



Children's Parasocial Breakups with Formerly-Favorite Media Characters

Kaitlin L. Brunick, Sandra L. Calvert, & Melissa N. Richards

Children's Digital Media Center
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY



Introduction

- Children and adults form emotionally-tinged, one-sided relationships with media characters, known as *parasocial relationships* (PSRs). (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Giles, 2002)
- Both adults and children end their relationships with their favorite characters, a process known as *parasocial breakup*. (Bond & Calvert, 2014; Cohen, 2003)
- 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.

Follow-Up (Jan 2015)

- Parents were re-contacted 3 years later about the same child (now 3- to 11-years-old).
- Participating parents (n = 105) answered questions about current & prior favorite characters
 - 57 parents reported that their child had stopped liking a previously important character.
 - 27 parents reported their child no longer had a current favorite character.

Character Coding

All characters that parents reported as current or previous favorites were analyzed by trained adult coders (all Cronbach's α s > 0.75) on:

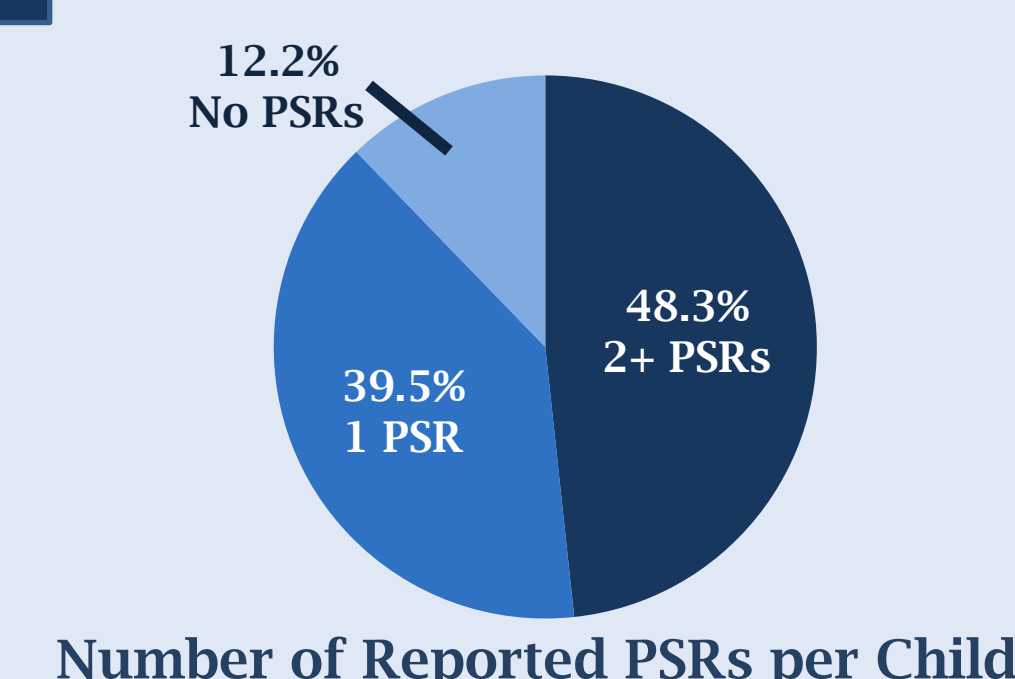
- Personality & physical traits** (strong, popular, baby-faced, etc.) from character images
- Sex role** features from videos of characters
- Color** information obtained from image processing

If parents reported both a current and former favorite character (n=55), we compared the character dyad to assess how character preferences and parasocial relationships change over time.

Results

Parasocial Relationships

- The vast majority (88%) of children have experienced a PSR with at least 1 media character during childhood.



