

Young Children's Positive and Negative Parasocial Relationships with Media Characters

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There is a scarcity of research on how young children form short- and long-term emotional connections with popular media characters. Preexisting research on young children's parasocial relationships (PSR) with media personae has traditionally operationally defined PSR exclusively in terms of friendship and focused on television characters. However, a growing body of research suggests the need for a wider survey of children's media platforms. Scholarship also actually points to two distinct constructs of PSR: positive PSR (friendly feelings or amicability) and negative PSR (unfriendly feelings or antipathy). This study engaged 88 children ages 5–7 in open- and closed-ended questions designed to measure both positive and negative PSR. Our research reveals a more nuanced understanding of young children's PSR.

Keywords: Children; Parasocial Relationships; Transmedia

Many television programs directed at young children in the United States use a technique in which the character speaks directly into the camera lens, known as a parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956), which influences the development of parasocial relationships (PSR). Researchers have operationalized PSI and PSR as affective bonding; however, PSR may constitute relationships grounded in antipathy rather than friendship (Chory, 2013; Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006). Scholars have explored disliked characters and personae with adults (Chory, 2013; Hartmann, Stuke, & Daschmann, 2008), but no PSR research has been conducted about disliked characters with children.

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Moreover, while television still occupies a large portion of children's screen time (Gutnick, Robb, Takeuchi, & Kotler, 2011), it is vital to recognize the growing presence of transmedia experiences in children's lives, creating an interconnected narrative (Jenkins, 2006). To date, only one study of children's PSI has included more than one media platform (Wilson & Drogos, 2007). Therefore, the following study examines positive and negative PSR in children aged 5–7 years in their transmedia experience.

Children and adults identify with media characters who are similar to them. School-aged children (Hoffner, 1996) and preschool-aged boys (Bond & Calvert, 2014) have reported same-sex preferences for characters. Chory-Assad and Cicchirillo (2005) found that college students reported preferring same-sex characters more similar to themselves and to the group of friends and family with which they interact. Therefore, the following hypotheses were derived:

H1: Boys will choose same-sex media characters as friends more often than girls will.

H2: Girls will report stronger PSR with same-sex character friends than boys.

Understanding both positive and negative relationships is important when considering the potential outcomes of mediated interactions. Chory (2013) found that adults reported more attraction to and identification with liked characters than disliked characters, and Chory-Assad and Cicchirillo (2005) submit that some viewers may be more vulnerable to negative outcomes when the characters are antisocial. Thus, three questions were posed:

RQ1: For which media characters will young children express dislike and negative PSRs?

Since research suggests a strong finding for gender in PPSR:

RQ2: Will gender play a role in children's negative parasocial relationships (NPSR)? Will boys dislike same-sex media characters more often than girls? Will girls report a stronger NPSR for same-sex characters than boys?

Finally, frequency of interactions with characters may also have an influence on children's PSR with characters. Klimmt et al. (2006) submit that "repeated exposure to media offerings centered around one specific persona leads to a large number of PSI processes" (p. 303):

RQ3: To what extent does the number of media platforms through which children experience characters affect children's PSRs with media characters?

Method

Participants

Parental permission and child assent were obtained for 88 children aged 5–7 years. More boys (53.4%) participated than girls, and far fewer 5-year-olds (12.5%) enrolled than 6- and 7-year-olds (46.6%, and 40.9% respectively).

Procedure

Child responses were digitally recorded with parental permission. During the interview, each child was asked about real-life friends and nonfriends to contextualize liked (“friendly”) and disliked (“unfriendly”) media characters. First, children were asked to identify a word that they would use for “someone who is the opposite of a friend.” Almost two-thirds of the children (63.6%) were able to identify a word or phrase that conveyed the opposite of a friend (“bully,” “enemy,” “frenemy,” “not a friend/non-friend/unfriend,” and “nemesis”). Three other questions were used to identify behaviors and traits of people who are the “opposite of a friend,” resulting in responses such as “they are mean,” and “they bully you.” Only four children could not indicate negative behaviors or dislike after four questions regarding “opposites” of friends in real life.

*Questions and Prompts**Defining character and media*

First, children were instructed about characters as follows: “*Characters are the people or animals that talk and move around in a story. They can be made up like cartoons or puppets or real like people.*” Second, children were given a visual aid showing a red stick figure on black line drawings of media platforms and instructions: “*Here are some places you might see characters like in books (point), movies (point), TV shows (point), the computer (point), on a cell phone (point), on an iPad (point), and in video games (point).*”

Character as friend or nonfriend

Children were told “*Sometimes a character that you see in these places can feel like a friend*” or alternatively “*can feel like they are the opposite of a friend.*” Children recalled media characters with whom they would like to be and not like to be friends. Children then explained why they chose each character and pointed to pictures (aided by the media platform visual aid) to indicate where they had seen them. Afterwards, characters were coded for gender (male, female, or gender unclear), form (live-action or animated), and media brand/ownership (Disney, Nickelodeon, Nintendo, Warner Brothers Animation, or Other).

