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Effects of Gender and Social Realism on Children's Identification with Media Characters

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Publication Date
2018-07-01
EFFECTS OF GENDER AND SOCIAL REALISM ON CHILDREN'S
IDENTIFICATION WITH MEDIA CHARACTERS

By

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A capstone project submitted for
Graduation with University Honors

March 9, 2018

University Honors
University of California, Riverside

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Abstract

The term parasocial describes one-sided social interactions with media personalities; these closely resemble real friendships: both have the potential to increase one's willingness to accept information. As the similarity between the viewer and media personality increases, so does the likelihood of a parasocial relationship. Similar to this, identification relies heavily on an individual's perceived similarity toward a media character. Gender is one of the earliest features of children's identification, and children are more likely identify with characters congruent with their own gender. Literature focusing on children's learning has cited the impact of identification; as children increase in perceived similarity they are more likely to learn from this media character.

Social realism refers to how likely media characters are to exist in the real world. Children are more likely to transfer learning from media characters they perceive as real rather than fantastical.

The purpose of present study was to understand the effects of gender and social realism on children's identification with media characters. We questioned identification and its correlation with perceived social realism. 64 children were recruited from local preschools and were asked a series of identification, fantasy orientation, and social realism questions.

Our study found that boys and girls were more likely to identify with characters that correspond with their own gender with boys being more likely to perceive Diego as socially real. Future studies on this topic could lead to a better understanding in how children learn from media characters.
Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude for my faculty mentor Dr. Rebekah Richert. Without her guidance and flexibility, this project would have never come to fruition. Thank you to Molly Schlesinger for letting me conduct and eventually borrow your research. I am also grateful to my current and past lab supervisors, Courtney Grant and Koeun Choi, for supporting my research passions and helping me understand psychological research design. I would like to express my gratitude to the Childhood Cognition Lab and the STEM CCL research team. Not only was the lab instrumental in conducting this research, but without their support and unwavering interest in this topic, everything here would fall on deaf ears. I would also like to thank University Honors for pushing me to take on such an endeavor; I never thought I would ever complete such a monster of a project. Thank you to my parents who have supported me emotionally and financially throughout my undergraduate career. Lastly, I would like to thank everyone who listened to my struggles, supported my endeavors, and granted me strength; this project would have not been possible without your support.
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Introduction

Parasocial

Horton and Wohl (1956) coined the term parasocial interaction to describe viewers’ social reactions toward television personalities. Parasocial interactions are characterized by one-sided social interactions; viewers’ social relation with a character is not reciprocated. Viewers may feel emotionally connected to a media persona; however, the media persona is completely unaware of the individual’s feelings and does not reciprocate the social interaction (Schramm & Wirth, 2010).

A parasocial relationship differs from a parasocial interaction regarding viewing experiences; parasocial relationships extend beyond the viewing experience and viewing process. Parasocial relationships can occur long after a viewer has stopped consuming media, and they require more emotional investment as compared to parasocial interactions (Schramm & Wirth, 2010).

Similar to a real relationship, parasocial relationships have been shown to affect a viewer cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally such as help individuals cope with stressful situations and understand their own identity (Bowman, Schultheiss, & Schumann, 2012; Perse & Rubin, 1989). Parasocial relationships with media characters closely resemble the development of real life social relationships, and the existence of parasocial relationships may increase a viewer’s willingness to accept information, a role similar to real life relationships (Bond & Calvert, 2014; Rubin & Perse, 1987; Rubin & McHugh, 1987).
Similarity to social beings instigates a feeling being personally relevant; therefore, viewers find interactions with media characters to be rewarding (Tian & Hoffner, 2010). Similarity to the media persona seems to correlate with a viewer’s preference or liking of the media persona, and thus appears to be a strong predictor of parasocial relationships (Tian & Hoffner, 2010).

**Dimensions of Parasocial: Identification**

Identification differs from parasocial relationships. Although conceptually similar, parasocial relationships are an illusionary social relationship whereas identification refers to the process by which an individual links their identity to another social being. (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Cohen, 2001). Identification has been defined in a variety of ways, however, it has often been related to character liking and perceived similarity to the character (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). Often one feature of identification is sharing in perspective; children must be able to distinguish between features or attributes they themselves and media characters share. (Feilizten & Linne, 1975; Bond & Calvert, 2014). Literature focusing on children’s learning from educational media has found a link between viewers’ emotional investment and their similarity to a character. (Hoffner, 1996). According to Richert, Robb, and Smith (2011), although preschool-aged children tend to assume television characters are not real, the presence of media characters does influence children emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally. As children become more similar to a media character, they are more likely to become emotionally invested; this is demonstrated by an increased likelihood that children will learn from educational content (Richert, et al., 2011). Research findings suggest children are more likely to learn from on-screen
characters when those characters are treated as social partners or children identify with these characters (Richert, et al., 2011).

