



# Measuring Young Children's Parasocial Relationships with Media Characters

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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?



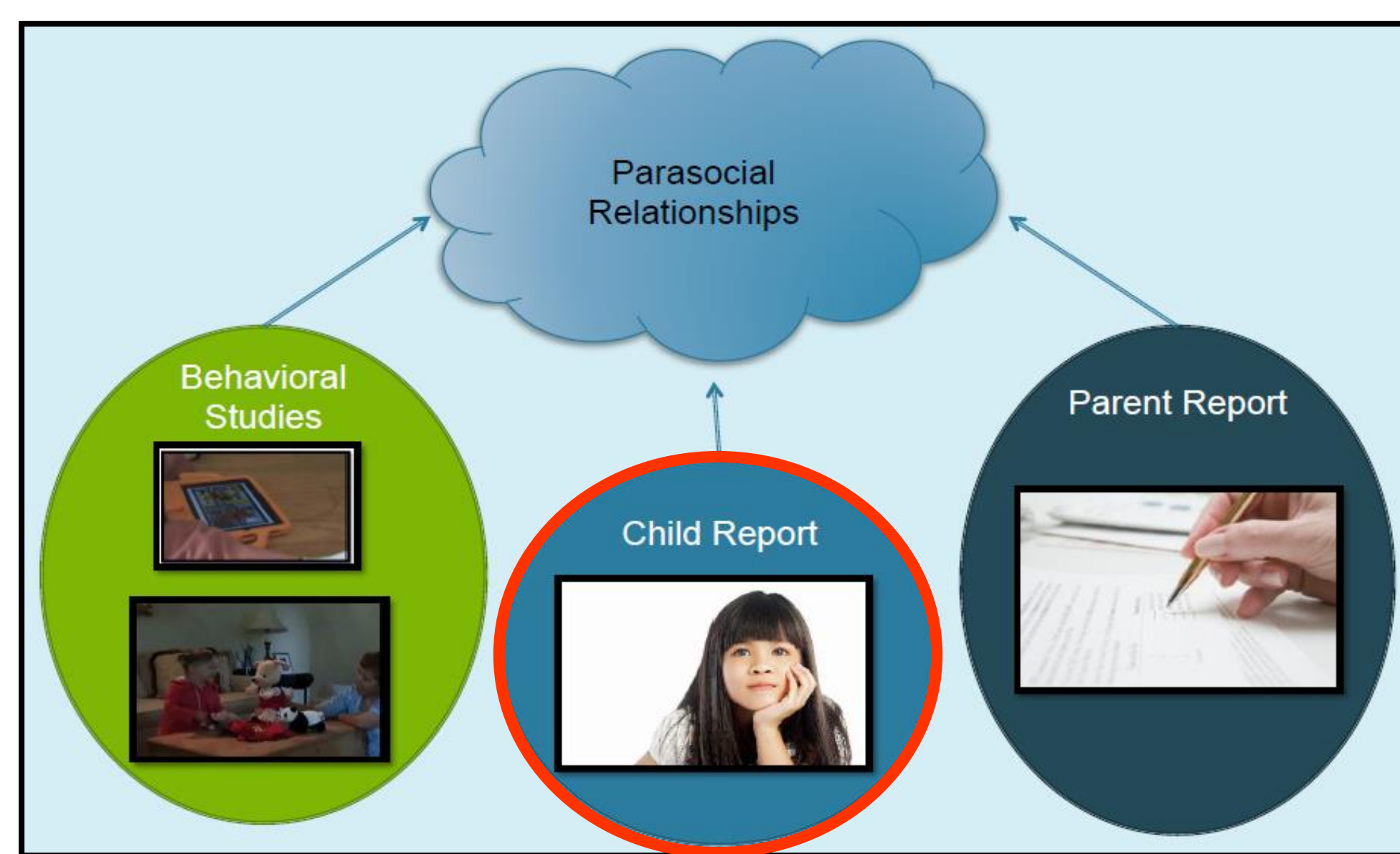
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Characters may aid in learning (Calvert, Richards, & Kent, 2014; Gola, Richards, Lauricella, & Calvert, 2013).

Research on young children's parasocial relationships is scant (Giles, 2002).

