what they in some sense 'already were' – they will only accept those ideas that they are predisposed to accept.

Thus, interpellation presupposes that the person is, so to speak, 'tuned to the right frequency'. Interpellating discourse must contain something familiar so that a person 'recognises' it, but mere familiarity is not sufficient, there has to be an appeal that makes this particular discourse relevant for the receiver. I argue that interpellation can be analysed as involving two stages: *recognition*, when people 'hear the call' of an ideological discourse, and *reaction,* where they 'turn around'. For Althusser, these were one and the same, as he claimed that hailings hardly ever miss their target. However, Butler (1997, p. 33), for example, disagrees, stating instead that interpellation 'regularly miss[es] its mark'. People do ignore ideological calls (this is what introduces some agency), and this is why it is useful to separate reaction from recognition. Recognition involves ideology grabbing someone's attention; reaction, in turn, involves the hailed person either rejecting the 'call' or accepting it and starting to act according to and reproducing the ideological discourse in question. In reality, these are not single events – not just one hailing – but usually a longer socialisation process (Charland, 1987). Then, especially assuming there are competing ideologies available, interpellation is not deterministic. Although people probably do not have much of a say in whether they hear the call of a specific ideology and recognise it as meant for them, this being more of an instantaneous and unconscious event, they can, however, thereafter reject the ideology or even renegotiate its contents.

Recently, Dean (2016) has argued for the reversal of Althusser's assertion about interpellation, saying that ideology 'interpellates the subject as an individual' instead of 'the individual as a subject'. Dean narrows the focus of her discussion to 'bourgeois' ideology and asserts that it is precisely that we are made to think of ourselves as *individuals*, separate from others, that is the problem with that ideology. Whereas Althusser argues that ideology puts individuals in their place through premade identities – so that they are enslaved by the conventional – Dean focuses instead on the specific aspect of individuality itself: Bourgeois ideology makes us believe we are first and foremost individuals, and this robs us of our collective power. However, as it is characteristic of ideology to tie people together, it can also do the opposite: bring people to an identity where they realise they can act collectively. I propose, therefore, that ideology can also constitute *collective subjects*. Charland (1987), for example, discusses how the group of the Québécois was constituted through an interpellative process. After all, ideologies are often thought to be unifying. They lend coherence to the groups that hold them, 'welding them into a unitary, if internally differentiated, identity' (Eagleton, 1991), by organising their membership criteria, actions, aims, norms and values, as well as their relations to other social groups (van Dijk, 1998, 2006b). Ideologies then always construct insiders and outsiders and inherently favour

certain values and interests at the expense of others – this is partly what gives rise to their often-negative character. Similarly, as ideologies are organising systems of ideas, they have a need to be coherent, to have an internal logic (this contributes to people sometimes disregarding or even manipulating facts to make them fit that logic). Thus, through a process of interpellation, ideology draws people into subject positions, both individual *and* collective, with an emphasis on one or the other, depending on the *content* of the specific ideology.

The case

The Nerdfighter community is an informal fan community formed around the YouTube channel Vlogbrothers, which is its 'backbone' (Escobar et al., 2014, p. 495) or 'centrepiece' (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016b). The case provides an example of how activist fan communities can be constituted through the interpellation of ideological discourse.

The channel was started in 2007 by two American brothers, John and Hank Green, initially as an experiment to keep in touch without text-based communication for one year. In 2019, the Vlogbrothers channel had over three million subscribers and the videos had been viewed altogether almost 800 million times. The authors of Vlogbrothers also produce several other YouTube channels that have specific themes, including Crashcourse (educational content) and SciShow (science news). Vlogbrothers, however, is more informal and covers a broad range of topics. One reason for the popularity is John Green's increasing fame as an author of young adult novels, which have reached enormous popularity, and a movie adaptation of the best-selling novel *The Fault in Our Stars* released in 2014. However, it is not accurate to describe the audience of the Nerdfighters as exclusively John Green fans; rather, the YouTube presence and fame of both brothers has grown in tandem with the fan community.

