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# PARASOCIAL BREAKUP AMONG YOUNG CHILDREN IN THE UNITED STATES

## Bradley J. Bond and Sandra L. Calvert

A survey of parents of children 2 to 8 years old was conducted to investigate parasocial relationships (PSR) and experiences with parasocial breakup among young children. Results indicated that boys were significantly more likely to have a female favorite character at a younger age than at their current age, but girls were no more likely to have a male favorite character at a younger age than at their current age. As children aged and transitioned to new favorite media characters, boys' favorite characters became more masculine and girls' favorite characters became more feminine. Child maturation, the influence of other media characters, and habituation to the character were the most commonly cited reasons for children experiencing parasocial breakup. Findings are discussed in terms of the similarities between face-to-face friendship dissolution and parasocial breakup among children and the importance of character gender to children's PSR, especially as children mature.

KEYWORDS parasocial relationship; parasocial breakup; young children; survey; gender

## Introduction

Elmo is a furry, red, 3 1/2-year-old *Sesame Street* Muppet who speaks in the third-person; he is also one of the most beloved characters on children's television. Research suggests that Elmo has the ability to alter children's food preferences (Cole, Kotler, & Pai, 2010), increase the likelihood toddlers will imitate a mathematical task (Lauricella, Gola, & Calvert, 2011), and even teach children about multiculturalism (Kraidy, 2002). Elmo's influence may stem from children's perception that Elmo is their friend.

The concept that individuals establish relationships with media characters similar to face-to-face relationships has been termed parasocial relationships (PSR; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Though children may form PSR with Elmo, the Muppet's salience eventually wanes as children grow. Parasocial breakup, the idea that individuals end PSR in much the same way they end face-to-face friendships (Cohen, 2003), may explain the parting between children and beloved onscreen characters like Elmo. Research has yet to investigate the developmental factors or environmental agents that contribute to children's parasocial breakup with media characters. This study uses data from a survey of parents to investigate children's PSR and their experiences with parasocial breakup.

#### Parasocial Relationships

Individuals often form PSR with media characters that are similar to face-to-face friendships in development, maintenance, and function (Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Rubin &

Perse, 1987). Unlike face-to-face friendships, however, PSR are one sided. On-screen characters' actions are observable to audiences, but audiences' actions are not observable to on-screen characters (Hoffner, 1996). PSR are, therefore, characterized by their lack of mutuality.

Research suggests that very young children not only develop PSR with media characters (Bond & Calvert, 2014), but may learn more from characters with whom they have established PSR than from unfamiliar characters. In one study, 21-month-old children were more likely to learn a mathematical task when performed on-screen by Elmo, a socially meaningful character with whom children are likely to experience PSR, than when the same task was performed on-screen by DoDo, a character popular in Taiwan but socially irrelevant to children in the USA (Lauricella et al., 2011). In a longitudinal follow-up study, toddlers who established PSR with the previously unknown character DoDo increased their ability to learn from an educational video featuring the character (Gola, Richards, Lauricella, & Calvert, 2013).

*PSR* and age. Much like face-to-face friendship development relies on spending time with others, children must be exposed to media characters to develop PSR with those characters. Given that 2 to 8-year-old children spend approximately 2 hours per day viewing television and video programs (Common Sense Media, 2013), ample time exists to develop PSR with media characters. Because older children have spent more cumulative time with media than younger children have, older children may be more likely to have developed PSR and to have experienced parasocial breakups with media characters than younger children. Rosaen and Dibble (2008) found that younger children's PSR were stronger than older children's PSR, suggesting that PSR may diminish overtime and lead to parasocial breakup experiences for older children.

PSR and gender. Gender is another attribute that may play an important role in children's PSR and parasocial breakups with media characters (Hoffner, 1996; Wilson & Drogos, 2007). According to Huston (1983), gender is a multi-dimensional construct comprising biological sex, activities and interests, social relationships, personal attributes, and styles and symbols. Ruble and Martin (1998) added gender-related values to these dimensions, as males have more power than females do. Kohlberg (1966) argued that children experience stages of gender constancy: children first label their own sex (identity), then learn that sex remains stable over time (stability), and finally realize that sex is an immutable underlying property that is not altered by superficial changes in behavior or appearance (constancy). Gender stability, occurring approximately between 3 and 5 years of age, is an important time for constructing gender norms because stereotype comprehension and conformity to gender expectations emerge during this stage (Ruble et al., 2007).