Although parasocial relationships differ from identification, viewers’ perceived similarity is a key feature in defining both parasocial relationships and identification during media consumption (Tian & Hoffner, 2010). According to Hoffner (1996), children’s identification with media characters may influence the socialization process; similar to adults, media characters act as behavioral models for young children.

Whereas identification refers to linking an existing identity, wishful identification refers to an individual’s desire to be or behave in ways similar to the character (Bond & Calvert, 2014). Children will attempt to emulate the behavior and characteristics with media characters they wishfully identify with (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). By age 7, children are more likely to form parasocial relationships and/or wishfully identify with same-sex characters (Hoffner, 1996).

**Social Realism and Social Implications**

According to Bandura’s (2002) social cognitive theory, people learn and behave by observing others, and people are more influenced by those they perceive to be similar to them (Tian & Hoffner, 2002). Perceived similarity within a media characters’ personal characteristics and attitude are related to an individuals’ desire to imitate the media character (Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). For individuals who identify with media characters, viewers may attempt to learn behaviors from these characters (Cohen, 2001). Social realism refers to how likely media characters are to occur in real world (Bond & Calvert, 2014). According to Sharon and Woolley (2004), young children are more likely to attribute human-like properties such as
sleeping and eating to characters they perceive as real. In addition to human-like properties, children have been more likely to transfer learning from stories told from realistic characters rather than fantastical characters regardless of the nature of the task (Richert, Shawber, Hoffman, & Taylor, 2009). According to one study, there is a positive correlation between parasocial interactions and social realism; as children age they tend to prefer characters high in social realism or real characters (Rosaen & Dibble, 2008).

Gender

According to Kohlberg (1966) gender is one of the earliest features of identification. Children develop conceptions of gender; as they begin to understand their gender identity, they seek to behave congruent with those gender conceptions (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Boys and girls behave according to gender stereotypes such as girls playing with dolls and boys playing with trucks (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Jones & Glenn 1991). According to social cognitive theory, children are more likely to mimic same-gender models (Bandura, 2002). Children are also more likely to form stronger parasocial relationships with characters that correspond with children’s perceived gender (Richards & Calvert, 2004). In addition to stronger parasocial relationships, children are also more likely to listen to initially listen to same-gender informants (Schlesinger & Richert, 2017).

Boys and girls in early childhood differ in their play. Boys tend to engage in more solitary-functional or activities that are more physically demanding whereas girls tend to engage in more solitary-constructive play like puzzle building (Lloyd & Howe, 2003). However, when it comes to pretend play, boys are more likely to engage in object fantasy pretend play (play with
objects), and girls are more likely to engage in more person fantasy pretend play (playing roles like doctor) (Jones & Glenn, 1991).

**Research Questions and Hypotheses**

Understanding parasocial interactions, identification, and social realism, this study sought to understand how children between the ages of 3 and 6 perceive media characters. This study sought to understand whether children’s identification with a media character would correlate with children’s ability to perceive character social realism.

RQ1: Does children’s identification with a media character correlate with perceived social realism? One feature of parasocial behavior is liking, and previous research has supported liking as a predictor for children’s willingness to imitate media characters. One aspect of identification and wishful identification is liking; based on previous research, character liking seems to positively correlate with social realism; therefore, the following hypothesis stems from this logic.

H1: There will be a positive correlation with character identification and perceived social realism.

RQ2: Are children more likely to identify with media characters that correspond with their own gender? Past research has indicated children tend to seek behavior and informants that correspond with their own gender, and gender is one of the earliest features of identification.

H1: Girls will identify more with a female character, and boys will identify more with a male character.
RQ3: Does gender difference contribute to how children perceive media character's social realism? Due to differing playstyles, children may have a different understanding of social realism. Boys and girls differ in their types of solitary and pretend plays.

H1: Gender will contribute to how children perceive social realism.

Methods

Participants

Children ages 3 to 6 (M = 4.136, SD = .715) were recruited from schools in the inland empire community. Children were interviewed with the supervision of one of their teachers. 18 three-year old children, 28 four-year old children, and 15 five-year old children participated in the study with three children’s ages omitted. The participants were an ethnically mixed subset of the population and comprised of 11 White/European children, 9 Black/African American children, 13 Hispanic/Latino children, and 3 mixed children with 23 unreported ethnicities. A total of 64 children participated in the study (26 male, 38 female).