Early in the channel's history, a growing group of Vlogbrothers fans became known as *Nerdfighters*, or collectively as *Nerdfighteria*, and the fan community set up several other Nerdfighter sites such as discussion forums, blogs, a wiki, and a subreddit. Offline meetings have also been organised in many countries. Nerdfighters identify as nerds, and the community has been described as having a strong sense of cohesion, shared culture and values and a great ability to become organised (Escobar et al., 2014; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016a, 2016b). In my field notes early on, I noted that there where many welcoming comments to newcomers and that the Vlogbrothers comment sections in general seemed extremely friendly compared to most other YouTube channels I followed. However, there was also delineation between members and non-members, with some non-members criticising or mocking members. This gave rise to references to previous experiences of bullying and the need for Nerdfighters to contribute to a new, more positive experience of living as nerds.

Nerdfighteria has been characterised as partly a 'fan activist organisation' (Kligler-Vilenchik, McVeigh-Schultz, Weitbrecht, & Tokuhama, 2012), or an activist fan community, whose activities are generally focused on charity and civic engagement around the agenda

of 'decreasing world suck' (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016a, 2016b). These activities include an annual charity initiative called Project for Awesome (P4A) and other fundraising projects. The case can also, to a certain extent, be seen as an example of celebrity-led activism (Bennett, 2014), as promoting this type of civic agency is 'baked into the content world' produced by John and Hank Green (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016b). Clearly, John and Hank Green have a great deal of influence on Nerdfighters' thinking and activism. This is precisely because of the central role of the YouTube channel where the Green brothers often talk to each other and to (other) Nerdfighters about issues they see as problematic in the world and about possible solutions to those problems. However, they 'lead' in a flexible way that leaves significant room for fan creativity. P4A asks fans to find charities that they consider particularly important and to come up with their own ways of promoting them. Escobar et al. (2014, p. 497) found that developing projects together was seen as a key aspect of the community's culture. This can be contrasted, for example, with the case of Lady Gaga: *She* has chosen specific campaigns to promote and encourages her fans to support those causes in specific ways, such as donating or phoning a senator (Bennett, 2014). This is why it is appropriate to describe Nerdfighters as a mixed model of fan activism, including both celebrity-led (top-down) and fan-led (bottom-up) features.

Data and method

The empirical section of this article is based on an analysis perhaps best described as a contextualised discourse analysis. Discourse is widely understood as a crucial way in which ideologies, and their 'content' such as norms, values, actions and goals are acquired, expressed and reproduced (e.g., Fairclough, 2003; van Dijk, 1998, 2001, 2014). Analysing discourse helps shed light on how certain subject positions are socially constructed in interaction and what (often taken-for-granted) meanings are connected to them, thus providing insight to the functioning of the interpellation process.

Many scholars argue that it is important to consider the context when analysing discourse in general (e.g. van Dijk, 2006a) and online discourse in particular (Georgakopoulou, 2006; Herring, 2007; Kelsey & Bennett, 2014; KhosraviNik & Unger, 2015). Contexts should, however, not be seen as deterministic constraints; rather, their influence depends on subjective participant interpretations, i.e. their context models (e.g. van Dijk, 2006a, 2014). By contextualisation, in this study, I refer to the fact that data collection was not done all at once. Instead, it took place in tandem with a prolonged observation period that allowed me to choose the texts to be analysed and to gradually develop a better understanding of the social context of the fan community. It is likely that by exposing the researcher to more material than would be realistic to qualitatively analyse in detail, this kind of contextualisation increases the trustworthiness of the analysis.

Before the more academic observation period, I had already been casually following Vlogbrothers and some other channels by the Green brothers (SciShow, Crashcourse) for approximately one year. The actual observation period began in late 2012, lasted

approximately 18 months and entailed spending one to two hours per week on online observation. This time also included a more intensive six week period when one to three hours were observed daily. The observation period involved regularly following the videos and comment sections on the Vlogbrothers channel and other related channels, as well as reflecting on the experiences in my field notes. As the online context permits this, in addition to 'real-time' observations as new videos were posted, I also went back to older materials, especially when they were deemed important – particularly the earliest Vlogbrothers videos. The majority of this observation time was spent on YouTube videos and comment sections but also, among others, on the 'Our Pants' forum, the 'eff yeah nerdfighters' Tumblr, the 'Nerdfighteria Wiki' and on sites related to Nerdfighter charity efforts (e.g. P4A, This Star Won't Go Out Foundation, kiva.org), as well as doing searches for mentions in the mainstream media. The observation phase bears a resemblance to some approaches of online ethnography (E. G. Coleman, 2010; Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, & Cui, 2009; Hine, 2015; Murthy, 2008), although it did not include participation or interviews.

