



# Children's Parasocial Breakups with Favorite Media Characters

Naomi R. Aguiar, Melissa M. Richards, Bradley J. Bond, Lauren E. Webb,  
Marisa M. Putnam, & Sandra L. Calvert

Children's Digital Media Center  
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY



## Introduction

- Children form emotionally-tinged, one-sided relationships with media characters, known as **parasocial relationships (PSRs)**.<sup>1</sup>
- PSRs with media characters can end through a process known as **parasocial breakups**.<sup>2</sup>
- Little is known about PSR breakups, and how the characteristics of past and current favorite characters differ as children age

### Research Questions (RQs):

- RQ<sub>1</sub>:** How many children experience PSR breakups over time?
- RQ<sub>2</sub>:** How long do PSRs last before a breakup occurs?
- RQ<sub>3</sub>:** Do reasons for PSR breakups change as children age?
- RQ<sub>4</sub>:** What are the similarities and differences in the characteristics of past and current favorite media characters?
- RQ<sub>5</sub>:** Are children attracted to more sex-typed characters as they age?

## Method

- 138 parents re-contacted from two past studies responded<sup>1,3</sup> (child  $M_{\text{age}}$  = 6.56 yrs.; 72 boys & 66 girls)
- Parents reported on children's *breakup* characters ( $n = 70$ ) and current *favorite* characters ( $n = 44$ ).
- Parents completed an online Parent PSR Breakup Measure<sup>2</sup> three years after initial participation ( $M = 3.02$  years,  $SD = 0.50$ ).