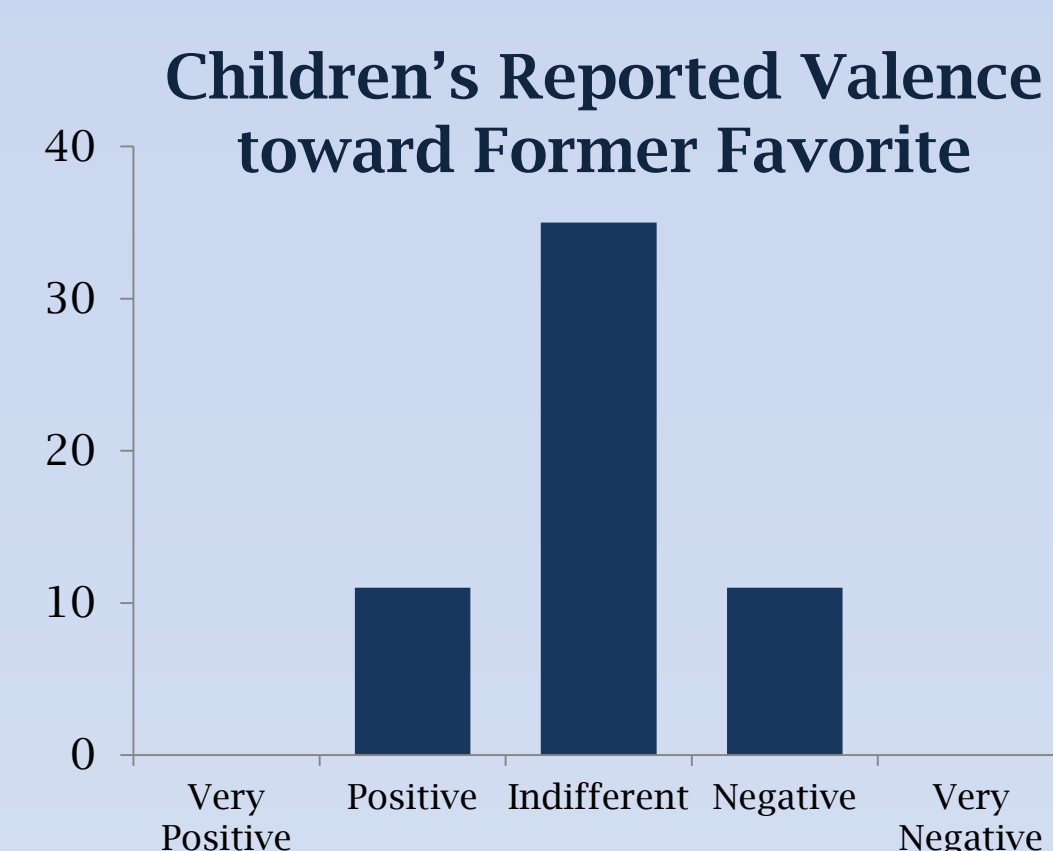
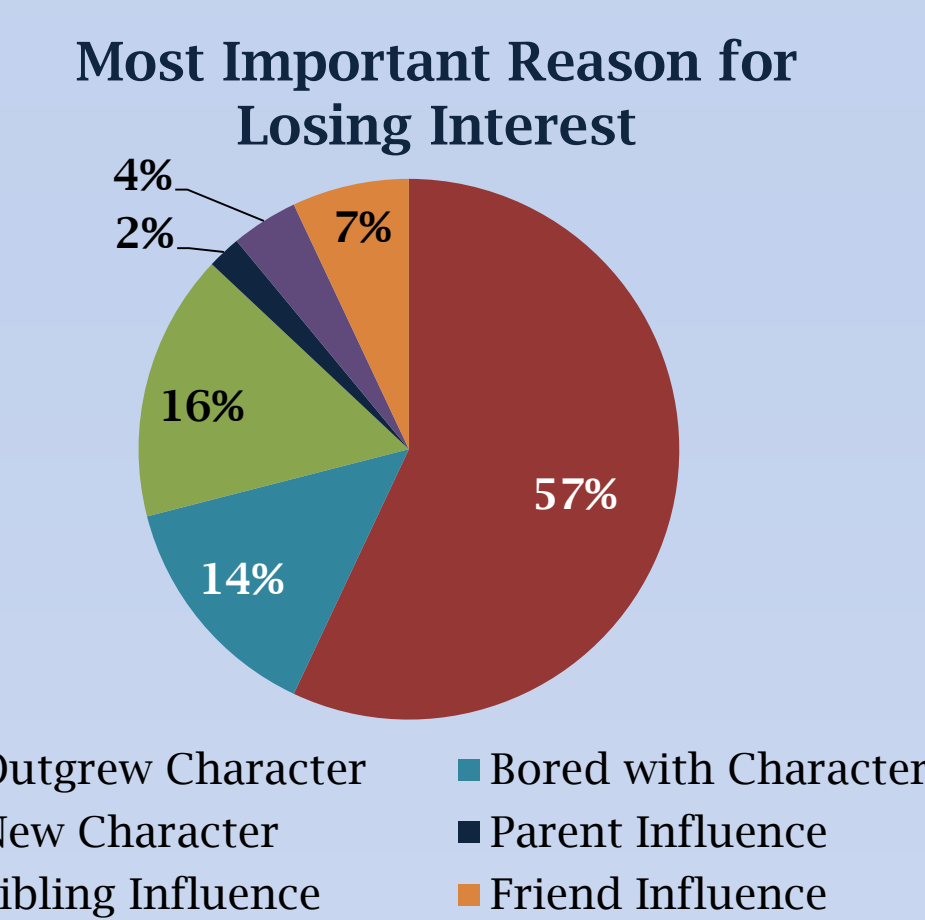
Parasocial Breakups

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.'"