### What exactly is a parasocial relationship during childhood?

Some research has quantified parasocial relationships through behavioral observation or parent report



**Goal of the current study:** Create a measure of early parasocial relationships by child interview

## Methods

### Participants:

2-6 year olds ( $n=176$ : 79 boys, 97 girls)

Childcare centers and preschools in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area

### Procedure:

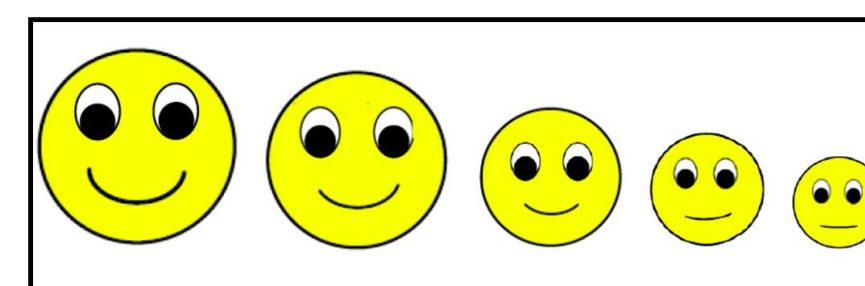
Children were asked to answer questions about their favorite media character

## Measures

Adapted from a parent report survey (Bond & Calvert, 2014)

Parent questions simplified

Responded using a Smiley Face Likert Scale:



### Human needs

- Does \_\_\_\_\_ get... really hungry, hungry, kind of hungry, a little bit hungry, not hungry at all?
- Does \_\_\_\_\_ get... really sleepy, sleepy, kind of sleepy, a little bit sleepy, not sleepy at all?

### Social Realism

- Is \_\_\_\_\_... totally pretend, mostly pretend, kind of pretend, mostly real, totally real?
- Is \_\_\_\_\_... totally real, mostly real, kind of real, mostly pretend, totally pretend?

### Personhood

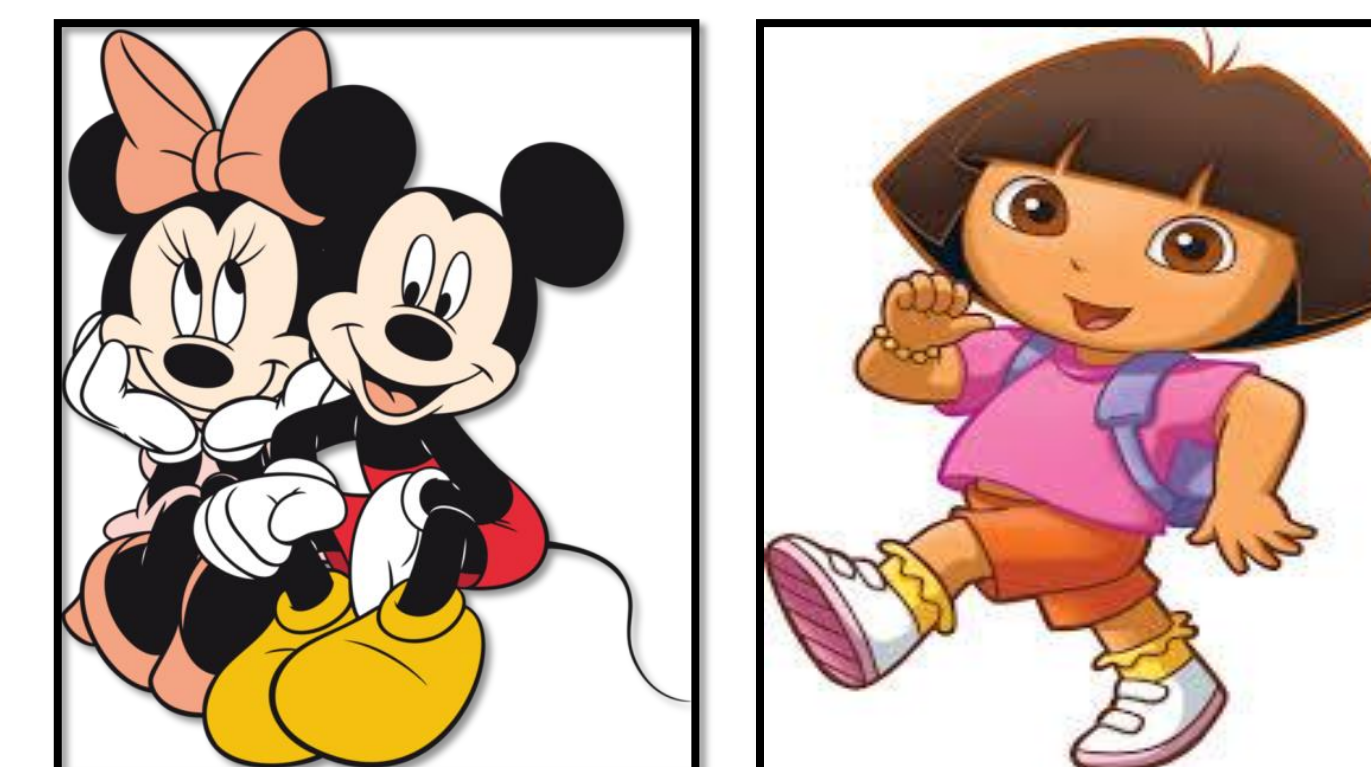
- Does \_\_\_\_\_ have... a whole lot of feelings, a lot of feelings, kind of has feelings, a little bit of feelings, no feelings at all?
- Do you believe what \_\_\_\_\_ tells you... all of the time, a lot of the time, sometimes, a little bit of the time, not at all?
- Is \_\_\_\_\_... your best friend, your good friend, kind of a friend, a little bit of a friend, not your friend at all?
- How safe does \_\_\_\_\_ make you feel when you are scared?...really safe, safe, kind of safe, a little bit safe, not safe at all?
- Is \_\_\_\_\_... really cute, cute, kind of cute, a little bit cute, not cute at all?