This approach helped me collect data where the essence of being a Nerdfighter was discussed in illuminating ways, to gain a general level of understanding of themes in the material and to view it from the perspective of the participants, i.e. gaining an understanding of the participants' own 'context models' and involving their knowledge, attitudes and ideologies (van Dijk, 2009).

The data collected include field notes (12 pages), collected videos and their transcripts (29 pages), comments relating to these videos (samples collected using InfoExtractor; 99 pages), newspaper articles (23 pages) and other relevant online texts such as materials related to Nerdfighter charity projects and wiki and blog texts about Nerdfighteria (55 pages).

In the first stage of the analysis, I looked at how people described becoming and being Nerdfighters and what it entailed for them to be a Nerdfighter in terms of actions and values. This stage involved a qualitative theme-based analysis. The emerging themes, in dialogue with previous theory, led to the choice of interpellation as theoretical perspective and analytical lens. Thus, the examples presented in the following sections represent types of talk that were found in the first stage and analysed through the lens of interpellation. In the second stage, the focus of the analytic process was on discursive resources (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Taylor & Wetherell, 1999) involved in interpellation, namely pre-existing cultural and linguistic resources that people draw on and that are, however, 'unfixed and open to alternative interpretation and construction' (Taylor & Wetherell, 1999, p. 56). Such resources include semiotic (e.g. linguistic, visual) resources used to indicate subject positions and relational resources such as accentuating similarities or differences to other groups or ideologies (see e.g. Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Fairclough, 2003).

Calling Nerdfighters
Several discursive resources that could be called semiotic, i.e. involving words and signs, emerged repeatedly from the data and proved relevant for interpellation as a Nerdfighter.

The labels *Nerdfighter(s)* and *Nerdfighteria* are central in 'calling' people – in both concretely referring to them and in interpellating them. The origin of the word Nerdfighter can be found in one of the 2007 Vlogbrothers videos, where John Green misreads the name of a game, 'Aero Fighters', and comments: *This game seems to be called Nerd Fighters. That's my favourite kind of fighters!* Initially, then, the word did not refer to anything specific; however, it caught on in the sense of a nerd that fights for (or against) something. Therefore, from early on, the very name of the community contained a semantic element reminiscent of activism. In the beginning, John and Hank Green did not specifically use the term to refer to themselves or their fans, but it soon became common for them to talk about both themselves and their viewers as Nerdfighters. This is different from many other fan communities in that it depicts both the celebrity object of fandom and the fans as part of the same group. The derivative *Nerdfighteria*, created later, is often metaphorically understood as a place where Nerdfighters live (e.g. island, town), but more generally it refers to Nerdfighters as a group.

As these terms are based on the concept of a *nerd*, existing cultural discourses related to nerds played a vital role in their semantic development. These discursive resources provide the familiarity needed for the 'recognition' aspect of interpellation. As discussed by Kendall (1999a, 2000), nerds are often understood as intelligent and valuing knowledge and interested in topics such as math, science and science fiction, but they are also associated with being socially inept, dressing badly and even having poor personal hygiene. With such negative connotations, the stereotype of a nerd required creative appropriation in order to add the additional layer of appeal that allows for 'reaction'. Nerdfighters and particularly the Green brothers have, then, regularly worked to rid the word of its negative connotations, as exemplified by Extract 1. It is worth noting that the celebrity-led side of the community is specifically due the fandom being focused around content by Hank and John where this kind of interpellative and inspirational work is integral.