The gender of children's favorite media characters may reflect gender development more broadly. Children, especially boys, are more likely to identify with characters of the same sex than they are to identify with characters of the other sex (Hoffner, 1996; Wilson & Drogos, 2007). Children, especially boys, may also develop PSR with characters based on the characters' activities and personality attributes because these dimensions can signify gender (Huston, 1983). Children in one study described male characters from their favorite programs as engaging in masculine behaviors, whereas female characters were described as engaging in both masculine and feminine behaviors (Calvert, Kotler, Zehnder, & Shockey, 2003). These patterns were particularly pronounced for boys.

Rigid conformity to gender expectations, then, may be more prominent among boys than among girls. Boys are expected to embrace their gender and to behave in gender-stereotyped ways because of the value that U.S. society places on the male role (Ruble & Martin, 1998). Boys may develop PSR with male characters because doing so would be an outward expression of maleness, an argument supported by research showing gender conformity manifests in many boys' media preferences for male characters and male-oriented programming by 5 years of age (Luecke-Aleksa, Anderson, Collins, & Schmitt, 1995). The same patterns are not true for girls' media preferences. Grade-school age girls do, however, prefer television programming with social and emotional themes more than boys do, a finding that is consistent with traditional gender roles and interests (Calvert et al., 2001). Girls are also more likely to select favorite programs featuring female characters than boys are (Calvert & Kotler, 2003; Calvert et al., 2003). Based on the literature, gender and gender stereotypical personality attributes may play pivotal roles in the PSR that children, especially boys, develop with media characters.

## Parasocial Breakup

Individuals can experience emotional reactions to the dissolution of PSR that are similar to the emotions experienced when losing face-to-face friends (Eyal & Cohen, 2006). The dissolution of PSR is referred to as parasocial breakup, defined as "a situation where a character with whom a viewer has developed a parasocial relationship goes off the air" (Eyal & Cohen, 2006, p. 504). Characters go off air for various reasons, ranging from a television show ending to something happening to the actor who plays the character. Eyal and Cohen's (2006) definition of parasocial breakup suggests that parasocial breakup is likely sudden and one-sided, similar to the traditional conceptualization of breakups in face-to-face relationships.

The term "breakup," however, may be more malleable and encompassing than suggested by Eyal and Cohen (2006). Cohen (2003) used the terms dissolution and breakup interchangeably in an earlier investigation of parasocial breakup, suggesting that parasocial breakups may include relationships that dissipate or passively fade in addition to those that are actively terminated. The latter approach may be especially applicable to children. That is, children may experience parasocial breakups for a variety of reasons beyond the parting of an actor or the cancellation of a television series. For example, children's relationships with Elmo likely dissipate over time as children grow and perceive the character as younger than the children. Parasocial breakups are considered any dissolution of PSR for the purpose of this manuscript because of the focus on children's parasocial breakups, which is uncharted territory in the PSR literature.

If PSR resemble face-to-face friendships, then reviewing research on children's face-to-face friendship dissolution would prove insightful. Berndt, Hawkins, and Hoyle (1986) found that instability in children's friendships was caused by increased disliking, a lack of interaction, increased dissimilarity, unfaithfulness, lack of intimacy, and increased hostile behavior between the children and their friends. Other-sex friendships during early childhood are also less stable than same-sex friendships because children are likely to end other-sex friendships in favor of same-sex friendships as they age (Warin, 2000). Cognitive development, however, seems to have a relatively negligible role in the stability of children's face-to-face friendships over time when compared to social and relational factors such as dissimilarity or unfaithfulness (Berndt & Hoyle, 1985).

Though parasocial breakups may occur for the same reasons that face-to-face friendships end, differences may also exist, especially among children. For example, one reason children's face-to-face friendships end is interpersonal hostile behavior (e.g., fighting). Unlike face-to-face friendships, children are not likely to experience parasocial breakups due to interpersonal hostile behavior, as the one-sided nature of PSR prevents media characters from spontaneously reacting to media audiences. By contrast, cognitive development may be an underlying factor in children's parasocial breakups even though it plays a lesser role in the dissolution of face-to-face friendships. Children develop physically, cognitively, and socially alongside their face-to-face friends. By contrast, children's favorite media characters may be animated or puppeteered, and would never age physically, cognitively, or socially. Consequently, children may outgrow PSR with media characters because children mature, but their favorite characters may not.

## The Present Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the experience of PSR and parasocial breakups among young children. Specifically, this study explored the reasons that parents provided for their children experiencing parasocial breakup. Parental reports were collected rather than young children's self-reports because parents are likely to provide estimates that are more reliable than those provided by very young children (≤8 years old) when asked about media habits (Common Sense Media, 2013). Parental reports have also been used in previous PSR research with very young children (Bond & Calvert, 2014). Moreover, studies suggest that parents can validly report a wide variety of factors related to their young children's cognitive abilities and attitudes, ranging from vocabulary complexity (Dale, 1991) to quality of life (Theunissen et al., 1998).