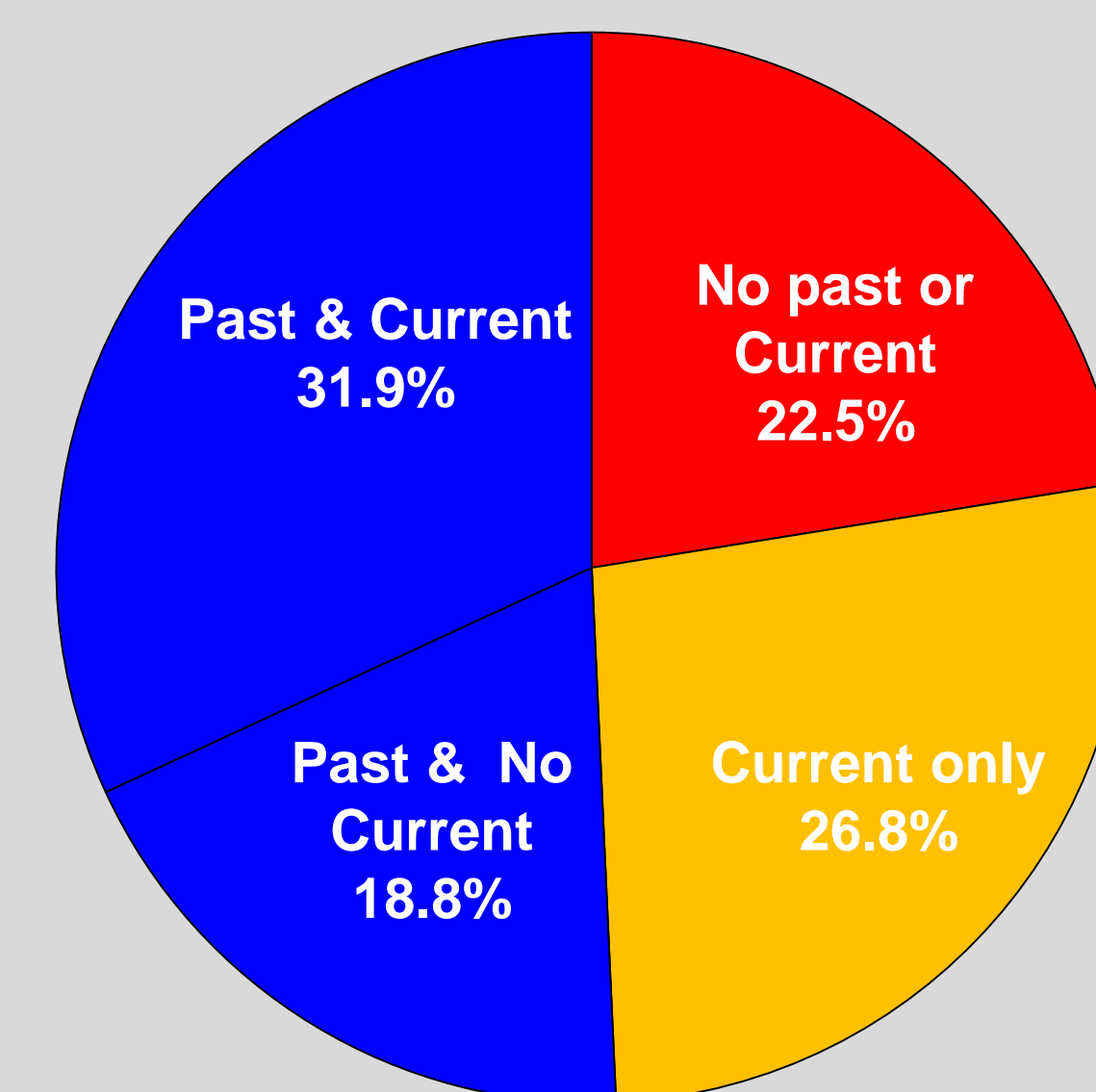
## Character Coding

Trained adults coded characters on:

- Physical characteristics:** animation, embodiment, color saturation, sex-typed appearance,  $K_s \geq .73$ ,  $\alpha = .98$
- Source content:** academic & fantastical content,  $K_s \geq .90$
- Bem Sex-Role Inventory**<sup>4</sup>: masculine & feminine traits,  $\alpha \geq .81$

## Results

### RQ<sub>1</sub>: FREQUENCY of PSR breakups



Experienced breakup (50.7%)