## Results

- $n=152$  children had clear favorite character (67 boys, 85 girls)
- $n=24$  had ambiguous responses (No age differences)

### Most Popular Characters by Age Group

- 2-3-year-olds:** Elmo, Lightning McQueen, Mickey/Minnie Mouse, Dora the Explorer, Thomas the Tank Engine
- 4-6-year-olds:** Spongebob Squarepants, Dora the Explorer, Cinderella



### Age Differences

- Age (older > younger): Positive predictor of children's ratings of thinking the character was a friend,  $\beta = .20$ ,  $t(148) = 2.52$ ,  $p = .01$

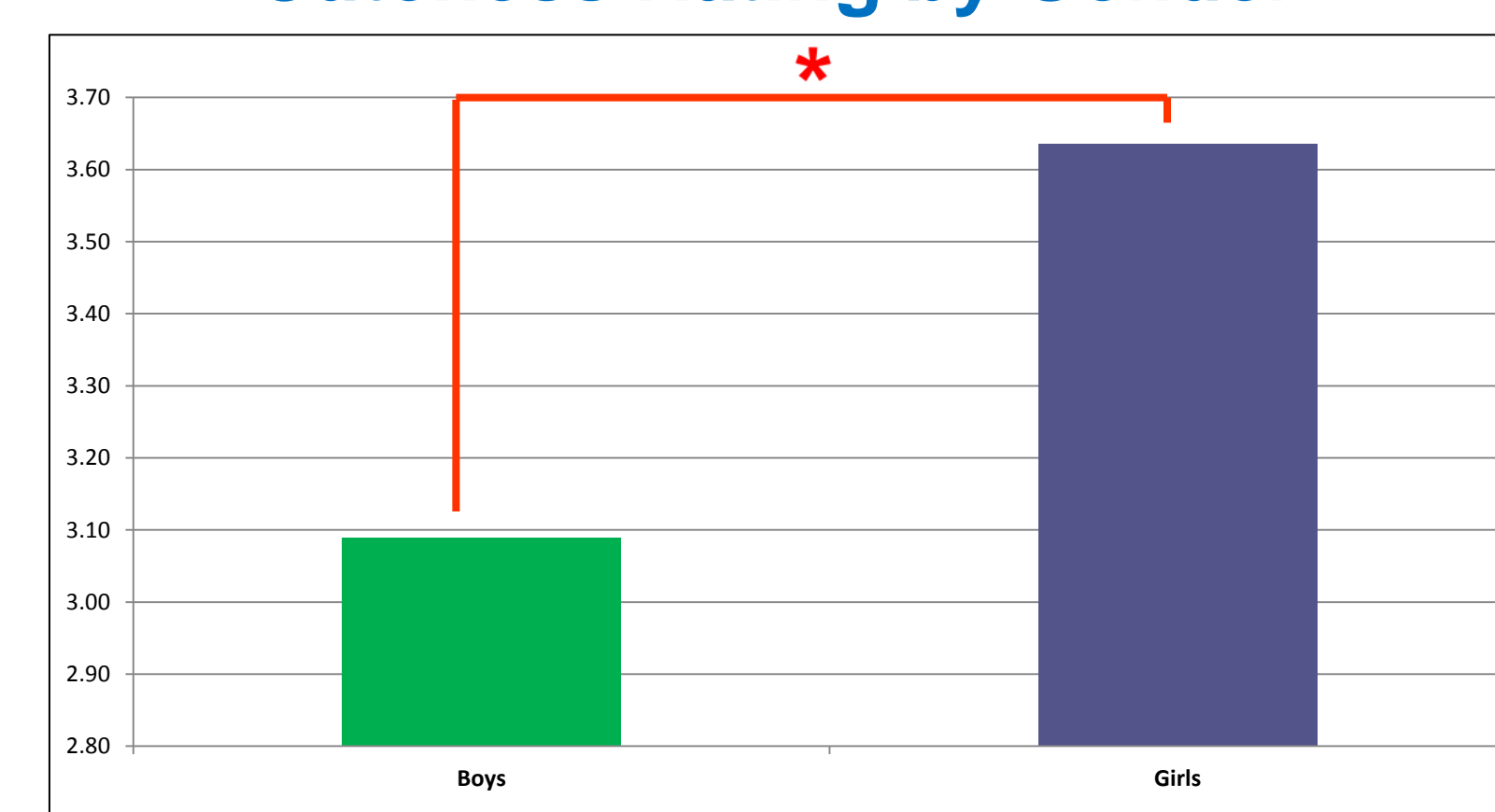
### Factor Analysis

	Factor Loadings			Factor Name	Eigenvalue	% of Variance Explained
	1	2	3			
Character has feelings	.565	-.449	.289	Personhood	2.76	30.661
Character is trustworthy	.537	.196	.003			
Character is a friend	.691	.151	-.027			
Character makes child feel safe	.753	.123	-.098			
Character is cute	.653	.132	.179			
Character gets hungry	.301	.669	.301	Human Needs	1.274	14.154
Character gets sleepy	.187	.796	-.022			
Character is real "Reverse Coded"	-.546	-.132	.510	Social Realism	1.104	12.266
Character is pretend	.085	.147	.857			