Hypotheses. Exposure to media characters is required to develop relationships with those characters and, in turn, to experience parasocial breakup. Older children have likely spent more time with the media than younger children, affording them more opportunities to establish PSR and to experience parasocial breakups. However, exposure to media characters is required to develop PSR. It is thus expected that media exposure will be related to parasocial breakup regardless of the child's age.

H1: Media exposure will be positively correlated with experiencing parasocial breakup even when controlling for age.

Gender is expected to influence children's PSR and parasocial breakup with media characters, particularly for boys. As boys mature, they may break up with female characters in favor of male characters because of traditional gender role expectations in U.S. culture. Societal pressures to conform to gender expectations may influence children's PSR beyond the sex dichotomy of male–female. As boys mature and masculinity becomes a defining feature of their gender identities, the personality qualities of their favorite characters may follow suit. Therefore, it is expected that boys' current favorite media characters will be more masculine than those characters with whom they have experienced parasocial breakup.

H2: Boys will be more likely to have experienced parasocial breakup with female characters than to currently have female favorite media characters. H3: Boys' current favorite media characters will be more masculine than boys' breakup characters.

Research questions. Girls are less likely than boys to experience societal pressures to conform to traditional gender roles and may perceive PSR with other-sex characters to be more acceptable than boys. Even so, they still prefer female characters more than males do (Calvert & Kotler, 2003; Calvert et al., 2003). Given previous research suggesting that young girls have more flexibility in their personality qualities (Ruble & Martin, 1998), the femininity of girls' current favorite media characters may not be any different from characters with whom they have experienced a parasocial breakup.

RQ1: Do girls demonstrate gender-stereotyped preferences for media characters and for feminine personality traits, or are they gender neutral in their preferences?

Children's motivations for parasocial breakup may mirror previous findings on the dissolution of children's face-to-face friendships. However, differences between face-to-face friendships and PSR suggest that factors influencing face-to-face friendships may not prompt parasocial breakup and that factors influencing parasocial breakup possibly play little role in face-to-face friendship dissolution. To better understand young children's motivations for parasocial breakup, parents were asked to describe why they believed their children experienced parasocial breakups.

RQ2: What are the primary reasons that children experience parasocial breakups with media characters?

#### Method

## **Participants**

Participants were recruited from a database of 562 parents in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. Parents were part of the database if they had participated in previous studies or had signed up to participate in research at various family-oriented events. Parents in the database who reported having at least one child between the ages of 2 and 8 years old were contacted via email and asked to complete an online questionnaire about children's favorite media characters.

The online study garnered a 22% response rate (N = 122 parents). Children ranged in age from 2 to 8 years old (M = 3.78, SD = 1.45). Approximately half of the children were female (52%). The sample comprised white (75%), multi-racial (15%), Asian (4%), black (2%), and Hispanic children (2%). Two percent of parents did not report their child's race.

#### Procedure

Parents could link directly from the recruitment email to the online questionnaire. The homepage to the online questionnaire served as the consent form. The questionnaire was designed as a parental report on one child's relationship with media characters. To randomly select one child in households with multiple children, participants were asked to complete the questionnaire considering the child in the household who was between 2 and 8 years of age and who most recently celebrated a birthday.

#### Measures

*Media exposure.* Media exposure was measured by asking parents to report the average amount of time that their children spend watching television, watching movies, playing video games, using the computer, and using handheld mobile devices like mobile phones or tablets like the iPad. Parents reported the amount of time spent with each medium in hours and minutes for both the average weekday and the average weekend day. Hours were transformed into minutes before applying the following equation to calculate the average number of minutes a child spends with each medium per week:  $(5 \times \text{weekday minutes}) + (2 \times \text{weekend day minutes})$ . Scores for each medium were summed and transformed back into hours to create a media exposure score for each child; scores ranged from 0 hours to 45.5 hours per week (M = 11.5, SD = 9.5).

Media characters. Parents were asked to report whether or not their child had a favorite media character. If parents reported that their child had a favorite media character, the parents were instructed to provide the name of the character and a media title (e.g., the name of a television show or video game) that features the character. Measuring children's PSR by asking about children's favorite media characters is common practice in the data collection procedures of studies examining PSR among children, based on the assumption that if children experience PSR, they will most likely have PSR with media characters that they consider to be their favorites (Bond & Calvert, 2014; Hoffner, 1996; Wilson & Drogos, 2007). Parents were then asked to consider parasocial breakup and to report if their child had experienced a parasocial breakup using the following prompt:

We'd like to ask you a few final questions about any possible media character that your child once considered a favorite, but no longer does. Often times, individuals' interests in certain media characters decrease over time. For example, if a television show is canceled, viewers no longer have the option of viewing the characters in that program and might develop interests in other characters. Has your child ever stopped liking a media character that was once considered the child's favorite media character?