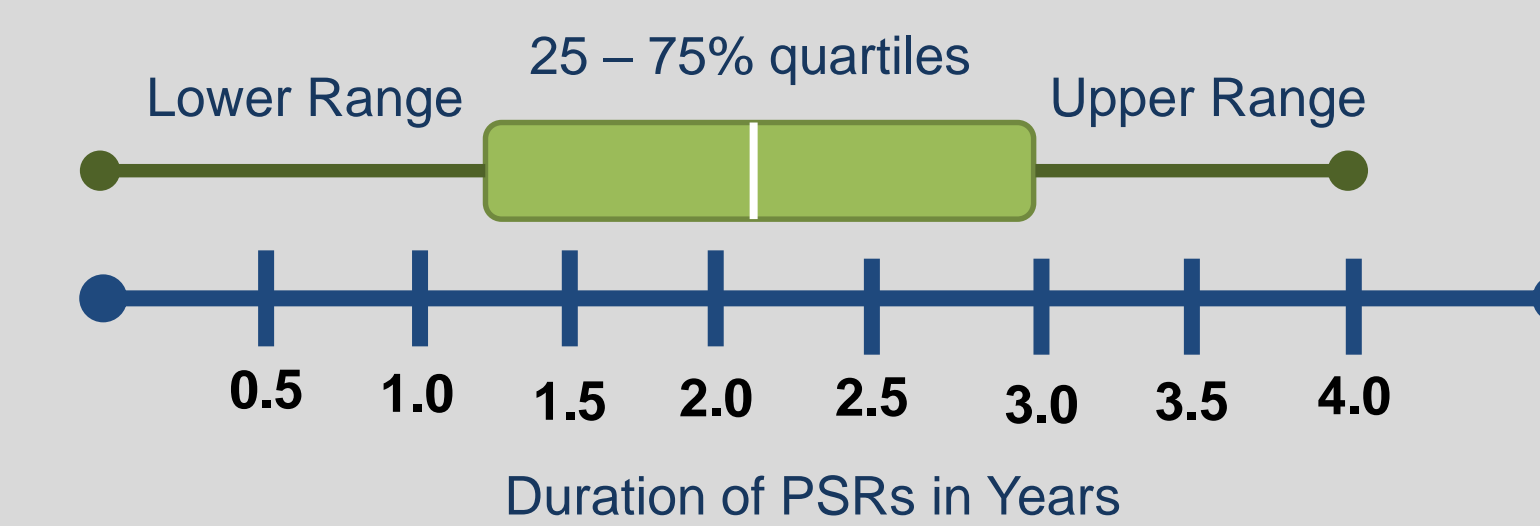
### RQ<sub>2</sub>: DURATION of PSRs

**Age Started:**  $M = 2.59$  years,

$SD = 1.15$  years

**Age Ended:**  $M = 4.65$ ,  $SD = 1.33$

**Lasted:**  $M = 2.16$  years,  $SD = 1.00$ , range = 0 – 4 years;

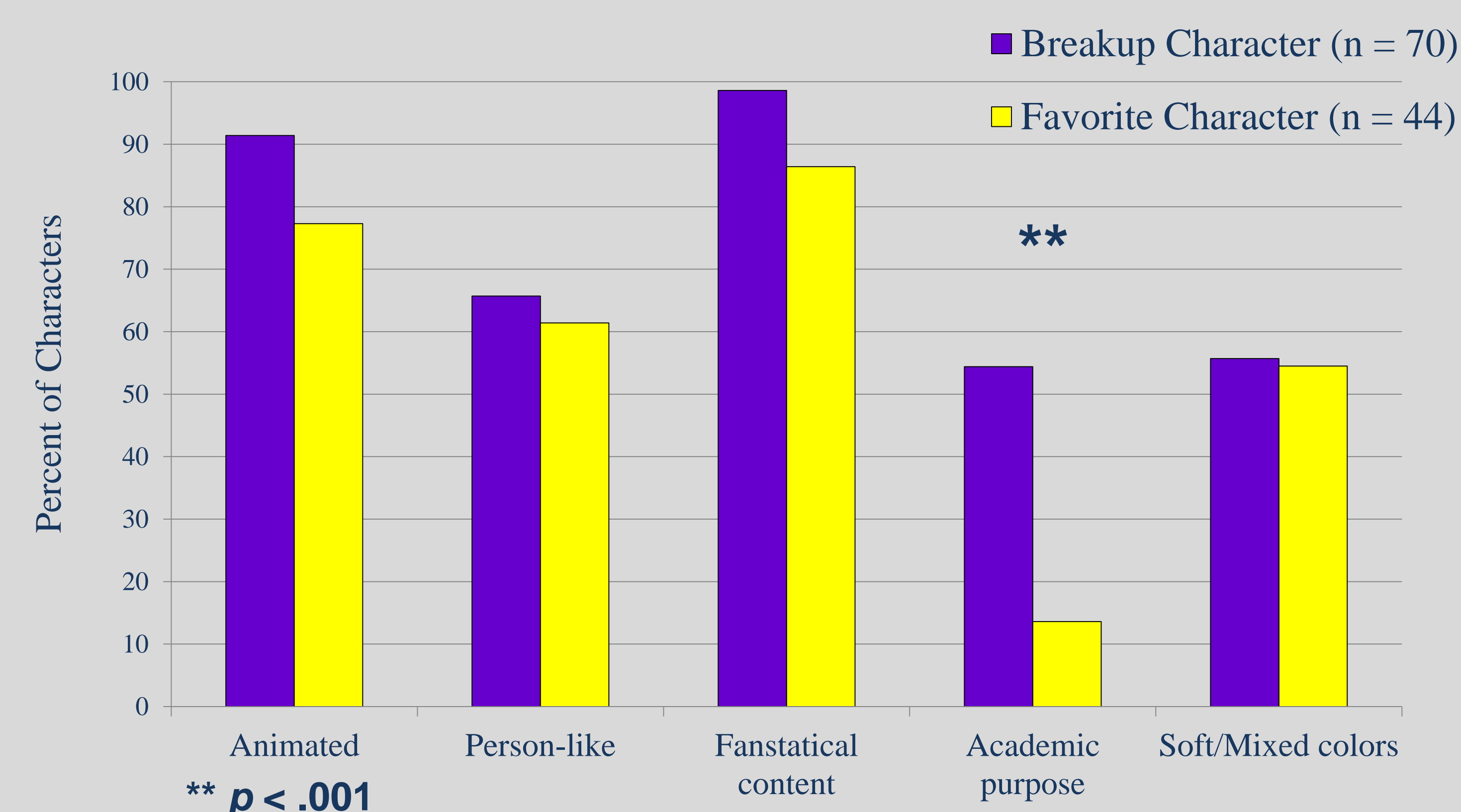


**Related to age:**  $r = .45$ ,  $p < .001$

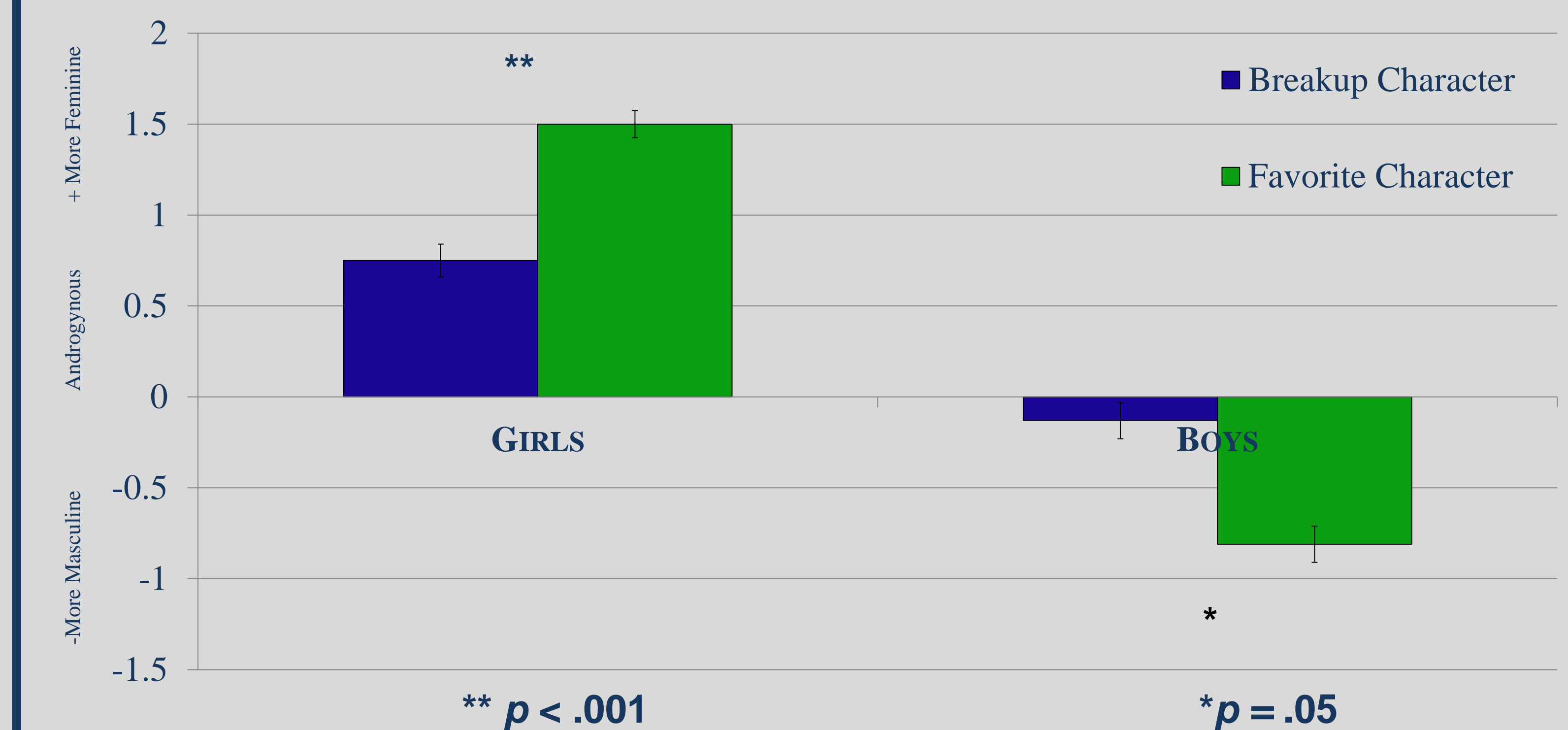
### RQ<sub>3</sub>: MOST IMPORTANT REASONS for PSR breakups

Item	Number	Frequency
[Child] outgrew [character].	44	63.8%
[Child] became interested in another character.	12	17.4%
[Child] got bored with [character].	7	10.1%
[Child] was influenced by friends or school.	3	4.3%
[Child] was influenced by siblings or in-family peers.	2	2.9%
[Child] was influenced by me or my spouse.	1	1.4%
[Character's] show/app/game changed or ended	0	0.0%