> *Extract 1:*
> I know that right now, the flamers are all flexing their little flame fingers, preparing to write 'u r a nurd' [appears written on screen]. Hank, I have a serious question. Why is being a nerd bad? Saying 'I notice you're a nerd' is like saying 'Hey, I notice that you'd rather be intelligent than stupid, that you'd rather be thoughtful than vapid, that you believe there are things that matter more than the arrest record of Lindsay Lohan'. Why is that?
> (John Green, Vlogbrothers video published on 27 July 2007)

The positive features of pre-existing discourses, intelligence and interest in knowledge and learning thus appear as discursive resources and elements of ideology associated with the proposed subject position of Nerdfighter. At the same time, a relational discursive resource is used, as outsiders, specifically people who use the word *nerd* as an insult, are ridiculed as shallow, stupid and ignorant (a point emphasised by the misspelling in the quotation).

In addition to these explicit references to Nerdfighters, symbols that are used as indirect references to the community are also common; their connection to Nerdfighteria is clear only to those who possess the necessary cultural-contextual knowledge to interpret them. Such symbols include a hand sign derived from the 'Vulcan Salute' in Star Trek. This reference to science fiction is another example of using cultural references to nerds as discursive resources and creatively reinterpreting them. In addition, there is a logo derived from the hand sign, and some versions of it refer to the United Nations emblem by incorporating a similar wreath. This allows an ideological comparison – Nerdfighteria unites nerds internationally – and refers to positive connotations of ideas such as internationality, togetherness and upholding peace. Other prominent indirect references to Nerdfighters are insider sayings and jokes. One example is the abbreviation *DFTBA,* which literally means 'don't forget to be awesome', and functions as a salute – and as a way of positioning oneself as a Nerdfighter. The word *awesome* contained in *DFTBA* is also used in many other contexts; for example, Nerdfighters are sometimes defined as people who are *made of awesome*.

In sum, referring to existing cultural concepts and discourses allows for 'recognition', while the positive reworking of connotations adds appeal and allows for 'reaction'; together these enable interpellation. As argued by Althusser, ideology calls individuals by their name – in this case, literally a name for a group or collective entity. This helps carve out the group as something specific, relatively durable and significant instead of merely a fleeting gathering of people by allowing identification and separation from outsiders. Thus, it constitutes the group 'as a subject'.

Always already Nerdfighters

In comments by people who identify as Nerdfighters, a relatively common theme was describing the Nerdfighter subject position as life-changing – specifically, not changing them as people but rather changing the framing of their identity. For example, in Extract 2, referring to a discriminating cultural discourse connected particularly to female nerds, person B expresses the idea that becoming a Nerdfighter allowed her to be more open about who she felt she (already) was (see Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016b, for more discussion on the Nerdfighter community as a place where people can be themselves).

> *Extract 2:*
> [Person A] Nerd girls are a scarcity sadly
> [Person B] We're not really a scarcity but...even more so than for guys, it's been a bad thing for girls to be nerds. Some of us try to act like non-nerds (i did 'til I became a nerdfighter). Quiet girls tend to be nerds, so you may not realize some of us are nerds. […] The scarcity is a facade.
> (Comments in response to a Vlogbrothers video
> published on 24 February 2009)

She emphasises the authenticity of her identity and that of other female nerds by stating that before becoming a Nerdfighter she *tried* to act like a *non-nerd*, implying that the effort was inauthentic and unsuccessful. She was, then, always already a Nerdfighter, and the interpellation of the Nerdfighter ideology allowed her to recognise this. At the same time, she is actively participating in the reinterpretation of the nerd label by questioning the strongly gendered cultural connotations associated with being a nerd, reproduced by person A in the example. It is noteworthy in this context that while nerds have often been understood as predominantly male (see e.g. Kendall, 1999a, 2000), the opposite is the case with Nerdfighters (based on 'censuses' conducted by Hank Green, see also Escobar et al., 2014), so Nerdfighters also more widely question this male stereotype.

The following comment to a Vlogbrothers Thanksgiving video is another example of this 'always already' quality or the idea of becoming who you already are.