For parents who reported that their child had experienced a parasocial breakup, additional items elicited the name of the character the child had broken up with and a media title that featured that character.

Two undergraduate students coded each of the current favorite characters and the characters with whom children had experienced parasocial breakup for sex of the character (i.e., male or female) and gender-stereotyped attributes of the character (i.e., masculinity and femininity). Coders were exposed to one still image and one short video clip of each character. Coders used physical appearance and gendered pronouns that referenced the character to determine sex (Cohen's  $\kappa = 0.87$ ). To determine the personality attributes of favorite media characters, coders used physical appearance and an adaptation of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory, a self-descriptive measure of traditionally masculine (e.g., self-reliant, assertive, forceful) and feminine personality characteristics (e.g., affectionate, understanding, gentle) (Bem, 1981). The Bem Sex-Role Inventory was adapted for use in this study to measure the qualities of media characters on a semantic differential scale ranging from -3 (hyper-feminine) to +3 (hyper-masculine). A zero on the semantic differential represented an androgyny score (i.e., a relative absence of gender-based judgments). The intra-class correlation coefficient for the measure was 0.96.

Parasocial breakup narratives. Parents were also asked to write narratives that described their child's parasocial breakup. An original coding scheme was developed to quantify the primary reason for the parasocial breakup. Narratives were coded by the two undergraduate students into one of the following categories: maturation, habituation, familial influence, peer influence, character influence, program alteration, unknown, and other. See Table 1 for definitions and examples of each category. Pilot coding was conducted on fictitious anecdotes that mimicked the narratives in the sample. Once intercoder reliability had reached acceptable levels in pilot coding (pilot Cohen's  $\kappa = 0.75$ ), the two coders each coded the entire sample (final Cohen's  $\kappa = 0.84$ ).

Demographics. Parents were asked to report the child's age, sex, and race using single-item measures. Race categories were taken from the U.S. census. If parents reported that their child had experienced parasocial breakup, they were also asked to report the age at which parasocial breakup occurred using a single-item measure. When responding to age variables, parents were asked to report age in years and months.

**TABLE 1**Percentage of parents' reasons for children's parasocial breakups with characters

Category	Definition	Example	Percentage
Maturation	Mentioning a child's development, most likely in the form of the child outgrowing the character or the character becoming too basic for the child's interests.	"She outgrew the show; Elmo became too babyish."	50.0
Habituation	Losing interest in a character because of overexposure to the same content containing the character.	"My son had seen all of the episodes multiple times and it could no longer keep his attention."	10.0
Familial influence	When a parent, sibling, or other immediate family member is noted as having influence on the child's PSR.	"His dad did not like the fact that he was a fan of a female character and introduced him to Star Wars."	6.0
Peer influence	When another child who is not a relative is noted as having influence on the child's PSR.	"The kids at school all liked this new superhero so he did too."	4.0
Character influence	The influence of another character (without mention of a family member or peer initiating the influence) on the child's PSR.	"He really liked Thomas the Tank Engine until he saw the <i>Cars</i> movie. Now he's obsessed with Lightning McQueen."	16.0
Program alteration	Changes to the television program itself that influence the child's PSR.	"The program was no longer on before she went to school so she couldn't watch it as often and lost interest."	6.0
Unknown	Specific statement detected that notes parent does not know why the child experienced parasocial breakup.	"I don't know what happened, it just happened."	8.0

Note: Coders were also given the opportunity to code the parental narratives as "Other" if they did not fit into any of the above categorical codes. This was not the case for any parental narratives. Cohen's  $\kappa = 0.84$  for the full sample.

#### Results

## Preliminary Analyses

Preliminary analyses revealed that children spent almost 2 hours per day with media  $(M=1.77, \mathrm{SD}=1.28)$ . Of the 122 parents in the sample, 75%  $(n_{\mathrm{girls}}=48 \mathrm{\ and\ } n_{\mathrm{boys}}=43)$  reported that their child currently had a favorite media character. Dora from *Dora the Explorer* was the most cited current favorite character among girls (30%, n=14). The next most popular characters among girls were cited by only 4% (n=2) of girls' parents (i.e., Strawberry Shortcake, Cinderella, and Barbie). Boys' parents reported more diversity in favorite characters. Elmo (9%, n=4), Thomas the Tank Engine (7%, n=3), Lightning McQueen from *Cars* (5%, n=2), and Buzz Lightyear from *Toy Story* (5%, n=2) were cited most frequently by boys' parents.

