Parent Versus Child Report of Young Children's Parasonal Relationships

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Background
- Media characters are ubiquitous
- Powerful, informal friends for children
- Children form parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956)
- One-sided, emotionally tinged relationships with media characters

Why study parasocial relationships?
- Center of transmedia environment
- Characters may aid in learning (Calvert, Richards, & Kent, 2014; Giles, Richards, Lauricella, & Calvert, 2015)
- Research on young children’s parasocial relationships is scant (Olanski, 2002)
- What exactly is a parasocial relationship during childhood?
- Recent research has quantified parasocial relationships through behavioral observation, child report, or parent report

Methods
- Goal of the current study: Compare parent and child report within dyads about children's parasocial relationships with favorite media characters.

Participants:
- 2-6 year olds (n=229; 45.4% male)
- Childcare centers and preschools in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area

Procedure:
- Children were asked to answer questions about their favorite media character
- Their parents surveyed separately on the child’s favorite media character

Results
- Overall, the results between parent & child surveys are consistent and three major factors emerged—Attachment (linked with Character Personification for parents and Friendship for children), Social Realism, and Humanlike Needs
- Key difference: Humanlike needs found in the parent and child dyad samples, but children also grouped the feelings they felt when the character made a mistake as part of a human needs factor, while parental report categorized this question in the attachment & character personification group.

Discussion
- Similar and consistent factors of parasocial relationships emerge during parent and child dyad reports.
- Child report, as well as parent report, explains a similar percent of the variance in children’s parasocial relationships.
- Parents and children usually report a different favorite character, but internal consistency and means of composite factors do not differ significantly between parents who matched with their child and those who did not.
- Children develop parasocial relationships with characters that are the same gender as them

Future Directions
- Use of this scale to understand the impact of parasocial relationships on STEM learning and food choices
- Investigate why parents and children mismatch when reporting favorite character

Conclusion
- Children’s early relationships extend beyond real people to those that exist primarily in a digital world
- These new measures are a way to tap into the 21st century media friends that are an uncharted source for understanding early learning, health, and behavior

References