Measures

Identification

Identification included three questions. Children responded on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 2 (a lot). Responses to the three questions were averaged to create a character identification score ranging from 0 to 2.

Liking, similarity, and desirability of media characters were all aggregated to define identification. Children were asked “how much do you like…”, “how much are you like…,” and
“how much want to be like…”. Children responded on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 2 (a lot). Three questions were asked per character for a total of six identification questions.

**Social Realism**

Children were asked social realism questions. These questions were designed to understand children’s perception of the media character’s social realism. Children were asked “could you ever see (character) at the store,” “could (character) ever play tag with you”, and “could (character) ever go to your school”. Children answered no (0) or yes (1) and indicated their certainty (little sure (x1) or really sure (x2)). Three social realism questions were asked per character for a total of six social realism questions. Questions were averaged to create a social realism score for each character (Eyal & Rubin, 2003). Score is average from -2 to +2 with scores closer to +2 meaning children think the character is real.

**Fantasy Orientation**

Children were asked a series of five fantasy orientation questions. Children were asked “do you talk to yourself when you are lying in bed before you go to sleep”, “do you like to makeup songs or plays”, “do you ever sing those songs or act out the plays for your family or friends”, “do you like to pretend”, and “do you have a pretend friend”? The fantasy orientation score is an average from -1 (no) to 1 (yes) with 0 as don’t know. Children with higher scores are higher in fantasy orientation.

**Procedure**

All procedures were approved by the UCR Institutional Review Board. Parents gave consent and children gave verbal assent. Children were recruited from local preschools and
kindergartens. Children were interviewed in their classrooms under the supervision of one of their teachers. These questions were part of a three-wave study. In wave one, children were asked the identification and social realism questions; in wave two, children were asked the fantasy orientation questions.

Children were asked questions regarding two different characters: Dora and Diego. In wave one, children were shown static pictures of each media character. As a baseline for familiarity, children were asked “if they had seen” Dora or Diego. Children were then asked a series of identification questions. Three identification questions were asked for each character. Children were then asked a series of social realism questions. Three social realism questions were asked for each character. In wave two, children were asked five fantasy orientation questions.

**Results**

An Independent Samples t-test was conducted to compare character identification for girls and boys. For Dora, a large significant gender difference, $t(62)=3.272$, $p=.002$, Cohen’s $d = .785$. Girls ($M=1.737$, $SD=.356$) were more likely to identify with Dora than boys ($M=1.308$, $SD=.686$) For Diego, the t-test indicated a moderate significant difference $t(61)=2.182$, $p=.033$, Cohen’s $d=.563$. Boys ($M=1.654$, $SD=.546$) were more likely to identify with Diego than girls ($M=1.333$, $SD=.593$).

An Independent Samples t-test was conducted to compare social realism for girls and boys. For Dora, there was a trend toward significance $t(62)=1.844$, $p=.070$, Cohen’s $d=.468$. Boys ($M=.603$, $SD=1.091$) were more likely to perceive Dora as socially real than girls ($M=.105$, $SD=.267$).
For Diego, there was a moderate difference $t(62)=2.494$, $p=.015$, Cohen’s $d=.640$. Boys ($M=.885$, $SD=1.119$) were more likely to perceive Diego as socially real than girls ($M=.1404$, $SD=1.207$).

An Independent Samples t-test was conducted to compare fantasy orientation for girls and boys. There was no significant difference $t(62)=.065$ $p=.670$ Cohen’s $d=.017$ between girls ($N=38$, $M=3.316$, $SD=1.876$) and boys ($N=26$, $M=3.346$, $SD=1.742$).

A Pearson’s Bivariate Correlation examined the relation between identification and children’s social realism. There was no significant correlation between children’s identification with Dora, and their views of Dora’s social realism, $r=.054$, $p=.669$. There was a moderate significant correlation between Diego identification and children’s social realism, $r=.438$, $p=.000$. Children who identified more with Diego believed Diego is real.

Pearson’s Bivariate Correlation examined the relation between identification and children’s fantasy orientation. There was no significant correlation between Dora identification and children’s fantasy orientation $r=.066$ $p=.602$. There was no significant correlation between Diego identification and children’s fantasy orientation $r=.085$ $p=.510$. Overall, there were no significant correlations between character identification and children’s fantasy orientation.