PSR Measures

This study piloted a new measure for PSR assessing affective, behavioral, and cognitive components (Hartmann et al., 2008). A 5-point visual analog scale of line-drawn faces with categorical responses from an exaggerated frown to an exaggerated smile accompanied each question. The exaggerated frown was valued as 1, leading across the facial expressions to the exaggerated smile with a value of 5. Scores were then calculated by averaging the score of all responses. Hartmann et al. (2008) developed two separate scales by inverting the wording of items in the PPSR Scale for the NPSR Scale.

However, one scale with the same wording was used in this study with the expectation that the scores would be the invert of each other. Both scales were found to be reliable (PPSR scale, $\alpha = 0.78$; NPSR scale, $\alpha = 0.85$), resulting in a 14-item scale.¹

Results

For H1, selections of friendly media characters, boys (97.7%) were significantly more likely to report a same-sex character as a friend than girls (55.6%), $\chi^2(1, 79) = 20.58$, $p < .00$. Only one boy reported a female character (Miss Sunshine) as his friend. As such, H1 was supported.

To test H2 about the strength of PPSR in relation to the gender, no significant differences were noted for PPSR score for same-sex characters for all children, for girls only, or for boys only. Therefore, H2 was not supported.

Regarding RQ1, about disliked characters, 76 children identified 63 unique characters as unfriendly. While only two children (both girls) were unable to identify a friendly character, 12 children (seven boys and five girls) were unable to identify unfriendly characters. Bowser (from Nintendo) and Squidward (from *SpongeBob SquarePants*, Nickelodeon) were named most often as unfriendly characters, mentioned five times each. The primary reasons for selecting characters as unfriendly was because of their behaviors (“he splashes cold water,” “he would blow me up,” “he is trying to hurt my friend”) or because of their disposition (“he’s so mean,” “he’s bad,” “he’s weird”). Significantly fewer live-action, human characters were identified as unfriendly compared to friendly characters, $\chi^2(1, N) = 5.3$, $p < .05$ (see Table 1). Interestingly, more male characters were identified as unfriendly (81.5%) than friendly (72.5%), and only 12 female characters were disliked (see Table 1).

RQ2, about children’s NPSR and gender, found significantly more boys picked same-sex characters as being disliked (90.9%) than girls (28.1%), $\chi^2(1, 65) = 26.68$, $p < .00$. Only three boys picked female characters as being disliked, including Princess Peach from Mario Brothers, the girls from Scooby Doo, and princesses. In contrast, some girls named two of these same characters (princesses and Princess Peach) as friendly characters. Three children (one girl and two boys) explained that they picked a particular unfriendly character based on gendered expectations. The girl said, “I don’t like Superman cause it’s a boy show.” The two boys explained, “cause they’re for girls and I’m not a girl” and “boys don’t like princesses.” No significant differences were noted between girls and boys for NPSR.

RQ3, about children’s transmedia experiences, found that most children reported seeing friendly (72.1%) and unfriendly characters (68.0%) on more than one media platform. However, when reporting where they have seen friendly and unfriendly characters the most, more children report seeing characters on television (47.7% and 53.3% respectively) (see Table 1). Boys (34%) were significantly more likely to have seen friendly characters in video games than girls (10.3%), $\chi^2(1, 86) = 11.28$, $p < .05$. The transmedia experience (measured by number of platforms) did have a significant

