



When Sexism Trumps Fandom: Hostile Sexism and Social Dominance Predict Negative Reactions to *Doctor Who*'s First Female Doctor

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Background

The British Sci-Fi television phenomenon *Doctor Who* recently celebrated its 50th anniversary. The main character, known simply as “the Doctor,” is reborn into another body or “regenerates” periodically and, has historically only been played by (White) male actors. On July 16, 2017, the BBC announced that the Doctor would be portrayed by a woman for the first time (scheduled for late 2018), Although many fans expressed support and enthusiasm for this decision on social media, there was some backlash as well. The present study was undertaken to clarify fan responses to this anticipated shift, in step with their existing social attitudes about women and social hierarchy in general. We predicted that fans with higher levels of sexism or social dominance might feel less positively about a female lead. We also anticipated that female fans might feel more enthusiastic than male fans.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited in two waves, one via MTurk ($n = 138$) and one via snowball sampling in which the survey link was publicized on social media by hosts of *Doctor Who* podcasts ($n = 97$). The sample was 49% female, 82% heterosexual, 83% White, $M_{age} = 38.6$ years. Significant differences on key study variables emerged for both sample and gender (men scored higher on sexism and social dominance; no gender differences emerged on Doctor Who-specific attitudes, contrary to our prediction). Thus we control for both in regression analyses.

Measures

The survey scales were presented in randomized order.

Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996; ASI-Short Form; Rollero, Glick & Tartaglia, 2014): Hostile Sexism (HS; e.g., “Women seek to gain power by getting control over men,” $\alpha = .90$) and Benevolent Sexism (BS, “Women should be protected and cherished by men,” $\alpha = .88$, 1-5 scale).

Social Dominance Orientation (SDO, short form; Ho et al., 2015; e.g., “Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups,” $\alpha = .88$, 1-7 scale)

Attitudes about female Doctor: A researcher-devised scale comprised of 6 positive emotions about the casting decision (e.g., how excited, happy), 6 negative emotions about the casting decision (e.g., how angry, upset), 1-7 scale). We also assessed the degree to which they supported the decision to cast a female, and how much they anticipated viewing and enjoying the new season (1-9 scale). Factor analysis yielded a positive emotion factor (including support for a new female doctor), a negative emotion factor, and anticipated viewing enjoyment/frequency (see Table 1).

Results/Discussion

To determine whether ASI and SDO were inversely correlated with positive attitudes, and positively correlated with negative attitudes, we performed correlations among the attitude scores and the Dr Who-specific factor scores. Indeed, HS, BS, and SDO were each positively and significantly correlated with Factor 2, and negatively and significantly correlated with Factors 1 and 3 (all $ps < .01$).

Table 1.

Mean Ratings, Standard Deviations, and Rotated Factor Loadings for Dr. Who-specific items

	Mean(SD)	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Enthusiastic	5.15 (1.81)	.90	-.02	.03
Proud	4.75 (2.11)	.88	.11	-.10
Excited	5.32 (2.86)	.87	-.03	.07
Positive	5.51 (1.76)	.81	-.09	.12
Inspired	4.42 (2.05)	.80	.06	-.11
Happy	5.44 (1.65)	.79	-.16	.10
Supportive	7.51 (2.12)	.63	-.20	.22
Upset	1.77 (1.44)	.11	.87	-.07
Sad	1.86 (1.55)	-.06	.85	-.09
Angry	1.77 (1.40)	.10	.84	-.26
Negative	1.90 (1.57)	-.23	.80	-.03
Tense	2.58 (1.75)	.01	.49	.05
Nervous	3.17 (1.94)	.01	.35	.22
Anticipated Viewing	4.15 (.85)	-.01	.02	.81
Anticipate Enjoying	7.20 (1.39)	.12	-.09	.71

To determine the relative contribution of ASI and SDO scores, after accounting for gender and sample, we ran 3 hierarchical regressions with factor scores as the criterion variable. Step 1 included gender and sample, Step 2 included SDO, and Step 3 included HS and BS. Results for the final step for each are shown below. HS and SDO were inversely predictive of positive attitudes toward the new female Doctor; high HS was the most robust predictor of negative attitudes, and SDO showed most robust inverse relationship with anticipated enjoyment/viewing frequency (see Table 2).

Table 2. Regression analyses predicting *Doctor Who* factors from Social Attitudes

	Factor 1 (Pos.)			Factor 2 (Neg.)			Factor 3 (Enjoy/View)		
	B	SE	Beta	B	SE	Beta	B	SE	Beta
Step 3									
Sample	-.14	.14	-.07	.12	.14	.06	-.74	.11	-.42**
Gender	-.07	.07	-.06	-.03	.07	-.02	.01	.06	.01
SDO	-.14	.07	-.18*	.06	.07	.08	-.17	.06	-.24*
HS	-.27	.08	-.33*	.33	.08	.42**	-.04	.06	-.06
BS	.11	.06	.14	-.04	.06	-.06	.01	.05	.01
<i>F-change</i>	5.57**			9.92**			.25		
R^2	.20			.23			.36		

Findings suggest that existing attitudes that favor social dominance or sexism are in fact relevant to how *Doctor Who* fans feel about the first female lead. Media affinities do not operate in a social vacuum, but rather appear to reflect (at the least) the broader social attitudes of their viewers. Fandom, in this case, did not trump sexism.