### Gender Differences

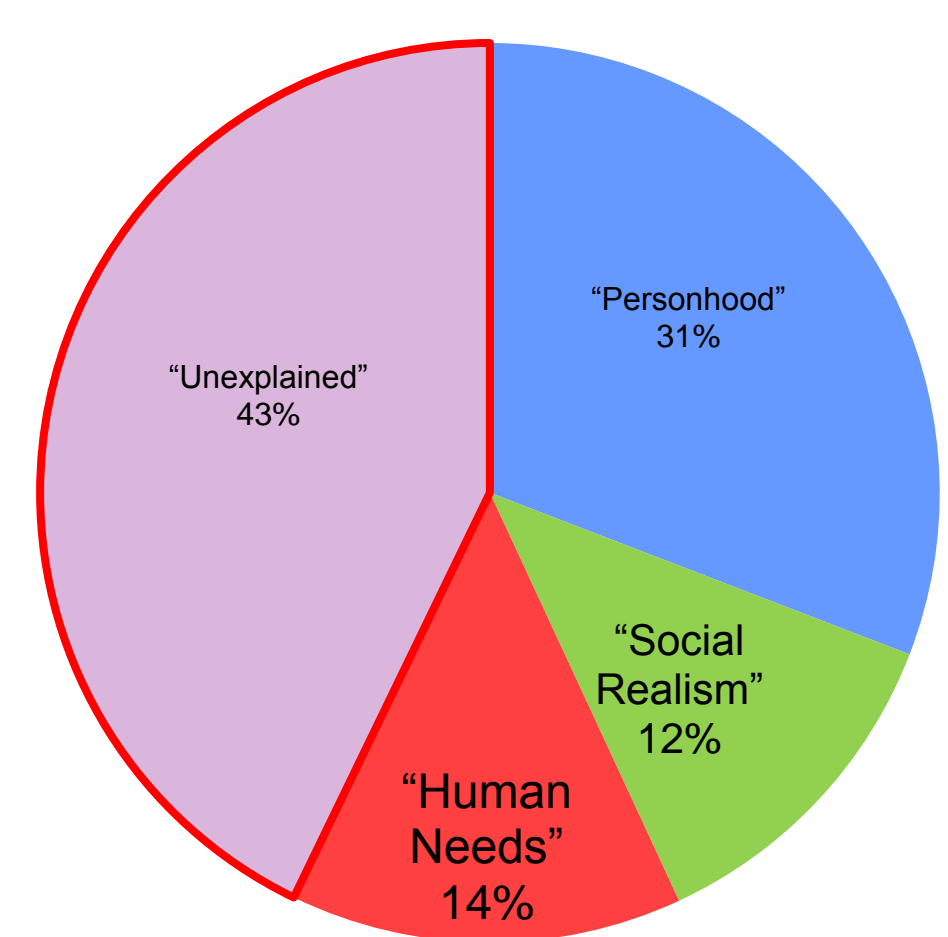
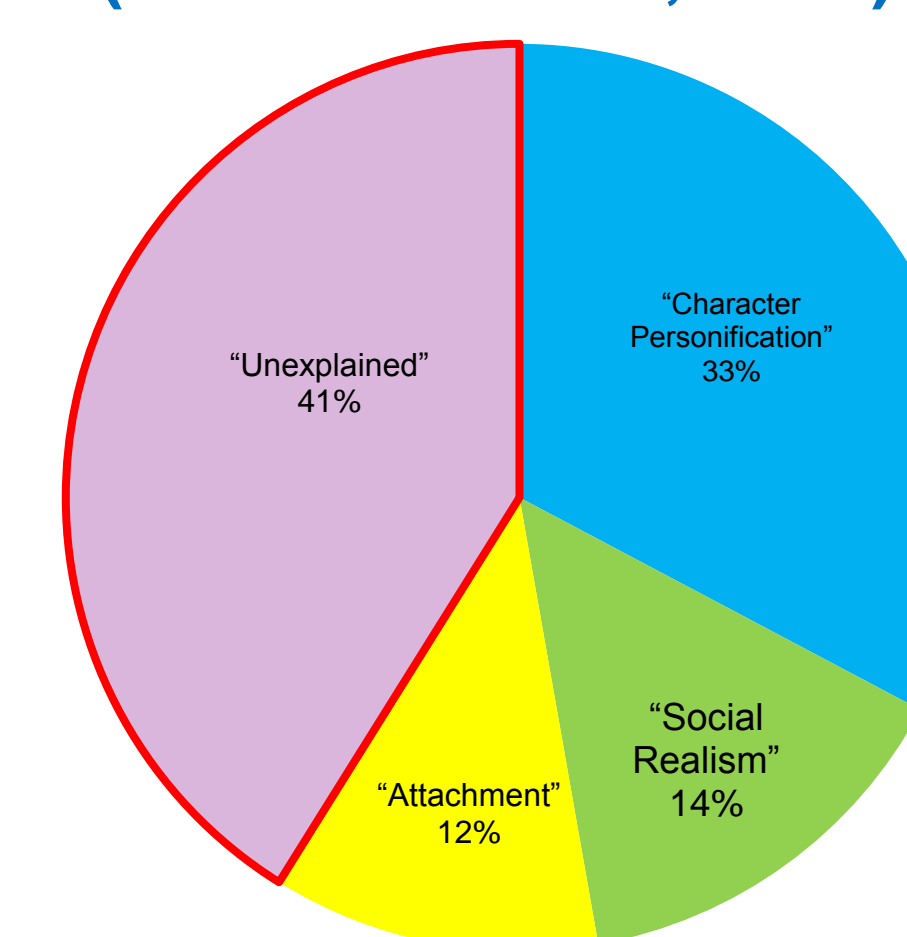
- Girls chose a favorite female character more often than a male character, (68.2% versus 31.8%, respectively), and boys chose a favorite male more often than a female character (94.0% versus 6.0%, respectively),  $\chi^2(1, N=152) = 60.14$ ,  $p < .0001$
- Girls ( $M=3.64$ ,  $SD=1.49$ ) were more likely to rate their character as cute than boys were ( $M=3.09$ ,  $SD=1.82$ ),  $t(150) = -1.98$ ,  $p = .049$

### Cuteness Rating by Gender



## Results

### Child Report vs. Parental Report



- Overall, the results between parent & child surveys are consistent—Personhood or Character Personification; Social Realism; Human Needs or Attachment— with a few key differences:
  - Human needs category is unique to child report (previously part of Character Personification in parent report)
  - Personhood category included Attachment in children, which was a separate factor in parent report

## Discussion

- Child report explains a similar percent of the variance in children's parasocial relationships as reported by the Bond & Calvert (2014) study which used parental report
- Children develop parasocial relationships with characters that are the same gender as them
- Girls are more likely to believe that their favorite character is cute, consistent with the literature that older girls' identification with female characters is predicted by attractiveness (Hoffner, 1996)
- Children are more likely to perceive favorite characters as friends as they get older

## Future Directions

- Use of this scale to understand the impact of parasocial relationships on STEM learning and food choices
- Link child report with their own parents' report of parasocial relationships with favorite media characters

## Conclusion

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

## References

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