Children's Parasocial Breakups with Formerly-Favorite Media Characters

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Introduction

- Children and adults form emotionally-tinted, one-sided relationships with media characters, known as parasocial relationships (PSRs).
- Both adults and children end their relationships with their favorite characters, a process known as parasocial breakup.
- Relatively little is known about how or why children end these early relationships with their favorite media characters.

Methods

Original Survey (Jan 2012)
- Parents (n=147) completed an online survey about their 6-month- to 8-year-old children's favorite characters.
- Parents were asked whether their child had a favorite character and/or if their child had lost interest in a previous favorite.
- If so, parents answered questions about that child’s relationship with those characters.

Character Coding
- All characters that parents reported as current or previous favorites were analyzed by trained adult coders (all Cronbach's α > 0.75) on:
  - Personality & physical traits (strong, popular, baby-faced, etc.) from character images
  - Sex role features from videos of characters
  - Color information obtained from image processing
- If parents reported both a current and former favorite character (n=53), we compared the character dyad to assess how character preferences and parasocial relationships change over time.

Results

Parasocial Relationships
- The vast majority (68%) of children have experienced a PSR with at least 1 media character during childhood.

Parasocial Breakups
- PSRs Start/End in Early Years:
  - Most parents reported their child’s parasocial relationship began during toddlerhood (M = 2.55 years, σ = 1.21).
  - Ended during the preschool years (M = 4.65, σ = 1.33).
  - PSRs lasted an average of 2.2 years before breakup.

- Largest Contributing Factor to Breakups:
  - Outgrowing the Character:
    - 90% of parents agreed or strongly agreed with "My child outgrew [character]."
  - 67% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that "My child thinks [character] is 'for babies.'"

Influence of Older Siblings. Parents reported that siblings influence children's parasocial breakups, but only if the siblings are older than the child (r² = 11.2, p < .05).

Gender Effects. Parents of girls reported their daughters felt their breakup character was 'for girls' (r² = 13.0, p < .05) and not 'for boys' (r² = 14.7, p < .05).

Previous and Current Favorite Character Dyads

Breakup Characters are...

More Saturated and Brighter. Old favorite characters' most frequent color (HSV) was brighter (t = 4.61, p < .001) and more saturated (t = 2.63, p < .05).

Bluer & Less Red. The most frequent color (yCbCr) in breakup characters had more red tones (t = -2.05, p < .05), while new favorites had more blue (t = 3.30, p < .01).

For Girls, More Feminine. Girls' new favorite characters were rated as having more feminine sex role traits (yielding, empathetic, etc.) (t = 2.85, p < .01).

For Boys, More Masculine/Dominant. Boys' new favorite characters were rated as appearing more masculine (t = 2.18, p < .05) and dominant (t = 2.96, p < .05).

Discussion/Conclusions

- Majority of children experienced 1+ PSRs and with media characters.
- Losing interest in characters is usually the result of outgrowing them, which is also influenced by older siblings.
- Children show indifference to previous favorite characters.
- Children’s taste in characters changes over time.
- New favorite characters are older, more mature-looking, & more consistent with developmental color preference trajectories.
- Girls and boys pick new favorites who are more gender-stereotyped.
- Uncovering the mechanisms responsible for parasocial relationships and breakups provides insight into children's early social development.

References


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