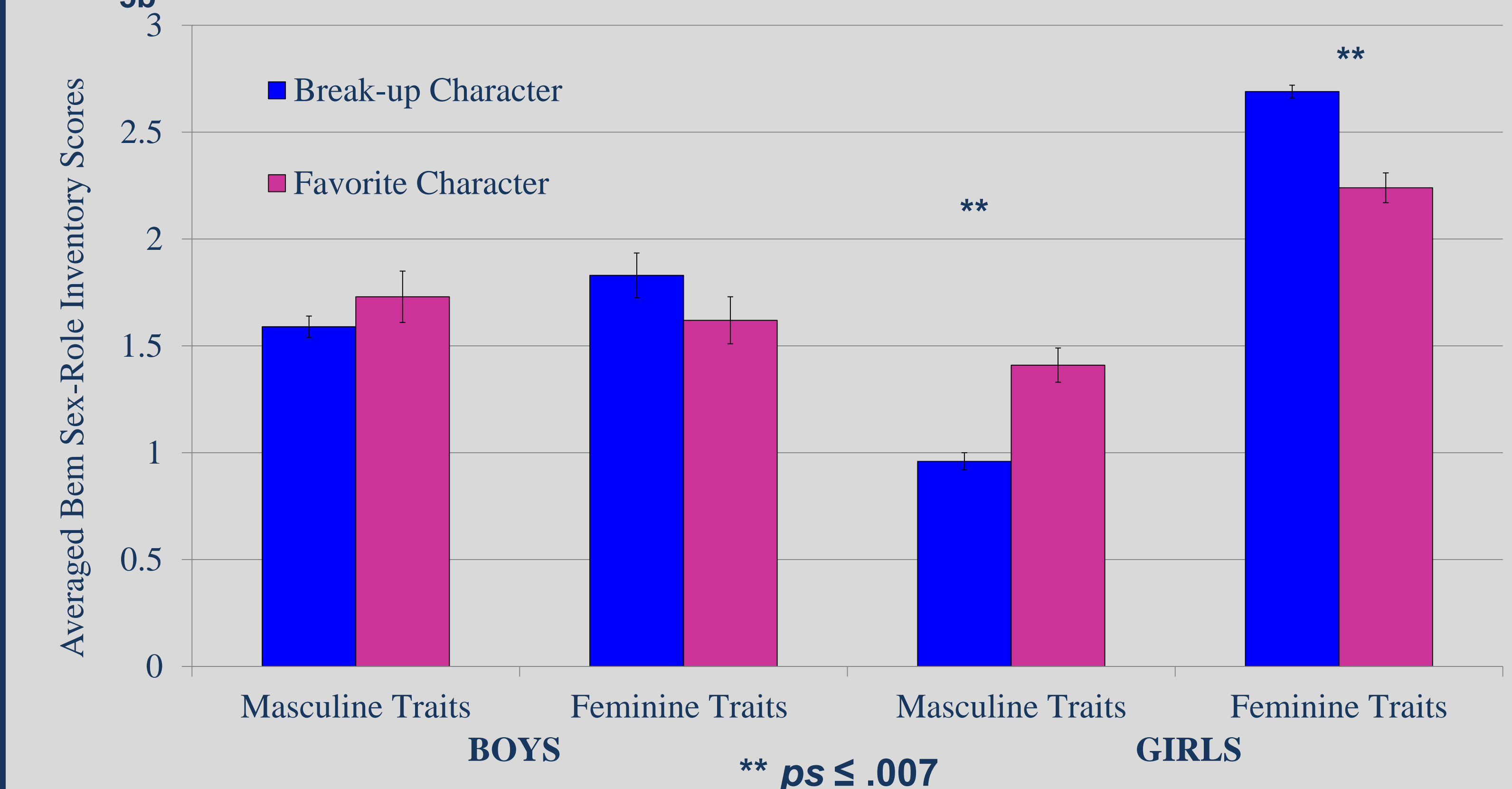
### RQ<sub>4</sub>: CHARACTERISTICS of past & current favorite media characters



### RQ<sub>5a</sub>: SEX-TYPED CHARACTER APPEARANCE



### RQ<sub>5b</sub>: SEX-TYPED CHARACTER TRAITS



## Discussion

- Current favorite characters and breakup characters are animated, person-like, and embedded in fantastical content.
- Current favorite characters are less likely to teach academic skills.
- For girls, the preference for more feminine looking characters with less feminine traits suggests greater complexity in the gendered messages they receive.

### References

- <sup>1</sup> Bond, B.J., & Calvert, S.L. (2014a). A model and measure of US parents' perceptions of young children's parasocial relationships. *Journal of Children and Media*, 8(3), 286-304.
- <sup>2</sup> Bond, B.J., & Calvert, S.L. (2014b). Parasocial breakup among children in the United States. *Journal of Children and Media*, 8(4), 474-490.
- <sup>3</sup> Richards, M. N., & Calvert, S. L. (2016). Parent versus child report of young children's parasocial relationships in the United States. *Journal of Children and Media*, 10(4), 462-480.

### Acknowledgements

A very special thank you to the families and the CDMC researchers who made this project possible. Support for this research was provided by NSF grant #1252113 to Dr. Sandra L. Calvert.