Table 1. Characters Traits of Friendly and Unfriendly Characters

Trait	Friendly Characters	Unfriendly Characters
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	72.5% (<i>n</i> = 58)	81.5% (<i>n</i> = 53)
Female	26.3% (<i>n</i> = 21)	18.5% (<i>n</i> = 12)
Gender Unclear	1.3% (<i>n</i> = 1)	0% (<i>n</i> = 0)
<i>Form*</i>		
Animated	81.0% (<i>n</i> = 68)	93.3% (<i>n</i> = 70)
Live-Action	19.0% (<i>n</i> = 16)	6.7% (<i>n</i> = 5)
<i>Brand</i>		
Disney	19.8% (<i>n</i> = 17)	17.3% (<i>n</i> = 13)
Nickelodeon	18.6% (<i>n</i> = 16)	17.3% (<i>n</i> = 13)
Nintendo	17.4% (<i>n</i> = 15)	9.3% (<i>n</i> = 7)
Warner Brothers Animation	8.1% (<i>n</i> = 7)	8.0% (<i>n</i> = 6)
Other	36.0% (<i>n</i> = 31)	48.0% (<i>n</i> = 36)
<i>Reported Platform Presence</i>		
One platform only	27.9% (<i>n</i> = 24)	32.0% (<i>n</i> = 24)
Transmedia (more than one platform)	72.1% (<i>n</i> = 62)	68.0% (<i>n</i> = 51)
<i>Most Often Seen</i>		
Book	11.6% (<i>n</i> = 10)	10.7% (<i>n</i> = 8)
Cellphone	0.0% (<i>n</i> = 0)	2.7% (<i>n</i> = 2)
Computer	1.2% (<i>n</i> = 1)	5.3% (<i>n</i> = 4)
iPad	5.8% (<i>n</i> = 5)	2.7% (<i>n</i> = 2)
Movie	10.5% (<i>n</i> = 9)	12.0% (<i>n</i> = 9)
Television	47.7% (<i>n</i> = 41)	53.3% (<i>n</i> = 40)
Video Game	23.3% (<i>n</i> = 20)	13.3% (<i>n</i> = 10)

**p* < .05.

impact on PPSR only, $F(6, 78) = 2.29, p = .04$. An increase is noted in PPSR with more media platform exposure, peaking at five media platforms.

Discussion

This study is the first of its kind to examine NPSR in children and is the first to explore the transmedia nature of PSR. In their everyday world, children identify friends and nonfriends based on liking and knowing of one another, and friends have significantly greater amounts of positive affect than nonfriends (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995). Applying this to mediated environments, mediated friends had a higher PSR score (higher affect) than mediated nonfriends. Children identified liked and disliked mediated characters and were able to express negative feelings about disliked mediated characters similarly to real-life friends and nonfriends.

Furthermore, while girls in our sample offered “Princesses” (ostensibly, Disney princesses) and Nintendo’s Princess Peach as PPSR characters, boys voluntarily named these same media personae as NPSR characters. Some children articulated gender-based reasons for disliking characters (“Boys don’t like princesses”). When applied to social interactions with peers, children often integrate narratives and characters from media content into their play outside of the mediated context (Paley, 1984). While this study focused on children’s mediated context, future research should consider media personae experienced in different settings.

This study adds to the growing body of research on children’s transmedia experiences. A large percentage of children reported seeing friendly and unfriendly characters on more than one media platform. Transmedia exposure was associated with PPSR only, reaching a saturation point at five different platform types. Research has found that preschoolers visit Web sites featuring their favorite television and film characters (Wilson & Drogos, 2007), and many children over the age of 5 indicate that their favorite Web sites are those tied to television networks (Gutnick et al., 2011). For unliked characters, children may have less desire to see them and do not follow them across platforms. Future research should continue to explore transmedia PSR experiences.

Results should be understood within limitations. First, our study had few 5-year-olds. While this age group does include children bridging Piaget’s preoperational and concrete operations stages, the limited amount of 5-year-olds puts constraints on analyses. During the egocentric preoperational stage, younger children tend to focus more on perceptual than conceptual properties of media characters (Wilson & Drogos, 2007), which may influence children’s liking of characters. To build a developmental model of PSR, further research should include more 5-year-olds. Second, future research should compare different PSR scales with children. While we tested the same scale expecting inverse reactions, strong results were not found. The sample size, age of the children, and other factors may contribute to this. Further refinement of measures is necessary. Finally, in this study, the child’s nonmediated world was not captured. Future researchers should consider both children’s mediated and nonmediated life. Despite these limitations, this exploratory study serves as an impetus for refinement in the measurement and conceptualization of children’s relationships with mediated personae.

This study contributes to the limited empirical research on young children and their relationships with media characters. While research on children’s PSR with media personae has been focused exclusively in terms of friendship and television characters, this is the first to explore negative PSR (*unfriendly* feelings or antipathy) with children and expands the research of PSR into children’s transmedia experience, revealing a more nuanced understanding of young children’s PSR with transmedia characters. It is important to recognize the different types of relationships that school-age children can form with these characters and how this potentially varies by technology, medium, and gender, pointing to a need for continued children’s media research taking into account a wider survey of children’s media platforms, the narratives and characters that traverse them, and the meanings that children make with this content.

Note

- [1] Both scales loaded onto four individual factors based on the eigenvalues obtained during orthogonal rotation analysis. Only one factor (Know the Character) aligned perfectly between the two scales. The average NPSR ($m = 2.43$) is lower than the average PPSR ($m = 4.13$), trending in the appropriate and expected directions for the scales, but the scores for the NPSR and PPSR were not negatively correlated. Factor information is available from the first author.

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