Of the 122 parents in the sample, 41% ( $n_{\rm girls}=28$  and  $n_{\rm boys}=22$ ) reported that their child had experienced parasocial breakup. Girls who had experienced parasocial breakup were most likely to breakup with Dora from *Dora the Explorer* (43%, n=12), Elmo (14%, n=4), Blue from *Blue's Clues* (11%, n=3), and *Sesame Street's* Abby Cadabby (7%, n=2). Boys who had experienced parasocial breakup were most likely to breakup with Dora (23%, n=5), Elmo (18%, n=4), Disney's Special Agent Oso (9%, n=2), and Thomas the Tank Engine (9%, n=2).

## Media Exposure and Parasocial Breakup

The first hypothesis predicted that media exposure would be positively related to experiencing parasocial breakup even when controlling for age. Binary logistic regression was used to test the first hypothesis. Experience with parasocial breakup was dichotomized (0 = No, 1 = Yes). Hypothesis 1 was supported; results indicated that media exposure was related to parasocial breakup even when controlling for age (Wald  $\chi^2$  (1) = 3.87, p < 0.05). For every hour increase in media exposure, odds of experiencing parasocial breakup increased 1% (Exp(B) = 1.01, Nagelkerke  $R^2$  = 0.27).

## Gender, Gender Expression, and Parasocial Breakup

This study also investigated the relationships between gender, masculinity and femininity (i.e., gender expression), and parasocial breakups. In order to validly test the hypotheses examining the role of gender in parasocial breakups, the age distribution of girls needed to be statistically the same as the age distribution of boys. Findings regarding parasocial breakups may have been skewed if one sex was significantly older or younger than the other sex because of the relationship between age and gender constancy (Kohlberg, 1966). Among children who had experienced parasocial breakups, the mean age at the time of data collection for boys (M = 4.34, SD = 1.55) did not significantly differ from the mean age of girls (M = 4.31, SD = 1.36), t (t) = 0.08, t = 0.94. Additionally, the mean age of boys when they experienced parasocial breakups (t) = 0.91) did not significantly differ from the mean age of girls when they experienced parasocial breakups (t) = 0.21, t0 = 0.21, t0 = 0.27. The mean age at the time of parasocial breakup was approximately 3 years for both boys and girls, the same age that children often begin to experience gender stability (Ruble et al., 2007).

The second hypothesis predicted that boys would be more likely to have experienced parasocial breakup with female characters than to currently have female favorite characters. The significance of the difference between two proportions was tested by calculating the z-ratio for the difference between the percentage of boys experiencing parasocial breakup with female characters and the percentage of boys who currently had female favorite characters. Hypothesis 2 was supported; the percentage of boys who currently had female favorite characters (2%; n=1 of 43 boys with a current favorite character) was significantly different from the percentage of boys who had experienced parasocial breakup with female characters (23%; n=5 of 22 boys who had experienced parasocial breakup), z-ratio = 2.48, p < 0.01. The importance of *Dora the Explorer* is worth noting here. Dora was the sole female noted as the current favorite character or the breakup character among boys.

The third hypothesis predicted that boys' current favorite characters would be more masculine than boys' breakup characters. Mean differences in masculinity were examined between boys' current favorite characters and their breakup characters. Hypothesis 3 was supported; boys current favorite characters were significantly more masculine (M = 1.75, SD = 1.44) than boys' breakup characters (M = 0.56, SD = 1.15), t (15) = 3.34, p < 0.01, d = 0.91.

The first research questions examined if girls would be equally likely to have experienced parasocial breakups with male characters as they would to currently have male favorite characters. The significance of the difference between two proportions was tested by calculating the z-ratio for the difference between the percentage of girls experiencing parasocial breakups with male characters and the percentage of girls who currently had male favorite characters. The percentage of girls' current favorite characters who were male (20%; n = 10 of 48 girls with a current favorite character) was not significantly different from the percentage of girls' parasocial breakups with male characters (28%; n = 8 of 28 girls who had experienced parasocial breakup), z-ratio = 0.78, p = 0.43. Dora the Explorer was not only prevalent among boys; Dora was noted as the current favorite character or the breakup character for 73% of girls. The femininity of girls' current favorite characters was also examined in relation to the femininity of girls' breakup characters. Girls' current favorite media characters were significantly more feminine (M = -1.55, SD = 1.50) than girls' breakup characters (M = -0.45, SD = 1.22), t = -2.98, p < 0.01, d = 0.80.