> *Extract 3:*
> I'm thankful for you and John for making a safe place for nerds to be themselves.
>
> > (Comment in response to a Vlogbrothers video
> > published on 23 November 2012)

Here, the writer indirectly positions themself as a Nerdfighter and suggests that at least some nerds feel that there is a degree of social discrimination against them in the wider cultural context, which creates the need for a *safe place*. Nerdfighter ideology is, then, often portrayed as a self-advocating type of activism – nerds fighting for their right to be themselves. In Extract 3, we see also that this Nerdfighter explicitly attributes the creation of this ideology to the Green brothers, pointing again to the celebrity-led character of the fan activism in this case.

Joining Nerdfighteria often sounds very easy: *If you've seen more than one episode of Brotherhood 2.0, you're not really a NiT* ['Nerdfighter in Training'] *anymore, you're a Nerdfighter* (Hank Green, Vlogbrothers video, 3 July 2007). Although *NiT* constructs a difference between members and not-yet-members (relational discursive resource), the division is simultaneously contradicted by defining a Nerdfighter as basically anyone watching Vlogbrothers videos. In some examples, the ease of becoming Nerdfighter is taken to the extreme:

> *Extract 4:*
> What is a Nerdfighter, you ask? Well, if you're wondering that, you probably are one.
>
> > (Tumblr: Eff Yeah Nerdfighters)

This points again to the idea that interpellated people somehow already are Nerdfighters at the moment when they become aware of Nerdfighteria. The same idea – one can be a

Nerdfighter without realising it – also underlies Extract 5, which is from a video filmed in a library by two young girls calling themselves Nerdfighters. This kind of contribution also shows the 'bottom-up' side of Nerdfighters, or the creative space available to fans.

> *Extract 5:*
> There are a lot of people here who are most definitely Nerdfighters, who don't know they are Nerdfighters. So, we decided we would help them out by putting 'secret memorandums' inside places where Nerdfighters are most likely to look. Where would Nerdfighters find these notes? Books, of course.
> (Fan video published on 17 December 2007)

The broad-brush definition of 'Nerdfighter' (and redefinition of 'nerd') as anyone who is intelligent and interested in learning makes it possible for many different people to be interpellated as Nerdfighters. A key aspect of interpellation as Nerdfighters is, then, a positive reframing of existing nerd identity and simultaneously keeping the category open to as many interpretations as possible.

Nerdfighter ideology

The values associated with Nerdfighters have already been discussed in some earlier studies. Escobar et al. (2014) identified 'values based on philanthropy, equality and empathy' as well as a shared enthusiasm for sharing knowledge, and Wilkinson (2011) mentions respect, playfulness, generosity and intellectual thought. The ideology 'content' – Nerdfighters' norms, values and goals – is somewhat vague and includes a general 'nerdy' love of and a belief in progress through intelligence, science and learning, as well as an appreciation of being a good, generous person and being part of something bigger, a community. Extract 6, where person C expresses a doubt concerning how easy it really is to become a Nerdfighter, provides additional elaboration.

> *Extract 6:*
> [Person C] Hmm.. Becoming a nerdfighter is that easy? Because I want to be part of your nerd community. :p but I feel like I need to be baptized or something. Plus I need some self-improvement, such as: not being so pessimistic about the world […] I feel this could make me into a better person. :3
> [Person D] Naaaah! Just hang with us. Be Awesome, share cool stuff, in general be nice: s'all good.
> (Comments in response to a Vlogbrothers video
> published on 23 June 2009)

The extract suggests that person C has understood Nerdfighter values as including optimism and being a good person, but with the reference to the need of *self-improvement*, a

difference is constructed between C and the Nerdfighter subject position. The 'recognition' aspect of interpellation has therefore not been fully achieved, while 'reaction' has. C probably bases this interpretation of Nerdfighter character on observation, as newcomers to online communities typically lurk for long periods before becoming active members (Rafaeli, Ravid, & Soroka, 2004; Ren, Kraut, & Kiesler, 2007). Person D, while dismissing the apparent worries of the newcomer and welcoming them, simultaneously confirms the overall understanding: A Nerdfighter is someone *awesome* and *nice*. The example suggests that a portrayal of Nerdfighters as good, kind and optimistic may limit interpellation and membership, as some people might not feel they can identify with such an idealised picture. It is more common, however, that members seem to understand the ideal as something like a vision to strive for and not a requirement. This can be seen as a kindness to oneself in spite of problems or shortcomings exemplified in Extract 7.

