Measuring Young Children’s Parasocial Relationships with Media Characters
Melissa N. Richards & Sandra L. Calvert
Children’s Digital Media Center
Georgetown University

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; Gola, Richards, Lauricella, & Calvert, 2015)
- Research on young children’s parasocial relationships is scant (Gola, 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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human needs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does _________ get... really hungry, hungry, kind of hungry, a little bit hungry, not hungry at all?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does _________ get... really sleepy, sleepy, kind of sleepy, a little bit sleepy, not sleepy at all?</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Realism</th>
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<tr>
<td>Is ___________... totally pretend, mostly pretend, kind of pretend, mostly real, totally real?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is ___________... totally real, mostly real, kind of real, mostly pretend, totally pretend?</td>
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</tbody>
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Results

Most Popular Characters by Age Group
2-3-year-olds: 4-6-year-olds:
- Elmo - Spongebob Squarepants
- Lightning McQueen - Dora the Explorer
- Mickey/Minnie Mouse - Cinderella
- Dora the Explorer - Thomas the Tank Engine

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), x² (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) = -.98, p=.049

Cuteness Rating by Gender

Factor Analysis

Factor Loadings Factor Name Eigenvalue % of Variance Explained

Character has feelings .565 .449 .258 .276 .30407
Character is trustworthy .557 .196 0.605 .587
Character is a friend .551 .151 -.021 .651
Character makes child feel safe .554 .123 .094 .651
Character is cute .455 .132 .179 .651
Character gets hungry .323 .100 .323 .100 .132 .141 .055
Character gets sleepy .187 .796 .022 .187 .796 .022
Character is real “Reverse Coded” - .548 .132 .115 .548 .132 .115
Character is listed .065 .147 .011 .065 .147 .011

Age Differences
- Age (older > younger): Positive predictor of children’s ratings of thinking the character was a friend, $\beta = .20, (t148) = 2.52, p = .01$

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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