#### Reasons for Experiencing Parasocial Breakup

The second research question explored the reasons that parents would provide for their child experiencing parasocial breakup with a media character. Each of the parental narratives describing children's parasocial breakups was coded for the primary reason parents provided for parasocial breakup. Table 1 displays the frequency of each reason for parasocial breakup in parents' narratives. More than twice as many parents reported maturation than any other reason for children's parasocial breakups. More specifically, 50% of the parents mentioned the child "growing out" of the character or maturing to the point of no longer finding the character interesting or engaging. For example, the parent of a 6-year-old boy said of the character Special Agent Oso, "He outgrew it. In his mind it just become 'too young' for him." Many parents, regardless of the sex or age of the child, wrote similar reasons for parasocial breakup. Consider a boy who experienced a parasocial

breakup with Sesame Street's Elmo at the age of 4 and who, at the age of 5, favored Lightning McQueen from Disney's Cars films. His mother wrote of his parasocial breakup with Elmo, "He outgrew Elmo. [Elmo] talks like a baby and I don't think it kept William's attention any longer."

The influence of other characters accounted for 16% of the parasocial breakups experienced by children. One 4-year-old boy who broke up with the PBS character Caillou exemplified the influence of other media characters when his parent wrote,

Cailou [sic] is a 4 year old boy who doesn't do much. He's just not as exciting as Mickey Mouse. There is so much media stuff around Mickey Mouse, way more than Cailou [sic]. I think that has gotten his attention more.

For this child, developing a stronger PSR with Mickey Mouse seemingly weakened his previously established PSR with Caillou. That is, the appeal of one character may have influenced the parasocial breakup experienced with another character.

Habituation accounted for another 10% of parents' narratives. Children grew tired of certain characters after overexposure, which, in turn, weakened the PSR with the characters. According to the parent of a 3 1/2-year-old girl, the cast of *Fresh Beat Band* on Nick Jr became repetitive for her child and the child lost interest. This parent wrote,

there was no real cause, but boy did she get bored with them. Maybe it was because there were not that many shows and she had watched all of them multiple times. After she had watched them many times on our DVR, she just seemed done with the show altogether.

Family and peers also influenced approximately 10% of children's PSR. Narratives coded as family or peer influence mentioned pressure from older siblings to move away from certain characters, the influence of parents, or the desire to fit in at school as reasons for parasocial breakup. For example, the parent of a 5-year-old girl who had experienced a parasocial breakup with *Dora the Explorer* concisely noted the influence of peers, "She started preschool. She learned about Disney princesses from her friends. That was the end of Dora."

Another 6% of parent narratives mentioned alterations to the program as the reason for parasocial breakup. For example, the time the program aired was coded as a program alteration that sparked parasocial breakup. One parent of a 6-year-old boy noted how changes to the show's format influenced her child's relationship with the Wiggles cast at the age of 3, stating that,

The Wiggles show changed format. It went from humans on a set to ... a lot of computer animation. The songs changed and many of the characters that were previously someone dressed up in costume became computer generated. That really made him dislike the show.

Eight percent of parents did not know why their child experienced parasocial breakup. These parents did not leave the open-ended response blank, but rather actively wrote that they did not know why their child had lost interest in a particular media character.

In summary, children's maturation accounted for half of all parasocial breakups with media characters, while the influence of other media characters and habituation were also common reasons for children's parasocial breakups. Interestingly, the sex of the character was rarely mentioned explicitly by parents though it was significantly related to parasocial breakups in the present analyses.

#### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore young children's experiences with parasocial breakups and to describe reasons for these breakups as reported by parents. Seventy-five percent of parents reported that their 2- to 8-year-old child currently had a favorite character, and 41% reported that their child had broken up with a favorite character at some earlier point in their lives. Children who experienced parasocial breakup did so when they were approximately 3 years old. Thus, it seems the dissolution of PSR with media characters can occur quite early in life for many children.

As predicted, children who spent more time with the media were likely to have experienced parasocial breakup even when controlling for age. Given that PSR are prerequisites to experiencing parasocial breakup, the likelihood of breaking up with a media character in this study was bolstered by increased exposure. Thus, there seems to be both developmental and experiential factors at work in children's parasocial breakup experiences.

Parental narratives supported maturation as the primary reason for children's parasocial breakups with their favorite characters. Cognitive development has little influence on face-to-face friendships (Berndt & Hoyle, 1985), perhaps because children tend to have friends who are their age. When describing children's experiences with parasocial breakups, however, parents often noted that children "outgrew" their favorite media characters. One 5-year-old boy's parasocial breakup illustrated child maturation when his parent wrote, "He started to perceive Elmo, who he always loved, as babyish." Unlike face-to-face friends, media characters who are Muppets do not age. As children grow and develop, the media characters they are attached to remain unchanged in personality, attributes, and appearance. Elmo has been 3 1/2 years old for over 25 years. Though cognitive development is a weak predictor of children's decisions to alter their face-to-face friendships, children's face-to-face friendships often end because of increased perceptions of dissimilarity (Berndt et al., 1986). As children mature, they likely perceive characters that were once similar to them as increasingly dissimilar if the characters do not grow and develop alongside the children.