> *Extract 7:*
> I definitely share your sentiment of how much the Vlogbrothers and nerdfighteria has helped me not just deal with things, but feel like I can still be a good person that's good for humanity in spite of my flaws.
>
> (Comment in response to a Vlogbrothers video
> published on 24 November 2012)

Goals are also an important part of ideology content. Nerdfighteria has the above-mentioned overall purpose of 'fighting for nerds' (self-advocacy and peer support) but also an explicitly expressed and perhaps even vaguer goal of 'increasing awesome' and 'decreasing suck' in the world, which can materialise as activism for any number of social causes. Keeping such statements of purpose very general can promote interpellation; this level of generality allows members to make their own interpretations of awesomeness and thus also allows for almost anyone to become a member (see also Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016a; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016b).

A major example of an interpretation of awesomeness is the annual charity campaign Project for awesome (P4A) where John and Hank Green invite Nerdfighters to become active contributors and make a video promoting a non-profit organisation or cause. Extract 8 shows that the expectation can weigh on some members who feel unable to act according to the instructions.

> *Extract 8:*
> I feel terrible about not participating in P4A. Every time I try to make a video, I just end up sitting there and not knowing what to say.
>
> (Comment in response to a Vlogbrothers video
> published on 28 December 2012)

Similarly to the ideal Nerdfighter traits and values (see Extract 6), depictions of ideal actions may in some cases lead to feelings of inadequacy and lead to people not being fully interpellated. However, often such instances of fan activism seem to inspire very positive emotions in fans, as seen in Extract 9.

> *Extract 9:*
> I've never been more proud to be part of Nerdfighteria than during P4A. We can do some really cool things when we work together. ☺
>
> (Comment on the Our pants forum)

This type of activity can therefore be beneficial for fans in terms of promoting a positive identity and also through increasing their faith in the possibility of making a difference in the world through civic action.

Discussion

The study has shown how an activist fan community can be formed in a process of interpellation, by calling people to a subject position they already somehow recognise (e.g. using the 'Nerdfighter' label) and appealing to them through positive elements of identity, including the desire to do good in the world. The aim of this study has been to explore the role of ideological discourse and interpellation (Althusser, 2008 [1971]) in the constitution of an activist fan community, with Nerdfighters examined as an example. Doing this, the study has contributed to a theoretical understanding of fan communities and fan activism, as well as deepening our understanding of interpellation as a two-stage process and its relevance in the online context.

The study has shown how an activist fan community can be formed in a process of interpellation, by calling people to a subject position they already somehow recognise (e.g. using the 'Nerdfighter' label) and appealing to them through positive elements of identity, including the desire to do good in the world. Ideological discourse attracts those who already feel close to the proposed subject position – they are always already Nerdfighters – leading them to identify with the ideology and the group. This is not a deterministic process; instead, some fail to be (fully) interpellated and others negotiate the tenets of Nerdfighter ideology, identity and activism to suit their own personality and purposes. Interpellation is a constitutive process, as demonstrated by Charland (1987). It is a process whereby 'real' and 'imagined' communities come about, and people find ways of making sense of themselves, and it can help us understand the construction fan communities and fan activism. Specifically, in this case, the process relies on drawing from and modifying the wider cultural stereotype of 'nerd' – the pre-existing cultural elements connected to a collective subject position. While incorporating the word 'nerd' in the label 'Nerdfighter' provides the familiarity ('recognition') needed for interpellation, reinventing discourses about nerds by erasing negative connotations and focusing on their positive aspects provides appeal for the

proposed subject position (allowing for 'reaction'). Nerdfighteria has grown at an astonishing rate, and the popularity may be partly due to the relation of the Nerdfighter ideology to a wider cultural phenomenon. As suggested by Quail (2011, p. 466), 'pockets of popular discourse are arguing that nerdy is the new "cool"'. The appropriation of the nerd label for positive identity construction is, then, certainly not unique to Nerdfighters (see e.g. Bucholtz, 1999; Kendall, 1999b).