Children Feel Indifferent toward Former Favorites. No parents reported their child had strong feelings about a previous favorite, either positive or negative.

Influence of Older Siblings. Parents reported that siblings influence children's parasocial breakups, but only if the siblings are older than the child (χ^2 = 11.2, p < .05).

Gender Effects. Parents of girls reported their daughters felt their breakup character was 'for girls' (χ^2 = 13.0, p < .05) and not 'for boys' (χ^2 = 14.7, p < .05).

Previous and Current Favorite Character Dyads

Breakup Characters are...

Younger. Current favorite characters are older than former favorites (t = 2.28, p < .05).

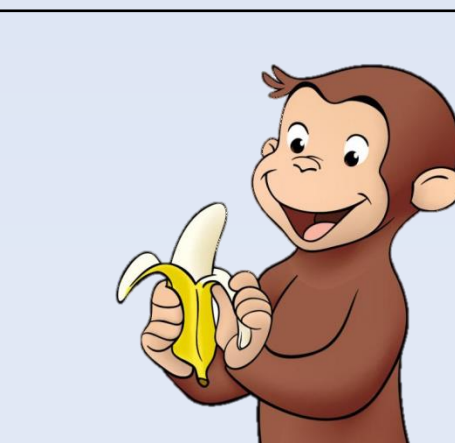
Example Dyad: Female Child, Age 5.5, Time 2 Survey

More Baby-Faced. Children break up with more neotenous characters than their new favorites (t = 3.50, p < .001).

Example Dyad: Male Child, Age 4.0, Time 1 Survey

Breakup Character

Current Favorite



Curious George
(Curious George)
Age: Toddler/Preschooler



Elsa
(Frozen)
Age: Young Adult



Elmo
(Sesame Street)
Baby-Face Score: 10/10



Anakin Skywalker
(The Clone Wars)
Baby-Face Score: 1/10

Breakup Characters are...

More Saturated and Brighter. Old favorite characters' most frequent color (HSV) was brighter (t = 4.65, p < .0001) and more saturated (t = 2.63, p < .05).

Example Dyad: Male Child, Age 4.5, Time 1 Survey

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 = 3.36, p < .01).

Example Dyad: Female Child, Age 5.8, Time 2 Survey

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).

Example Dyad: **Female** Child, Age 5.0, Time 1 Survey

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

Example Dyad: **Male** Child, Age 3.8, Time 1 Survey

Breakup Character

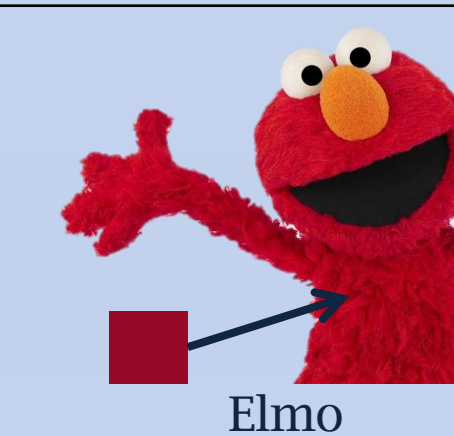
Current Favorite



Oso
(Special Agent Oso)
Variance: 86.3



Darth Vader
(Star Wars Films)
Variance: 19.6



Elmo
(Sesame Street)
Chromatic Blue (Cb): 100
Chromatic Red (Cr): 211



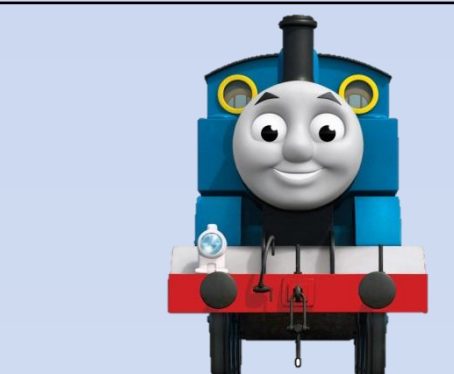
Ms. Frizzle
(The Magic School Bus)
Chromatic Blue (Cb): 169
Chromatic Red (Cr): 92



Barney
(Barney and Friends)
Sex Role: Gender Neutral (0)



Strawberry Shortcake
(Berry Bitty Adventures)
Sex Role: Very Feminine (+2)



Thomas the Tank Engine
(Thomas and Friends)
Masculinity Score: 7/10
Dominance Score: 5/10



Superman
(The Animated Series)
Masculinity Score: 10/10
Dominance Score: 10/10

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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Acknowledgments

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