With age there also comes a better understanding of gender. This study reinforces previous research suggesting that boys develop PSR with characters of the same sex (Hoffner, 1996; Wilson & Drogos, 2007). The current favorite character of nearly every boy in the sample (98%) was male. Boys' preferences for same-sex characters are consistent with boys' preferences for same-sex face-to-face friends (Warin, 2000), reinforcing the assumption that PSR mimic face-to-face friendships. Boys were also significantly more likely to have broken up with female characters than to have current female favorite characters. Although only one boy in this study had a current female favorite character, 20% of boys had experienced a parasocial breakup with a female character. This finding supports the assumptions of gender stability (Kohlberg, 1966). The rigid conformity to gender expectations characteristic of gender stability may account for boys experiencing parasocial breakups with female characters in favor of developing PSR with male characters.

Boys' favorite characters also became significantly more masculine over time. For example, a 4-year-old boy's current favorite character was Lightning McQueen, but his

favorite character just 1 year earlier was Thomas the Tank Engine. Though both characters are male anthropomorphized modes of transportation, Thomas the Tank Engine is a rather docile, altruistic character with a childlike personality. By contrast, Lightning McQueen, the protagonist in Disney's *Cars*, is an overly confident, competitive character with a bold personality. As they experience gender stability, boys may feel pressure to conform to gender expectations promoting traditional beliefs about maleness, a pressure that manifests itself in children's PSR with media characters. Alternatively, more masculine characters may simply be depicted with greater frequency in media produced for older children and, as such, pure accessibility could explain these findings. Nevertheless, boys increasingly selected gender-stereotypical media characters as they aged.

In contrast to boys, girls were equally likely to have experienced parasocial breakup with male characters as they were to have current male favorite characters. The consistency of girls' PSR with male characters over time may reflect a media landscape where children's television characters are not only more likely to be male, but male characters have more varied roles than female characters (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004). Thus, girls may be exposed to fewer female characters with whom they can develop PSR. Consequently, girls continue to develop PSR with male characters. Alternatively, the higher value U.S. culture places on the male role over the female role may make it easier for girls to select male characters as their favorites.

The femininity of girls' favorite media characters also increased as girls aged. For example, a 4-year-old girl's current favorite character was Disney's Tinkerbell, but her favorite character 2 years earlier was *Sesame Street*'s Abby Cadabby. Though both characters are fairies, Abby Cadabby is an inquisitive, rambunctious little girl. Tinkerbell is a physically attractive, graceful fairy. This finding suggests that girls' favorite characters may be more gender-stereotyped as girls mature, mirroring the findings for boys' favorite characters.

Compared to previous research (Hoffner, 1996; Wilson & Drogos, 2007), the number of girls' parents reporting female favorite characters was high. One media character was so popular among children in the sample that the number of parents reporting female favorite characters among girls could be explained entirely by her presence: Dora from *Dora the Explorer*. Dora was by far the most frequently cited current favorite character *and* the character with whom girls were most likely to have experienced parasocial breakups. Experimental research exposing children to *Dora the Explorer* found that girls more so than boys perceived Dora as being similar to them and girls were also more motivated by Dora (Calvert, Strong, Jacobs, & Conger, 2007). If PSR mimic face-to-face friendships, then similarity would be a key component to friendship development, especially among children (Duck, 1975). If young girls are able to discern similarity with Dora, then Dora's presence in the media world may play a principal role in the increase of girls' PSR with female characters. However, the findings of this study suggest that girls will still outgrow Dora as time passes and girls mature while Dora remains ever the same.

Dora was popular not only among girls in the sample. She was the only female character reported by boys' parents as a current favorite character or as a character with whom boys had experienced parasocial breakups. Why is Dora such a prominent character among boys? When boys show interest in female media characters, the characters tend to be adventurous and heroic (Calvert et al., 2003). Dora is often portrayed as a heroic adventurer who travels afoot, solving educational obstacles on her quests. Though the adventurous nature of Dora may increase her attractiveness to young boys, no level of

adventure can overcome the fact that Dora is a girl. As boys age, the increased social pressure to conform to rigid gender expectations may result in boys' parasocial breakup with Dora. When writing about parasocial breakup with Dora, the parent of a 3-year-old boy noted, "... he outgrew Dora. He decided Dora was a girl and wanted to like something that was more boyish and a bit more fast-paced." Though this parental narrative primarily discusses the child outgrowing Dora, gender differences between the child and the character are clear. Other parents of boys who experienced parasocial breakups with Dora reinforced the influence of gender when they reported that boys broke up with Dora in favor of PSR with Spongebob Squarepants and Gargamel, the villain from *The Smurfs*.