The fan community is constructed as separate from outsiders by referring to values and goals, such as progress and community, being a good person and aiming to 'increase awesome' as well as through relational discursive resources such as explicit comparison with outsiders. The constructing of insiders and outsiders and the use of indirect references, which are difficult for outsiders to understand, might be thought to form a barrier to the interpellation of new members. However, this is counteracted by keeping 'entry criteria' very loose and portraying 'nerdfighterness' as a quality someone can possess even without being aware of it. Potential new members are thus made to feel as if they always were Nerdfighters. Vague definitions of both who is a Nerdfighter and what Nerdfighters do (in terms of activism) promote interpellation and allow fans to have significant space for creativity. This is why I do not consider the Nerdfighter community a pure case of celebrity-led fan activism but rather a more flexible model.

The interpellative process, more generally speaking, is highly relevant in the current online media environment. In recent years, the increasing use of algorithms, which personalise search results and feeds based on what people have previously clicked on, has amounted to an important change. In fact, the circumstances on YouTube are optimal for interpellation. Many platforms such as discussion forums are content-centred, meaning that similar beliefs and interests are the main reason people flock together, instead of, for example, aiming to reproduce existing 'real-life' networks. YouTube is also content-centred, but, in addition, it proposes personalised content that is similar to something the user has watched before and is therefore likely to take a similar perspective and deal with similar topics. Crucially, this content comes from outside those channels that the user already subscribes to. Because of this bombardment by new but recognisable content, users are more likely to come across discourses that are able to both grab their attention and appeal to them in such a way that they accept the interpellating discourse. A discourse that 'speaks' to certain kinds of people probably also increases the likelihood of those people gaining a sense of togetherness and community, but these communities are not necessarily activist in nature.

So, what is it, finally, that makes a fan community activist? Under which circumstances is interpellation conducive to the formation of activist communities in particular? Firstly, as I have argued in this paper, there are different kinds of ideologies. Some fix their subjects in conventional identities and favour the status quo, and others already incorporate the idea of change. Changing, improving or helping (either nerds or people in general) are part of the Nerdfighter ideology, and this is also part of the appeal of the ideology. Secondly, and this is also about the differences between ideologies, this study

suggests that interpellation as a subject does not have to mean interpellation as an *individual* but that subject positions can also be *collective* (cf. Dean, 2016). If, as argued by Dean (2016), interpellation as an individual causes a reduction of agency by foreclosing collective political subjectivity, interpellation as a collective, conversely, could offer possibilities for extending agency. Clearly, activist groups and social movements can and do form around shared identities and problematics. They have a shared ideology (in the descriptive sense), and they may go on to effect change on social structures. Both the idea of change and the idea of acting together are therefore key aspects of ideological discourse in terms of the constitution of an activist fan community.

However, it is relevant to consider the argument by Mitchell (2016) that due to a focus on philanthropy, celebrity-led fan activism can be seen as part of a neoliberal citizenship formation and depoliticization, namely Western 'bourgeois' ideology (see also Chouliaraki, 2011). A 'wish to help' is a typical element of fan activism (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2012); therefore, it is not surprising that many manifestations of fan activism involve some type of charity effort, as is also the case with Nerdfighters. As opposed to many instances of celebrity-led fan activism (Bennett, 2012, 2014; Mitchell, 2016), it can be argued that as a mix of the top-down and bottom-up models of fan activism, Nerdfighters have a more active role in the projects they engage in, and therefore, the community has more agency instead of being simply a loyal army mobilised by a celebrity. 'Celebrity humanitarianism' often has a tendency to focus on distant others, for example in Africa, and it thus involves interpellation as a Western subject and mobilises emotions of guilt and pity related to that position (Chouliaraki, 2011; Mitchell, 2016). However, as the Nerdfighter community is also a collective identity project and involves elements of self-advocacy (standing up for nerd rights), this could bring their activism closer to home. Therefore, Nerdfighters could also be empowered to get involved in endeavours of a more political nature as they realise the power of the collective subject.

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