Pearson’s Bivariate Correlation examined the relation between social realism and fantasy orientation. There was no significant correlation between children’s fantasy orientation and perceived social realism of Dora $r=.244$ $p=.075$. There was a small significant correlation between children’s fantasy orientation and perceived social realism of Diego $r=.252$ $p=.045$. Children with higher fantasy orientation were more likely to believe Diego was real.
Pearson’s Bivariate Correlation examined the relation between social realism and age. There was a small significant correlation between children’s age and perceived social realism of Dora $r = -.285 \ p = .025$ There was a small significant correlation between children’s age and perceived social realism of Diego $r = -.270 \ p = .034$. Age correlates with children’s perceived social realism with younger children more likely to view characters as pretend.

Pearson’s Bivariate Correlation examined the relation between age and identification. $N=64$ for all. There was no significant correlation between age and Dora identification $r = .180 \ p = .161$. There was no significant correlation between age and Diego identification $r = -.102 \ p = .434$. There is no relation between age and identification.

**Discussion**

According to Kohlberg (1966), gender is an early element of identification in young children (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Past research has indicated that children find characters more appealing when they match their gender (Calvert, Strong, Jacobs, & Conger, 2007). Consistent with prior research, the current study suggests that children find characters more appealing when they match their gender. Boys are more likely to identify with Diego than with Dora, and girls are more likely to identify with Dora than with Diego. Children by this age are likely to understand gender differences and may identify as such; therefore, character liking and identification would stem from their understanding.

This study’s findings suggest boys are more likely to believe characters are real than girls. The reason for why this difference occurs may be because children often engage in several
types of play with one type called pretend play which is further categorized into object fantasy and person fantasy (Field, Stefano, & Koewler, 1982). In object fantasy, children attribute new meaning to objects. For example, a string may represent a snake. Person fantasy is a child’s portrayal in a person-role. For example, a child may pretend to be a doctor or a teacher (Field, et al., 1982). In pretend play, boys show more object fantasy and girls show more person fantasy oriented play (Jones & Glenn, 1991). Past research seems to suggest girls engage in more realistic social play than boys (Barbu, Cabanes, & Maner-Idrissi, 2011). According to Fine (2002), boys have a larger interest in physical play whereas girls have more interest in imaginative play; the book discussed the possibility of girls having a greater commitment to social reality, which may lead to girls preferring more socially realistic play in which they tend to assume social roles. Perhaps boys are less adept than girls at distinguishing social reality, which may lead to them identifying media characters as real.

Our study seems to suggest children who identify with Diego believe Diego is real. Boys identified more frequently with Diego than girls. When engaged in person fantasy, girls were more likely to adopt female roles and boys were more likely to adopt male roles (Garvey, 1992). Gender is one of the earliest features of identification, and identification may indicate emotional investment; perhaps children who become emotionally invested and are less predisposed toward person fantasy may be more inclined to believe in the social reality of media characters.

According to this study, children higher in fantasy orientation are more likely to believe Diego is real. Perhaps higher fantasy orientation may represent a child’s willingness to involve themselves in fantastical worlds; therefore, children may believe characters can interact in ways
similar to real social beings. While some may argue boys are higher in fantasy orientation, this study did not find any significance between gender and fantasy orientation (Fine, 2002).

Past research suggests as children develop, they are better able to discriminate between real and fantastical fictional worlds (Walker, Gopnik & Ganea, 2015). Consistent with this idea, our findings seem to suggest children begin to interpret media characters as less real as they get older.

**Limitations**

This study was conducted with short lists of identification, social reality, and fantasy orientation questions. In addition, these questions could have been refined to test our hypothesis with more accuracy. For example, three identification questions were asked per character; while these questions were defined as identification, some bore close resemblance to wishful identification and parasocial relationship questions. Arguably, these could be different from identification. In addition to identification questions, social reality questions may need to be defined further. Perhaps children have trouble defining media characters’ existence in social worlds. A child might see Diego at the store because he or she could imagine seeing Diego on a backpack, or perhaps Diego could go to the store in his personal universe. Future research should re-evaluate identification and social reality questions’ language to clarify intended meaning.

In addition, children have had differing experiences with Dora and Diego. While we asked familiarity questions, we could not accurately deem the type of interactions children had with these characters outside this question. Children may have seen Dora or Diego on television
or on merchandise. In addition, frequency with these characters may impact how children view these characters.

Questions were asked in a busy preschool where it would be easy for the child to be distracted.

**Implications**

This study helps us understand the effects of social realism and gender on identification with media characters. While we cannot interpret our findings without speculation, it does raise some interesting questions for future research and children’s understanding of social reality. Past research has suggested children often listen to more socially real characters, and similarity (in the form of identification or parasocial) can lead to more emotional investment to media characters; this can influence people on various levels, for example: children appear to learn more from realistic characters than fantastical characters (Walker et al., 2014). This research can lead to a greater understanding of how children learn and identify with media characters.
References