The influence of other characters also appeared in parental narratives about parasocial breakups. Though this category was not coded specifically for mentions of gender, many of the parental narratives spoke of the influence of gender. For example, the parent of a 4-year-old boy wrote that PBS's Caillou was "just not as exciting" as Buzz Lightyear and that Buzz Lightyear influenced the boy's parasocial breakup with Caillou. Caillou is a 4-year-old boy who is imaginative and creative, but also rather nurturing. Buzz Lightyear is a hypermasculine, rough and tough space adventurer. Though this parental narrative was coded as "influence of other character," the differences in the characters' masculinities are apparent.

#### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

Although this study is the first to examine children's experiences with parasocial breakups, it is not without limitations. The validity and reliability of one-item open-ended measures of children's PSR and parasocial breakups need further investigation. Simply defining a child's favorite character as the existence of a current or past PSR may be a parsimonious measure, but it may be strengthened by obtaining some measure of relational closeness with the character. No measurement tool exists in the literature that validly measures children's experiences with parasocial breakups. Moreover, adult measures of parasocial breakup focus on stress induced from parasocial breakup (Cohen, 2003; Eyal & Cohen, 2006). Findings from this study suggest that many children experience parasocial breakups for reasons related to maturation or habituation and, in turn, may not experience the stress that coincides with parasocial breakups among adults. Advancing sophisticated measures of parasocial breakups should be of importance to media scholars studying children's PSR. Additionally, future studies should use self-report measures to investigate children's experiences with parasocial breakups. Asking children directly about their parasocial breakups may lead to a more nuanced understanding of how young children experience this phenomenon.

The small sample size of parents reporting a child's experience with parasocial breakup (n=50) hindered more advanced statistical analyses of age, experiential, and gender differences. For example, very few parents reported on children above the age of 6 years, making any analyses examining differences in gender constancy difficult (Ruble et al., 2007). Theoretical debate exists regarding the relationship between gender constancy and the rigidity of gender expectations. One interpretation contends that gender constancy allows children to realize that gender norms can be violated without life-altering consequences, while an alternative interpretation suggests that gender constancy provides a sense of permanence that would motivate children to further adhere to gender roles (Ruble et al., 2007). Studying PSR and parasocial breakup among older children, in which

evaluations of gender stability and gender constancy could be measured, might provide valuable insight into the relationship between gender and the development of PSR with media characters.

The salience of parasocial interactions should also be considered in future research examining children's parasocial breakups. Parasocial interactions are understood as individual instances of viewers' responses to media characters (Bond & Calvert, 2014). Many of the most popular children's media characters (e.g., Dora) speak directly to the viewers onscreen, pause so that the viewers can respond, and then provide feedback that signals the character heard the responses of the viewers. One study using parental reports suggests that the frequency and quality of young children's parasocial interactions with favorite characters are positively correlated with the strength of children's PSR (Bond & Calvert, 2014). Parasocial interactions may also influence if and how children experience parasocial breakups.

Finally, children may experience their favorite media characters on a variety of media platforms. No longer are media characters relegated to television—characters are available to children on computer screens, mobile phone apps, and tablets like the iPad. If increased media exposure is correlated with an increase in PSR and parasocial breakups, research investigating how children interact with media characters on various media platforms could further our understanding of the development of PSR and parasocial breakups among children.

## **Application of Findings**

At an applied level, those with a vested interest in the effectiveness of children's educational media should be aware of why educational media may sustain as well as eventually lose child audiences. Educational programming is of less interest to older children than to younger children (Calvert & Kotler, 2003). Production practices such as repetition of content, simple plotlines, and slow pacing are all features that make a television program more comprehensible to younger children, but parents in this study noted that they seem to be the same features that make programming too slow or boring for older children. If children are losing interest in educational media because the characters do not mature alongside the children, then attention could be given to crafting developmentally appropriate characters in educational programming targeting older children who also age with their audience.

#### Conclusion

In conclusion, this study is the first to document that young children experience parasocial breakups with media characters similar to the ways in which children dissolve their face-to-face friendships. Parasocial breakups with media characters seem to occur for many of the same reasons that face-to-face friendships dissolve among children: increased dissimilarity that, in the case of PSR, primarily occurs because of changes in cognitive development and gender role expectations. Development involves both constancy and change. That young children experience their favorite media characters in much the same way as they do face-to-face friends points to the value that characters have for the social worlds of children, providing constancy that can be comforting, but that can also become boring and lead to the search for new "friends" as children grow and change.

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